

BLOOD IN THE DUST

BILL SWIGGS

ZAFFRE

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*This book is for my mother and father,
Joan and Robert Swiggs*

The Colony of Victoria, Australia, 1853

The two boys came up along the spine of the spur where the last of the cleared land gave way to verdant bush. The older one carried the musket slung over his left shoulder and plodded along behind his brother who was armed with a long spear that he used to probe at the ground as they walked. On a patch of dirt among the dried grass he found what they were looking for.

‘Here, Toby! He came this way.’

Toby O’Rourke squatted in the shadowed undergrowth and traced his fingers around the paw print. The marks left by the dog’s claws were plain to see and Toby lifted his face in the direction the animal had gone, towards the rocky ridges below the first sweeping rise of the escarpment. He had been afraid of that, even though he suspected it all along.

‘What do you reckon, Pad? Is this the bugger?’

‘Could be,’ Paddy murmured, glancing down for a moment. ‘It’s big enough to be him. Got a lair up among those rocks, I reckon.’ He shifted the spear to his other hand as he spoke and looked to where the backbone of the ranges stood against a perfect sky.

Toby nodded and looked at the print again. Here in the shadows the dirt still held moisture from the night dew, but the edges of the print had dried enough to crack and crumble. He pressed his thumb into the soil and studied the outline it left, comparing it with the one left by the dingo.

‘About three hours ago. We haven’t come across any feathers since the chook pen. He’s headed home for sure.’ He stood and

followed his brother's gaze, the Lovell musket heavy in his hand. 'Once he gets onto rocky ground it won't be easy to track him.'

'Ma will throw a blue fit if he gets any more of her chooks,' Paddy said. 'This is the fifth time this month he's raided the pen.'

'He's got a taste for chicken all right,' Toby agreed. He shouldered the musket and pointed uphill. 'Lead the way, Pad.'

Paddy moved off into the bush, his long spear held at the ready. Toby followed his brother's back and neither spoke for almost an hour, not until they had climbed to within fifty paces of the ridge line. Here, the bushland thinned out and a group of tumbledown boulders, as large as cottages, sat in the warm sun. Paddy stopped in the shade of one of the boulders and took the canteen from around his neck. He drank thirstily and then handed it to his brother.

Toby took several mouthfuls and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. 'He must have come this way. Let's scout about a bit and see if we can pick up his spoor between the boulders.' He handed the canteen back to Paddy.

'Toby?'

'Yeah?'

Paddy pointed at the Lovell in his brother's hand. 'If we corner the bugger, do you think I could take the shot?'

Toby shook his head. 'You know how Pa feels about you using the Lovell. I wasn't allowed to touch it until I turned sixteen.'

'I'll be sixteen in a couple of months,' Paddy shot back. 'It's time I started learning how to shoot.'

'More like eight months. If Pa found out he'd skin us alive. It's one of his strictest rules.'

Paddy looked down at the ground, pouting. 'You've been using the gun for three years now and all I get is a spear. It's not fair.'

'But you're good with a spear, Paddy. Better than I ever was. We have to find the dingo before anyone gets to have a go at him anyway – with spear or gun.'

‘Fine,’ Paddy said. He shouldered his spear and moved away between the boulders.

Toby watched him go and shook his head, then turned to explore the ground in the opposite direction. He hadn’t gone more than five paces before a low whistle stopped him. Turning, he doubled back and found his brother crouched between two rocks.

‘This is the mongrel.’ Paddy pointed at several paw prints in the dust between the boulders. Then he lifted a white feather from the ground and waved it under Toby’s nose.

‘He still has the chook in his mouth. I think you’re right about his lair, Pad. Better let me take the lead.’ Toby pulled the musket’s hammer to full cock and moved off.

The tracks followed a well-worn path between the boulders, heading high along the ridge. They disappeared on rocky ground near the top, but Toby crossed the stony patch and found another print on the far side of the ridge. Here, the dingo had changed direction, traversing the high ground to their right.

Without ever really knowing how, Toby felt they were close to their quarry. He turned and held a finger to his lips. Paddy gave a curt nod and Toby started forward again, travelling more slowly, mindful of where he put his feet.

The backbone of the ridge ended abruptly at a twenty-foot drop. Fifty paces away it rose again in a series of giant steps and continued on. Toby looked down into the space between, into a mess of boulders and stunted vegetation. The dog had somehow found its way down and as Toby started to look for a way to do likewise, Paddy tapped his shoulder and pointed. Toby followed the direction of his finger and saw a small patch of vivid white, out of place amongst the earthy tones of granite and bushland. It took him a moment before he realised it was a mess of white feathers, the remains of his mother’s chicken. Next to it was a flash of yellow and he could see the dingo, almost blending into the background. The dog stood in the

shadow of an overhanging boulder, head held high as it sniffed the air. Paddy's fingers dug deep into Toby's shoulder.

As slowly as possible, Toby raised the Lovell and took aim. The dingo moved, turned, sniffed the wind. It sensed danger, but the boys were downwind and their scent had not carried to the animal. Toby tightened his finger on the trigger, but the dog moved behind a rock and was mostly hidden from view. Then it climbed onto the rock and turned in their direction, at last seeing the two brothers on the ridge.

Toby fired as the dog moved, the butt of the Lovell thudding into his shoulder as a cloud of gun smoke billowed. When it cleared the dingo was unhurt, twisting and turning around boulders as it sprinted in the opposite direction.

Paddy ran forward and let his spear fly in a high arc. It reached its zenith and plummeted towards the ground. A good throw, at least sixty yards, the distance helped by Paddy's vantage point on the ridge. The spear struck the ground two feet to the dog's right, the fire-hardened tip shattering against the rocks.

Toby dropped to one knee and opened the ammunition pouch slung around his neck. He pulled out a fresh cartridge, tore it open with his teeth, poured the fine grains of gunpowder into the barrel of the Lovell and followed it with a musket ball in a wad of cloth. With speed garnered through practice, he slid the loading rod from beneath the barrel and tamped the load. As he slid the rod back home with one hand, the other was already placing a cap onto the firing nipple. Then he had the hammer at full cock again and aimed at the yellow shadow dashing between the rocks.

The dingo reached the far rise and started its climb, leaping from boulder to boulder. The animal was tiring, but it still carried too much speed for Toby to have a clean shot.

'Take him, Toby,' Paddy urged. 'You can do it.'

Toby watched the dingo climb higher and higher, following every movement with the front sight.

‘C’mon, Toby! Take the shot!’

There was such an edge of excitement in his brother’s voice that Toby glanced up at him. Paddy’s gaze followed the dingo intently and it took him several moments to realise Toby was holding the musket towards him.

‘You take the shot, Pad.’

Paddy blinked uncertainly, not taking his eyes off the gun. ‘But what about the rules?’

‘You’re nearly sixteen. C’mon, do you want to take the shot or not?’

Paddy hesitated for a heartbeat, then he took the Lovell from Toby and mimicked his posture, crouching down on one knee.

‘Don’t fire yet,’ Toby warned. ‘He’s moving too fast.’

‘U-huh!’

‘Too many rocks in the way. Wait until he tops the ridge and exposes himself on the skyline.’

‘U-huh!’

‘The ball will drop about four inches at that distance, so aim a little high.’

‘U-huh!’

The dingo was a yard beneath the ridgetop now. It paused briefly on a boulder and gathered itself for the final leap that would carry it out of the gully.

‘When he lands after this jump. Take him, Pad!’

The dingo leaped gracefully through the air with its front legs outstretched, looking more like a cat than a dog. It gained the edge of the gully and paused to glance in the direction of the brothers, its outline silhouetted against the sky. At that instant, Paddy fired.

Toby heard his brother grunt from the force of the recoil. Another cloud of gun smoke obscured their vision before being snatched away on the breeze. The gunshot echoed off the ranges, coming at them again and again.

The dingo lay sprawled on the opposite ridge. The ball had struck the animal in the ribs and its hind legs twitched as it died.

‘Nice shooting, Pad. You killed him. He won’t be coming down to raid Ma’s chooks any more, that’s for sure.’

Paddy lowered the gun, a grin of triumph on his face. He held the musket out for Toby to take. ‘That was the best thing I have ever done in my life, Toby.’

‘Just make sure Pa doesn’t find out I let you use the gun. He’ll never let either of us near it again.’

‘I won’t, Toby. You can bet I won’t.’

Toby could see in his brother’s eyes that there was no way he would give either of them up. ‘C’mon,’ he said. ‘Let’s go skin the bugger to prove to Ma that we got him.’

Chilbi watched the smoke coming from the chimney of the little homestead on the valley floor and knew that soon they would kill again. The two Djarriba were excited, shifting in their saddles and chattering in that strange tongue of theirs, talking quickly so that he was only able to follow half the conversation.

‘There’ll be food down there. I can’t eat too much more of that black fella shit,’ the one called Tanner complained. No matter how good the hunt had been or the amount of food on offer, he would often study his meal with a disgusted look, push it away and eat some of the dried meat he carried in his saddlebags instead.

The other Djarriba, the big white man Chilbi’s people had named Warrigal, was better accustomed to the food offered by the land, though he never hunted for it himself. That task he left to the three Jannjirra warriors.

‘Chilbi?’

The white men had finished their discussion.

‘Yes, Warrigal?’

‘You heard the Djarriba thunder earlier?’ the big man said, speaking the language of the people.

Chilbi nodded. The noise had caused Warrigal and Tanner to reach for their weapons and they had waited nervously in the shadows until the echoes died away.

‘How far away?’

Chilbi pointed across the valley. ‘Long way that way.’

Warrigal considered this information. ‘Those shots were far enough apart to have come from the same gun.’

‘Just a little homestead,’ Tanner said. ‘A ma and pa outfit, I reckon. Even if the hunter gets home before we get there, I don’t think they’ll give us too much trouble. We’ve been three weeks in the bush. I need a good feed, Warrigal.’

‘Me too,’ Warrigal nodded his big, scraggly head. ‘Chilbi? Scout us a way down into the valley.’ He pointed at the homestead. ‘We will take our war to those below.’

‘Yes, Warrigal.’ Chilbi urged his mount forward, still feeling a little uncomfortable at the motion of the huge beast beneath him. His brothers, Yawong and Tarrat, fell in behind, their hands resting on their war clubs.

Standing on the verandah of the homestead, Sean O’Rourke looked at the dingo pelt at his feet, then his two sons, and then the pelt again.

‘So you got him, boys?’ He towered over both his lads, his greying head almost brushing the bush poles that were the homestead’s rafters.

‘Sure did, Pa.’ Paddy said, excited to tell the story of the hunt, the words gushing from his mouth. ‘We tracked him right into that gully up beyond the ridge.’

‘That so?’ their father said. He picked up the raw pelt and poked his finger through the hole made by the musket ball. ‘Only one hole in it. I heard two shots echo off the hills.’

‘Missed with the first one,’ Toby said quickly, before Paddy could respond. ‘He made a run for higher ground. Gave me time to reload and take him down when he reached the skyline.’

‘Ah! Nice work.’ Their father nodded his head. ‘Well, your mother will be pleased. This old dog won’t be raiding her chooks any more.’ He dropped the pelt onto the verandah boards. ‘We can cure this later.’ His hand shot out and gripped Toby’s chin, the thumb rubbing his right cheek. ‘The cap from the Lovell has left a little mark on your face, Toby. Best you go and wash it off.’

Toby felt the acid of despair in his stomach. As his father rubbed at his cheek, he turned his eyes towards Paddy. His brother still had that triumphant grin on his face, and the mark left by the flash of the firing cap was plain to see against his tanned skin.

‘Paddy? You best wash yours off, too. Then you can come and help me take a hind quarter off a side of mutton for your mother to roast. Go now,’ he barked, and Paddy turned and ran to where the washstand stood behind the homestead, his hand rubbing at his cheek.

Toby felt the grip tighten on his chin and he looked up at his father. Sean O’Rourke’s eyes were fixed firmly on him. There was a hint of anger in the steel-blue depths, but his father’s beard hid the set of his mouth.

‘Who taught you to shoot, Toby?’

‘You did, Pa.’

‘Are you a good shot, boy?’

‘I like to think so, Pa.’

‘Oh, you do, do you?’ The eyes lightened a little and creased at the corners. ‘So, if you’re such a good shot, then you must’ve had a good teacher.’

‘Yes, Pa.’

‘But not good enough to teach your brother how to shoot.’

Toby wanted to turn away, to look anywhere but at his father, but the grip on his chin was firm. ‘Pa, he was pleading with me. I did it more to shut him up than anything else. You know what Paddy’s like when he gets to whining about something.’

Sean ignored the tone in his son’s voice. ‘Toby, when I let you use the gun, I place it into your responsibility. My rules then become your rules.’

‘Yes, Pa.’

‘Oh, “Yes, Pa”, is it now? It wasn’t “Yes, Pa” when you let Paddy use the gun.’

‘I’m sorry, Pa.’

The hand dropped and Toby rubbed at his chin as he waited for his father to decide what his punishment would be.

‘Your mother is cooking a roast for tonight’s dinner. She needs the wood box by the kitchen door kept topped up with a good supply. In between cutting wood, you can help her in the kitchen. Peeling potatoes, stripping cabbage, whatever she needs.’

‘Yes, Pa.’

‘And you won’t be using the Lovell for a while. From now until Paddy turns sixteen. You can both wait.’

Toby drew breath to protest, but the look in his father’s eyes made him think again. He was nineteen years old and his father was punishing him as if he were twelve, but he knew there was nothing he could do but accept the punishment and wait out his time.

‘Go and wash your face, Toby. Then I want to hear that axe ringing for an hour or more.’

Toby nodded and turned away, but his father’s voice brought him up short.

‘So, the first time Paddy fires the gun, he drops a dingo with a chest shot. At what range?’

Toby turned to see his father holding the pelt again, his finger through the hole. ‘Must’ve been all of eighty yards, Pa.’

‘Eighty yards, hey?’ Sean looked at his finger and shook his head in wonder. Then he gave Toby a look that said he had better get moving.

Toby was at the wood heap behind the tack shed when he first noticed the riders. They were still high on the ridge, but coming steadily along the outside of the house paddock. It was the direction they came from that made them a curiosity. The O’Rourke place was the last of a string of properties that followed a narrow valley into the maw of the mountains. There was nothing north until the settled areas of the Goulburn valley and the only paths through were east at the Kilmore Gap, or at the Mount Alexander road, a day’s ride to the west.

The riders rounded the corner at the far side of the house paddock and paused beside the two-rut track that led into the settlement of Bunyong Creek, five miles down the valley. Toby saw an arm or two gesture back and forth as they discussed their options. After a few moments they turned towards the slip rails at the bottom of the paddock.

Toby gathered up an armload of wood and walked around the shed to the front of the homestead where he climbed the verandah steps and dropped the wood into a box beside the open kitchen door. Careful to shake any woodchips from his hair and clothing, he went inside.

The heat in the humble little home was stifling and sweat prickled the skin on his arms. His mother stood stirring a pot in the shimmering air around the oven. A pile of peeled potatoes sat on a plate on the table.

‘I cut a good load, Ma. Enough for a couple of days at least.’

Ellen O’Rourke finished her stirring and tapped the wooden spoon on the brim of the pot a few times before setting it down. ‘You’re a good lad to be sure,’ she said in her bubbling Irish brogue.

‘Where’s Pa?’

Ellen pointed with her chin towards the side of the house, in the direction of the little shed. ‘He’s still out there with Paddy, cutting a hock off last week’s kill. Tell him to be quick about it. If it doesn’t go in the oven soon we won’t be eating till well after eight.’

‘I will, Ma.’ He turned for the door then remembered the horsemen. ‘Might have a few guests. There’s five coves down at the slip rails.’

‘Five?’ Ellen gave a startled look. Her free hand automatically went to her hair, brushing several sweaty strands into place. ‘I shall have to put a bonnet on. Tell your father to make it a whole hind quarter if we are going to have guests for dinner.’ She looked at the plate of peeled potatoes and shook her head. ‘I shall be needing some more potatoes peeled, Toby.’

‘I’ll let Pa know and then I’ll peel some right away, Ma.’

He found his father standing beside the carcass of a sheep that hung from a chain fixed to one of the shed’s rafters. The damp hessian cloth had been removed and his father was running a knife back and forth across a steel, using rapid, well-practised strokes. Paddy stood nearby, waiting to help with the hock once his father cut it away.

‘What’s up with you, me boyo?’ Sean said as he noticed Toby in the doorway. ‘I don’t hear that axe ringing.’

‘There’s five horsemen heading for the slip rails. They’re planning on paying us a visit.’

‘Geoff Smith and his boys, back from their stock camp?’ Sean said.

Toby shook his head. ‘Nah. These fellows rode down off the ridge. Looks like they’ve been up in the ranges.’

‘Maybe they’re prospectors,’ Paddy offered.

‘I don’t think so.’ Toby shook his head again. ‘They look pretty ragged – like they’ve been living rough.’

‘They might just be after a good feed.’ Sean set the steel aside and traced his first cut with a finger.

‘Ma says to make it a whole hind quarter. Just in case they’re here for supper.’

‘Good thinking.’ Sean shifted his finger. He went at the carcass with the knife, using fluid strokes. ‘Ready to take the weight, Pad?’ Unlike the homestead, the shed had a dirt floor. To allow the cut of meat to fall would be a travesty.

Paddy stepped up and took hold of the leg. ‘Ready, Pa.’ Their father made the final cuts and Paddy stood back with the hind quarter in his hands.

‘Get that to your mother. She’ll be waiting for it,’ Sean said, and Paddy turned for the homestead, brushing past Toby. Sean watched his son go and then wiped the knife clean on a piece of cloth before placing it in its leather sheath. ‘Now, let’s take a look at these fellows.’

Toby walked with his father to the homestead and they climbed the steps onto the verandah. The riders were at the slip rails, about three hundred paces off. As they watched, one of the men dismounted, walked to the rails and pushed them open.

‘They don’t look like diggers to me.’ Ellen came out of the kitchen and stood beside her husband. She wiped her hands on her apron and Toby noticed she had tidied her hair and now wore a dark-blue bonnet. ‘I can’t see a pick or shovel anywhere on those horses.’

Paddy pushed his way in next to Toby, working his elbows to make room. ‘Ma’s right,’ he said. ‘Those miners that called in last month had two packhorses loaded with stuff.’

Squinting against the afternoon glare, Toby studied the horsemen. The two leading the little procession sat straight-backed, heels low in the stirrups in the English fashion, but the three trailing behind sat their mounts in a loose, undisciplined manner. Even at that distance his sharp eyes could pick out broad brows and deep-set eyes.

‘I reckon the last three are Aborigines.’

‘They could be native police,’ Paddy said excitedly. ‘Maybe they’ve been out chasing bushrangers.’

Toby elbowed his brother in the ribs. ‘Don’t be daft, Pad. They’d be in uniform if they were police. These blokes are in little more than rags.’

The men urged their horses through into the house paddock and Toby expected to see the dismounted man push the slip rails closed again, but he simply swung up onto his horse and followed the others towards the homestead, leaving them wide open. There was a herd of two hundred and fifty head in the paddock, waiting to be driven to the butchers’ yards at the diggings. These visitors would cop hell when they arrived at the homestead.

Beside him, his father straightened, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

‘Toby!’ His voice came as a low growl.

‘Yes, Pa?’

‘Fetch the Lovell for me, boyo.’

Paddy gave a little chuckle at the thought of the drama as their father prepared to confront the men. Toby, on the other hand, felt uneasy. Sean O’Rourke was an emancipated convict and had survived the horrendous conditions of a prison hulk, had been worked to the point of exhaustion on a chain gang and still bore the scars of the punishment lash. There wasn’t much in the world that frightened him, and yet Toby thought there had been a hint of fear in his voice.

He found the Lovell where it was always kept, behind his parents’ bedroom door, along with the leather pouch containing powder, caps and shot. He knew the weapon was loaded. His father had seen to that after the boys’ return, in case of a chance shot at fresh meat for the stew pot. It stayed that way, propped behind the door, unprimed until needed. With trembling fingers, Toby opened the bag and took out a small copper cap, fumbling as he placed it onto the nipple. He eased the hammer down and, keeping the muzzle pointed skywards,

stepped back out onto the verandah, where he handed the musket and leather bag to his father.

‘Here you are, Pa. Primed and ready.’

Sean pulled the hammer to full cock. ‘Good lad!’ He cradled the barrel of the musket across the crook of his left elbow. ‘Ellen, take the boys inside and close the door. Looks like these men are planning on leaving us in a hell of a hurry.’

‘Sean, are you sure this is the right way to go about things?’ His mother’s voice had lost its melodic quality, replaced instead with a quivering tension. ‘Maybe your being armed will only provoke them if they mean us harm?’

Sean shook his head. ‘If they mean us harm, then it won’t hurt to show them we have the means to defend ourselves. They may just be in a hurry, but until we find out for sure, I want you and the boys inside.’

Ellen nodded and took Paddy by the arm, leading him into the kitchen. Toby hesitated, his nervous gaze flicking between the approaching men and his father. If there was going to be trouble, he wanted to be standing at his father’s side.

‘Inside, Toby!’ Sean growled. Toby didn’t move and his father gave him a wink. ‘I’ll be fine, son.’ His voice softened and his hand reached out, giving his shoulder an affectionate squeeze. ‘Do as I tell you.’

Toby hesitated a moment more then went inside and closed the door. He hurried to the window by the stove where his mother and brother were watching the horsemen ride up from the slip rails.

The riders were closer now and he could make out more detail. Two white men rode at the head of the little column. The man leading seemed too big for his horse, his large frame filling the saddle, the stirrup straps at full length to accommodate long legs. He had a cabbage-tree hat pulled low over his eyes and a full beard of black, matted hair that reached halfway down his chest. His head turned from side to side as he rode,

examining the corners of outbuildings and shadows beneath the trees. When he saw the faces in the window, he paused and his cold stare filled Toby with fear.

The other white man was thin and short with sickly-yellow skin. He wore a seafarer's peaked cap pushed back on his head. A broad smile exposed a set of tobacco-stained teeth.

The other three men were Aborigines, dressed in a curious mixture of animal skins and European clothing. They kept a little distance between themselves and the two leaders, their eyes flicking left and right.

The white men eyed the musket in Sean's hands and said something to each other. They separated as they came on, heading for opposite ends of the verandah. Sean had to step back a little to keep them both in sight without turning his head too far. The little yellow man reined in on the left and lifted a hand in greeting.

'No cause for concern, sir,' he said, pointing at the musket. 'We're just after some directions.' He swept his gaze over the front of the homestead. 'Be glad of some food, too,' he added, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air. 'Happy to pay you.'

'Why the hell didn't you close the slip rails?' Toby heard his father snap. 'Can't you see I've got cattle in the paddock?'

'We don't expect to stay long,' the other man responded, his voice as deep as mountain thunder. 'We'll close them on the way out.'

'If you want anything from me, you'll ride back down and close them now.'

The little man lifted his chin defiantly. Toby saw the way his eyes narrowed and knew then that they meant trouble. His next words only served to confirm this.

'And if we don't?'

Sean lowered the musket's muzzle a little. 'Then you'll get nothing here.'

'Now, don't be rash, sir.' The large man fidgeted in the folds of his shirt, drawing Sean's attention. He produced a little

leather purse and bounced it on the drawstring so the contents jangled. 'Like we said; we'll pay you.' The purse slipped from his fingers and fell into the dust beside his horse. 'Oops!'

'I don't want your money. You can turn around and ride away. There's nothing for you here.'

The big man raised his hands in resignation. 'Sorry to have caused you any concern. If you'll be kind enough to return my purse we'll be on our way. We'll close the slip rails as we go.'

Toby watched as his father stepped off the verandah and stooped towards the purse. A flash of movement drew his attention back to the little man as he pulled a single-shot pistol from beneath his shirt and aimed it at his father. There was a metallic click as the pistol cocked.

'Pa! Look out!'

His father was half turned away and had one hand outstretched towards the purse, but at Toby's warning he straightened and raised the musket, levelling the barrel at the little man as a spurt of smoke erupted from the pistol. A wind snapped at his father's shirt and the concussion of the gunshot rattled the glass in the window. The musket fired a heartbeat later. His father's arm jerked with the recoil of the unbraced, one-handed shot. The little man took the musket ball in the centre of his chest and fell backwards off his horse. Even as the man fell, his father reversed the empty musket in his grip, holding it like a club as he turned towards the other rider. But the big man had a revolver in his grip and fired before Sean had halved the distance between them.

Toby's mother screamed as his father staggered backwards. Sean dropped the musket and clutched at his chest. The stranger extended his arm straight and paused, taking aim down the barrel. He fired again and Sean fell backwards onto the ground.

The echo of gunshots boomed about the valley, holding Toby in that brief, terrifying moment. Then, through the horror, he became aware of another noise. His mother was screaming

again, a high-pitched, keening wail. She held her skirts bunched in both hands to free her legs as she ran across the kitchen. Too late, Toby realised what she was about to do.

‘No, Ma!’

He moved to stop her.

Ellen reached the door and yanked it open, rushing out onto the verandah, screaming as she ran. The revolver fired again and her scream was cut off. Toby reached the doorway to see his mother on the boards, her skirts thrown up in disarray, her arms reaching for the steps and her husband. Blood pounded in Toby’s ears, his stomach a knot of fear and panic. He moved to where his mother lay, but the sound of the revolver being cocked stopped him short.

The big man aimed the gun at Toby’s head.

‘Don’t bloody move!’

Toby was torn between wanting to help his mother and fear. His indecision held him fast and probably saved his life.

The stranger swung off his horse. He tossed the reins to one of the Aborigines and walked calmly up the steps, barely glancing down at Ellen and the growing pool of blood.

‘I thought she was you.’

He grabbed Toby by the arm and turned him back to the kitchen door.

‘I thought she was you coming at me with another bloody gun.’ There was no emotion in the voice, no hint of regret, just a simple statement of fact. He pushed Toby inside and turned to the three Aborigines.

‘Search the other buildings. Make sure no one else is hiding.’

The Aborigines pulled clubs from beneath their cloaks and slid from their horses. They rushed between the homestead and the tack shed.

Paddy dropped to the floor and crawled under the table as the stranger stepped into the kitchen. The man let Toby go, shoving him towards the far wall.

‘Sit!’

Toby lowered himself onto a kitchen chair and watched through tear-filled eyes as the man opened the door to his parents’ bedroom and glanced inside. He then went to the back door and did the same with the boys’ little lean-to room. Satisfied there was no one else in the house he moved to the stove where the remainder of the stew Ellen had prepared for lunch still simmered away. He ladled out a huge helping into a bowl, came back to the table, pushed the hind quarter of lamb aside and sat down, then shovelled stew into his mouth as fast as he could manage.

One of the Aborigines came to the doorway. ‘No more people here, Warrigal.’

The man nodded and droplets of stew flew from his tangled beard. He pointed at the pot on the stove. ‘Take it to the others, Chilbi. Eat while you can. The traps may not be far behind us.’

Without a glance at Toby or Paddy, the Aborigine went to the stove, picked up the pot and hurried back out into the yard.

The stranger emptied the bowl in moments and pushed it into the middle of the table. He stood and went to the kitchen cupboards where he rummaged around and found a flour bag that he began filling, tossing in bags of sugar and tea, a large tin of golden syrup and a loaf of bread. Then he went into their parents’ bedroom and Toby could hear him pulling open drawers and cupboards. He came back into the kitchen and pointed the revolver at Toby.

‘Where does Daddy hide his money?’

Toby knew his father had at least twenty pounds in a rawhide wallet hidden under the chest of drawers in the room. Beyond his grief and terror he felt a little spark of defiance flare. This man was not going to take everything from him. ‘There isn’t any.’ His voice cracked and didn’t sound as convincing as he’d hoped.

‘Don’t lie to me, boy.’ The revolver barrel almost touched Toby’s nose.

'We—we don't have any money. Not until we sell the cattle in the yard.'

'Is that so?' He lowered the revolver and shoved the table aside. Paddy tried to squirm away, but the stranger took a fistful of hair and yanked the boy to his feet. Paddy was a big lad for fifteen, but the stranger had no trouble holding him at full-stretch.

Paddy let out a squeal of terror and closed his eyes. 'Please, Toby! Make him stop.'

Toby stood and the man whirled, dragging Paddy by the hair like a child's doll.

'Sit!' he roared.

Toby shrank back onto the chair.

The man twisted Paddy around so he could look into the boy's face.

'Open your eyes, boy.'

Paddy kept his eyes firmly closed.

Infuriated, the stranger shook him by the hair and screamed, 'Where does Daddy hide his money?' He shook so hard that some of Paddy's hair came away in his fist and he lost his grip. Paddy cried out and fell to the floor. He scrambled for the door on all fours, reached the verandah and broke into a full run.

Toby ran after him, but the stranger grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and held him fast. He saw Paddy reach the rail and leap it in a clumsy lunge, landing in the dust beyond where he rolled to his feet and kept running.

The three Aborigines were crowded around the pot, using their hands to ladle stew into their mouths. The one who had come to the kitchen door saw Paddy land in the yard and gave chase.

'Run, Paddy!' But Toby could see that his brother wasn't going to make it. The Aborigine caught him in several paces and the club hissed through the air. The vicious knob of fire-hardened wood struck Paddy on the side of his head. His brother let out a grunt and sprawled in the dust where he lay still.

'You bastards!' Toby felt his stomach slide with terror and anger. He struggled to get free, but the stranger just chuckled under his breath and pushed him out onto the verandah.

Toby stopped struggling and stooped towards his mother, but a kick in the backside sent him tumbling down the steps.

'Stay down,' the deep voice warned.

He lay on the ground and watched as the stranger went to his horse. He was carrying the hind quarter from the kitchen table and tossed it to one of the Aborigines.

'Take this, Tarrat. If we get nothing else from this place, at least we will eat well for the next few days.' He then walked to where Toby lay sobbing on the ground and took hold of his shirt front, pulling him to his feet. The stranger held him so close Toby could smell stew on his rancid breath.

'Don't be fool enough to follow me, boy.' The dark eyes seemed to burn through him.

Toby's head lolled like a drunkard's as he was shoved backwards. The stranger swung up onto his horse and rounded on the Aborigines.

'On your horses, you black heathens.'

The Aborigines dropped the pot and ran for their animals, springing lithely onto their backs. One of them gathered up the reins of their dead companion's horse, ignoring his body on the ground. They followed the white man towards the slip rails.

Toby stood between the bodies of his mother and father and watched the men ride away. They reached the slip rails and did not pause or look back, riding on until the bush surrounded them and they were gone. He stared after them for a long time, too scared and shocked to move, his gaze fixed on the patch of bushland where they had disappeared.

His brother's low groan snapped him out of the trance-like state.

'My God, Paddy!'