

Outback Danger Sample

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Chapter One

ALICE SPRINGS AIRPORT - 1988

The events of two weeks ago still dominated Mike Thompson's thoughts. Kept him awake at night. The yearning almost tangible.

But he still had a job to do. A visit to the air-traffic controller to make. And while his old friend would never understand, perhaps a chat would lighten Mike's mood.

But a movement in the cloudless expanse caught his eye. He stopped, melancholy lifting as two wedge-tailed eagles swooped, chased, touched, teased, dodged and returned to each other in an aerial mating dance. As captivating as any ballet performance.

At least they have a partner.

One finally banked to the right, the other in close pursuit as they sought the shelter of the Ilparpa Range. Beyond it the MacDonnell Range dominated the town and stretched hundreds of kilometres in each direction. Its crimson and ochre glow bleeding to a mauve blue as it reached the horizon, that harsh delineation between cobalt sky and

flat red plain that extended some 1,500 kilometres before reaching an ocean.

“Hi,” he called on reaching the top step, surprised that two men had already squeezed into the tiny control room. Men that two weeks ago had been part of the team, the three risking their lives.

One a fellow policeman. The other awaiting the weekly US Air Force C-5 Galaxy transport aircraft with its top-secret consignment for to the sprawling Pine Gap intelligence facility.

“Got an arrival time for me yet?”

“Not another bloody one.” The controller grinned; earphones casually draped around his neck. “Third to ask.”

Mike gazed out the large, 360-degree windows as his friend consulted his radio log, flight schedules and began calculating. A gaggle of parked planes sat in the general aviation area below. Further along the various maintenance, storage and operational hangars, including the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Then the main passenger terminal and the Jennair complex.

Now an important part of Mike’s life, he was frequently at the airport, flying in and out to the various Aboriginal communities scattered over an area of a million square kilometres. “If you’d been flying Ansett, you’d be a Platinum Frequent Flyer by now,” his boss had joked. “But there’s no free points when you fly with us.”

It was the taxiway that held a special place in Mike’s heart, memories of that fateful arrival so long ago. A memory even more poignant after he and Pam Griffiths had seized each other in that desperate embrace. A desperate embrace for survival. A desperate embrace that both hoped would last forever.

But there was always a barrier. A barrier that would always keep them apart.

“Your flight’ll arrive in about an hour.” Like a blunt axe, the controller’s voice severed Mike’s daydream.

Pam Griffiths was rostered off. Needed a distraction. Anything to erase the recurring vision of those desperate minutes when her and Mike’s lives were held in the balance. Not the terrifying moment itself. More importantly, its implications.

Catching up with her old Flying Doctor mates might dull the memory, she thought. But heading towards their hanger she noticed Mike walking along the apron. Her pulse raced as her eyes followed his path to the control tower, determined to once again breathe in his presence. She also knew the controller from her flying days and to an observer, a control tower visit would be as natural as visiting her flying nurse friends.

Pam was also surprised to find the control space cramped, the men’s banter relaxed, convivial.

“If we’ve all got an hour to fill in, how about a cuppa?” Mike spoke before anyone noticed Pam’s presence.

“No way you’ll get one here. You know there’s only one cup.”

Still unaware of Pam, the others chuckled.

“Just like you. Stingy to the last, you old bugger,” said Mike with a grin, turning to acknowledge the others’ smiles.

“Pam?” His gut sunk as a sheepish look swept away the smile. Replaced by confusion. By hidden elation. An awkward silence descended as everyone noted Pam’s mask matched that of Mike’s. A silence shattered by a loudspeaker bursting into life with a loud, crackly, hard to understand transmission.

The controller seized his microphone, his face now earnest.
 “Unidentified caller. This is Alice Springs tower. Say again. Over.”

Ears strained as the message repeated.

“It’s better to die with honour ... crackle ... crackle ... than live without it; Echo ... crackle ... crackle ... Alpha.”

His face a mix of intrigue, annoyance and concern, the controller demanded the mystery voice identify himself.

“Sounds like a crank. But you guys had better bugger off so I can track down what it’s all about.”

They nodded goodbye and with understanding smiles, slipped away.

“Strange message,” said Pam as they descended to the ground.

“If we wait at Jennair Airways, at least they’ll have more than one cup,” said Mike.

Pam joined the others and gossip continued as they strolled to Jenner Airways complex, the strange radio message all but forgotten.

A high-pitched roar drowned their conversation.

They turned their heads in unison.

A twin-engine plane approached, well beyond, but parallel with the runway. While a much later model, Mike’s body warmed at the sight. It was a Baron, the same model that had taken him to hospital after the Lake Peters accident.

Lake Peters. So much has happened since that fateful day.

But he was confused by the plane’s flightpath.

Even more confused when it made a sharp, ninety-degree turn.

“What the hell’s he doing?”

The incoming scream of engines.

The four stopped and stared.

"Something's wrong."

"He's crossing the runway!"

"Down!" yelled Mike. "Heading straight at us."

They threw themselves to the unyielding tarmac.

In a shallow dive and at maximum speed, the aircraft flew just a metre above their heads.

Chapter Two

FINKE RIVER DOWNS CATTLE STATION, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA - 1956

Thirty years earlier, to all on the vast cattle operation, the *Three Finkateers* appeared the best of mates. But appearances were deceiving. Friction always bubbled below the surface.

Mike Thompson and Allan Jenner were as if joined at the hip. Kurt Amsburg not so.

The broad-brimmed hats of two hid dishevelled nests of blonde. Allan's the product of Viking genes, the conquerors who settled the Irish town of Waterford. Kurt's was Aryan German.

Mike led the group up a slight rise, both he and Allan riding with the liquid grace of natural horsemen, as if they and their animals were one. Kurt was in constant battle with his mount.

Adrenaline surged through the two close friends' veins as they breathed in the challenge, eyes scanning the ground ahead.

Never keen on horses or adventure, Kurt trailed behind. His eyes lighting at a flock of pelicans. While fascinated by anything that flew, he found it hard to believe that pelicans would be so far inland. But Allan's father had explained that whenever the normally dry inland lakes finally flood, they provide a feeding frenzy for all manner of aquatic birds.

Planes! Flight! Birds! Kurt's only interests. His only dreams.

Bugger these peasants with their stinking horses and stupid cattle.

Mike's eyes narrowed on reaching the crest, fighting the distant glare of the water ahead. After the recent deluge, it was the first time in a generation that the rain over Lake Peters had overcome the sun's constant desiccation.

"There it is!" A grin of achievement slashed across his face as he turned back in Kurt's direction. "Hurry up! Taking forever."

The shout shook Kurt out of his daydream and he urged his mount forward.

Mike waved his hat as Kurt neared. No longer masking his face's copper glow, a sprinkling of red follicles glinted amongst the tangle of black. "Beat ya to it!"

"You're on!" cried Allan, the station owner's son.

"Hooshta!" cried Mike. Leaning forward, he dug his heels into his brumby's flanks, the beast's coarse mane scratching his cheek. "Come on, boy," he purred as he roused his mount to a gallop.

The challenge accepted; twelve hooves pounded the sun crusted red earth now reforming over the recent, gluggy mud.

They weaved and lurched, avoiding spiky spinifex clusters as Allan revelled in his mount's potential, his chestnut mare's breeding clear from the elegance of her stride.

"Bastards!" The blood of Kurt's Nazi grandfather swirled through his body as he grimaced at the self-assured way the others raced forward. Dust flew from his animal's rump as he flogged it with the ends of his reins. Vicious. Harder.

Allan gained ground, three lengths ahead on reaching a watercourse. A raging torrent two days ago, it was now just a series of waterholes linked by a slimy, clay-walled creek.

Kurt saw his chance as the bitterness burned his throat. From a family of counts, generals and bishops, he felt trapped here in the middle of nowhere.

Dust, heat, flies and peasants like Jenner. And then there's bloody Thompson! The murdering, sub-human bastard and his Abo mates just scum!

He could only take his frustrations out on his horse.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Yes!

He stopped attacking the animal and delved into his pocket. Extracting a clasp knife, his thumb fought its way between the handle and its folded marlin spike.

The round, sharp-pointed tool clicked open.

This'll teach you for killing my father.

Birds had begun their morning chorus and the pastel was colouring the nearby range as the aroma of frying steak and eggs fired Mike's appetite. He and his grandfather approached the homestead.

"What's ye matter?" Gramps Trevor asked, his Scottish accent unchanged since his arrival in Australia forty years before. "Ye looking down in the dumps."

"It's nothing."

"Don't be try'n to pull the wool over my old eyes. What's it be?"

"Just Kurt. Always trying to start a fight. Calling me Abo! Sub-human."

"Aye. A right little shite. Not only a Nazi like one of his grandfathers, but he's up himself too. Struts round like he's got a poker up his bum. Desperate to convince himself he'll inherit his other grandfather's title and their Lower Saxony estate in Krautland."

"But what can I do?"

"Get used to the fact that life's bloody hard. I had a lousy boyhood in Linlithgow, between Scotland's Glasgow and Edinburgh, and looking for a better life brought me here. But while we Scots are scattered over the world, we're never forget'n our roots, our clan. Never let'n anyone else define us. Never do'n anything half-hearted. An' neither should you. Put ye heart and soul into everything and good people'll judge you by what ye do. Not by ye origins."

"Ignore Kurt, you mean?"

"Couldn'a have said it better."

"But how?"

"E's not worth worrying about, laddie. Just enjoy everyone else's company. Forget the present. Think of the future."

They entered the homestead kitchen, its massive table the heart of the station. Mike wrapped his arms around mother Betty, her familiar comfort swamping the smell of grilled steak and eggs. While Mike lived

with Gramps Trevor in the Head Stockman's cottage, as the Jenners' housekeeper, Betty's quarters were a small alcove off the kitchen.

He grabbed an overfilled plate, fetched his cutlery from the sideboard and took his seat amongst the other key staff. There he rotated his plate to ensure the two eggs lay parallel to the table edge and adjusted the position of the steak to ensure it aesthetically balanced the baked bean pile. His knife and fork set at exact right angles, equidistant from the plate.

As usual, Kurt and his mother sat opposite, Kurt's constantly diverting his eyes from the others around the table.

"Love you, Gramps." Mike gave his grandfather a farewell hug as the old man and the others filed out at the end of the meal. Keen to commence their duties on the seven hundred square mile Finke River Downs Station owned by Allan Jenner's parents.

Mike stayed to help his mother prepare for the day.

As Betty washed each item, Mike's tea towel was close behind. Once dried, every plate, bowl, mug, pot and frypan was accurately aligned in place. Finally wiping her hands she caressed Mike's shoulder, pleased with his meticulous attention to detail. "As they taught at the mission, there's a place for everything and everything in its place."

It was an expression Betty drummed into him time and again. But never as frequently as Gramp's mantra that Mike was the equal of any man. That he should never shy away from whatever he wanted.

The three greatest lessons Mike would take through life.

An exciting life.

A life where Mike learned to ride and herd cattle, fascinated that the station was also a mini aviation operation. Allan's dad Lenny was both a cattle baron and an aviation entrepreneur, he and his airline's staff constantly flying back and forth from its Alice Springs headquarters.

With Mum's help finished, Mike gave a final hug and stepped outside, sucking in the rapidly warming air.

"Morning, Mista Mike." The mostly Aboriginal station hands, some from up to a thousand miles away, greeted him as they saddled their horses. Mike's silent smile returned the stockmen's greetings as he sniffed the sweet scent of waxy saddle soap.

Unlike Kurt who loathed them, Mike relished every moment with the Aboriginal ringers, lapping up every word of their dreamtime stories. But he not only learned the stockmen's stories. Betty's own Arrernte dreamtime became part of his very being. "But remember that away from the station, us mixed-blood people find it hard. Many whites like Kurt look down on us. And most full-blood Aboriginal people spurn us. But be proud of the cultures and beliefs of our three noble races. Your Arrernte, your Afghan and your Scottish ancestors. Always keep one foot firmly in the white man's world, and the other among the stories and songlines of your Arrernte lands, laws and customs."

Mike and Allan laughed their way to the small station school where Kurt Amsburg and his mother Selma stood waiting. The station's governess, Selma soon had the children busy despite the distraction of horses, cattle and planes, her job assisted by teachers from the School of the Air.

With great precision, Mike placed his exercise book and ruler at exact right angles to the wall and his two pencils precisely parallel with the edge of his book. Used to Mike's pedantic habits, Allan smiled inwardly at Mike's neatly arranged implements.

The voice of the School of the Air teacher came through the speaker from her own console eighty miles away in Alice Springs; welcoming children from cattle stations, mines, small hamlets, police stations, Aboriginal communities and roadhouses over a nine-hundred-mile radius. Both teacher and children asked questions as the arithmetic lesson progressed.

After the radio ‘sign off’, the day dragged on, claustrophobic hour following claustrophobic hour as the sun continued radiating the red earth outside.

“Two o’clock,” Selma announced. The students rushed outside, sucking in the now hot, pure air. The wide-open spaces beckoning.

“Rained cats and dogs last week.” Allan’s face lit with an adventurous grin, “Dad says it’s the first time he’s seen Lake Peters full of water. Pelicans and other birds all over the place. Reck’n we should take a peek.”

“Great,” Mike replied.

The invitation wasn’t necessarily intended for Kurt, but as the only other boy their age, Mike and Allan tolerated his company.

“God, they’re hopeless,” Kurt muttered, careful the others didn’t hear. “Thinking a lake full of water is something exciting. My German cousins use their private lake right through summer.” But the idea of the birdlife sparked his interest as the others raced to their steeds. His own boots raised dust as he shuffled to his horse, his mind swirling at Selma’s tales of his father’s grand family, its vast estates, its castle and forests.

Everyone should envy me. Be jealous of my noble family. But one day they’ll grovel when I’m rich and famous.

Mike ignored Kurt’s scowl, but despite his determination to explore the normally dry lake, in his usual pedantic manner he triple-checked his saddle before mounting.

“Hooshta!” He took the lead.

“What the heck’s this Hooshta about?” asked Allan on catching up.

“Grandad’s old call. Cameleer from a far-away place called Afghanistan.”

Chapter Three

LAKE PETERS, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

“Come on, girl.” Allan stoked his mare’s right flank as the creek’s rust-coloured water raced closer. “You can do it!”

With a mighty leap, they cleared the stream and continued forward.

Mike galvanised his own animal for the jump.

Kurt saw his opportunity and whipped his mount even harder.

“Come on, you bitch. Closer to that bloody father-killer.”

Neck to neck, they approached the watercourse.

“Closer, you bugger!” Kurt yanked on one rein, turning his horse to Mike’s.

Equine thigh rubbed equine thigh, saddle almost touching saddle.

Oblivious to Kurt’s actions, Mike urged his own horse on. Muscles and tendons tightened. A compressed spring, ready to leap.

Kurt then jerked his other rein and turned from the obstacle. A gap appeared as the animals disengaged.

“Take this, you murdering bastard.” With a backward swing, Kurt jabbed the pointed marlin spike into the rump of his rival’s horse. It bellowed, muscles quivering as their power evaporated. Leap aborted; it lurched forward. Front hooves cut through the red crust, skidding through the wet, soft clay beneath.

Mike cart-wheeled through the air.

A sickening crack.

“Shit!” His face contorted. “My bloody leg!”

He reached down to investigate, wincing at his thigh angled to the left. Then he felt it; a hard, bony point projecting from the skin. Spasms wrenched his body as he slipped deeper into the quagmire, unaware of Kurt’s malicious grin.

Get a grip!

He commanded his fingers to dig into the muddy embankment, his one good leg unable to halt his slide into the muddy ooze.

A flurry of legs and neighs but without broken bones, Mike’s horse struggled to stand. It pawed itself upright, turned and bolted for the homestead.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get help,” yelled Kurt, avoiding the other’s eyes. “Not that you deserve it. You can’t do anything right, can you, Thompson? It’s lucky you didn’t break its leg. But I never expect anything from a mongrel like you.”

As Kurt turned his horse and casually rode back to the homestead, Mike’s body slithered deeper and deeper into the slime.

“Can’t get a hold.”

Horror swept Allan’s face at Mike’s pleading eyes.

He flew off his saddle, raced to the creek bank and in near panic, grabbed Mike’s hand. But despite straining his young muscles to their limit, he couldn’t stop the inevitable slide.

“Pull harder!” Mike’s voice pleaded.

“Just bloody hold on!”

Mike doubled his efforts and together they fought the unrelenting pull of the ooze. Pain ravaged Mike’s body, but despite their efforts he floundered lower and lower, his face sinking ever closer to the water’s surface.

Allan realised the futility of trying to haul Mike from the sludge. He raced to his saddlebag and grabbed a rope.

“Go’n under!” Mike’s gurgled cry was muffled by water lapping his lips.

“One more sec.” Allan tied the rope to his saddle’s pommel and ran back to the creek.

Mike struggled to shout but his mouth was now under the surface. With only his nose clear, he spluttered to expel the fetid water.

“I’m here!” Allan knelt over the edge, forcing his own face into the foul liquid.

He dived into the putrid water, groping for the armpit of the gradually sinking body. Feeding the rope between Mike’s arm and body, he fumbled further, forcing it behind Mike’s back and under his other arm.

Surfacing, he spat out the muddy filth, tied off the line and urged his horse backwards.

Mike began to move, dragged against the ever-gripping sludge. His eyes, lips and teeth welded together as rope cut into flesh. The fire that had raged through Mike’s thigh now engulfed his entire torso. He passed out from the pain.

Finally on firm ground, Allan dragged Mike’s unconscious body to the shade of a desert oak. Feeble and wheezing for breath, he too collapsed next to his friend.

Seeing the riderless horse galloping towards the airstrip, Gramps Trevor raced for a first aid kit and was in the battered Jeep before Kurt reached the homestead. He forced the accelerator to the floor and the old vehicle bashed, lurched and bounced along the almost non-existent track.

Movement from under a tree caught his eye. Allan frantically waving. Then more movement; Mike raising his head.

Relief washed over Gramps as he assessed the shallowest point. Grating the levers into low-range and four-wheel-drive, he accelerated up the other bank. First aid kit in hand, he was out of the vehicle before it stopped.

“Hold on, laddie.” Trevor’s reassuring voice contrasted with the fear flaming his eyes. He checked Mike’s breathing and pulse. “T” will soon be over.”

He applied a pressure bandage to slow the blood and pulled Mike’s thighbone, straightening the distorted limb. Then a splint. It was the best Gramps could do to limit the grating of bone on bone during the torturous drive back to the airstrip.

The pain unbearable, Mike again passed out again.

At the homestead, Anne Jenner injected morphine from the medical chest provided to all remote communities. As its silk-like tentacles engulfed Mike’s body, she called the Royal Flying Doctor Service, re-dressed and re-splinted his wound.

An hour later the distinctive drone of a Jenner Airway’s Beechcraft Baron penetrated Mike’s groggy, drug filled psyche. On charter to the Flying Doctor, sun glinted off its wing as it banked to the left and landed from the east.

Willing hands helped the flight nurse secure Mike’s stretcher.

“Lay back and enjoy the flight.” She rested her hand on his shoulder. “We’ll have you right as rain in no time.”

But Mike neither laid back nor enjoyed the flight.

No way Kurt'll ever get the better of me again.

Chapter Four

OLYMPIC GAMES, MELBOURNE, VICTORIA - 1956

Twelve hundred miles away, Pam Forbes' bandicoot squealed. Working in her home-based animal hospital she nodded in satisfaction. Its leg was healing. Rescued from a rabbit trap on an uncle's farm, with Mum's guidance she was guiding it back to health.

"Almost finished."

Next an inspection of a magpie's once broken wing. A laugh of delight as the bird took tentative flight. Despite his own affliction, father Val had built an aviary.

Treatments finished, she ran to her dad, an infectious smile lighting her always inquisitive face. "Ready!"

Val followed her down the street with a calculated gait, a gait only noticeable to a careful observer. Out of sight in his Gladstone bag, his folding white cane was only brought out on the rarest occasions. He strove to live as if fully able.

Pam jumped into the tram and leant forward. "Your hand, Dad. I'll help."

Val gave an indulgent smile. "Fine, thanks dear." Getting on and off the tram was a daily occurrence as he travelled to and from work at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind.

Today was no workday but their third visit to the Olympic Games. Unable to see the events, Val still revelled in the experience, breathing in the atmosphere as his daughter stared in wonder. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Pummelled, pushed and shoved by the good-natured occupants, they weaved their way through the crowded green and cream tram to a slatted timber seat.

"Enjoying the Games?"

"Loved the athletics yesterday. Glad I missed my ballet class."

A change of trams brought them to the new Olympic pool on the grassy banks of the Yarra River which meanders through the city.

"We've been lucky. The Institute received free tickets to the water polo finals, Hungary against the Soviet Union."

Closeted in a remote training camp a month ago, the Hungarian team were unaware of their fellow countrymen's uprising. Of their battle with only a few rifles against the tanks of a fully equipped Soviet Army. Learning of the Soviet invasion after their arrival in Australia, they were outraged.

The atmosphere was electric, animosity surging through the largely Hungarian immigrant crowd. Pam gripped her father's arm, terrified at each team's abuse and the crowd's barrage of insults.

Hungary led throughout the match.

Pam gasped towards the end as a Russian punched the eyebrow of an unsuspecting Hungarian. Her stomach churned at the sight of the victim's blood trail as he stroked to the edge of the pool.

The abuse was deafening.

Pam's heart went out to the injured swimmer, as if the wounded player's pain was her own. Apart from her bandicoot and magpie, she'd never seen an injury.

Engulfed in an innate, uncontrollable need, she jumped from her seat. With a windmill of gangly arms, she charged down the aisle to give solace to the bleeding athlete.

Mayhem erupted as Pam reached the last step, the crowd surging onto the concourse.

Swept up into the amoebic mass of incensed spectators, Pam lurched from yelling body to yelling body, her tiny frame unnoticed beneath the shoulders of the angry mob. Terrified, her cries went unheard as she was inadvertently shoved and elbowed by the abusing pack.

While the crowd was oblivious to Pam's cries, Val heard her screams.

"I'm coming!" His voice tried to compete with the crowd as his fingers felt the line of seatbacks and stepped into the aisle. Feeling forward with his feet, he navigated step by step to the rioting mass.

"Pam!" he screamed as he weaved his way towards her shrieks, his slim, sightless body making slow headway through the agitated horde.

"Here!" Pam shouted even louder as she was accidentally pushed to the ground. Above her, a sea of legs, torsos and agitated fists.

Val forced his way deeper into the fracas until he too was knocked to the floor.

Police charged into the arena to subdue the uproar, but the Hungarians were not easily quietened. More police swarmed into the mass, finally separating the opposing groups.

With a minute remaining, the match was abandoned, Hungary declared winners. Immediately the mood changed, Val's cries unable to compete with the cheers exploding through the stadium. Spectators jumped, danced and shouted at the Hungarian National Anthem.

Of the past and of the future! You brought our ancestors up over the Carpathians' holy peaks. By you was won a beautiful homeland

Joyous cries continued, drowning out those of the father and daughter now cringing in foetal positions at their feet.

Someone finally noticed them both. Bruised and battered, they were helped to the first aid station, a screaming siren then racing them to the Royal Melbourne Hospital. While Val was found to be only bruised and sore, it took morphine to relieve Pam's agony.

Heavy boots had unknowingly stamped on Pam's left hand, crushing her two smallest fingers. Taken to theatre, the surgeons only option was to amputate the two mangled digits.

Ready for discharge, Pam looked up to her father, her forehead creased, confusion in her eyes. "Why were the Russians so nasty to the people of Hungary?" The Soviet swimmer's action had offended her youthful sense of black and white. Her sense of fairness. Her innate understanding of right and wrong.

Val's face winced. Unable to explain geopolitics in a way comprehensible to his daughter, he changed the subject. "You were such a brave girl; I'll pop down to the kiosk to buy an ice cream."

Pam sat quietly, twisting a lock of hair with her one good hand, determined that like her father's blindness, her missing fingers would never be a hindrance to whatever she wished to do.

Val's return interrupted her thoughts and Pam began devouring her icy treat. Rotating the cone in her one good hand, she concentrated to prevent the melting treat dripping down to her fingers.

Blissfully unaware of what lay ahead.

Chapter Five

ALICE SPRINGS, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA - 1960

Four years later, torsion-bar tension froze Kurt's shoulders, his fingernails burying deep onto his palms as he entered the high school principal's office. Despite his aristocratic heritage and his contempt that Alice Springs' whites being little more than peasants, fear always struck in the presence of any authority figure. A fear born beyond his time at Finke River Downs. By the monster who'd forced his penis down his mouth, Kurt choking as the appendage pushed deeper and deeper. "Suck!" the brute had shouted, his grip on Kurt's ears almost pulling them from his head. "Suck harder, you piss-weak little cunt!" Then even greater horror as Kurt's shorts were ripped off. Bum exposed, he was forced over the edge of a table.

While there was no similarity between the kindly principal and the brute of his boyhood, Kurt's phobia remained.

"I want to be a world-famous test pilot," Kurt managed to blurt out.

"You'll need university maths and physics for that, but you're making little progress. You need to try harder."

"But my marks will improve," Kurt would claim. They never did, convinced his teachers were jealous of his aristocratic family and conspired to lower his results.

But his delusions of grandeur nowhere near matched his ability.

Although floundering in most subjects, he thrived on anything German. Excelling in German language classes and spending endless hours studying German history. But it was in the beliefs of his grandfather that he took particular interest, poring over every book in the school and town library about Hitler and his Nazi philosophy.

Bastards want me to fail but that won't stop me being top of the heap.

Following Hitler's approach, he built a gang to terrorise the vulnerable kids, basking in being the school bully. His loyal gaggle never questioned an order.

"Torment the smaller kids who can't fight back. Pick on the Greeks, Italians, Poms, Asians and Abos."

His mother got wind of his bullying.

"Kurt, this is a small town. Everyone must get on together, regardless of race."

"But why are we here at the end of the earth? Why didn't we stay on the family estates?"

"Your father preached peace and goodwill to all, his vocation to spread the word of the Lord."

"My father might've been a pastor, but your farther was a Nazi."

“It’s why I stayed here when he returned to Germany to join the SS at Auschwitz. But we don’t talk of that now. The war, the Nazis and the SS are long gone.”

“Just because I was born here doesn’t mean I have to think like everyone else. That I can’t believe in the Nazi ideals. The Asians and Abos are all Untermensch. All sub-human. If Hitler was in power here, he’d exterminate the lot.”

“Kurt! Eighty million people died because of that madman’s fanatical ideas. Forget my father. Just remember your own father’s teachings of peace and love.”

Selma swept to the privacy of her bedroom, tears cascading, despairing that her own father’s legacy had passed down to her son. Reliving the heartache of husband Carl’s cruel heart attack so early in life, half-way through Mike Thompson’s christening. Her face softened as she recalled the happy years they’d worked together. Long but satisfying hours at the Hermannsburg Mission bringing healthcare, education and the word of the Lord to a flock mostly spurned by their traditional families.

Then emptiness returned, the vacuum of a life without Carl. Grief that soured, churning her gut at the nightmare that followed. Working for the alcoholic cattle station owner who terrorised his wife, abused Selma and worst of all, she found attempting to rape Kurt. She’d heard his screams and running to help, she’d grabbed the man’s rifle and found Kurt bent over a table. Naked. The brute had his pants around his ankles, about to force his way into her son. All reason lost, she lowered the rifle, chambered a round and shot at the man’s engorged

penis. Blood spurted as he screamed in agony, his member half-blown away.

Without an ounce of sympathy, she left him writhing on the ground, grabbed Kurt, shot out his truck's tyres and drove his only other vehicle to the refuge of the Hermannsburg Mission.

As Mission neighbours, the Jenners became aware of the situation and provided Finke River Downs as their sanctuary.

And now with the help of excellent references from Lenny Jenner, she rented a small house in the Alice Spring suburb of Gillen and obtained a teacher's aide job at the School of the Air.

Stability at last.

Kurt stomped into her bedroom. "It's not fair. Allan's at school with Adelaide's rich kids. I should be at a school like that near our family estate in Germany. And anyway, why do I have to put up with that Abo all the time?" As usual, Kurt avoided eye contact, Mike Thompson remaining his bitter enemy.

"Don't speak like that, Kurt. Your father's sacrifice improved the lives of the original inhabitants of this land. Your words insult all he held dear."

"An insult to my father? I might be more like him if he'd lived longer but that bloody Thompson killed him. And you expect me to be his friend?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Mike had nothing to do with your father's death.

"If it wasn't for Dad's heart attack during Thompson's christening, he'd still be alive. We could all be living in the family castle. He's the reason we're stuck here in the middle of nowhere."

"You've been told time and again that your uncle inherited the title and the von Amsburg estate. In turn, so will your cousin. If you ever

go to Germany, you'll be just an embarrassing relative from the other side of the world. No claim on the family or the estate."

"Just wait. One day I'll be like them. Rich and powerful. So respected by the von Amsburg family, they'll welcome me with open arms."

Chapter Six

ALICE SPRINGS

On ANZAC Day, four years after the Lake Peters incident, Mike Thompson marched down Todd Street. Pride in every step, his father's war medals pinned to his right chest.

A father he never met. A father he would never see.

His Scouts troop followed World War 2 veterans in civilian dress, uniformed Army Reservists and airmen from the US Air Force's Detachment 421, one of Alice Springs two US intelligence facilities. He smiled at Gramps Trevor and Betty as he passed, and despite their red-sore hands, their clapping reached a crescendo.

Neither saw Kurt standing 200 yards away, his mocking sneer at Mike's small collection of medals. Contemptuous that Mike's father had been a mere private.

"E's becoming a fine laddie," said Gramps Trevor, the delight in his grandson obvious to all.

"Certainly is." Betty's face beamed at the compliment.

But as proud as she was of Mike, the annual day of remembrance brought back the nightmare of that fateful telegram. That Roy had died in New Guinea, fighting a potential Japanese invasion.

We spent so little time together. Never saw your son.

For months she'd collapsed into the depths of denial, anger and depression over her husband's death.

"I won't have you stay in the church-run boarding house. I'll move into town too." Betty insisted when Mike also moved to high school in Alice Springs. And like Selma, Lenny Jenner helped with their move to the small outback town.

"I've given you an excellent reference Betty. Normally the Native Affairs Branch would house you to Rainbow Town for the mixed blood, Afghan and Asian families. But I've pulled a few strings and they've given you a modern, cement-sheet house in Warburton Street."

"I know the area well." Betty's face lit with excitement, pleased at a house in the leafy suburb of Old Eastside. "When I returned from Port Augusta during the war, that area was one vast, tented camp for troops on their way to defend the north."

"Alice's certainly changed since those days," Lenny replied. "Our old shantytown of a few hundred people has long gone."

"Not many of the old, corrugated iron buildings left. Modern houses are springing up everywhere between the ranges. But I think I'd rather have the old days."

"Over five thousand living here now." Lenny coughed in preparation to changing the subject. "I've also organised an interview for the housekeeper's job at The Residency, the District Officer's home."

Betty's generous bust almost burst on being given the position and soon she was cooking, cleaning and washing; her workload varying according to the number of visiting officials. Each day she strode across

the footbridge to the town centre, an honour to work in the town's most important building.

While Betty easily settled into her new town life, Mike found the change far more challenging.

He'd been baffled on arriving in Alice Springs.

As long as they pitched in, everyone was respected at Finke River Downs. So why do some look down on me here in town?

He shuddered at the memory of his first school day, cringing from taunts, insults and foul play. Kurt's gang constantly conniving to make his life a misery.

"Stay strong!" Betty warned. "Stay proud of your past. Your three noble families. Your heart is buried in this country. The stars, the spirits, the rocks, the rivers and trees all embrace you. Will always protect you."

While grateful for his mother's support, he missed Gramps and his many stories, Trevor's advice echoing over and over. "Ye'll be good as any man and better than most. And while there'll always be challenges, always remember people will ultimately judge ye by what you do, not by the circumstances of ye birth."

He pined for his old cattle station world, convinced he'd never fit into town life or adhere to the rules set by Betty's circle of cousins. "Keep busy or you'll get inta' trouble. 'N'if you do, we'll make sure ya regret it. Do ya best. Keep ya self busy. Stay out'a trouble."

Determined to not disappoint his extended family, Mike strove to excel in all that lay ahead, to become as good as any man and better than most. He played football, joined the Scouts, took up boxing at the Wills Terrace Youth Centre and played basketball with the US airmen from their seismic intelligence facility.

The compulsory swimming program began two weeks after starting school. His heart raced as he lined up with his classmates, his face a mask of fear. The nightmare of the ever-constricting Lake Peters' mud never went away.

His legs refused to move.

"What's the matter, Blackie?" Kurt's jeer was loud enough for the kids to hear, but not the teachers. "Afraid of a little water?"

It was all Mike needed. He'd rather relive the muddy waterhole nightmare than pander to Kurt's taunts. He took a deep breath. And jumped.

Engulfed. No control.

Then air again.

The pool didn't trap him. No vice-like sludge.

He searched for Kurt's eyes, his with their own tale. A tale of success. Of renewed contempt.

In years to come, he came third and then second in the school's swimming championships.

Tired of Kurt's bullying towards the end of his last school year, Mike sought help from his boxing coach.

"Don't worry about it, boy," the instructor said. "I'll soon have you ready for anything." Mike took in every one of his instructor's instructions.

Weeks later, Mike heard a cry from behind the blockhouse-style school building. "Stop! Please stop!"

Racing to help, he found Kurt and his henchmen bullying a first-year student from an Italian family. The younger brother of Mike's best friend.

"Abo lover! Abo lover! Bloody bastard Abo lover."

"God, you're a prick Amsburg! Leave the poor kid alone."

"What's it to you, you mongrel?"

"Just like you to hide behind your pack of goons. Haven't the guts to torment someone your own age."

"Such as you?"

"If necessary."

"We could mash you to pulp." A sneer swept Kurt's face as he spat at the ground.

"You and your thugs probably could. But too gutless to do it yourself."

"Me? Too gutless to fight an , a subhuman like you?"

"Gutless."

Two teachers appeared and the kids scattered.

"It doesn't end here," Kurt taunted. "I'll slaughter you after school. Bet you won't turn up."

Mike's jaw muscles strained all afternoon as boring lesson followed boring lesson.

What the hell have I got myself into?

But Gramps Trevor's words swamped his fears. "As good as any man, better than most."

Then it was time.

No time to back down now!

Towering red boulders of ANZAC Hill stood on one side of the school's road to Wills Terrace, stately gums lining the dry Todd River

on the other. Between lay an expansive oval, its irrigation system in a constant battle with the parching sun.

Word spread like wildfire, and pushing and shoving, crowds swarmed to the confrontation. The mood electric.

Ignoring his adversary, Mike removed his jumper, folded it neatly and placed it next to his backpack. Both edges straight in line.

Kurt stepped forward, two inches taller and heavier than Mike. But much was fat.

Mike danced closer. Nimble. Wiry.

“Not hiding behind your thugs?”

Kurt’s eyes flared. “I don’t need help to take on a nobody like you.”

“Come then. What’re you waiting for?”

“You’re on! I’ll beat you to pulp,” Kurt blustered, expecting Mike to make his escape.

But Mike stood his ground.

“Show me!”

It was too much. Kurt’s eyes blazed, his face fury red as he put his entire weight into the swing that targeted Mike’s nose. An unstoppable punch.

But Mike weaved aside, no longer where the blow was directed.

Kurt staggered off balance. His arm flew wide, his side exposed.

Mike turned in an instant and a series of short, sharp jabs pounded into Amsburg’s ribs. His last an uppercut to Kurt’s jaw.

Kurt’s head reverberated like the Hermannsburg church bell. Dazed, confused, disoriented to his very core. Felt as if there was a gaping hole in his ribs. Knees like jelly, he crumpled to the ground.

A cheer erupted as Kurt’s mob stood sullen. Leaderless. In shock.

Mike waited.

Still no movement.

His face alight, he picked up his things and ambled away, desperate to hide the pain pulsating up his arm.

“Don’t just stand there!” Kurt shrieked. “Flatten the bastard!” Finally galvanised into action, Kurt’s eight thugs attacked Mike from behind. Obscenities echoed off the hillside as punches and kicks rained into Mike’s ribs and face.

The crowd roared in disgust, surging forward and pulled the attackers from their victim.

Fearing their growing anger, Kurt’s mob stumbled an escape.

Mike winced as the crowd helped him up, praising his stance.

Despite a limp arm, his fist afire and his ribs screaming, a grin stretched from ear to ear.

He’d finally floored Kurt.

More importantly, everyone had cheered.

Chapter Seven

ROYAL MELBOURNE HOSPITAL, VICTORIA - 1963

Three years after the Alice Springs fight, Pam Forbes fought the stench of a patient's faeces as she made her way to the pan room. Her face like thunder.

Inspired by her mother, she was in the second year of her nurse training and between periods of formal lectures was a 'dogsbody', serving the ward's twelve patients.

She'd been frantic since her 6.00 a.m. start and unpleasant odours were part of daily life.

"God, this hangover's shit!" she growled to her fellow worker, commanding her body to hold down the bile that demanded to erupt from her toxin-filled stomach.

Now a trainee nurse, Pam lived in the nurses' home of the Royal Melbourne Hospital where she bonded with five other nurse trainees. Following their fun influence, her once sheltered life was a thing of the past.

The night before had started simply enough.

"Welcome, girls." The publican at the Crimean Hotel gave his well-rehearsed smile, fully aware they were below the 21-year-old drinking age. But the engaging, animated girls were an asset, a magnet for his beer-guzzling male patrons. "What'll it be?"

"Beers all round." Pam turned to her mates. "Only half an hour. Time for some serious Six O'clock Swill drinking."

All were in a happy, alcohol-fuelled frame of mind by closing.

"Two rough reds." Heather ordered a couple of bottles from the bottle counter and light of step; they cavorted their way to Lygon Street.

"What're we feeling like?" Joan was already somewhat inebriated.

"Italian?" Pam waved her hand in the direction of Angelinos, a converted bakery.

With the flood of post-war European migrants, Melbourne's eating habits had changed. A sea of new, inexpensive bistros, coffee shops, cafes, pizza shops, Italian and Greek restaurants were overtaking the Carlton area.

A cute, accented waiter explained the menu, Pam's face reddening as he took in her cleavage.

So what!

"The lasagne al forno." Accepting she wasn't a stunning beauty; Pam was comfortable that her not unattractive face was always dominated by an engaging smile. She fluttered her eyelashes. "I've never tried it before."

They ate a variety of pasta dishes; all washed down with their wine. Feeling in a cosmopolitan mood, they finished with tiramisu and cappuccinos, both the rage.

“There’s a party at Bill Jackson’s in Fitzroy,” said Margaret. “Everyone in?”

“Try and keep me away,” said Pam, her ballet training evident by her elegant, purposeful stance.

There was a sadness in the run-down terrace houses in Fitzroy’s Brunswick Street and there were only a dozen people at Bill’s on their arrival. But the crowd soon grew to over fifty noisy, intoxicated guys and girls. With affordable recreational drugs still uncommon, they got high on alcohol and LP records. The Beatles and Rolling Stones played non-stop. Some couples slunk off to explore their mutual attraction while the rest drank to excess, gyrated and danced until exhausted; their larynxes hoarse from talking over the incessant noise.

Concealing her damaged left hand, Pam chatted to two recent Melbourne University engineering graduates. “We’ll work for a year to raise some cash,” said one, “then I’m off to travel and work around Australia. Ted’s off to the UK by ship for a two-year working holiday.”

Living in the Carlton area, Pam thought herself both cosmopolitan and adventurous, but hearing of the guy’s plans, she realised what a sheltered life she’d led. “Perhaps there’s a wide world out there for me too.”

“Bloody oath! Sure is,” agreed the lads. “Fun and adventure everywhere. All for the taking.”

Midnight came and went, and the nurses’ home was locked. The Grey Ogre, the home’s supervisor, would be lurking the corridors seeking latecomers to discipline.

The partying continued.

At 5.30, the girls slunk into the main hospital foyer and headed for the basement mechanical services area, where a corridor led to the nurses' home.

Like a squad of soldiers, they crept down the dark passageway as if through an enemy-infested jungle. As forward scout, Pam poked her head around each corner. Margaret followed as 'rear end Charlie'. All fearful of an Ogre-launched ambush.

Their heads throbbed, thunderous machinery magnifying the alcoholic poundings in their skulls. Step by step, they snuck forward.

Into a trap?

Eyes scanned for anything out of place. Ears for any unexpected sounds.

Then something ahead.

Movement in a shadowy corner.

Everyone froze. The end of their nursing careers flashed through their minds.

A figure appeared from behind a piece of machinery.

Caught?

"Hi, girls." It was a man's voice. "Had a good night?"

Pam sniggered.

"Had an early call-out for the boiler. Lucky it's me that found you, not that nurses' home tyrant. Hope the hangovers won't be too bad."

Each girl touched the man's arm as they passed, a silent thanks.

Pam crept up the fire stairs, still fearful of an ambush.

She peered into the foyer.

Empty.

She signalled the others to stop until she reconnoitered the hallway.

The coast was clear.

Giggling like a bunch of five-year-olds, they ran to their rooms. One slipped on the shiny, vinyl floor, bursting into laughter. “Shush!” they cried, their voices even louder than the laughter.

Pam’s quick shower did little to settle the hammering in her head the next morning, the turmoil in her stomach. “A nice greasy breakfast?” a fellow nurse asked.

“Not on your Nellie! Just an Alka-Seltzer.”

The shift was busy, made almost endless by her self-inflicted wounds and at the end of the shift, she collapsed like a sodden rag doll. But despite her weariness, her mind wandered, the young engineer’s plans swirling round and round.

She envisaged her own world of travel. Adventure beyond the se-date city of Melbourne.

She couldn’t wait to finish her training.

And then where?

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