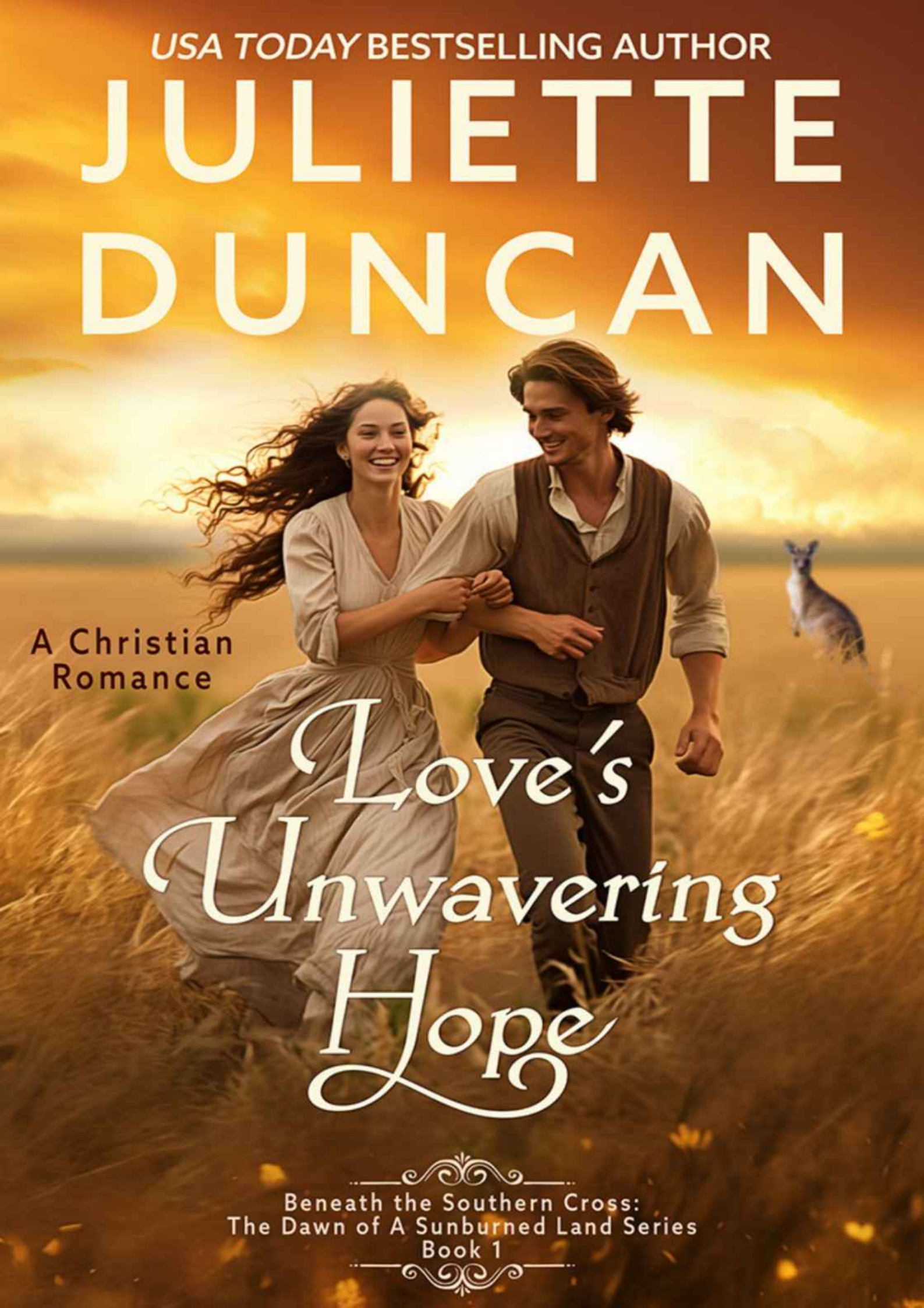


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIETTE DUNCAN

A Christian
Romance

A man and a woman are running through a field of tall, golden grass at sunset. The woman, on the left, has long, dark, curly hair and is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved dress. The man, on the right, has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a light-colored shirt under a dark vest. They are both smiling and looking towards each other. In the background, a small, light-colored dog is running towards them. The sky is a warm, golden yellow, and the overall scene is romantic and hopeful.

Love's Unwavering Hope

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Beneath the Southern Cross:
The Dawn of A Sunburned Land Series
Book 1
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Love's Unwavering Hope

**Beneath the Southern Cross: The Dawn of a
Sunburned Land Series**

Juliette Duncan

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Foreword

HELLO! Thank you for choosing to read this book - I hope you enjoy it! Please note that this story is set in Australia. Australian spelling and terminology have been used and are not typos!

As a thank you for reading this book, I'd like to offer you a FREE GIFT. That's right - my FREE novella, "Hank and Sarah - A Love Story" is available exclusively to my newsletter subscribers. Go to: <http://www.julietteduncan.com/subscribe> claim your copy now and to be notified of my future book releases. I hope you enjoy both books! Have a wonderful day!

Juliette



Prologue

Gippsland, Victoria, 1882

The Cobb and Co coach jostled its passengers, every bump in the road resonating through its timeworn frame. The wheels' creaks and groans echoed the pulsating ache in seventeen-year-old Eliza Reynolds's temples. For three days, she and her twelve-year-old brother, Thomas, had been travelling, first by carriage, then by train, and now by coach, after their father sent word that their home in Gippsland was ready.

In Melbourne these past four months, she and Thomas had felt far from welcome with distant relatives in an already crowded house. Then the promise of a better life in Australia had seemed but a distant dream.

The unimaginable marred their voyage on the *SS Sovereign Star*. Fever cruelly claimed their mother. The memory of her body, veiled by the dark cloak of the sea, was still raw. Their father had been a broken man, and their collective grief felt insurmountable. But their parents' shared dream—a dream whispered in the corners of their tiny London flat—had propelled Father to venture into Australia's wild terrain, seeking out the land they dreamed of.

Now, Gippsland's savage beauty unfurled outside the coach window, its sprawling pastures dotted with livestock and shadowed by towering eucalyptus trees. The sun-drenched terrain, while beautiful, also stood as a stark reminder of how far they were from their London home.

Thomas leaned against her. "How much longer, Eliza?"

Her lips curved as she ruffled his wavy brown hair. "I believe Baker's Run is close."

He tipped his head upwards. "Do you think Father will be there to meet us?"

"He knows our journey's schedule. He should be." She couldn't share her doubts. Her brother already suffered too much. But those doubts clenched her jaw. Had living in this new country changed Father, or was he still the moody and unpredictable man he'd always been? *God, please, let him have changed.*

Thomas, his voice tinged with the innocence of youth and shadows of past sorrows, whispered, "What's our new life going to be like?"

Heart softening, she replied, "It's going to be wonderful."

"I do hope so." He jiggled in his seat, displaying his first eagerness in months. "Maybe Father got the ponies Mother promised us."

She hesitated, thinking of their father's inconsistent nature. "Time will reveal all, dear brother." Straightening, she pointed to a distant collection of buildings. "I do believe that's Baker's Run."

Chapter One

In dawn's golden light, peace filled the valley. A crisp chill hung in the air, carrying with it the earthy scent of dew-laden grass. Nineteen-year-old Jamie Goddard leaned against the porch of his family's homestead, the worn wooden beams cool against his back while awakening magpies warbled in the gum trees. He slipped on his boots as Dart, his faithful hound, wagged his tail.

Boots on, Jamie donned his wide-brimmed hat, shoved his hands in his pockets, and tilting his face to the sun, breathed in deeply. As far as he could see was Goddard land. His family, amongst the region's first settlers, had braved the harsh bush and isolation to forge a life from the untamed wilderness, and he couldn't think of any place he'd rather be.

This was God's own country.

His father joined him on the veranda and clapped him on the back. "Cracker of a morning, son, but we best get to work."

Jamie grinned and rolled up his sleeves, the fabric tight against his muscles. Farmwork never ceased, but he didn't mind. Since boyhood, he'd risen at dawn to help work the land.

“Come on, Dart.” He whistled to the dog, a brown mutt who rarely left his side. They headed to the barn where he and his father mounded hay while the dog ran between them. The pitchfork handle, worn smooth from years of use, fit in his calloused hands, the hay pricking his exposed skin. The scent of the dry hay, sun-warmed and sweet, filled his nostrils.

Soon, his mother and younger siblings, Sarah and Pete, emerged from the homestead to attend to their chores. Theirs was a joint endeavour. Together, they’d weathered hardship and joy, bound by faith and kinship in this place, their whole life and world.

Jamie paused to wipe his brow. Two figures on horseback watched from a distant ridge.

Following Jamie’s gaze, his father’s eyes narrowed. “The Chatworth brothers.”

Jamie’s chest tightened. The brothers, known to covet fertile lands, often employed nefarious means to gain what wasn’t theirs.

“There’ll be no peace till they get what they want.” His father took off his hat and rubbed his hand across his wavy brown hair.

Jamie clenched his jaw. “They’ll never get this land, Father. This farm is our life. We’ll defend it to the last.”

Father clapped a hand on Jamie’s shoulder. “And so we shall. But we’ll not go looking for trouble that isn’t ours.”

Jamie nodded, even as heat simmered in his veins. His father was right—violence shouldn’t be taken lightly or instigated without cause. That was the way of hotheaded fools, not God-fearing men.

Still, as he gazed out at the golden fields and rolling hills, he knew this peace couldn't last forever. Trouble was brewing, whether they willed it or not.

Squaring his broad shoulders, he let out a breath and followed his father. They'd stand together when the time came, but for today at least, there was work to be done and a life to live in this place they called home. The future could wait, but when trouble came, as no doubt it would, the Goddards would be ready.

Midafternoon, under a blazing sun, he saddled his horse Baxter, a sturdy chestnut stallion, for the five-mile ride to Baker's Run on errands for his mother. With the leather saddle hot beneath him and the reins firm in his grip, he tipped his hat to her and headed off. At the halfway brook, he paused, allowing Baxter to drink the cool, clean water bubbling down from the mountains. Heavily wooded, this was bushranger country, and he kept his eyes and ears peeled, although it'd been some time since a robbery had occurred in this locale. Bushrangers or not, the Chatworth brothers instilled fear in the locals, but they didn't scare Jamie. They'd meet their match if they tried to take him on.

The sounds of village life—a blacksmith's hammer striking metal, children's laughter, the market's buzz—and myriad smells from fresh bread to roasting meat wafting on the breeze greeted him as he rode along the main street.

Established for some years now, Baker's Run was the area's central hub, a hard five-day ride from Melbourne. Many a carriage had come to grief in the boggy swamplands east of the city. Good thing the railroad had reached Sale recently, making the journey less arduous.

Outside the general store, Jamie tethered his horse to the hitching post before taking the steps two at a time. A young woman with emerald eyes and hair cascading in waves of burnished copper breezed past him in the doorway, her skirts brushing his boots, lavender fragrance wafting.

Where had *she* come from? His gaze followed her down the steps. It was rare that such a beauty made her way to their small town. Even rarer that they stayed. This rugged country was less than amenable for genteel womenfolk, but something about her—perhaps the way she held her head—suggested she might be more robust than most.

Benjamin Jones, the shopkeeper, a portly man with a white tufted beard and twinkling blue eyes, glanced up from his ledger. “Ah, Jamie lad, put your eyes back in yer head!” His voice, full of warmth and joviality, boomed in the cluttered shop.

Jamie swept off his hat, ran his hand over his wavy hair, damp from the ride, and leaned on the counter. “Who is she?”

“Your new neighbour, Miss Eliza Reynolds. Just arrived on the afternoon coach from Sale with her young brother in tow.”

Jamie’s brow lifted. “She’s Arthur Reynolds’s daughter?”

“Aye.”

“Well, I be. Heard he had a daughter, but figured she’d be like him.”

“Ah, Jamie. Don’t be too hard on the man. He lost his wife, bless her soul.”

And that meant the young woman had lost her mother. Word was she died from fever on the ship from Southampton, somewhere near Cape Town. The man had continued his journey to Gippsland, leaving the children in Melbourne. But

he was a surly character. Kept to himself. Perhaps the daughter took after her mother.

Jamie straightened and removed his hat. "Maybe he'll become more amenable now his family has arrived."

"Time will tell. Now, lad, what are you after today?"

Jamie handed over his mother's list.

Benjamin glanced down at the parchment, adjusting his round spectacles. "Ah, the usual for Mrs. Goddard. And how is she, by the way?"

"As good as ever." Jamie flattened his hands on the wooden countertop. "Keeping us all on our toes, especially Pete."

The shopkeeper began to gather the items from the shelves, their familiarity evident in the way he moved. Flour, salt, a spool of thread, and other sundries were soon bundled into a brown paper parcel.

"You got any of that apple jam? Mother's been asking after it since last week."

"Got a new batch in just yesterday." Benjamin bent down and rummaged under the counter before producing a jar with a golden-red hue. "It's Mrs. Mitchell's preserve. Best in Gippsland."

Jamie grinned. "Mother will be pleased."

With his purchases complete, he delved into his pockets, produced the required coins, and placed them on the counter. The clinking of money was soon followed by Benjamin's good-natured banter. "And do try to keep your eyes and mind on the road when you head back," he teased, nodding towards the direction Miss Reynolds had taken.

Jamie ducked his head, a slight heat rising in his cheeks. "I'll do my best."

After securing his purchases in a satchel, he stepped outside, untethered Baxter, and swung into the saddle, his gaze seeking out Miss Reynolds, but not finding her.

The sun, now lower in the sky, cast a golden hue over Baker's Run. Taking a deep breath and giving a farewell nod to the bustling townsfolk, he spurred Baxter into a trot, keen to return home before darkness fell, though the image of emerald eyes and burnished copper hair remained in his mind.

As he rode past the Reynolds homestead, a small herd of dairy cows grazed in the paddock by the timber construction, and a thin ribbon of smoke drifted from the chimney. His mother had learned to love this harsh land. Would Miss Eliza Reynolds learn to love it, too? Or would the hardships send her scampering back to wherever she came from?

A warm January wind gusted in from the distant Strzelecki Ranges where clouds, dark and heavy, threatened to split open and drop their watery load, and he spurred his horse towards home.

Chapter Two

Dawn ignited the sky, and the trill of birdsong roused Eliza from sleep. She threw open the shutters, her spirit uplifted by the endless golden hills now stretching out before her. So many delights and discoveries marked her first week on the farm, and each day brought new adventures in this wild, open place she now called home, a place so different to anything she'd ever known. What would today bring?

Father had kept his promise. He'd bought horses for both her and Thomas, and her heart had become tethered to Clover, the caramel-coloured beauty Eliza was beginning to master amidst her daily chores.

Her bare feet brushing the cool earthen floor, she padded to the kitchen, the fireplace now dormant, the kettle untouched and cold. And yet, her father's boots were missing. Perhaps he'd ventured out to check on the damage after last night's storm. Their house had somehow withstood the torrential rains and gales that lifted the corrugated iron roof and howled through the gaps in the timber walls.

As she stepped onto the wooden veranda, Thomas, mud-spattered and wide-eyed, raced towards her. "Eliza, the creek! It's risen! Father fears all we've built will be washed away!"

Her heart slammed into her throat. She slung her shawl around her, jammed her feet into her boots, and ran across sodden fields to the creek bed. Only yesterday the creek had bubbled, shallow and sparkling, through their land. Now a fierce, bloated current threatened to engulf all in its way.

Lines deepened on her father's grim face. "We must dig diversion trenches or lose the farm before we've scarce begun. Take a shovel, Eliza, and dig."

Her eyes widened. A shovel? Dig? In the mud? Feeding chickens and turning soil in their vegetable garden was one thing. But shovelling mud?

But he spoke the truth. There was no time to waste. Picking up a shovel, she joined the battle and laboured in the mire until her limbs grew weary and she was soaked through. But each shovelful seemed insignificant against the advancing flood.

The ceaseless flow even yet increased, and she slogged on. "Why now, when the skies are clear?"

Father pointed towards the distant mountains. "The water flows from up there."

A shudder ran through her. What if they couldn't divert the flow? Would their entire farm flood?

With renewed vigour, she continued digging.

By afternoon, exhausted and mud smeared, they'd made little progress. And now, with ominous clouds forming a curtain over the mountains, another storm threatened.

Soon, the first raindrops began to fall, and tears heated her cheeks. Dropping to her knees, she implored the heavens for a miracle to shield their fledgling home and farm.

But then a shout cut through the sounds of rushing water. A horse and dray approached. Amongst the newcomers were the shopkeeper and the young man whose path she'd crossed in town last week.

Father straightened as the men, numbering six, alighted and approached on foot, each clad in moleskins and bearing implements.

"We've come to help." A tall well-built man extended his hand to her father.

Nodding in appreciation, Father shook the man's hand. "Arthur Reynolds."

The man smiled. "Franklin Goddard. And this"—he gestured to the sun-bronzed young man she remembered—"is my son, Jamie."

Her chest fluttered as their gazes met, holding longer than necessary.

Clearing his throat, Father addressed the group. "Thank you for coming to our assistance. My children and I appreciate your help."

Eliza, self-conscious, retreated a step and clasped her hands in front of her. Yet Father beckoned her forward. "Eliza might be a woman, but she has the heart and strength of a man. She has been labouring all day and will work alongside us."

She raised her chin. Indeed, she would. No way would she let this land, their dream, be drowned without a fight.

Together, the group battled the surge. Though they made headway, nightfall saw a landscape still under threat.

"It's not enough." Father's shoulders bowed. "By morning, there may be little left."

Jamie's blue eyes, illuminated by lantern light, glinted, and his jaw set. "Then we persevere. We won't back down."

His conviction, coupled with the undeniable connection between them, anchored Eliza amidst the unfolding disaster. The night wore on, and the other men returned to their homes. But he remained, working alongside her, her father, her brother, and their farmhand, John.

Past midnight, her father clasped Jamie's hand. "Our gratitude is immeasurable."

"You'd do the same for us." His lingering glance at Eliza conveyed a silent promise—one not just of camaraderie but also of a growing bond—and something warmed inside her.

Her father gave a nod. "That we would."

When Jamie departed, Eliza returned to the homestead alongside her father and brother. While Thomas tended the fire, she prepared a modest meal. Father sat heavy-hearted, every line on his face deepened by weariness.

She handed him a steaming mug of tea and rubbed his shoulders. "This land is our dream, Father. We won't let one setback determine its fate."

His eyes, misting over, met hers. "Your resilience reminds me so much of your mother. And you're right, my dear. With such unwavering faith, how can we not push forward?"

She bent and embraced him, her heart aching. The loss of Mother bore down on them all, but most of all on Father. He carried the burden of their future alone. "Yes. Together, we will prevail."

Chapter Three

Again, Eliza woke at dawn, despite the late night and toil of the previous day. Thomas's jubilant shouts joined the familiar birdsong. After quickly dressing, she stepped outside, gathered her skirts, and hurried towards him by the creek bed.

His youthful face lit. "Liza, the flow has eased! The worst is past!"

Her knees wobbled. The water's surge had indeed eased, and the creek's direction had shifted due to their relentless efforts. She slipped her arm around his shoulders. "Father will be relieved."

A shadow crossed his face. "Do you think he'll be alright?"

Her heart ached afresh for her brother who seemed careworn beyond his twelve years. "We can only pray for the good Lord to heal Father's heart."

"If He was so good"—his voice trembled with more than its usual wobbling between boyhood and manhood—"Mother would still be here."

She held him tighter, fighting her tears. "We have to hold onto faith and stay strong for Father."

He sniffled. "I miss her so much."

Her eyes misted, and she swallowed hard as she drew him close and stared over his head at the sodden land. "So do I. But we will endure, Thomas. We have each other."

His hair tickled her cheek as his head tipped up, his eyes shining. "Promise you won't leave me?"

The ache in her heart deepened. "I promise. We'll face everything together." She breathed in deeply and stepped back. "Now, let us wake Father with the good news."

Back at the homestead, the fire was lit, and sizzling bacon greeted them.

"Good morning, children. You two are up early."

"As are you, Father." She placed her shawl over the chairback.

"I have had little sleep, keeping watch most of the night."

"Then you'll know the flow's eased," Thomas said, his face still glowing. "Our farm's safe."

"Yes. It's wonderful." The lines on Father's face softened. "I feared the worst."

Eliza approached the stove. "Rest, Father. Let me handle this." Before handing him a mug of freshly brewed tea, she added a splash of milk and sugar, just as he liked.

Thomas waited by the frying pan, plate in hand. "May I have a double serving?"

With his cheeky grin, no way she could deny him. Shaking her head, she piled his plate high, adding a large chunk of damper for good measure. "You'll eat us out of house and home."

He chuckled. "I'm a growing boy. I need my strength."

Ruffling his hair, she added two more slices of bacon and another piece of damper. "There you go."

Their father looked on with a hint of a smile. "It's heartening to see you two getting along so well."

"Our spirits are lighter now the flow has eased." She joined him and her brother at the table and sipped her tea. "I'd like to bake something to thank our neighbours for their assistance."

His brow quirked. "All the neighbours or one in particular?"

She swirled the hot liquid in her mug, avoiding his gaze. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I saw how young Goddard looked at you."

He'd noticed, too? Her cheeks heated. She flicked long hair over her shoulder.

"You need to take care, Eliza."

She lifted her chin. "I can take care of myself."

He reached across the table and laid his hand on her wrist. "I do not doubt that. But don't allow the first young man to catch your eye steal your heart."

"Father, I'm not a child!"

The room grew quiet, interrupted only by the clock's steady ticking.

"I know," he finally replied. "But remember, your place is here with Thomas and me."

Frustration simmered inside her. "I know that. I love this home, but one day, I'll want one of my own."

He sighed. “I know, but after losing your mother, the thought of losing you, too—”

“I’m not going anywhere, Father, but please, don’t tether me here forever.”

He held her gaze. “You’re a good girl, but I fear you have your mother’s wild spirit. Don’t let it lead you astray.”

“I simply wanted to thank our neighbours.” She released his hand and bit into a piece of damper, trying not to glare at him.

Thomas scraped egg yolk from his plate, seemingly oblivious to the undercurrent between her and their father.

While he continued eating, blissfully unaware, she cleared the dishes, wrestling with her emotions. She wasn’t just angry at her father. She was angry at the world, at God, for the loss of her mother and the weight of the expectations now on her shoulders.

With breakfast completed, she assisted in the morning chores. After inspecting the diversion trenches, they tended to the chickens and pigs, then checked on the newly planted crops that had withstood the floodwaters.

That afternoon, as her father was engrossed in his ledger and Thomas busied himself chopping wood, she ambled along the boundary line to inspect their fences.

Bathed in the late afternoon sun, a solitary figure toiled in the adjacent field. Even at a distance, his profile was recognisable—Jamie, every inch of him exuding strength and resilience like the native eucalyptus trees peppering the horizon.

She drew nearer, her footsteps and the soft rustle of her skirts against the grass announcing her arrival.

He paused, straightened his back, and greeted her with a smile warm enough to rival the sun's brilliance—a smile that sent an unmistakable flutter in her chest.

“Good afternoon, Miss Reynolds.” His voice, a heady mix of ruggedness and charm, did strange things to her insides.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Goddard.” What striking features, and those piercing blue eyes exuded a fierce determination in marked contrast to his gentle manner.

He swept off his wide-brimmed hat, wiped his brow with his forearm, and leaned against a fence post, the sun burnishing his skin and hair. “I see the water's receded.”

She nodded, her voice emerging a touch breathless. “Yes, and again, I must express our gratitude for your help.”

“You're welcome. May I enquire about your hands?”

Taken aback, she tucked them behind her. “Oh, they're quite alright. But it's kind of you to ask.”

“My mother swears by wool grease.”

She tilted her head, her roughened hands twisting together behind her. “Are you suggesting my hands could use some?”

His laugh rang out as bright and warm as the day. “Not at all. I just remembered it might help.”

She couldn't help but grin. “Your thoughtfulness is appreciated, Mr. Goddard.”

A silence settled, punctuated only by the sounds of nature. He gazed across the fields before turning to her again, his voice gentling. “Settling into this new land without your mother must be challenging.”

She dipped her head, blinking back unbidden tears, and a confession rasped her throat. “I miss her every day.”

His hand reached out, a comforting touch on her arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s alright.” She let loose her tight hold on her hands and waved off his words so he wouldn’t know how much such thoughts hurt. “Time heals, or so they say.”

His gaze grew intense. “Do you believe, Miss Reynolds?”

What on earth? Her forehead creased. “In what, exactly?”

“In God.”

Oh. How did she answer that without revealing her anger at the Almighty? Inhaling deeply, she finally replied, “I was raised in faith, but after losing Mother... my beliefs have wavered.”

“Matthew 5:4 says that blessed are those who mourn: for they shall be comforted. Hold onto that, Miss Reynolds.”

Touched by the care in both his words and tone, she let out pent-up breath, her shoulders relaxing. “Thank you, Mr. Goddard.”

His gaze travelled over her face and searched her eyes. “Would you care to join me under that tree?” With his hat, he gestured towards a majestic eucalyptus on the edge of their unploughed field, its shade beckoning.

Her pulse ticked up. Father was not about, but for how long? Could she risk his ire if he discovered her with Jamie?

She jutted her chin. Yes, she would. “I do not wish to keep you from your labour, but a reprieve from the sun would be most welcome.”

His blue eyes twinkled. "You do not keep me. It would be my pleasure to sit awhile." He swung his legs over the fence and whistled to his hound. "Come on, Dart."

The dog bounded over the fence with ease, clearing the rail by at least six inches, and trotted by his master's side.

"Does he go everywhere with you?" She lifted her skirts a few inches to keep pace.

"He's my constant companion."

As they walked through the grass, a rabbit bounced past, and Dart gave chase.

"Will he catch it?" Eliza asked as the pair commenced a game of cat and mouse.

"We shall wait and see." Jamie's laugh bound across the open fields.

When they reached the leafy canopy of the towering eucalyptus tree, he gathered fallen leaves and created a makeshift seat for her. "It's the best I can offer."

She smiled her appreciation, eased onto the ground, attempted to gather her skirts gracefully, and curled her legs to the side.

He sat beside her, and they remained in companionable silence, her fully aware that, if Father did find them together like this, she'd be punished. But something about Jamie Goddard dared her to be defiant. She was almost eighteen years of age. Many girls her age were wed. Her father could not bind her forever.

Yet, with Mother gone, he bore the responsibility of both parents, though sometimes it felt more than that. He didn't want to lose her. Ever.

Shaking off those thoughts, she admired the mountains, their peaks bathed in the soft hues of afternoon. “They’re breathtaking, aren’t they?”

“They become a part of you.” Jamie tossed a stick for Dart, who seemed disheartened after losing the rabbit chase.

She swung her gaze to him. “How long have you lived here?”

He fiddled with his hat brim. “I was born here. The Goddards were pioneers in this region.”

“You must love it.”

He lifted his gaze to the horizon. “My father says our blood is mingled with the soil. This land has made us who we are. Proud Goddards.”

At the intensity in his tone, she frowned. “Is something troubling you?”

He hesitated, then met her gaze. “No.” But his tightened jaw and the clench of his fingers on his hat betrayed him.

She’d heard rumours of bushrangers causing trouble as well as conflicts between settlers and the aboriginal people. Could such dangers be lurking closer than she thought? Yet, he seemed unready to share, so she let it be.

In the quiet, she couldn’t help studying him—the weathered hands, the sun-streaked light-brown hair, the depth of his gaze. In him, she saw the spirit of this vast new land. Aware she was staring, she turned her focus elsewhere, picked up a leaf, and studied its veins. “Tell me about life here in Gippsland. I still have so much to learn.”

He dropped his hat in his lap, stretched out his legs, and leaned back on his hands. The deep breath he took as he tilted

his face towards the canopy overhead spoke of an enviable contentment. “It’s challenging yet fulfilling. We all support each other. Through drought, fire, flood, and famine, we’ve persevered, and there’s no place I’d rather be.” He chuckled. “Mother and Father took me and my siblings to the city once. I couldn’t wait to get back here where it’s quiet and peaceful. Where I feel closest to God.”

She tilted her head, her forehead creasing and her leafy chair rustling with her restless movement. “Do you always share so openly with strangers about your faith?”

“Um, no.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “But something about you, Miss Reynolds, makes a man want to bare his soul.”

Unexpected warmth surged through her. “Please, call me Eliza.”

Their gazes held, and her heart beat faster. “Only if you call me Jamie.”

The warmth from his eyes seemed to penetrate her very soul. “Jamie.” His name slid effortlessly from her lips.

“So”—he waved at her—“now it’s your turn. Tell me about you, Eliza Reynolds.”

With his gaze as soft as a caress, she swallowed hard. “What—what would you like to know?”

“Everything. Tell me everything.”

She laughed, the sound ringing through the hollow. “Everything might take some time! But I can tell you my family came here from England seeking a new start.” She drew a long breath. “You already know my mother died on the ship. Father was determined to continue. He wanted to give

my brother and me the new life he and Mother dreamed for us.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, but I understand your father’s thinking. This land has a way of healing wounds and filling empty spaces in a soul.”

Nodding, she traced random patterns in the dirt with the leaf’s stem. “It does seem that way. Though it’s only been a short time, I feel more at peace here than I have since she passed.”

“Because you were meant to be here.” Jamie’s voice, soft but earnest, slid under her skin and reached into her heart. “Just as my family was called to settle this valley, I believe God led you here, too.”

She met his gaze, breath catching at the tenderness there. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps this place shall be the making of us in ways I’ve yet to discover. I pray it be so. Father seems so lost without Mother. I fear for his wellbeing.”

“God can do amazing things if we let Him.”

As Jamie spoke of his faith, she felt the resonance of his beliefs, the sincerity that made him, well, *him*. An unyielding faith and a determination that mirrored the relentless Australian sun.

“My faith is the compass that guides my days. Without it, I’d be but a rudderless ship in a storm-wracked sea,” he continued.

“Your faith is palpable.” She breathed in deeply. “In a world of uncertainty such as this, to have something so steadfast to cling to must bring great comfort. Since coming here, I feel something stirring in my soul—a flicker of hope taking light once more.” Her words surprised her, but she

knew them to be true. She couldn't remain angry with God forever.

A comfortable silence stretched between them, broken only by a kookaburra's laugh.

Finally, he looked at her. "You'd be welcome to attend service at our local church later this afternoon. I cannot pretend to know your journey or the path you should take, but you mentioned a flicker of hope, a stirring. Perhaps being part of a community that supports each other, that shares in each other's trials and joys, could fan that flame."

The genuine offer glowed deep in his eyes, an invitation, not just to church, but into his life, his community. "I—I think I'd like that. Thank you for inviting me." Her voice steadied as her resolve firmed. Surely, Father wouldn't prevent her from attending a church service.

"It's my pleasure." He beamed, crammed his hat onto his thick hair, and sprang to his feet, helping her up. "The church is on the edge of town. You would have passed it on your way here."

"I recall seeing it." Her hand lingered in his. "A whitewashed chapel on the hilltop."

"That's the one." He released her. "Will your father and brother attend with you?"

Her skin still warm where he'd touched, she lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I cannot say. My father is not a man of faith. But I will attend, with or without him."

They parted, and as the afternoon melted away, she found herself anticipating the service. To her surprise, her father agreed to attend. Perhaps something about this land was

softening his heart. And perhaps her earlier thoughts of him had been too cruel.

Or perhaps he didn't want to let her out of his sight.

Chapter Four

Just past four o'clock, the Reynolds family departed from their farm in their buggy, covering the five miles to Baker's Run. Sitting beside her father and brother on their way to church was quite surreal. As they climbed the slight hill towards the chapel, her heart beat in time with the church bell's echoing toll, a call to service about to commence.

After tethering their horse to the hitching rail beside other buggies, they approached the entrance, her linking her arm with her father's, all the while searching for Jamie.

"Are you alright, Father?"

His stance straightened. "Of course. Why would you think otherwise?"

She bit her lip. *Because I never know how you are from one moment to the next and you seldom come to church.* Instead, she replied, "No reason."

As she entered, the congregation's soft murmurs and the familiar scents of hymnbooks, beeswax candles, and the mustiness of the wooden pews surrounded her. They settled into a polished oak pew near the back, her gaze still scanning for Jamie. When she sighted him with his family towards the front, her breath caught. Despite her father's warning, Jamie Goddard had already captured her heart.

The pastor, a balding man in his forties, stepped up to the pulpit and introduced himself as Pastor Isaac. He then beckoned everyone to stand for the first hymn, 'Rock of Ages'.

As her father mumbled the words, Eliza sang with renewed fervour, and the words reignited the faith she once shared with her mother.

When the sermon commenced, the room settled into a reverent hush.

"My dear brothers and sisters," Pastor Isaac began, and the gentle firmness of his voice commanded attention. "Today, I wish to speak of resilience, unity, and faith, the three pillars that hold us upright in the face of life's tempests.

"When trials beset us, when the skies darken and the gales howl, resilience allows us to weather the storm. We are all familiar with the towering eucalyptus trees of our land." Like a breeze through one of those trees, his gaze swept across the room. "How they bend but do not break under the ferocity of the strongest winds. Their resilience is a testament to life's enduring spirit. As children of God, we too possess this resilience."

Eliza closed her eyes, allowing the pastor's words to flow over her. His message echoed within her, strengthening her courage and determination while reawakening her faith.

"And yet," he continued, weaving the strands of his sermon with the finesse of a skilled storyteller, "resilience is but the first step. In unity, the joining of hearts and hands, our shared strength multiplies. Alone, we might bend under pressure, but together, we stand tall and unbroken."

The truth of his words seeped into her, the memory of their neighbours banding together to help them still fresh.

“Finally”—the pastor’s gaze grew even more earnest—“faith fuels our resilience and binds us in unity. Our faith in the Lord, in His purpose for us, is our light in the storm, our compass in uncharted waters. It is the unwavering belief that He walks with us, even through the valleys of shadows.”

A murmur of agreement rumbled through the congregation. Eliza peered forward at Jamie, catching his fervent nod. His unwavering faith was already inspiration in this unfamiliar world.

After the sermon concluded and the final hymn was sung, the congregation dispersed. The waning sun cast a warm glow on the assembly as they moved towards the fellowship hall for dinner.

Jamie sought her out. “Miss Reynolds! So good to see you here. And Mr. Reynolds. And you, Thomas. Come meet my family.”

He led them into the hall. “Mother’s here somewhere.” He searched amongst the crowd. “There she is, at the serving table.”

By the time he’d located her, their fathers were engaged in conversation. Thomas stood alongside them, hands clasped as if he didn’t know what to do with them. She waved him over. “Come with me, Thomas.”

He joined her and Jamie, and they headed across the hall to the serving tables.

“Mother, I’d like you to meet Miss Eliza Reynolds and her brother, Thomas.” Jamie turned to Eliza. “Eliza, Thomas, this is my mother, Eleanor Goddard.”

The short, robust woman with greying hair tied at her nape clasped Eliza's hands and beamed at them both. "So good to meet you. Welcome to Baker's Run."

That warm hand—or maybe it was the woman's whole persona—wrapped around Eliza like a soft blanket, reviving memories of her own mother. Pushing her fresh wave of sorrow aside, she returned Mrs. Goddard's smile. "Thank you. It's lovely to meet you, too. Jamie's told me so much about you already."

Her brow lifted. "Has he just?"

Eliza's face warmed. "He says you're a remarkable woman."

"I'm not so sure about that, but he has a way of making you feel special."

She had that right.

"Now, take a plate and help yourself to some food."

The tabletop had nearly vanished so laden with dishes of all types. But... Her stomach wrenched. "We didn't bring anything to share."

Mrs. Goddard patted her hand. "No need to concern yourself with that. There's more than plenty to go around."

The tightness in her stomach loosened, and Eliza smiled her thanks. "That's so kind."

"You're more than welcome, dear."

After filling their plates with a comforting assortment of dishes, Eliza and Thomas sat with Jamie at the long communal table amidst the hum of jovial conversations and the clinking of cutlery.

Each time her gaze connected with his, her heart ticked faster. She prayed Thomas wouldn't notice. Although with him engrossed in his food, there was little chance.

A gruff voice cut through their conversation. "That Reynolds farm won't last a season after the floods. Mark my words."

Eliza blinked at the man's foreboding prediction.

Jamie's demeanour changed. His relaxed aura replaced with a firm resolve, he faced the man. "With respect, Mr. Hawthorne, we're here to uplift each other, not tear one another down."

The grizzled man scoffed, dismissing Jamie's retort with a wave of his hand. "I speak the truth, lad. Not all seeds grow into trees."

"No, but all seeds deserve a chance to sprout," Jamie countered. "And it's our duty as a community to provide the best the environment for growth, to give them that chance."

The hall grew quiet as Jamie's words hung in the silence, his defence of her and her family a powerful statement of faith and community, defying the gruff man's prediction.

When Jamie turned back to her, the spark in his eyes reassured her. His words weren't just for her and her family. They were a challenge to the community, affirming their shared responsibility to support each other in this pioneer town.

"I believe in your family, Eliza." He met her gaze. "And I know that, with time, the entire town will too."

His quiet conviction served as a balm, soothing the sting of the man's words. As gratitude welled within her, she held his

gaze. She'd only just met him, yet he already felt like an old friend. A person who had her back in this unfamiliar land.

As the meal continued, she lost herself in thoughts of him. Even at his young age, he was more than a man of faith—he was a pillar of the community, a binding force. And she'd glimpsed a future where they faced trials not in isolation, but together, where her roots could grow deep into the fertile soil that undergirded them.

However, the gruff look on Father's face as they bid each other goodbye suggested that she might need to fight for that future.

Chapter Five

Several days later, Jamie woke to a rooster's persistent crow.

"It's as if he knows we've chores to do," his brother quipped in the bed alongside him.

As morning light streamed in, Jamie rose and lit the fire in the woodburning stove, and soon, the familiar scent of eucalyptus smoke tinged the air. While Mother prepared breakfast, he joined his father and siblings with their morning chores. Once done, they scrubbed their hands at the pump before gathering around the rough-hewn table. As she passed around dishes, the tempting scent of fresh bread wafted through their conversation. They joined hands while Father gave the blessing. Then Mother set a freshly baked loaf on the table, the crust crackling as Father cut hearty slices.

"Might be the last of the white flour for a while if that order doesn't come in today," Mother remarked.

Father squeezed her hand. "We've enough wholemeal flour till harvest and a ham curing for meat."

Conversation turned to the list of chores. The wooden plates and cutlery were well used but cherished, simple necessities Jamie's father carved when first settling this wild land.

Jamie's thoughts wandered as he gazed out the open door, dreaming of a certain copper-haired young woman who'd entered his world. His eyes traced the familiar curves and dips of the land, envisioning them through her enchanted gaze. Her laughter, trilling and effervescent, echoed in his thoughts, bringing an involuntary smile.

"Jamie?" His mother's voice shook him from his reverie. "Did you hear your father?"

He blinked, heat rising under his collar. "My apologies. What did you say, sir?"

Father shook his head. "Seems you might have more than chores on your mind this morning. I asked if you'd take the wagon into town today and get some supplies."

Jamie grinned. "With pleasure." His family's good-natured banter was a small price to pay for the thought of possibly seeing Eliza today.

Later, with a lightness in his step, he set off to harness the horse to the wagon. As he headed into town, the familiar creak of the wagon wheels accompanied his lively whistling. Passing the Reynolds farm, he scanned the homestead for a glimpse of the copper-haired girl.

Smoke spiralled upwards from their chimney, and their sheep and cattle grazed. But of Eliza herself, there was no sign.

He tugged the reins and continued on.

After exchanging pleasantries with the butcher and blacksmith, he entered the general store where he stocked up on supplies. Benjamin grinned, nodding towards a new shipment of lace and ribbons. "Perhaps something to catch the eye of a special lady friend?"

Jamie rubbed the back of his neck, cheeks warming. “Just the usual orders today, thank you.” A noise outside the window drew his attention. The butcher was struggling to keep his young son from chasing the chickens in front of the shop. “Seems young Mack has more interest in those chickens than learning the family trade.”

Following Jamie’s gaze, the shopkeeper chuckled with him. “That he has. Henry has his work cut out keeping that boy from trouble.” He turned back to Jamie, eyes gleaming. “Now, about that special lady friend of yours...”

Jamie paid for his items, eager to escape the probing questions. “A pleasure doing business with you, sir.” He bid Benjamin good day and made his exit before any more teasing could come his way.

His errands complete, he wandered the main street in hopes of seeing Eliza. Her vibrant spirit was a balm to his soul, her joy and wonder at life’s beauty awakening his senses.

Disappointment lowered his shoulders, and he strolled to his wagon. What was wrong with him lately? She was a friend, nothing more, yet thoughts of her had begun to fill his hours and bring warmth to his face unbidden.

As he neared home, a flash of copper caught his eye. He leaned forward. Could it be her? Or was the midday sun toying with his eager heart?

He pushed to his feet for a better view. It was just a trick of the light. Loosing a rueful chuckle at his fanciful hopes, he sat back down, but his thoughts lingered on her.

A wheel hit a rut, and the wagon jarred, drawing him from his reverie.

“Whoa there!” He tugged at the reins, slowing the horse before leaping down to assess the damage.

“Oh dear,” a familiar voice drifted across the field.

He whirled around. Eliza approached, copper hair shining in the noonday sun. “Eliza.” He fumbled his hat off his head, his every muscle relaxing. “So nice to see you.”

“And you. But you seem to have a problem.” Her gaze swung to the wagon leaning to one side, making him wince.

“My focus was elsewhere, and the wheel got caught in a rut.”

He jammed his hat back on and righted the wagon, but then his shoulders dropped at the sight of the smashed jars and torn flour sack spilling its contents onto the dusty track. The items he’d purchased for his family now lay in tatters.

She pressed a hand to her chest. “Your supplies! Let me help recover what I can.” Before he could protest, she scrambled around the wagon, gathering intact jars and sacks.

His pulse quickened at her nearness when she leaned over beside him, the scent of lavender from her hair leaving him struggling to breathe.

Their eyes met in a lingering glance, long enough to evoke an unfamiliar warmth in his chest before she looked away, a flush rising in her cheeks.

How little remained of his family’s supplies. He rubbed his palm over his eyes, picturing telling Mother. Yet, as he lowered his hand and his eyes were drawn once again to Eliza, the depleted supplies were forgotten. “Might you and your father and brother call upon the farm tomorrow afternoon for a neighbourly visit?” The words left his lips before he could call them back, pulse racing at his boldness.

“Such a kind offer.” A sparkle lit her eyes, but then they dulled. “I fear my father will be less than amenable. He has been withdrawn these past days.”

“A visit could be good medicine.” Jamie swallowed against the dryness in his throat. “I will pray he accepts the invitation.”

“I will pray that too.” Her lips twitched into a shy smile. She gathered her skirts. “I’ll send word.”

He tipped his hat as she headed back across the fields, the sun bouncing off her hair, the prospect of seeing her again swelling his chest.

Chapter Six

In dawn's gentle embrace, Eliza hovered between the world of dreams and wakefulness, thoughts of Jamie painting vibrant pictures of their encounter the previous day. The corners of her lips quirked up as she recalled his warm, inviting eyes. But would her father accept the invitation to visit?

Casting her covers aside, she rose and set her hair with practised movements. As the pins secured her locks, her heart raced.

Her father sat in his chair, his unfocused gaze hinting at a thousand distant thoughts.

She planted a soft kiss on his cheek, feeling the prick of his whiskers. "Good morning, Father."

His dazed eyes found hers. "Morning, Eliza. You're an early bird today."

"There's something I wish to discuss."

He clasped his hands on the tabletop and leaned forward, his forehead creasing. "What's on your mind?"

"Yesterday, by pure coincidence, I encountered Jamie Goddard. He extended an invitation to visit their farm today."

"Bah." He waved a hand, and his face darkened. "I've warned you about wandering too far."

“I wasn’t wandering. He was passing by when his wagon got stuck and spilled its contents. I offered a helping hand.”

He rubbed his temples. “Very well.”

When his hand lowered, she held his gaze, determination burning in her eyes.

He observed her before answering. “Alright, we can pay the Goddards a visit. But remember our stance on trust. It’s earned, not given.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “I understand. Thank you.”

John, their farmhand, delivered the message to Jamie, accepting his kind invitation. As the air grew warmer, carrying the scent of eucalyptus and freshly turned earth, the now-familiar laugh of kookaburras echoed across the open fields. Eliza took her time selecting a dress. She settled on a sturdy cotton frock in a pale blue, adorned with a delicate ruffled lace collar and front trim down the bodice matching the cuffs.

They made their way to the Goddard farm in their buggy. But a steely tension emanated from her father, his every muscle seemed coiled, and he eschewed her attempt to ease his nerves.

Then two unfamiliar riders approached. Though they were too far away to make out their faces, an unsettling feeling came over her. Their posture seemed hostile, not friendly or neighbourly.

“Father, do you see those men?”

He gave a grim nod. “I see them.”

As the riders drew closer, she stifled a gasp. A scar down one man’s cheek made his twisted smirk all the more menacing. Surely, these were the Chatworth brothers she’d

heard about, established cattlemen from a nearby settlement. She'd heard whispers of how they harboured animosity towards new settlers and were expanding their land with little regard for others.

The brothers slowed their horses to a stop, blocking the road. The scarred Chatworth tipped his hat, his smile not reaching his eyes. "Afternoon. The Reynolds family, no doubt." His gaze lingered on her with an unsettling intensity. "Let us guide you safely on your journey. Wouldn't want anything untoward happening to you on this lovely afternoon."

The underlying menace in his tone made her shiver.

Her father's hands tightened on the reins. "We've come this far safely. Now stand aside."

The scarred Chatworth's smile faded. "Very well, but you've been warned." He nodded to his brother, and they galloped off, the sound of hoofbeats echoing on the dusty track.

Her heart pounded while Father urged their horse forward.

As they approached the Goddard property, her father remained alert, his eyes continuing to scan the homestead and surrounding bushland. The Chatworths' threat lingered, putting them all on guard, clouding her joy like a thunderstorm blotting out the sun.

She placed a hand on his arm, hoping to reassure him, though her own heart still raced. His grip on the reins remained tight, his knuckles pale.

When Jamie emerged from the house, her father's eyes further narrowed, his expression guarded. Jamie approached with a smile, extending his hand. "Good to see you, Mr. Reynolds. Thank you for coming."

“Goddard.” Her father shook his hand, his curt tone lacking cordiality, uncalled for since Jamie had been nothing but neighbourly.

Jamie’s smile wavered before brightening again. “A pleasant day for a visit, is it not?”

Her father humphed, but his shoulders loosened as he stepped onto the gravel. He held his hand to Eliza while Thomas jumped down.

Eliza could barely keep her gaze from Jamie. In a plaid cotton work shirt, he looked ruggedly handsome, and each time their gazes met, a tingling fizzed in the pit of her stomach. But she couldn’t allow her father to see the growing fondness between them, so she turned her gaze to the homestead, a split-log structure much larger than their humble abode. Not far from the house stood a barn, and sheep grazed in the top paddock.

Mrs. Goddard bustled outside, her cheery face warm. “Welcome! We’re so glad you came.” She clasped Eliza’s hands and beamed and then turned to Father. “Welcome, Mr. Reynolds.”

He responded with a curt nod.

Thomas was already heading to the barn with Jamie’s brother.

“Come inside.” Mrs. Goddard took Eliza’s arm and walked her up the three steps onto the veranda.

“This is lovely,” Eliza said as she stepped inside. The air was rich with the scent of freshly baked bread, an aroma as warm and inviting as the house itself. Dark wood panelling, velvet drapes, upholstered armchairs. Knick-knacks filling the shelves and dressers. An open Bible on a side table.

This was a home filled with love.

“Thank you, dear child.” Hugging Eliza’s arm close, Mrs. Goddard smiled, then released her. “Make yourself at home while I pour the tea.” She gestured to the oak table, its varnished surface glinting in the gentle light.

Mr. Goddard appeared and welcomed Eliza and her father. “It’s remiss of us not to have welcomed you sooner. Please forgive us.”

Her father dipped his head and mumbled, “We keep to ourselves mostly.”

He had that right.

Mr. Goddard ignored her father’s gruffness and invited them to sit. Father sat awkwardly beside Eliza, while Jamie sat opposite. She kept her gaze averted lest her father notice the sparkle in her eye or the shortness of her breath.

Mrs. Goddard served scones with freshly whipped cream and preserves as well as oatcakes that melted in Eliza’s mouth.

“I hear we’re indebted to you for saving our supplies,” Mr. Goddard said, amusement twinkling in his eyes that were so like Jamie’s.

Eliza sipped her tea. “I’m sure Jamie would have salvaged as much on his own.”

“Hmm. Perhaps his mind should have been on the track, and he would have avoided the rut,” Mr. Goddard said.

“Father,” Jamie spoke up. “Are you accusing me of daydreaming?”

“Were you?”

Eliza held her breath.

“Not at all. I was merely distracted by—”

Thomas and Pete burst into the room, saving him from answering.

She met Jamie’s gaze and hid a grin.

After they concluded the visit and exchanged goodbyes, Eliza climbed back into the buggy, her heart full. Although nothing had been spoken between her and Jamie, a subtle tension hovered between them, as if both were aware of the other’s presence. Each fleeting look left her tingling, a physical manifestation of their strengthening ties.

Father tugged the reins, they departed the Goddards’ homestead, and the track stretched out before her. In that moment, the Chatworths’ earlier threats overshadowed the pleasant afternoon, a looming spectre she couldn’t shake.

Resting her hands in her lap, the coarse fabric of her dress beneath her fingers grounding her in the here and now, she uttered a prayer for protection.

Chapter Seven

A week had passed since the Reynolds family visited their homestead. But the memory of Eliza lingered on, and Jamie found himself thinking of her more often than he'd like to admit. The liveliness in her was uncommon, a spirit that reminded him of the resilient native wildflowers rising from the bushland.

On this sun-soaked afternoon, with the sky painted a brilliant blue and a gentle breeze rustling the eucalyptus trees, Jamie was in the sun-drenched paddock, sweat beading on his brow as he repaired a hole in the aged wooden fence where a stubborn ewe had tried to make her grand escape. Father was inside, poring over the ledger, and Jamie's sister, Sarah, was helping Mother prepare supper.

The distant thud of horse hooves disturbed the tranquillity, and a knot tightened in his stomach. Only a few would ride up unannounced, and they were seldom bearers of good news. Abandoning the fence, he approached the front of the homestead.

As he drew nearer, the Chatworth brothers cut an imposing silhouette. William, the elder, had slicked back his dark hair, and piercing blue eyes glinted beneath a heavy brow while the prominent scar slashing his cheek seemed like a string that

pulled up that side of his mouth into a permanent smirk. He sat tall in the saddle, and his broad chest strained the stitching on his shirt. Edward, with wild sandy hair and vigilant green eyes, had a leaner presence, a lanky snake seeking his brother's shadow. Their demeanour, always hovering between smugness and cold detachment, made it clear they were not to be trifled with.

Their notorious reputation wasn't just because of their intimidating looks. A few years prior, they'd claimed ownership over a prized waterhole many believed belonged to old Mrs. Henderson. When she tried to dispute their claim, they poisoned her cattle and burned down her barn. The devastated elderly widow, lacking the means to fight back, was forced to sell her property at a pittance. The land soon became part of the ever-expanding Chatworth estate.

The brothers had also been involved in a series of altercations in town. From pub brawls to disputes over poker games, their names livened up local gossip. They seemed to thrive on conflict, using their wealth and fearsome reputation to quell opposition.

More than their ruthlessness was unsettling. Rumours whispered of illegal dealings and shady associates from the city, further cementing the brothers' image as men who would stop at nothing to get what they wanted and cementing the Chatworth name as synonymous with treachery and danger.

As the brothers dismounted, Jamie took a deep breath and squared his shoulders to quell his rising anger.

"Chatworths," he greeted, his tone neutral.

The elder brother, William, smirked, the scar puckering his cheek. "Goddard. Thought we'd come for a neighbourly visit."

Jamie's jaw hardened. Nothing was neighbourly about them. "Is that so?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "And to what do we owe the pleasure?"

The younger brother's features twisted into a grin. "Just checking in on our neighbours. Making sure everything's in order."

Jamie flicked his gaze between the pair, unable to decipher their true intentions. The Chatworths might be known for their intimidation tactics, but he wouldn't be bullied.

His father stepped out of the house and came to stand beside him. "Chatworths."

The brothers tipped their hats to Father, but the gesture did nothing to alleviate the tension. William widened his stance. "There seems to be a bit of confusion about our lands."

Jamie's heart pounded and his hands clenched. The Chatworths often created 'confusions' to justify their land grabbing. He exchanged a glance with his father, whose expression remained composed, yet stern.

"Is that so?" Father raised an eyebrow. "Why don't we pull out the maps and clear up this confusion right now?"

The Chatworths exchanged glances. Perhaps they hadn't expected this confrontation. Jamie's heart rate steadied. Maybe they could resolve this peacefully.

"Sounds fair," William Chatworth agreed, his gaze still fixed on Father. "We'll come by tomorrow with our maps. Settle this once and for all."

As they rode away, Father placed a firm hand on Jamie's shoulder, the weight of his grip carrying a silent promise of protection. "They may try, son, but we won't allow them to take our land. Justice will prevail. But we do need to prepare."

That night, after dinner, Jamie and his father retreated to the study and spread out a map of their property on the worn wooden table. They scrutinised the boundary lines, committing every detail to memory. They would be ready when the Chatworths arrived.

As darkness enveloped the homestead, they retired to their beds, but sleep eluded Jamie. He tossed and turned, his mind replaying the day's encounter. Getting down on his knees, he beseeched the Lord to be with them when the Chatworths returned.

The following morning, Jamie rose early, his resolve strengthened by the first light of day. He and his family went about their chores, tension electrifying the air like a coming storm, each family member aware of the looming threat. They exchanged few words, but a shared determination bound them together.

Midmorning, the Chatworth brothers arrived, their horses' hooves kicking up dust in the dry earth. Jamie and his father stood at the front door, stoic and resolute. His mother and younger siblings watched from the window.

The Chatworths dismounted, their gazes never leaving Jamie and his father. William carried a rolled-up map under his arm.

"Shall we get on with it?" Father gestured towards the table on the veranda where their own map lay spread out.

William unrolled his map and placed it beside theirs. Then the four of them gathered around, searching for discrepancies.

Jamie's eye was drawn to one particular point of contention: Lark's Meadow, a lush tract where a bubbling stream attracted wildlife and kept the soil fertile.

“I see you’ve extended your claim to include Lark’s Meadow,” Father said. “That land has been in our family for generations. And I believe you’re well aware of its significance.”

Yes, for their family, Lark’s Meadow was more than a piece of fertile land. Jamie’s grandparents had been buried there, and his father had proposed to his mother there, making its importance immeasurable.

William Chatworth smirked, leaning in closer over the map. “It’s prime land, Goddard. It would be a pity to let sentimentality hinder its potential.”

A surge of anger heated Jamie. “It’s not about sentimentality. That meadow has the best water access in the region. You’re not just taking our heritage—you’re attempting to cripple our farm’s livelihood.”

Edward sneered. “All’s fair in business.”

Jamie slapped the table. “This isn’t just business.”

Father’s eyes darkened. “My son’s right, Chatworth. This is family, history, and honour. Lark’s Meadow is not for negotiation.”

The air grew even more charged, the weight of generations pressing down on the gathering. The Chatworths’ audacity was a direct affront to the Goddards’ legacy, and the battlelines were unmistakably drawn.

The Chatworths had manipulated the lines to seize that portion of Goddard land. Heat pulsed through Jamie’s veins, and his gut churned. But he backed away, holding his tongue, as his father was the voice of reason.

With both hands braced alongside the map, Father looked up and met William’s gaze. “It seems your map is incorrect.

Our boundaries have not changed since we acquired this land. There's been a mistake on your part."

William's face reddened, his jaw clenching. Edward shifted, his gaze darting between his brother and the Goddards.

Would the Chatworths accept their defeat with grace? Jamie held his breath. But then, William's eyes narrowed, and a hard smile twitched his lips, twisting the scar. "Very well, Mr. Goddard. We will have our surveyor take another look at the boundaries. But remember this: you've made enemies today."

As the Chatworth brothers mounted their horses, William's gaze locked on Jamie's father. "I've seen your boy with the Reynolds girl." His voice emerged in a chilling whisper. "Such a pretty thing. Delicate. Would be a shame if she were caught in the crossfire of our... disagreement."

Jamie clenched his fists as the Chatworths rode off in a cloud of dust. How dare the brothers threaten not only his family's land but also something even dearer to him—Eliza. He ground his teeth. He'd do anything in his power to keep her safe.

Chapter Eight

Eliza carried herself with an energy few could match. Her thoughts, however, often wandered to the stolen moments she shared with Jamie Goddard on his family's farm.

Days later, on a warm afternoon, with the sun beaming down on Gippsland, she and Thomas gave in to the pull of adventure. Father was away in town until the late afternoon, so who could resist the temptation of the surrounding bushland, even in the face of his earlier admonitions to stay close?

"Hurry up, Thomas!" she called, laughing, charging on foot deeper into the bushland on an unpaved track, muddy from recent rains. Eucalyptus scented the air, and bird chatter echoed through the trees while small wildlife darted amongst the underbrush.

Thomas tripped, crying out as a jagged rock gouged his knee.

Eliza dropped into the mud beside him, brushing his blood away with her thumb as she examined the damage. "It's just a scratch. Let's get you cleaned up."

He grimaced, nodding and holding back further yelps.

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, dampened it with water from her canteen, and cleaned the wound, her touch

gentle and soothing.

“There, all clean and safe.” Hopping from her crouch, she offered a reassuring smile. She helped him to his feet and nudged him on their way, the sun casting shadows through the trees in its descent.

“Eliza?” Thomas’s voice, more trembly after the fall, broke the silence. “Are the Chatworths as bad as everyone says?”

Maybe it wasn’t the fall making his changing voice more acute. “I’m not sure, but let’s not find out.”

Near their homestead, the creek, swollen with the recent rains, blocked their path. The water roared by, carrying with it tangled debris from upriver.

Hands on her hips, Eliza surveyed the obstacle. “We’ll need to find a safe way across. It’s too far to go back the way we came.”

Thomas, eager to prove himself, began to search for rocks or fallen branches to help forge a path. Eliza scanned the banks for a shallower spot where the current might be weaker.

“There—that branch looks sturdy enough. We can use it to help steady us as we cross.” She pointed to a fallen tree limb stretched across the stream.

He grabbed hold of it to test its strength, but the branch shook loose in his hands, swept away by the raging waters.

“We’ll have to find another way.” She ground her teeth with mounting urgency as dusk approached. The fading light and their stranded position left them vulnerable.

Thomas flung a stone into the water, seeming to toss his pent-up frustrations along with it. “What if we can’t make it

home?”

“Don’t fret. We’ll find a way across.” She squeezed his shoulder. “Father will come searching if we’re not back by nightfall.”

Their options dwindled. With Thomas exhausted and shivering, waiting for rescue seemed their only choice. In the distance, she spotted a faint glow—the light from their farmhouse. Salvation was in sight, yet out of reach with the creek flowing between them.

As the world darkened, two lanterns pierced the night.

“Look! Father’s come to guide us home.” Hope surged, only to be dashed when the Chatworth brothers stepped into view only yards from them on their side of the creek.

Her protective instincts flared, and she moved in front of Thomas.

The elder Chatworth sneered, raising his lantern as if to get a better look at them. “Well, well, if it isn’t the Reynolds children. And here I thought this miserable patch of land was deserted.”

“Be on your way.” She struggled to keep her voice steady. “We’ve no quarrel with you.”

“Is that so? But your good friend Jamie Goddard does. Given how close you are, I’d call that a quarrel, wouldn’t you?”

The brothers cackled.

Eliza’s jaw tightened. There had to be a way out of this predicament! Their home was so close, yet with the creek separating them, escape remained improbable. She gripped

Thomas's hand, willing him to be brave, or perhaps siphoning some of his bravado for herself.

"Perhaps we can come to an...understanding." The larger Chatworth advanced, his lips curling and scar wrinkling. "One that might convince Goddard to relinquish the land in question."

Eliza gasped, a flash of heat racing through her. She picked up a rock and hurled it at the figures. "Be gone from here!"

Her defiance took the brothers by surprise. They stumbled back, and their lanterns crashed, shattering the light.

From the shadows, a commanding figure approached—her father, his rifle trained on the Chatworths. "Get out of here. Leave my children alone."

At home, after Thomas was asleep, Eliza sat opposite her father, flattening her palms on the battered oak table. "I'm so sorry. We hadn't expected the creek to flood."

His eyes flashed. "Why were you wandering off on your own?"

"Alone? Thomas was with me."

"He's too young to protect anyone." Father's face hardened as she detailed the Chatworths' threats. His resolve firmed. "Henceforth, neither of you is to leave the farmhouse and surroundings. Is that clear?"

Chastened, she ducked her head and fiddled with her sleeve's fraying hem. "Yes, Father."

"And, for your safety, no more socialising with the neighbours."

Her stomach quivered, and her head snapped up. "But the Goddards have been kind. And Jamie—"

“Is not our concern. While the Chatworths menace this land, you’ll heed me.” With that, he stormed out.

She stood and moved to close the door behind him. The smell of alcohol he’d been wearing lately lingered.

In the dim firelight, she paced the room. Memories of Jamie surfaced, comforting yet distant. Of course, she was grateful Father had come to her and Thomas’s rescue. She hugged her arms across her chest, shivering over what might have happened if he hadn’t seen the Chatworths’ lantern lights upon his return from town. And of course, this wouldn’t have happened if she and Thomas hadn’t disobeyed him and ventured into the bushland. But this—

A hand grabbed at her.

She choked on a grasp.

But only Thomas was beside her. “I heard Father.” He gripped her arm tighter. “Are we prisoners here?”

She hugged him, pressing her cheek into his uncombed hair. “Father’s just being protective of us. It’ll pass.”

A few days on, while Eliza was with the chickens, a rider handed her a sealed note before departing. Seeing Jamie’s initials, her heart raced. She sought the quiet of the barn to unveil its contents.

My dearest Eliza,

My family warmly invites you, your father, and Thomas for supper and a delightful evening of games around the table this Friday evening. I hope you can make it.

I eagerly look forward to seeing you again.

JG

As she clutched the precious letter to her chest, she closed her eyes to absorb her emotions. Father wouldn't agree. Showing him the invitation would be pointless. But how she longed to accept, if only they were not caged birds with clipped wings. Their friends remained close yet beyond reach, on the far side of fences now guarded tight.

She should burn the letter and scatter its ashes, erasing any trace of its existence as her father had done to their freedom. But how could she part with this lone link to the world outside their prison walls?

"Eliza?" Thomas stood in the open doorway. "Are you crying?"

"Crying?" She slipped the note into her apron pocket and forced a breathy laugh. "Worry not. Just a trick of the light. Now help me fetch the eggs. We've chores yet unfinished and mustn't let Father find us idle."

But yes, she touched her cheek as soon as her brother's back was turned. Those must've been tears. And what would ever change to stop them from flowing?

Chapter Nine

When Jamie emerged from the homestead each morning, his gaze fixed upon the distant road. It had now been four days since he'd penned his invitation to Eliza. With each dawn that passed without a letter in return, his optimism wavered. Had her affections faded so quickly?

On the fourth day, as he made his way back, his mother's hand rested on his wrist. "Jamie, you've been like a restless shadow. What troubles you?"

After hesitating, he slid his hand free and rubbed the pulsing points beside his temples. "I must admit I've been waiting for a letter from Eliza. It's yet to arrive, and I don't understand the delay."

His mother's eyes softened. "I'm sure there's good reason for the silence. Give it time."

Caught in her intuitive gaze, he exhaled as his resolve crumbled. "Something's amiss. Eliza wouldn't neglect a reply."

Dart, as if sensing his master's melancholy, pressed against Jamie's leg, seeking attention, and the dog's simple affection lifted Jamie's spirits. "Perhaps a visit is in order, though her father's disposition complicates matters. Come on, boy."

Jamie headed outside, the dog following. He threw a stick, and Dart bounded after it, his enthusiasm making Jamie smile, though it faded as his gaze strayed to the road again.

Dart returned and dropped the stick at Jamie's feet. When no game of fetch ensued, the dog cocked his head, and Jamie knelt to stroke his soft fur.

Between concern for Eliza and the need to respect boundaries, Jamie remained trapped in uncertainty. Despite his humble means, he was smitten with the fiery-haired girl living just beyond his reach.

"It's like being penned in a barn, Dart. If I could but hear her voice," he mused aloud, earning a puzzled bark from the hound.

While he chopped wood the next morning, the distant rumble of the postmaster's wagon reached Jamie's ears. Axe abandoned, he strode to the road, heart pounding.

The postmaster handed over an envelope. "For you, Mr. Goddard."

Jamie's hands barely managed to steady themselves as he unfolded the letter, and his eyes devoured the words:

Dearest Jamie,

Please forgive my delayed reply to your kind invitation, which sadly, we must decline. Due to unforeseen circumstances, I'm confined to our homestead. Yet my heart yearns for you. Would you meet me beneath the eucalyptus tree at midday tomorrow?

In anticipation,

Eliza

Clutching the note, he stemmed a rush of emotions.
Nothing would deter him from this rendezvous.

Chapter Ten

Eliza gazed through the window, chest swelling at the golden sunlight bathing the rolling hills. Somewhere in that vast expanse, Jamie greeted the day. Just the thought of him was a balm to the growing despair encircling her.

But would he meet her at midday?

The consequences, should they be caught, would be dire, especially against her father's wishes—a boundary she'd never dared to cross so defiantly.

Yet, a certain truth remained difficult to deny—her heart was choosing its own path, and she was helpless to stop it. Was this how love felt? A blend of joy and anxiety? Her mother had once told her about the fluttering of first love. Was that the sensation thrumming in her chest and leading her to defy her father?

With breakfast preparations underway, she snuck into his study. There, amidst his documents, she again found his list of plans for the day. Good. The trip to town to acquire seed remained unchanged since she'd written her note. She released a relieved sigh. She would have time.

The promise of escape, however brief, intoxicated her. While preparing breakfast, she packed a small basket with

bread and cheese and two apples, red as a summer sunset. She covered the basket with a cloth and stowed it on a shelf.

When Father and Thomas arrived for breakfast, she greeted them cheerily. “I made a large damper to accompany your eggs and ham, just the way you like it.” She pressed her lips to her father’s cheek to conceal her hidden motive behind genuine affection.

“Your mother would be proud, Eliza.”

Ouch. Guilt turned her away. If only Mother were here to guide her along this challenging path.

She made the tea and filled their plates with the nourishing food, but with her insides so jumbled, she barely ate.

Father eyed her. “Are you poorly today, Eliza?”

She could claim her monthly courses ailed her, but she couldn’t openly lie to him. “No. My appetite has left me this morning. That’s all.” She sipped her tea. “Thomas and I will work in the vegetable patch. By the time you arrive home, we may be ready to plant the winter crops.”

“And not before time. We must become self-sufficient to survive in this land. I’ll purchase more seed to plant both the fields and extend the garden.”

She laid her hand atop his. “I’m glad you brought us here, Father.” The sentiment was true, but how she wished to have the freedom to find her path as Mother would have wanted.

His eyes misted. “If only your mother could have seen it.”

A lump formed in her chest. “I’m sure she’s watching over us.”

They finished their breakfast in silence. Whenever they spoke of Mother, a heavy cloud hovered over them all.

When Father hitched the cart to the mare and rode off, she and Thomas attended their morning chores and then headed to the vegetable garden.

“Thomas?” She stood and brushed dirt from her hands when the sun was approaching its zenith. “Could you share your midday meal with John? I have things to attend to.”

Though she avoided his gaze, well aware of the unspoken risk she was about to take, she felt him study her from where he crouched.

She turned her back under the pretence of tucking away her tools, glad to avoid his penetrating gaze. “John plans to teach you to shoe a horse.”

“Really?” He hopped to his feet, all suspicion vanishing.

“Yes, go find him by the barn.” With that, she hurried back to the homestead and scrubbed the dirt from her hands before slipping on her faded blue poplin dress. The dress clung to her figure, the crinkles on the skirt ironed out with careful strokes of her hands. She braided her copper locks and coiled them around her head, a delicate crown. Vanity was never her companion, but today, she wished to look her best for Jamie, should he come.

She stepped outside, tucked the basket she’d hidden earlier under her arm, and headed towards the agreed meeting spot. On her walk across the fields, the warm air embraced her like a soft caress, and her mind raced with possibilities and fears.

As she neared the tree, a lone figure stood there. He’d come!

She approached, her heart fluttering. His figure, bathed in the golden sunlight, brought a warming reassurance, easing the anxiety knotting within her.

“Jamie,” she breathed out, her voice barely a whisper carried by the wind.

He turned, his features breaking into a warm smile.

“Eliza,” he greeted, and her name on his lips elated her, justifying her defiance.

She set the basket on the ground and seated herself, her hands clasped in her lap, while he eased onto the ground beside her.

“I’ve missed you.” He spoke with genuine emotion. “Why have you kept away?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat, focusing her gaze on him. “It’s not because I wanted to.” She took a deep breath. “My father has forbidden Thomas and me from leaving the homestead alone... and from fraternising with our neighbours.”

Jamie touched her hand. “Does that include me?”

His fingers so gentle, his touch so brief as to have been imaginary. Still, it disturbed all her focus. She edged her hand away to prevent a recurrence, not sure she could handle how it disturbed her. “It does. He has imposed these new rules after Thomas and I had an unfortunate meeting with the Chatworth brothers one evening.”

His brows shot up. “The Chatworth brothers?”

“Thomas and I had ventured into the bushland. We became stranded by a flooded creek. They found us there.”

“Did they do you harm?”

“Father rescued us before anything untoward happened, but their intentions seemed... not honourable.”

A silence fell between them, broken only by the soft rustling of leaves and the distant sounds of farm animals. Jamie sat still, his brow furrowed, his jaw clenched.

“I understand your father’s concern.” He slapped his hat against his knee. “He wants to keep you safe. But keeping you from me isn’t right. He has nothing to fear from me.” An intensity she hadn’t seen before tinted his blue eyes, a determination that hinted at unspoken promises.

She held his gaze. “He fears losing me.”

The intensity softened, and he reached out and stroked her hand with his thumb, his soft touch sending shivers through her. “Eliza...”

A rustling from the long grass stopped him. A kangaroo? Or a snake?

They turned in unison, their hands slipping apart. Jamie rose to his feet, positioning himself between her and the noise, his posture protective.

Intense moments passed as the rustling grew louder, until, with a suddenness that made her jump, Thomas burst through the long grass, panting, sweat dripping down his face and staining his shirt collar. His chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath, his wide eyes shifting between her and Jamie.

“Eliza!” He rushed to her side, sidestepping Jamie, and slumped beside her as if he’d been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. “Father has come back from town early, and when I couldn’t find you...”

He remained bent over where he knelt, resting his hands on his knees to regain his breath, but the urgency in his voice made her heart race even faster.

“Father has returned early?” Shivers raced through her. She sprang to her feet. Father couldn’t discover her defiance, let alone with Jamie!

Jamie gripped her hand. “You should go.” He glanced across the tall grass towards the homestead, his tone calm, but his eyes mirroring the worry in Thomas’s.

She nodded, freeing her hand. No matter what, they couldn’t be seen together.

“I will see you soon, Eliza.” His eyes locked with hers for a lingering moment before he crossed the fence and disappeared into the thicket of trees and gully separating their properties.

Eliza slipped an arm around Thomas’s shoulders as they trekked back to the homestead, the burden of dread making every step heavier. “Thank you for finding me, Thomas. Was Father angered I was not about?”

“He didn’t seem himself. I told him I would fetch you.”

Unease lowered her shoulders. “I wonder what happened in town to cause him to return so soon?”

Thomas angled his head. “If Father discovers you met with Jamie, he’ll be angry, won’t he?”

Another shiver tingled at the base of her spine. “He’d be disappointed at the least.”

Chapter Eleven

As the homestead loomed ahead, shivers slithered up Eliza's spine. What would her father do if he discovered her secret rendezvous with Jamie? He had been unpredictable of late, and the alcohol he was consuming only heightened her fear. It wasn't the bottle, but rather the stench on his breath, that gave him away.

At the homestead, though, he wasn't there. Yet another shiver prickled her skin. "Where could he be?"

John came out from the barn, wiping his hands on his trousers. "Miss Eliza, your father took his horse."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No, miss."

After nodding her thanks, she turned to Thomas. "We must go about our chores and wait. He will return."

But as evening descended, his absence became more palpable, and she caught her breath with every gust of wind and creak of the floorboards. Thomas, sensing her concern, sidled closer, his hazel eyes big. "Why hasn't Father returned?"

She rubbed his back. "He won't abandon us."

The evening wore on, and her confidence wavered, an unease sliding in. The kitchen clock's hands seemed to crawl at an agonising pace, each tick marking the passing of time and their father's imminent return, because surely, he would return soon.

Dinner was taken in near silence, the clink of cutlery on plates the only sound. She pushed her food around her plate, lost in thought. Catching Thomas staring at the silver locket around her neck, she lifted it and opened it. Inside was a delicate miniature photograph of their mother, her eyes vivid, her smile gentle.

"Do you remember," Eliza whispered, her voice thick with emotion, "the day before we boarded the ship? Mother took us to that little bakery near the docks."

Thomas's eyes lit up. "The one with the buttery pastries and raspberry jam tarts?"

Eliza nodded. "She bought each of us our favourite treat, and we sat by the water, watching the ships. She told us stories of our family, of grand adventures and new beginnings."

One side of his thin mouth quirked. "She said Australia would be our new beginning. A place filled with hope and opportunity."

"She believed in new horizons for us, in a brighter future." Eliza traced the outline of their mother's face with a fingertip. "She told me to look out for you, to always keep you close."

Thomas reached out, placing his hand over hers. "And you have, Eliza. Every day."

She smiled, her eyes misting. "She also told me that, no matter where we were, a piece of her would always be with us. She's here, Thomas, in our hearts."

They shared solemn silence, basking in the warmth of the memory, the bond between them reinforced.

But soon, the weight of their father's absence returned. Her gaze shifted to the window, where the outside darkness offered no reassurance. She pushed her chair back. "It's best we retire for the night. But first, let's pray for his safety."

It was the first time she'd ever prayed aloud. The act felt both strange and comforting as they bowed their heads.

"Heavenly Father, please watch over our father and guide him safely home. Be with him wherever he is. Amen."

She raised her head and squeezed Thomas's hand. "God will look after him. Now, off to bed."

He stood and wrapped his arms around her, resting his head against her chest. "I love you, Eliza."

With her voice catching, she replied, "I love you, too, Thomas."

Her bedchamber was cast in darkness, the soft glow of a single candle offering little relief from the shadows clinging to the corners. She changed into her nightgown and climbed into bed, the familiar embrace of the sheets small security.

As she lay there, her thoughts returned to Jamie. If only she could hold onto the warmth and security she'd felt in his presence, the brief happiness they'd shared. What a bittersweet consolation, a fleeting respite.

Outside, the night was still, the world holding its breath. Eliza's eyes grew heavy, her mind drifting between wakefulness and sleep, her heart aching with each passing moment. The darkness pressed in on her, the silence a weight crushing the room.

And still, her father did not return.

Waking in the predawn hours, she found the house still and quiet, and the kitchen revealed no trace of her father. His boots were missing from their usual spot by the door, and his chair at the table remained empty, untouched. Her heart sinking, she glided her fingertips over the chair's backrest. "Where could he be?"

Had he discovered her secret meeting with Jamie? Was he so furious he'd ridden off in rage? She clenched her fists around the chair's back posts, fighting back panic. She had to control her fears for Thomas's sake.

She busied herself with preparing breakfast, but something was amiss. Her hands shook as she cracked eggs into a pan. Standing frozen in place, she focused on the sizzling sound to distract herself. As she was about to flip the eggs, footsteps sounded, and she spun around.

But it was Thomas, his eyes heavy with sleep. "Morning, Eliza," he mumbled, rubbing them. "Did Father return last night?"

Although tempted to lie, she forced the truth from her lips. "He did not. But he will this morning."

Thomas's forehead creased, but he remained quiet.

They ate breakfast in silence, her appetite nearly non-existent for reasons completely different from yesterday's excited jitters. Usually, breakfast was her favourite meal, but now, every attempted mouthful felt like gravel.

After breakfast, they began their morning chores, Eliza hoping the work would help clear her mind. As they stepped outside, the sun cast brilliant light across the fields. She

breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of freshly mown hay and damp earth.

Together, they fed the chickens, milked the cows, and tended the vegetable garden. But, even as she immersed herself in the rhythm of their work, her thoughts kept drifting to her father's absence.

The frequent glances towards the road yielded no comforting sight of him returning.

When the midday sun was high overhead, they sought shade under a gum tree, and Thomas voiced the unsettling question. "What if he doesn't come back?"

Eliza swallowed hard, finding no words to counter his dread.

All afternoon, they toiled in the vegetable garden, planting the seeds Father had purchased in town and left in the cart, tilling more soil to expand the garden even further, and mucking out the chicken coop.

The evening sun cast long shadows as they returned to the house. She pushed open the door, the hinges creaking in protest. Inside, the already familiar scent of their home—a blend of woodsmoke, beeswax candles, and the faintest hint of lavender from the sachets their mother once made—greeted her.

She moved through the dimly lit rooms, scanning each corner for any indication her father had returned during the day unnoticed. She passed the worn armchair and imagined him sitting, engrossed in a book or whittling a piece of wood into a delicate figurine. The chair was empty, and the table beside it was devoid of new carvings.

Swallowing the lump clogging her throat, she continued her pointless search. She entered the kitchen, and her gaze was drawn to the wooden table where he should be enjoying a cup of tea. Despite her desperate hopes, the kettle remained cold and untouched on the stove, and the table was unburdened by his presence.

The home felt hauntingly empty.

Chapter Twelve

His meeting with Eliza replayed in Jamie's mind like a persistent melody as he worked in the barn. Holding the pitchfork, he tried to distract himself by focusing on the horses. He longed to see her, but risking her father's wrath held him back. Every so often, he'd sneak a glance towards the edge of his property, where Eliza's home stood, and offer up a prayer for her.

A soft creak interrupted his thoughts. His mother entered, her silhouette framed by the sunlight. She carried a basket of freshly washed clothes, the faint smell of lavender wafting into the barn. Her voice, gentle as always, reached out to him. "Lost in thoughts again, Jamie?"

He offered a weary smile. Could it mask the torment churning within him? "Just tending to the horses, Mother."

Her eyes held a knowing warmth. "You've been spending a lot of time in here lately. Is something on your mind?"

He hesitated. Could he confide in her? As much as he wanted to share his burden, could he share his heart with her?

"I'm working through some things," he replied, his gaze fixed on the hay beneath his feet.

She placed the basket down, stepping closer. “You’re too much like your father—shouldering burdens alone. If you ever need someone to talk to, you know I’m willing to listen. And remember, the Lord is always with us, and He wants us to cast our burdens upon Him.”

After giving him a reassuring squeeze, she picked up her basket and left.

Leaning on the pitchfork, he breathed deeply, the weight of his predicament pressing down on him once more. If only he could unburden his heart to his mother and seek her counsel as he had so many times before. But what if she disapproved of his meeting with Eliza against her father’s wishes? What if she forbade him from seeing the woman he loved and planned to one day marry?

He glanced out the open barn window at the distant outline of Eliza’s house. What was he to do? *Lord, please guide me.*

Sometime later, when orange hues painted the sky and kookaburras laughed in the trees, he strode to the farmhouse, each step filling him with anxiety over the conversation to come. But he needed to confide in someone.

His mother was in the kitchen, bent over the stove.

He slid onto a wooden stool and grabbed an apple, the crunch so loud when he bit into it, it made her turn.

“Jamie!” Her hand flew to her chest. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Sorry.” He sat there, his heart thudding. “Mother, do you ever worry about things you can’t change?”

She paused, her hands stilling in their work. Quiet wisdom radiated in her blue eyes as she slid onto a stool beside him. “Of course. Everyone does. But sometimes, the best we can do

is focus on the things we can control and trust the rest will work itself out in time. Remember to pray and let God guide you through your worries and fears. He has a plan for us all, and our faith in Him will see us through the most trying of times.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s all very well. But, Mother, Eliza’s father has forbidden us from seeing each other, and now...”

Midway through sharing the details with his mother, he stopped at a cacophony outside—the sound of crashing pans and a distressed grunt.

“What in the world?” His mother’s brow furrowed.

They both slid off their stools and rushed outside.

“Good gracious!” Her eyes bulged. One of their large pigs was trotting through the yard, leaving a trail of chaos.

“That’s Old Bessie!” Jamie exclaimed, running after her. “How did you escape from your pen?”

Slipping through his hands, the sow bounded for the open door and burst into the kitchen.

He and his mother shared a look and then sprinted after her.

The sow snuffled around, snorting and grunting as she explored unfamiliar territory.

“We can’t have her rampaging through the house!” Mother waved him ahead of her. “Jamie, help me get her back outside!”

Armed with a broom, he attempted to corral the pig while his mother shooed it with a dish towel, but Old Bessie proved

surprisingly agile, dodging their efforts and creating more disarray.

“Old Bessie! Have you no shame, you troublesome beast! Out!” his mother ordered, pointing to the door.

“She’s a slippery one!” Jamie shouted, his face heating with exertion.

As the sow knocked over jars and spilled flour onto the floor, his siblings appeared.

“What’s going on?” Sarah gasped, her eyes wide.

“No time to explain. Help us catch her,” Jamie urged, stifling a laugh.

They scrambled to capture the pig, their laughter mingling with the pig’s grunts and snorts. After a frenzied chase, they cornered the sow, and Jamie led her outside and returned her to her pen.

Back in the house, panting and out of breath, he surveyed the destruction. Mother laughed, rallying her troops to tidy the mess. “Jamie, sweep up the flour. Sarah, wipe those hoofprints off my floorboards, will you, dear? What a merry mess that pig has made!” Mother waved both hands above her head. “She’ll be the death of me yet.”

Sarah wiped the floor. “At least we’ll have an exciting story to tell Father when he gets back from the mill.”

It had been a long week with their father away on business.

Pete snorted. “Can you imagine what he’d say if he walked in with Old Bessie running loose?”

They all chuckled. With the kitchen restored to order, Mother retrieved a jar of preserved peaches from the cellar and set it on the table along with a loaf of fresh bread, still warm

from the oven. Wooden spoons and crockery gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight filtering through the lace curtains as she bustled around.

“There. All’s well that ends well. Shall we enjoy an early supper?”

The family gathered around the scarred wooden table, a familiar ritual they had shared countless times. But after the day’s misadventures, this simple meal together felt like a special gift.

“Jamie, will you give thanks for the meal?”

Giving a nod, he held out his hands, as his father always did. With his mother’s and Sarah’s hands in his, he bowed his head. “For what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful. Amen.”

A chorus of amens resounded around the table.

“This bread’s delicious.” He reached for another slice.

Mother’s eyes crinkled at the edges before she winked. “Only the best for my family.”

They ate their fill, chatting and laughing about Old Bessie. The worries of the day faded into the background, and his mother’s words came back to him: “Have faith that all things work out in time.”

Later, while fetching water for the dishes in the dusk, a distant movement caught his eye. A lone figure was hurrying up the track towards their homestead, skirt swishing. As the figure neared, his stomach dropped.

Eliza.

He rushed to meet her. “Eliza! What’s happened?” He grasped her arms to steady her, dread coiling as she swayed on

her feet and her shawl slid to the ground.

She gazed up at him, her gleaming emerald eyes flaring wide, and her hands coming up to clutch at his shirt. “It’s my father. He’s missing, and his horse has returned without him.”

Chapter Thirteen

Discarding the pail of water he'd fetched for the dishes, Jamie half-carried, half-walked Eliza the short distance to his front veranda. "Stay here. I'll fetch you a drink." He settled her into a cane rocking chair and headed inside.

"What's going on, Jamie?" Mother approached, drying her hands on her dish towel.

"It's Eliza. Her father is missing."

Her hand flew to her chest. "Oh, good Lord." It was a prayer she uttered often, asking the Lord to intervene in times of distress. "Let me see her."

"I was fetching her a drink."

"I'll brew a fresh pot of tea."

"Thanks. She's outside."

"Bring her in, Jamie! We can't leave her out there as though she's some stranger."

"She's always welcome, but given the circumstances, she might not want to come in."

"Very well. Give her this." She poured a mug from the teapot, tipping it up to get the last drop. "It's a strong brew."

Accepting the mug gratefully, he returned to Eliza. “Mother invited you inside.”

“That’s very kind, but I mustn’t linger. I need to get back to Thomas. John is out searching for Father, and I just... I didn’t know who else to turn to.” She blinked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed and glistening.

He reached to touch her shoulder, then jerked his hand back. As much as he ached to comfort her, he didn’t dare make her awkward. “You did right coming to me. My father may be away, but I promise to search for yours until he’s found. Tell me everything since we last spoke.”

Taking a sip of tea, she looked away. “When I got home after Thomas fetched me, Father wasn’t there. John told me he’d gone to look for me. He didn’t return that night, and now... his horse came back alone.” Fresh tears traced the tracks they’d already formed down her cheeks. “Something terrible must’ve happened.”

“I’ll start searching at dawn. I’ll cover every inch of this land.”

She met his gaze, her chin rising. “I’ll come with you.”

He hesitated, thinking of the demanding ride ahead. “It will be tough.”

Her chin lifted further. “He’s my father. I won’t sit around idly waiting. I’ll be ready at first light.”

AT THE BREAK OF DAWN, Jamie saddled Baxter, feeling the weight of the task ahead as he rode to the Reynolds homestead.

Eliza emerged, her face pale but composed. She was wearing her riding habit, her hair braided. Only the faint smudges under her eyes betrayed her anguish of the previous evening. After she'd stumbled to his homestead on foot, he'd ridden her home on Baxter, battling the urge to stay by her side to comfort and protect her.

He gazed at her with quiet compassion. "Are you ready?"

She took a deep breath, rubbing her arms against the early morning chill. "As I'll ever be. Thank you for coming with me."

"Of course." He clasped her hands, trying to instil her with hope. "We will find him, Eliza. Have faith."

She managed a wan smile. Her hands remained in his a heartbeat longer than was proper, but in this moment of uncertainty, propriety seemed trivial. All that mattered was finding her father.

Leaving Thomas in John's care, they mounted their horses and set off down the dirt track towards the valley below. The morning mist still clung to the hills, shrouding the landscape in a veil of silvery grey. The only sounds were the clip-clopping of hooves and magpies warbling to greet the dawn.

The sun soon peeped over the hills, and its golden rays burned away the mist, revealing the valley lush from recent rains. The murmur of a creek floated up from the gully as they descended the winding track, a ribbon of life amidst the bushland.

"The creek is running high. Do you think he could have had an accident crossing it?" Jamie asked as they forded the stream.

She swallowed hard, glancing away. "I sincerely hope not."

They continued their search downstream, scanning the banks for any sign of disturbance or tracks leading into the creek. But the soil remained undisturbed, the only footprints left by their horses' hooves.

As the valley opened onto rolling pastures, the warm breeze brought with it the earthy scents of grass and cattle. In the distance, a herd of dairy cows grazed by a weathered homestead, a thin ribbon of smoke drifting from the chimney.

"Let's ask if they've seen him," he suggested.

Eliza nodded, her shoulders squaring as she tugged on the reins and directed her mare towards the sprawling farm.

They approached, halting by a wooden gate. An old dog snoozing on the porch perked up at their arrival, barking.

A grizzled farmer emerged, eyeing them. He wiped his hands on a rag. "Can I help you folks?"

"We're looking for my father," Eliza said, her voice faltering. "He went missing yesterday. Have you seen a man pass through here?"

The farmer scratched his chin, eyebrows furrowing. "Can't say I've seen another soul for some time, miss. What's your father's name?"

"Arthur Reynolds," Jamie supplied. At the man's blank expression, he added, "From the Reynolds farm, a few miles east of here."

The farmer shook his head, brow furrowing. "Sorry, the name's not familiar. Reynolds, you say? Are you folks new to these parts?"

Eliza sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Yes, we’ve moved here recently.”

Hooking his hands on his suspenders, the farmer scuffed his feet. “That explains it, then. Sorry I can’t be of more help, miss. Not many folks pass through these parts, and strangers tend to stick out. If I do spot anyone unfamiliar, I’ll send word your way.”

“Thank you for your time,” Jamie said. With a nod, they turned their horses and continued down the track.

He gazed at her, wishing he could lift the worry shadowing her eyes. “I’m sorry our first lead came to naught.”

She attempted a smile, though her face remained wan. “We had to try. At least now we can rule out this area.” Her voice softened. “Though with Father’s condition, I fear he may have wandered far from home.”

Jamie frowned, steering his horse closer. “Condition?”

She hesitated as if wrestling with how much she dared reveal. “My father suffers from bouts of confusion and mood changes, and recently, the episodes have worsened. I fear in a confused state, he may have become lost while searching for me.”

Jamie absorbed this news. He’d known the man to be gruff, but learning he suffered an illness that caused him to be so explained a lot. “Your secret is safe with me, but this information could help in finding him. Have you consulted a doctor?”

Eliza shook her head, gazing off into the distance. “Father refuses to see one. He insists the episodes are temporary, though they are becoming more frequent. And his liking for strong liquor is exacerbating the problem.” She blinked back

tears, her voice little more than a whisper. “I don’t know how to help him.”

“We will think of something,” Jamie said. If only he could offer more by way of solace. He hesitated, then nudged his stallion closer to her mare, and reached across, clasping her hand in his. Propriety seemed trivial in light of her anguish.

A faint smile lifted her lips as she gazed upon their joined hands. But her fingers remained limp in his grasp, as if her worries had sapped them of strength. The light in her eyes flickered, threatening to go out.

He squeezed her hand, hoping his touch would rekindle her spirit. “Don’t lose hope. We will find your father. Have faith, Eliza.”

She took a deep breath, straightening in her saddle. Her hand tightened around his, and he felt in her a resolve she’d been lacking moments before.

“Yes,” she said. “We must have faith.”

Chapter Fourteen

The dense scrub stretched as far as the eye could see, an endless sea of mottled greens and browns shimmering under the afternoon sun. Eliza stared at the bushland with mounting despair, any traces of her father's path long lost to the thick undergrowth.

Despite their extensive search along the nearby roads, they'd found nothing. This vast bushland seemed their final hope. And undoubtedly the most perilous.

As she dismounted, the soft earth embraced her boots. The towering eucalyptus trees filtered golden shafts of sunlight that danced upon the ground. The soundscape consisted only of the cicada symphony and Jamie's soft footstep as he came to stand beside her.

"The bushland goes on for miles," he said. "We could search for days and still not cover it all." His tone was gentle, as if reluctant to voice what they were both thinking.

Her father could be lost anywhere in this sea of scrub. Or worse.

She blinked back tears, grasping for any dregs of hope still left within her. "I cannot imagine leaving him alone through another cold night." If he yet lived. "What horrors might have befallen him, injured or disoriented in this unforgiving land?"

She strained her ears for any sound to betray his presence, yet none came. To leave without knowing his fate would be agony.

And yet, what choice did they have?

“We have to try,” she murmured, her spine stiffening, her voice betraying a tremor she couldn’t hide. “From where the dirt track ends, we’ll spiral outwards. Maybe... maybe we’ll find a trace of Father.”

Jamie exhaled, his hand resting on her shoulder, his unwavering strength her source of hope. “We’ve little daylight left. Let’s begin.”

Eliza glimpsed the sky, partially hidden by the overhead canopy, but the sun’s descent was unmistakable. “Father mustn’t spend another night alone in this vast wilderness. We cannot leave without uncovering his fate.”

Jamie squeezed her shoulder. A promise or a consolation?

Ensuring their horses were tethered, they delved into the heart of the scrub on foot. The ever-changing terrain—riddled with fallen logs, hidden dips, and treacherous boulders—demanded their utmost attention.

Still, she scanned the brush ahead. The tangled mess of undergrowth could hide all manner of dangers—venomous snakes ready to strike from the shadows, steep drop-offs obscured by foliage, or wild dogs that stalked the valley. Her father, if still able, would have avoided such perils. But in a confused or injured state, could he have wandered into a hazard, blind to the threat until too late? The thought spurred her on, hacking through the scrub with renewed urgency. They had to find him before the light failed and the bushland’s dangers awoke.

The landscape changed subtly around them. The eucalyptus trees thinned, and the ground seemed to fall away with every step they took. When Jamie stopped, holding out an arm to halt progress, she stumbled into his arm, gripping it to steady herself.

The land dropped away, forming a steep ravine, its bottom hidden in shadow. Dense undergrowth and ferns masked its edge, making it a treacherous trap for the unwary. They stood silent, staring into the abyss.

“Do you think...?” She clutched at his arm and swallowed hard, clearing her throat but unable to free the question. Father, in a state of confusion or weakness, could have met with such a peril.

“We must be cautious,” Jamie whispered. “The bushland isn’t just thick scrub. It’s fraught with dangers like this.”

She nodded, her throat tightening. “Father might not have been aware of such a drop-off.” She rose onto her toes, craning around for any sign he’d been near.

With renewed caution, she skirted the edge, now and then casting anxious glances into its shadowy depths, half fearing they might find some sign of his passage.

Amidst the natural hazards, a shadow of a more insidious nature darkened her thoughts—the Chatworth brothers. Though they bore no specific grudge against her family, their nature could have caused them to harm him if he stumbled across their path. Sharing her dread with Jamie seemed vital, but she hesitated, wary of deepening his worries.

Yet if there were any chance of foul play, his keen senses were their best warning.

When she voiced her fears, his eyes, sharp and discerning, met hers. “You think the Chatworths might have crossed paths with your father?”

She nodded, the lump in her throat constricting her voice. “It’s a possibility.”

His expression hardened, but his voice remained gentle. “Eliza, even in our darkest hours, God is with us, even here. Let’s keep the focus on finding your father.”

But the bushland stretched before them, its secrets waiting to be unearthed. Was her father’s fate one of those secrets? She shuddered. “How I wish I shared your faith and fortitude, Jamie. My fears and doubts assail me at every turn.”

“Then I will believe enough for both of us.” He squeezed her hand, calloused and familiar. “The light yet lingers, and with it, remains hope. Take comfort—you do not face this trial alone.”

She squeezed back, clinging to the warmth and life within his grasp. For a breath, all faded but the steadfast beat of his heart, guiding her own through the shadows.

“Father!” she called, her voice echoing as it bounced along the trees. Only the chattering birds replied, indifferent to her anguished cries.

She walked until her legs ached, clawing through bushes that caught at her skirts and scratched her hands, exposed in her search for balance. The faint path that led them in had long disappeared, but they pressed on. As the light faded, her concern for her father vied with fears of becoming lost in the bushland themselves.

“We must head back while we still have light,” Jamie urged. His face was scratched from battling through the dense

scrub, his eyes mirroring her anguish at abandoning the search. "If we lose our way, we'll be of no use to your father."

Already, a sea of trees stretched endlessly in all directions. Though she strained her ears, no sound betrayed her father's presence. Her heart twisted. How could they leave him alone through another long, cold night?

"You're right," she said, her voice hollow. "We can return at first light to continue the search. I only pray we are not too late." She turned back the way they had come, the faint light guiding their path.

"I'll call on others to help," Jamie said.

Transformed in the twilight, the land that had been familiar by day now played host to hidden threats that stalked the coming night. When they remounted their horses, an eerie stillness had descended, the chirping birds now nestled in their roosts. The faint moon granted scant light to see by, shadows dancing at the corners of her vision. Each rustle and snap of twigs underfoot set her heart racing, her mind conjuring unseen dangers awakening to prowl.

At one haunting cry, she jumped and gripped her horse's reins even tighter.

"Only a nightjar," Jamie whispered.

They rode in silence up the narrow track, the sure-footed horses guided by instinct where human senses failed. The thick silence unnerved Eliza, her ears straining for any sound. "Do you think he found shelter for the night?"

"I pray so." But his words lacked conviction, and something cold tightened her stomach.

As they approached the homestead, the faint glow of candlelight flickered through a crack in the window shutters,

casting a long shadow across the yard. Eliza's stomach clenched. Thomas would be hoping for reassuring news—a hope she couldn't fulfil tonight.

They dismounted their horses, and John came out to take them. No words were spoken. There was no need. With a weighted breath, she pushed open the front door, and the hinges groaned in protest. She stepped inside, the dim candlelight casting a warm glow on the familiar surroundings. The scent of a hastily prepared meal still lingered in the air, a testament to Thomas's attempts to maintain some semblance of ordinariness.

He stood near the fireplace, his anxious gaze fixed on her. The flickering light danced across his youthful face, highlighting the worry etched in his expression. "Eliza?" His voice cracked. "Did you find Father?"

How could she convey their failure? Her eyes welled as she met her brother's desperate stare. "We searched as long as we could, but we couldn't find him. The bushland is vast, and the darkness... it made it impossible to continue."

His face crumpled, the weight of her words crushing any remaining hope he held. He clenched his fists. "How could you give up? Father could be out there, hurt or worse, and you just left him!"

She hugged her arms around herself, a shield against the accusation, but it couldn't shelter her as the same thoughts shouted within her mind. "We didn't give up." If only she could believe that. "We had to come back for our safety. We can't help Father if we get lost or injure ourselves."

Jamie lingered outside the doorway. She waved him in. "Come inside. Thomas needs your comfort."

He hesitated, but then stepped forward, and placed a reassuring hand on Thomas's shoulder. "We'll head back out at first light. We won't rest until we find your father."

Thomas's lanky body slumped into a nearby chair, his head in his hands. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just—we can't lose him, too."

Eliza crossed the room and knelt beside him, her hand on his back. "I know." She pushed the words past the tears clogging her throat. "We all miss Mother, and we'll do everything we can to bring Father home safely."

In the tense silence, only the crackling of the fire and the distant howling of a wild dog beyond the safety of their walls intruded. The weight of her responsibility pressed down on her, the need to protect and care for her brother in the absence of their parents.

She pushed to her feet. "We should try to get some rest."

Thomas rubbed a fist against eyes red-rimmed and weary. "I doubt sleep will come."

"Eliza, try to eat something to keep up your strength." Jamie edged backward towards the door. "I'll be back at first light, and I will bring help."

Eat? Impossible. They extinguished all but one of the candles, the remaining flame casting a feeble light as they prepared for bed. She changed into her nightgown and climbed into her small bed, the coarse linens a poor comfort against the chill of the night. She lay awake, listening to the soft snores of her brother, who slept in the bed alongside her despite fearing sleep would elude him. What had happened to her father? Would they ever know his fate?

And what of the ever-present threat of the Chatworth brothers? Had they done something to him? If not, what would they do when they realised he was no longer here?

She turned on her side, gazing at her brother's silhouette in the dim candlelight. His brow was furrowed even in sleep as if his dreams offered no reprieve. A fierce protectiveness surged through her at the sight of him so vulnerable. How could she guide Thomas through the loss of their remaining parent if the new day delivered the unthinkable? Why must she bear such a responsibility, so heavy yet unavoidable?

In the stillness, she closed her eyes and bowed her head even while lying down. She clasped her hands beneath her chin, clenching them tight. *Lord, please, let Father live to see the dawn. May the first faint rays of sun illuminate the path to finding him whole. And thank You, Lord, for sending me Jamie!*

What would she have done without his quiet strength through this long day? Only having him there led her back from the brink of despair. Whatever news the coming morn might bring, with him beside them, she and Thomas wouldn't have to face such trials alone.

Chapter Fifteen

Jamie awoke to the first blush of dawn, the chill of night still clinging to the world. Moving silently to avoid waking the household, he donned his clothes and ventured outside. The previous night, his mother had prayed with him for Mr. Reynolds's safety and promised to gather a search party amongst the townsfolk at daybreak. However, Jamie's restless spirit couldn't wait.

He set off for the Reynolds homestead and arrived as hues of gold and fiery orange painted the horizon. Dismounting, he breathed deeply of the crisp morning air, the beauty and serenity stirring memories of happier days. In times of trouble, the valleys and ridges reminded him there were peaks yet to be climbed.

The front door's soft creak interrupted his musings. Eliza emerged, her eyes dark with worry, yet shimmering with hope. "Do you think we'll find him today?"

At her breathy whisper, he smiled, masking his trepidation. "I pray with all my heart we will." Her pain hurt more than anything. She'd seen too much hardship these last months, and yet there remained a grace about her in even the darkest of times. The sunrise seemed to ignite the burnished copper of

her hair, such glorious beauties forever reminding him of life's sweetness amidst the bitter.

She raised her chin, seeming to draw strength from his words.

"We'll search the ridge to the west, as yet unexplored," he said.

As they prepared to depart, she hugged her brother and kissed the top of his head. "We'll be back as soon as we find Father."

They were confident words, spoken with conviction. But would they find success today? Jamie squared his jaw, grinding his teeth against such doubt.

But what if they didn't find him?

Thomas nodded, but his thin lips wobbled as he opened them to speak. He clamped them shut, trapping in whatever he would have said. Had he intended to voice support and encouragement or doubt?

"Stay with John." Eliza squeezed his shoulders. "You should not be alone."

His head hung low. "I wish I could come with you."

Stepping back, she patted his shoulder. "If Father returns of his own accord, he will want one of us to be here to greet him. And you are too young for such an ordeal."

Although she spoke the truth, the words did nothing to lessen Thomas's obvious despair at being left.

Jamie uttered a silent prayer for God to comfort the boy, then spoke aloud. "And remember, we need you to have John fire three shots in the air to alert us and the other searchers if your father comes home."

As they rode off, Eliza smiled at Jamie with a tender warmth as if stolen from the dawn itself. “That was wise, giving him something to feel important. Thank you for your presence through this trial. Your friendship and guidance have been a comfort beyond measure.”

His chest swelled as he savoured the unspoken trust between them in that fleeting moment. “There is nowhere else I would rather be.”

With renewed purpose, they set out for the ridge. Surely, this day, their fortunes must change. As the sun broke over the distant mountains, its light seemed to herald new hope of success.

They spent the morning combing the ridge for any sign, to no avail. As the day wore on under an overcast sky, their pace began to slow. Jamie’s lungs burned with each breath in the thin air, and his limbs ached from exertion and lack of rest. Eliza fared little better, her eyes rimmed with shadows smudged violet. Neither mentioned the storm clouds gathered on the horizon. Nor the lack of those triumphant three shots fired from the homestead or other searchers.

Now, a heavy fog rolled down from the peaks shrouding the ridge in a blanket of grey. Visibility dropped until Jamie could barely make out Eliza riding ahead of him. He called out to stop her before the trail vanished from sight.

The world around them dissolved into nothingness. No shadows remained, no diffused light to penetrate the gloom—only this strange floating sensation of being cut loose from all bearings and cast adrift.

He dismounted and reached for her to keep from losing all sense of her presence. His hands found her waist, then slid up

to clasp her arms as reassurance and anchor amidst the sea of grey engulfing them.

“We won’t make it home before nightfall in this,” she said, her voice taut with fears unvoiced until now. “And in the state we’re both in, wandering lost under darkness could prove the end of us.”

He ground his teeth, tasting the truth of her words. Though loath to abandon their search, risking their lives in this way would avail them nothing. “We’ll go slowly and follow the slope until we find better visibility and can pick up the trail again. And perhaps we will encounter other searchers.”

She remounted, waiting as he tied a length of rope between them to prevent them from becoming separated. Side by side, they guided their mounts down the ridge, all sense of direction slipping away until only the tug upon the rope remained to guide their course.

Step by slow step, they descended. Jamie prayed the fog might lift and reveal a landmark to show the path home. Their lives now tethered as one, in this place where time seemed strange and distorted. Not knowing how much time had passed, only that night would bring its terrors if deliverance did not come before.

Then it happened—a subtle shift, the grey softening to the palest lilac and then gold as the sun broke through over the distant peaks at their back. The veil withdrew, the world and trail ahead now bathed in fading light.

“Jamie, look!” She urged her horse down the trail while pointing to a scrap of fabric caught on a branch. “It’s from Father’s coat.”

He followed, a smile relaxing his face. "Praise God," he breathed. This was the first trace of her father since the day he went missing. Surely, they were gaining ground at last!

Eliza's eyes shone with renewed faith. "We're close. I can feel it. He took this path. We simply need to follow wherever it may lead."

"Then we shall do so and not rest until your father is found." His weariness fell away, replaced by conviction. Yes, they would see this journey through together. By grace, they had been guided thus far, and on that same grace would their hopes now rise or fall.

The darkness deepened, but they refused to halt their search, driven by the first real clue. The moon cast its silvery light upon the trail, allowing them to navigate the shadows.

"Father!" Eliza called, her voice echoing into the night.

Jamie joined her, their voices merging.

As they rode on, she sat her mount with determination, her spine straight, her head up, her unwavering spirit spurring him on. He would continue with her, no matter the obstacles.

The hours passed, and with the moon sinking ever lower, a hush descended upon the bushland. Just as Jamie began to fear their efforts would be in vain, a faint cry pierced the silence.

"Did you hear that?" Eliza edged her mount nearer, reaching across and gripping his arm.

"I did." His breath caught in his chest, his heart pounding.

Urging their horses forward, they traced the sound to its source. As they drew nearer, the voice grew stronger, leading them like a light through the darkness.

“It’s coming from over there.” She pointed to a shadowy rock formation.

Navigating the rugged terrain, they reached a small cave nestled beneath a vast rock ledge.

“Father!” Eliza called out, her voice echoing into the cavernous shadows.

“Eliza...” The weak reply came from within.

“Jamie, it’s him!”

Dismounting, they left their horses and scrambled into the cave. The flicker of a fire illuminated a figure that made Jamie’s breath catch—nothing more than a shadow of the man Jamie knew. His face was pale and gaunt, days of exposure leaving their mark. A scraggy beard had sprouted, and his eyes seemed sunken. Yet, they lit with gratitude as Eliza reached him.

“Father!” She flung herself to her knees and embraced him.

“You found me.” He clung to her.

After firing his trio of shots, Jamie watched, an outsider in this tender reunion. The weight of the older man’s disapproval pressed upon him, but he couldn’t let Eliza face this alone, even if it meant facing the man who’d driven a wedge between them.

As Eliza comforted her father, the older man’s gaze found Jamie. A brief flicker of hostility passed, but then, perhaps seeing Jamie’s genuine concern and fatigue, his expression softened.

“Father.” She eased back but took her father’s face between her hands. “Do not be angry with Jamie for coming to

our aid. Without him, I never would've found you."

The older man seemed to wrestle with himself, then sighed, nodding once. The gesture was small, but Jamie saw it for what it was—a first step towards acceptance.

Chapter Sixteen

The ordeal was over! Scarcely able to believe it, Eliza fought the shivers starting in her belly. After two days of combing the bush, they'd found her father. She hadn't allowed herself to imagine how it might feel to look upon his face again. Anxiously anticipating his fate was one thing, but confronting the reality of his condition was something else altogether. Now, so many emotions congealed her insides.

As they rode back towards the homestead, her father seated in front of Jamie on his horse, the dim moonlight revealed his weathered profile. He seemed aged beyond his years, face haggard, and his clothes draping a frail body. Starvation, thirst, and exposure had etched deep lines onto his features and perhaps deeper lines into his soul.

She'd been so angry, so resentful. But now, with the memory of the bush's unforgiving vastness in her mind, all that gave way to intense gratitude. His eyes, full of weariness and pain, also shimmered with a warmth and recognition she had longed to see.

At the homestead, Jamie took charge, lifting her father and carrying him inside as though he weighed no more than a child. Thomas's face lit as he rushed to help.

Despite the comforting familiarity of their home, dread clawed cold fingers down Eliza's spine as she tended to her father. The physical injuries were evident, but the malaise that seemed to have taken hold of him ran far deeper.

He looked at her, that unmistakable edge of determination still present, but dulled. "I fear... I might not come back from this," he murmured, exhaustion slurring his words.

"You mustn't say such things," she choked out, desperate to reassure him as much as herself. But even as she wrapped his wounds, hope felt like a fragile thread, ready to snap.

A heavy sigh escaped him. "If I should depart this world, I cannot go without asking your forgiveness. For every hardship I have caused you. And for separating you from those who hold your heart. I see now the error of my ways." His weary gaze drifted to Jamie, who lingered near the door, and then back to Eliza.

She grasped Father's hand, clinging to this precious moment of clarity between them. His expression held a softness she had rarely seen. Perhaps his brush with death had diminished his hardness of heart.

"Think no more on it," she whispered. "You must save your strength. Together, we will see you healed."

But as days turned into weeks, her optimism waned. Despite some initial improvement, his strength never fully returned, though his wounds healed and his fever lessened. He couldn't rise from bed without aid and tired after only brief moments of sitting. She urged him to rest, fighting the gnawing fear that he might never be whole again.

While she cared for him and attended to basic chores, Thomas and John shouldered the farm's more demanding

work. Jamie, despite responsibilities at his family's farm, lent his support whenever he could.

One day, as Eliza returned from her chores, she found her father striving to stand. He gripped the bedpost with trembling hands, but his legs wouldn't support him.

"Father, please!" She rushed to his side. "You mustn't strain yourself so!"

He leaned upon her as she helped him back to bed, then shoved away her tending hands. "I cannot lie here useless while there is work to be done."

"You're still recovering," she soothed. But her words rang hollow. She could no longer deny the truth—he lacked the strength for the life they had known.

He huffed. "I fear I will be naught but a burden now, unable to provide or care for my own."

"Never say such things!" She grasped his hand. "We will find a way to manage until you recover."

Yet how would she make good that promise? For the first time, their future seemed precarious.

The next morning, as she headed out to begin her chores, Thomas was waiting for her outside the barn.

"I'll see to the livestock today," he said. "Your place is inside, with father."

She opened her mouth to protest, but how could she? Gratitude welled inside her chest as tears pricked the backs of her eyes. Thomas had seen what she couldn't bring herself to admit—she was wearing under the demands of each long day and the anguish of their father's unceasing decline.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Thomas nodded, his eyes clouding. Surely, he, too, feared the path now before them.

Inside, she took a seat at her father's bedside. When he frowned and asked about her chores, her smile came at great effort. "Thomas is seeing to them today. I wished to stay here, with you."

Her father sighed but didn't argue.

As she sat beside him, watching him, the weight of the unspoken truth hovered between them—their world was changing.

When Jamie arrived the next day to check on them, he looked at her with concern, then clasped her hands, and implored, "Talk to me."

Her vision blurring, she clung to his grip and struggled to give voice to her fears, as if speaking them breathed them into being true. "Father is declining. We're losing him."

He squeezed her hands. "Your father is resilient. Do not lose hope."

"But how will I manage everything if he... doesn't make it?" She ducked her head, her whisper shaking, her hands trying to pry free. "There's so much work, so much I don't know."

"You won't be alone." His grip held firm. "Thomas, John, and I are here. And remember to lean on God, Eliza. Trust Him. Do not try to do this in your own strength. Trust in the Lord, and He will guide you."

Emotion welled inside her, and her hands relaxed into his. With Jamie and faith, she could face the uncertain future. She leaned in, seeking solace in the comfort of his embrace, allowing her tears to flow.



DAWN'S first light saw Eliza checking on her father before she ventured outside to start her duties. The farm's routine sounds, usually so comforting, were interrupted by a bleating that set her nerves on edge. Racing towards the noise, she found a ewe collapsed, legs akimbo, and body quivering. She knelt by its side, the creature's wool slick with sweat and its breaths laborious.

While she had confronted issues with lambing and minor ailments in the past, this felt different. With the urgency so palpable, the ewe required expert care.

Eliza sprinted towards Jamie and Thomas, who were working on a distant fence. "Come help! A ewe is in distress. We can't lose her."

Dropping their tools, they ran alongside her. Jamie examined the ewe while Eliza, seeking comfort, nestled close to Thomas. Jamie's worried expression upon rising only intensified her anxiety. "This severe an infection or ailment's beyond our expertise. We need the veterinarian. I'll ride into town and fetch him."

Thomas's arm tightened around her waist. Did he think this would be too much for her? She stepped away. "Please, Jamie, hurry."

As he disappeared towards town, Eliza stayed by the ewe's side, murmuring comforting words, her fingers running through the animal's wool. She was barely an adult, just turned eighteen last week, and the responsibility weighed upon her, especially with her father's deteriorating health. This farm was

a legacy, a testament to her mother's dreams—she had to find the means to save it should the unthinkable happen.

She lifted her gaze to the sky. “God, if You're there, please heal Father and remove this burden from me. It is too much to bear.”

She remained at the ewe's side until John approached, fatherly understanding in his eyes. “The veterinarian might take a while. Your father needs you right now. Let me watch over the ewe.”

The conflicting duties warred within her, but how could she argue? “Thank you, John.”

As she returned inside, she held her father's hand, soaking in every detail of his face, feeling the fleeting warmth of his skin. Time seemed to be playing a cruel trick, with every hour stealing more of his vitality. Desperate for solace, she opened her mother's cherished Bible, reading passages aloud, hoping the words would comfort them both.

At least, the veterinarian successfully treated the ewe, a minor victory amidst her personal tempest.

Chapter Seventeen

Jamie wiped the sweat from his brow as he pitched another bale of hay into the wagon. The late summer sun beat down upon his back, and his muscles burned from hours of chopping wood and mending fences. But his work was not done yet. After finishing here, he would ride over to Eliza's farm to help Thomas with the evening chores, as he had nearly every day.

After Eliza's father took a turn for the worse, he now rarely left his bed. Eliza remained at his side, leaving the farm in Jamie's hands. Not that he minded. He was happy to do whatever he could to lighten her burden. But tending to two farms was exhausting, even with John and Thomas helping.

As he hauled the last bale into the wagon, his mother's voice came from the house. "Jamie, you must come!"

Heart racing, he ran to the homestead, praying nothing was amiss, although her tone suggested otherwise.

She met him at the door, her face flushed. "It's the chimney again. Smoke's billowing into the sitting room. We must have a blockage."

Whew. It wasn't an emergency. Still, a chimney blockage did need attention. "I'll fetch the brooms and see what I can do."

She followed him to the sitting room. “I do worry the whole chimney will need rebuilding soon. What with lambing season done and harvest on the horizon, do we have the time or means for such a task?”

“Let’s see if a good sweep will fix the trouble first before we worry needlessly.” He grabbed the broom. Their farmhouse was old, and many repairs were needed—it seemed an ongoing task.

While he cleared most of the blockage, part of the chimney crumbled, confirming her fears, and he stifled a groan. “It seems the chimney will need attention after all.”

His mother threw up her hands. “However will we pay for the repairs?”

“Father and I will rebuild it.” He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I will fetch him, and it will be done by suppertime.”

She cupped his cheek. “God blessed us when He brought you into our lives, dear Jamie. What would we do without you?”

He breathed in deeply. Eliza had uttered those same words the day before, and for the first time, the weight of responsibility settled heavily on his shoulders. “It’s my pleasure to do what I can, Mother. This is my home.”



ELIZA SAT BY HER FATHER, resting her head on their joined hands, praying through a veil of tears. “Lord, show us Your mercy. First our mother, now our father. Yet, Thy will be done.”

His weak grip tightened. “Eliza.” He gasped, his voice a mere wisp. “Do not shed tears for me. Not yet.”

She grasped his thin hand. “Have faith, Father. The Lord will answer our prayers. He will not forsake us.”

He sighed and turned his head as if he gained no comfort from her words. He had lived without faith, and so it was not unexpected.

She clutched her mother’s Bible to her heart. If only she could draw strength from its words, just like Mother and the Goddards. She adjusted his blankets, her hand lingering on his chest. “Rest now.”

The room grew silent except for his rhythmic breathing. She held her breath, each pause between inhales stretching into eternity, until she surrendered and whispered the Lord’s Prayer, the only prayer she knew.

“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

Once the final words left her lips, Thomas moved to sit beside her on the floor. Their shoulders touching, they huddled together, trying to find comfort in each other’s presence. Sleep came in fitful bursts as the night deepened.

The new dawn brought Jamie, his eyes heavy with worry. “I came as soon as I could. How is he? I’m sorry I didn’t come last night.”

His familiar, caring face crumbled her façade. She sobbed into his chest, seeking solace in his embrace. “The doctor—he

said there's little hope. What will we do, Jamie?"

Jamie caressed her hair. "He's a fighter. Don't lose faith."

She wanted to believe him, but dread gnawed at her. Then a carriage clattering up interrupted them, and she stood. "I must see who it is."

Jamie patted her shoulder as she passed him. "I'll stay with your father."

The carriage had stopped in front of the homestead, and Pastor Isaac dismounted. He approached, Bible in hand, compassionate smile in place. "I came to offer guidance and prayer in your time of need, Miss Reynolds."

Her shoulders loosened, and her pent-up breath whooshed out. Her attendance at the local church had been irregular, but she welcomed the pastor's kind support. "Thank you. That's so thoughtful. Please come in."

She stepped aside to allow him to enter first. Thomas had joined them and followed alongside her.

"Lead me to your father?" Pastor Isaac asked in a soft voice.

With a nod, she guided him into her father's bedroom, moving her and Thomas's bedding off the floor.

When Jamie stood and stepped aside, her father's eyes flicked open before surprise widened them further, and he tried to sit. "Pastor? I didn't expect you."

Coughing racked his body and echoed through the small room.

She placed a pillow behind his head and lifted a beaker of water to his lips.

When Father's coughing ceased, the pastor touched his shoulder. "Rest easy. I came to offer comfort and prayer in your time of illness. That is all."

Eliza stilled. Would her father welcome the pastor's offer or send him away?

He coughed again. "You can pray for me, but I doubt God cares for the likes of me."

Pastor Isaac gave a wan smile. "He cares for all His lost sheep. May I pray for you?"

Her father shrugged. "Go ahead."

With his hand still on Father's shoulder, Pastor Isaac bowed his head. "Heavenly Father"—his voice, though strong, wasn't overbearing—"we come before You today humbly asking for Your mercy for Arthur. You are the Great Physician, able to heal all maladies and mend every wound. Place Your healing hand upon him now, ease his suffering, and grant him comfort. Let Your light shine upon him and restore him to health and strength."

He shifted to lay his hands on Eliza and her brother. "I also ask for Your mercy for Eliza and Thomas in this time of trial. Give them courage, faith, and hope. Surround this family with Your grace, dear Lord, and bless them with Your love. In the name of Your Son, we pray. Amen."

Eliza wiped her eyes as something shifted in her heart, the reassurance of God's care for her and her family overwhelming. "Thank you, Pastor." She swallowed hard before stepping in and squeezing her father's hand. "Can I get you anything, Father?"

He shook his head, and when he replied, his voice was weak. "I have no desire for food."

His protruding collarbone and hollow cheeks gave testament to his failing appetite.

She drew a long breath, her throat clogging. “I’ll get the pastor refreshments. Call if you need anything.”

He nodded before his eyes slid shut.

A deep rumble of thunder shook the house as she ushered the pastor from the bedroom. Outside, the sky had darkened, and the wind whipped through the trees.

“Thank you for your offer of refreshments.” Pastor Isaac held up a hand, forestalling her movements towards the kitchen. “But I must return to the village before the storm arrives.”

She saw him out and then returned to her father’s bedside. He was coughing again, struggling to sit. She rushed to help him, the heat of fever scorching her through his nightshirt.

“The fever has returned,” he rasped. “I fear I am worsening, not improving, despite the pastor’s prayers.” Another fit of coughing shook his thin frame.

Fighting tears, she grasped his hand. “Do not lose hope. You must drink—let me fetch you some broth to keep up your strength.” She hurried to the kitchen, listening with dread to the storm worsening outside and her father’s cough rattling inside.

In the kitchen, Jamie was stacking firewood. When he looked up, he stood and gathered her into his arms. “Has your father’s condition worsened?”

She clung to him, drawing courage from his steady presence. “His fever is high again, and his cough won’t leave him be. Without the Lord’s intervention, he will fail quickly.”

Her voice broke, and shudders racked her. She burrowed in closer to Jamie's chest, tears heating her cheeks.

Jamie held her close, stroking her hair. "Hush. You mustn't lose faith." With his forefinger, he tilted her chin upwards, brushing away her tears with his fingers. "Did the pastor not say to pray without ceasing? We must continue to ask for God's grace. He will be faithful."

She stared into his eyes, drawing strength from his faith. "We'll pray all day and night if we must. God will provide."

Angry footsteps clomped past, and Thomas appeared in the doorway, his expression as thunderous as the storm raging outside. "Pray all you like—it won't help. Father is dying, and no amount of prayer will save him!"

Eliza gasped. "Thomas, don't say such things. Have faith in the Lord. He'll heal Father if we ask—"

"I don't want faith. I want a doctor! Not prayers, but medicine and treatment. Faith alone won't cure a raging fever or make his cough subside!" His voice broke. "I don't want to lose him, Eliza. Not after we lost Mother."

She went to him, embracing him as he wept into her shoulder. His anger scarcely concealed his fear and vulnerability. At twelve, he was struggling to be a man, but in her arms, he dissolved into a child again.

"I know, Thomas," she soothed. "I fear losing him, too. But we dare not lose hope or faith. God will aid his healing, and the doctor continues to treat him. Both faith and medicine will restore him to us."

He sagged against her, his anger spent. "I only want him well again."

She held him close, praying silently to God to give her guidance to console her brother's troubled spirit.

A cough and groan from the bed drew their attention. Their father was stirring, roused by Thomas's outburst.

Eliza rushed to his side, but Thomas hung back, wiping his eyes.

"Despair not, children," their father rasped. "I am still here." He gazed at Thomas, his stern expression softening. "Do not be cross. Your mother would not wish to see such anger."

At that, Thomas crumbled. He flew to their father's side, burying his face in the blankets as his thin shoulders shook. "I only want you to be well again," he cried. "Don't leave us, Father!"

With his hand on Thomas's head, Father met Eliza's gaze, his smile sad. Her eyes welled again. Although not the most caring of men, he was their father, and she loved him. How could she imagine life without him?

Lord, please let Father get better.

Chapter Eighteen

The next morning, Eliza awoke to golden sunlight filtering through the curtains, chasing away the shadows of the night's troubles. Pushing the curtains aside, she took a moment to gaze out at their farm wrapped in the dawn. The panorama of undulating green hills against a pristine blue sky rekindled hope in her heart.

After checking on her father and brother who were both still sleeping, she began her morning rituals. She slipped into her worn work dress, tied on her apron, and twisted her hair into a tidy braid. The comforting rhythm of cooking, cleaning, and attending to the animals settled her restless mind. By the time Thomas appeared, ravenous and ready for breakfast, she was more convinced than ever that God had answered their prayers and brighter days lay ahead.

"The storm has passed," Thomas observed, digging into his porridge. "Perhaps Father will improve now, as the pastor said."

She smiled at his optimism, so easily restored after his outburst. "If we continue to pray, I'm certain of it."

A short while later, while she was studying the ledger and concern over their dwindling finances nibbled at her, carriage

wheels crunched outside, along with a horse's neigh. Another unexpected visitor so soon?

She moved the curtain enough to peek out. A grand carriage, its polished wood gleaming, halted before their humble abode. The coachman, dressed immaculately, assisted an older gentleman to alight. His posture, upright and commanding, combined with his suit's impeccable tailoring and his signet ring's thick setting, declared his status before he even spoke.

Should she greet the stranger or feign absence? But snubbing someone of this man's obvious stature could bear consequences. Instructing Thomas to remain out of sight, she smoothed her dress and opened the door as the man neared, his cane clicking against the ground.

"Good morning, sir. I am Eliza Reynolds. How might I help you today?"

He acknowledged her with a polite nod. Then his gaze travelled over her in a discomfiting manner. "Miss Reynolds, I'm Samuel Bartholomew of Bartholomew Estate to the south of your property. I hope my visit isn't ill-timed?"

The name struck her. Mr. Bartholomew, in person? The grandeur of the Bartholomew manor house was a familiar sight on her trips into town, but she'd never crossed paths with its elusive owner.

She steeled herself. "Not at all. Your visit is unexpected but not unwelcome. Please, do come in."

As he passed her, he scanned the humble abode with a discerning eye. "I've heard of your father's ailment. I've come to wish him a swift return to health, and I look forward to seeing him soon."

Her brows drew together. Did Father know this man? And if so, how? But she dared not query him. "Thank you."

Despite the courteous words, his underlying note of condescension was hard to miss. Still, she offered refreshments, relieved when he declined, saying he wouldn't linger. But before leaving, he paused. "Farm life is challenging, especially for those new to it. Do not hesitate to call upon my assistance if times grow dire. I may prove to be a valuable ally. Good morning to you, Miss Reynolds."

With a tip of his hat, he departed, climbed into his carriage, and rapped his cane for the driver to be off.

As the carriage disappeared down the track, a chill wove down Eliza's spine. There was more to Mr. Bartholomew's visit than him being neighbourly. After all, he'd scarcely been neighbourly, speaking as though he pitied their attempts to forge a life on their farm.

Breathing in deeply, she stood on the veranda until the dust settled and the carriage could no longer be seen or heard.

When she returned inside, Thomas was buffing his boots by the window. He looked at her, his eyes narrow. "What did that man really want?"

She swallowed hard. No doubt, Thomas had heard the conversation, but had he also detected an ulterior motive? She folded a rug that had been left on the horsehair couch. "He came to wish Father a speedy recovery."

"I didn't like him."

She didn't either, but she held her tongue. "We must be neighbourly."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't mean we have to like him."

She set the rug down and stood beside Thomas while gazing outside. “You’re right. We don’t have to like him.”

Then she busied herself with kneading dough for bread and chopping vegetables for a stew. As she gazed out at the golden fields, the familiar tasks somewhat soothed her. What would they do if their crops failed or if they suffered some other hardship? If Father’s ledger was correct, there was little money left. Anxiety clawed up her chest.

What had he done with their money? In his weak state, she couldn’t question him about their finances. All she could do was study the ledger and pray their harvest would be prosperous.

His coughing drew her from her thoughts. She ladled some broth into a bowl and gathered bread, butter, and medicine before making her way to his room.

“You must eat to keep up your strength.” She helped him sit against the pillows.

He accepted the food, but his chest rattled with each laboured breath. “Do not look so grim, my dear,” he said after a few mouthfuls. “All will be well.”

She forced a smile, but his optimism couldn’t buoy her.

With eyes still keen, he studied her. “Something is troubling you. Speak your mind, child. I am still your father.”

Unwilling to add to his worries, she forced another smile. “It is nothing, Father. Merely the worries of the day.”

He placed his hand over hers, his eyes intent. “Eliza, promise me something?”

She frowned. “Of course. What is it?”

“No matter what may come, you must keep this farm. It’s your mother’s legacy.”

She blinked. Mother encouraged him to leave England and forge a new life here, but he’d been eager as well. “Of course, but don’t talk that way. You *shall* recover, and we *will* have many years left together.”

He eased back against the pillows, his sudden burst of energy dissipating. “My dear, we both know my remaining time is short. You and Thomas will be the ones to fulfil your mother’s dream. Promise me you’ll keep this farm and make it prosper. That is all I ask.”

Eliza swallowed the lump in her throat. Was he asking the impossible? How would she and Thomas manage without him, especially if he left them penniless?

But he looked at her expectantly, so she clasped his hands and met his gaze. “I promise to do everything in my power to keep the farm.”

Chapter Nineteen

A kookaburra's laugh broke the silence of dawn, rousing Jamie from his sleep. Rolling out of bed, he stretched to work out the kinks from yesterday's labour. Then he made his way to the kitchen.

His mother, with sleeves rolled up to her elbows, was engrossed in kneading dough. The rhythmic motions paired with the fresh scent of rising yeast brought a sense of comfort. She looked up, her eyes crinkling into a smile. "You're up early, my boy."

"With so much work awaiting, sleep feels like a luxury I can't afford." He sat at the worn table, fingertips brushing the family Bible's aged leather.

She wiped her brow, leaving a flour streak. "I've watched you helping our neighbours. It warms my heart, but remember, you can't be of help if you're stretched thin."

He lifted his chin. "The Lord gives me strength. It's a privilege to help. And I promise I won't neglect our farm. The Lord will sustain me."

A fond chuckle escaped her lips. "Perhaps the beautiful Eliza lends you some of that strength. Speaking of the neighbours, could you take this flask of bone broth to her father? I've heard his health has deteriorated."

Jamie exhaled a breath heavy with concern. “Despite our prayers, I fear he’s not long for this world.”

Setting the dough aside to rise in the warmth of the early morning sun now streaming through the kitchen window, his mother sat opposite him and reached for his hand, her eyes searching his. “And when he’s gone? What becomes of Eliza and Thomas?”

Jamie hesitated, his throat tightening. He’d dared not dwell on that thought, but reality was harsh. Without their father, the two would be forced to abandon the farm and return to Melbourne, to their aunt, or to England.

Unless he took Eliza as his wife. The mere thought made his heart race. “I haven’t thought that far.”

Her expression softened, a mix of concern and understanding. “I see the way you look at her. But tread carefully. Emotions can cloud judgement, and your heart might get broken. Perhaps you should distance yourself in readiness.”

“I could never do that. Eliza needs my help.”

Her golden brow lifted, and she rubbed his hand with her thumb. “All the more reason to study the Word and seek God’s guidance. The path you are walking is a challenging one. You’re a good boy, a hard worker, a loving soul. But you don’t want to burden yourself with a fledgling farm at your age.”

He held her gaze. “And how old were you and Father when you settled here?”

“That’s different. We came here with your grandfather.”

“I don’t see how that’s different.”

“Your grandfather and father made enough money in the gold fields to pay for this farm. Then years of drought all but wiped us out, and now we live from season to season, trusting in the Lord’s providence. Unless the Reynoldses have money saved, were you to marry Eliza, which I’m guessing is your intention, I fear you’d struggle from the beginning.” Her grip on his hand tightened. “You are not yet twenty. You have all your life ahead of you. Do not make rash decisions you may regret.”

“I love her, Mother. We could work together and make the farm prosper. I’d never regret marrying her.”

She sighed, hesitating. “I’ve heard whispers, Jamie. About Arthur Reynolds. Rumours of debts incurred through gambling.”

His eyes widened, and he started to pull away. “Are these mere whispers, or is there truth to them?”

Her grip on his hand held fast. “Enough truth to warrant caution. If you’re thinking of intertwining your fate with Eliza’s, be certain you know the full picture.”

“How much is his debt?”

“I do not know, but any debt would place duress on a family’s finances. Please think about these things. You have rarely ventured more than five miles from Baker’s Run. There’s a big world out there, and Eliza is not the only young woman who could capture your heart. Perhaps God has another in mind for you.”

Jamie’s chest hollowed. “I will pray about it, but what I feel for Eliza is real.”

“I do not doubt that. She’s a kind, hardworking girl, and you’ve been smitten with her from the moment she arrived.

But do you not think your heart is leading you, instead of rational thought?”

“What does rational thought have to do with love?” Trapped between his feelings for Eliza and his mother’s advice, Jamie stood. The sun had already started its ascent, casting a golden hue over the land. He marched to the barn, his loyal dog trailing him, and picked up a scythe.

With the sun’s rays shimmering over the wheat fields, he swung the scythe, his mind racing with thoughts of Eliza, her father’s possible debts, and their uncertain future.

If his mother spoke the truth, who was Arthur Reynolds beholden to?

The Chatworth brothers?

Though Dart panted at his side, tongue lolling in the heat, Jamie didn’t slow. Eliza’s farm depended on this harvest as much as their own, but with her father so ill, Jamie would see their crop harvested, even if it meant him working from dawn to dusk. He wouldn’t allow her family to lose their farm.

He swung harder, and even when his vision dimmed and his legs shook, he forced himself onward.

Sometime later, a disturbance pulled him from his work. Dart’s low growl and raised hackles indicated a presence. Jamie’s hand tightened around the scythe’s handle. However, recognising Thomas’s familiar face amidst the wheat stalks, he relaxed.

“Thomas. What brings you here?”

“It’s Father, Jamie.” Thomas rushed forward, his face ashen, his voice quivering. “He’s taken a turn for the worse. Eliza sent me to find you.”

Without a second's delay, scythe forgotten, Jamie sprinted through the fields.



ELIZA SAT at her father's bedside, holding his hand as the ravages of the fever stole the colour from his face. The unsettling warmth of his skin, seemingly at odds with the feeble heartbeat pulsing under her fingertips, was a stark reminder of the battle he was fighting. His once robust frame was now a fragile shadow of its former self.

A soft clearing of a throat drew her attention. Jamie stood at the doorway, his eyes shimmering. He walked over, knelt beside her, and enveloped her free hand with both of his.

"I'm here, Eliza," he whispered.

Drawing a shuddering breath, she leaned into his shoulder, her tears dampening his shirt. "He's all I have left."

Jamie's thumb caressed her cheek, wiping away a fresh tear. "You have Thomas, and you have me."

She nodded, trying to find solace in his words. "Will you lead us in prayer?"

He gestured for Thomas to join them. Together, they huddled close, their heads bowed in a circle of shared pain and hope.

"Lord, we ask that You heal this man who is so dear to his children. Grant him respite from this fever and illness. Show forth Your mighty power and goodness by raising him up. Fill our hearts with hope and faith that You are at work, even now. But Thy will be done."

During his prayer, the heavy weight pressing down on her heart began to ease, replaced by a tentative hope. The room, warmed by words of faith, seemed to push back the cold hand of impending loss, if only for a moment.

As he finished, she rested her head against Jamie's chest, the steady rhythm of his heart a reassuring presence. "Thank you," she murmured. "Your prayers have eased my troubled heart."

He held her close, his voice little more than a stirring in her hair. "Whatever comes, we face it together."

She squeezed his hand and studied her father's face, now softened in sleep. "I must stay by his side. I can't abandon him now. I'll be here with him till the end."

"Then here, I remain, too. We will face this trial together, side by side."

A tear slid down her cheek. Jamie brushed it away, and in that gesture, she felt the strength of the bond they shared. "Promise me you won't leave me?"

He stared into her eyes. "I promise."

The night wore on, the agonising procession of hours punctuated by her father's fitful movements and gasps for air. Time seemed both endless and too short. As dawn's light began to filter through the curtains, Father's eyes fluttered open, settling on her and then on Thomas.

"Eliza...Thomas," he rasped, his gaze taking on a heartbreaking clarity.

Tears spilling over, she clutched his hand tighter. "We're here, Father."

His lips quivered into a smile, weak but sincere. “Forgive me?”

With a sob, she nodded. “Always.”

His gaze lingered on them, a final silent farewell, before his eyes closed and his breathing stilled.

Jamie, his face etched with sorrow, checked for a pulse. He met her gaze and shook his head. “He’s at peace now.”

The weight of the finality crashed upon her, and she crumbled, Jamie’s arms catching her and holding her close as grief consumed her.

No words could comfort now, but in his quiet strength, she found safe harbour.

When her tears were spent, she peered up at him, reading the same grief in his eyes. “He is with Mother now.”

Jamie brushed her damp cheek with the back of his hand.

Her father’s fight was done. The long, dark night ended.

Chapter Twenty

Muted hues painted the morning of the funeral, the grey sky mirroring the sombre atmosphere. Jamie splashed cold water on his face, scrubbing away the last vestiges of sleep. He stared at his reflection in the small mirror, the toll of grief etched in the shadows beneath his eyes. Two blurry days had passed since Eliza's father breathed his last, slipping into eternity with the dawn.

As Jamie arrived at the Reynolds farm, Eliza emerged from the house in black mourning attire, her eyes swollen. His heart twisted in his chest. He longed to wrap his arms around her and hold her close, to comfort her in this deep sorrow, but his mother's caution held him back.

Instead, he took Eliza's hands. "How are you faring?"

"It—" She breathed out, her voice breaking. "It's a tough day."

He helped Thomas load the coffin onto the wagon and secure it for the ride to the church. Their solemn procession was a silent one with only the sombre clip-clop of the horses' hooves on the gravel.

Pastor Isaac's welcoming face was a small solace. "Today, we remember and celebrate Arthur," he consoled.

As mourners took their seats, a chorus of hymns floated up. Jamie's focus, however, was on Eliza. Every sob, every tear, felt like a dagger. Love for her pulsed through him, but expressing it felt like scaling an insurmountable mountain.

Could he ever offer her a life worthy of her father's dreams?

He was but a farmer's son. Could he give her the comfort she deserved? Would he be asking her to sacrifice too much for love?

Pastor Isaac stood before the mourners. "Arthur was a good man, devoted to his kin, and faithful to the last. Though times were hard, he endured with fortitude and grace. Now his labour is done. He is at peace in the arms of the Lord."

Jamie swallowed and stared down at the coffin, the weight of his decision a millstone around his neck. When the ceremony ended, his gaze was drawn to a familiar figure—Mr. Bartholomew. The man's ostentatious display of wealth was distasteful at such a solemn occasion.

Eliza, her eyes damp with tears, her face ashen, in deep conversation with the well-dressed man, sent a jolt through Jamie. Was that strange feeling jealousy or insecurity?

When it was time to lower the coffin, Jamie threw himself into the task, but his gaze never left Eliza. The barrier between them seemed to grow with Mr. Bartholomew's shadow looming large. His promise to Eliza weighed on him, but how could he compete against Bartholomew?

After the mourners departed, Eliza remained at her father's grave.

"Eliza?" Jamie hesitated at the strange new distance in her manner.

She glanced up at him, eyes glistening. “Jamie.” The chill in her voice startled him, deepening his fears. Arms wrapped around herself, she looked away.

He stood beside her. “Eliza, please talk to me. Your father was a good man. I am so sorry for your loss.”

A strained silence hung between them before she whispered, “Thank you for your condolences.”

What was she saying? Why was she acting like this? He reached for her hand, but she tucked it closer to her chest. “Eliza, if I’ve done something wrong, I need you to tell me.”

“I just need some time alone.”

His stomach clenched, and the image of her with Bartholomew flashed again. “Eliza, can you look at me?”

For a heartbeat, their eyes met, raw pain visible in hers.

With a soft voice, he pleaded, “I promised to stand by you. Please let me.”

Her façade crumbled, and tears flowed. Yet, as he held her, doubts about Bartholomew’s intentions and his own worthiness lingered.

Chapter Twenty-One

A sob rose in Eliza's throat as she halted the wagon before their farmhouse. Beside her, Thomas stirred. "Eliza?"

"Yes. We're home." She alighted from the wagon, the hem of her black skirt brushing against the dust. Thomas followed.

The doorway greeted them with silence. "It doesn't feel the same without Father," he murmured, the void in his voice echoing the emptiness of the house.

She lit a lamp, casting a glow over the sparse furnishings. The bareness mirrored their loss. Thomas slumped into a chair, a shadow of the lively boy he used to be.

"Are you hungry?" She stroked his tousled hair.

He shook his head, eyes still clouded. The hearth's coldness reminded her winter was looming, another adversary in the offing.

"Sister, what will we do now?"

She battled rising despair. How would they maintain the farm with Father gone? The debts he accrued in town threatened to drown them. And then there was Mr. Bartholomew's offer, far below the farm's value. Their dreams for a fresh start in this new land hung in a fragile balance.

She forced a smile. “God will provide for us.” She uttered the words in comfort, praying they were true. “Rest now, Thomas. We’ll face tomorrow when it comes.”

After sending him to bed, she changed into her nightdress, her gaze roving over the familiar room. Three short months had not been long enough to make this place feel like home. She thought of their small, candlelit lodgings in London, her father singing as he whittled, her mother darning socks in the dim light. A heavy invisible weight crushed her shoulders, and a sob escaped and loss washed over her anew. If only they had stayed! Would they all still be together?

She knelt to pray for strength, but no comfort came. In the silence, she gazed out the bare window into the night. The vast unknown of fields and bush seemed to stretch endlessly.

Doubts crowded her. Tears slipped onto her cheeks. In chasing freedom, they had found only hardship. Her mother lay on the ocean floor, and her father lay beneath the soil of the land to which they had pinned their hopes.

As she piled a second blanket onto her bed and sighed, struggling to sleep, her mind turned to Jamie, his promise to support her in her grief still fresh. Yet she’d pushed him away at her father’s graveside.

She needed time to think. To consider their options. Although she loved him, she couldn’t burden him with a struggling farm when he had his entire future before him. Perhaps she’d accept Mr. Bartholomew’s offer and sell the farm, and she and Thomas would return to England.

But could she break her promise to her father?

And could she leave Jamie?

The morning sounds stirred her from a fitful sleep. While Thomas lingered in slumber's embrace, she faced the day. The weight of her father's absence pressed upon her, slowing her in her chores. Soon, she'd lit the stove, and porridge bubbled while she churned butter and dressed.

"Thomas, wake now." She nudged his shoulder. "The day awaits, and so does our work."

He yawned, gazing up at her with eyes still red from weeping. "Must I rise, Sister?"

"I fear we have little choice. There's porridge on the stove and chores that won't do themselves."

Thomas ate, but with her stomach churning harder than she'd churned the butter, no way could she join him. So she left to milk the cows, her thoughts as restless as her roiled stomach.

Lord, what am I to do?

The future would seem less daunting were Jamie by her side, and yet, she couldn't burden him.

As she finished milking, a crash shattered the morning's silence. She ran into the house to find Thomas gazing at the floor, shards of their mother's china plate scattered at his feet.

"I'm sorry!" He snorted back tears, fisting his hands before him. "I did not mean to drop it."

She steered him away from the ruins of the treasured plate and consoled him, their shared grief overshadowed by the accident.

But a new interruption came with the crunch of carriage wheels on gravel. Could it be Jamie? She peered through the

open door, her shoulders deflating when Mr. Bartholomew's carriage approached.

She wiped her hands and went outside to greet the man. He had promised her a week to consider his offer, so his visit now was most unwelcome.

He climbed down, dusted off his hat, and surveyed the farmhouse. "Miss Reynolds. How fortunate to find you home." His lips twitched, but the smile he offered didn't reach his eyes. "Might I have a word?"

She forced a polite smile. She'd have to receive him, unannounced and unwelcome as his visit was. "Of course, Mr. Bartholomew. Do come in." She waved him inside, glancing at the remnants of her mother's plate still strewn across the floor.

He removed his straw top hat, assessing the modest furnishings and settling on the shattered plate. "I see I call at an... inconvenient time. My apologies, I did not mean to intrude."

Eliza clenched her hands. "Not at all. An accident, nothing more. Please take a seat."

They settled into the front room where Mr. Bartholomew claimed the horsehair couch. After straightening the crease of his pants, he leaned forward, withdrew a bundle of notes from his waistcoat pocket, and placed them on the nesting table between them. His gloved index finger jabbed at them hard enough to rattle the tables safely tucked beneath the first, drawing her gaze.

"Do you know what these are, Miss Reynolds?"

She picked them up, rifling through them as her father's signature flashed up at her. "What are these?"

He sighed as if pained. “I thought your father might have shared this with you before—well, you know.”

She met his gaze, her eyes narrowing. “Shared what?”

“These notes represent certain, um, let us say obligations your father had to me. Debts that have yet to be honoured.”

Her pulse quickening, she shuffled through them flicking past the sums at the bottom of each as she calculated the terrifying tally. “How much did he owe you?”

He chuckled, but surely, he couldn’t be amused by her distress. “Let’s say, roughly the value of something you hold dear.”

Fisting the wad of notes, she looked around the farmhouse. “The farm?”

His smile widened. “Precisely.”

Feeling trapped, she sprang to her feet. “I’ll find a way to settle this debt.”

The amusement in his eyes deepened, a dangerous glint appearing. “You know, Miss Reynolds, life could be so much easier for you if you... cooperate.” He leaned forward and held her gaze. “I have a new offer, one that will solve all your problems.”

A chill settled over her. “And what might that be?”

“Marry me, and I will forgive your father’s debt in whole.”

She gasped. “Marry you?”

His bushy brows lowered. “Why does that thought distress you so? As my wife, you would live in comfort with your young brother provided for. Your debt would be forgiven, and

you could enjoy a life of ease. How can one not look upon my offer favourably?"

Thrusting the papers onto the table, she firmed her jaw. "I'd sooner lose all than bind myself to the likes of you, sir. Now kindly remove yourself from my house at once!"

His eyes flashed, his expression menacing. But as swiftly as the storm clouds gathered, his face cleared. Donning his hat, he regarded her, a—perhaps genuine—regret passing over his features.

"I understand this might seem heartless, Miss Reynolds, but one must look after one's own affairs in this world. While I sympathise with your plight, I have my burdens to bear and my debts to settle. I thought offering you this arrangement might benefit us both. Don't be too hasty to refuse. You may come to regret it. Do be certain this is the choice you wish to make, for you have but two weeks before I demand repayment in full."

He stood and strode to the door, glancing back with a smile that sent shivers up her spine. "Two weeks, Miss Reynolds, and this farm will be mine unless you repay the debt or accept my proposal."

When the door shut behind him with an air of finality, she sank into her chair, trembling hands clutching her chest as the predicament her father had left them in fell upon her shoulders.

How could Father have done this? She swallowed the despair creeping up her throat as she recalled the promise she'd made on his deathbed.

Despite her repulsion, marrying Samuel Bartholomew was the only way forward. She couldn't burden Jamie with her

father's debt when he had no means to repay it.

She stared at her mother's shattered plate, and a sob escaped her. Like the plate, any remaining dreams of forging a new life in this land now lay shattered in pieces.

God, what am I to do?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jamie Goddard had braved the demanding seasons of Gippsland for as long as he could remember. The relentless droughts, the ferocious fires, and the unpredictable floods had been perennial adversaries for his family. This year, the intensity of summer hinted at an equally merciless winter.

As he surveyed their meagre crop, he swallowed down a sense of despair. If the weather turned, as it was prone to do in these uncertain lands, all their hard work could be for naught.

And what of Eliza? He hadn't seen her since her father's funeral, and he couldn't shake the guilt. He'd promised to stand by her, to support her in her grief, yet he had absented himself. And that, he regretted more than anything.

He had to see her and make things right.

As he rode Baxter towards the Reynolds farm, anticipation thrummed through him, almost a reverberation of his stallion's solid hoofbeats. But that excitement faltered when he sighted a carriage departing her property. The all-too-familiar figure of Samuel Bartholomew sitting in the back of the carriage sent a shiver down his spine. Bartholomew's mocking smirk was as chilling as the southern winds.

Jamie's stomach twisted. Although he might not be Eliza's ideal suitor due to his financial situation, he wouldn't stand by

and allow Bartholomew to win her heart.

For certain, Bartholomew wasn't a man to be trusted.

Before he could even dismount, John, their loyal farmhand, appeared from a nearby thicket of gum trees.

"Jamie, good to see you," the man greeted, but the cheer in his voice seemed forced.

Brushing aside any small talk, Jamie pressed, "What did Bartholomew want?"

John hesitated, glancing between the farmhouse and Jamie. "He had some business with Miss Eliza."

Jamie's pulse quickened. "What kind of business?"

"You'll need to ask her that. It's not my place to say."

"Say what?"

"I really can't. You need to speak with her."

"John, please tell me."

He ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "I—I believe he asked for her hand."

Jamie blinked. "Her hand? A proposal?"

"That's what Thomas told me."

"And what did she say?"

"He didn't hear as he fled the house before she answered."

Jamie clenched his fists. "Eliza would never marry him."

John shrugged, casting his gaze downwards.

The very idea of Eliza considering marrying Bartholomew was unthinkable, an affront to everything Jamie knew and believed about her. Yet, the sinking feeling in his chest was

hard to dismiss. What did he, Jamie Goddard, have to offer her?

His chest hollowing further, he turned away from the farmhouse. His gaze remained straight ahead, fixed on the path home. But he couldn't return, not yet.

He headed to the eucalyptus tree at the boundary of their properties where they had met on that fateful day her father had gone missing, the day that heralded his passing. He dismounted and sat beneath the broad canopy, disappointment raw and stinging. He glanced around, half expecting to see Eliza beside him, looking at him with her bright, emerald-green eyes. But the place was deserted, leaving him alone with his roiling thoughts.

He traced his fingers on the rough bark, his thoughts drifting to that day. He could still hear his voice as he spoke about his family's legacy, about the deep connection he felt to this land. He could see Eliza's eyes light up, the soft smile on her face when she teased him about his openness. A bitter laugh escaped. So much had changed since then.

The morning sun bathed the landscape in a warm glow. As he grappled with the events, an odd sense of calm washed over him. Despite the hurt, despite the confusion, this place brought him comfort.

With his gaze fixed on the horizon, he whispered a soft prayer. "God, please guide me." He bowed his head, letting his voice carry his confusion, his pain, to the heavens. It was all he could do. He had to believe there was a way to navigate this.

A rustle in the grass snapped him from his thoughts. Dart emerged from the undergrowth, his tail wagging. He must have followed his master's scent trail, the dog's familiar

bounding energy providing a brief, comforting distraction. Dart nuzzled his wet nose against Jamie's hand, prompting a faint smile.

"Good boy." Jamie ran a hand through his dog's soft coat.

Dart snuffled and settled beside Jamie, resting his head on his master's lap. His presence reassured Jamie's troubled soul, and he took in the scene, suddenly ever so slightly brighter.

He lingered in silence, his eyes distant. The thought of Bartholomew and Eliza churned his insides, but a new nagging began to settle.

Bartholomew was a wealthy man, wealthy enough to offer her a comfortable life free from the worries of a failing farm. And if Jamie's mother was right and Eliza's father had accrued gambling debts, those debts would have fallen on Eliza.

Marrying Bartholomew could relieve her of that debt.

The truth was harsh but unavoidable. Jamie's hands clenched, the eucalyptus's rough bark biting into his skin.

He'd promised to stand by Eliza, to support her. But what if the best way to do that was to let her go?

Dart looked up with his soulful eyes, a soft whimper escaping his throat.

Jamie sighed and rubbed the dog's head. "I know, boy. I don't like it either."

Despite the knot in his chest, he had to consider what was best for Eliza. Love was more than just possessing. It was about wanting happiness for the one you loved, even if it meant sacrificing your own.

He sat there in the throes of a battle. A battle between his love for Eliza and his letting go of that love so she could live a

life of comfort. After all, what could he, Jamie Goddard, offer her compared to the likes of Samuel Bartholomew? He couldn't decide right then, the weight of it all too heavy, but a decision would have to be made, sooner rather than later.

He ruffled Dart's fur and stood. "Come on, boy. Let's head home."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Early the following day, while Thomas still slumbered, Eliza headed to the small cemetery outside of town. The beauty of the morning, with golden rays seeping through the tree canopy contrasted with the storm brewing in her heart. She journeyed through the familiar path in a daze, the gentle ride from their farm seeming both too short and interminably long.

As she entered the cemetery clutching a bunch of wildflowers, the familiar scent of dry eucalyptus leaves mingled with the earthy aroma of freshly turned soil. The sun's warmth touched her face, contrasting with the cool breeze that whispered secrets of the past.

Her father's grave, freshly dug and still bare, stood in sharp contrast to the weathered tombstones around it, a stark reminder of a loss still fresh, an emptiness that invaded every corner of their house. She approached, her footsteps muffled by a carpet of dry leaves.

Kneeling, she placed the wildflowers on the grave—golden wattle, flannel flowers, and bluebells gathered from the edges of the fields. Their vibrant colours were a tribute to the man who loved this new land, devoted his life to securing it for Eliza and her brother, but gambled it away.

Tears welled in her eyes, hot and bitter, as a lump choked her, constricting her throat. “How could you, Father?” Her whisper blended with the rustling leaves. She clung to the memory of his frail hand squeezing hers as he lay on his deathbed. His whispered apologies, his regret-filled eyes. Had he known then about the looming shadow of debt?

She absorbed the silence, the rustle of leaves and the distant calls of magpies the only sounds. Her father’s face swam before her eyes, his voice echoing in her mind. “No matter what may come... Promise me you’ll keep this farm and make it prosper. That is all I ask.”

His plea hung in the air, a promise heavier now than ever. The farm was their mother’s dream, an echo of her unwavering resolve to forge a better life for Eliza and Thomas, and yet now it became a burdensome yoke around her neck.

Despite her desire to push all thought of Samuel Bartholomew away, his proposal cut through everything else. Marrying a man she barely knew, a man she did not love, and a man old enough to be her father would be a betrayal of herself.

Yet, her father’s desperate plea overshadowed her, its weight bearing down on her heart like an unyielding stone. Did Father know this would happen? Was that why he had discouraged her friendship with Jamie?

A man of stature and wealth, Samuel Bartholomew had offered her a way out, a chance to save her family’s farm. To repay Father’s debt.

Eliza’s eyes unfocused as she pictured a life with Samuel Bartholomew. It would be a life of wealth and comfort. A life confined to the rigid standards of the upper class. A life where she would stand by a man whose beady stare sent shivers

down her spine and whose words were laced with veiled threats. Their farm would no longer be threatened by debt, and Thomas would have everything he needed. But at what cost?

She saw Bartholomew's grand house with its myriad servants and intricacies of high society. But amidst this luxurious image, she saw herself, standing alone, bound to a man who sought her farm more than her person. Her heart would never find happiness in those cold, gilded halls.

Yet, the life she once imagined was vastly different. She had dreamed of working the land alongside someone she loved and raising children who would run through these same fields. She had dreamed of a life rich with love and simple happiness, not one of strategic alliances and calculated gains.

Jamie's image sprang to mind. Jamie, with his gentle smile and warm eyes, the man who made her feel like she had known him all her life, the man she'd dreamed of sharing her life with. But Bartholomew's warnings echoed in her ears, forcing her to consider the bleak reality of Father's gambling debts.

She traced the engraved name on the tombstone, her fingers pushing against the rough edges as she pursed her lips. "Father, how dare you! On both counts! You've tied me to our farm, and you've tied me to Bartholomew!"

Anger surging, she tossed the flowers to the ground. And then she bent over his grave and wept.

Sometime later, when her tears were spent, she straightened, her eyes distant. The sun, now higher, bathed the cemetery in a more intense light. It filtered through the tall gum trees, their leaves whispering secrets as dappled shadows danced over aged tombstones. With the quiet acknowledgement that her path had been determined for her,

she stood and brushed the dry leaves from her dress, just like she brushed the vibrant dreams from her heart.

She would marry Samuel Bartholomew, not for her sake, but for Thomas's. She had a promise to keep, a legacy to uphold. As she turned to leave, she made a vow to her father, although her voice was barely audible in the quiet morning. "We will keep the farm, Father. Mother's dream will not be lost."

She picked up her skirts, leaving the cemetery behind, the soft rustling of the gum trees following her like a whispered prayer.

Engrossed in her thoughts, she almost missed the familiar figure standing by the edge of a nearby field.

Jamie. His tall silhouette was framed against the backdrop of the golden Australian bush while he surveyed his land, the morning sun casting long shadows around him.

The heaviness in her heart quickened as she guided her horse closer, not ready for the inevitable conversation.

When she neared him, he turned. "Eliza?" His voice, usually so mellow, strained out the word. "I've heard the rumours. Please tell me they're not true."

She hesitated, her fingers playing with the reins. "Jamie, it's not what you think."

But wasn't it?

He stepped closer, his gaze intense. "Are you considering Bartholomew's proposal? How can you think of binding yourself to such a man? Especially when—" He broke off, a flush spreading across his face.

Could she allow herself to hear it, just once, before she gave him up forever? “Especially when what, Jamie?”

He exhaled. “Especially when there could be something between us. You know how I feel about you.”

Tears pricked her eyes. “Jamie, I’m trapped. The farm, Thomas, the debts—they’re all weighing on me. What choice do I have?”

He clenched his fists, stepping closer. “There must be another way. You can’t sell your soul to Bartholomew.”

She met his gaze, her heart breaking. “I don’t see another way.”

Jamie looked as though he wanted to say more, to protest, to offer a solution. But reality silenced him. They shared a moment, locked in their private pain, before she nudged her horse forward, leaving him behind, a solitary figure against the vast backdrop of the land they both loved.

Willing herself not to cry, she shook her head as if she could clear her muddled thoughts. From behind the silvery bark of a eucalyptus, a hare darted out, halting to fix its gaze on her. Close on its heels, two young leverets scrambled, their large, awkward feet fumbling as they tried to keep pace with their vigilant mother. Eliza watched the three hares, transfixed, before they disappeared into the thick bushland beyond the field.

Her heart clenched. Would she be able to provide and care for her brother, just as the hare cared for her young? She fingered the crumpled letter in her dress pocket, Bartholomew’s haughty script swimming before her eyes. A letter he had sent the previous day, a letter full of veiled threats about his patience wearing thin, his generous offer, and her

dire situation. His final line—*the choice is yours*—yet seared her vision. For what choice did she have? How clearly he made that obvious!

She yearned for Jamie's embrace, for the solace only he could offer. But how could she ask him to shoulder her father's debts?

Fresh tears stung her eyes.

The farmhouse was quiet when she arrived. "Thomas?" she called out, hanging her bonnet by the door.

There was no reply. She checked the bedrooms and yard outside but found no sign of her brother. Then the barn doors swung open, and he emerged into the sunlight.

"Eliza! I thought you were never coming back."

She embraced him. "I'm sorry I was away so long." She drew a long breath and pulled back and brushed a stray tear from her cheek. "I have something important to discuss."

His eyebrows furrowed. "What is it?"

She took another deep breath. "I've decided to accept Mr Bartholomew's marriage proposal."

His eyes widened. He ran an agitated hand through his unruly hair. "But you barely know the man!"

She gripped his shoulders. "He has offered to pay our debts and ensure the farm remains in the family. It is the only way."

"The only way?" Thomas jerked away from her, his jaw clenched, hints of their father's stubbornness showing through. "There must be another way. We could sell some livestock, or I could find work in town—"

“No, Thomas. The debts are too large.” She buried her fingers in her skirt at her sides, fisting wads of it to fill the aching hollows of her palms, her soul. “It’s the only choice that will secure our future and uphold the promise I made to Father.”

He fell silent, his shoulders curving inwards.

“Believe me, if there was another way, any at all, I’d clutch onto it.”

Head tipped to one side, hair tumbling over his forehead, he stared at her. “If you do this”—his voice emerged low and rich, eerily like Father—“you’ll be throwing your life away.”

The truth of his words cut deep. How wise when he was so young! “Perhaps, but there is no other way to ensure our future and maintain Mother’s dream.”

Thomas blinked, his eyes moistening, his face a reflection of their shared pain and fear.

She reached out, drawing him into an embrace, trying to offer comfort when she herself felt so bereft. “I’m so sorry, Thomas, but I vow I’ll never leave you. You’re all I have.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jamie took a moment to wipe his brow, the relentless sun casting long shadows on the ground as he finished mending the fence lining the north paddock. Sunbeams seared into his back, soaking his clothes with sweat until they clung to his skin. His eyes, though, were drawn towards the place where he encountered Eliza the day before, the anguish on her beautiful face still vivid in his mind.

She was on the brink of committing herself to Bartholomew.

Could he, in good conscience, do nothing and watch it happen?

He'd tried to convince himself it was best for her. Bartholomew could offer her financial comfort, even if the man coveted her land more than her heart. But was that the best for Eliza? Or was it a lie he told himself, a shield against his inadequacy?

Soon, as he rode into town, his thoughts beat down on him more relentless than the sun. With every step his horse took, his mind warred between his desire to be by Eliza's side and his insecurities. Every instinct told him not to leave her to the mercy of a man like Bartholomew. Deep down, he knew she belonged with him, Jamie.

“Lord, what am I to do? Your Word says that if any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and it shall be given him. I am asking for that wisdom now. Please lead and guide me and show me the way forward.”

Reaching the hill’s peak, he stopped and allowed the breathtaking expanse of Gippsland to stretch before him. Nestled below was the Reynolds homestead, a painful reminder of what he had forsaken. Should he have been braver? Should he have confessed his love?

Shaking off these thoughts, he ventured further into town. Though he saw familiar faces, he was in no mood for small talk. But as he neared the blacksmith’s, a figure emerged from the hotel and caught his eye—Samuel Bartholomew.

The sight stirred up his apprehension. Nevertheless, he kept his demeanour neutral.

“Good day, Mr. Goddard!” Bartholomew tipped his straw top hat.

Jamie gave a curt nod. “Bartholomew.”

The older man swaggered closer. “Taking a break from your farm, are we?”

“I have business here,” Jamie replied, eager to end the interaction.

“I thought you’d want to know. Soon, the Reynolds estate and the lovely Eliza will be mine.”

The declaration was a slap to Jamie’s face. “She’ll never agree to this.”

Bartholomew leaned in, his eyes gleaming. “She doesn’t have many options, Goddard. I offer her financial stability.

And once we're married, she won't want for anything."

Seething, Jamie towered over the man. "She deserves better than you."

Bartholomew's chilling laughter echoed as he sauntered away. "Stay out of my affairs, Goddard. Nothing you can do to stop this marriage. That girl and her farm will be mine. "

Jamie's determination was now unshakeable. He couldn't—no, *wouldn't*—let Bartholomew claim Eliza and her farm. He'd protect both.

Back at home, the aroma of dinner did little to soothe him. As his family shared stories from their day, Eliza and the impending catastrophe consumed him.

His mother's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Old Mrs. Dell mentioned..."

But Jamie's mind was elsewhere. Bartholomew might think he'd won, but Jamie was ready to prove him wrong. There would be no hesitation now. He *would* ensure Eliza remained free from Bartholomew's grasp.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eliza knelt on the worn wooden floor, her fingers brushing over the old trunk her family brought over from England, its leather cracked and weathered, a testament to the journey it made across the seas. The fine dust unsettled as she opened it, revealing the once-resplendent floral pattern of her mother's wedding gown. Although yellowed with age, the dress whispered tales of beauty and happiness from days long gone.

The fabric felt as delicate as butterfly wings between her fingers. She undressed and slipped into the gown, its touch a bridge to the past. In the aged mirror, she saw her mother's radiant smile, hearing the echo of laughter, imagining her walking towards wedded bliss.

Yet, Eliza's reflection juxtaposed her reality. Instead of a love-filled future, a cold alliance awaited her. Memories of Jamie, with his earnest smile and sincere eyes, battled with her future husband's chilling image in stark contrast. A future with Jamie promised warmth and love, accompanied by toil and challenge, while one with Bartholomew promised comfort and financial security—as well as duty and loathing.

With haste, she removed the gown and packed it away once more. Her mother's memory deserved far better than to be stained by a man who sought only to claim and conquer.

Thomas stood in the doorway, horror in his eyes as he sighted the partially concealed gown. “You can’t wear Mother’s gown for *him*.” His thin hands fisted in front of him. “It’s not what Mother or Father would have wanted.”

“It’s the only way to save our home, Thomas.”

“I cannot watch you sacrifice yourself to Bartholomew.” Hands still fisted, he pivoted and stormed out.

A weight pressed on her chest. “Don’t leave me,” she whispered, but he was already gone.

Her stomach knotted, and she ran to the window. He was sprinting down the road, westwards, towards Jamie’s farm. Had the choice she’d made driven her brother—her only remaining family—away?

Hours slipped by before the sinking realisation hit. He wasn’t coming back.

She grabbed her cloak, her numb fingers fumbling with the clasp, and ventured out into the moonlit night. She made her way to the barn.

Clover nickered at Eliza’s approach, her breath a warm cloud in the chilly evening air. Eliza saddled the horse, her movements swift and practised. She hesitated before swinging into the saddle and turning Clover’s head towards the Goddards’ property.

The ride was slow and silent, accompanied only by Clover’s thudding hooves and an occasional owl’s hoot. Moonlight cast long, twisted shadows across the landscape, turning familiar sights into monstrous shapes.

Finally, the Goddard homestead, a solid, welcoming structure, loomed ahead. Light spilled from the windows, painting a warm glow against the inky night. Eliza breathed

deeply, steeling herself. Then she urged Clover forward and navigated the horse towards the barn where Jamie was often found at this hour.

Stepping down from Clover, she hesitated at the barn door. She had spurned him, yet now she needed his help. Again.

With another deep breath, she pushed the door open and entered.

He was there, as she had hoped, standing by an anvil, his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows, his forehead damp with sweat. The forge's fire flickered, casting a warm glow on his features and highlighting his corded arm muscles. His focus was on the iron he was shaping, the hammer's rhythmic clang ringing in the quiet barn.

Her breath hitched. He was the most handsome man she'd ever met, and a sudden wave of regret nearly undid her. If only circumstances were different.

As she stepped inside, his gaze lifted, and surprise flashed in his eyes. His hammer hung suspended in midair at her approach.

"Eliza!" He put the hammer down and strode towards her. "What are you doing here this late?"

"Thomas has run away." Her words came out in a breathless, nervous rush. Shuddering, she clasped her hands in a tight knot in front of her. "He couldn't bear the thought of me marrying Mr. Bartholomew, and he's run off."

Jamie's frown furrowed his brow. "Did he say where he was going?"

She twisted her hands. "No, but he was headed this way. I thought he might have come here."

“I haven’t seen him, but don’t worry. We’ll find him. You have my word.”

She nodded her gratitude.

Together, they set off into the cool night, riding side by side, as memories of another night when they had ridden together surfaced. The full moon cast a pale silver light over the land, illuminating the path. A chorus of nocturnal creatures serenaded them, their sounds blending into a gentle hum of life beneath the star-studded canopy.

Jamie guided them further west, riding with a confidence that didn’t wane even as the night deepened. His steady presence soothed her anxious heart, but although he drew her, she had to marry another. She dare not allow thoughts of what might have been to tempt her from her path.

At first, they rode in silence, but now Jamie cleared his throat.

“I...I’m sorry, Eliza. About Thomas. And this whole... situation,” he said, his voice rough.

She swallowed, her throat tight. “Thank you.” Her breathy voice steamed the chill night air before her, her heart aching. “It’s not your fault, though. Circumstances—” Well, no reason to finish.

Jamie shook his head. “You deserve someone who truly sees you, values you, not someone like Bartholomew.”

Shocked by the intensity of his words, she twisted her fingers in the reins as if she could hold onto this precious fleeting moment. “And who might that be?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he looked at her, his eyes steady and sure under the silver moonlight. Moments passed, so much conveyed in that glance. “Someone who loves you.”

His words hung in the air, her heart breaking. Such honesty carved his expression, a vulnerability she'd never seen before that she allowed herself to believe maybe, just maybe, she had a choice. She was not an object to be bartered, but a woman deserving of love.

They rode on. When she shivered in the cool night air, he removed his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thank you." She pulled the thick fabric around herself. It was much too large for her, but the faint scent of Jamie—woodsmoke, iron, and an earthy cologne—comforted her. She snuggled into it, her gaze drifting off into the distance.

"Eliza?" He broke the silence, his tone cautious. "You don't have to do this."

Taking a deep breath, she attempted to steady her voice. "I promised my father. I vowed to protect this family, this farm. His gambling debt sits heavy on my shoulders now, and this marriage is the only answer. I must marry Bartholomew to ensure Thomas's future, for no other reason."

Jamie's face contorted. "You deserve to be loved."

She ducked her head, hair tickling her cheeks and pain searing her eyes. "And if love cannot feed us or shelter us, what good is it?"

"I love you," he whispered, reaching for her.

But in a flurry of emotion, she spurred her horse on, leaving him in her wake. Her scream, a release of frustration, anger, and despair, echoed in the still night.

Chapter Twenty-Six

As Eliza's silhouette faded, Jamie could still hear the traces of her parting words. The pounding of his heart was so fierce, each beat felt as though it threatened to break free from his chest, condemning him for the words he didn't say sooner. He remained on his horse, frozen, the wind's biting fingers tugging at his shirtsleeves. However, it wasn't the cold that numbed him, but the icy realisation of her words.

"I must marry Bartholomew to ensure Thomas's future, for no other reason." The agony in her voice ripped through him anew.

Each repetition of her statement in his mind magnified the wound she had inflicted. His confession had been tardy, and in any case, love, no matter how deep, couldn't secure her and Thomas's future.

Memories of her pain, her fear, and her sacrifice for her brother plagued him. But what life awaited her with Bartholomew? Would that man care for Thomas after the vows were exchanged? And for Eliza, once she fulfilled her end of the bargain, would she become nothing more than an asset Bartholomew could control?

Jamie clenched the reins tighter, the thought insufferable. He couldn't allow her to suffer that fate, but what could he do?

God, if there is a way, please show me.

The silence of the bush seemed to grow more profound in her absence, punctuated only by the occasional hoot of an owl and the rustle of the wind. But then a sound, soft yet distinct, interrupted his musings—the muffled cry of a young person.

His heart raced as he guided his horse towards the sound. “Thomas?”

The sobbing paused, replaced by hesitant snuffles. “Thomas, it’s Jamie. Are you there?”

A rustling movement came from a cluster of wattle trees before Thomas appeared, his eyes a window to his tormented soul.

Dismounting, Jamie approached the distraught boy. “Thomas, your sister’s frantic! What happened?”

Overwhelmed, Thomas shuddered. “She’s going to marry that awful man, Jamie. Mr. Bartholomew.”

Jamie clasped a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I know. But you can’t run away, not when your sister needs you most.”

Mounting his horse with Thomas in front, Jamie turned towards the path Eliza had taken, the gentle trot a hypnotic rhythm. Jamie’s vigilance never waned, ensuring Thomas’s safety and scanning the shadows for Eliza. As the minutes slid by, the fatigue of the day enveloped Thomas, lulling him into a deep slumber, his body slumping against Jamie’s.

Then a familiar, heart-wrenching sound—a muffled sob—again interrupted the night’s stillness. His pulse quickening, Jamie nudged his horse towards the source.

Beneath the skeletal embrace of a tree sat Eliza, every sob shaking her fragile frame. Jamie’s heart ached. Recognising

Thomas's sleeping form, she quieted, and relief flowed across her face, rejuvenating her weary features.

"Thomas," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

As she approached to comfort her brother, Jamie descended from the horse. "He's safe now."

A vulnerable gratitude mirrored in her eyes, and she brushed her fingers to her brother's sleeping face. "Thank you."

A heavy silence blanketed them, its weight pressing down on Jamie. "Eliza, I..."

But he faltered, for what reassurances could he offer?

She met his gaze, a storm of emotions playing in her eyes. "Please, Jamie, let it be. My path is set. I must marry Bartholomew."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

While Thomas lay sleeping after his ordeal of the night before, Eliza's gaze fell on her mother's Bible, its leather worn soft from years of reading, its margins brimming with her mother's tidy handwriting.

Seated at the worn kitchen table, she turned the delicate pages until a passage from Jeremiah spoke to her: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end."

She touched the typesetting, feeling as though those words had been destined for her in this moment, soothing her turbulent soul like balm. Even in her bleakest hours, she was not forsaken. She held onto the belief that a path was laid out for her, mysterious though it may seem.

She clasped the Bible close, taking a deep breath, absorbing its wisdom. She would approach the bank to mortgage the farm and repay Mr. Bartholomew, thus negating her need to marry him.

After dressing in her finest gown—a navy-blue taffeta with delicate lace trim and matching bonnet—she penned a note for Thomas:

My dearest brother, I have gone into town on important errands. I promise to return by midday.

With all my love, Eliza.

She stepped outside, the golden sun caressing her skin, and headed to the barn. John, the farmhand, gave her a nod and began to hitch the buggy.

The journey to the bank felt different today. The world was painted in vivid colours, the Strzelecki Ranges standing tall in the distance, and the sounds a natural symphony around her.

As she hummed under her breath, her thoughts wandered to Jamie. If she could secure the mortgage, she'd be free of Mr. Bartholomew, and then she and Jamie could plan their future.

The morning sun glinted off the bank's façade when she stopped her buggy before the imposing two-storey brick structure, drawing attention from townspeople passing by. She alighted and tied the horse to the hitching post, and large windows flanked by heavy curtains caught her reflection. Then she ascended the white stone steps to the wide double doors, passing Mrs. Thompson, a local baker, and Mr. Parsons, the town's blacksmith, who tipped his hat to her. Taking a deep breath to calm her nervous stomach flutters, she entered the bank, ready to fight for her and Thomas's future.

Inside, the high-ceilinged room smelled of wood polish, coal smoke, and tobacco, and the scratching of quills underplayed the hushed voices, mingling with the sounds of creaking floors and the heavy iron door of the strongroom swinging shut. Windsor chairs and writing slopes furnished the space, steel pens waiting in open inkpots.

She swallowed hard and lifted her chin.

The bank manager frowned from his desk, clearly perturbed at a woman daring to enter a man's domain.

Through the strongroom's iron bars, stacks of gold sovereigns and pound notes were under lock and key. Eliza waited at the counter, aware of the bank officers and clerks, men clad in formal wool suits and waistcoats with cravats knotted at their throats, watching her with disapproval from their cramped desks.

She straightened her back, attempting to appear more composed than she felt as the bank manager beckoned, his expression still stern.

"And what can I do for you today, Miss...?" His frown deepened.

"Miss Eliza Reynolds. I wish to mortgage my farm."

The man's eyebrows shot up. "I see. And why would you want to do that?"

"My father recently died, and I need to settle his debts."

He removed his spectacles to look directly at her. "While I understand your predicament, lending money when the harvest is not yet ensured would be irresponsible, for both parties. How do you propose to repay the loan if your crop fails this season?"

Eliza's heart sank, though she could not fault the manager's reasoning. "I aim to work hard and to cut expenses where I can to repay the debt within a year. I will do whatever is necessary to ensure my payments remain up to date."

The manager studied her, stroking his beard. "Your determination is admirable. However, the fact remains that your ability to repay the loan is uncertain if the harvest is poor." He shuffled through some papers, then met her gaze again. "I'm afraid I must deny your application."

Her mouth fell open. "But, sir—"

“My decision is final.”

With her shoulders sagging, she set off for home. As she rode through the town, she barely saw the quaint storefronts and the children playing in the town square, and the distant hum of barter and the clang of a blacksmith’s hammer did little to distract her.

A few townsfolk nodded, their expressions a mix of pity and respect. At the outskirts, where the bustle diminished and the open road began, she tried to focus on her faith and the conviction God had a plan for her.

She’d been so sure securing a mortgage was His answer.

God, if not that, what?

Despair pressed on her, the walls of her world closing in. She felt trapped, a creature ensnared by circumstances beyond her control.

As she neared her property, the thud of approaching horses’ hooves caught her attention and dragged her from her thoughts. Up ahead, a thick cloud of dust billowed into the sunlit sky, casting a shadow over the path. The thud grew louder, each beat sending a jolt of anxiety through her, for who would be on this track but the Goddards or the Chatworths? And the Goddards wouldn’t so abuse their animals unless something were wrong. All she could see was the swirling dust. Then it began to settle, and the outline of two horses with riders emerged. And then their progression slowed as if to prolong her foreboding.

They drew nearer. It was them—the Chatworth brothers. Her pulse quickened, her mouth drying, the horses now close enough to see their frothing mouths as they seemed to

consume the path ahead. The brothers' cruel expressions were turned up in identical grins that never reached their flinty eyes.

She slowed her horse, the atmosphere around her growing tense. Each hoofbeat seemed to echo her escalating dread. William tipped his hat in mock courtesy, his smirk twisting his scar.

"Well, if it isn't the charity case. And all dressed up. I wonder where she could be going?"

Eliza clutched the reins tighter, her knuckles whitening. Her voice remained steady through an act of will. "Move aside. I'll not ask twice."

William's eyes hardened, all pretence of civility dropping. He nudged his horse forward until they were nearly face-to-face.

"Your business, girl, is whatever we say it is. With your father not here to protect you, this land you're standing on won't belong to you much longer. It will be ours." He reached out a grimy hand, grasping her chin in his iron grip. "It's time you learned your place."

Eliza recoiled as his fingers dug into her skin, her heartbeat thundering in her ears. She searched the scrub for any sign of help, finding only empty road. Edward's horse blocked her escape, and she was alone.

Where was God when she needed Him?

She struggled as William's grip tightened, his scarred face inches from her own. His breath was hot and foul against her cheek, and his free hand wandered to clutch her waist with bruising force. He released her waist, fumbled at his belt, then brought a knife to press against her throat. "Perhaps I should

give you a matching scar, so everyone knows you belong to me.”

Eliza squeezed her eyes shut, hot tears searing her cheeks. She thought of Thomas left alone, waiting for her return. Her end seemed written, all hope gone, when the crack of a rifle split the air. The shot struck the ground at William’s horse’s feet. When the horse reared, William hissed, and the knife clattered to the ground.

Eliza’s breath escaped in a sob before she glimpsed Samuel Bartholomew emerging from the scrub on his horse, rifle levelled at the Chatworths.

His stare found Eliza. “Miss Reynolds, are you unharmed?”

Nodding, she lowered her gaze and sucked in long, deep breaths.

Bartholomew turned his glare upon the Chatworth brothers, who flared back with rage-fuelled expressions.

“This is trespassing, Bartholomew! You have no right—”

“I have every right to defend this woman from ruffians and thieves. Now remove yourselves at once.”

With curses and dark looks, the Chatworths spurred their horses into a frenzied gallop down the road. Only when they disappeared from view did she release her breath.

Bartholomew rode to her side. “These lands are no place for a lady alone, Miss Reynolds. One never knows what dangers lie in wait.” His gaze swept over her, a hunger in his eyes for her farm—and for her.

She swallowed hard, forcing a wavering smile. “Thank you for your aid, Mr. Bartholomew.”

“You are most welcome, my dear. I still await your answer. I don’t know why you delay when my only purpose is to offer you protection and security.”

With defeat washing over her following the bank manager’s rejection, her head was telling her she must accept his proposal, but her heart continued to cry out otherwise. “Please give me more time to consider.”

His lips pursed. “Very well. You have until week’s end.”

As he rode off, the tightness in her throat once again threatened to choke her.

God, please help me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sunday morning in Gippsland dawned with nature's symphony, a blend of tuneful calls and whispering breeze. Birdsong ushered in the day, interweaving with the soft rustling of eucalyptus trees. Their leaves shimmered silver in the sunlight, painting a tranquil canvas. Against this serenade, Jamie and his family rode the well-trodden path to the modest church perched atop the hill, its aging timbers overseeing the town below.

Closing in on the church's grounds, two figures caught Jamie's eye. Eliza, resplendent in a dress the colour of dawn, stood alongside Thomas.

The sight of her stirred a cauldron of emotions, primarily his unresolved feelings and the gnawing uncertainty of how he could convince her to reconsider her decision to marry Bartholomew and how to obtain the funds to repay her father's debt.

Inside the church, the familiar wooden pews and the gentle lighting from the stained-glass windows did little to calm his racing mind. Pastor Isaac's words, usually comforting, seemed to blur into the background as Jamie's thoughts revolved around Eliza's upcoming wedding and a sense of impending doom.

Post sermon, Pastor Isaac beckoned Jamie forward, asking him to play a pivotal role in the sacred communion ceremony. Though honoured, Jamie found himself going through the motions.

Once the hymns faded and the congregation began to disperse, he didn't hesitate. He strode straight to Eliza and Thomas, greeting them with a veneer of cheerfulness. "A beautiful service, wasn't it?" he called out, ruffling Thomas's hair, but his gaze was locked onto Eliza's.

Her initial smile waned, replaced by an expression of urgency. "Jamie, can we step aside? I need to confide in someone."

His heartbeat accelerated. Something was amiss. Leading her to a quieter spot, he listened as she relayed her encounter with the Chatworth brothers. Heat flared at the thought of anyone harming Eliza, but her mention of Bartholomew's sudden appearance sent a cold shiver down his spine.

They exchanged hushed words, with Jamie attempting to remain composed while grappling with the implications of Bartholomew's 'heroic' act. Deep down, he felt an instinctive distrust of the man's intervention, and this intuition screamed there was more to this narrative.

With the church bell resonating in the background, signalling the end of Sunday service, Jamie couldn't waste another second. Informing his mother of an urgent matter, he borrowed a horse from a good friend. The fierce determination to protect Eliza and uncover the truth propelled him forward.

As he spurred his horse to a gallop, the wind whipping through his hair, he made a silent vow. He would uncover Bartholomew's deceit. He would keep an eye on the man, tracking his movements and scrutinising his actions. No matter

the cost, he would not let harm befall the woman who had claimed his heart. And somehow, he'd find the money to repay her debt.

Bartholomew's grand property stood stark against the surrounding nature, a symbol of the man's greed. Jamie dismounted at a safe distance, settling himself behind tall bushes, his gaze never leaving the manor.

Over the next few hours, he watched Bartholomew interact with his workers, ride his horse around the estate, and disappear into the house for long stretches of time. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but Jamie wouldn't trust appearances.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Bartholomew emerged from the manor, carrying a small package. A furtive demeanour replaced his usual swagger as he crossed the courtyard to the stable.

His heart pounding, Jamie crept closer, making sure to stay hidden in the shadows. The stable was quiet, save for the occasional snort of a horse or rustling of hay. As he peered around the corner, Bartholomew passed the package to a dark figure at the rear.

The figure stepped into the dim light—Edward Chatworth! A cold, bitter realisation washed over Jamie as the men exchanged pleasantries, their deceitful collusion confirmed.

Squinting through the chink between the planks, Jamie watched Samuel Bartholomew and Edward Chatworth in the lantern's glow. Jamie held his breath, straining to catch their words over the soft rustle of the horses shifting in their stalls.

"Did everything go as planned?" Bartholomew asked.

Edward snatched the package, greed glinting in his eyes. “Aye, just like we agreed,” he confirmed. “The lass was scared half to death. She bought your heroic act.”

A cold laugh slipped from Bartholomew’s lips. “As we knew she would,” he gloated. “A woman in fear, Edward, is easily manipulated.”

In the dim stable, the air thick with the scent of fresh hay and leather, came the muffled sounds of horses shifting, oblivious as Bartholomew proved his intentions towards Eliza sinister.

Plotting his exit, Jamie took a tentative step back. Every fibre of his being was screaming at him to leave, but he had to do so without drawing attention. In his haste and the enveloping darkness, his boot knocked against a metal pail. The sharp clang echoed like a gunshot.

He froze, heart in his throat, as heads turned in his direction. Shadows stretched long and eerie, the men’s faces barely distinguishable.

“Who’s there?” Bartholomew’s voice thundered, his tone deep and menacing.

Jamie weighed his options. He could either step into the light and face them or make a break for it, hoping the night would cover his escape.

Just as he dared to hope he might go unnoticed, the distinct creak of a lantern handle broke the silence. A halo of light cut through the darkness, illuminating the stable’s interior and steadily finding its way onto his retreating form.

“Hold on! That’s Goddard, ain’t it?” Edward Chatworth’s voice sent chills through Jamie.

With adrenaline coursing through his veins, he ran as fast as he could, the echoes of his footsteps mixing with the shouts from behind. Reaching his horse in a few swift strides, he vaulted onto its back. The stallion responded to a swift kick, and they vanished into the night, leaving shouts and accusations fading in the distance.

As Jamie neared the Goddard family homestead, the lantern-lit windows shone like beacons, suggesting his parents were still awake and awaiting his return. Alighting from his horse, he sprinted up the steps, his boots sounding on the wooden boards leading to the entrance. When he opened the door, his parents stood, their countenances bearing their concern.

“Jamie,” his mother began, “wherever have you been?”

His father, attempting to maintain a stern façade, crossed his arms. “What sort of tomfoolery has kept you out, lad?”

Taking a moment to gather his thoughts, Jamie replied, “Father, Mother, I must share a matter of great urgency.”

She touched his hand. “This concerns Miss Reynolds, does it not? I did caution you, Jamie, that such affections would lead to naught but trouble.”

“Mother.” He turned his hand to grip hers. “The situation is graver than mere affections. I fear for Eliza’s safety.”

His father motioned for them to sit, his brow furrowed. “Explain yourself, son.”

Jamie perched on the edge of an upholstered couch, facing Father, who remained standing behind Mother’s rocker. “Today, after the sermon, Eliza shared a distressing account involving the Chatworths. And oddly enough, Mr.

Bartholomew happened upon the scene most fortuitously to aid her.”

His mother’s eyes widened. “It’s that Bartholomew, isn’t it? He’s got designs on her.”

Jamie nodded. “Indeed. And your earlier suspicions proved accurate. Miss Reynolds is indeed burdened by her late father’s gambling debts. The shocking revelation, however, is that the creditor is Mr. Bartholomew.”

His father’s grip tightened on the back of Mother’s rocker. “That man’s always been as sly as a fox.”

Drawing a deep breath, Jamie pushed out the words with his worries. “I cannot shake this gnawing feeling, Father. There’s a darker purpose behind Mr. Bartholomew’s pursuit of Eliza, beyond mere coin.”

“Jamie.” Mother raised a hand, forestalling his further speculation. “You’re but a young man. This predicament is far beyond your years. Why entangle yourself thus?”

Jamie scooted forward on his seat, his knees almost touching her skirt. “Because I love her and I hold fast to the belief that she returns my affections—and because she is in dire need of our aid.”

Father twisted his grip on the rocker’s back. “What are you proposing, my boy?”

“I fear I’ve roused the ire of Mr. Bartholomew and those Chatworth ruffians. They chanced upon me this evening on Bartholomew’s grounds. I suspect they shall come seeking retribution.”

His mother let out a soft gasp, her fingers fluttering to her throat. “Mercy, Jamie!”

Standing resolute, his father moved his grip to her shoulder. “Steady there, Eleanor. We shall weather this tempest as kin. With our faith as our shield, we’ll seek the Almighty’s guidance.”

Jamie’s stiffness relaxed a fraction, though he’d expected no less from his father. “Thank you, sir. We must also beseech the Lord for Eliza’s wellbeing and pray that He shall guide our path.”

Mother sprang from her chair, her swift movement sending it rocking. Then she dropped onto the couch beside Jamie and drew him into a tender embrace, her cheek pressing against his. “You possess the heart of a lion, Jamie. Yet always remember, the Good Lord shall never burden us beyond our bearing. With His grace, we can confront and overcome this tribulation.”

And in that dimly lit room, Jamie drew strength from his family’s unwavering faith, resolute in their mission to safeguard their own and ensure justice prevailed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The day dawned bright as Eliza stationed herself in the centre of Baker's Run's bustling township, displaying the freshly baked bread she hoped would help alleviate her financial burdens. With Bartholomew's ultimatum nearing its end, her unthinkable choice loomed over her—marry a man she loathed or abandon her family's legacy.

As midmorning approached, the sun cast its oppressive heat, and she skimmed the crowd, seeking Jamie's familiar face. She hadn't seen him since confiding in him following the Sunday service.

"Miss Reynolds!" Samuel Bartholomew's voice boomed across the marketplace. A cord tightened around her heart, and yet, the bleak reality remained. She would soon become this man's wife. What alternative remained?

As he stopped before her and swept off his white straw top hat, she put on a mask of civility. "Mr. Bartholomew." Good. Her voice didn't betray her dread. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He loomed over her modest stall, his proximity almost intrusive. "Given your unfortunate altercation with the Chatworths, our impending nuptials should be hastened—for your protection."

She took a steadying breath. “You promised me time, Mr. Bartholomew.”

He huffed. “Eliza, my affections for you are undeniable. Why delay our happy day?” His fingers grazed her hand with an unwelcome familiarity. “Pledge yourself to me, and every affliction shall dissolve. I vow to provide for your every need and whim.”

Tears threatened. But how could she deny the reality? Despite everything within her saying no, she inhaled and then—murmured her consent.

His face brightened, and he snugged the ridiculous hat back on his greasy curls. “Splendid! In a mere five days, you shall be Mrs. Bartholomew.” He kissed her hand. “Fret not, my dear. Every arrangement will be under my care.”

As he melted into the throng and the bustle of the marketplace continued around her, something distanced her from it all, as though she were trapped inside a suffocating bubble. Her heart raced, and its rhythmic pounding in her ears drowned out the distant conversations and haggling. The weight of her promise pressed down on her like a heavy stone, pinning her in place, trapping her in a decision made not of desire but of necessity.

Her mind replayed their brief exchange. The way he had looked at her, not with genuine affection, but possession. The way he had assumed authority over their impending wedding, not even considering her wishes. The way he touched her—a touch she hadn’t invited or welcomed—left her skin crawling, an intimate invasion she hadn’t been ready to defend against.

She felt anger too—anger at her vulnerability, at the world for putting her in such a corner, and at herself. Why had she allowed it to come to this? Why had she not found another

way? Yet why did she question it? Her choices were limited, and Mr. Bartholomew, with all his power and wealth, would win eventually.

A lump formed in her throat, and she fought back tears. How she wished Jamie were here, with his calming presence and understanding eyes. How she yearned for his advice, his strength. But she'd made her choice and must bear the consequences, no matter how heart-wrenching they might be.

She attempted to busy herself with her stall, adjusting the loaves of bread, and repositioning her wares. But nothing could distract her. Would it ever? After all, she'd just signed her life away to a man she loathed, turning her future into a winding path leading to a place she feared to tread.

The morning waned as she prepared to depart. A young lad darted forth, presenting her with a sealed note. "For you, Miss Reynolds."

She handed him a coin and, with shaking fingers, broke the seal. Jamie's familiar handwriting beckoned.

Eliza, urgent matters regarding Bartholomew demand discussion. I implore you to meet tonight by the old gum tree. He may not be the saviour you believe him to be...

She tucked the note into her basket, only half-read. "I can't confront this now," she murmured.

At home, a maelstrom of emotions surging within, she cast Jamie's letter onto the coals of this morning's fire. The paper crisped and curled, bearing away its insistent message.

"Forgive me, Jamie," she whispered. Her course was now set, and in five days, she would become Mrs. Bartholomew. For better or worse.

Yet, as the note turned to ash, a vision seemed to materialise from the flames—a farmhouse ablaze, Jamie’s reassuring grip, and Bartholomew’s towering figure on horseback casting a long shadow. With a start, she dispelled the eerie images. But a sense of impending doom lingered.



THAT AFTERNOON, while Thomas was checking fences with John, the creak of wagon wheels on the worn dirt path drew Eliza’s focus away from the ledger she was poring over. She rose, her curiosity piqued. She opened the door, the afternoon light warming her face, and Pastor Isaac and his wife, Grace, smiled at her.

“Pastor Isaac, Mrs. Thompson! What a welcome sight,” Eliza exclaimed, her spirits momentarily lifted.

Pastor Isaac, with kindness ever present in his eyes, removed his hat and extended a respectful nod. “We didn’t wish to intrude, Miss Reynolds, but we felt compelled to discuss your impending union.”

At his gravity, Eliza hesitated, then welcomed them inside. “Please, enter. Your company is always a blessing.”

Grace gripped Eliza’s hands. “These are challenging times for you, dear. We’ve been worried.”

Her defences crumbled under the weight of the older woman’s genuine concern. “It’s been...overwhelming,” she admitted, freeing her hands from the dear lady and leading them to the front room.

Pastor Isaac perched on the edge of a horsehair armchair. “We’ve heard of your betrothal to Mr. Bartholomew. Is it what

your heart desires?”

Eliza hesitated, sliding her arms around her middle as his enquiry, while well intentioned, was painfully piercing. “It is a difficult path, but I must consider it for the farm and my father’s legacy.”

Grace touched Eliza’s shoulder, her maternal instinct seeming to sense Eliza’s internal struggle. “Promises are sacred, yes, but not at the expense of your happiness.”

Remembering Jamie’s gaze, his comforting presence, she blinked as her eyes welled. “It’s difficult. My father’s wishes for the farm weigh heavily upon me. And there are other complications.”

The pastor leaned forward on his chair. “Life is full of complex choices, but sometimes we must listen to the still, small voice within and trust in the guidance of the Lord.”

Now seated on the couch beside Eliza, Grace wrapped a comforting arm around her, drawing her close. “This is your life, dear girl. It is not too late to choose your own path, to follow your heart where it leads.”

As the words pressed into her heart and warmed her heart, Eliza allowed herself to be comforted in the woman’s embrace. Finally, Grace pulled back, but she clasped Eliza’s hands. “I know this is an immense decision to make on your own. If I may ask, what do you think your dear mother would have wanted for you?”

The mention of her mother evoked a rush of memories—whispers of lullabies, soft laughter, and heartfelt counsel. Eliza lifted her gaze to Grace’s. “Mother believed in love’s power to overcome challenges.”

Grace's clasp firmed. "Your mother's legacy lives on in you. She'd wish for your heart's happiness, not your duty."

Eliza's chest constricted. "I wish I had her strength, her clarity."

"You do. And perhaps, in seeking your happiness, you'll also find God's purpose for you."

The visit, though brief, left a lasting impact. As Pastor Isaac and Grace made their departure, the weight on Eliza felt somewhat lighter. Their words had sewn seeds of doubt about her choice, but they'd also ignited a spark of hope.

Perhaps even yet there was another path.

Chapter Thirty

The moon hung like a silver pendant, casting a muted glow over the landscape. Under the gum tree's massive branches, Jamie paced, every shadow and rustle amplifying his anxiety. He'd implored Eliza to meet him, but the night, with its rustling leaves and chirping crickets, gave no hint of her arrival.

Nature continued its rituals, and somewhere in the distance, a dingo's mournful cry echoed. Jamie scanned the path, willing Eliza to emerge from the twilight. Perhaps Bartholomew had intercepted the note, or maybe Eliza had been held back by unforeseen circumstances.

Then a rustle sounded behind him. He pivoted, but only caught a fleeting glance of a kangaroo disappearing into the thicket.

Then the distinct rhythm of approaching hoofbeats pierced the quiet. At last, she was coming!

But no. Instead, two dark silhouettes on horseback loomed, casting long, ominous shadows. Recognising Edward and William Chatworth, Jamie ground his teeth, and his gut clenched.

"Ah, Goddard," Edward drawled. "Hoping your little lady friend will meet you here, no doubt?"

William smirked. “Hoping to be her knight in shining armour, are we?”

Though outnumbered, Jamie stood tall. “What’s your business here, Chatworths?”

The brothers exchanged glances, and William edged his horse closer. “Just a friendly warning. The Reynolds girl belongs to Bartholomew now.”

Despite the palpable danger, Jamie refused to back down. “She’s not some property to be claimed. I won’t stand by and let Bartholomew ensnare her.” The words spat from his mouth, emerging with a disdain that rose from deep within.

William drew his pistol and shoved it under Jamie’s chin.

Dart bared his teeth and growled.

“Stay down, Dart,” Jamie ordered, his gaze fixed on William. Every fibre of his being told him to fight, but he was outnumbered.

Edward turned his horse around. “This is your last warning. Bartholomew won’t be as kind as us.”

With that, William withdrew the gun, and the brothers rode off.

Jamie’s breaths came fast as he stared after them. How could he protect Eliza from such danger? And what of his parents and their farm? Was his defiance placing everyone he loved in danger?

He sank to the ground. “Lord, what am I to do?”

If he went to Eliza, he could be leading the Chatworths to her door.

Torn between duty and love, he moved closer to the tree, planting his back against the trunk. He would stay here all night, clinging to the thin thread of hope that she might yet come.



ELIZA SAT in the dimly lit kitchen, stirring her tea. The remnants of supper remained on the table, evidence of a tense meal with Thomas.

He'd barely eaten, pushing his food around. "Eliza? Why Bartholomew? You know he's a cruel man. The stories about him aren't just tales."

She set aside her tea, reaching across the table to grip his hand. "I made a promise to Father. I thought... I thought I could find a way to see the good in him. Perhaps even change him."

"You can't change a man like that." Thomas jerked away, balling his hands into fists. "I don't want you to become another one of his tales."

She sighed. What about Pastor Isaac's words that afternoon? He'd said God had plans for her, plans to give her a hopeful future. Was Jamie part of those plans? Dear Jamie, the glint in his eyes and the warmth of his touch—the sharp contrast between the two men was undeniable.

She pushed from the table, pausing by the stove where she'd impulsively thrown his urgent message into the fire, haunted by the risks involved in meeting him.

"Eliza?" Thomas came to stand behind her, his hand on her arm now. "Promise me you won't go through with this

marriage.”

How could he ask such a thing? Especially when she’d just shared her promise to Father? She let out a slow breath, trying to mesh her duty to her father and brother with her duty to follow whatever path God Himself set before her. “I’ve been praying. I believe God does indeed have a plan for me. And while I feel guilty about breaking my promise to Father, I have to trust my heart.”

He slid his arm around her waist. “Then you know what you must do.”

“I need to speak to Jamie. Tonight.”

His lanky form stiffened beside her. “But if the Chatworths or Bartholomew catch you—”

“I’ll be careful.” And yet her own heart pounded. “Please, go to bed. I’ll return soon.”

He hesitated, then nodded, and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Be safe, Sister.”

She stepped out into the chilly night, pulling her cloak around her, and a mix of fear and determination spurred her steps. The moonlight guided her path, and as she headed towards the old gum tree, she prayed for protection, guidance, and the courage to follow her heart.



AS JAMIE LEANED against the tree, a distant light caught his attention. He straightened, pulse quickening. Could it be her?

And then, lantern in hand, she emerged from the shadows, her copper hair shimmering, tumbling in waves over her

shoulders. Her green eyes locked with his, a connection igniting the space between them.

“You came,” he breathed out the words, perhaps a prayer of thanks to God.

She set the lantern down, its glow illuminating her features. He drank in the sight of her, this woman who had captured his heart and soul. The shadows under her eyes spoke of anguish and restless nights, yet her smile upon seeing him was like the rising sun, chasing away the chill that had settled in his spirit.

She reached for his hands, and he clasped them, marvelling at the soft warmth of her skin against his calloused palms. How he had missed her touch, as sustaining as the first rays of sunshine after endless winter rain.

“Jamie, is everything alright?” She glanced into the creeping night.

He squeezed her hands, grateful beyond measure to have her here beside him again. He forced a hopeful smile, not wishing to burden her straight away with all that weighed upon his heart. “Now it is.”

And it was. With Eliza here, the night didn’t seem as ominous, nor the path ahead so uncertain. Yet the Chatworth brothers’ threats lingered.

Taking a deep breath, he met her eyes. “There are some things I must tell you about Samuel Bartholomew.”

He explained how he’d overheard the man plotting with the Chatworth brothers—paying them to threaten her on the road so he could step in and appear the hero. “He doesn’t care about your safety or wellbeing. He staged the whole thing to gain your affection.”

“But...” She hugged her arms around herself. “He has no need to gain my affection. He already owns me.”

Jamie grasped her shoulders. “Marry me instead. I should have asked you a long time ago. I cannot offer you riches or a comfortable life like Samuel Bartholomew can, but I can offer you my undying love.”

Her body stiffened, conflicted emotions warring on her face. Then her fingers splayed along his jaw and chin, turning his gaze towards her, her touch tender as her resolute features softened and her eyes glistened. “Oh, Jamie, how I want to accept. With all my heart, I would love to marry you.” Her voice broke. “But I accepted Mr. Bartholomew’s proposal only today. And then there’s my father’s dying wish... his debts...”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “Shh... We’ll find a way to save the farm together and to repay your father’s debt. God will provide the answers.”

She trembled, tears spilling free. “The debt is too large. The bank has already denied me. There is no way to repay him.”

“‘The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.’ We will pray and trust God.”

Jamie shifted his hands to her face, cradling her cheeks in his palms as his thumbs wiped away her tears. “So, Eliza, will you marry me?”

“Oh, Jamie.” She threw her arms around him.

He held her close, breathing in the scent of her hair.

After a moment, she drew back enough to meet his gaze. In that wordless exchange, a silent understanding passed between them, like the first shoots of new growth taking root after a season of drought and desolation.

His gaze flicked to her parted lips as he tentatively leaned in. When their lips met, the kiss was featherlight, trembling with unspoken longing.

Her eyelids fluttered shut as she leaned into him, her hands coming up to cup his jawline.

He wrapped his arms more firmly around her slender frame, deepening the kiss ever so slightly. He poured all of his heart's yearning into that delicate brushing of lips, expressing what words had failed to convey. She responded timidly at first, then more fervently, months of buried affection rising like sap in spring.

In the lantern's golden light, time itself seemed to pause, the world narrowing to the two of them suspended in this moment.

When at last they broke apart, faces flushed and hearts pounding, the air between them fairly crackled with awakened possibility.

"So... I take this is a yes? That you will be mine, tied together with God's love and blessing?"

Before she could respond, a deafening crack split the still night air. She cried out as a bullet struck their lantern, glass shattering before it plunged them into sudden darkness.

Jamie whirled around, pulling her behind him. As his eyes adjusted, two shadowy riders emerged from the trees, their pistols glinting in the faint moonlight.

"Your last chance to walk away, Goddard," came William Chatworth's icy voice. "The lady belongs to Bartholomew."

Jamie's jaw clenched, but he refused to yield any ground, shielding Eliza with his body.

“She belongs only to herself. And Eliza will never be Bartholomew’s bride,” he declared through gritted teeth, staring down the barrels aimed in their direction. His protective stance left no room for doubt. He would defend Eliza to his last breath.

“Then you’ve chosen your fate. Kill them both!” William roared.

The riders opened fire, but Jamie dragged Eliza down, sheltering behind the broad gum tree. Bullets peppered the bark as they huddled together.

“When I say run, make for that hollow,” Jamie hissed.

Then the brothers paused to reload, and he yelled, “Now!”

They bolted from the tree, bullets flying past them. He pushed her ahead, refusing to leave her side even as their enemies closed in.

Dart erupted from the brush and sank his teeth into Edward’s leg with a savage growl.

The man screamed and dropped his pistol while shaking off the dog.

In the confusion, Jamie seized the chance to pull Eliza to safety. He led her stumbling through the dark scrub, branches scratching their arms and legs. But he didn’t stop until the sounds of the snarling dog and shouting men had faded into the distance.

At last, in the shelter of a rocky hollow, she collapsed against him, her slender frame trembling.

He wrapped his arms around her, her rapid heartbeat slowly calming against his chest. They clung to one another in the darkness, the acrid taste of gunpowder still sharp in the air.

“It seems Bartholomew will stop at nothing to force your hand,” Jamie said, his arms tightening around her. “But I swear to you, Eliza, I will lay down my life before I see you bound to that monster against your will.”

She lifted her gaze to meet his, luminous with emotion in the dim moonlight. “Then we make our stand together.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Eliza's heart raced as she and Jamie scrambled through the moonlit scrubland towards her farmhouse. Every snap of a twig or rustle in the bushes made her start. The once-familiar surroundings now felt foreboding, holding secrets in the shadows.

The pathway they were embarking upon was both exciting and menacing. Despite Mr. Bartholomew's relentless pursuit and the looming debt, she would not be tamed or controlled.

Outside her door, uncertainty knotted in her stomach. But meeting Jamie's eyes, she felt that familiar surge of strength. "I never answered your question."

His hand caressed her cheek, and she leaned into the touch. "I've been patient."

"The answer is yes. I will marry you, Jamie Goddard."

He lowered his face and brushed his lips against hers. "I love you with all my heart, Eliza. Together, we'll conquer everything."

With reluctance, she pulled away. "I need to go in now. Until tomorrow, my love." She stretched up and brushed his lips again before he left her and slipped into the night.

Stepping inside, she paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room. How surreal to think that, within these walls, life continued as usual. The lingering smell of fresh bread and woodsmoke brought unexpected comfort, but it was juxtaposed with the night's events.

Thomas was sitting by the dying embers, and he jumped to his feet when she entered. "Eliza! I heard gunshots, and I feared the worst."

She took his hands in hers. "I'm safe. But we need to talk. I have good news."

"Good news? Tell me you're not marrying Bartholomew."

"Yes! But more than that. Jamie asked me to marry him."

"And you accepted?"

She nodded, her lips curving into an involuntary smile. "I did!"

Their laughter rang out, filling every corner of the house, a simple joy in complicated times. She made tea, and they sipped it while sitting at the fire, chatting and laughing.

The hour grew late, and the room fell silent, save for the fire's soft crackling. As they stood to go to bed, she paused.

Something was amiss.

A sudden chill invaded the warmth, a sixth sense of danger prickling her skin.

"What's wrong, Eliza?" Thomas's eyes narrowed.

A crash interrupted her response. The subsequent hoofbeats echoed like a harbinger of doom.

When they emerged from the house, the scene looked like a dark tapestry woven from nightmares. At the epicentre,

Samuel Bartholomew sat upon a black stallion, the malice in his eyes unmistakable.

“Your games have consequences, Miss Reynolds.”

Every fibre of her being told her his threat was genuine, his arrogance had reached a crescendo, but so had her resolve. This was her destiny, her life, and she would protect it.

As she met Thomas’s eyes, a silent agreement passed between them. She stepped forward. “I’ve made my choice, Mr. Bartholomew. I will not marry you.”

His face darkened. “You’ll live to regret this.”

She’d tasted regret ever since their encounter at the market. Nothing could ever be worse than that. Chin high, she held his gaze. “Regret is a word I’ve removed from my life, Mr. Bartholomew. Now, get off my property. You’re trespassing.”



THE EXHILARATION JAMIE FELT, knowing Eliza was to be his, was like a songbird set free. Sharing the news with his parents was like breathing life into a long-suppressed dream. But as he prepared for bed, darker thoughts clouded his happiness. The looming debt to Bartholomew remained a phantom hanging over their future.

Jamie’s prayer was fervent as he washed his face with a damp rag, seeking guidance in their most dire of circumstances. With his faith unwavering, he prayed, envisioning a life free from Bartholomew’s claims.

The sudden, echoing drumbeat of hooves interrupted his prayer. He dropped his rag and darted outside, his heart

pounding with a new, ominous rhythm. Figures emerged on the horizon, torches blazing.

The Chatworths.

He sprinted inside, fear coiling in his gut.

“Father! Come quickly.”

By the time his father joined him, the barn was a roaring inferno.

His father sprang into action. “We have no time to waste.”

Racing to the barn, they fought the flames to release the animals, the air thick with smoke.

As the fire spread to the fields and painted the night in hues of orange and crimson, the Chatworth brothers vanished, but two other figures emerged from the darkness.

Eliza and Thomas. She rushed to Jamie, her eyes round.

“We saw the flames. I’m sorry, Jamie,” she murmured, her voice muffled against his smoke-streaked shirt. “I shouldn’t have brought danger upon you.”

He pulled back and looked at her, wiping away her tears with a sooty hand. “Don’t apologise. I would face a sea of flames for you and Thomas.”

Her emerald eyes shimmered as she looked at him. “I love you. But this...” Her gaze shifted to the fields lighting up the night.

“Shh...” He tugged her tear-streaked face against his chest. “It’s going to be alright.”

But as he held her close, the glowing fields reminded him of what they faced and stood in bitter testament to the lengths Bartholomew would undergo to assert his dominance.

However, Eliza's touch was like a balm, her love grounding him. As they faced the fiery tempest, Jamie vowed to protect and shield her from further harm. The raging fire, though devastating, became a crucible, forging their bond even stronger.

With the surrounding fire warming him, he held her closer, their heartbeats merging into a comforting rhythm amidst the crackling ruins. His gaze lifted to the stars peeking out from the smoky haze above, twinkling with a promise of better days. They had each other, and that was all they needed.

He kissed the top of her head. "Come inside. You can't go home tonight."

"But the fire? We must fight it before it destroys everything."

He kissed her again. "You're right. We'll fight it together."

All night they fought the flames, drawing water from the well and the creeks, along with the townsfolk who came to their aid. But they were no match for the raging inferno.

Chapter Thirty-Two

As the first rays of sunlight pierced the morning fog, Eliza looked upon a starkly different landscape than the one she'd known yesterday. She stood next to Jamie, their hands woven together in a silent pledge of unity. Before them spread the sobering aftermath of the fire that had not only consumed Jamie's barn but also swept across the Goddard family's fields and into hers.

The normally verdant expanse was now a patchwork of scorched earth, charred timbers, and smouldering remnants. The Goddards' cattle and sheep had survived, herded to safety in time. But the fences that had enclosed them were now mere suggestions of their former structure, the sturdy eucalyptus posts reduced to blackened stubs.

Eliza's gaze slid from Jamie's grazing lands to where the barn had stood. Now it was a ruin, a skeleton of charred logs, consumed by the flames. Nearby, the woolshed, too, had suffered, half its structure now an unsalvageable mess of burnt timber and scorched wool bales.

With her free hand, she pinned her hair away from her face, her chest hollow. "I am so sorry to have brought this heartache upon your family."

He looked at her, his eyes soft and understanding. He squeezed her hand, his firm grip providing a measure of comfort. “We might have lost some structures, but the farm, its spirit, is still here. We will rebuild.”

A short while later, they rode to her farm. She already knew her and Thomas’s home had burned to the ground. The fire that had lit the night sky had given testament to that.

The tin roof was now a twisted, melted hulk atop the skeletal remains of its wooden structure. The veranda where she’d stolen away for brief respites, just sipping tea and admiring the view was now nothing more than smouldering rubble.

Her fledgling orchard was a mix of charred and surviving trees. But amidst it all, the well her father had dug when he first claimed the land stood intact, its cool, clean water a lifeline they couldn’t afford to lose.

“There is a lot of rebuilding to do,” Jamie said, his determined voice resounding over the devastation laid bare before them.

“And we’ll do it together,” Eliza added, her resolve hardening.

Walking amidst the ashes, she found her mother’s trunk unscathed by the fire. Unveiling her mother’s wedding dress felt like a message from her dear mother, a silent whisper of hope amidst the ruins. She could picture her, young and radiant, wearing this dress on her wedding day. She remembered her stories about that day, about the love and happiness in her heart. The dress had symbolised a new beginning for her mother then, as it would for Eliza now.

She'd known she couldn't wear it to marry Bartholomew, but now, she would wear it to wed Jamie. Her love.

Clutching the dress, she surveyed the remnants of their dream, a renewed determination buoying her. They had lost much, but they had also found something better—strength, resilience, and love.

With the precious wedding dress in hand, she returned to where Jamie stood appraising the damage. As she approached, he turned, and his gaze fell upon the dress, his expression shifting to quiet understanding.

“My mother's,” she explained, her voice thick with emotion. “It survived.”

He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her.

She leaned into him, taking solace in his steady strength, then drew back to meet his tender face. “This dress is a sign of hope, of new beginnings. I wish to wear it when we are wed.”

Despite the weary lines etched on his face, his eyes lit. “It would be my greatest pleasure to have you wear it.”

“I also found these.” She lifted her gaze and handed him the wad of notes Bartholomew had given her and she'd placed in an old tea canister. Although charred, they, too, had survived the flames.

He flicked through them before tucking them under his arm. “We will take these to the police in Sale. I suspect they'll be found to be fraudulent. I also have every confidence that Bartholomew and his sidekicks will be charged with arson and coercion.”

“That would be an answer to prayer.”

In the days that followed, their community came together to help clear the debris and salvage what they could. Pastor Isaac arrived with his wife, their wagon loaded with food, blankets and medical supplies donated by the congregation. “Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go,” the pastor reassured her and Thomas, quoting the words of Joshua.

Neighbouring farmers brought tools and spare lumber. The blacksmith offered his skills to rework any bent metal into new farming implements. Even young children helped gather bricks from the rubble to be reused. Each evening the families shared a communal meal around the campfires, their fellowship sustaining weary spirits.

During the day, Jamie and Eliza laboured from dawn till dusk alongside their neighbours. Though at times weariness threatened to crush their will, each evening he would take her hands and remind her of the joys to come. He spoke of the flower garden she would plant, the meals they would share by the fireside, and the laughter of the children they would raise. The words of Isaiah came to Eliza: “And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations.”

Their love had withstood many trials, but they clung to the promise of Jeremiah: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”

Then came the trip to Sale, a journey of justice and validation. The town, though bustling with its own life, felt different, charged with the weight of their purpose. The police sergeant’s validation of their claims was a victory in itself. Bartholomew, they learned, had gained his riches by nefarious means, marrying rich widows to gain their lands, and then

having them mysteriously die after he'd gained their fortune. Had she married him, Eliza would have been his fifth wife.

But Jamie's surprise—a sparkling engagement ring—was the highlight of their excursion. In Sale's finest restaurant, they shared more than a meal. They shared dreams of a future built on love, trust, and resilience.

Their return journey held a touch of magic. The sun was setting, bathing the valley in a golden hue as they reached the hilltop. Pausing to take in the view, Jamie took her into his arms, and their lips met. This kiss was different, a culmination of shared trials, unwavering love, and the promise of brighter days.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jamie awoke to a chorus of birdsong heralding the new day—his wedding day! With the world bathed in dawn's tender hues, he stepped outside and took a moment, committing the day and his marriage to the Lord. Thoughts of the past rushed in—the first time he laid eyes on Eliza, their struggles, their joys, and the obstacles they overcame there had all led to this day.

Back inside, as he opened the wardrobe, the suit his mother had adjusted for him hung inside. It wasn't a fancy suit, not like the ones men from the city wore, but it was special to him. The dark-grey woollen fabric was both sturdy and warm, chosen for its practicality and the way it held up over time rather than for its sheen or softness.

Taking the white cotton shirt, he slipped his arms into it. As he buttoned it up, it felt cool and smooth against his skin. No tie, though. He'd never been one for ties, and today was no exception.

He reached for his trousers and attached the old leather suspenders that had once belonged to his grandfather. They were a comforting weight on his shoulders and would keep his trousers in place.

He then took the jacket, a simple single-breasted design, and shrugged into it, revealing a hint of the white shirt cuffs underneath. Lastly, he pinned a freshly picked boutonniere to his lapel, a touch his mother insisted upon. A combination of wildflowers, it was simple yet heartfelt.

He studied his reflection in the mirror, and he lifted his chin. The suit made him feel more mature, ready for this new chapter in his life. He wasn't one for dressing up, always feeling more comfortable in his work clothes, but today was different. Today, he wasn't just a farmer's son but a groom about to marry the love of his life.

With a lightness to his step, he entered the kitchen where his mother stirred a pot on the stove. "My dear boy, look at you!" She drew him in for a hug, her arms encircling him. "Your father and I are so proud."

"Thank you, Mother." As he returned her embrace, he gazed out the window at his father tending to the livestock. Though slowed by age and the impact of the recent fire, his spirit remained unbroken, a symbol of resilience Jamie sought to embody.

A sudden commotion shattered the peaceful moment. A cow, spooked by something unseen, was charging across the yard, its hooves kicking up dirt and rocks. Without a second thought, Jamie sprinted outside, shedding his jacket as he raced towards the beast. Of all days, today had to be the day nature played its tricks.

"Jamie, your clothes!" his mother called out, but the cow's panic-stricken bellowing drowned out her voice. He didn't have time to worry about his wedding attire—a startled and rampaging cow could trample the smaller, more delicate parts of their recovering homestead.

Launching himself with all the speed of a seasoned stockman, he lassoed the rope around the beast's neck, and worked to steer it away from the vegetable garden they'd painstakingly cultivated from the ashen soil.

The animal resisted, bellowing and charging, the tug of war stirring up a cloud of dust and dirt that settled on his once-pristine wedding clothes. His heart pounded with the adrenaline of the chase.

Finally, with a powerful pull, he steered the cow towards their farmhand who grabbed the rope and took over, his calming manner settling the beast.

Breathing heavily, Jamie glanced at his clothes. He was a mess, his shirt drenched with sweat and stained with dirt, and his trousers.... He chuckled to himself. This was just like him, taking on a rampaging cow on his wedding day. He headed back towards the house.

His mother was waiting at the doorway, a clean set of clothes in her hands. He stripped off his soiled shirt and trousers, dropping them into the basket. She clucked her tongue, but a twinkle glinted in her eye.

His father stood behind her, still chuckling. "Only you, son." He clapped Jamie on the shoulder. "Only you could find a way to make your wedding day more memorable."

Hastily, Jamie cleaned himself off with a rag and a bucket of water, then pulled on the fresh clothes. He buttoned up his shirt and tugged at the stiff collar, then reached for the jacket. He glanced over at the old mantel clock. It was time to go.

"Jamie! The carriage is here!" His sister appeared, bushy blonde curls escaping her bonnet. "Best fix that hair. Can't have you looking unkempt for your bride!"

Jamie chuckled and smoothed his unruly locks before stepping outside. The carriage driver gave a nod, and then they all clambered into the vehicle with the lightheartedness only love could bring.

The carriage stopped outside the church. Birds sang, and the chapel's whitewashed walls seemed to shimmer, reflecting the golden hue of the morning sun. The scent of fresh-cut grass and blooming flowers heralded a new day, a new beginning.

As Jamie stepped down, his boots crunching on the gravel path, he spotted Thomas pacing nearby.

"Thomas!" Jamie called out as he approached.

Thomas whirled around. "Jamie! Eliza was worried you weren't coming!"

Jamie placed a steadying hand on the boy's shoulder. "Wild horses, or even cattle, wouldn't keep me away. I intend to devote every day to making your sister happy. She deserves all the joy in the world."

Thomas threw his arms around him. "I know you will." He squeezed him tight and leaned in to whisper by Jamie's ear. "Thank you for taking care of us."

Jamie held the boy close, humbled by Thomas's trust. Somehow, no matter what, he would live up to that ideal and create a home and family where Eliza and Thomas would always feel safe, cherished, and free to follow their dreams.

Pulling back, Jamie ruffled Thomas's hair. "Now, let's get inside before they send out a search party for the groom."

Thomas laughed and, linking his arm through Jamie's, led the way into the church, joy bouncing in his steps despite all he had endured. At that moment, Jamie knew he had been

welcomed into this patchwork family of two that had captured his heart. With Thomas's blessing, he now felt more than ready to take the next step into his future with Eliza.

Despite the modest interior, the church was aglow on this special day. Wildflower bouquets decorated the altar and pews, lending their sweet aroma. Friends and neighbours greeted Jamie, their familiar faces warmed by smiles.

At the front stood Pastor Isaac, his kind eyes crinkling as Jamie took his place. A hushed anticipation settled over the congregation. Then the doors opened, and there was a collective intake of breath.

Eliza appeared, resplendent in her mother's gown, and the delicate lace and silk hugged her graceful frame as if made for her alone. Her fiery locks cascaded freely, crowned with a circlet of wildflowers. As she glided forward, the gown came alive, whispering of new beginnings and triumphant hope.

She'd never looked more beautiful than in that moment. His breath caught while their gazes met across the hushed chapel. All the hardship and heartache melted away, eclipsed by the radiant vision before him. A thousand memories danced in front of his eyes—stolen glances, whispered secrets, tender touches. And now, here she was, walking towards a shared future.

When she drew up beside him, he thought his pounding heart might burst from sheer joy. Her emerald-green eyes sparkled with happy tears, a mirror to his own. At last, after all they had suffered, this remarkable woman was his, and he hers.

"I've dreamt of this moment, and still... words fail me. You're radiant," he whispered, taking her hand, his fingers trembling ever so slightly.

She smiled, squeezing his fingers. No more words were needed. Time itself seemed to pause, suspended in this perfect moment of long-awaited unity.

The pastor began the ceremony, but Jamie heard only the beating of his own heart. Nothing existed now but Eliza's hand in his, the love shining from her eyes. Their past was written, their future, alight with hope. In that hushed chapel, they took the first steps together.

Pastor Isaac smiled at them before addressing the congregation. "Dear friends, we are gathered here today to celebrate the holy union of James Harold Goddard and Eliza Jean Reynolds in solemn matrimony. As it is written in Corinthians, 'Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.' The love this couple share is built on mutual trust, respect, and devotion. Their journey together has not been without trials, yet their commitment remains unwavering."

He refocused on them. "Jamie and Eliza, never forget that your marriage is a gift from God. As Mark tells us, 'What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.' You have been brought together by His purpose and plan."

Clasping their joined hands, Pastor Isaac continued. "Today you make a solemn vow before God to face all of life's blessings and hardships side by side. Hold fast to one another, just as Ecclesiastes instructs, 'And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.' This reminds us of the strength that comes from unity and trust in God. Your marriage will be strongest with Christ at its centre."

With a warm smile, he released their hands. "I know you will fill your life together with the love described in First

Corinthians—patient, kind, and enduring. Let your home be founded on faith, hope, and above all else, love. And may you continue to walk in God’s light all the days of your lives. Amen.”

When it came time to pledge their vows, Jamie gazed into Eliza’s eyes, and she his, their promises spoken straight from their hearts.

“With this ring, I promise to stand by your side in good times and bad, in sickness and health, till death do us part,” Jamie recited, sliding the band onto her finger. Every word of his vow weighed heavy with commitment and love, promises forged in trials and kindled in moments of shared joy.

Eliza’s eyes shone, brimming with love and hope.

As the church doors swung open, a vibrant scene embodied the essence of their tight-knit community. The yard adjacent to the chapel had been transformed into a lively reception space. Long wooden tables, made by hand from the timber of nearby trees, stood under the shade of leafy branches. Each was adorned with white linens borrowed from the homes of neighbours, and the array of dishes on them would tempt even the most discerning of palates.

Jamie paused, allowing the enticing aromas to wash over him. There were the hearty, savoury scents of roasted meats and fresh bread, a hint of the spiciness of Mrs. O’Hare’s famous apple chutney, and the irresistible sweetness of Miss Thompson’s blackberry pie. Each dish was a testament to the culinary talents of their community and was offered up not just as sustenance but also as a symbol of shared joy and unity.

To the side, a makeshift dance floor had been set up, and the fiddle player was already drawing couples in with an

upbeat tune. Jamie tapped his foot to the rhythm, excited for the dances that awaited them.

The laughter of children punctuated the air as they played their games. Little ones darted between the tables, playing tag, their giggles infectious. Older kids set up a game of horseshoes, while adventurous souls tried their hand at impromptu juggling, using apples borrowed from a nearby fruit bowl.

Near the ancient oak tree, Jamie spotted old Mr. and Mrs. Black, a couple who had seen more than sixty summers together. They sat hand in hand, exchanging whispered secrets and stealing kisses as if they were newlyweds themselves. It was a touching reminder that love wasn't bound by time, and a warmth spread through him. Surely, he and Eliza would be blessed with such enduring affection.

Friends and relatives gathered in small groups, swapping stories, some recent and others from days long past. The shared history amongst them was palpable—battles fought, losses mourned, and triumphs celebrated. Their animated conversations painted a rich tapestry of lives intertwined by fate and choice.

By the drinks table, Jamie's cousin was pouring his homemade cider, the fruits of last autumn's labour, and it was a hit, judging by the line of guests waiting with glasses in hand. There was also fresh lemonade for the kids, its tartness balanced with just the right amount of honey.

While Jamie took it all in, he realised this reception was more than a celebration of their wedding. It was a testament to the community's resilience, their ability to come together in times of joy, just as they had in times of adversity. Every

smile, every hug, and every shared memory was a reminder of the strength of bonds forged in love and shared experience.

As dusk fell, he drew his new bride close for a dance. She rested her head against his chest with a contented sigh while they swayed together.

“I love you, Mrs. Goddard,” he murmured into her hair, still hardly believing this amazing woman was his wife.

She glanced up with a teasing smile. “I love you, too. But you owe me a real honeymoon once we finish rebuilding. I’m thinking a trip to the city, just the two of us.”

He grinned. “It will be my pleasure.”

Laughter and music soon faded into the night, and Jamie glanced around at the loved ones still gathered. He sighted his parents, their faces reflecting the warm glow of the lanterns, and Eliza’s brother lost in animated conversation with Jamie’s siblings. Jamie couldn’t help but think of the trials they’d all faced—the fire, the losses, the attempts to exploit their land, but tonight, those memories were not a source of pain, but a reminder of the strength they held as a family, as a community.

His gaze fell upon Eliza, her eyes sparkling in the dim light when she laughed at something his sister said. A surge of affection filled him, not a dramatic swell but a quiet, resolute certainty. This was his life, his home, these were his people, and here beside him was his wife, her spirit every bit as resilient and strong as the land they stood on. From the ruins of tragedy, together they had rebuilt not just a home but also a life brimming with love and purpose.

He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. “Thank you,” he murmured, “for loving me and for choosing me.”

She reached up, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead. “And thank you for never giving up hope. I love you, Jamie Goddard.”

As they gazed up, the stars above seemed to twinkle in agreement. Their love story was but one amongst millions, yet it felt as vast and eternal as the universe itself.

Love had bloomed even on burnt and broken ground. Now, with care, it would flourish.

Epilogue

Eighteen Months Later...

The sun's golden rays danced on Eliza's skin as she looked over their sprawling land, the undulating pastures painted with grazing livestock and the neat patchwork of resilient crops. Although less than two years had passed since the flames had consumed everything they held dear, nature's resilience mirrored their own. The scars were fading, replaced by symbols of renewal and rebirth.

Drawn by the comforting aroma of freshly baked bread, she stepped back inside their new dwelling—lovingly built by her husband from local timber and stone. Jamie had poured his heart into every beam and brick. The gentle play of sunlight filtering through the curtains made the handcrafted wooden furniture glow, each detail a testament to his devotion and their shared dreams for the future.

The sight of him engrossed in his leather-bound ledger was familiar and endearing. The intensity in his eyes, the maturity in his posture, contrasted with the spirited lad she had fallen for. Time had sculpted them with challenges, unveiling depths of tenacity and devotion.

He looked up, his blue eyes lighting. “We might see a surplus this harvest.”

A chuckle escaped her lips as she draped an arm around his shoulders and kissed the top of his head. Then a crash echoed through the room. Their nine-month-old son, Harold, Harry for short, giggled gleefully beside the overturned stool, a mess of cutlery strewn across the floor. Eliza couldn’t help but grin before she lifted him into her arms. “What have you been up to now, my little explorer?”

Jamie, never able to resist his son’s antics, joined in the laughter. “With the way he’s growing, he’ll be running around causing even more havoc before we know it.”

He stood and gathered her into his arms. “Sometimes it feels surreal—this life, this family.” His voice held a tremble, emotions close to the surface. “Facing those trials with you gave me purpose, Eliza. Every moment now feels like a precious gift.”

She rested her head against his chest, warmth spreading through her. “It’s all the sweeter because we walked that path side by side.”

When she returned their baby to the floor, heavy footsteps announced her brother’s arrival. The transformation in Thomas had been heartening. Gone was the shadow of grief that once dominated his features. Now, he stood taller, his confidence shining through as he laboured alongside Jamie to work their land.

“Is it time for the picnic, Eliza?”

“I just need to pack the basket and blanket. Why don’t you play with Harry while I get ready?”

His face brightened at the mention of his little nephew. He stepped inside and scooped the giggling baby into his arms. “And how’s my favourite little joey today?” Thomas cooed and playfully tossed a squealing Harold up in the air before catching him in his sturdy arms.

The baby chortled, his tiny fingers grasping at Thomas’s shirt.

Thomas smiled down at him. “You’re getting so big! Pretty soon you’ll be running this place.” He tickled Harry’s belly, eliciting more gleeful laughter.

Watching her brother dote on her son, Eliza sighed out her contentment.

Soon they were settled on the blanket under the shade of the gum tree where she and Jamie had met so often. The air, fragrant with the earthiness of the bushlands, danced with their laughter.

Her father had longed to give her and Thomas a new beginning here. Looking around at those she held most dear, she knew his and her mother’s dreams had come to fruition. She shivered at how close she’d come to losing it all, but God had given her the desires of her heart.

Over this past year as she, Jamie, and Thomas read the Word together after supper each night, she’d learned what it meant to trust God with all things and to grow in wisdom and grace.

Jamie lifted her hand and pressed his lips against her skin and gazed into her eyes. “I love you, Eliza Goddard.”

Her chest swelled with her whispering her love in return.

Though the future was never guaranteed, especially given the unpredictable Gippsland elements, their faith and love

were unwavering anchors. Harry snuggled close, his tiny fingers wrapped around hers, and she envisioned the legacy they'd leave—a love born from adversity and nurtured by unwavering hope and faith.

“AND NOW ABIDETH FAITH, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed “Love’s Unwavering Hope” and were blessed by it. Book 2 in *The Beneath the Southern Cross, Dawn of Sunburned Land Series*, “Love’s Rebellious Spirit”, is now available to pre-order and will release in March 2024, but you can read the first chapter below.

To ensure you don’t miss any of my new releases, why not [join my Readers’ list](#)? You’ll also receive a free thank-you copy of “Hank and Sarah - A Love Story”, a clean love story with God at the center.

Enjoyed “Love’s Unwavering Hope”? You can make a big difference. Help other people find this book by writing a review and telling them why you liked it. Honest reviews of my books help bring them to the attention of other readers just like yourself, and I’d be very grateful if you could spare just five minutes to leave a review (it can be as short as you like) on the book’s Amazon page. You can jump right to the page by clicking [here](#).

Keep reading for your bonus chapter of “Love’s Rebellious Spirit”, which you can pre-order [here](#).

Blessings,

Juliette

CHAPTER 1

The tense undercurrent of a whispered argument stirred Harry from sleep. He crept out of bed, and from his position atop the stairs, he strained to catch the undertones of his parents' heated dispute.

"It's madness, Jamie, he's still so young!" His mother's voice carried a hint of desperation.

Harry's pride smarted. Eighteen, almost nineteen, and he was more than ready to step out of the shadows of childhood.

His father's weary response followed. "Eliza, if we try to hold him back, he'll leave regardless. He has that fierce spark in him, the same one I fell in love with in you."

"But the city could be his undoing. It's such a wild place!" Mother's fear was palpable.

Harry bit his lower lip, conflicted. He understood their apprehensions. Yet the world was calling to him, and he had to respond. He cherished the farm, but he craved more.

As the familiar creak of their bedroom door signalled the end of their conversation, he retreated, wrestling with his emotions.

The next morning, as dawn painted the sky with a soft blush, Harry rose, taking care not to disturb his younger brothers. A rush of love for his siblings swept through him. He would miss them and his four younger sisters, but there was more to life than the familiarity of their farm, the repetitive nature of his chores. Always curious, he'd listened with

eagerness to the Sunday School tales of far-off lands and heroic exploits.

He entered the kitchen, Mother's emerald-green eyes softening as she sighted him. "Harry, my love. You're up early."

"I need to talk to you and Father."

Her hand stilled on the teapot. Strands of silver streaked her copper hair tied at her nape, and lines creased the corners of her eyes, bearing witness to decades of hard work. After bearing nine children, seven still alive, her slender frame had softened, but she was still a beautiful woman, and Harry understood why Father loved her so.

"Your father has taken the mare to inspect the top paddock. He fears foxes have attacked the lambs overnight, but you can talk to me." She handed him a mug of tea and sat at the table opposite him.

He wrapped his hands around the mug and lifted his gaze to her. "I heard you and Father last night."

A pained look flickered across her face. "Then you'll know your decision grieves me."

Harry looked down, struggling to put his emotions into words. "I do. But this isn't just youthful rebellion. It's a yearning, Mother. A pull that I can't ignore."

"How will you support yourself in the city?"

"I'll work as a dockhand, or a labourer. I'm not afraid of hard work."

"I know that. You work as hard as your father and your grandfather before him, but your home's here, with us."

“You’ll always be my family, and my love for you will never dim, but I want more than this.”

When her expression crumpled, his chest hollowed. He reached out and covered her hand with his. “Mother, you’ve raised me to be a strong, resilient, God-fearing man, but I have this longing inside me to experience more of the world beyond this sheltered valley. Please let me go with your blessing.”

She searched his eyes, the weight of their history between them palpable. After a long, tense silence, her voice barely more than a whisper, she conceded, “If you have to go, I’ll give you my blessing, but I’ll pray every day for your return. You’re my firstborn, Harry, and you hold a special place in my heart.”

“I know, Mother, and I’ll always remember that. You and Father strived hard to build a home filled with love, and one day I hope I can do the same for my own family, but right now, I need to venture beyond Baker’s Run and this farm.”

“When will you leave?”

“Today.”

She jolted. “You can’t leave today! We need to say goodbye properly.”

“It will only be harder the longer I delay. I’ll attend to my chores this morning and take the afternoon train.”

“Oh, Harry. Come here and give me a hug.”

He stood and went to her, wrapping his strong arms around her. “I’ll always love you, Mother.”

“And I’ll always love you. May the Lord bless and keep you, my dear son.”

Harry went about his chores, excitement and nervousness churning his stomach.

When he entered the barn, the horses whinnied. “Shhh Kiva, it’s just me.” He stroked the mare’s neck. “I’m going to miss you, but Simon will look after you while I’m gone. He’s a good boy.” The horse whinnied again, as if understanding. “If I have time, I’ll take you for a ride before I go.”

He inhaled the sweet scent of the hay one last time as he fed and watered the horses.

By the time he returned to the homestead, all his siblings were seated around the table, and he felt their stares as he entered the room.

Seated at the head of the table, Father gave him a nod. “Harry.”

“Father.”

Six-year-old Ellie grabbed his arm. “You can’t leave. Who’s going to teach me to ride?”

An ache tore through him, but he stuffed it back inside. “Simon. He’s a better rider than me, anyway.” Harry winked at his sixteen-year-old brother as he sat between him and Ellie.

But his attempt at joviality did nothing to soften his brother’s stony expression.

Harry straightened and looked at his family. “I’ll come back, you know. I just need to do this. It’s not like I’m crossing the sea never to return. I’m only going to Sydney.”

“Can I come and visit?” Ellie piped up, her emerald-green eyes large and round.

Harry’s heart melted at her innocence. He patted her hand. “I’ll write when I get settled.”

Father cleared his throat and held out his hands. “Let’s give thanks so we can eat.”

They joined hands around the table, and as Father prayed, Harry stored the words in his heart, for who knew when next he would sit around this table?

“And lastly, Lord, we ask that You bless and keep Harry, may Your face shine upon him, and be gracious unto him. Lift up Your countenance upon him, and give him peace. In the blessed name of Your Son, we pray. Amen.”

Amens resounded around the table.

Mother had made all his favourites—poached eggs, bacon, roasted tomatoes, and scones with preserves she’d canned herself.

“Eat up and prepare for your journey.” She handed him a heaped plate and gave him a knowing look before she sat across from him.

He might have her blessing, and she might have put on a brave face, but she couldn’t hide the sadness in her eyes.

He’d need to leave as soon as possible otherwise his resolve could falter, and he’d live with regret for the rest of his life.

“Father will take you to Sale in the buggy,” she announced as she sipped her tea.

“Can I come?” Ellie asked, tipping her face to Father.

“I think we should all go,” ten-year-old Michael announced.

“Mother?” Simon’s twin sister Mary lifted her brow. “I’d like to buy some lace for my new dress. Baker’s Run doesn’t have what I want.”

Mother looked to Father, who shrugged. “A family outing sounds wonderful.”

Ellie clapped her hands. “Can I get a new doll?”

Harry ruffled her blonde hair. “I’ll buy you one as my parting gift.”

She leaned against him. “I’m going to miss you.”

His throat tightened. How much more guilt could she heap on him?

He kissed the top of her hair and breathed in the fresh floral scent, committing it to memory. “I’m going to miss you, too.”

At the station, just before he boarded, Mother pressed a worn leather Bible into his hands. “May this guide and comfort you on your journey, my dear boy.”

He hugged it close and held her gaze. “Thank you, Mother. I’ll treasure it always.”

With a final glance at his family, he boarded the train, ready to face whatever lay ahead.

Grab your copy [here](#)!

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About the Author

Juliette Duncan is passionate about writing true to life Christian romances that will touch her readers' hearts and make a difference in their lives. Drawing on her own often challenging real-life experiences, Juliette writes deeply emotional stories that highlight God's amazing love and faithfulness, for which she's eternally grateful.

Juliette lives in Brisbane, Australia. She and her husband have five adult children and eleven grandchildren whom they love dearly. When not writing, Juliette and her husband love exploring the great outdoors.

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