

THE
ELIJAH
TRILOGY

BOOK 1

MIXED BLOOD

The ~~Half~~-breed Boy

GRAHAM ANDERSON

Prologue

*Nanderra Station, Outback Queensland, Australia
October 1894*

The remoteness of the property conspired to make her as much a prisoner as if she'd been incarcerated in Brisbane's notorious Boggo Road prison, perhaps more so. The rains were late this year and the air was laden with the thick humidity that promised they couldn't hold off for much longer. The humidity... it was the feature of this arid land that she hated most, even more than her loveless marriage.

The image that stared back at her from her mirror looked far older than her twenty-three years. She'd been married for only four of them, but already it seemed like a lifetime sentence. Her unfinished letter to Amy lay on the bureau in front of her.

You were right sister dear. Coming back to Nanderra was a mistake. I should have left The Brute when the opportunity presented itself, but as you know, Father threatened to cut me off without a penny if I did so. Returning here has been made worse by the brief spell of freedom and happiness I had with you and Peter in Brisbane.

I can't tell you how much my heart sank when the ropes were cast off. When the streamers stretched to breaking point as your ship sailed from the dock, it was as though my heart was being wrenched from my body. I truly thought my world must end.

Glancing once more at the mirror, hanging above her writing bureau, she traced the faint line at the edge of her eye she'd discovered the previous day. "If I have this already, what will I look like at forty?" she despaired. "I'm

not sure how much more of this I can take.” Looking away before she became too despondent, she once more picked up her pen and continued her letter.

The loneliness, the tyranny of distance, his constant absences; they all bear down on me. And now my lifeline, you my darling Amy, have sailed away to London. Not that it really makes much difference. Sydney may as well be London, they are both so far away.

It was weeks now since she and John had spoken. She pushed the chair back and crossed over to the window and looked out at the dusty landscape. God, she hoped the rains arrived soon to cool the place down. Her eyes fixed on the stock hand working in the garden bed at the edge of the sun-burnt lawn. She watched the muscles of his bare torso as he pulled at the well-entrenched weeds, feeling quite flushed as she did so. Looking up and seeing her watching, he waved and flashed a smile.

Feeling like a voyeur, she stepped back from the window, idly running her finger over the bookcase, drawing a pattern in the dust.

“That lazy wench hasn’t dusted in here since God knows when. Look at the state of the books. Instead of being lined up as I’ve told her time and time again, they’re all over the place.”

She hated things out of place. As she bent to tidy them, she noticed a slip of paper protruding from Louisa Alcock’s *Little Women*. She couldn’t recall seeing it there before, but then that was hardly surprising. Books were more a decoration than an item of entertainment for her.

The old newspaper article had been neatly cut and folded. It was undated but looked as though it’d been there for some time.

Brisbane, Wednesday

Police are investigating the disappearance of the Second Officer from the barquentine “Forth of Leith” currently docked at Hamilton. Mr H Hocking was last seen leaving his ship on Friday of last week. He is six feet one inch tall, of medium build with dark hair. He has no distinguishing features. Authorities are concerned as Mr Hocking’s personal belongings remain on board his ship and he indicated when going ashore that he would be returning the same day.

The police are appealing for assistance from any members of the public who may have information regarding Mr Hocking's whereabouts to make contact with Constable McRae at the Brisbane Police Station.

She glanced again out the window at the muscular black. She was about to place the cutting back into the book, but as the man stopped and returned her stare, she screwed it into a ball and threw it in the bin instead. Feeling quite flushed, she sat back at the bureau and picked up her pen to dispel his image still fixed in her mind.

If it was not for your letters dearest, I would...

Chapter 1

Brisbane, Queensland
2011

“Are you telling me they can just walk onto my land and do what they like?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you” the lawyer said. The two men were sitting in a meeting room high in The Emirates Building on Eagle Street.

“How could this happen?” Peter Davorets asked.

“It didn’t just happen, mate. It’s the law. Mining companies, with a valid exploration lease, can pretty well come and go as they want.”

“And the permit’s for real?”

“I’m afraid so Peter. I had it checked out this morning. It was issued a couple of months ago.”

“I won’t let them onto the property.”

“Now don’t go doing anything stupid. You can’t block them from coming onto Nanderra although they’ve got to behave themselves. They have to stick to the areas specified in the permit and not disrupt your operations. But there could be a way of hindering them. Did you see last night’s news?”

“No. I checked into the hotel and went straight to bed.”

“I recorded it in case. Watch this.”

Lawrence hit the remote and the large television screen on the opposite wall came alive.

“Demonstrators from the protest group Concerned Australians Against Fracking, or CAAF, forced their way into the ballroom of the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Melbourne earlier today and disrupted the Annual General Meeting of Mercedes Occidental. The Australian subsidiary of the multinational conglomerate has announced its intention to commence drilling for coal seam gas

using the controversial hydraulic fracturing process. CAAF claim the process, also called fracking, will lead to contamination of the Great Artesian Basin. The Company has advised the Australian Stock Exchange that Nanderra Station, situated southwest of Mt Isa in western Queensland has been identified by them as a region of interest and permits have been issued by the Queensland Department of Mines and Energy to commence test drilling.”

As the announcer spoke, the screen filled with images of demonstrators battling with police and being dragged from the room while shareholders watched on with horrified looks and the Chairman banged his gavel calling “Order, Order!”

“Holy shit” Peter said as a volley of eggs was launched at the head-table, two of them hitting seated directors.

“The meeting was bought to order after nearly half an hour and then closed to the media. Most shareholders emerging at the close of the meeting refused to comment about proceedings. A full report will be shown following the news on The 7.30 Report.”

Lawrence turned off the television as Peter asked “Who’s this Mercedes mob?”

“It’s a big overseas outfit. Into all sorts of things including oil and gas. You must’ve heard of them.”

Over coffee, the lawyer briefed him on Mercedes Occidental. “It’s part of a Swiss based conglomerate. The oil division has operations in the States, the Gulf and Nigeria. They’re developing a gas hub on the North West Shelf and they’re about to start drilling throughout Queensland and northern New South Wales for coal seam gas. That’s why the interest in Nanderra.”

“I still can’t believe they can march willy-nilly onto private property and start drilling.”

“Exploration rights override property rights I’m afraid. They’re allowed unfettered access to their mineral leases.”

“What happens if they find anything? How much do they have to pay me?”

“Nothing. It’s all theirs.”

“That *can’t* be right.”

“It’s the law. I had a look at the purchase agreement for the station in case there was something in it that might help us. Mineral and gas rights aren’t mentioned. There is something you might want to consider but you

might not like it.”

“Fire away.”

“This mob CAAF that stirred up the trouble down in Melbourne. Perhaps you should talk with them.”

“You have to be joking! They’re a mob of greenies. I don’t want them around either. A bunch of bloody shit stirrers. No thanks.”

“I’ve looked at CAAF. They seem a different mob to your average greenie. They’re dedicated to stopping this type of drilling going ahead. It’s worth a talk to see where they lie.”

“Listen mate, I reckon give them an inch, they’ll take a mile.”

“What about I set up a meeting... privately... with one of the organisers? Nothing official, say over a drink? Then we can see whether you want to do anything else with them. When do you go back?”

“Friday. I still don’t like it, but set it up. Just a drink mind you. I’m not wasting dinner on this mob.”

Brisbane did nothing for him, he mused. It never had. He hated the place. In fact he hated all cities; too big, too noisy, too many people. The warm sun beat down on him as he walked across the railway bridge in Upper Roma Street. He still didn’t think meeting this CAAF mob was a good idea, but he didn’t want to let Lawrence down.

It was late afternoon when he entered the Casablanca Bar in Petrie Terrace. Thank God it wasn’t one of those dimly lit places where you had to shout to make yourself heard.

“Peter Davorets?”

He turned around to be faced by a woman in her mid-twenties dressed in a well-tailored cream linen suit and matching high heels, light brown hair gently cascading to her shoulders.

“Ms Farnham?”

She nodded. “You look like you’d prefer to sit in the sun” she said.

They found a table and ordered drinks. “Lawrence tells me you own Nanderra.”

“That’s right. Cheers” he added raising his glass.

“How long have you owned it?”

“Just over five years. My father died and left me some money. The bank owns the rest.”

“Is that why you’re allowing Mercedes Oil to drill? To help pay the bills?”

“Is that what Lawrence told you?”

“He didn’t tell me much at all. He said you owned the place and he thought we should meet.”

“How long have you two known each other?”

She looked at him coolly. “About five minutes. You haven’t answered my question.”

“Question?”

“Are you letting them drill to help pay the bills?”

“Who said anything about letting them drill? This is all about keeping these bastards off my property.”

“So the damage to the environment doesn’t count?”

“Of course the environment counts. But keep them off the place, they can’t do any damage. Look I realise you lot have your own agenda. That’s fine, but it doesn’t help me.”

She leaned back in her chair. “So what do you intend to do?”

“I’ll work something out. I’m sorry Miss Farnham, this meeting was a mistake. I’ll muddle through on my own. I always have. Thanks for your time.” He dropped a twenty dollar bill on the table. “I’ll pay for the drinks.”

“Mr Davorets!” she called after him. He turned back towards her. “Are you always this touchy?”

“I guess I’m not used to being attacked by someone who doesn’t know the facts.”

“I apologise” she said before he could turn away. “Can we start again?” He stood there and stared at her. “Please? I promise to behave.”

He hesitated, then against his better judgement, sat back down.

“I apologise” she said again. “We’re fighting a massive battle against these companies who seem to have the government on their side. I really

don't know anything about you or Nanderra but my contacts indicated that Mercedes is rumoured to have done a deal to drill on your land."

"I've done no deals. I only know what I've seen on the news."

"So what are you planning to do?"

"I don't know. It seems they hold all the cards and I can't stop them doing whatever they like."

"Have you ever heard of fracking?"

"Yes, but I don't know anything about it."

"Fracking. It's short for hydraulic fractured mining. It's a process where a borehole is drilled anywhere up to five thousand feet deep into rock to capture gas or oil and allow it to flow to the surface under pressure. It enables the miners to get to reserves that would be uneconomic by more traditional methods."

"What makes them think there's gas on Nanderra?"

"There're huge reserves of gas right across inland Australia. You're not on your own. These companies are also taking out permits to drill in the western suburbs of Sydney and places like Byron Bay. They really don't care where they drill."

"And the government's letting them?"

"They're virtual partners. You have to remember governments get the royalties and taxes. It's like gambling taxes. Once government, any government, is hooked on them, they can't let go. You won't get any help from that quarter believe me."

"Shit. I had this idea of going to the Minister."

"Good luck. It gets worse. The whole of inland Queensland sits on the Great Artesian Basin. This madness has the potential to poison the underground water supplies. To get to the gas, they inject the rock with high pressure water mixed with a cocktail of chemicals and sands including radioactive materials. There're well documented cases of contamination in places like America and Canada. In France, they've banned the process."

"So you're saying I've no hope of stopping them?"

"Not at all. I'm saying it's no good relying on the government to help. It's a bit like asking a heroin dealer to help you kick the habit."

"You don't much like the government do you?" he said with a smile.

"Not the current ones... ..either persuasion" she smiled back. "But I'm

sure you didn't come here to hear my political views."

He stood again and extended his hand. "Thanks for your time Miss Farnham. At least I know a little more about what's happening. Doesn't help me much but I appreciate your time."

"Don't go yet Peter. It's my shout. I'd like to know a bit more about Nanderra. There may be something we can do yet."

She called over a waiter and placed her order.

"What made you buy Nanderra?" she asked.

"I was born on a station in the Territory, third of three boys. My eldest brother took it over, but I decided I wanted to be my own boss rather than work for him or anyone else. Nanderra came on the market. I'm only the third owner in it's history."

"Why'd the previous owners let it go? Wasn't there an eldest son?"

He looked at her sharply. "Why would you say that?"

"I thought most of the time they passed down through the family like in your brother's situation."

"Ah!" he said, his features softening. "The legend of the rural aristocracy! No. It was owned by a Brazilian company. They'd owned it for about eighty years and decided it was time to get out. The drought wasn't helping."

"It sounds like a hard life. I'm not sure how I'd go."

"It has its moments but I wouldn't swap it for quids. I've spent the first few years hanging in, but the breaking of the drought will change everything."

"And Mrs Davorets, how does she like it?"

"Dunno. I've never asked her."

"Don't you think you should, sometime?" She raised an amused eyebrow "Or don't aristocratic wives have a say?"

He laughed. "You never give up do you? I'll do you a deal. When I meet her, I'll ask her. Okay?"

"*Touché*" she replied raising her glass in a toast.

"Do you think there's anything that can be done to stop this mob?"

“Let me do some research. For a start, it’ll be interesting to see what’s happening on the neighbouring properties. I’ll also find out when the application was lodged and what conditions, if any, have been attached to the permit. When I have those I can contact you again. How does that sound?”

“Sounds fine. Perhaps you might want to look at Nanderra as well.”

“I’d like that. I’d never heard of the place before all this happened” she said as the meal arrived. “You say there’s only been three owners.”

“Three owners, although quite a few managers. It has a fascinating history, although how much is fact and how much is fiction is debatable. Many of the stockhands’ families have worked on the station for generations. Much of what I’ve learned comes from them. The most fascinating story I’ve heard revolves around a mixed-blood boy who was removed from the property by the government around 1900. My, that fish looks good doesn’t it?”

“Tastes good too. You mean like a stolen child? The boy that is.”

“Something like that. As I said, how much is fact I don’t know. You interested in hearing it?”

“Yes, I sure am. But don’t let your fish go cold.”

He nodded and picked up his knife and fork. “It all started with the arrival of a new manager in the late 1880’s...”

Chapter 2

Nanderra Station, Outback Queensland, Australia

August 1899

The sun marched towards its zenith, beating down relentlessly on the children playing in the parched dusty clearing. To one side where a small clump of Native Plum trees were breaking out in spring flowers sat a group of elders. Opposite them, across the clearing, the women gathered, cross-legged, swatting at the persistent bush flies that were a feature of this arid land.

Between them, a group of young boys were playing puuny in the middle of the clearing; one of them running around with his eyes closed, trying to tag the others who taunted him, laughing as they scrambled out of his way. Under the watchful eye of the women, the young girls were playing their own game of wana nearby; a game where one of the girls protected her “baby” represented by a stick from the others who were trying to steal or beat it.

The calm of the clearing was broken as one of the stockmen rode into the clearing.

“Troopers!” he cried. “Troopers! They’s comin’ up the track!”

Where the track crested the horizon, a distant cloud of dust could be seen drawing towards them. The women young and old immediately sprang into action calling urgently for their children. Scooping up the younger ones, some hid in the nearby makeshift shelters while others ran as fast as they could into the surrounding countryside clutching their offspring in the hope they would’ve disappeared before the troopers arrived.

Fear ran through the camp as a wagon, flanked by four mounted policemen, drew to a stop in front of the collection of ramshackle huts. An official, dressed in a dark grey gabardine suit and a black derby hat despite

the heat and the blazing sun, stepped down and looked disdainfully at the campsites and the scattered rubbish littering the ground. He kicked at an empty rusting bully-beef can lying nearby before turning to the man closest to him.

“The boy Sergeant, get the boy”.

“Yessir” the policeman replied as he beckoned his three companions.

“Hawkins, take those huts to the left; Rogers, you the ones on the right. Adams, you take the rear and keep watch. Turn the place upside down till you find the boy. No-one leaves, you understand?” he barked.

The three men fanned out while the sergeant remained in the clearing watching the settlement closely. To his right, he spotted the small group of Aboriginal elders sitting under the tree.

“You there” he called out, pointing to one of the men. “Get over here.”

The old man hesitated before stepping forward until only six feet separated him from the policeman.

“We’ve come for the half-caste” the policeman said. “We’ll be gone as soon as we have him. Where is he?”

The old man shook his head.

“Dunno. There ain’t no half-caste kid here” he replied.

“Who said anything about a kid” the sergeant snapped back. As he spoke, a scream rent the air coming from the hut being searched by Trooper Hawkins followed by the crash of tin plates and the sound of breaking furniture.

The two policemen worked their way through the collection of ramshackle dwellings, demolishing the interiors. The sound of the huts being pulled apart was accompanied by occasional curses from the policemen intermingled with cries from the women and children.

The official waited impatiently under the blazing sun, the oppressive humidity pressing in from all sides, swatting at the persistent flies buzzing his face and seeking out the moisture of his ears, eyes and nose.

“God this is an accursed bloody country” he swore as he retrieved his handkerchief to wipe his brow. “Can’t they bloody hurry up?” he demanded of the sergeant. With the ball of his hand, he banged at his right ear

where a fly had become caught in the inner confines. It's buzzing as it tried to escape was maddening.

"You want the boy or not?" the sergeant replied sharply.

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Nearby the huts was a rubbish mound around which squatted a group of women watching. As one of the troopers moved towards them, they broke into a low mournful song. He suddenly pushed two of the women aside and delved into the mound before hefting a young boy out of the middle of it. The boy's nose was running but his cries couldn't be heard until the singing stopped.

"Billy! No! No! Gimme back Billy" one of them screamed followed by a string of curses and the sound of a hand connecting with bare skin.

"Billy!"

The policeman stumbled out of the garbage heap holding a screaming kid under his arm, while fending off an Aboriginal woman who was trying to grab him back.

"Get back you black bitch" Adams yelled aiming a kick at her as she lunged after him.

"Gimme back Billy. Gimme my boy" she was screaming as the child was dragged before the sergeant.

As the young boy was deposited into the wagon, the woman tried to climb in behind him but she was dragged away screaming. The sergeant pointed to the old Aboriginal man. "You! Get this bitch under control" he said before turning back to the official.

"You've got what you came for, now let's get out of here" he said as he swatted at the flies buzzing his face.

"About bloody time" the government official acknowledged, climbing aboard the wagon and grabbing hold of the boy who by now was howling for his mother. As the convoy disappeared back down the track, the wailing woman lay in the dirt banging at the ground with her fists. "Billy, gimme back Billy" she screamed as the other women and the elders gathered around her.

The young boy kept trying to escape as the group travelled away from the camp.

"Stop it you little shit" the official remonstrated with him giving him a cuff on the back of the head, "or I'll have you tied to the wagon."

The boy slumped to the floor, his streaming eyes level with the wagon's tailgate as the trooper went to open the gate. By the time they reached the cattle grid he was too exhausted to put up any further fight.

As they crossed the grid, off to the side unseen by all but Billy, a woman sat on horseback beneath a paperbark tree watching the small procession.

He'd seen her before, he was sure of it. She looked like the woman who'd come one day during The Wet, when the creek was up and he'd been playing at its edge. Rosie had run across the clearing and grabbed him, clutching him as the pale woman stopped her horse alongside them. He'd never seen anyone with skin so white and he'd stared up, mesmerised, as two large tears trickled down her face.

Dismounting, she'd stepped closer while Rosie clutched him tighter.

"May I?" the woman asked as she extended her arms towards the pair.

"No" Rosie replied stepping back, pulling Billy with her. "im's mine."

"I only want to hold him" the stranger replied. "May I?" she asked again. Her voice was as soft and melodious as a bird's and broke as tears welled in her eyes.

Rosie vigorously shook her head. The woman stood staring at them for a moment longer before she remounted her horse, wheeled it around and rode out of the clearing,

He thought he'd seen her again about six months later watching him play from a distance. Once more she stared at him, this time not speaking. As before tears coursed down her face but as Rosie appeared from her hut and ran across the clearing screaming "Billie, come 'ere", the woman turned and rode away.

Not long after that a whitey had reigned-in his horse near where Billy was playing with a group of small boys.

"You! Boy! Come here!" the man demanded.

The boy stood mesmerised and shaking before Rosie emerged from the nearby shack and grabbed him. She was shaking so hard with fear she had trouble holding him.

"Put him down."

Extending his riding crop so that it rested under the boy's chin, the

man tilted it upwards to inspect him.

Staring at the boy, the man's hand trembled and when he finally spoke there appeared to be a tremor in his voice.

"Where's the father?" he demanded.

There was no answer from any of the sullen group of faces assembled in front of him.

"I said, where's the father?" the white man demanded again, louder this time.

"im's gone" Rosie answered in little more than a whisper, her head hanging, unable to look at the man in front of her.

For a long moment, the whitey continued to stare at the boy crying in front of him before abruptly riding off.

And now there she was again, on her horse beneath the tree. Even in his distress he could see she looked as miserable as he was. Billy's last view of Nanderra Station was the woman, tears streaming unchecked down her face, as she watched the party go by.

On a cold September morning, nearly three weeks after being snatched from the camp, Billy was deposited at the Mission of Our Sacred Lady at Willowbank inland from Brisbane.

The compound was a series of ramshackle buildings constructed around a central courtyard set amidst rolling farmlands. As the paperwork required for the handover of the child was completed, Billy cowered in the corner of the priest's office.

The living conditions at the mission were little different from those he'd left behind except home was now an old iron bed shared with two other boys, the mattress stained both by its previous occupants and the rain that entered the dormitory through the holes in the roof. The bedding was nothing but a rough blanket, and on cold nights the three boys would huddle together for warmth.

Billy's co-inhabitants were both sickly boys. The older one, aged six, was constantly wracked with a cough which kept Billy – and most others in the dormitory – awake for long periods. Because he couldn't undertake the hard manual labour required of all the inmates, the sickly boy was often the

subject of beatings from the priests who claimed he was lazy. Four months after Billy arrived, the boy was taken from the bed and deposited in the sickbay where he died of tuberculosis several days later.

By then, the second of his bedmates was also affected by the same wracking cough and two months later, he too was dead. Billy never contracted the disease but for a time he had the relative luxury of the bed to himself.

Barely four years old, Billy, despite being one of the youngest at the mission, started his working life foraging for firewood with a party of younger boys under the watchful eyes of one of the priests.

What they lacked in compassion and humanity, the priests made up for in discipline. Any transgression, however minor, earned the boys a punishment ranging from a cut in food rations to a beating. Serious “crimes”, ranged from forgetting to cross themselves or saying grace before meals, to not standing when one of the priests entered a room. Each transgression could earn a period in solitary confinement in a dark windowless room.

It didn't take Billy long to develop acute hearing as he listened for one of his tormentors creeping up on him, hoping to catch him engaged in some act of wrongdoing.

During the evening meal about three months after the death of his second bedmate, Billy dropped his mug on the floor with a clatter. The room instantly fell silent. Father Gabriel, the tall, gaunt, sadistic priest who supervised mealtimes like a predatory hawk, stood up from his high stool in the corner and strode towards Billy.

“Pick it up you stupid boy” the priest shouted as he drew closer to the unfortunate miscreant.

Rigid with fear, the boy slipped from his chair. As he bent down to pick up the mug, Father Gabriel landed a tremendous kick to his backside sending him sprawling to the floor.

“Stand up you imbecile” he shouted at the quivering boy.

Scrambling to his feet in front of the priest, Billy was cuffed across the head with the back of the priest's hand.

“What do you have to say for yourself boy? Have you lost your tongue?”

Billy tried to answer but the words wouldn't come. He stood there crying and shaking his head.

"The Lord in his infinite wisdom has no time for scum like you" the priest shouted at him, his face now a brilliant red, highlighting the network of veins on his nose and cheeks; spittle flying from his mouth as he worked himself into a rage.

By now Billy was shaking so violently, he dropped his mug a second time. A pin could've been heard to drop as all eyes were transfixed on the unfortunate boy and the enraged priest.

"Insolence!" the man screamed. "Insolence!" he repeated, his voice rising even louder. "We have a remedy for the likes of you."

Cuffing him a second time, Father Gabriel grabbed Billy by his hair and pulling him from the room, half dragged the boy to the punishment cell where he tossed him into the dark, airless room. Billy landed face down on the floor as the door banged behind him. The lock was slammed home, its clanging hollowness reverberating in the darkness.

Never in his short life had he experienced such complete terror. The darkness was absolute. No light of any sort penetrated the room. Long into the night he cried; he screamed; he banged on the walls until his tiny fists turned raw and started to bleed.

At first Billy didn't stir when the key was inserted into the lock the following morning. The door opened to reveal a newly ordained priest aged in his early twenties. He crossed the small room to where Billy was curled in a foetal position in a corner of the cell and shook the boy awake.

"Get up!"

The boy shrank from the man's touch, staring at him with wide eyes.

"It's alright boy, I won't harm you. Get up and follow me."

Bending down and taking Billy's hand, he noticed the boy's fingers and knuckles were raw and skinned from his fruitless attempts to escape the room.

"We'll wash those as well" he said as he led the boy from the room.

Crossing the courtyard they were both startled by a bellow from the porch of the chapel.

“Father Luke! Where are you taking that boy?”

His tormentor of the night before stepped out from the shadows into the sunlight, hurrying across to where Billy hid behind the younger priest’s cassock.

“The infirmary” the young priest replied “to bandage his hands.”

Father Gabriel reached out and grabbed one of the boy’s hands.

“Mere scratches, that’s all. Not worth the time or the expense of the medicine. It’s no use being soft with this scum, Father, they’re all lazy. You’ll learn that soon enough... once you start mollycoddling them, they’re next to useless.”

“I agree, but Father Alfonso has placed him in my work detail and I don’t want him shirking. With bandages on his hands he’ll have no excuse.”

With that, he pulled Billy with him towards the infirmary.

“Come on boy, move it. We haven’t got all day. There’s work to be done or there’ll be no dinner for you” he snapped as he hurried away, watched by the older priest.

Once inside the infirmary his tone softened.

“They don’t mean you harm boy, but you best stay out of their way and do what you’re told. Now what’s your name?” he asked.

“B... B... B... Billy” the boy stammered, bewildered by the changes in his protector’s attitude.

“How old are you?” Father Luke asked as he worked at washing the boy’s hands.

“Nearly f... five F... F... Father” Billy answered.

“Holy Mother of God” the priest uttered, looking around to ensure they were alone. He kept working at cleaning up the boy’s hands as he spoke.

“I can’t protect you all the time you understand, but I’ll do what I can. Like I said, you keep out of the way of the other Fathers and do everything you’re told. You do that and they’ll leave you alone by and by.”

True to his word, Father Luke acted as the boy’s protector often interceding on Billy’s behalf when the other priests singled him out for punish-

ment. But the priests were not the sole source of Billy's problems. He was a loner, making few friends amongst the other boys who in turn resented him for the favouritism being displayed towards him by the young priest. To repay his protector, it became Billy's habit to clean the priest's boots each morning while he was in the chapel for his morning prayers.

One day following a particularly savage beating from one of the priests, Billy went missing. Father Luke searched for him without success. Giving up, the young priest returned to his own room where he found the boy hiding; squatting on the floor, his arms pulled over his head sobbing.

He sat beside the distressed boy, his arm resting on a trembling shoulder and tried to comfort him. "Understand that God has not abandoned you Billy. You'll find that each visit to purgatory awakens our souls and gives credence to the existence of some greater being."

In the winter of 1904, returning from his work party Billy found a new boy lying on his mattress.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"What's it to you?" the boy replied.

"That's my bed."

"Looks like it's mine now mate".

Billy stood there uncertain what to do. He'd had the luxury of the bed to himself for over twelve months and he wasn't in any hurry to share it again. The dormitory was filling up with the other boys returning from work and they could sense the animosity between the two as they stared each other out.

"Fight" went up a cry from the rear of the room and it was quickly taken up as a chant.

"Fight... .. fight... .. fight... .."

The chant increased in intensity as the spectators pressed closer. It was obvious to Billy that despite the other boy being bigger and older, he was going to have to fight him. He moved closer to the bed raising his fists as a priest entered the room unnoticed. As the older boy stood up, the priest pounced.

"What's going on here?" he yelled, startling everyone.

As the other boys scattered to their beds he continued yelling.

“Well, well, well it’s Johnny isn’t it? True to form I see. We’ve been warned about you. Here barely half an hour and up to your old tricks already are you? Well this isn’t some sissy government institution where you can do what you like. You’ll learn your place here, my boy.”

He grabbed the older boy by the ear.

“We’ve got the place for you. Perhaps we could put a permanent bed in there just for you?” he said as he started to pull him from the room before he was stopped by Billy’s voice.

“It wasn’t his fault Father, it was mine.”

A gasp went up around the room from the watching boys. It was unknown for anyone to take the blame for any transgression. It was an accepted fact of life that everyone tried their hardest to shift the blame to some other unfortunate soul.

“*Your* fault boy?” the Father asked as he stopped and turned around.

“Yes sir. I told him he’d have to fight me for the bed.”

The priest hesitated for a moment then, his voice dripping with sarcasm, he replied, “Since you two have hit it off so well and are friends already, you can spend the night together. You know the way” he indicated to Billy.

As the key turned in the lock, sealing them into the dark, windowless cell, Johnny spoke.

“What’d you do that for?”

“Dunno” Billy replied. He really didn’t know what’d made him step forward and take the blame but for some reason it seemed the right thing to do.

“You weird or summit?”

Billy didn’t answer, instead feeling his way to the wall and sitting down.

“Are all the priests bastards here?” Johnny asked.

“All except Father Luke.”

They fell silent again before Billy asked “What did he mean ‘up to your old tricks already?’”

“I got moved from a home near Maryborough. Before that there were two others. I won’t be here long before they’ll move me again” Johnny said, a hint of pride in his voice. “You’ve gotta show them who’s boss.”

“Where’d you come from before that?”

“Up the Gulf Country somewhere. Got taken as a baby but don’t remember anything about it.”

When they were released from the cell next morning, Billy hurried as usual to Father Luke’s room to clean his shoes only to find it empty of all the priest’s belongings. Bewildered, he looked around, tears welling in his eyes. Something made him look up at the doorway to see Father Gabriel standing there with a smirk on his face.

“Looking for someone boy?” he asked.

Flustered, Billy replied “Father Luke.”

“Ah yes, your good friend Father Luke” the priest said. “Well you won’t be seeing him again. He’s gone. Off to spread his message of comfort and light in a Mission amongst the heathens.”

He continued to block Billy’s escape before finally stepping aside.

“You’ll find life here very different now you little black bastard” he sneered as Billy edged forward hoping to squeeze past his tormentor. As he did so the priest raised his hand, hitting the boy across the back of the head making him stumble.

“Down payment” the priest shouted after the retreating boy, “and there’s plenty more where that came from!”

Billy was re-assigned kitchen duties; cleaning the pots and pans and plates, hosing the floors and sluicing out the drains, but despite being close to the mission’s food source, he was constantly hungry. He often thought about stealing food, but the priest who supervised the boys watched them too closely; even the few scraps were out of bounds. The previous kitchen-boy whose job he’d inherited, had been caught red-handed stealing bread from the larder. When he’d emerged with his booty hidden in the folds of his clothing, Father Aloysius had pounced.

“You despicable little heathen” he snarled, dragging the unfortunate thief into the courtyard where he was flogged before the assembled in-

mates. Stealing was second only to blasphemy in the priests' litany of sins and the boy spent a week in sickbay recovering. Billy quickly decided his hunger wasn't that desperate.

Johnny was assigned to the vegetable gardens spending his days weeding and harvesting. On Sundays, after morning mass, the boys were allowed to escape the confines of the central courtyard to the relative freedom of the nearby fields.

They hadn't been sharing the bed long when Billy found a small flat tobacco tin hidden under the mattress. Inside was a collection of nails and bits of wire and twine. He asked what it was.

"You'll see" Johnny replied mysteriously.

On one of their Sunday breaks, a couple of weeks later, the two boys were lying on their backs in the field. Billy was dozing when he was awakened by Johnny shaking him.

"Wanna play Fathers?" his friend asked with a grin.

"What's that?" Billy asked mystified, sitting up.

"We need to catch some dragonflies first" Johnny told him. "Put them in this tin so they can't fly away" he said pointing to a small cigarette tin on the ground nearby.

Once the requisite number of dragonflies had been captured, Johnny told him each of the insects needed to be given a name.

"This one's Father Gabriel. See, he's the biggest meanest looking one. This one's Father Antonio; he's the fattest one."

"Then this must be Father Vincent" Billy said laughing as he got into the swing of the game. "He's the smallest sickliest looking one."

"We've forgotten Father Alfonso" Billy commented once all the insects had been named.

"No" Johnny replied. "He's got a special game of his own. We can play that another day."

He reached into the tin and extracted "Father Roland". The dragonfly's alter ego was one of the older priests at the mission who enjoyed punishing boys by making them stand on tiptoes while balancing a book on their head. If the book dropped or the boy tired before the allotted time, Father

Roland would deliver a beating with a thin bamboo cane. Johnny had suffered such a beating a couple of days before.

“I can’t make him stand on his toes but I can do this” Johnny muttered as he pulled the wings off one side of the insect’s body, letting it go so that it fluttered on the ground in circles. After a minute or so, he pulled off two of the insect’s legs, slowly continuing until he had removed all of its appendages.

Billy looked on, fixated.

“Your turn” Johnny said, thrusting the tin at him.

Billy hesitated before reaching in and removing “Father Vincent”. He went to follow Johnny’s lead but found he couldn’t bring himself to mutilate the insect.

“What’re you doing? You do it like this. Watch me” Johnny snapped at him as he demonstrated his technique once again.

Billy begged off, “I’ll watch so I know what to do next time.”

“Next time we’ll play Father Alfonso” his companion said with a laugh. “Now that’s gonna be real fun.”

Chapter 3

Nanderra Station, Outback Queensland, Australia
2011

The Piper Seneca touched down on the gravel airstrip and taxied to where Peter Davorets waited by the Landcruiser. The howl of the engines subsided as the door opened and Libby stepped out onto the wing, the breeze tussling her short, brown hair, before jumping lightly onto the ground.

Peter leaned against the bonnet as she waved and headed towards him.

“Quiet there” he yelled at the two kelpies barking from the vehicle’s tray. “Welcome to Nanderra miss, gas capital of outback Queensland” he said straightening up and shaking her hand. “Sorry about the din back there. They don’t see too many strangers. Good flight?”

“It was. It really makes you appreciate the loneliness and size of the Outback doesn’t it?”

“Giddy there Ted. She behave herself, or did you have to tie her down?” he asked the pilot.

“Smacked her about a bit on takeoff and that sorted her out” the pilot replied, receiving a punch on his arm from Libby for his trouble. “Your mail mate” he said passing a canvas bag across. “I won’t hang about. The weather’s not crash hot round Birdsville so I’ll keep going before it closes in.”

Peter reached into the back of the Landcruiser and passed over a similar bag along with two cartons.

“How’s Susie? Had that nipper yet?”

“No still a month away. She seems to thrive on being pregnant. Don’t know how she does it.”

“This is number seven” Peter explained to Libby. “Rumour has it he’s trying for his own cricket team.”

“Along with a couple of subs most likely” Ted quipped heading back towards the plane. “See you at the end of the week mate” he called over his shoulder before climbing back into the aircraft.

Peter collected Libby’s bags and half a dozen pieces of freight and carried them back to the vehicle. They watched the plane taxi down the runway before it turned and accelerated down the strip, took off and banked to the left until it was a dot in the sky.

“Not as warm as I thought it’d be” Libby commented. “I could do with a jumper.”

“End of the wet. Bit later than usual this year but I think we’ve seen the last of the rain. I hope it clears up soon so we can start mustering.”

They climbed into the Landcruiser.

“Hello guys, what’re your names?” she asked the two dogs as they licked and nuzzled at her hand.

“Rolly and Tye. Push them away if they become a nuisance.”

“They won’t be a problem. I’m a dog person. You’re lovely, aren’t you guys.”

They rode in silence for a couple of minutes before he said “You’ve done something to your hair and stocked up for the trip.”

“Sorry?”

“Don’t be. Your hair looks different and the trousers and boots. Just the thing for the outback. J.M. Williams?”

“Don’t be such a smart-arse. I thought cutting my hair shorter would be wise as I expected it to be much warmer. And for your information, I bought my clothes on-line from Outback Trading.”

“You know, when I met you back in Brisbane, you weren’t exactly what I was expecting.”

“What’d you expect?”

“Not the business suit that’s for sure.”

She broke into a laugh. “Let me see. Glasses, probably steel rimmed,

hair pulled back, tie-dyed tank top with armpit hairs poking out, legs unshaven. Something like that?”

“Not quite like that either” he responded turning red.

“Well if it’s any help, you sort of threw me in your suit and tie. I expected open necked shirt with moleskins or jeans and scuffed boots. Evens?”

He laughed back. “Even.”

She glanced at him as he drove along the muddy track pointing out items of interest. She couldn’t get his measure. For all his easy going exterior, he was nobody’s fool; you certainly wouldn’t want to underestimate him. She felt the miners might’ve done exactly that. There was an inner toughness, bought about she suspected, by having to negotiate with this harsh unforgiving land. Then there was the story he’d told her over dinner. It showed his love of the property. The fact he’d sat down in the dust with his native workers and taken the time to learn something of Nanderra’s history intrigued her. From her own background, she knew that was unusual enough.

Chapter 4

*Mission of Our Sacred Lady, Willowbank, Queensland, Australia
March 1904*

Life with Johnny was never dull. The older boy went out of his way to annoy the priests. In particular, he loved targeting Father Severus, a tall aesthete who had a fetish for ensuring that all the religious pictures and icons hung perfectly straight. Johnny made it his practice to ensure they were all knocked askew driving Father Severus to distraction. The priest would lay in wait for the offending boy, but Johnny seemed to possess a sixth sense and always eluded being caught.

Another time, Johnny crept into the sick bay, stole a bottle of laxative and applied it to the priests' meal before it was carried from the kitchen. He then filled the bottle with water and replaced it in the infirmary before its absence was noted. It was some time before it was discovered the bottle had been tampered with and while nothing could be proved, all the boys were punished as a result.

Knowing of Johnny's poor record at his previous missions, Father Alfonso was convinced that the boy was responsible for many of the incidents at the Mission of our Sacred Lady. Before long Johnny was being blamed and punished for any mishap. Because of their relationship, Billy would often share in the punishments, ranging from loss of meals or being beaten to being locked in the windowless room.

Billy's formal education was basic and the little he received was discontinued at the age of ten. After that he laboured full-time, his pitiful wages expropriated by the mission to pay for the care they lavished upon him. But he grew strong with the work, his shoulders broadening and his features dropping any vestiges of childhood.

He was a handsome boy with a finely chiselled chin, tall with curly,

black hair and his skin was the colour of milky coffee. He was soon taller than Johnny, towering over his friend's athletic, wiry frame. Still, he could never best his friend when they wrestled, no matter how hard he tried. What Johnny had in physical prowess, Billy made up for in intellect; together they made a formidable team, constantly watching out for each other. Even Father Gabriel learned to be wary of them.

It was Father Laurence's idea to assemble the rudimentary boxing ring in the courtyard.

"These boys have too much time on their hands" he grumbled to Father Alfonso. "We need to make sure they don't have any spare time for the Devil's use."

A combination of his lightning speed and power packed punches ensured that it wasn't long before Johnny was known as "King of the Ring".

There was great consternation one morning when the bell to the outside door rang several times before it was answered by one of the novices. The boys hung from the upper windows pointing and gesticulating at the caravan of wagons that had pulled up outside.

"It's a circus" Billy said astonished. "I can see a lion in one of the cages. Look."

A little later the boys were all called together into the courtyard. Even though it meant short rations for the boys for the next couple of weeks, the priests had sold produce and water to the travelling troupe, and the boys were set to work loading the wagons.

"I see you've got a boxing ring" the man from the circus commented. "We've got a boxer with us. How old are your boys? Perhaps there's one who'd like to get in the ring with him. We could put on a demonstration as our way of thanks."

The boxer was in his teens, coloured like the mission inhabitants. He climbed over the ropes in his bright red shorts and strutted arrogantly around the ring.

"I have just the boy" Father Alfonso commented calling Johnny forward.

"Bit small don't you think?" the man said. "What about that one"

pointing to Billy.

“What about both?” the priest replied. “A pair of trouble makers if ever there were.”

“There must be at least five years between the two boys Father” one of the other priests commented.

“Yes there must be” the senior priest replied with a malicious grin.

The bout with Billy was short. Never one for serious fighting, he was totally uncoordinated and outclassed from the start. It was only his ability to duck and weave that saw him still standing at the end of the first round.

“Keep it going Billy” Johnny murmured as he acted as his friend’s second. “If you can keep running faster than him, you’ll last the other nine rounds.” The circus boxer had other ideas. As the bell rang for the second round, he exploded from his corner and was on Billy’s side of the ring almost before the younger boy was on his feet. Two lightning fast jabs to the jaw followed by a haymaker to the stomach saw Billy flattened.

“You next” Father Alfonso said as Johnny was pushed into the ring. “A pound note if your boy can wipe the smile off this little black bastard’s face in the first round” he told the circus man.

The boxer smiled at hearing the news. Johnny was a good two inches shorter than his opponent, but what he lacked in height, he possessed in rat cunning. Dancing on the balls of his feet, he stayed just outside the boxer’s reach, darting in and out and landing punches to his opponent’s body. The fight was in its third round, both boys taking punishing blows from the other, when Johnny feinted to the right throwing the older boy off balance before charging in and landing a heavy blow to his opponent’s solar plexus. The other boy stopped still, shocked and out of breath when Johnny darted in again, landing another punch to the gut and an uppercut to the jaw as the boxer slowly crumpled to the ground.

There was a moment’s silence before the watching boys broke out in cheers “Johnny... Johnny... King of the Ring.”

“Silence!” Father Alfonso bellowed. “To your rooms, NOW!”

“A moment Father. Those two boys. You want to sell them?” the circus man asked.

“Sell them?” the priest echoed.

“Sure, I’ll take them off your hands. Five pounds each.”

The priest stood back considering the offer, struggling with his deci-

sion. Finally he said “If I thought I could... but the paperwork.” He shook his head. “Don’t think I’m not tempted.”

“That one” the man persisted pointing at Billy. “Where’s he from? He doesn’t look like the others. Looks a bit like Peter Jackson.”

“Jackson?” The priest asked.

“Yeah. One of Australia’s greatest boxers. Fought all over the world particularly America – died about three years ago. He was a blackfella came from some place in the West Indies.”

“Sorry sir but this little shit comes from out back of Longreach.” The priest turned and snapped at Billy “Get to your room boy before I’m tempted to change my mind.”

The boxing ring had disappeared before dinnertime and no more mention was ever made of boxing.

“We need to find a frog” Johnny told Billy on one of their Sundays off, pocketing his tin of nails and twine from under the mattress. “I’ve heard them croaking down near the dam at the back of the veggie patch.”

“You know we’re not allowed there” Billy replied. “It’s out of bounds. We get caught and it’ll be big trouble.”

“Everything’s trouble round here mate” said Johnny. “Anyway they’re all in church and won’t know we’re down there. Come on race you.”

It didn’t take them long to find a frog in the reeds on the far side of the dam.

“This is Father Alfonso” Johnny said with mock seriousness as he pushed the frog, held tightly in his hand, close to Billy’s face.

“Say hello to the sinner Father” he added making the sign of the cross with one of the frog’s front legs.

Billy started laughing.

“Now for the real fun. Here, you hold Alfonso” Johnny said, handing the frog to Billy who almost dropped it during the transfer.

“Careful boy” he said, mimicking one of the priests. “If you drop our Blessed Father you’ll have to say twenty Hail Marys with your lips sewn together.”