

Crossing Borders

...a red dirt romance...

..love 'neath outback stars..

by Jocelyn Price

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Copyright 2013 by Jocelyn Price

Publisher's Cataloguing-in-Publication

Price, Jocelyn M.

Crossing Borders : A *'family friendly' outback romance*. - 1st edition - Charleville, Qld. Australia

Mulga Mob Pub., ©2013

ISBN: 9781311237729

Audience: Adults and teenagers

Summary: When Rashida, an Afghani refugee, takes a job as governess on a Queensland cattle station, intrigue, danger, laughter and love await.

Cover Art: © Mulga Mob

Disclaimer: All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Dedication - Dedicated to my cousin Muriel, a true Afghan beauty. Her picture appears on the front cover.

BACKGROUND STORY

Being of Afghan heritage I have some knowledge of Afghanistan and its people in the pre-Taliban era. The Afghani characters are based on real people that I knew. Rashida's grandparents reflect the nature of my own relatives. Rashida and Rafi have them to thank for the liberal education and life that they (and I) enjoyed. The cover photo is of my cousin – a true Afghan beauty.

Taking on a position as a governess in Outback Queensland, I, like Rashida had much to learn of life in the outback, the native animals and the general environment. Rashida's initial experiences of the outback plants and wildlife echo those of my own. The welcoming, altruist, tolerant, open and accepting temperament of the varied people of the outback and the courteous, thoughtful

nature of the typical Australian bushman are fundamentals of the culture of the Australian Outback as I (and thus Rashida) experienced it.

Jocelyn Price

CHAPTER 1 ~ PERIL & PROMISE

The April sunlight was as blinding as a flash of gunpowder, and he imagined the rattle of his bed curtains sounding like distant artillery fire. For a moment Rafi wondered if he had gone to hell and ended back in the Peninsula war as he sank beneath the turbulent waters swirling around the half-submerged refugee boat within sight of Christmas Island. His father beckoned him in the distance. His mother stood beside his father. She was smiling. His father held up his right hand, trying to convey a message to him. What was it? A number, perhaps? Rafi peered closer. His father placed his thumb across the palm of his hand. His other fingers then followed the thumb. His father repeated the action. 9-7-7-6-1. It was a message, but what did it mean? Rafi vaguely turned the numbers over in his mind as he tried to remember, but he was too lightheaded. Instead he slowly turned over on his back and floated gently towards his smiling parents.

Above him in the water, his sister Rashida gasped for breath. She could feel her life force ebbing away as she struggled against the heavy sea. Any minute now she thought she would go down, down, down; like her brother. An enormous wave threw her heavily against the side of the slowly sinking boat. She grabbed an outstretched hand and was heaved partly out of the water.

Clinging to the wreckage, Rashida glanced wildly towards the beach; there were people wading into the water. Some were waving orange coloured devices and hanks of rope, as they reached the deeper water only dark heads were visible. Rashida felt a surge of hope - perhaps she was not yet ready to die! Thoughts of the past few months tumbled randomly through her mind. "O Rafi, Rafi"

she cried. Then there was a rope being tied roughly around her waist and she was dragged unceremoniously across what was left of the deck and into the water again. Spluttering and coughing as water lashed her face, Rashida was finally hauled on to a sandy beach. Her rescuer untied the rope and without a word disappeared back into the rough water.

Rashida shivered in the warm rain. She was exhausted but her mind was racing. She tried to still her pounding heart but could not. “Oh, Rafi! What will I do without you?” she cried. “It’s my fault you are dead! You were always there when I needed you! But where was I when you needed me?” She relived the nightmare — the boat capsizing, lifeless floating bodies, cries that suddenly stilled; not one person had a life jacket.

Rashida had stayed afloat by treading water, but Rafi could not swim, he was scared of water. As a small boy he witnessed a man, enraged because his wife had given birth to a girl, snatch the tiny baby from the mother’s arms and fling it into the river. The heartbroken wailing of the mother as she held her daughter’s lifeless body haunted Rafi ever afterwards when he was around water. It took great courage for Rafi to attempt this journey by sea, Only Rashida knew of his terror, and now he was dead!

Her tears mingled with the rain as great sobs racked her body. Turning to look out to sea she saw the rescuers returning. No one was left to save. “What kind, brave people these Christmas Islanders are,” she thought, “risking their lives to save strangers.” Would the relatives or friends of the lost refugees ever find out what had become of their loved ones? Rashida cried even harder for these lost souls. She was thankful to be alive. “I must be strong for Rafi!” she thought. At that moment she promised

Rafi to carry out their parents’ dream of finding their relatives in Australia and starting a new life; free from the murderous Taliban who had taken over their beloved Afghanistan.

The rain ceased. Rashida felt a strange sense of peace as she lay on the beach. Her breathing slowed and she felt herself relaxing. She sighed, took a deep breath, closed her eyes and fell into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER 2 ~ FLIGHT FROM KANDAHAR

The golden light of the morning sun illuminated the shadows dancing around the walls of the small house in Kandahar. Abdul and Amina sat with their children around the table in their living room, sipping green tea and eating naan with cream and sugar. Their voices were hushed as they huddled together. Outside they could hear the sporadic gunfire from the hated Taliban. The noise of the gunshots were getting louder; trouble was coming!

This alarmed Abdul and Amina. Rafi and Rashida knew that their parents were anti-Taliban and felt it was only a matter of time before their enemies came pounding on the door of their home. What would happen then? Would their parents be killed, or would they be taken away and tortured?

Suddenly Abdul stood up and walked quickly into the next room, returning with a small box. He sat down and opened it carefully then looked at Rafi and Rashida and said, "I want you to take this money and use it to get out of Afghanistan. Travel over the mountains into Pakistan then can catch a plane to Australia where some of our relatives live. I have written down their address for you. They will look after you. It's not safe for us anymore to be here." Abdul looked earnestly at his children and continued, "If there is not enough money for a plane fare, you must find a boat."

Rafi and Rashida stared open-mouthed at their parents. "But what about you?" cried Rashida. "What are you going to do? You can't just send us away!"

"Yes!" cried Rafi. "We want to stay with you and fight. I will protect you!"

Abdul regarded his children fondly. "No. You must go and it must be now. I have heard rumours that the Taliban are on their way here and I want you both away before they come. Now, Rafi, I want a quiet word with you." Rafi stood and walked with his father into the next room, while

Amina took her daughter's hand in hers. She was crying. "There is no other way, Rashida," she said. "We have been betrayed and it's only a matter of time before they come for us."

In the next room, Abdul said quietly to Rafi, "I want you to look after your sister. You know how headstrong she is. There is money and deeds in a box stored safely in Australia – the details are on a note in here," Abdul took a small oilskin bag from his pocket. "So remember the numbers 9-7-7-6-1. These numbers will unlock the box and you will have access to the money." Rafi stared at his father. Without a word he took the bag from his father and tucked it into his shirt.

They returned to the living room where Amina and Rashida were sitting at the table, crying. Suddenly everything happened at once. There were loud shots from outside the house, accompanied by what seemed to be the sound of rifles battering against their door.

Abdul said quickly, "Go, now, my children, up on to the roof. You can escape that way, but you will have to be quick!" Abdul and Amina hugged their children tightly. "Inshallah!" was the last word Rafi and Rashida heard as they made their way up to the roof of their house. Down below they could hear the sound of gunfire, followed by the screams of their parents. Then there was silence.

Rafi and Rashida clutched hands. They heard the thump of hurried footsteps on the stairs leading to the roof. Rafi yelled out, "Jump! Rashida! Now!" Landing on the next roof, they rolled behind bales of hay and lay still. Bullets spluttered around them, but they were safe for now. Below they saw people gathering outside their house, shouting and waving their arms in defiance. More shots, more screams.

Rafi held his sister tight, pressing her face against his shoulder, trying to shield her from the horror. "What shall we do now?" mouthed Rashida, her face white with terror. "Stay here till it is dark and then we'll make our next move," said Rafi.

Rafi and Rashida sat in silence as they waited for darkness to fall. Traumatized by the events of the past few hours, it was hard for them to even talk to each other. Finally Rashida broke the silence. "We'll never see our parents again," she sobbed. Rafi took her hand and tried to comfort her. They found the situation so hard to comprehend.

As night fell everything was quiet below. Rafi was sure the Taliban had left. “Now, Rashida, we have to get out of the city quickly! We can’t follow the main road as the Taliban are sure to be watching.” They climbed carefully down the side of the house and turned into one of the many side streets that Rafi knew led out of Kandahar. In the darkness that had enfolded them, Rafi moved cautiously, smoothly; his hand tight in Rashida’s. She followed like a shadow. An icy wind swirled about them but despite the bitter cold, they had keep moving. They rested many times throughout the long night and tried to keep themselves warm by moving their arms and legs.

At last it was light and they found themselves surrounded by high mountains. “We should make our way in that direction,” said Rafi, pointing up to the mountains. “I hope we come across some friendly villagers who will help us.”

“All right,” replied Rashida, “but let’s keep moving. It’s so cold.” They were both hungry, it had been a long time since they had eaten. Weak sunlight filtered through the clouds, making travelling a little easier. A few hours later, Rashida pointed ahead. She narrowed her eyes. “I think I can see a couple of buildings. It looks like some sort of a village.”

Rafi stopped and looked ahead. “We’d better watch out,” he said. “It might be a Taliban outpost, so I’ll go and check things out first. You wait here.” He passed the oilskin bag over to Rashida and set off.

Rafi crept closer to the settlement then froze with a gasp of fear; a dog leaped towards him, barking furiously. Two armed men appeared. They looked like hard, fierce, dangerous men and Rafi hoped they were not Taliban. “Oh, no,” he thought. “What’s going to happen to me now?” The men came closer.

“Come out,” said an angry voice. “Who are you? What do you want?” The guns were pointing straight at him. “It’s no good trying to get away; if we don’t get you, the dog will!” Rafi stepped out of the shadows with his hands raised. He knew it was no use trying to lie. “I-I’ve just come from Kandahar,” he said. “My parents were killed yesterday by the Taliban and I’m just trying to get to Pakistan.” The men lowered their guns, their faces relaxed.

“Come in,” said the first man grimly. “We’ll help you. The Taliban are no friends of ours!” Rafi almost fainted with relief when he heard these words. “I’ll just call my sister,” he said.

Rashida and Rafi were soon enjoying the hospitality of their newfound friends. As they sat in front of a roaring fire, their clothes warmed and dried. The men were simple farmers, not ferocious warriors after all! Two women and several children appeared from one of the small rooms and looked at Rafi and Rashida shyly. The women brought dishes of food to the table.

After they had eaten, Rafi said, “We’ll never be able to thank you enough. We will not stay long in case we were followed.” He stopped, listening for sounds from outside. “All we want to do is get to Pakistan, and then a flight to Australia where we have relatives.” He stood up and thanked the men for their hospitality. It was time to say goodbye. “You have saved our lives,” said Rafi, shaking their hands vigorously. “My sister and I are very grateful.”

The men followed Rafi and Rashida outside. One man said, “We have a friend who lives about four kilometres from here. His name is Rahman. He has a truck and he will take you to the border. You go that way.” He pointed ahead. “Wait one minute,” said the other. He dashed inside the dwelling. Returning, he handed Rafi a note. “Give this to Rahman when you arrive at his house. Now go quickly, and may Allah be with you!”

“Oh thank you so much,” said Rashida fervently. “We will never forget you.” She turned once to wave as they set out on the next stage of their journey.

CHAPTER 3 ~ PAKISTAN & THE PEOPLE SMUGGLERS

Hours passed as Rafi and Rashida made their way along the mountain trails, following the directions given to them by the friendly farmers. This time, travelling was quite pleasant as the

weather was warmer and their friends had given them food and water. It was just on dark when Rafi and Rashida made out twinkling lights ahead.

“That must be the place,” said Rashida.

“Yes, let’s go,” replied Rafi. They walked up to the door of the simple house and knocked tentatively. The door opened slowly and a fierce-looking face peered into the gathering darkness.

“Are you Rahman?” asked Rafi, handing the man the note he had been given.

“Yes, I am,” the man answered unfolding the paper, and glaring at Rafi so fiercely that the boy positioned himself protectively in front of his sister. As Rahman read, his expression softened.

“Please, come in,” he said gently, gesturing for them to enter his house. “You are very welcome here,” continued Rahman with typical old-world Afghani hospitality. Rafi and Rashida entered the warm, well-lit, comfortable room. They sat down.

Rahman introduced his wife Farida. “I will go and make some tea,” she said, disappearing into the kitchen. “Yes, I will be able to help you,” said Rahman. “I have a truck and tomorrow morning I will drive you to the border. Then you can make your way to the nearest airport to catch a plane.” This sounded very simple to Rafi and Rashida, except for one thing. They had no documents with them. They had left Kandahar in such a hurry that documents and passports had been the last thing on their minds. But now it was an important issue, especially if they wanted to travel by plane.

Rafi explained their situation to Rahman. “Rahman, what can we do now? We have no passports. We’ll never be able to get on a plane!” Rafi shoulders slumped in despair, as he held his head in his hands. Rahman was silent, Rashida could see he was lost in thought, and almost jumped when he abruptly stood up saying “There is no time to get you new passports. It would take time and I know there is a long waiting list but...” He disappeared into the kitchen to consult with his wife. Rashida looked at Rafi. She was as worried as her brother. Their whole world was disintegrating before them. Rahman and Farida came out of the kitchen. Farida set tea and cakes on the table. “Help yourselves,” she said. “We have been talking about your situation, and we think we have a solution.” “Yes,” Rahman said. “We have many friends and relatives in Pakistan and I am sure they

will help you get out of the country. You don't need documents except in certain areas, and my friends are expert at avoiding the authorities. They have helped many friends of ours in the past. Of course," he continued, "it would mean you would have to forget travelling anywhere by plane, but they could get you to Indonesia, where you could take a boat to Australia." "How far is it from Pakistan to Indonesia?" asked Rafi. "Just over 5,600 kilometres," answered Rahman, "but you could do the trip in a few weeks. I know because I've been through this all before." He regarded the young people thoughtfully. "You know," he said ruefully with a thin smile, "Afghans are amongst the most resourceful people in the world – they've had to be considering the number of nations who have tried to take over our beautiful country." Rashida said quietly, "So when we get to Indonesia, we'll just have to find a boat to take us to Australia?" "Yes," replied Rahman. "You can get away without documents as long as you can pay for your fares. But be careful when looking for a boat. There are some very unscrupulous people out there. You should shop around, do not be taken in by these people." Rafi nodded. While they were having tea, Rafi told Rahman and Farida what had happened to their parents in Kandahar. Farida wiped tears from her eyes. "I think you are very brave," she said. "Think of your parents and what they would have wanted for you, and make them proud of you. That will keep you going." They nodded. "Well," said Rahman, "it is time to plan our next move." He shuffled through some papers on the table. "Hmm, here we are, here's your first stop. My cousin lives not far from where I will drop you tomorrow." He wrote some notes on a sheet of paper. "I have explained the situation and he will pass you on to other people who will help you." Next morning Rafi and Rashida set out with Rahman. Farida was sad to see them go and asked them to let her know when they reached their destination. On reaching the border Rahman wished them good luck with the usual "Inshallah". The following weeks had a dreamlike quality as their journey proceeded just as Rahman had foretold. Rashida and Rafi were passed from one family group to another - friendly people who looked after them as if they were their own. Their benefactors did not ask questions – like where or why they were going. That was the Afghan way, the acceptance that the journey was the traveller's own. Rafi and Rashida felt proud that they were part of this age-old culture. Sometimes they travelled in comfortable cars, sometimes they were crammed with goods and other passengers in the back of a truck, and other

times they travelled in overcrowded buses filled beyond capacity and once they travelled for half a day on the luggage carrier of a single seat motorcycle, Rashida clinging tightly to Rafi as he held onto the jacket of the wild looking but ever smiling driver. Always at a border between countries, there was someone who indicated to Rafi that he should conceal money in his palm and shake the hand of a specific official who would wave them through. From Thailand a sturdy but deceptively ramshackle looking fishing boat provided the final link to Indonesia. For two days, Rafi and Rashida stayed with a family group of Hazra refugees who were waiting for UNHCR processing of their application to settle in Australia. Before the family fled their homeland, father had sealed the family's important documents inside a bag which he carried always under his clothing. Having documents meant that the application process would take less time than otherwise. On the third day, they said their farewell to the Hazra family and set off to make a deal with the people smugglers offering their services from cafes near the port. Some of the boats they saw did not seem very seaworthy; they were dirty and looked as if they would sink in a heavy sea. Eventually Rafi spotted boat that appeared to be a little better condition than the others. As they had no documents to offer the people smugglers (who had a side business in selling documents on to others) the price was higher, but Rafi did not care, he was focussed on his father's instructions, and gladly handed the agreed amount to the ship's captain, Wahid. Rashida did not like the look of Wahid at all. He watched her with furtive glances, running his eyes over her body, but she dared not tell Rafi - he had enough worries already. Wahid informed them that the boat would set sail for Australia in a few hours so they should not leave the docks. As they set out to find food in one of the many markets on the docks, Rashida had the ominous feeling that Wahid was still staring at her. Once or twice she turned around and sure enough, the captain was there in the distance, watching her. She did not say anything to Rafi; perhaps she would say something later. About nine o'clock at night, they boarded the boat. There were two families with young children and a few married couples, but most of the passengers were single men. The captain informed all the passengers that their destination would be Christmas Island. "All going well, we should reach the island in a couple of days." He gave orders to his crew to start the motors. During the first days of their trip, the sea was very calm. A light breeze blew and most of the passengers passed their time

looking out over the ocean, amused by the porpoises and dolphins following the ship. Without warning the weather changed dramatically. The sky darkened with ominous black clouds, and thunder and lightning filled the air. Huge waves crashed over the boat and the captain ordered the passengers below. Rashida felt afraid. Wahid put his arm around her and said, “Don’t worry, beautiful girl, this won’t last for long. We are nearly at Christmas Island.” Rashida pulled away from him and clung to Rafi, who had not noticed anything amiss with Wahid. They went below, clutching the rails as the boat heaved wildly from stem to stern. Below the deck there was confusion. People were rolling about, some were seasick. The stench was horrible. Rashida clung harder to Rafi. She was terrified. Was this how it was all going to end? Rafi, as usual, was a tower of strength. He patted her hand and spoke to her. “You’ll be all right,” he said softly. Rashida looked up only to see the face of Wahid regarding her. She looked away in disgust and decided to tell Rafi how she felt about the captain. Rafi looked up, but Wahid was nowhere to be seen. The storm went on and on. Suddenly there was a shattering crash and water began pouring in. The passengers screamed in horror and the boat lurched from side to side. In a matter of seconds, people were scattered everywhere, bumping into each other in panic, wondering what to do next. Rafi and Rashida struggled up to the deck, trying to see what was going on. As they clung together, Rafi reached over, took off his oilskin bag and placed it on Rashida. He shouted, “If we get separated, you keep the bag and remember the numbers 9-7-7-6-1!” There was a sickening thud as the boat broke into pieces. Rafi and Rashida were thrust into the water and separated. Only the screams of the passengers could be heard above the raging seas!

CHAPTER 4 ~ NEW LIFE UNFOLDS

“Whaaat ...!” Rashida struggled to wake. A firm hand was shaking her roughly. She felt damp sand beneath her body; a rush of memories, a tumult of emotions overwhelmed her and she sat bolt

upright, eyes wide with the remembered horror. Standing above her was Wahid, the captain of the ship that was supposed to take them safely to Australia.

“What do you want with me?” she spat angrily. Wahid looked surprised. He put his arm around her but she shrugged him off with an angry gesture.

“Take your hands off me!” she shouted. “It’s your fault that my brother and all the others drowned. You knew your boat was unseaworthy but you took our money anyway! You promised to bring us to a safe place but you only wanted our money and all those people drowned because of your lies — murderer!” Rashida jumped up. “Leave me alone. Don’t ever come near me again!”

Shaking with rage, she strode towards the cluster of buildings on the island. Wahid was taken aback. “Pretty girl,” he shouted after her, “when you calm down, you will need a friend and it will only be a matter of time before you come to me.”

Wahid had the idea that women, especially Afghan women, were so dependent on men that they could not function without them. Wahid watched her as she disappeared out of sight. “I wonder what is in that oilskin bag she guards so closely,” he mused. “Maybe it’s money, and in that case, I’ll keep a close eye on her.” He felt no guilt about the deaths he had caused. His only thought was for himself. He wanted Rashida; she was so beautiful and from what he had observed, she had a lot of money too. Wahid lit a cigarette and gazed thoughtfully out to sea.

Rashida opened the door of the nearest building and looked in. People were standing about, some quiet and staring, others weeping. Their damp clothes clung to them. There were people trying to comfort the refugees. Some were obviously medical personnel as they attended to the patients on high narrow beds, while others offered trays of food to the unhappy boat people.

“I must be strong for Rafi,” thought Rashida. “When I get rid of these wet clothes, I will see what I can do to help.” She tentatively approached a friendly looking man and asked if she could help in any way. The man stopped what he was doing and said to Rashida, “Yes, we need all the help we can get right now. It’s very kind of you. Go over to the lady who is handing out dry clothes and tell her I sent you. Then come back here and you can help me deal with some of these poor people.”

He continued, "Thank you for offering to help. It's an added bonus that you speak English so well."

Rashida smiled and went across to the woman who was outfitting the refugees with clothes. She selected some garments and went behind a screen to change, carefully putting the precious oilskin bag over the top of her dry clothing. Rashida returned to the friendly man, noticing his ID badge said "Dr Mike". She was so busy over the next few hours that she failed to notice Wahid. He was observing her from a distance and wondering how long it would be before he had Rashida eating out of his hand. He smiled to himself in anticipation.

The time passed quickly and when Mike called for a meal break, Rashida was surprised to realise that she was indeed very hungry. Mike told her about his family in Australia, including a brother who was in charge of trying to place refugees in suitable employment, after he had sorted out their backgrounds of course. His brother Joe had worked at Christmas Island for some years and had placed many refugees in suitable employment. "I'll introduce you to him some time. I am sure he will have no trouble in finding you a job."

"That's very kind of you, Mike," said Rashida. "I have to find work quickly and get to Australia." Over tea she told Mike about what had happened to her over the last few months; her parents' death, their flight from Afghanistan to Indonesia, and the death of Rafi. When she told him of her brother's death, she could not help crying. Mike took her hand and tried to comfort her.

She asked Mike if anything could be done to prosecute Wahid, but he shook his head. "There are a lot like him, bringing boatloads of people out here. The people they bring out are so trusting and they give all their money to these people because they are so desperate to get away from the terrors they have experienced. When the boats are completely unseaworthy, people like Wahid just go back to Indonesia, buy more leaky boats and pick up more refugees. They get away with murder, and nothing can be done about them."

Rashida shook her head in disbelief. "That just sounds like what happened in our case," she said. She told Mike what Wahid had said to her and how he had treated her. Mike told her to stick close to him for the time she was on Christmas Island. Somehow she felt safe with him. "Now you'd

better get some sleep, young lady,” he said. “We’ve got another busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Rashida thanked Mike and went to find a bed in the women’s quarters.

Just as she reached the door, she felt a hand on her arm. She turned to find Wahid leering at her.

“Hello, my beauty,” he said in a soft oily voice. “Don’t you want to come and sleep with me?”

Spinning around, she slapped him hard across the face. “I told you to get away from me,” she shouted. “If you touch me or come near me again, I’ll kill you!”

Wahid rubbed his cheek. “Little spitfire,” he said to himself, “but I like my women that way. It will be fun taming her when the time comes.” With that remark he turned on his heel and made his way to the men’s quarters.

Mike and Rashida worked together for the next few weeks. She told him what Wahid had said and that she had slapped his face. “I’ll have a word with him,” said Mike.

“No, don’t do that,” said Rashida. “That will only make things worse. I can handle it.”

“I can see you are a very determined young lady,” said Mike. “Anyway, I’ve got some good news for you today,” he said. “I’ve had a word with my brother about you and I have to take you to meet him this afternoon. What do you think of that?”

Rashida was so grateful. She did not want to stay at the detention centre for any length of time. She wanted to be out there with a job that could finally get her to Australia so she could try to find her relatives. She had a sobering thought. “Mike, what about my papers? My brother and I left Afghanistan in such a hurry that we didn’t think about passports or anything. Will that go against me?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Mike. “I’ve had a word with Joe and he said as long as someone can vouch for you, it should be OK - I’ll vouch for you, and so will Joe.”

“Oh, thank you so much, Mike,” said Rashida. “You are so kind. I’m so glad I met you.”

Promptly at three o’clock, Mike took Rashida over to meet his brother Joe. Rashida liked him at once. She felt comfortable talking to him. Joe asked her what type of work she could do. Rashida explained that in Afghanistan she was a primary school teacher aide. She had had a good

education because her father believed in the value of education for both girls as well as boys. She recalled him explaining to her uncle, who had questioned the wisdom of schooling for girls. "If our country is to return to its greatness of a long time ago, we must ensure a modern education for all – knowledge and understanding of science, culture, and society beyond our own borders as well as locally. Advancement cannot come from looking inwards. I believe that a well-educated mother will inspire her children to look outwards, to seek knowledge in all the things that our country so desperately needs." Her father's words as clear and loud in her thoughts as if he was standing beside her.

"I was employed at a girls' school to teach English," she told Joe in a hopeful voice. Joe rummaged through some papers on his desk.

"Unfortunately I can't offer you a job as a teacher in Australia because you would have to undergo some intensive training, but Mike told me that you were keen to get a job and search for your relatives. Is that right?"

"Yes," replied Rashida. "I will take anything at the moment. Perhaps I could do that intensive training you spoke of at a later date, because I would love to be a teacher again."

"Mm," said Joe. He rummaged through the papers scattered on his desk. "Ah, here we are," he said. "I have a vacancy on a cattle station in south-west Queensland for a governess to teach two young boys, aged 10 and 11. The owner of the station lost his wife to cancer about six months ago." He looked expectantly at Rashida. "Would you be interested in a position like that for a while?"

"Oh yes," replied Rashida, "but you must tell me all about the cattle stations in Australia, as I have no idea about that sort of life."

"Ask Mike to tell you all about it," said Joe. "In fact, it so happens that we know the owner of the station very well. We all used to go to school together."

"If the owner is as nice as you and Mike, then I will be quite happy to take the job," said Rashida.

Over the next few days, Mike told her all about the cattle station, which was about 260 kilometres out of Charleville in south-west Queensland. Both brothers had spent school holidays there. Mike said, “Although we were on holidays, we helped with mustering cattle and joined in all sorts of activities on the station.” Mike paused as he recalled the good times he and his brother had had during the school holidays. “Rashida, sometimes it’s a very hard life on a cattle station in the outback. The climate is very harsh, and when it is dry and there is no grass for the cattle, they have to be taken out to where they can feed on the mulga trees.”

Rashida interrupted. “What are the mulga trees?”

Mike replied, “Mulga trees grow well in dry, hot climates like the outback of south-west Queensland. They are lifesavers for the livestock. Where the mulga trees are tall, you have to cut the branches down so that the cattle can reach them. The cattle eat the branches and all.” He paused for a moment. “That’s when Joe and I first learned to use a chain saw; we were only about ten years old at the time.”

“I do hope I can cope with all this,” said Rashida, “but I’m really looking forward to my new life.”

“You’ll be fine, I’m sure,” replied Mike. “But now it’s time to eat.” They stood up and went to join Joe for the evening meal.

In a few short weeks, the paperwork had been done and Rashida found herself on a plane bound for Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland. From there she was to take a short flight on a smaller plane that would land in the beautiful garden city of Toowoomba, at the top of the Great Dividing Range. Her new employer, Mr Steven West, would meet her there. The final leg of the journey would be by road. There was only one problem — Wahid had slyly organised to be on the same plane!

CHAPTER 5 ~ FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Rashida's plane landed in Brisbane and a smiling hostess guided those passengers continuing on to Toowoomba to the gate for the planes flying to western Queensland. Rashida made sure she kept close to the group of friendly people she had met on the plane. She wanted to avoid the loathsome Wahid at any cost. She wondered why he was on the plane at all and hoped he would disappear when the plane landed at Toowoomba.

Joe had told her that he had been in touch with Steven West, the owner of Mulga Lakes Station, who had agreed to make the long road trip to Toowoomba in order to meet her from the 'plane. Joe and Mike thought it would be a good idea for Steven and his young sons to meet her in Toowoomba. On the drive out to the station they could all get to know each other and Rashida would have a more gradual introduction to the type of country that would be her home for some time.

Rashida knew that the trip to Toowoomba would be fairly short. She glanced out of the plane window. The country below was lush and green. She was a little anxious as she wondered what her employer would be like, and wondered how she would get along with his boys. Suddenly there was no time for any further thought as the plane screeched along the tarmac and came to an abrupt stop not far from a building labelled Toowoomba Airport – Gateway to the Outback.

Rashida halted before descending the steps of the aeroplane. “Another border to cross; Inshallah this is the final one,” she thought.

Meanwhile, Steven stood behind the security fence, watching the passengers disembarking from the plane. The vulnerable beauty of the slightly built girl pausing at the top of the aeroplane steps caused a sudden quickening of his pulse; a

quickening he immediately stilled, hauling the emotion back to where it belonged — behind the shield that bordered his heart.

Rashida walked across the tarmac towards the airport lounge and looked around. She had no time to wonder about Wahid as three figures stepped forward from the crowd of people waiting by the

building; a tall man and two small boys. The man removed his hat and said in a soft voice, “Miss Rashida Kahn? I am Steven West, and these are my sons Nick and Alex.” He offered his hand to Rashida, who took it timidly.

“I’m so pleased to meet you, Mr West,” she said.

“Don’t bother about the ‘Mr’ bit,” replied the man. “Just call me Steven.” He formally introduced Nick and Alex, who shook her hand and regarded her politely but curiously.

Rashida studied the man in front of her. Tall, probably over two metres, his brown wavy hair topped a deeply tanned face that featured the most penetrating blue eyes Rashida had ever seen. Unlike the men in her own country, this man stood tall and confident, and she could not help but notice the hard muscles through his open-neck checked shirt. A thick brown leather belt with a small pouch on the right side topped his faded well-fitting jeans. Rashida’s felt a small shiver of excitement as she realised that, for a while at least, her future was linked with this man. She had the distinct impression that he was a capable and energetic person who could handle any situation, however tough it might be.

Rashida glanced at the boys from under her eyelids. They were regarding her with mixed expressions on their faces then Nick, the older boy, nudged his brother and they began to laugh softly. Immediately Steven glanced down at them and they ceased giggling and stood quietly.

Steven looked slightly embarrassed as he said, “Don’t mind the boys, Rashida. I have to pull them into line occasionally but normally they are quite well-behaved.”

Rashida was not convinced. At that moment she experienced a ripple of uncertainty. “How am I going to deal with these boys?” she thought to herself. “Will I ever be able to get along with them? Will they ever learn to like me?”

Steven must have noticed her expression. He looked down at her with a smile on his face then turned towards his sons. “Now, boys,” he said, “this is Rashida and she is going to be your teacher for a while. She has come all the way from Afghanistan. She does not know much about our

country, so I am relying on you to show her round and teach her all about outback Australia. Will you do that for me?"

The boys' faces lit up and they nodded enthusiastically. Nick said, "Gee, we'd like that, wouldn't we, Alex?"

"Too right," replied Alex. "And we could learn all about Rashida's country too."

Rashida relaxed somewhat at these words but she was still feeling a bit self-conscious, and wished fervently that she could talk to children the way Steven could. He did not talk down to his sons but had an easy confident way of communicating with them. Rashida found her spirits rising.

Meanwhile Steven was regarding Rashida with interest. She was dressed neatly in long pants and a coloured shirt. She was very beautiful, with long dark hair, a faultless complexion and a stunning figure, but as he looked more intently at her, he sensed her sadness. Mike and Joe had told him what she had been through over the last few months. He felt that she was too young to have experienced so much sorrow in her life and he made up his mind that he would do everything in his power to make her happy in her new environment. Steven clapped his hands together and said in a brisk tone, "Right, guys, we'd better get going. We've got a long drive in front of us. We have about five hours of daylight left so we'll be able to show Rashida some of the local scenery. Now, we'd better get Rashid's luggage."

"Oh, but I've just got this overnight bag," she said. "All my things were lost when the boat sank." She looked worriedly at Steven.

"That's OK then," said Steven. He didn't seem at all perturbed by her reply. "So let's get moving." He turned on his heel and Rashida and the two boys followed him out of the airport lounge where his Toyota Landcruiser was parked. Steven idly wondered what was in the oilskin bag that Rashida wore over her shoulder but he soon dismissed these thoughts, feeling it was none of his business.

Steven drove around Toowoomba to show Rashida a little of the city before turning on to the Warrego Highway, which led directly to Charleville. After several kilometres she noticed the

scenery changed, instead of the lush greenery of Toowoomba, the countryside became drier. The trees were bare of green leaves and the grass was the colour of straw.

“Is the country as dry as this all the time?” she asked.

“No,” replied Steven, “only in the dry season, and that’s what we are in now.” Rashida sat back and gazed out of the window. As far as the eye could see, the country was flat. The soil varied from sandy to red dirt. Steven continued, “You would not recognise this country when we have a proper wet season,” he said. “The landscape completely changes. The trees are full of fresh leaves and the grass is so green, and flowers and animals appear seemingly out of nowhere. It’s such a contrast from what you are seeing today.”

Rashida said, “Somehow this land reminds me a little bit of Afghanistan. My country is a land of contrasts too but during our winter, it is very cold and we get a lot of snow. For instance, the road from Kabul to Kandahar is nearly five hundred kilometres long and there is hardly any vegetation at all. It is so dreary and monotonous. I remember driving there when I was a small child with my parents and brother. It was so cold that we almost froze. It took us about eight hours to do that trip.”

“What was the road like?” enquired Steven.

“Oh, it was a straight bitumen road built by the Russians when they invaded Afghanistan,” replied Rashida. “But it’s so different when the snow melts. You would not recognise the landscape, as it becomes really fertile and beautiful. I am dying to see the country out here. I should imagine that it will be similar.”

“We haven’t had a proper wet season for a couple of years now,” said Steven, “so perhaps your coming out here will prove lucky for us.” Rashida smiled. Steven noticed the difference a smile made to her face. She was a very beautiful young woman and he hoped to see her smile a lot more often. He wanted her to be happy after the terrible time she had had over the last few months.

A voice came from the back seat. “Gee, Dad, I’m so hungry,” said Nick. “When are we going to stop for something to eat?”

Steven looked at his watch. “We are just about in Roma,” he said. “We’ll go to McDonalds for lunch.”

“Great!” exclaimed Alex, “I’m just starving!”

Steven grinned at Rashida and it seemed no time before the town of Roma came into sight. Soon the red and yellow Big Mac sign appeared and Steven steered the Landcruiser into the McDonald’s parking lot. He turned to the boys and smiled. “You’d both better enjoy your meal here as it will be the last time you’ll visit McDonalds for a while.” He grinned at Rashida and explained, “We don’t have a McDonalds in Charleville.” Rashida nodded, bemusedly returning the smile as she realised that McDonalds was place to eat.

CHAPTER 6 ~ WAHID MAKES SOME DECISIONS

Wahid watched Rashida’s every move from behind a tree at the Toowoomba Airport. He observed her meeting with a man and two small boys and frowned. “What’s going on?” he wondered. “Who are these people and what do they want with Rashida?” He saw the group climb into a Toyota Landcruiser and drive off. Quickly he memorised the number plate and wrote it down in his small notebook, which he then placed in his pocket. He stepped outside and contemplated on what to do next. He had already made a start. The number plate of the Landcruiser would come in handy. His thoughts returned to Rashida. He’d noticed that she was still wearing the small oilskin bag. Wahid was convinced that she was carrying something very valuable and he was determined to find out what it was. “I’ll take what’s in the bag, and I’ll make her mine,” he said to himself vehemently. “She’ll be sorry for the way she has treated me!” Wahid was already planning his next move.

He stepped back into the airport and booked the next flight to Brisbane, where he had many Indonesian friends. They too were in the people-smuggling business so Wahid felt sure that they would have some ideas of what he could do next. He thought that the beautiful Afghan girl was very foolish not to succumb to his charms. After all, he was making plenty of money from his illegal activities and he was now a very rich man. He pondered over the last trip, and the many refugees who had drowned. "Pity about that," he thought, "But that's life." He felt neither responsibility for the tragedy nor compassion for those who had entrusted him with their lives. There were only two questions uppermost in his mind. Firstly, would he return to Indonesia and procure another boat? Secondly, would he stay in Australia for a while and pursue Rashida? As the plane droned on towards Brisbane, Wahid thought about these two options. He leaned back in his seat, closed his eyes and tried to make up his mind as to which path he would follow.

At Brisbane Airport, Wahid was met by a group of his Indonesian friends. They were so glad to see him. His wife was also there to meet him. He gave her a perfunctory kiss on her cheek. Ayesha was dressed in the typical Moslem way; she was wearing an abaya or yashmak and her head was covered modestly with a scarf. She wore sandals on her feet.

Wahid surveyed her and noticed that she was putting on weight, her skin was sallow and she was showing signs of ageing. He had the idea that she was not looking after herself the way she should. "I must talk to her about it sometime," he thought. But he was not overly worried. He felt it was time for a change in his domestic situation but the time was not yet ripe. He could afford to wait for a while. He surveyed his wife from under his eyes and compared her to Rashida. What a difference! He pictured Rashida with her fabulous figure and flawless skin. Yes, it would be fun taming her and eventually owning her. He smiled to himself in anticipation. Ayesha thought he was smiling at her and she looked lovingly up at her husband.

That night Wahid's Indonesian friends took him out to a nightclub, where they partied until after midnight. They drank heavily and when the club closed, they took women to their hotel rooms and partied some more. Wahid's wife stayed at home. She was content and did not mind her husband going out with his friends though she had no idea what they were all up to, and would

have been shocked and embarrassed if she had. She trusted Wahid and thought that he felt the same way about her. Little did she know that her husband was already planning to pursue another younger and much more attractive woman.

Wahid, in his drunken state, was already boasting about Rashida.

“Is she your latest conquest?” asked one of his companions. His friends were all too aware of his behaviour when he came to Australia. They had seen it all before. In fact, his friends did the same as Wahid. Most of them were married, but they still picked up women for pleasure and then dropped them just as easily. They thought their behaviour was perfectly normal.

“What’s this one like?” continued his friend in a drunken voice.

By this time Wahid was so intoxicated that he was slurring his words. “I just can’t tell you how beautiful she is,” he said loudly so that all his friends could hear. “She’s very rich as well,” he continued.

“And does she share your feelings?” asked another friend.

Wahid paused. “Er, well, not just yet,” he replied. “But she will.”

“Of course she will,” added his friend in an equally loud voice.

“They all come round to our way of thinking in time, don’t they?”

It was nearly daylight when the Indonesians finally ended their party. The women left and Wahid and his friends collapsed on the beds in the hotel room. Wahid’s last thoughts before he went to sleep were about Rashida.

It was late when they woke up. Wahid rubbed his eyes and for a moment he wondered where he was. He looked at his friends, who seemed to be in the same sorry state as he was. They ordered breakfast to be brought up to the room and while they ate, discussed the fun of the night before.

“Good party last night, eh, Wahid?” one said as he yawned.

Wahid nodded. “But now let’s get down to some serious business,” he said. “I need your advice about a few things.” He told his friends about what had transpired on his latest trip, how the boat

had fallen apart and sunk in the rough seas near Christmas Island. He mentioned that several refugees had drowned and how he could now be in trouble with the authorities. “So I think it would be a good idea for me to lay low for a while.”

His friends thought that was a good idea. “Wait till things die down,” said one. “You’ll be safe with us here. But what will you do while you are here?”

Wahid paused and thought for a moment then turned to one of his friends. “I want you to do something for me.” He took out his pocket book and showed his friend the registration number he had taken down in Toowoomba. He tore the page out of the book, handed it to his friend, and explained what he wanted him to do. The man listened carefully, nodded and agreed to do what Wahid had asked of him.

CHAPTER 7 ~ JOURNEY TO THE OUTBACK

The boys were so excited they could hardly wait to order their Special Maccas Meal. Steven looked at the pile of food in front of the boys and said, “How on earth are you going to get through all of that?” Rashida’s eyes opened wide then she looked at Steven and smiled. “Well, Rashida, now it’s your turn.” Rashida studied the menu and ordered then Steven did the same. Both of the adults’ meals fit on one tray compared to those ordered by the boys, which required a tray each. The boys chose a table.

“Two, four, six, eight, bog in, don’t wait!” said Alex as he unwrapped his burger and grinned cheekily at his father. They did.

Steven glanced at Rashida. “It’s the quietest I’ve ever seen these two,” he said with a smile. He finished his meal and turned to his sons. “Now, boys,” he said, “look after Rashida for a short

while. I've got a bit of business to attend to in town." The boys hardly raised their eyes. They were too busy eating. Steven disappeared out the door.

"Wonder where he's going?" asked Nick.

"Don't know," replied Alex. Rashida smiled at the boys. They both had their mouths full. Alex continued, "Gee, you don't eat much, Rashida," he said. "Aren't you hungry?"

"No," replied Rashida, "but I'm sure I'll get my appetite back when I get to your place."

"That's good," said Alex. "You could do with fattening up a bit!"

"Don't be rude!" exclaimed Nick.

Steven made for the store that sold every type of clothes for the outback. As he strode through the door, a friendly voice said, "Why, good afternoon, Steve, what can I do for you today?" He recognised Jenny, who was part owner of the largest clothing store in Roma.

He looked sheepishly at her for a moment and then began, "Hi, Jen. ...Er, I do have a bit of a problem. I've got this girl coming out to work for me. She is going to be governess to the boys for a while. Only trouble is that she has no gear with her. All her belongings went down when the ship she arrived on sank." He continued, "You see, she's a refugee from Afghanistan. In fact, she used to be a teacher aide there."

"How terrible!" Jenny was genuinely sympathetic. "Well, let's get down to business," she said briskly. "For a start, what do you want to buy and about what size would she be?"

Steven looked puzzled. "Well," he replied, "I think she'd be about your size, although I think she's slightly taller than you."

"OK then. No problem," said Jenny. "Well, let's get this sorted." In no time she had a pile of clothes on the counter in front of Steven. "I suppose you want a few changes of everything for her," she said.

“Er, yes, Jen,” he said. He looked at the pile of clothing. There were summer and winter shirts, pairs of jeans, warm jumpers for the winter, as well as summer and winter PJs – in fact, everything one could imagine. “I’ll bet you’ve done this lots of times before,” he said.

“Sure have,” replied Jenny in a friendly voice. “Now, Steve, what about boots? I’ll put a couple of different sizes in with the clothes and she can try them. You can return them when you come to town next time.” She selected two pairs of elastic sided boots and placed them beside the pile of clothes. Then Jenny thought for a minute and said, “Oh and she’ll need some other bits and pieces.” She went to another section of the store, returning with a few items packed into plastic bags. “Underwear and stuff like that,” she said with an understanding smile. She could see that Steven was a tiny bit embarrassed. “Now, last thing, she’s just got to have an Akubra hat!”

“Right,” said Steven. “Thanks so much, Jen. You’ve been so kind and helpful. I won’t forget this.” He picked up the parcels, said goodbye and promised to bring the boys in to see her next time he was in Roma. When he returned to Maccas, the boys had finished eating and were deep in conversation with Rashida.

“Hi, Dad!” cried Alex. “Guess what? Nick and I are going to teach Rashida to ride. She’s never been on a horse before, so I reckon we could find a nice quiet horse for her to begin with.”

“That’s great,” said Steven.

“What have you got there, Dad?” asked Nick, looking at the parcels with great interest.

“Oh, just a few bits and pieces for Rashida,” replied Steven. He handed some of the parcels to her and, before she could say anything, turned to the boys and said, “OK guys, into

the Landcruiser and let’s get going. The sooner we get going, the better. We’ll overnight in Charleville at the Waltzing Matilda Motel and we should be home about lunch time tomorrow.”

Rashida could see that the boys were very excited at the prospect of getting home. She was feeling a little apprehensive about reaching her destination and wondering just how she would cope. She felt embarrassed about all the clothes that Steven had bought for her and resolved that she would pay him back as soon as possible. But there was no time to talk to Steven as the boys kept up a

constant chatter from the back seat most of the way to Charleville. The late afternoon sun cast shadows over the road and the branches of the trees were waving softly in the breeze.

“Look out for kangaroos and wallabies, Dad,” shouted Nick.

“Yeah, Dad,” added Alex. “We might even be lucky enough to see a few emus.”

Rashida looked puzzled. “I’ve never seen these animals,” she said. “I would…”

She was interrupted by Steven jamming on the brakes. A huge kangaroo bounded out of the bush, followed by a group of smaller ones.

“There, Rashida, now you’ve seen your first Australian native animal!” he exclaimed. “What do you think?”

“I think they look very nice,” she said hesitatingly. “Are they dangerous?”

“No,” replied Steven. “A lot of the time they are really a nuisance because in our dry season they eat the grass which is meant for our cattle and sheep. Sometimes at our place we even have to employ special people to get rid of some of them.”

“Oh,” said Rashida, “but they look such beautiful animals.”

“Yes, it is a shame,” replied Steven. “The boys and I love all animals and we are very upset when we have to do things like getting rid of some of the kangaroos and wallabies, but here in the outback, our first duty is to look after our sheep and cattle.”

“I’ve got a lot to learn about life in the outback,” said Rashida ruefully.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” replied Steven kindly.

They drove on in silence for a few kilometres then Alex shouted, “Hey! Look, Dad! Stop! There are a few emus ahead of us!” He continued, “Look, Rashida! There’s a family of emus! A dad and the chicks out for their evening stroll!”

Steven pulled over and they all got out of the car. Rashida looked curiously at the emu family. They were like no other birds she had ever seen in her life. The father was huge and seemed to be enjoying their walk. They made no attempt to hurry across the road. The little chicks were

oblivious to the strangers and just followed in the steps of their parent. With a last glance at the humans, they disappeared into the bush on the other side of the road. Rashida could not help laughing. "I've never seen anything like them," she said. Steven and the boys were happy for her.

The big four-wheel drive ate up the distance; Steven was a careful, but not a slow, driver. The boys in the back seat told stories about other strange bush animals they hoped to show to Rashida at a later date. Rashida listened to them with great interest, although she was still a little upset about the kangaroos.

Finally they reached Charleville and booked into the Waltzing Matilda Motel for the night. Rashida was amazed by how friendly the people were towards her.

When the boys had gone to bed, she at last had a chance to talk to Steven. "I really want to thank you for being so kind to me," she said. "I will pay you back just as soon as I can."

"Don't worry about it," said Steven. "I know it's very different from the life you have led in the past. It will take some time for you to get used to the way we do things out here, but so far you're doing fine."

Rashida was not convinced. She looked worriedly at Steven and then said, "What about the boys? I'm still not sure how and what to teach them."

"They get their lessons from the School of Distance Education and when they finish their tests, the papers are sent in to be marked. So really all you will have to do is supervise the boys and help explain anything that they do not understand."

Rashida breathed a long sigh of relief. She looked at Steven and said, "That won't be difficult. I was a primary school teacher aide in Afghanistan. I am looking forward to working with the boys. Now I know that I have a plan to follow, it will be much easier for both the boys and me." She sat back looking much more relaxed, and Steven could not help but notice again how attractive she was, especially when she smiled.

Steven and Rashida spent quite some time in the lounge drinking coffee and discussing the events of the day. Most of the things they had done were new to her but Steven sensed that she was

already more relaxed than when she'd first met them. He knew that the boys were beginning to like her already otherwise they would never have even mentioned wanting to teach her to ride a horse! That was definitely a plus in his estimation. Time passed pleasantly with more conversation. Rashida wondered idly if she would ever run into the horrible Wahid again. She hoped not.

Steven was wondering, too, but about that little bag she wore around her all the time. He dismissed it as a passing thought as it did not seem to be any business of his. Yawning, he said, "Well, young lady, I guess we should turn in. It's the last leg of our trip tomorrow, so we'll get an early start after breakfast." They stood up and Steven walked her to her room and said goodnight.

Rashida undressed after opening some of the packages and selecting a pair of pyjamas. Curiosity got the better of her and she opened more packages. When she came to the parcels of underwear, she could feel her face getting warmer. She felt a great deal of affection for Steven because of his kindness to her. She determined again that she would not let him down and would really try hard with the boys' education. She tried on the jeans, shirts and jumpers and they all fitted perfectly. Next she tried on the boots. One pair was a bit small but she was surprised to find that the other pair was just right. She put on the Akubra hat and looked at her reflection in the mirror. A smiling face looked back at her. Rashida glanced at the lock – it was nearly 11 pm. "No wonder my eyelids are feeling heavy," she thought. She lay down on the bed and settled into a deep untroubled sleep.

CHAPTER 8 ~ WAHID PLANS A TRIP

Sound surged into the dark street as Wahid pushed open the heavy entrance door to the nightclub. "Let's see what the talent is like here." He motioned his friends to follow. Sound and harsh flashing light battered their senses as they moved smoothly alongside the dance floor, past

bodies gyrating under multi-coloured pulsating strobe lights, towards the dimly-lit area beyond. Wahid's face brightened with excitement as he spotted a table occupied by three attractive girls. "Come on," he urged his friends. "We'll make for that table before anyone else closes in."

The three friends walked over to the table and introduced themselves politely as wealthy businessmen from Indonesia. "What sort of business are you in?" asked one of the girls. Wahid answered at once with a smile. "Importing," he replied, and his friends nodded in agreement. "Now, would you beautiful girls like another drink?" The girls nodded. Wahid went to the bar and ordered drinks for the table. In no time at all, they were all chatting easily. Wahid and his friends could be extraordinarily polite when the occasion demanded and the girls were impressed with the attentive businessmen and their conversation. They had no way of knowing that their three new friends were people smugglers from Indonesia.

The night passed pleasantly with drinking, dancing and conversation. It was close to midnight when Wahid suggested that they go to a quieter place where they could continue enjoying themselves.

"What sort of a place?" asked one of the girls.

Wahid beamed at her. "Trust me," he said, smiling at her. "You will love it."

The men escorted the three girls outside to where a uniformed chauffer was waiting beside a stretch limo. The girls' eyes widened; these men were rich indeed! One of the girls cried, "Wow! I've never been in a stretch limo before."

"Get in, girls," said Wahid, ushering them forward as the chauffer held the door. While the girls were settling into the plush seats, Wahid and his friends exchanged triumphant glances. Just as they were about to join the girls, a man slid out of the shadows.

"Which one of you is Wahid Kusomo?" He demanded.

"Who wants to know?" asked Wahid. For once in his life, Wahid appeared to be taken aback.

Dressed in the neat suit of a government official, the man looked to be somebody important. He was. The man consulted some papers, turned to the Indonesians and, flashing an ID badge, said,

“Will Jennings — Department of Immigration. I believe that Wahid Kusomo can provide information about a boat which recently sank near Christmas Island. It was carrying refugees, and a number from Afghanistan were drowned. Please come with me now, Mr Kusomo. You are not formally under arrest. I just want to ask you a few questions.”

Wahid opened his mouth in amazement. “I – I had nothing to do with it,” he stuttered. “You can’t make me come with you either,” he added more firmly, noticing that the man was not holding a firearm.

Will Jennings surveyed Wahid and said softly, “Mr Kusomo, if you don’t come with me now, I will have no option but to arrest you and take you into custody.”

Wahid opened his mouth and started shaking. He opened his mouth to argue, but no words emerged. He thought quickly for a moment and then said suddenly in Indonesian, “Come on, let’s get out of here!” The three Indonesians took off down a side alley and disappeared into the darkness.

Motioning the girls in the limo to stay where they were, Will Jennings speed-dialled a number on his mobile phone and spoke for a short while. To the dismayed girls, it seemed they heard sirens almost immediately and a number of cars appeared. They had no idea that their night out with such charming company would end like this!

After being transported to a police station the girls were extensively questioned by members of the Immigration Department and only when the officials were satisfied that the girls knew nothing about their companions were they allowed to leave. Horrified to learn that they had been dealing with some of the worst low-life criminals they could have ever met, they decided that never again would they be duped by such seemingly charming, smooth-talking individuals.

Meanwhile Wahid and his companions made their way to a small dingy café that was owned by another of Wahid’s friends, where they knew they would be safe for the time being. One of Wahid’s friends looked at him and said, “Well, what do we do now? The police and Immigration will be looking for us everywhere from now on.”

Wahid said, "They mainly want me, so I've got to stay out of sight for a while."

His companions looked troubled. "No, they'll be after us all. See what you've done! We're all in trouble now! You should have gone back to Indonesia when you had the chance, instead of living it up here with your endless cavorting around with prostitutes and flashing your money around! Your family and friends will be involved now. There's no escape for you, Wahid!"

Wahid glared at his so-called friends. "And who provided you with all the money and made sure you enjoyed yourselves?" he asked, bitterly. "You've had such a wonderful time spending my money and sharing everything with me. And this is all I get

in return!" He surveyed his two companions. "And you call yourselves friends," he ended sadly. For a brief moment, his friends looked shamefaced, but that mood did not last for long.

They continued berating him, feeling sorry for themselves and blaming him for their involvement until Wahid stood up angrily and thumped his fist on the table. "I've had enough of you both," he said. "I'll work this thing out for myself. And I suggest you do the same!" He stalked out of the dimly-lit café into the dark night, leaving the others flabbergasted, wondering what to do next.

Hands in his pockets, he walked the dark streets, carefully avoiding the well-lit main streets in case the authorities were already looking for him. All the time he was racking his brains for a solution to this latest problem. "I can't go home because that's the first place they'll try to find me! I can't book into a hotel as they'll be having them watched. I can't rely on friends anymore, because I don't know now who my friends really are! What a mess they've got me into!"

Wahid walked the streets until it was nearly dawn. His face was drawn and haggard and his eyes felt heavy from lack of sleep. He was completely exhausted. He sat down on a seat in a nearby park and wondered what he was going to do next. A police car drove slowly by. Wahid held his breath, but the car moved on, the driver not even glancing in his direction. Wahid let his breath out and sighed with relief.

At once he became aware of the need not to attract attention. He got up from his seat and mingled with other early-morning risers. Wahid was disheartened. He was not used to feeling so

humiliated. He was accustomed to throwing around money and ordering people to do things for him. This was a new experience, and one that he did not relish. At one stage he even thought about his wife and how she might react, but he dismissed these thoughts almost immediately. Then he thought about Rashida. It was her fault that he was in this position. His heart beat rapidly and he could picture her in front of him — her smooth skin, her beautiful face and features, and the way she had treated him. A rush of anger ran through him. “If only…” he said to himself.

Suddenly he had an idea. He thought back to when he was at the airport in Toowoomba, remembering that he had written down the number of the vehicle as a man was helping Rashida climb

into it. It was a wonder he hadn’t thought of it before. Quickly he pulled out his mobile phone and dialled a number. He tapped his fingers as he waited impatiently for an answer.

“Hello, Adhi speaking.”

“Hello, Adhi, this is Wahid. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” said the voice, “but I hear you are in a spot of bother.”

“So word has already got around?” replied Wahid, dejectedly. “Yes, I am in a spot of bother and I need your help.”

“So, what can I do for you?” asked Adhi cautiously.

Wahid took a deep breath and began, “Remember when I met you in Brisbane, I gave you some particulars of a vehicle and asked you to find out the name of the owner, where he lived, plus any other information you could get about him?”

“Yes, I remember. I made enquiries and I’ve got the information you need.”

Wahid breathed a sigh of relief. “Can you give it to me? Will you come and meet me?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line then Adhi answered slowly, “But the authorities may trace me because they know I am a friend of yours.”

Wahid replied, "If you give me the information, I would be so grateful. I will pay you well, of course."

"All right." Adhi named an amount which was scandalously high in Wahid's opinion, but he agreed. He had no other option.

Wahid had a sudden thought, "Adhi, I hope the authorities don't contact you about me. If they do, you must promise not to tell them a thing about me."

"Of course," replied Adhi, "but you must give me the money first."

"All right." Wahid told Adhi where to meet him. "Come right away don't waste time and do not bring anyone with you!"

A short time later, Wahid saw a car pull up. He recognised Adhi's face even under the baseball cap pulled so low that he wondered how Adhi could see to drive! Adhi peered out furtively and beckoned to him. Wahid hurried over. Adhi had the engine running and he appeared to be very nervous, checking the mirror constantly as if he were expecting somebody to come along at any minute. Wahid handed over the money and Adhi gave him the information he had collected. Wahid looked at the paper and nodded. "Thank you."

With that Adhi revved his car and set off with a final, "Good luck, mate. You'll need it."

Wahid realised that time was of the essence and he would have to work fast. He took a bus to the outskirts of Brisbane and booked in to a small motel about one kilometre past a large shopping centre. He did not use his own name and address. Next, Wahid walked to the shopping centre, purchased several changes of clothes, and had a meal in the food court, where no one gave him a second look. Returning to the motel, Wahid settled to sleep, feeling confident and satisfied with his plan.

At first light, he woke, feeling calm and rested. With a thrill of excitement, he surveyed the information that Adhi had given him. The truck belonged to a Steven West, who lived on a vast remote cattle station — Mulga Lakes Station, about two hundred kilometres from Charleville in south-west Queensland. Adhi had thoughtfully scrawled 'Remote parts of Australia are called the

outback'. Wahid read on, noting that Steven had lost his wife to cancer and he had two small boys. His eyes opened wide and he gasped when he read that just a few weeks ago, Steven had employed a young female refugee as a governess for his two sons.

“Rashida!” he gasped. “Of course! Bless you, Adhi. I don’t know how you came by this information, but I will be eternally grateful to you.”

During the next day, he planned his itinerary very carefully. First of all he purchased a second-hand serviceable Toyota Landcruiser utility truck, camping gear and enough food to last him for some time. At a service station, he filled up his Toyota and bought an extra couple of tanks of fuel, which the helpful attendant loaded in the tray and tied securely.

The owner of the service station was operating the till when Wahid went to pay. “Looks like you’re heading outback.” The man nodded his head towards the drums of fuel in the ute tray. “Goin’ on a fishin’ trip?”

“Yeah, out west,” replied Wahid, nodding his head and putting on his best Australian drawl.

“Enjoy yer trip. Fishin’ should be good out there this time of the year.”

At a newsagency he scanned the rack of tourist maps, selected one of outback Queensland and took it back to the motel in order to plan his route. Wahid packed up his truck and started out at about 9 o’clock that night. As he left Brisbane, his thoughts turned again to Rashida. “I’m going to get you this time, my girl,” he mused. “You’ll never escape from me, I’ll see to that!”

Despite being wanted by the authorities, Wahid was still obsessed with Rashida. He felt that when once he had her in his possession, all his troubles would be over! He could even force her to marry him and then she would never be able to testify against him!

“That’s what I’ll do,” he said to himself. “When I get my hands on her, it will be fun taming her and making her submit to me! And what better place to do this than in outback Queensland! Somehow I’ve got to get her away from the owner of the station. But I’ll bide my time. I’ve got all the rest of my life to do it!” With that Wahid muttered “Inshallah!” and began his long journey towards Charleville.

CHAPTER 9 ~ ARRIVAL AT MULGA LAKES STATION

Rashida opened her eyes. A glance at the bedside clock told her that it was already 7.30 am. She had a quick shower and dressed in some of her new clothes. Looking in the mirror, Rashida was satisfied with what she saw. Her new clothes fit perfectly. As she opened the door, she realised that it was the first night she had had such a good sleep. She was looking forward to her new life at Mulga Lakes Station. Rashida walked to the dining room and, seeing that Steven and the boys were already seated, apologised. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

Steven looked up and smiled. "Don't worry about it," he said. "You must have needed that sleep."

"Gee, you look cool," said Nick.

"Yeah," added Alex. "That gear really suits you."

Rashida blushed and said, "Why, thank you, boys that is so nice of you." She noticed that Steven was smiling in the background. She sat down and ordered breakfast – eggs, toast, and a cup of tea.

"Will you be able to cook us something from Afghanistan when we get home?" asked Alex.

"Why of course," replied Rashida.

"Hang on a minute, you two," said Steven. "Rashida is out here as a governess, not a cook. We have our own cook, who has been with us for years."

"Yeah, but Dad, it would be great to have something different," said Nick.

"I really don't mind," said Rashida.

"Well, we'll see," replied Steven. "Now hurry up, boys, we've got a fair way to go and we want to be home by early afternoon. I'll go and pack up the Toyota while you all finish your breakfast."

Rashida said, “My things are already packed and on my bed.”

“OK,” said Steven, standing up. “So I’ll see you guys later outside after you finish eating.” With that he disappeared in the direction of the rooms to collect the gear.

Rashida and the boys didn’t take long to finish their breakfast and soon they were on their way. As they drove further out of Charleville, Rashida noticed that the country was very dry and the stunted trees gave the area a rather ghostly appearance. As it was early morning, there were plenty of kangaroos and wallabies on the road, but Rashida noticed that Steven slowed down so as not to hit them. They also saw a few families of emus taking their morning walk. They all sat quietly for a while and then Alex broke the silence. “When will we be able to start teaching Rashida to ride, Dad?” he asked.

Steven replied, “You’ll have to catch up with your lessons first. Don’t forget you’ve both missed a couple of days. Your Distance Education supervisors like you to forward your work on time, you know.”

“OK, Dad.” Alex pulled a face and Rashida could not help smiling at Steven. She could hear the boys talking softly in the background and wondered what was going on. She hoped that when she started working with them, they would be as friendly and pleasant as they were now. Rashida looked out of the window and watched the scenery. They passed a few road trains and Steven waved to the drivers as they went by. She felt herself thinking about the last few weeks – her parents’ death, their flight from Afghanistan, the disastrous boat trip, the terrible drowning of Rafi and then that horrible Wahid. She shuddered when she thought about the loathsome Indonesian captain of the boat.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Steven stopped the Toyota suddenly and pointed to an animal on the side of the road. “Look, Rashida, that’s a wallaroo.” She saw a medium- sized brownish black animal ahead. Steven continued, “A wallaroo is a member of the kangaroo family. Its colouring is not quite the same as a kangaroo and, as you can see, it’s a bit different from the ordinary ‘roos you see out here. Some wallaroos can grow fairly big sometimes – though they are usually not quite as big as kangaroos.”

Rashida looked at the strange animal. “You certainly have some interesting animals here,” she said. “I think I’m going to enjoy my time discovering them. Are there many other animals that I have to see?”

Nick said, “Oh yes, there are heaps; possums, wombats, dingoes, and of course all the different birds. You just wait and see.”

“Steady on, Nick,” said Steven. “Give Rashida time. She’ll see them all eventually. Otherwise she will become confused.”

Time passed pleasantly and soon Mulga Lakes Station was in sight. “We have several workers on the station,” explained Steven, “as well as a couple of house staff. You’ll like Mary, our cook. She’s been with us for ages – ever since I married. She decided to stay on after my wife died.” For a brief moment, Steven’s thoughts seemed to be far away but he soon recovered and continued. “When it’s the busy season, we employ temporary staff from Charleville.”

When they came to the turnoff to Mulga Lakes, the boys took turns in opening and shutting the gates. “It’s very important to shut all the gates,” said Steven, “because if you don’t then our cattle could get out and wild cattle from the bush could get in.”

Rashida nodded and thought what a lot she had to learn about the outback. When the station came into view, her eyes opened wide with excitement. The house seemed huge. It was surrounded by trees and as they drove closer, she saw many hardy looking shrubs, some of which were flowering. Further away was an orchard with different fruit trees.

“We have bore water for the gardens and orchard,” explained Steven. “And,” he added, “We have a gardener. He’s an old pensioner we’ve known for years. He has his own little cottage just away from the main house.” He pointed to some other buildings nearby and told Rashida that they were where the outside staff lived. They had their own cook, but when things got really busy, Mary would go down and help with the cooking.

Rashida was amazed. She had no idea that such a beautiful house could exist in such a dry area. Steven almost read her thoughts. “You wait till we get our wet season,” he said as he stopped the

Toyota close to the house. “Then you’ll find the country will take on a whole new aspect. You can’t even imagine it now because you’ve got to see it to believe it.”

The boys were out of the car in an instant; the adults alighted more slowly and Steven began unpacking the gear as he talked. In the meantime, two huge dogs bounded up and flung themselves on the boys, licking their faces as the boys hugged them delightedly. “These are the boys’ dogs — Boots and Pockets. They are very friendly but they are good watch dogs as well,” he said.

Rashida patted them tentatively and they wagged their tails in delight. Steven handed the boys their bags, took down his own large bag and then handed Rashida her packages. “Come on inside and I’ll show you to your room, but first I’ll introduce you to Mary and her little helper.”

“Little helper?” wondered Rashida. She was puzzled but then a plump lady came out to meet them. She wore a long dress with an apron over the top. She had a round face and red cheeks and she rushed over and gave Steven and the boys a big hug and then turned to Rashida. “So this is the little girl you have been telling me about.” Rashida felt herself enveloped in a great bear hug and then Mary landed big kiss on her cheeks. Mary surveyed her. “Poor lass,” she said sympathetically, “I’ve heard what you’ve been through and I’m so sorry. But don’t worry, you’ve come to the right place. We’ll all look after you, won’t we, boys?”

Steven and the boys nodded. Rashida felt tears coming to her eyes. “Aw, don’t cry,” said Alex. He patted her hand awkwardly - both boys looked a bit embarrassed.

Mary turned behind her and said, “Come on out, Jilly, and meet the new governess.” Rashida looked behind her and saw a pretty, young, dark-skinned girl with the biggest brown eyes she had ever seen. Jilly shyly put her hand out to Rashida and smiled.

“Hey, Jilly, we’ll be goin’ fishin’ soon. Right?” said Nick. Jilly nodded enthusiastically her eyes sparkling as she gave the boys a big wide smile.

Steven interrupted. “After school work, boys.”

“Aw, Dad,” groaned the boys and immediately began pulling faces.

Steven turned to Rashida. "Come on and I'll take you to your room," he said. He turned to Mary. "We'll see you at tea time. I want Rashida to settle in and have a bit of a rest."

Rashida followed Steven upstairs. The house was even more beautiful inside than outside and it was scrupulously clean. It was bright and airy and cheerful, but she had no time to admire her surroundings as Steven opened a door saying, "Rashida, this will be your room. I've put you near the boys."

Rashida peered curiously into the room. It was huge. One corner held a queen-sized bed with a brightly coloured doona. A built-in wardrobe and two large timber cupboards stood against the far wall, as well as a dressing table with an ornamental glass mirror. At the other end of the room was an office chair and a table, on which sat a laptop computer. Two comfortable looking armchairs flanked a large window. A vase on a small table held freshly picked greenery and flowers from the garden. An open door showed a bathroom complete with toilet, shower, bath, towel racks and shelves. On the shelves were thick towels, different sorts of shampoos, soaps and toilet accessories.

Rashida gasped in wonder. "Oh, Steven," she said softly, "this is so beautiful." She pushed back the curtains and was surprised to see a door and some steps leading downwards.

Steven said, "You have your own private entrance, and there's a balcony too, just in case you want to sit outside and relax after school. The steps lead down to the ground in case of fire. Every room up here has the same setup. The staircase is

very narrow so you have to be careful when you're going up or down." Steven placed her packages on the table. He said, "I thought you could use a laptop and if you have any trouble with it, the boys will help you. Like all kids, they are experts. I've been trying to learn to use a computer for ages, but I don't really have that much time. However I'm slowly getting there. Anyway, I'll leave you to get settled and have a rest before tea."

He turned out of the room then looked back and said, "By the way, tea's about six o'clock."

Rashida sat on the bed. A feeling of peace enfolded her as she sank into the soft comfort and she felt all her previous tensions disappearing with every breath. It was such a beautiful feeling. She decided to have a warm bath and then rest a little before tea. The clock beside the bed showed 4 o'clock. After a bath, she laid out a new set of clothes then lay back on the bed and, with a gentle sigh, closed her eyes.

At 6 o'clock on the dot, Rashida went downstairs. Steven was waiting to escort her to the dining room. Mary and Jilly had cooked a beautiful dinner, which was typical of meals in the outback. The meat was roast lamb, complete with three different vegetables and thick gravy, followed by a delicious sweet consisting of fruit salad and cream. The boys kept asking Rashida if she liked what she was eating. She thought it was a great meal. Then Nick said, "Rashida's going to cook us a meal like she eats in Afghanistan, aren't you?"

For a moment Rashida looked embarrassed but before she could reply, Mary said, "That would be great. Perhaps you could teach me too."

Rashida replied, "Then perhaps you could teach me how to cook such a delicious meal like the one we are having tonight."

"Of course I will," said Mary. "That will be fun, won't it, Jilly?" The young girl nodded her head vigorously. The time passed pleasantly and the grownups finished their meal with a glass of wine. Soon it was time for bed. Reluctantly, the boys, after saying goodnight, headed upstairs to their rooms while Mary and Jilly cleared the table.

"Can I help?" asked Rashida shyly.

"Not tonight, love," said Mary. "You get yourself settled first then we'll talk about it."

"All right," said Rashida, "and thank you for the beautiful meal."

Steven got up from the table, explaining to Rashida that he was going to work in his office for a while, and suggested she get a good night's sleep. "You'll need it," he said, smiling at her, "because you've got to deal with the monsters tomorrow." Noticing a worried look on Rashida's

face, he smiled and added kindly, “Don’t worry; you and the boys will be fine. I’m sure of that. Now, goodnight. Sleep well and I’ll see you in the morning.”

Rashida brightened somewhat. She turned to Steven and said, “Thank you for everything. I promise I will do my very best for you. You have all been so kind to me.” She said good night to them all, then made her way slowly up the stairs to her luxurious bedroom.

CHAPTER 10 ~ RASHIDA MEETS THE WILDLIFE

Rashida was dreaming of her home in Afghanistan. It was summertime and the snow had completely disappeared from the mountains. She was with her parents and Rafi - they were picnicking by a lake. They were sitting on comfortable chairs and all their favourite foods were set out on a blanket on the soft green grass. She was just about to pick up a piece of naan and spread cream and sugar on it, when suddenly a ghastly noise filled the room. Rashida jumped out of bed, raced to the door and flung it open in panic. She was as white as a ghost and literally trembling. She banged on the boys’ doors and shouted, “Nick! Alex! Come quickly! Listen to that horrible noise. Ww-what is it? W-w-what’s going on?”

Two doors opened simultaneously and Nick and Alex appeared in their pyjamas, rubbing their eyes. “What’s wrong, Rashida?” asked Nick. “Did you have a bad dream?” asked Alex.

The same noise filled the air again. Rashida looked so frightened. She pointed towards the window the noise seemed to be coming from that direction. The boys relaxed and smiled. Alex said, “Rashida, that noise belongs to one of our native Australian birds.”

“Yes,” said Nick. “It’s called a kookaburra.”

“A what?” asked Rashida shakily.

“A kookaburra,” replied the boys in one voice.

Alex said, “So don’t be scared. Just go back and look outside your window and you’ll probably see it sitting on one of the branches of a gum tree.”

The boys followed Rashida into her room. She drew the curtains and looked out. The boys pointed. Sure enough she saw a strange brown and white bird staring back at her. It was a medium-sized bird with white on its front and dark brown on its back and wings. Dark brown eye stripes were around its face. Rashida looked embarrassed. “I’m so sorry I woke you up,” she said. “But I’ve never heard anything like that before.”

“That’s OK, Rashida,” said Nick. “Now we can all go back to bed and get another couple of hours’ sleep. You’ll soon get used to the different sounds out here. Oh, by the way, Rashida, kookaburras are also called ‘laughing jackasses.’”

Rashida replied, “Now I know why.”

Rashida and the boys went back to their beds. It was not even 5 o’clock so she settled down for another couple of hours’ sleep. Meanwhile the ‘laughing jackass’ continued its raucous tirade outside her window.

Breakfast that morning was a cheerful affair. Mary and Jilly bustled about in the kitchen then joined Rashida and the boys for a delicious breakfast. Mary told them that Steven had already gone down to work, and that day he had to arrange for the men to muster a large group of cattle and bring them into one of the closer paddocks where there was more grass for them to eat.

After breakfast the boys escorted Rashida to their school building. It was a small sturdy timber construction a short way from the house. Inside were desks, comfortable chairs and a big table for the governess to use. Bookcases filled with books lined the walls, and Rashida was glad to see that the boys were obviously keen readers. There were papers and books scattered around and the first job that Rashida gave the boys was to tidy up and sort the worksheets in order so that she knew what to work on that week. She and the boys soon cleaned everything up and while she studied the Distance Education worksheets, she allowed the boys to read. Silence reigned for about an

hour while she made a study plan for the boys. "It's not as hard as I thought it would be," she mused. The boys started work and only asked intermittent questions about the worksheets, and Rashida was able to help them. Despite her initial misgivings, there were no problems at all! They worked until lunchtime and returned to the house. Steven joined them for lunch. "How are the rascals progressing with their schoolwork?" he asked Rashida.

"Very good," replied Rashida. "We had no problems at all."

"Yeah, Dad, we got through heaps of stuff, so we'll be able to teach Rashida to ride in a few days, eh?" said Nick.

Steven smiled. "I've already got one of the men picking out a suitable horse for her."

"Great, Dad," said Alex. "What about this afternoon then?"

"Hold on," replied Steven. "Let's wait a while. I've got to be sure that the horse we pick will be suitable."

"Aw, that will take ages," groaned Alex.

"Be patient," laughed Steven.

After lunch the boys and Rashida returned to the schoolroom. Instead of getting straight back to written work, she suggested they take a short walk. This pleased the boys very much, as they were eager to show Rashida around and tell her all about their home. She met some of the station hands, who were very friendly towards her. She also met the old gardener who was a delightful gentleman, and they liked each other from the very start

"Look, Rashida," cried the boys, "there are our horses." They whistled and a couple of horses tossed their heads, whinnied and came over to the fence to greet them.

"What are their names?" asked Rashida.

"Mine's called Silver," said Nick. He rubbed his horse's head and immediately the horse nuzzled closer to the fence.

“And mine’s called Foxy,” said Alex, “‘cos he likes to go wandering off the beaten track when we go riding. Dad’s horse is in another paddock. He’s a huge stallion and he’s called Rajah. You should see him. He’s enormous.”

“And there’s your horse,” said Nick, pointing to a rather stocky looking horse in the same paddock as the boys’ horses. “She’s called Honey. She’s pretty quiet. You can ride her for a while and when you’re good at riding, Dad will get you another horse that’s a bit livelier.”

“I think I’ll be sticking to Honey for some time,” said Rashida.

“Mum started on her, and when she got the hang of riding, Dad broke in another horse for her,” said Alex. For a second he looked a little sad and Rashida patted his hand in sympathy.

“Now let’s get back to work,” said Rashida briskly.

“Race you to the schoolroom!” cried Nick. The boys took off, with Rashida following closely behind them.

Over the next few days, Rashida organised the boys into a classroom routine. When the boys asked questions about their work she made the answers interesting and so they looked forward to their lessons. Steven asked how they were going and the boys said that Rashida was a great teacher. “A bit better than your last governess then?” he said.

“She was yuck,” said Alex, “and so boring too.”

“She didn’t appreciate the rubber snake we put in her drawer,” said Nick. “Dad stopped our pocket money for two weeks over that.” Steven glanced over at Rashida to hide his smile.

At last Rashida’s horse was ready. It was a cool Saturday morning and promptly after breakfast, Steven told the boys to bring Rashida down to the yard to have her first riding lesson. Steven introduced her to Honey and told her to pat the horse and get acquainted. In no time, Honey was literally eating out of her hand. The next step was to help Rashida on to the horse. It was a bit difficult at first, but Rashida learned to climb into the stirrups and pull herself up with the help of the reins. Then Steven walked Honey round the yard for a while until Rashida got used to the

motion of the horse. He gave her the reins and showed her how to use them and, for the first time, Rashida was riding by herself. The boys watched her from the other side of the fence.

“You’re doing great!” called Nick. “When can she come out riding with us, Dad?” he asked.

“In a couple of days,” said Steven. Rashida walked her horse round the yard a few more times and Steven told her that that was enough for today. She got off the horse and found that she already felt a bit stiff. “Tomorrow I’ll teach you how to canter,” he said, “and after a couple more days, you’ll be ready to go out with the boys.”

The days passed pleasantly with schoolwork and riding, and Steven told her that the following day she would be ready to ride with the boys. The next day, Nick and Alex saddled up their horses and Rashida accompanied them out of the horse paddock. She was about to have her first real ride and was so excited. “Take it easy, boys,” said Steven as he waved goodbye to them.

“We will, Dad.” They waved and set off. The boys led Rashida on to a wide bush track. The gum trees around were green but the grass was like straw because of the lack of rain.

“When the wet comes, it will be great. The grass won’t take long to grow and everything will become green again, and all sorts of wild flowers will grow,” said Alex.

“And all the birds will come back too,” added Nick. Suddenly he looked up and pointed. “Look, Rashida, there’s a koala bear with a baby on its back.”

“Koala bear?” Rashida looked puzzled. She looked up and saw one of the cutest grey bundles of fur she had ever seen.

“It looks just like a teddy bear,” she said.

“Koalas are really beautiful animals,” said Alex. “They feed only on gum leaves and their claws are sharp so that they can grip and climb trees. They are native to Australia, but I read somewhere that a few are found in Papua New Guinea.”

“They look after their babies really well, and they are great mothers,” said Nick. “But it’s so sad because they are becoming extinct.”

“Why?” asked Rashida.

“Well, a lot of trees are being cut down, and this is destroying their habitat. They are also prone to a fatal disease which affects their eyes. Alex and I send some of our pocket money to the Save the Koalas Fund,” said Alex.

“I’d like to do that too,” said Rashida.

They rode on for some time and when they came to a clearing, the boys suggested that Rashida urge her horse into a slow canter. She did and found it was easier to canter than to trot. It didn’t feel quite so bumpy. She didn’t feel stiff either.

They were enjoying themselves immensely when suddenly Nick’s horse reared up in fright. Because he was an experienced rider, he had no trouble in regaining his seat. It was the same with Alex. But when Honey reared, Rashida got such a fright that she felt herself slipping out of the saddle and finally landing on the hard ground. Honey took fright and disappeared into the bush. The boys dismounted, tied up their horses and went to help Rashida.

“Are you OK?” asked Nick.

“Yes, I think so,” said Rashida. “What happened?”

But before the Nick could answer, Alex said in a commanding voice, “Don’t move a muscle, Rashida.” Then he said softly to Nick, “Get a stone. There’s a snake close to Rashida and it looks as if it’s going to strike at any moment. Be quick!” he urged.

Nick reached down and picked up a stone. Aiming carefully he threw the stone at the snake, which immediately slithered into the bush. “Wow! That was close!” exclaimed Alex. “For a minute I thought the snake was going to bite you!”

Rashida got shakily up from the ground while the boys went to catch Honey. “I don’t think I’ll get back on,” she said. “I’m a bit too scared.”

“You’ve got to get back on at once,” said Nick with a voice of authority, “otherwise you’ll be too scared to ride again.”

“That’s right,” said Alex. “That’s what Dad taught us. It’s true. We’ve had dozens of falls, haven’t we, Nick?” Nick nodded and both boys helped Rashida climb back on to Honey. “We’d better turn round now and go back home.” Rashida was nervous at first but she soon settled down and became confident again.

“You’re back early,” observed Steven. The boys told him what had happened and he looked concerned. “Are you all right, Rashida?” he asked. She nodded.

“She’s OK, Dad,” said Nick before Rashida could reply.

“For a girl anyway,” added Alex. Everyone laughed and Steven told Rashida that when anyone had a fall off a horse, it was said that person had “claimed a piece of ground.” Rashida smiled at this.

The next few days on Mulga Lakes passed pleasantly with schoolwork and horse riding and Rashida was enjoying life. She did not have many nightmares now and Steven felt she was doing a good job with the boys. He idly wondered what she kept in the little bag she wore every day, but dismissed it. If Rashida wanted to tell him, she would in her own time. They were sitting out on the veranda one afternoon enjoying the last of the sun when Rashida started out of her seat. She heard strange noises coming from the distant hills.

Steven said, “They are dingoes and they are coming closer to our cattle. We will have to go out soon and get rid of as many as we can.” He explained to Rashida that a dingo was a wild dog and the people who lived on the stations had to go out and deal with them because they would come in at night and attack the cattle and sheep. Rashida felt sad about this but she understood just what would happen if the dingoes were not controlled. The dingoes’ howling went on for some time. “They are hungry, so we had better go out tonight and see what we can do.” Steven got up and said he was going to round up some of the men.

In bed that night, Rashida heard the dingoes howling followed by the sound of gunshots. This went on for some time. Then the howling and gunshots stopped and although Rashida was sad for the animals, she did understand. “It would be terrible if Steven lost his sheep and cattle because of the dingoes,” she murmured to herself. “I have such a lot to learn about the Australian outback, but I do feel happy here.” It seemed that she felt Rafi smiling at her as she slipped into sleep.

CHAPTER 11 ~ WAHID PLANS HIS NEXT MOVE

Early the following morning, Wahid arrived in Charleville. Everything was quiet and he drove slowly round the sleepy town, looking for suitable accommodation. He came across several motels and a couple of hotels, but decided to avoid them just in case the authorities were looking for him. Finally he saw a caravan park that had small cabins to rent. He pulled up at the Reception Office and pressed the bell for service.

A lady came out from behind the counter. She was still dressed in her night clothes and was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. “You’re an early bird,” she remarked in a friendly voice. “How can I help you?”

“I would like to rent a cabin for a few weeks,” said Wahid. “I’ve come out here to write a book about the outback for my friends at home. They all want to know what the real Australian outback is like.”

“Well, you’ve certainly come to the right place. We often get people out here who are writers,” said the lady, “and there have been heaps of books published about this part of the world.”

Wahid smiled at her. He gave a false name and address to the friendly lady. She gave him the key and told him that she had given him one of the far cabins where she thought it would be quiet for him to write. He thanked her profusely and drove off to the cabin. She was right; his cabin was situated at the far end of the park and he had no close neighbours as far as he could see.

He unlocked the door and decided to sleep for a few hours before planning his next move. Wahid woke up several hours later, had a meal from his supplies, and showered. He felt calm and confident as he turned on the television set. An attractive girl from the ABC was reading the news. He stopped dead in his tracks when she announced, “Police and immigration officials are still

looking for three Indonesian men reputed to be people smugglers in connection with the leaky boat that capsized near Christmas Island, where a number of Afghan refugees were drowned. We have no photos of them as yet, but we will pass them on when we get them. All three are believed to be somewhere in Brisbane at present.” She then continued with other news.

“What will I do now?” said Wahid to himself. “I must act quickly. I must get to Rashida before the authorities get to me!” He could not think of anybody he could ask regarding the whereabouts of Mulga Lakes Station. Driving around the town, he spotted a sign pointing to the Charleville Visitor Information Centre and a plan began to form in his mind.

Wahid followed the signs and parked the vehicle in a patch of shade cast by a clump of trees. Entering the building, he noted several racks of brightly coloured brochures and books about this part of Australia, attractive cafe tables and chairs, and shelves of souvenir gifts. A welcoming aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifted from a counter behind a glass display cabinet packed with delicious looking cakes and savouries. “Well set up for visitors,” thought Wahid as he moved between the racks, studying the brochures relating to the local area.

“Can I help you?” a friendly voice called from the counter. Wahid noticed a very pretty girl smiling in his direction.

Wahid moved to the counter. “I’m not sure,” he said, returning the smile, “I’m an author you see, and I am writing a book about outback Queensland. I was wondering if you could possibly give me any information about this area.”

The girl took out some brochures. “You’ll have to visit the Cosmos Centre and the Bilbies Show while you are here in Charleville,” she said. “Then of course there is the museum.”

“What are the bilbies?” asked Wahid, in a smooth and engaging voice.

The young girl replied, “Bilbies are desert-dwelling animals with long soft blue-grey fur. They look like a large rabbit, with long ears that help them deal with the heat and long pointed muzzles. Their tails are about 20 to 29 centimetres long and mostly black, except for a white tip. They were almost extinct, but Charleville has a very successful breeding programme.”

“Thanks for that. I’ll definitely take your advice and see those interesting places,” said Wahid politely. Of course he had no intention of going to any of those attractions, even if they were supposed to be of so much interest. He was more wrapped up in going after and getting hold of Rashida. “And what is further out from Charleville?” he asked.

The girl leaned over and took out some more brochures. “There are so many interesting places to see,” she said. She searched further and took out a map. “There are plenty of places to fish along the river if you are interested in fishing, and also you could call in to some of the stations marked on this map. I know they welcome visitors.” Wahid pricked up his ears at this. He looked keenly at the map as the girl spread it out on a table.

“Let’s see now,” she said. “Hmm, there’s Grey Rock Station, that’s the closest to here. Then there is Gum Tree Creek Station, you keep following the road all the way out. There are signposts to show turn-offs to the stations.” She pointed again to the map. “Oh, here’s a good one —Mulga Lakes. It’s one of the larger stations. It’s really well run too. It’s owned by Steven West. He lost his wife to cancer some months ago. He’s just employed a new governess to teach his two small sons.”

Wahid’s heart beat faster when she told him about Mulga Lakes. He hoped that the girl had not noticed anything was amiss. She went on to explain more about the stations and road conditions. “May I take the map and the brochures with me?” Wahid asked casually.

“Of course,” replied the girl. She handed him the brochures. “By the way,” she added, “if you have any problems, do come and see me. My name is Anne.”

“Why, thank you, Anne,” said Wahid with an engaging smile. “I might just call on you sometime.” Anne’s eyes sparkled and she blushed as returned to her position behind the counter.

Back at the cabin, Wahid studied the literature. Most of the stations had a river running through the property and those marked on the tourist map encouraged tourists to fish in the river, camp and, by arrangement, call at the station for a meal and a chat. “This is almost too easy,” thought Wahid. “But I must start out soon.”

In the late afternoon, he bought fresh supplies of food and made sure he had plenty of water, even though he didn't think water would be the problem. He filled up his Toyota and purchased an extra drum of fuel. "Goin' fishin'?" commented the young fellow at the roadhouse as he helped Wahid to secure the extra drum. "Make sure not to have a big campfire — it could start a bushfire. See you." He waved as the vehicle pulled out and Wahid, adopting his role as a polite tourist, returned the wave.

He consulted the map and made his way to the road to Mulga Lakes Station. As he drove, his mind was on thoughts of Rashida. He barely noticed that he ran over a couple of small wallabies. He had no compassion for the dead animals, and he was pleased that he had a thick, strong bull bar on his vehicle. Wahid drove on. He passed the first two station turn-offs and then two more before he came to the Mulga Lakes signpost. He turned off the bitumen road and on to a dirt track. The sign said it was 30 kilometres to the station so he slowed down. The sun was slowly sinking and it was quite cool. He was glad he'd bought extra blankets with him. As he drove along the road, he was glad the trees were dense. These would provide a hiding place for his truck if needed. About three kilometres from the station, Wahid noticed a narrow track. He turned sharply and slowly drove through the trees. About a kilometre on, he reached the river.

"What an ideal place for me to hide," he said to himself. "I couldn't wish for anything better. This will do for a place to camp tonight." Getting out of his truck, he spotted an old burnt out campfire, presumably used by campers or fisherman. There were sticks and small pieces of wood close handy so he did not have to collect anything else to make a fire though he knew he had to be careful to make only a small one.

Wahid slept lightly that night, his mind always on Rashida. As he finally dropped off to sleep, he planned to check out the station from a distance the next morning with his binoculars. He could check out how he might get closer to the main homestead building without attracting any attention. The next morning, after he had eaten breakfast, he took a bottle of water and a couple of small tins of fruit, plus the strong binoculars he had brought with him and set out for the station. He was careful to stick to the bush but he need not have worried as there was no traffic.

Taking care to remain hidden, he observed the station buildings through the binoculars. He could see figures walking around, but not Rashida. For a long time, he studied the homestead while finding a way to sneak into the station without being observed. "That's going to be a bit of a problem," he mused. Wahid sat down on the grass and opened a tin of fruit. The sun was warm and he soon felt himself dropping off to sleep. A sudden noise woke him. Taking care to keep out of sight, he stood up and looked in the direction of the station. Four figures on horseback trotted along the dirt road. Gathering his things, he headed into the dense bush, fervently hoping that his hiding place could not be observed by the horse riders. Cautiously he parted the leaves and peered out. His heart nearly missed a beat. There was Rashida, accompanied by two small boys and an adult. He could even hear what they were saying.

"Hey, Dad," said one of the voices, "Rashida can canter really fast now."

"Yeah, Dad. You watch her. Go on, Rashida, show Dad what you can do!" said another voice.

"Just take it easy, boys," said the adult. Wahid assumed that the adult was Steven West, owner of Mulga Lakes.

"Come on, Rashida. We'll race you to the river track and back!" The riders took off at a fast canter, with the man following closely behind.

Wahid felt apprehensive. He hoped that they would not notice the truck. He knew it was well hidden and a fair way from the road; nevertheless, he waited anxiously, feeling his heart pounding with the fear of discovery. Only a few minutes later, the riders returned. This time they were trotting their horses and then slowed them down to a walk. Wahid peered out again. When the riders came into view, Rashida's horse stopped suddenly and pricked her ears. The other horses stopped too.

"What's the matter with Honey?" asked one of the boys.

"I don't know," he heard Rashida say. "I hope it's not another snake."

Wahid sucked in his breath and put his hands over his eyes. "What now?" he thought nervously. The seconds dragged by. The waiting seemed endless.

“Don’t worry,” said Steven, “just keep going. It’s probably only the wind.” The riders cantered off.

Wahid breathed a sigh of relief. “That was close,” he said, panting. His breathing slowly returned to normal but he stood where he was, still visibly shaken. He waited until dark to make his way back to the truck. He was not hungry and, still shaking, he slid straight into his sleeping bag and tried to sleep.

Wahid slept uneasily – he had a number of strange dreams that night. Waking anxiously from one, he consoled himself with the thought that one good thing had come out of this latest experience. He had seen Rashida at last! It would not be long now. “Soon, she’ll be mine – all mine,” he vowed as he fell asleep again.

Meanwhile, back at the station, Steven and Rashida were enjoying a glass of wine. The boys had gone to bed. Rashida said, “I wonder what made Honey stop like that?” she asked. “She hasn’t done that with me since she was frightened by the snake.”

Steven smiled. “You can never tell with horses. Sometimes they hear and sense things that we don’t.”

Rashida looked worried. “I felt as if someone was walking over my grave. Rafi often told me that he thought I was a little bit psychic.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Steven replied. “You’ll feel better in the morning.” He stood up. “Well, time to go to bed.” He started walking towards the door then turned around and said to Rashida, “By the way, the boys are coming along really well. Their reports came back today from the School of Distance and they were excellent. What an improvement from their last governesses! You should feel very proud of yourself, Rashida!”

Rashida cheered up somewhat and felt a bit better after that. She said goodnight to Steven and went upstairs, but could not shake off the slight feeling of trepidation. Her gut feeling told her that things were not quite right, and she felt that something bad was going to happen in the future. She tried to dismiss these negative thoughts as she undressed and climbed into bed.

Rashida slept fitfully that night, and for the first time in weeks, she dreamed of that dreadful night when Rafi drowned in the raging seas near Christmas Island. She tossed and turned in her bed. She also saw the face of the horrible Indonesian boat captain. She woke with a start and sat up, stifling a cry. But all was quiet. She could only hear an occasional call from one of the many night birds. As Rashida dropped into a troubled sleep, she was completely unaware that Wahid lay in his sleeping bag just a few short kilometres away, gleefully planning his next move in her abduction.

CHAPTER 12 ~ RASHIDA HAS A PREMONITION

When Rashida woke next morning, she felt weary — the pervasive sense of foreboding had meant a restless sleep. At breakfast, Steven voiced his concern. “Are you OK, Rashida?”

“Yes, thanks, Steven,” answered Rashida. “I just didn’t sleep very well last night.”

“Would you like the day off?”

“Oh, no, I’m not that tired.”

The boys looked at each other. “Go on, Dad, give Rashida the day off. We can all go riding,” said Nick.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” added Alex. “And besides, we are really going great with our schoolwork.”

Rashida paused and finally said, “Well, if you don’t mind, Steven, I do think the boys deserve a day off, because they have been working so hard.”

The premonition hovered at the forefront of her thoughts, the feeling that something bad was going to happen soon, but of course she said nothing to Steven. The boys clapped their hands.

“Let’s get Mary to pack us a picnic lunch and we’ll go down to the river!” cried Alex. “Great!” exclaimed Nick. Both boys hurried towards the kitchen.

Steven turned towards Rashida. “I’m taking the men out to see to the stock and fences further out,” he said. “I’ll be away for a few days. You’ll be OK—I’m leaving Jock the gardener in charge of everything. He’s used to it.” He continued, “Oh, and I’ll be taking Mary and Jilly too. They will do the cooking. Now is the time for you to try your hand in the kitchen and give the boys a taste of a couple of meals from your country. They’ve been pestering you for so long now.”

Rashida felt a wave of panic. She did not want Steven to go away at this particular time because she still had that feeling of foreboding, but she said nothing. She smiled and agreed that it would certainly be a good time to show her skill in the kitchen. As he walked away, he said to Rashida, “The boys and Jock know where I am, so if there are any problems while I’m away, one of them can ride out and get me.”

The boys soon returned with a picnic basket. “Let’s saddle our horses and get going,” said Nick. There was a great deal of activity going on around the station. Steven and the men were saddling their horses as Mary and Jilly were packing supplies into a Landcruiser Ute.

As the boys and Rashida were saddling up, Jock ambled over. “I expect you to be back round about the middle of the afternoon, otherwise I’ll come looking for you. OK?” he said. “I’ll open the first gate for you. Now have a good day, enjoy yourselves; and boys, and look after Rashida.”

“OK,” said the boys. “See ya!” Rashida waved as they set off. Jock watched until they were almost out of sight then walked unhurriedly back to work in his beloved garden.

At 3 am that morning, Wahid woke with a thumping headache. Damn! The one item he had forgotten – painkillers! His headaches could last for days. There was nothing for it but take a trip back to Charleville to buy the tablets. “I may as well get a bit more food too,” he thought, “in case I need to camp out here a while longer.” Wahid set off just as the sun was rising.

Meanwhile the boys and Rashida ambled along the dirt road and then turned off on the narrow track towards the river. “A truck’s been around,” observed Alex, pointing to the ground, “and quite

recently too. The ground is still damp.” They dismounted, tied up their horses, put the picnic basket down on the grass and looked around.

“Someone’s still camping here,” said Alex. “Look, here are the remains of a campfire. The ashes are still warm.” He came across a jacket lying on the grass, plus a few tins of baked beans and tinned meat. “Looks as if whoever it is has gone off for the day. That would also explain the damp tracks, probably made by his truck.”

“And look,” said Rashida, “here is a sleeping bag and clothes, and tea bags and plates. So it looks as if the person who’s camping here will be back. What do you think, boys?”

“Probably a traveller coming to do some fishing,” said Nick. “Lots of people come here ‘cos the fishing is so good.

Have you ever been fishing, Rashida?”

“When I was small,” she said. “My brother used to take me fishing, but I never caught anything much — only an old shoe.” The boys laughed. Rashida looked around closely. Again she had an odd feeling about this place but she didn’t mention anything to the boys. Instead she said, “I’m getting a bit hungry, boys, so let’s break out the tucker box.”

The boys laughed loudly. “You’re beginning to sound like a real Aussie,” remarked Nick.

“Yeah,” added Alex, “that’s real cool.”

Rashida smiled. They ate their lunch while sitting on the green grass. “Mary certainly knows how to pack a great lunch,” said Nick.

The boys lay on their backs while Rashida told them a bit about Afghanistan. They said that one day they would like to visit her country. While Rashida was talking, she was listening intently for the sound of a vehicle.

“Is anything bothering you, Rashida?” asked Alex. “You seem a bit jumpy.”

“Not really,” replied Rashida. “But I would like to know just who’s camping here.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Nick. “They’ll probably come up to the house for a feed and a chat sometime.” He rolled over on his side and looked towards the river. “Next time we come out here, we’ll bring some fishing lines and see what we can catch”

“I hope it won’t be an old shoe!” said Alex, and Rashida laughed. The boys spent the rest of the time throwing stones in the river, and all too soon it was time to go home. They packed up, mounted their horses and trotted along the narrow track.

Rashida admitted to herself that she was pleased to get away from that spot. She still felt as if there was something not quite right about it. She was even more pleased to arrive back at the station, where Jock was waiting for them. After helping to unsaddle their horses and brush them down, he turned them out into the house paddock where they could relax after their long day.

“I’ll cook you one of my favourite Afghan dishes tonight,” she said to the boys, “so both of you go and have your showers and watch TV. I’ll call you when tea is ready.”

“Okay!” said the boys. “Gee! We’re lookin’ forward to this.”

Rashida went into Mary’s neat kitchen. She did not want to leave anything out of place so she took careful note of the original position of the utensils and dishes that she used. Gazing at the pantry shelves, she saw that all the ingredients she needed for her favourite Afghan Lamb Pilaf were there; vegetable oil, onions, salt, white sugar, rice, carrots, sultanas, almonds. She even found some garam masala behind the salt. Rashida took a leg of lamb from the meat fridge, and expertly chopped it into 6 cm pieces. She took down a couple of saucepans, lit the gas burners and began to prepare the meal. As each section of the dish was cooked, it was put to aside in a covered container. When all the sections were ready, she put them together on a large plate and placed it in the oven on a low heat.

“Jock, boys, tea is ready,” Rashida called. She waited with bated breath as the menfolk started to eat.

“Boy, this is delicious, Rashida,” said Alex. “Mm,” said Nick, licking his lips. “It’s really nice,” added Jock. “I’ve never tasted anything like this.” Rashida breathed a sigh of relief.

“Is there any more left?” asked Nick.

“You’re a guts,” said Alex.

“Well, only what’s left in the dishes in the kitchen,” she said.

Both boys asked to be excused and went into the kitchen to finish the dishes off, while Rashida and Jock sat at the table with a glass of white wine. “I wonder how the men are going with their fencing?” she said.

“They’ll be fine. They’ll be back in a few days,” answered Jock. “Now, I’ll leave you and the boys to clear up while I go down to my place and have a smoke and watch a bit of TV.”

“OK,” said Rashida. “Goodnight, Jock.”

Jock smiled. “Goodnight, sleep tight and don’t let the bedbugs bite,” he said. Rashida looked puzzled until Jock told her it was a favourite Australian saying, used by parents when they put their children to bed. Rashida smiled. She felt she still had such a lot to learn, especially some of the quaint expressions that she had heard since coming to Mulga Lakes.

Rashida washed the dishes while the boys dried them. They helped her put all the things away and then she swept the kitchen. Everything was as neat as a pin. She left the list of ingredients she had taken and a little note saying that she would replace them when next they went to Charleville for supplies.

“OK, let’s go and watch some TV now,” said Alex.

Rashida followed the boys to the TV room and sat on the comfortable lounge, sipping her half-finished glass of white wine and making a big effort to relax. She managed to laugh with the boys as they watched The Simpsons and then it was time for the news.

“Boring!” exclaimed Alex. He got up and went to change the channels.

“Wait a bit,” cried Nick. “Rashida might like to know what’s going on in the outside world. You know how Dad always likes to watch the news. It’s only about half an hour anyway.”

“All right,” said Alex, sitting down, “but we’ll watch something interesting after that.”

The ABC newsreader appeared on the screen. "Here are the headlines," he began. "Today in Brisbane two Indonesians were arrested in connection with the sinking of a boat near Christmas Island. Twenty Afghan refugees were drowned in this incident. The captain of the vessel is still at large. He is believed to be hiding somewhere in Brisbane but has been unable to be contacted at this time. Anybody having any information about this man should contact the police, Crime Stoppers or the immigration authorities." The newsreader paused and in the next second a picture of the wanted man appeared on the screen.

"His name is believed to be Wahid Kusomo. He is a dangerous man and should be approached with caution. I repeat, anybody seeing this man or having any information about him should contact the relevant authorities or the ABC immediately."

With a startled cry, Rashida dropped the glass she was holding. It hit the floor with a crash, shattering into small pieces. She slumped on the lounge chair and everything went black.

CHAPTER 13 ~ THE HUNT FOR WAHID

The late afternoon sun streamed through a window of the Immigration Office in Brisbane. A number of officers shuffled papers with one hand as they typed with one finger, on the computer keyboard, sorting their work for the following day and completing left-over paperwork. "Bugger!" shouted one as his elbow jogged a large take away mug of coffee sending the lukewarm liquid streaming across the keyboard. Ripping the keyboard from the usb port, he hurled it across the room where it landed with a satisfying clang in the trash can by the door.

"Janice!" he yelled to the young administration assistant out in the front office. "Clean this mess up willya!" Janice, a pert seventeen-year-old sporting eyebrow piercings sashayed through the

door, took in the scene at a glance, tilted her head and saying "Not in my job description Kevin!" flounced out the door.

Frustration showed on Will Jennings' face as he murmured, "Yes, Commissioner," and replaced the telephone in its cradle. Turning to a colleague, he said, "Damn! That was the Police Commissioner. Seems some politicians are annoyed that neither the police nor our department have located that bloody Indonesian boat skipper! It'd be some sort of pressure group demanding answers I bet; I don't recall a politician being all that interested in catching a people smuggler before. Apparently police have stretched their resources to the full trying to find him. They've even called in extra detectives from New South Wales to help out!"

"Where could he be?" mused his colleague. "We've combed the city several times, checked on all his friends — or those we know about — checked the airports, buses and trains. We've even got police surveillance on roads out of Brisbane."

"Someone out there must know something. We've grilled his two closest mates several times and I am sure they were telling the truth when they said they didn't know where he was."

"Yeah, they told us there'd been some sort of a fight and Wahid had just stomped out and disappeared, and that's the last they saw of him."

"Anyway," declared Will, "let's go up to the pub for a few coldies. It's nearly knockoff time - I'm sick and tired of trying to find him! I could do with a few beers, couldn't you? They'd go down really well right now. We'll come in early tomorrow and start again!"

"OK, let's go."

As the men were shrugging into their coats and making for the door, the phone rang. Will raced to answer it. "Hello!" he said. "Who's speaking? Where are you? " He grabbed a pen and paper and wrote down an address. "That's great! We'll be there shortly, and thanks." He turned to his colleague. "Hey we've got a lead!"

"Who? Where?"

“A bloke, Wal, from a service station a bit out of town. He just saw a picture of Wahid on the TV and got straight onto us.”

“That means we won’t have time for a beer,” complained his colleague.

“No way,” replied Will excitedly. “When this is all over, then we can celebrate.” He snatched a file of papers from his desk and hurried to the door. “Come on, let’s get this show on the road!”

It took longer than Will expected to get to the service station; the late afternoon traffic was heavy. Pulling onto the forecourt, he took a photograph out of the file and practically sprang out of the car. Wal was running a cloth over a bowser as Will approached him. He greeted Will with a firm handshake.

“Is this him?”

“Yep! Spot on,” replied the man.

“What can you tell us about him?”

“He filled up his Toyota, bought a couple of extra drums of diesel, and told me that he was going outback to do some fishing.”

“Did you happen to get his registration number?”

The man shook his head. “No, sorry.”

“Any idea where he was heading?”

“My guess is that he’s heading towards Charleville because that’s where the fishing is at the moment, out the Ward River. Someone from here to Charleville would be sure to spot him. And then of course there’s the TV.”

Will pulled out his mobile phone and spoke rapidly to his boss. “Right, sir,” he said. “I’ll make the arrangements straight away.”

He turned to the service station owner. “Great. Thanks to you, mate we are back on the track of this criminal; oops, sorry, I meant – this alleged criminal.”

“Good luck. I hope you catch up with the bastard and he gets what he deserves. Gotta go, customer waiting.”

Waiting to pull out into the traffic, Will grinned at Rob. “Hey, Rob, how about a trip to the outback?”

“Great, sir,” said Rob. “When do we start?”

“Early tomorrow morning. I’ll just run you home, do a bit of packing myself, and pick you and a couple of our field guys up in the morning.”

“OK. Don’t forget to run off a few posters of this Wahid. We can put them up in the towns on the way.”

Early the next morning, two cars from the Immigration Department set off on the hunt for Wahid, stopping at the small towns along the route; visiting the police station, general store, pub and post office at each; presenting the photograph and asking the same question “Has anyone seen this man?” Nobody had. At Roma, they lunched at the roadhouse and asked around the staff and some locals, but again nobody had seen the wanted man. It was as if he had completely disappeared into thin air.

Will Jennings was becoming frustrated again. As they left the roadhouse diner, Will announced, “We’ll go as far as Charleville, stop the night there, poke around a bit and if nobody has seen him, then we’ll just have to try something else.” They drove on, their vehicles effortlessly eating up kilometres of plains and mulga lands that surrounded them on all sides.

At about 4 o’clock, Will’s mobile phone rang. “Hang on, I can’t hear you. Hold on a minute. Rob, pull over!” Gravel scattered as Rob hit the brakes a little too hard and the department car fishtailed to a stop. Will glared at Rob then grinned and gave a thumbs-up signal before returning to his conversation.

“Hello?”

“Hello,” said the voice. “Is that Immigration?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“This is the owner of the Star Caravan Park in

Charleville. You’re looking for an Indonesian man? About a week ago, a bloke that looks like the picture on the news rented a cabin from me. He went away for a couple of days but he came back in from the bush just this morning. I am looking through the curtains and his Toyota has just pulled out of the drive.”

“Any idea where he’s going?”

“No, but he told me he was a writer and he was looking for experiences in the outback.”

“Did he give his name as Wahid Kusomo?”

“No, he gave me another name.” She gave Will the name that Wahid had given her.

“We are on our way to Charleville, ma’am, so we’ll call in to see you. Thanks again. If you think of anything else in the meantime that might help us in our search, please write it down and you can tell us when we get there.”

The immigration officials arrived in Charleville about 6.30 in the evening and headed for the Star Caravan Park.

They were very pleased to meet the owner, who told them that she thought Wahid was headed in the direction of the various stations which lay along the river. “We’ll check them all,” said Will. “Surely they will know something. We’ll stay here tonight, but first of all we’d better have a look at his cabin.”

They found nothing in the cabin that Wahid had rented. It had been completely cleaned out. “No sign at all of anything,” said Will in disgust. “I wonder why he’s out here. First he’s a writer, and then he’s a fisherman. It’s a very strange situation.”

“Perhaps he’s looking for someone?” suggested Rob.

“But who?” Will shook his head. “I don’t know. Things are pretty confusing at the moment. Anyway, we’ll follow the leads we’ve got so far, surely we’ll find something.” They rented two

cabins in the caravan park for the night from the friendly lady and were soon sitting down to a large steak dinner at the Charleville Hotel.

Meanwhile Wahid had just reached his camping spot by the river. It was dark but the lights of his Landcruiser picked up several clumps of horse droppings. "Somebody's been here," he said to himself. He walked over to his sleeping bag and camping gear. They were definitely not how he had left them that morning. "It's those dratted kids," he thought angrily. "They've been here. I'm sure of it." He hadn't liked the way the owner of the caravan park looked at him either, when he was leaving. Dorothy had not realised that he could see her from the rear vision mirror. That was another reason for his hasty departure.

Wahid knew he would have to snatch Rashida in the next couple of days. He must get into the station homestead while there were so few people there. As Wahid checked his rifle, then his handgun he felt the adrenalin rush mounting - he was close to completing his mission. In his mind he was a proud, strong, resolute warrior, keen eyed about to claim his prize and destroy all who attempted to prevent him.

Eyes wide with alarm, the boys leapt from their chairs and rushed to Rashida. Nick took one of her hands. It was as cold as ice. He fought the wave of panic that threatened to overwhelm him. Alex knelt, staring at Rashida, the colour drained from his face, he tried to speak but no words came.

Nick punched his younger brother on the shoulder to bring him out of his shock reaction. "Nick..Wha...", began Alex, his eyes now focussed on Nick's face as colour returned to his cheeks.

"Quick, Alex! Run! Run down to the cottage and get Jock! He'll know what to do for sure!" Alex rushed out while Nick tried to revive Rashida. "Gee, she's awfully white. And she's so cold," he said to himself. "What's happened to her!"

In was just a few minutes until, Alex came running in, followed closely by Jock. "Let's have a look at her," he said. He knelt on the floor and took Rashida's hands in his. He told Alex to go and get a cold wet cloth from the kitchen and bring it to him. Alex came back and gave the cloth to Jock, who proceeded to sponge Rashida's brow. "You massage her hands while I'm doing this," he said to Nick.

After several minutes, Rashida opened her eyes and cried, “W-what happened?”

CHAPTER 14 ~ NICK MAKES A DECISION

“We don’t know,” said the boys. “One minute you were watching TV and then suddenly you fainted.”

Rashida shut her eyes then opened them wide and started sobbing. She saw Jock. He gave her his handkerchief and in between sobs, she explained. “That man’s picture on the TV — I know him!” She was crying uncontrollably by this time. “H-he was the captain of the boat we came out from Indonesia in. Twenty-four people were drowned when the boat sank; my brother was one of them!” Jock and the boys exchanged horrified glances. “A-and, and that’s not all of it!” Rashida went on, “He was forever trying to force me to go with him. It was so horrible. He told me that one day I would be his forever and that he was going to follow me and track me down wherever I was.” Tears poured down her face. “I’m just so scared. I thought I had seen the last of him, and then the man on the TV said that he was out this way. He must be that camper down by the river! I know he’s come to get me and I don’t know what to do!”

Jock thought for a moment. “First thing to do,” he said, “is for all of us to have a nice hot cup of tea. Then we’ll sit down and make a plan.” Jock was a wise old bushman who knew the familiar ritual of having a cup of hot tea would induce some calm, while giving him time to think. He told Nick and Alex to go to the kitchen and make some tea. “And put plenty of sugar in the cups,” added Jock.

The boys soon came back with four cups of steaming tea, plus a plate of sweet biscuits. Rashida was crying softly now, the act of sipping hot sweet tea relaxing her anxiety a little. Jock’s mind was ticking over and he was wondering what to do. “If only Steven were here,” he thought.

The boys were so angry about the captain of the boat. How dare he threaten their friend! They muttered to each other imagining violent scenarios of revenge on the man who had caused such distress to Rashida. “They should make him walk the plank!” exclaimed Alex. “Yeah! But this is the 21st century!” interrupted Nick.

“Thank you for the tea,” said Rashida. “I’m so sorry to have upset you all.”

“No trouble,” said Jock kindly while the boys were trying to work out a way to protect her.

“We’d better get hold of Dad, pronto,” said Alex.

Nick nodded. He thought carefully for a moment and then said, “I’ve got an idea. First thing in the morning I’ll ride out and find Dad. I know exactly where he and the men are. It will take me most of the day to get there and then another day for us to get back.”

“That’s a good idea, Nick,” said Jock. “But don’t you think I should be the one to go?”

“No,” replied Nick. “You and Alex should stay here and look after Rashida in case that horrible man turns up. I wish Dad hadn’t taken Boots and Pockets though, they are the best watchdogs in the world.” Alex and Jock agreed.

Jock was pleased he did not have to ride such a long way because, although he had ridden all his life in the bush, he was getting a bit old to undertake such a long trip. He said, “All right. Now we had all better get some sleep. I think I’ll stay up here in the house tonight.”

“Right,” said Nick. “But before we go to bed, I’ll get a couple of Dad’s rifles out in case you need them.”

Rashida turned pale. She was still very frightened but she knew in her heart that Jock and the boys would take care of her.

Nick went out to one of the back rooms and fetched the key to the gun safe where the firearms were kept. He unlocked the gun safe and took ammunition and two rifles out, checking to see they were not loaded. He returned to the lounge and gave the rifles to Jock. He knew that Jock was an excellent shot because he had taught Nick and Alex all about guns – not only how to shoot, but also the dangers involved in handling firearms.

Nick said to Jock, "You can have my room and I'll bunk in with Alex."

"Thanks, Nick, but no thanks. I'll just make myself comfortable down here on the lounge. Now, you boys take Rashida up to her room." The boys and Rashida said goodnight to Jock and went upstairs.

On the way up, Alex whispered something to Nick.

"Good idea," he replied. He turned to Rashida. "Alex and I are going to get our sleeping bags and sleep on the floor in your room, if that's OK with you."

Rashida sighed with relief. "It's very OK with me," she said thankfully. The boys returned with their sleeping bags and set them up on the floor in Rashida's room.

"I reckon that that guy is a scumbag and a rotten b..." said Alex. "Sorry, Rashida, Dad would kill me if he heard me talking like this."

Rashida gave a weak smile. "Don't worry, Alex, that's exactly what I think of him too."

"And you won't tell Dad?"

"No way!"

The boys settled down in their sleeping bags.

"Goodnight, Rashida," they chorused.

"Goodnight, boys," returned Rashida, "and don't let the bedbugs get you!"

The boys laughed. They were pleased to see Rashida looking a bit happier. "You know, Alex, Rashida is talking more like a fair dinkum Aussie every day!"

"Yep," agreed Alex. "Now let's go to sleep. We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow." He turned out the light. "Oh, and Nick, please don't snore tonight!" Nick did not reply. He snorted at his brother's smart remark and vowed that he would pay him back later.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Jock turned off the light and settled himself comfortably on the large lounge. He covered himself with a blanket and made sure he had his rifle by his side. He was a light sleeper and his ears pricked up at every sound outside. He wished fervently that the dogs were around.

The next morning, everyone was up early. After breakfast, Rashida made Nick up some food to take with him, and Jock gave him a good supply of water. She was trying to be brave but she was still visibly shaken, and she looked as if she hadn't had much sleep. Nick saddled his horse and galloped off with these parting words, "Look after Rashida, you guys! Be back as soon as we can!" Nick and his horse disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Alex was all for getting on his horse and going down to the river to see if the camper was really the notorious Indonesian captain, but Jock would not let him do any such thing. Alex's face fell, but he knew better than to disobey Jock. "If we had the dogs and some of the men, we could go down there, but we haven't," he said. "Besides, he might be armed and he could also have some of his mates with him." Alex nodded dejectedly and kicked some stones around.

"Let's go for a walk in the garden," said Rashida.

"Good idea," said Jock. "You haven't seen my entire garden, have you?"

"No," replied Rashida, "but I have noticed that you have very colourful shrubs growing, and they are all different too." She examined some of the shrubs. "Are they all native to this part of the country?" she asked. Jock nodded. He led Rashida round the side of his shrubs and she saw that he had a huge vegetable garden. There was every sort of vegetable you could think of growing.

"I supply the station with all their fresh vegetables," he said proudly. "And now come and see my orchard." Rashida followed him. She saw citrus trees consisting of orange and lemon trees arranged in neat rows, as well as mandarins. "There are two types of lemons," said Jock. "Bush lemons are much nicer than ordinary lemons." He then pointed to a group of dense evergreen trees, some of which were even higher than his citrus trees. "Those are avocado trees," he said. He explained that they shed their leaves in early spring and they took a long time to bear fruit. "But avocados are very tasty and they are full of vitamins and minerals, so they are well worth waiting

for. Some of these should have fruit by early spring, provided the rains don't come early and destroy them."

Rashida and Jock walked around the gardens and orchard. She admired Jock's work and hoped that one day she could learn about gardening from him. She looked around and said, "By the way, Jock, where is Alex?"

Jock smiled and replied, "Oh, I sent the young fellow out to the first gate to keep watch. It'll make him feel important. You never know, he might even spot something."

"Or somebody," added Rashida.

"I don't think we need worry for a day or so because if it is that Indonesian captain, he will have to come closer in to the station homestead before he can do anything. And by that time Steven and the men should be back."

"I hope so," said Rashida, "but I still wish the dogs were here."

"Me too!" exclaimed Jock. "Anyway, let's go and get a cuppa. I'm sure you could do with one too." They walked back to the house. Jock called out to Alex, who had been sitting at the first gate. "See anything, young 'un?" he asked. Alex shook his head.

The afternoon passed quickly. Jock stayed in the house while Rashida went upstairs for a rest. Alex resumed his post at the first gate. Just as the sun was starting to go down, Alex rushed inside and said in an excited voice, "Hey, Jock! Guess what I just saw?" Without waiting for an answer from Jock, he rushed on. "I just saw a whole heap of flying foxes. They were rising up in the air as if someone was frightening them! And it was in the direction of the river too!"

"It could have been anything," replied Jock. "But we'll take precautions just the same."

While Rashida was preparing tea that night, Jock and Alex kept watch at the windows. Jock kept his rifle close beside him, just in case. Nothing happened.

Rashida and Alex watched some TV for a while and then went up to bed, but Jock turned out the light in the lounge and sat on a chair by the window, smoking his pipe and keeping his rifle handy. He was a little alarmed by what Alex had seen but he did not say anything in case he frightened

Rashida. Jock felt himself dozing off several times. The cattle outside in the home paddock were making a lot of noise. That could only mean one thing. He put out his pipe and stood up, pulling the curtains apart at the same time. He peered out into the blackness. He rubbed his eyes; then he rubbed them again. He thought he saw a faint light in the distance. He clutched his rifle and peered out again. Yes, Jock was not imagining things. There certainly was a light out there in the darkness, and it was definitely coming closer.

Will Jennings and his friends left Charleville after spending a quiet night at the Star Caravan Park. They had really enjoyed the company of Dorothy, the manager. Will was grateful that she had been able to help, even in a small way, in the search for the villainous Indonesian boat captain. He promised to keep in touch with her and told her that she would be the first to know when he had any more information. The two Immigration cars were now on their way to the first large cattle station heading away from Charleville.

“What’s the name of the station?” he asked.

Rob consulted his map. “Grey Rock Station,” he replied. “The turnoff is about 75 kilometres from the bitumen road.”

Will was glad that they had extra fuel. He’d been apprehensive about the state of the road and wondered what it was going to be like, but Dorothy had assured him that, as there had been no rain lately, their cars would be OK. “There might be a few holes in the tracks leading to the stations but if you drive carefully, you’ll be all right.”

They reached the turnoff at about 1 o’clock; the sign said that Grey Rock Station was 160 kilometres ahead. “This is a track, not a road at all,” complained Will. “We’ll have to be careful while driving.” The track was dusty and full of deep potholes. He had to watch the track and drive very carefully. They covered the first ten kilometres slowly and then Will stopped. The other Immigration car pulled up behind them.

“What’s wrong?” asked one of the field officers.

“Bloody awful road,” complained Will. He turned to Rob, thrust the keys at him, “You can drive for a while.”

One of the field officers said, “If we had known what it was like, we would have taken one of the Department’s Landcruisers.”

“Yeah,” replied Will. “I’m sure Dorothy made a mistake when she told us that we wouldn’t have any trouble getting to Grey Rock. Oh, well, we’d better make the best of it, but you know, out here this is more than likely a great road, according to the locals.”

“You’re probably right,” said one of the field officers. “So let’s keep moving. We want to reach Grey Rock before dark.”

The cars continued slowly on their way. They drove carefully to avoid the many potholes. “We could all become rally drivers after this,” said Rob, looking ruefully at Will, who nodded then told Rob to keep his eyes glued to the road. A freshening wind stirred up eddies of dust, reducing visibility to only a few metres. Soon their eyes were watering as they peered into the dust haze.

The vehicles reached the station just on dark. The station dogs barked excitedly and the outside lights of the homestead flashed on, suddenly illuminating the gloom. The four men emerged from their cars, brushing themselves down and rubbing their eyes. As a man walked across the yard towards them, Will called, “Are you the owner of this station?”

The man nodded tersely, replying, “And you are?”

Will introduced himself and his three colleagues, briefly told him what they were doing out that way, and asked if he had seen anyone matching Wahid’s description.

“No,” said the station owner. “If I had, I’d have radioed the other stations round about ‘cos we all keep an eye out for each other in the outback – I guess you city folks would call it sort of an “eyes on network”. So, to answer your question – no, I haven’t seen this fellow, and I reckon none of my neighbours have either. We all keep in touch and see what’s happening round about, especially if there are any strangers in the area.”

Will was disappointed. “Oh well,” he said, “we’ll just have to go on to the next station in the morning. We are pretty sure that our man is around here somewhere.”

“You could camp in the bush by the river for months without anybody knowing,” said the station owner, and that remark made the men feel even more dejected. He went on in a more cheerful note. “You can all stay here for the night,” he added. “Come up to the house and have a good feed.” He peered closer. “And you look as if you could all do with a bit of a scrub up too. Oh, and by the way, my name is Jed.”

Will nodded and thanked him profusely. He knew that he and his men had no desire to drive off to the next station that night, and, being a true city slicker, he couldn’t imagine anything worse than having to camp in the bush. Jed led them up to the house and introduced them to his wife Janine and their children – a boy of twelve and a girl who was probably a year older.

After a welcome shower, they sat down to a hearty meal. Will noticed a rather pretty girl was helping Janine to serve the food. “That’s Jenny, our governess,” Jed said. “Some of the stations out here have governesses, until the kids are old enough to go into the city to boarding school. Our daughter will be going into Toowoomba next year. It will be a big adventure, and a whole new world for her as well.”

Will smiled at Jenny. He glanced over at Rob, who seemed to be quite smitten. In fact he was actually blushing. The governess smiled back at him, turning a light pink. Jed went on as the governess returned to the kitchen. “Jenny is a great girl, won’t take any nonsense from the kids but she’s real fair, and the kids love her.”

“Do all of the stations employ a governess?” asked one of the field officers.

“Most do,” replied Jed. “We’ve just heard on the grapevine that Steven West of Mulga Lakes Station – that’s the station after Gum Tree Creek, has recently employed a governess from Afghanistan. She was one of the refugees that came out on a boat that sank near Christmas Island. Terrible tragedy that. Anyway, Steve is going to bring her over some time to meet our kids. Steve’s wife died from cancer some time ago.”

Janine took up the story. "Pretty sad it was too," she said, "leaving two young boys behind." She continued, "You never know what lies ahead of you."

Will looked keenly at Jed and Janine. "As a matter of fact, the man we are looking for happens to be the captain of the boat that sank, killing a number of Afghan refugees."

"Wonder if the governess came out on that boat?" said Jed.

"That would certainly be a coincidence," said Will. "When I get to Mulga Lakes, I must have a talk with her."

"It would be very strange if she had been on the same boat," observed Jed.

Will thought so too, and decided that he would call the main Immigration Office in the morning and have them check out the names of the passengers on the ill-fated boat. When he asked Jed about mobile phone reception, he was told that he would not be able to use his phone at all in that area. "It's the same all over," he said. "Even if you stood on the top of your car, you would not get any reception. Maybe you would get one bar on your phone, but that's all."

"Drat!" thought Will. So it looked as if he would have to wait until he spoke to the governess employed at Mulga Lakes.

Will and his colleagues said goodnight to their hosts, thanked them for the meal and their hospitality and were shown to their various rooms. Before Rob went to his room, however, he slipped into the kitchen to have a word with the attractive governess. Jed winked at Will. "Love at first sight," he whispered with a grin. Will nodded.

Next morning, after a hearty breakfast, the immigration officers set out for Gum Tree Creek Station. "I'm not looking forward to this," said Rob.

"Neither am I," returned Will. "But you can drive for the first twenty kilometres."

The cars made slow progress but at last they reached the main road. They drove on until they came to the turnoff to Gum Tree Creek Station. The track to the second station was just as

bad, if not worse, than the drive to the first station. This time the distance was shorter but a mulga stake through the tyre of the second car meant a long delay while the inexperienced bush travellers changed the wheel. It was past six o'clock in the evening when they reached the station, where they were shown the same hospitality as the previous night.

"The people out here are so nice," said Will. Rob agreed enthusiastically with him.

"Oh, I know you are thinking about Jenny. You have that dopey look on your face!"

"Well, yeah," said Rob, "you've hit the nail on the head." Will was right. He had thought about nothing else except Jenny since last night. "I'm sure she's the one."

"How do you know?"

"I just saw that soft look in her eyes."

"Well, let's get moving. The sooner we get to Mulga Lakes, the better!"

The turnoff to Mulga Lakes was not far, and this track seemed to be in a much better condition than the others they had travelled on. "It looks as if it has been graded just recently," said Will.

"Didn't Dorothy say that Mulga Lakes was one of the wealthier and larger stations in the area?" asked Rob.

"That's right," said Will. "Anyway, no time to waste, let's get this show on the road." Driving was quite pleasant that morning and the men were more relaxed; they did not have to use all their concentration to stay on the road and they made good time. "We should reach Mulga Lakes about noon," observed Will. "I'll be really glad to meet that Afghan governess who works for Steven West."

"Yes," replied Rob, "but it's a pity you couldn't get on to our main office in Brisbane to get the list of people who were on that boat."

"I've got a funny feeling about that," said Will. "But we'll just have to wait till we talk to the governess for a start, and then get somewhere so I can use my mobile. This trip to Mulga Lakes will be a short one."

They drove on. Suddenly Will cried, “Look! Rob! Up there! Tell me what do you see?”

“It looks like a man walking. Now he’s stopped and he’s gone off into the bush!”

“Pretty suspicious! Stop the car and let’s see if the other guys spotted him too!” However the field officers had not noticed the man, but they all agreed that it would be a good idea if they tried to find out who he was and where he was going.

“How far away are we from Mulga Lakes?” said Will.

Rob looked at the speedometer. “Around about four kilometres.”

Both cars continued slowly to where the man had been seen. They pulled up and saw a track leading off to the left. Tyre tracks, hoof prints and a few footprints showed clearly in the soft red dust. “Look!” cried one of the field officers, “I’m sure he was headed along this track.”

“Wonder where it leads to.”

“Let’s go and find out.”

“Hmm,” Rob observed, “I doubt if our fugitive could ride a horse. Those tracks have probably been made by somebody from Mulga Lakes – maybe the kids. But see here, the footprints stop. It looks like the person realised he’d better continue through the scrub, harder to track. Only a few people could follow a trail through the leaf litter, and I’m not one of them! We may as well follow this track a bit further.” He looked at his map. “It must lead to the river.” He gestured towards the thick bush and tall trees not far ahead. “Perhaps our friend has been doing a bit of fishing after all. OK, on we go!”

To their surprise, just where the track met the river, in full view was a Toyota 4WD ute, a sleeping bag and the remains of a campfire. They searched closer, and one of the field officers found a map with Mulga Lakes Station marked in red and a comment, “station very quiet, soon my beauty I will have you!”

Will scratched his head in perplexity. “Wonder what that means,” he said.

Rob came to the rescue. “I reckon it means that he’s after somebody at Mulga Lakes. It’s gotta be our man.”

“Why?”

“Well, he’s certainly gone to a lot of trouble to get out here and spy on the station homestead. I wouldn’t mind betting that he’s after someone or something. When he writes ‘station very quiet’, it probably means that the men from the station are away working somewhere – mending fences or mustering cattle and they’ve taken the station dogs with them. I suspect he’s been hanging around and watching the homestead for a few days, because when anyone strange comes around the stations out here, first thing they hear are the dogs barking. So what’s our next move, Will? Do you think I’m right?”

“Yes, I do in a way, but I’m still a bit puzzled.” He thought for a moment and finally said, “Now, here’s what we’ll do.” He turned to the two field officers. “You two guys wait around here and see if the owner of this camping gear here, returns. If he doesn’t come back within a couple of hours, you get in your car and join us at Mulga Lakes. If he’s legit, that’s OK but if not, then after the couple of hours is up, you both make sure that he can’t use his vehicle to go anywhere!” The field officers smiled wryly. They understood the meaning of Will’s instructions. Will continued. “In the meantime, Rob and I will head for the homestead and see what’s going on there.”

Will proceeded back to the main track as quickly as he dared; he had a sense of unease and an urgency to reach the Mulga Lakes homestead. At the first gate, Rob jumped out, opened it and shut it again after Will drove through. Rob was a country boy and knew the country rule —if you open a gate, then shut it again. He hastily did the same with the second gate. The homestead was now in sight and Will was anxious to meet with the owner, and also talk to the governess. He was just as anxious to get back to where he could use his mobile and find out the names of the Afghan refugees on the ill-fated boat. He sensed the pieces of the jigsaw fitting together. Rob too, was impatient for the investigation to be wrapped up — he was keen to make contact with Jenny again to judge if he could make some tentative plans towards the future.

Will parked the car near a garden gate in the shade of a brush box tree overhanging a fence covered with pink and yellow bougainvillea. Just inside the gate were a couple of large oleander trees. Leaning against the post and the rail fence that surrounded the homestead yard, they gazed at the house, wondering about the silence that seemed to envelop them. It was eerily quiet. Warily they opened the small gate and cautiously approached the door; before they could knock, the door was wrenched violently open from the inside. Two figures confronted them — an old man and a small boy. Both had rifles pointed directly at Rob and Will.

“Hands up!” shouted the old man. “Don’t make a move! I’ve got you covered! You have ten seconds to tell me who you are and what you want!”

CHAPTER 16 ~ THE NET TIGHTENS

“Now wait a minute,” said Will. “You can put that gun down, mate. We are with Immigration and we are here in relation to Wahid Kusomo, whom we believe is in this area. If you let us put our hands down, we will show you our credentials.”

Jock and Alex lowered their guns. Jock checked their papers and said apologetically, “We thought you might have been in league with your wanted man. Last night the cheeky bugger almost made it to the homestead.” He told Will and Rob what he had seen the evening before. “I don’t know what happened after his torchlight went out. Maybe he went back to the river or maybe he snooped around the homestead from a different direction. I don’t know. I stayed awake all night but didn’t see any further signs.”

“Well, we caught a glimpse of him this morning on the road,” said Rob. “He was a bit far away, but we’re sure that was him. He went off into the bush when he saw our cars.”

“How many of you are there?” asked Jock.

“We’ve got our two field officers back at his camp. They are waiting to see if he returns.” Will told Jock about the orders he had given his two field officers. He looked at his watch. “If nothing unforeseen happens, they should be here in an hour or so.” He continued, “I would like to talk to your governess, if that’s possible.”

The small boy spoke for the first time. “You can’t see her now ‘cos she’s upstairs resting.”

“Yes,” agreed Jock. “She saw the picture of your wanted man on the TV last night and as you can imagine, it was a great shock to her.”

Alex’s eyes widened. “Yeah, she even fainted. It was so scary, wasn’t it, Jock?”

Jock nodded. “Well, you’d better come inside and have a cup of tea.” He turned to Alex and said, “Young ‘un, you go upstairs and check on Rashida.” Alex made for the steps.

Will was a bit dismayed. He had wanted to question Rashida as soon as he arrived at Mulga Lakes but he guessed that he would have to wait, it would not do to upset her.

“Rashida is fast asleep,” Alex said. “I don’t want to wake her up. Reckon I’ll make us all a cuppa tea and I know where there’s a new tin of cream biscuits too!”

Jock took out his pipe and lit up. “Rashida has told us all about your Wahid; how her brother was drowned when the boat capsized. She told us that he made unwelcome advances to her the whole time, from the start of the journey from Indonesia until the boat reached Christmas Island. He must be a terrible person. If I had my way, I’d shoot him.” Then he smiled. “The young fellow was all for going up to the camp with rifles and a ton of ammunition but I put that idea out of his head quick smart; I didn’t know how many other slippery people were involved.”

“Good thinking,” said Will. “Did Rashida tell you anything else?”

Jock thought for a moment. “Well, she did say that she had reported his behaviour to Immigration on Christmas Island.”

“Oh, that would be Mike and Joe Reynolds,” Will said. “Mike is a doctor up there, and Joe looks after the welfare of the refugees.”

“That’s interesting,” said Jock. “I do feel sorry for the refugees. I sort of feel guilty when I think of the good life we have out here compared to what some of them have had to put up with in their countries.”

Alex returned carrying tea and biscuits for the visitors. Rob said, “Gee, this will go well.” He talked easily with Alex, who explained that his father and the men should be back home some time that day. He told them that they had gone to repair fences and check the stock in an area well away from the homestead. They chatted amicably for a while round the table. About an hour or so later, they heard the sound of a car.

“That will be your friends for sure. Alex, you go out and show Will’s friends in,” said Jock. “Oh, and you’d better make another pot of tea after that.”

“OK, Jock,” said Alex.

“Good lad that,” remarked Jock. “In fact both the boys are so capable that they can do almost anything around the station. It was such a shocking tragedy when Steve’s wife died. Everyone misses her terribly. She would be very proud of her boys today. They get along so well with Rashida.” He told them how the boys had taught her to ride a horse and how she had fallen off when her horse got a fright. “She wasn’t game to

get back on the horse straightaway, but the boys took charge and made her get back up right there and then. I would really have loved to have been there when it happened – it reminds me of my younger days when I first had anything to do with horses.” Jock continued, comfortably smoking his pipe.

Will greeted his field officers. “How did you get on?” he asked. “Any trouble?”

“Well,” replied one, “We’d only been there for about 15 minutes when we thought we heard a noise in the bush, so I took my gun and went to investigate, leaving Bob by the Landcruiser. I raced in the direction of the noise and I glimpsed a figure running away. I ran after him but could not catch him so after a while I came back.”

Bob said, "We didn't see or hear anything else after that, although we listened carefully. We waited until it was time to head down here."

"What did you do about the Landcruiser?"

"We practically dismantled it," said Bob with a grin. "In fact, we've got a number of the essential parts in the car with us."

"Good!" said Will.

They chatted on while Jock smoked his pipe and reminisced about his younger days, and Alex filled them in about daily life on the station. He periodically went upstairs to check on Rashida, but each time he came down it was to tell them that she was still sleeping.

"I'm beginning to be a bit worried about the wee lass," Jock mused. "When Steve returns, I think he should take her into Charleville to see the doctor. Dr Wilson has been there since the year one and he'll know how to fix her."

The men asked many questions about life in the outback and Jock and Alex were only too glad to enlighten them.

Suddenly Jock pricked up his ears. "Horses," he said. "That must mean that Steven and the men are back." He stood up. "Go and see, young 'un!"

Alex raced out the door and shading his eyes, peered into the distance. He could not see anyone but a couple of minutes later, he heard the barking of dogs. Then the riders came into view led by his Dad and Nick cantering towards the homestead. Last of all came the food wagon carrying Mary and Jilly. Steven slid quickly off his horse, handing the reins to Alex. Nick accompanied him towards the horse paddock.

"Boy!" cried Alex, "have I got some news for you!" He proceeded, with suitably dramatic embellishment, to tell his brother all that had happened whilst he had been away.

"Who belongs to the flash city cars?"

“Immigration from Brisbane. They’re after Wahid big time. I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes for quids!”

“Me either. How is Rashida?”

“I’ve been checking on her every so often and she’s still sleeping. It must have been terrible for her.”

“Yeah, I’ll be so glad when the mongrel’s caught. I’d like to shoot him, wouldn’t you?”

“You betcha! I’d like to blow him from here to kingdom come!”

The boys went inside to join the others. It was past lunchtime but, nevertheless, Mary and Jilly were bustling about in the kitchen making everyone a meal. The boys went to help them. “Hello, boys,” greeted Mary. “How is poor Rashida?”

Alex replied, “Right now she’s upstairs sleeping. She’s way out stressed to the max.”

“She’ll be OK when all this is over,” said Mary. “Now if you boys will take this food into the men, I’m sure they are ready for it, and you too no doubt.”

While they ate, Will brought Steven up to date with the latest on Wahid.

“I’m sure glad the dogs are back,” said Nick. “We’ll be much safer now.”

Steven nodded his head vigorously. “If I’d known that something like this was going to happen, I would have left one of the dogs here,” he said. “I think we should all talk about what we should do next. Any suggestions?”

Will replied, “Obviously we’ve got to catch him as soon as possible. We know he’s definitely in this area, so I suggest we search the bush, and one of my field officers will take a drive along the road just in case Wahid tries to make a run for it. But I don’t think he’ll do that somehow.”

Steven said, “Jock will stay here with the boys, Rashida, Mary and Jilly. They’ll be safe. I’ll leave one of the dogs here too.”

“Good idea,” said Rob. “When do we start?”

“Right now,” said Steven. “I don’t suppose you ride, do you, Will?”

“Er, not very well, but Rob can, so he can go with you and I’ll try combing the bush from another direction.”

“OK, and you can take the other dog.”

The boys helped Mary and Jilly with the dishes and then sat down to watch some TV with Jock. The men were just about to start on their search when Nick asked, “Do you think I should check on Rashida?”

“No, she should be all right,” said Alex. “I checked on her a little while ago.”

“No, I’d better just see if she’s still sleeping.” Nick was persistent.

“All right then, but hurry up, there’s a great cowboy movie coming on in just a few ticks,” said Alex flipping through channels with the TV remote. As the boys were not allowed to join the hunt, he figured to slip in a bit extra TV time without Steven noticing..

Nick reached the stairs and raced up, two steps at a time. Suddenly there was an unearthly scream. Nick appeared outside of Rashida’s room, his face ashen.

“What’s wrong?” cried Alex.

“Rashida’s not in her room,” cried Nick. “Sh-h-e-e-s gone!” The men thundered up the stairs and into the room.

“She can’t have gone,” cried Steven. “Nick, have you looked around upstairs?”

It took only seconds to search every upstairs room - Rashida was nowhere to be found. They went downstairs and searched all around the homestead, but there was no trace of her.

Running back up stairs, Steven went to the balcony of Rashida’s room and peered into the distance. He couldn’t see any movement, no matter which way he looked. He went down the narrow outside staircase. Part way down, he noticed something. He bent closer. It was a muddy footprint. Steven turned pale as he raced back up the stairs and down the inside stairs calling out his discovery to all in earshot.

“It’s bad news! Wahid has managed to get hold of Rashida! He’s even more cunning than we thought!” He looked at the downcast faces in front of him and said harshly, “Well then, let’s get moving. We certainly can’t afford to lose any time now. Rashida is in terrible danger!”

CHAPTER 17 ~ RASHIDA'S REVENGE

Wahid ran through the bush, only stopping every now and then to see if he had been followed. He listened intently. Only the birds called from the trees. He reached the road and looked carefully to the right and to the left. There was no sign of anybody. He thought he was so clever the night before when he spotted the different entrances to the homestead. “It’s now or never,” he’d thought to himself. If the people in the cars were indeed looking for him, then he would have to get hold of Rashida quickly. Time was crucial and Wahid quickly made his plans as he took a different route to the homestead, careful to keep it in sight. Moving swiftly he skirted a paddock where the cattle were moving restlessly, slipped through a fence and made his way to the side of the building.

Wahid paused and looked at the three sets of stairs. He hesitated. “Which room is Rashida’s?” he wondered. Swiftly and silently, he climbed the middle set of stairs. Softly opening the door at the top of the stairs, he looked in. There were bunk beds, pictures of horses on the walls, and a football was on the floor. “Damn!” thought Wahid. “It’s not this room for sure!” He closed the door gently and crept down the stairs. Choosing another set of stairs, Wahid repeated his first actions. Peering into the second room, he saw that it was much the same as the first; bunks, pictures on the wall, a laptop on the table, but this time he saw a pile of dirty clothes on the floor. Wahid cursed under his breath again, closed the door and sneaked down the stairs.

“Third time lucky,” he thought as he went up the third lot of stairs and reached the door. Gingerly turning the handle, he gently opened the door. His heart raced at the sight. There, lying on the bed, under the covers, was the light of his life. “Rashida!” he breathed. “She’s as beautiful as she was when I last saw her!” But he stopped and thought that this was no time to be soft. He thought back to how she had treated him in the past and then he felt angry. Taking out his gun, he crept over to where Rashida lay. Putting his hand heavily over her mouth and pointing the gun to her head, he said in his soft, oily voice, “Rashida! Rashida! Wake up!”

Rashida woke with a start sitting up quickly. She could not speak because Wahid had one hand tightly clasped across her mouth and the other hand held a gun directly pointing at her head. She could not speak but her eyes said it all. They filled with horror and disbelief as her face whitened. Wahid could hear her heart beating rapidly. “You must come with me now! At once, you hear! Otherwise I will order my men downstairs to kill the boys!”

Rashida’s heart pounded wildly, but she did as Wahid said. She tried to stand up, but could not seem to move her legs. Her whole body was trembling with fear. Wahid shook her roughly. “Get a move on!” he said. “I haven’t got all day. We’ve got to be out of here quickly!” He pushed her again and, taking his hand away from her mouth, said, “Now, my pretty one! If you make even one small sound, I’ll give my men orders to shoot the boys!”

Rashida nodded. “D-don’t do that,” she whispered frantically. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

“Of course you will,” replied Wahid. “You’ve got no other choice. I’ve been waiting for this day for such a long time. It seems like forever.” His voice took on a more ominous tone and he roughly hauled Rashida to her feet. Half carrying her, half dragging her, he reached the door. “Now, get going, my pretty one.” He shoved her upright but she was still stumbling. He pushed her again. “Walk properly! You can do better than that!” Wahid felt a bit disappointed that she was not begging him to treat her better. “That’s what Afghan women are supposed to do – cry and beg their men to treat them better!” he thought to himself. “But not this one! I can see I’m going to have to beat her into submission, and I’ll certainly enjoy doing that!” He pushed her again and

was glad to see that Rashida was at least making a bit of an effort to do what he wanted. “Now, get moving, quickly!” he said and thrust her in front of him.

Wahid made the same roundabout trip as before and despite Rashida's stumbling gait, they soon came to the road. He hurried Rashida across, forcing her to take the track towards the river and his freedom. Rashida was exhausted with fright, but her mind was icy calm as she vowed to use every ounce of strength and resourcefulness to get away from this monster.

When they reached the vehicle, Wahid motioned for Rashida to climb into the front seat. He put away his gun, feeling there was no need for it now. He had won his prize; in a few seconds, he would be on his way! He turned the key to start the engine. Nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing happened. With a savage curse, he flung himself out of the Landcruiser, took out his gun, and gestured it meaningfully at Rashida. “Stay there!” He snapped the bonnet up and peered inside. Even though he had little mechanical knowledge, he noticed that some parts of the electrical system were missing. With another devilish curse, he slammed the bonnet down and ordered Rashida out of the car.

Again he waved the gun menacingly at her. “Perek! Back to the house. I shall bargain with them!” Rashida was becoming more frightened by the minute as Wahid continued cursing loudly. “It’s your entire fault!” he shouted, giving Rashida a vicious kick as he pushed her in front of him. Rashida said nothing. She was scared, but she was seething too, and determined to escape the moment an opportunity arose.

They came to the paddock where the cattle were grazing, Wahid opened the gate and forced Rashida through. In his haste, or maybe his ignorance, he did not shut it. He pushed Rashida in the direction of the homestead. “W-what are you going to do?” Rashida asked in a trembling voice, but a hard light blazed in her eyes. She lowered her head to avoid Wahid noticing the anger and determination in her face.

Wahid spat at her as he said, “Oh, just you wait and see, my pretty. Just you wait and see.” It was the voice of a mad man and Rashida could see just how desperate he was. “What next?” she thought. “What is this maniac going to do next?”

Wahid forced her into a run until they came to where they could see the homestead clearly. He stopped. There seemed to be a great deal of activity going on. There were cars, there were horses being saddled up, and people moving urgently and talking. Wahid noticed that most of the men had rifles. The dogs began to bark loudly.

Wahid stopped and made sure that the gun was pointing at Rashida's head. He had to shout loudly in order to make himself heard. In an unnatural voice, he screamed, "Call off your dogs and put your guns down or I will shoot Rashida!" Everyone did as they were told. Even the dogs were quiet and obediently sat down on the ground.

A man who seemed to be in charge called out to him, "We've done what you said. Now what do you want us to do? Can we all be reasonable and talk about this so that nobody will get hurt?"

Wahid waved his gun and screamed, "Reasonable! Reasonable! I'll give you reasonable! I'm going to make you all sorry for this!" He shot wildly in the air.

Rashida ducked then spun towards him in dismay; she thought the shots were being aimed at her. She straightened up and looked over at the homestead. She saw the two boys standing beside Steven. Even though she was so frightened, she was thankful to see they were OK. She recalled that Wahid had said to her, 'If you even make one small sound, I'll order my men downstairs to shoot the boys!' So where were Wahid's men? Had they been captured, or was he acting alone? At that moment, all the anger she had been bottling up came to the surface. She thrust herself at Wahid, pushed him to the ground and began pummeling him with all the strength she had.

This was so unexpected that Wahid hesitated before trying to push her away. They were both struggling fiercely on the ground. Over and over they went. Now Wahid was on top; now

Rashida. She tried hard to get the gun, but to no avail. With a great effort, she stood up and began kicking her captor viciously. Wahid was holding his gun tightly in one hand while trying to ward off her blows with the other. He fired crazily, aiming at nothing in particular.

A shout came from the homestead. "Look out, Rashida! Run!" It was Steven's voice. She looked up and saw the mob of cattle stampeding in her direction. With a last monstrous kick at Wahid, she started to run.

"Don't run this way!" shouted Steven. "Make for the other paddock, come round the back way to the homestead!"

Rashida turned in the direction of the paddock and started running for her life. Fear lent wings to her flying feet and she did not stop running until she had reached the fence, just as Steven swung himself over it to run towards her.

On the other side of the fence, the boys were waiting for her. They helped her through and hugged her tightly. The boys were crying and Steven was near to tears as well.

"Oh, Rashida, thank goodness you're all right!" cried Nick.

"Yeah!" drawled Alex. "We thought you were a goner!"

Rashida was too exhausted to answer. She was breathing heavily and could not speak. All she could do was try to control her beating heart.

Suddenly there was a shout from one of the men. "Steve! Quick! Get here now and see what's happening!" Steven, Rashida and the boys rushed round to the front of the homestead where everyone else was gathered. Wahid was running for his life towards them. He was stumbling out of control and weaving blindly from side to side as he tried to outrun the stampeding mob. He fell and, struggling to get up, he slipped again. The cattle ran right over the top of him. The last thing Wahid heard before he died was Rashida's scream of terror as she fell unconscious at Steven's feet.

CHAPTER 18 ~ AFTERMATH

Rashida woke some hours later, surprised to find that she was in her room. Steven held her hand as he sat on the chair beside the bed. “Thank goodness you’re all right,” he said.

“How long have I been here? What’s the time?” asked Rashida.

“It’s nearly 7 o’clock,” replied Steven, “so you’ve been out to it for quite a while. Do you remember what happened this morning?”

Rashida nodded her head. “Yes, I do,” she said tearfully. “I remember everything. I got so scared when Wahid told me that his men were going to kill the boys, so I had no choice but to go with him and do whatever he said.” Steven clutched her hand more tightly. “Then, when I found out he was acting alone and telling me lies about the boys, I got so mad that I cracked up.” Steven smiled at her quaint use of English. “I just couldn’t help myself. When I finally broke free, I just wanted to kill him!” said Rashida.

“We were watching from here,” said Steven. “We were hoping and praying that you would not get hurt. It’s all over now. The guys from Immigration have called the flying doctor to take Wahid’s body back to Brisbane and return it to his family.”

Rashida looked puzzled. “Flying Doctor?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” said Steven. “If we have an accident or a death out here in the bush, a doctor comes out in a plane to see what he can do. If the patient is seriously ill, he will fly the patient into the nearest hospital. In the case of a death, he will fly the body to the nearest morgue, which is usually at the hospital. The police and hospital authorities take over then and contact the nearest relatives. In Wahid’s case, we have found out that he has a wife and children, so the authorities will contact his wife.”

Rashida said vehemently, “I had no idea he was even married. It’s shocking for a married man to carry on like that – especially in our culture. If I ever get married, I hope my husband will never do anything as bad as that to me!”

Steven felt something stir inside of him and, for a swift moment, he could feel his heart beating a little quicker than usual but he soon shrugged this feeling off and said, “Would you like something to eat now? I can get Mary or Jilly to rustle something up for you.”

Rashida shook her head. She sat up and said, “No, I’ll come down shortly. I feel a lot better, and safe now that I know I don’t have to fear Wahid anymore.”

She stood up but was so shaky that she would have fallen if Steven had not caught her. “I think you’d better stay in bed for the rest of the day, young lady,” he said.

“All right, but I’ll see how I feel after a shower and a change of clothes.”

“Will you be OK?” asked Steven. “I can easily send Mary or Jilly up to help you.”

“No, I’ll be all right, thanks,” said Rashida. When Steven left her room, she hobbled over to her bathroom and had a long hot shower. She put on some clean clothes and felt decidedly better. But there was something missing – the precious bag that Rafi had given her. She looked around and began to cry softly. “I-I must have lost it somewhere. I’ve got to find it.” She stood at the top of the steps and called Steven.

Steven bounded up the stairs. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“My little bag that I wear every day – it’s gone. I just have to find it.” She had tears in her eyes. “Oh Steven, it’s so important to me. Rafi gave it to me just before he died.”

“Don’t worry,” said Steven kindly. “I’ll send the men out to look for it. Now you go back to bed.”

“No, I’m all right now,” replied Rashida. “I feel OK now that I’ve had a shower and a change of clothes. I’ll come down and see the boys.”

“They’ll be so pleased to see you,” said Steven. “Also we have some officers from Immigration here who would like to have a few words with you.” Rashida looked puzzled. “Oh, I forgot to tell you, they were after Wahid too.” He quickly put

Rashida in the picture before she made her way slowly down the stairs.

The boys rushed over and hugged Rashida. They hugged her so tightly that she did not think they would ever let her go. "Gee, we thought you were a goner there for a minute," cried Nick. "But you really did a good job on him. We could almost hear you sluggin' him from here!"

"Yeah, you can certainly pack a punch!" Agreed Alex. "I didn't know girls could fight like that! Anyway, if the cattle hadn't finished Wahid off, somebody here would have blown him to smithereens!"

At this stage Steven interrupted. "It's time for you to go to the classroom, boys. You can both do a bit of work until tea time. You've had quite enough excitement for a while."

The boys reluctantly trudged out of the room and headed in the direction of the schoolroom, muttering to themselves, "Not fair! Grownups get all the breaks!"

Steven introduced Rashida to Will and Rob and the two field officers. He then disappeared outside to line up his men to search for Rashida's precious bag. Will and Rob told Rashida all that they knew about Wahid and how they had been led to Charleville with the help of the people who had seen his picture on TV.

"Yes, that's how I came to know about him being out here," interrupted Rashida. "I was absolutely terrified when I saw it."

"I'm sure you were," replied Will sympathetically. "Then we got on to your friends Mike and Joe from Christmas Island and they filled us in on the rest. I'm glad it's all over."

Rashida nodded her head. "But I didn't think it would end like that," said Rashida. "I feel so sorry for his wife."

"Wahid's wife and family probably had no idea that he was leading a double life," added Rob. They thanked Rashida for all her help. They would be leaving Mulga Lakes early the next morning and returning to Brisbane to tie up all the loose ends. "And complete a mountain of paperwork," groaned Rob. "I'd much rather stay out here."

Hearing the flying doctor's plane, they went outside and looked up to see it circling the homestead, then coming in to land on the station airstrip.

Steven was walking past the kitchen when Mary and Jilly called him. “May I have a word, Steven?” asked Mary. “Yes, Mary, what is it?”

“Well, when I sent Jilly up to the chook pen to collect the eggs this afternoon, she found this.” She handed Steven a little bag. “It does belong to Rashida, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” replied Steven, “and she’ll be so glad to get it back. Actually her brother gave it to her just before he died.”

Mary said, “Well, you can thank Jilly for that.” Steven smiled at Jilly, who gave him a big smile in return. Her eyes lit up when Steven promised to tell Rashida that Jilly was the one who had found the precious bag.

Before going out to meet the Flying Doctor, Steven made a detour to his office. He put the bag on the table. There was a piece of paper sticking out and Steven noticed the numbers, 9-7-7-6-1, on one side of the paper. “Wonder what that means,” he mused. He was just about to put the piece of paper back into the bag when he noticed another folded-up piece of paper underneath. He could not contain his curiosity. That piece of paper was folded into two small squares. Steven unfolded it and, though the writing was faded, he squinted his eyes and could just make out the words. “Crescent Moon Café, Queen Street, Brisbane.” He looked puzzled. “Wonder what’s so important to Rashida about these papers,” he thought. “I wonder why she guards them so well.” Steven experienced a twinge of guilt about reading Rashida’s personal papers. “But,” he rationalised, “after all, the first piece was sticking out of the bag so I had to handle it in order to put it back, and it was only by chance that I read it.” He now felt that anything to do with Rashida was important to him. He experienced the same twinge of excitement as when he had held Rashida’s hand in his.

Coming out of the study, Steven saw that Rashida was sitting with Will and Rob at the table, drinking tea. When he handed her the little bag, she was quite overcome and threw her arms around him. “Hold on, Rashida,” he said. “It wasn’t me who found your bag. It was Jilly.” Rashida hurried off to the kitchen, found Jilly and gave her a hug.

Steven went out to meet the plane and talk to the Flying Doctor. Some of his men had gathered Wahid’s remains and placed them in a body bag. The doctor looked under the sheet. “Poor devil,”

he said. "What a way to go!" But when Steven explained the whole situation to him, he didn't feel quite so sorry, especially when he learned what had happened to Rashida.

"Sure you don't want me to take her out to the hospital in Charleville for a check-up?" he asked.

"No," replied Steven emphatically. "She's better off here."

"Well, I'll be off then," said the doctor.

"Sure you won't stay for a cuppa?" asked Steven.

"No thanks," the doctor replied. "I've got to get back to Charleville. I've a heavy date tonight." He smiled at Steven, climbed into the aeroplane, and, with a final wave, the plane roared off towards Charleville.

It was a happy group of people who gathered for the evening meal at Mulga Lakes that night. Mary had decided that they would have a barbecue on the closed veranda. All the station hands were invited, as well as Jock, who came up smoking his well-loved pipe.

The boys were allowed to watch TV for an extra hour. "The old man can be OK sometimes, don't you reckon?" whispered Nick to his brother, and Alex nodded vigorously. It seemed no time until Steven shooed the boys off to bed, and this met with the usual muttering.

Rashida went to help Mary and Jilly in the kitchen. As soon as she finished, she said goodnight to the men gathered on the veranda and went slowly up to her room. "What a horrible few days it's been," she said to herself as she slipped into her nightclothes. "I hope I never have to go through that again!" She slid beneath the covers and settled into bed.

Although Rashida was exhausted, she found that she could not sleep. Visions of Wahid kept coming and going, and these visions were mixed with ones of Steven, holding her hand, his face so full of tenderness and concern. "I think I'm falling a tiny bit in love with him," she thought. "But it can't happen. He is my employer and he is probably just as concerned about me as he would be with any of his other employees." She fell asleep but the dreams, both good and bad, persisted.

At the same time, Steven was downstairs on the veranda in deep discussion with the immigration officers. "When you're ready, I'll show you to your rooms," he said.

Rob said, "Rashida is a beauty, isn't she?" Steven nodded absently, but only Jock saw the slight reddening of his face. He smiled to himself and sucked on his pipe, his eyes twinkling with amusement and wisdom.

Will said, "Oh, Rob's got an eye for pretty girls." He went on to tell everyone about Rob's encounter with the young governess at Grey Rock Station. This time it was Rob's turn to blush. "I suppose first thing you'll do when you get back home is write her a letter."

"I've done that already," said Rob. "By the way, Steven, when are you going to get decent phone towers in out here?"

Steven shrugged his shoulders. "Goodness knows," he replied. "When we get a change of government, I expect." That remark led to a full-on discussion about politics and the coming election.

Later as the conversation lulled, Rob yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Think I'll turn in," he said. The others were ready to follow suit, and Steven showed the men to their rooms. The station workers wandered off to their quarters and only Jock lingered. When he saw Steven returning, he asked innocently, "Aren't you tired, mate?"

Steven looked keenly at Jock. "What's going on in that old head of yours?" he asked.

Jock smiled mischievously. "Something to do with a certain little lady?"

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

Jock puffed on his pipe. "The voice of experience," he said archly.

"Er, well," stuttered Steven, "I do have a lot to think about."

"You can't fool me, boy," returned Jock. He stood up and yawned. "Well, mate, it's time to put these old bones to bed. See you in the morning."

"All right, don't let the bed bugs get you," said Steven as he turned out the lights on the veranda. For some time he sat gazing into the night, thinking. He was a bit nervous about his recent feelings for Rashida. They had changed from friendly to much stronger feelings; feelings bordering

on the first blossoms of love. It was great for Steven in a way, and he idly wondered what Rashida's feelings were for him. He knew she was very spontaneous with everyone, especially the boys. He had often observed how well she interacted, not only with the boys, but with all the other people on the station. His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a dingo howl in the distance. This was followed by another howl much closer to the homestead. "I must get out there in the next few days with the men to see if we can find the dingoes. They are getting too close for comfort."

His thoughts returned to Rashida, then, with moist eyes, he thought of his beautiful wife Laura. When Laura had accepted the fact that she was going to die, she had told him not to wait too long before looking for another wife. Putting her beloved menfolk first as always, she advised him that the boys would need both a mother and a father in their lives. "They are good boys, Steven, just as you are a wonderful man." She had kissed him tearfully just before she died and said, "But be careful and make sure you choose the right one – one that is right for both you and our boys."

Steven stood up and walked around the veranda. He was almost sure Rashida was right for both him and the boys but then he thought there would be some obstacles to overcome. He thought about her religion and her customs. Rashida seemed to be fitting in well to station life. The boys loved her, but would that last? Another thing he thought about was the little bag she wore every day. What was the mysterious secret of the two pieces of paper inside; 9-7-7-6-1, and the address, Crescent Moon Café, Queen Street, Brisbane? What did it all mean? Steven pondered over this for quite some. Out of the blue came a brilliant idea – or so Steven thought. He could see the two pieces of paper clearly in front of him; 9-7-7-6-1, and Crescent Moon Café, Queen Street, Brisbane.

Things were becoming clearer by the moment, "Why didn't I think of it before? Now I know exactly what I am going to do!" He smiled to himself. "Now what's that word she's always saying to the boys?" Steven paused and thought. "It's 'In something'. Oh, I remember, it's 'Inshallah!'" With that, Steven smiled to himself and his step as light as he made his way to his bedroom. "Inshallah! Inshallah!" he mused.

CHAPTER 19 ~ STEVEN PLANS A TRIP

Everybody at Mulga Lakes was awake early the next morning to say goodbye to the immigration officers. After breakfast, Steven, Rashida and the boys accompanied the men out to their cars. "Thank you for all your help," said Will as he shook Steven's hand. "Now all we have to do is get back to Brisbane and make our final report."

"That's good," said Steven. "Don't forget to let us know when you finish it."

Rob interrupted and looked at his boss. "Will we be calling into the stations on the way back?" he asked.

"Of course." Will smiled and winked at Steven. "I'm sure you're especially keen to see a certain person on Grey Rock Station," he said.

Rob blushed and his face went a deep red. "Er, er, I was only asking."

"Well, we'll probably make it there for lunch. I want to inform all the people who helped us."

More goodbyes were said and everyone waved to the officers as they started their vehicles. Being more familiar now with driving outback roads, they made good time to Gumtree Creek Station, where Rob was able to inform the manager that Wahid was no longer of concern.

"That's good," he said. "I'm glad he's out of the way. It makes us all nervous on the odd occasion that we get criminals out here."

They reached Grey Rock Station just on lunch time. The car had hardly stopped when Rob raced out, greeted Jed and asked if he could see the governess. Jed pointed to the small school house. "Reckon they've about finished lessons for the morning. Go on over and tell her lunch is about ready."

"OK!" Rob needed no further invitation and disappeared into the school house.

Jed turned to Will. "So you got your man, then?" He listened intently as Will told of all that had happened since they first met. All but Rob and Jenny sat at the large dining room table to have lunch. They had taken their plates to a small table on the veranda and seemed to be in earnest conversation. Jed nudged Will, gesturing discreetly to the veranda. "Well, if that isn't a case of love at first sight, I don't know what is!"

Once on the road again, Will glanced slyly at Rob as he skilfully avoided a large hole in the road, and said, "How'd you go with Jenny?"

"Really great," replied Rob enthusiastically. "Jenny's a really terrific girl."

"As long as it doesn't interfere with your work," said Will.

"It won't," replied Rob. "I'm keen to get back to work. I'm going to put away money now and save like hell."

"So you won't be joining us at the pub quite so regularly now?" Will smiled.

"Er, well..."

"Only joking, Rob," Will said, grinning as he smoothly skirted a deep hole in the road, "I'm getting the hang of this outback driving," he thought. Steven had cautioned them to drive carefully because it was so dry that the kangaroos were grazing on the sparse green pick on the edges of the bitumen. It was just on dark when the travellers crossed the bridge into Charleville. Dorothy gave them a warm welcome when they pulled into the Star Caravan Park. She had two deluxe cabins reserved for their use and invited the men to join her for tea after they had freshened up. "I'm so pleased that your trip was successful and you caught that horrible man," she said fervently. "It's been the talk of the town since you left."

"We are really so grateful to the people who helped in our search," declared Will.

"I do hope you get out this way again sometime," replied Dorothy, "but for a holiday – not for the reason you came out this time."

“Yes, I’d like that. I find that the people who live out this way are so friendly and accommodating.”

He told her how the station people treated him and mentioned that his offsider had met the girl of his dreams.

“The new girl at Mulga Lakes?”

“No, the one from Grey Rocks.”

“Oh, you mean Jenny? She’s a lovely girl.”

“Rob thinks so too.”

“She’s from Charleville, so I hope you like the country, Rob.”

Rob smiled, “Yes, I’m from the bush myself,” he said. “Not from this part of the country, but from New South Wales.”

“You’ll do then, my lad,” declared Dorothy. After another large steak dinner at the Charleville Hotel followed by a peaceful night’s sleep, they said goodbye to Dorothy, promising to return someday soon for a visit.

“Well, Rob,” said Will, “now we can take it easy. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. I’ve already rung Brisbane to fill them in on the incident to date. All we have to do now is write up our reports – and fill in all the other damned paperwork!”

He looked at Rob, who was settling back for a snooze, and said, “Don’t get too comfortable, mate, you can take the wheel soon.”

Rob sat up, rummaged in the bag beside him, took out a CD and slipped it into the player. The sound of country music filled the car. “One of Jenny’s?” enquired Will, not expecting an answer as Rob was already lost in the music.

Meanwhile it was just another day at Mulga Lakes. Rashida accompanied the boys to the schoolroom and they got out their books. “Children are so adaptable,” she thought, watching them with their homework. “They soon forget the bad things.” Rashida pondered over the last month or so. She had mixed emotions – coming to a new country, getting used to life in the

outback, the terror she had felt about Wahid, and now she was experiencing a new emotion – she seemed to be falling in love with Steven. “But I must not think about that,” she said to herself, rousing from her reverie as Nick asked a question about his English worksheet.

Life at the station went on as usual for the next couple of weeks. Steven was busy with the cattle while Rashida and the boys were busy with the schoolwork. When they went riding each day after school, the boys praised Rashida and told their dad that she was already nearly at home in the saddle. The boys watched TV at night and Steven and Rashida sat outside, or, if there was something good on TV, they watched too, while enjoying an occasional glass of wine. Rashida still wore her little bag and Steven’s thoughts went back to what he had seen on the papers inside her bag. It was time to put his plan into operation.

After the boys had gone to bed, Steven asked, “How are the boys doing with their schoolwork?” He hoped that his voice sounded casual.

“They are doing very well,” replied Rashida. “In fact, they are two weeks ahead, and the School of Distance teachers are very pleased with their work. Both boys have been awarded merit certificates in the last month.”

“Thanks to their governess.” Steven smiled. “I was thinking the other day that we all might take a trip for a few days. I was looking at the map and decided on a little place called Windorah. It’s an interesting place and some of the things you can do there are so different from here.”

“What sort of things and how is it different?” Rashida asked.

“Well, it is only a small place, but they have a yearly event called the ‘Yabby Races’. A yabby is a sort of a crayfish. It can come in different colours such as green, yellow, brown, black or blue. People catch the yabbies to race them. There are ten yabbies in each race; before the races, the yabbies are auctioned, and after the race they are released back into the river. The money raised goes to the Royal Flying Doctor Service.” “Then there’s a nature drive from Windorah to Cooper Creek. You will see heaps of birds there as well as other wildlife, and the spinifex grass, the gidgee woodlands and...”

“Steven, you’ve lost me there. What do those two strange names ‘spinifex’ and ‘gidgee’ mean?”

“Spinifex is a bush that grows from up to a metre high and spreads out up to two metres wide. Some types of spinifex have long, flat leaves, while other species have hard, sharp leaves. They have green and brown flowers.” Steven paused. “Now gidgee is a type of wattle, sometimes known as ‘stinking wattle’, and they are found only in the Australian bush.”

“I’m looking forward to this trip already,” smiled Rashida. “When will we go?”

“I thought this weekend, so you can tell the boys tomorrow.”

“All right,” said Rashida. “That will be great. I’ll tell the boys tomorrow.” She said goodnight and went up to her room, leaving Steven to think over the coming trip. He had an ulterior motive. This would be a good opportunity to get to know Rashida better.

When Rashida told the boys about the trip their father had planned, they were both so excited that they could hardly concentrate on their school work. Because it was Friday, Rashida did not worry so much. After school she went up to the kitchen and told Mary and Jilly about the trip. “Oh, yes,” said Mary, “Steven has already been here and told me about it. I’ll have everything ready for you early in the morning.”

“Thank you,” said Rashida. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“No, dear,” she said. “You will love the trip. I’ve been to Windorah, but such a long time ago. It will do you all good to get away for a while after all you have been through.”

Tea was an extra merry affair that night. The boys were very excited, and they were allowed to watch the TV for an extra hour. Finally the boys and Rashida went to bed, and Steven went out onto the veranda. He was glad that he had planned this trip since the boys had not been to Windorah either. He had been too busy caring for Laura before she died, and after that he seemed to have no spare time to take the boys anywhere. “Yes,” he thought, “it’s a good move.”

After the Windorah trip, he intended to get to the bottom of the mysterious papers he had found in Rashida’s bag. “I wonder why she hasn’t said anything to me about them,” he pondered. “But perhaps she has her reasons.”

A short time later, Jock sauntered up with his pipe and sat down beside Steven. “How are you goin’, mate?” he asked.

“Pretty good, Jock,” he said. “How about you?”

“I’m good,” replied Jock. “I hear you’re going on a trip.”

“That’s right,” said Steven.

“A getting-to-know-you trip with a certain little lady,” Jock said with a sly grin.

“Reckon you’re right,” agreed Steven, “but keep it just between us.”

“You can trust me, mate,” said Jock. “Cross my heart and hope to die!” He put his hand over his heart with an exaggerated gesture. “Well, mate, think I’ll turn in,” he said.

“Me, too,” said Steven. “Goodnight, Jock.”

“G’night, Steve.”

CHAPTER 20 ~ HUSTAR !

Before Rashida came down for breakfast the next morning, the boys and Steven had packed the Landcruiser. She hurriedly ate breakfast then brought down a few changes of clothes and her toilet gear. They were soon on the road. Steven said, “First stop will be at Quilpie, where we’ll be spending the night.” He continued, “Now, first of all we have to find the bush track that leads to Quilpie. I haven’t used that track for quite some time, so it will be a bit of a rough ride.”

“We don’t mind, Dad,” said Nick.

“It’s OK by me too, said Alex. “How about you, Rashida?”

She turned round and smiled at the boys. “I’ll be all right.”

After about an hour, Steven veered off to the right and on to a narrow track. “You don’t get car sick by any chance?” he asked.

“No,” replied Rashida. “I did a lot of rough travelling from Afghanistan to Indonesia!”

Eventually the track widened and a crooked signpost said, “Quilpie 150 kms.” The Landcruiser left a cloud of dust trailing behind. Just as the outskirts of Quilpie appeared in the distance, a strange sight met their eyes. Steven slowed.

“What’s up, Dad?” asked Alex.

“There are quite a few camels ahead of us,” said Steven.

“Do you want to stop and see them?”

“You bet,” said Nick. “This should be great for you,

Rashida. You dig camels, right?”

Rashida laughed and said, “Yes, it will remind me of Afghanistan. Sometimes where I lived, it was the only way to travel.”

“Can you ride a camel?” asked Alex.

“Yes, I can. Before my father had a car, we used nothing but camels to travel from one place to another.”

The boys’ eyes opened wide. “What’s it like?” asked Nick.

“A bit bumpy sometimes,” she said.

Steven pulled up and the boys tumbled out. The man accompanying the camels was slightly built and wore a long, light flowing type of robe and a turban. As the cameleer sauntered across to the Landcruiser, Steven noticed his relaxed rolling gait, and that the battered hat sat atop a deeply browned face that was creased with laughter lines and framed by jet black curls of hair and a beard. A blackened pipe sat in the corner of his mouth. “Good day, mate,” said the stranger.

“Travellin’ far?”

“To Quilpie and then on to Windorah,” said Steven.

As Rashida jumped out of the Landcruiser, she could hardly contain her excitement. She stopped in front of the man and said a few words in a strange language. The man nodded happily and replied to her. "He's from Afghanistan and speaks Pashtun," she explained to Steven and the boys. She spoke some more and the camel man answered rapidly. This time he seemed excited, and waved his arms vigorously.

"What's he sayin'?" whispered Alex.

"This is Hassan. He's just telling me about all the trouble still going on in Afghanistan. He's worried about the family he left behind. He hasn't heard from them for a long time and is sure that they have been killed by the Taliban. He's been saving every bit of money he makes so that he can get his wife and children out here."

"Dad, perhaps Uncle Joe and Uncle Mike can do something for him," said Nick. "They are big shots in Immigration, aren't they?"

"Or what about Will and Rob?" said Alex. "Go on, Dad; tell him that we might be able to help him."

Steven nodded and spoke to Rashida, who translated. A big grin spread over Hassan's face and he thanked them profusely. Rashida and the boys walked up to the camels and she began patting one of them. "Hey, Rashida, what do you say to the camels when you want them to bend down for you?" asked Nick.

"You say 'Hustar!' in a pretty loud voice," replied Rashida.

"Go on, do it then!" urged Nick.

"Yeah, go on Rashida," added Alex.

Rashida asked Hassan's permission; he smiled and nodded. In an authoritative voice, she cried, "Hustar!"

Immediately the camel she was patting bent down on his knees and waited.

"Gee," said Alex. "Can I have a go?"

"Me too," said Nick.

Hassan said something to Rashida and she turned to Steven. "Hassan is asking if you would like to have a go." Steven looked a bit nonplussed.

"Go on, Dad!" cried Nick and Alex together. "Do it!"

Steven took a deep breath and approached what he thought looked like a quiet animal, feeling well and truly out of his comfort zone. He put his hand on the camel, began patting it just like Rashida had done, and then cried, "Hustar!" in an unnaturally loud voice. The camel suddenly turned in his direction, lashed out with his back legs and fastened his teeth on to Steven's arm. "Ouch!" cried Steven. "That hurt!"

The boys started laughing and even Rashida was smiling. She said something to Hassan then turned to Steven. "You've only picked the worst camel in the bunch," she said. "That wild little lady there just happens to be Hassan's favourite breeding camel." Hassan joined the boys in their laughter and eventually the camel let go of Steven's arm. Rashida tried to keep a straight face. She took hold of his arm and began rubbing it gently. "You might have a bit of a bruise later on, but when we get to Quilpie, I'll see what it's like then."

It didn't take Steven long to see the funny side of things and he joined the laughter. The boys acted out the incident, taking it in turns to be the camel, collapsing in fits of merriment, and rolling on the ground.

"You know, Dad, you wouldn't make a camel driver for quids," said Alex in between guffaws. Steven laughed. He was looking forward to arriving in Quilpie and having his arm massaged by Rashida.

They said goodbye to Hassan and the boys patted the camels. Rashida brushed the worst of the dust from the boys' clothes as they climbed into the vehicle, still making muted snorts of laughter.

As they left, Steven promised Hassan that he would talk to his friends about his family back in Afghanistan. Rashida promised to let him know if Steven could do anything at all about his family. She asked where they could contact him. Hassan indicated that it would not be hard to find him in the area as everyone knew him. "I'm known all around the place," he said proudly.

The boys waved through the rear window until Hassan was out of sight and a short time later, Steven pulled up outside the hotel in Quilpie. After freshening up, they went over to the dining room to book in for the evening meal.

“Would you like me to have look at your arm? Rashida asked Steven. He rolled up his sleeve. Rashida regarded the injury with a practiced eye. “Hmm, you’ve got a bit of a bruise there, but it will stop hurting when the colour comes out.”

Although Steven felt a dull pain in his arm, he knew it was the beating of his heart that produced the throbbing, not his injury. Rashida took a small tin of cream from her bag. “Here,” she said, rubbing the cream into his arm, “this should help.”

“What is it?” asked Steven.

“A sort of tiger balm that some Chinese people gave me in Afghanistan. It’s supposed to cure everything from colds to cuts and bruises. It’s pretty powerful. The tube was in the bag Rafi gave me before he drowned.” For a moment she looked sad. “It’s about the only thing that I salvaged from the boat and I’ve got into the habit of carrying it around with me wherever I go.”

Steven said, “It is rather soothing. In fact my arm has a nice warm feeling now.” He didn’t dare tell Rashida how he really felt!

The hotel manager came over to chat. They learned that the hotel had been built round about 1926 by Jimmy Coronos. Recent renovations included painting, new furniture and air-conditioning installed in the guest rooms. “Why don’t you and your family go and spend some time looking around the historical lounge, and before tea tonight have a drink and watch the sunset? Sunsets are particularly spectacular at this time of the year.” Steven thanked the manager and made his way to the lounge, followed by Rashida and the boys.

On the way Nick nudged his brother. “Did you hear the manager calling us a family?” he asked.

“Yeah, great, hey Dad?” said Alex. Steven thought it had a nice ring to it but he was not game enough to look at Rashida, who put her hand over her face to hide a smile.

The display of memorabilia and historic photographs in the lounge captured the boys' attention, particularly the section showing the camel trains. Steven and Rashida took the manager's advice and sat outside on the veranda just before tea. The late sun lingered with all its glory from the rose-curtained halls of the west. The manager joined them on the veranda for a drink. "So what do you think of our sunset?"

Steven replied, "It's one of the most stunning sunsets I've ever seen." He turned to Rashida. "What did you think?"

"Oh," she replied, "it was magnificent. I don't think I've ever seen a sunset like it."

"I came here 20 years ago," the manager said. "I was living in Sydney and the rat race just got too much for me. I just up and left one day, not a clue where I was going to end up and, well, here I am. Got a job, married a local girl and I could not be happier!" He stood up and said, "Well, almost time for tea so see you in the dining room."

"What's 'rat race'?" Rashida queried.

"It's just another name for the non-stop busy life in the city," he said. "Now, let's call the boys and get them to wash up. They've been wrestling on the grass, so they are sure to be a bit grotty."

The manager and his wife joined them for a relaxed meal and when the boys went upstairs to their room, the adults enjoyed a quiet drink in the lounge. "This place certainly has an appealing atmosphere about it," remarked Steven.

The couple related events of the pioneering days and Steven and Rashida listened with great interest. "Oh, it's not only the olden days that are interesting. We've had something unusual happen here just recently. A few weeks ago, a young Canadian backpacker was lost in the area but fortunately he was found a couple of days later. Practically every person in the district joined the search."

"Lucky for him," said Steven.

"Yes," said the manager. "It could have turned out quite tragic."

After a coffee and a cheese platter, Steven and Rashida thanked their hosts for the hospitality. “We’ve had a great time staying here,” said Steven, Rashida nodding enthusiastically, “but I reckon we’ll hit the hay now as we’ve got an early start in the morning.”

“Where are you off to?” enquired the manager.

“Windorah. I’m showing Rashida a bit of the typical outback country.”

“Are you enjoying it so far?” the manager’s wife asked.

“Very much,” replied Rashida with a smile.

As Rashida and Steven made their way upstairs, the manager turned to his wife and said, “Great little family, aren’t they? It’s so nice to see that these days, especially with all the divorces and nonsense around nowadays.”

“Yes,” agreed his wife, “and you can see how they completely adore each other. The young ‘uns are so polite too. You don’t often see that either!”

CHAPTER 21 ~ AN ASSORTMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

The family started off early next morning after saying goodbye to their newfound friends from the hotel. The owner told them that he hoped they would come back some time in the future.

“Windorah, here we come,” said Nick from the back seat.

The road quickly deteriorated into a single lane of bitumen with many shallow holes. Steven dealt with these with his usual driving skills. “Feels like we’re on a roller coaster,” said Alex. Everyone laughed.

The country changed to sandy soil with sand hills appearing seemingly at random. Steven said that the distance from Quilpie to Windorah was about 436 kilometres, and it would take about four and a half hours to get there. They passed places with strange names such as Dead Horse Creek, and there was even a sign that said Dead Man's Creek.

Rashida said, "I don't like the look of those signs with 'dead' in them."

"No," agreed Steven. He turned back to the boys. "You both know a lot about this part of the country, so tell me about the two explorers who died out here."

"Burke and Wills," they answered in unison.

Rashida looked puzzled. "I can see I'll have to read up on your Australian history."

Suddenly an animal raced across the road in front of them. Steven pulled up in order to miss the animal. "What was it, boys, did you see?"

"It was a feral cat, Dad," said Nick, "and I reckon he's mighty scared of something!"

They scrambled out of the Landcruiser just in time to see a huge eagle diving towards the ground. The feral cat did not manage to reach the cover of the stunted undergrowth, and the eagle swooped down, picked him up and disappeared from sight.

Rashida was upset at what she saw, but Steven and the boys explained that in this part of the world, where food was scarce for both animals and birds, things like that often happened, especially when the land was so dry and desolate. Later they came to a creek that still had quite a lot of water in it, and there on the bank were three small caravans. The owners were sitting on small chairs, having a cup of tea. They waved as the Landcruiser passed. "Grey Nomads," said Steven.

"Grey Nomads?" asked Rashida in a puzzled voice.

"Grey Nomads are people who are retired and spend a lot of their time travelling in the outback," said Steven. "They usually travel in small groups and they really seem to enjoy their retirement. They often spend several weeks in one place, just lingering through their journey."

“Lots of them have been out to our place for a meal or two,” said Alex. “They love our river and they catch lots of fish there.”

“Mum used to love having them there too,” added Nick wistfully.

“Yeah, Mum used to let us off school when they came. It was great,” said Alex, “and even if we played up, she wouldn’t get cross with us.”

“That must have made you happy,” said Rashida. Steven glanced at Rashida and gave her a wry smile. He felt a little puzzled as the boys had not spoken of their mother like that for such a long time.

Alex continued. “No, she didn’t even get mad when she found us smoking down in one of the sheds. She just laughed and told us to get rid of the cigarettes before Dad got home.”

Steven had a grin on his face at this. “Now, boys, tell Rashida what happened after that.”

“Aw, Dad, do we have to?” asked Nick.

“Go right ahead,” said Steven.

“Er, well, when Dad got home, he kinda smelt the cigarettes on us, and he grabbed us both by the scruff of our necks and took us down to the shed,” began Alex.

Nick continued, “Mum said to him, ‘Don’t you hurt the boys’, and then Dad made us tell him where the cigarettes were, and guess what he did, Rashida?” Rashida shook her head.

“Well,” said Alex, “he made us sit down and smoke the cigarettes till we got sick! Yuck! It was so cruel! I can still remember it!”

Steven laughed this time and Rashida smiled. “But that was a good lesson for you both, wasn’t it?” said Steven.

“If you say so, Dad. I don’t think me and Alex will ever forget it,” said Nick.

“Yeah, even the thought of cigarettes nearly makes us spew,” added Alex.

“And what did your mother do after that?”

“I think she was bit cross with Dad but she was like a bit soft on us too,” said Nick.

Alex said, “She was beautiful too, like you, Rashida, only she had blond hair and fair skin, while you have dark hair and a nice brown skin.”

“Why, thank you, boys,” said Rashida.

“Hey, Rashida,” said Alex, “what would you do if you caught us smoking?”

“Er, er…” She looked at Steven.

Steven said, “Well, it’s not going to happen, is it?”

Alex said, “No, sir, just thought I’d ask, that’s all!”

They drove on. Steven was pleased and puzzled at the same time. He felt glad that they had spoken about Laura. He believed it was a good sign. Rashida was thinking about it too and she hoped it was a good sign that the boys were remembering the past so fondly. She did not know just how Steven felt about her; for that matter, she was not sure of her own feelings for him either.

The boys were quiet in the back until suddenly Nick broke the silence. “Dad! Shouldn’t we be close to the solar farm by now?”

Steven scanned the distance ahead and said, “You’re right, Nick. I can just make out the dishes in the distance.”

Rashida smiled. “Something new for me to learn?”

Steven replied, “Yes. You must see the solar farm. The other night I checked it out on the Internet. In fact I took a copy of the article.” He stopped the Landcruiser and read out to Rashida and the boys. “I found out that the Windorah Solar Farm uses five solar dishes which each have 112 square mirrors and they measure 1.1 m. across. They sit on top of masts and can rotate 360 degrees. The solar farm saves the locals from using around 100,000 litres of diesel fuel. The project cost \$4.5 million and it was opened in December 2008.”

“That’s really great, Dad,” said Alex. “Wonder if they’ll ever build farms like this on our place.”

“Or even Charleville,” added Nick.

“Boys, you’re getting way ahead of yourselves,” said Steven. “Maybe in your time or in your children’s time it could happen. OK to get moving again?”

As they drove slowly past the dishes, the boys shouted together, “Hey look, they’re following the sun!” Sure enough, three of the dishes were slowly moving.

Nick was quietly scribbling on a piece of paper, "Hey Dad," he said "I just worked out that 100,000 litres of diesel costs \$12 million, so \$4.5 million seems like a pretty good bargain."

A little further on was the township of Windorah and the Western Star Hotel, where they were booked in. In the usual outback fashion, the manager of the hotel was pleased to see them and extended every courtesy. He too thought they were a family, much to Nick and Alex’s delight!

Steven asked the manager about the yabby races, but he was informed him that they were no longer allowed to run them because some boffins in the Environmental Department in the city decided yabby races were detrimental to the yabbies. “Pity,” he said to Steven, “they were very popular and they brought a lot of money to our town. The money we raised used to go to the Flying Doctor Service, as they have to rely on donations.” The manager continued in a quiet voice, “I really don’t think it hurt the yabbies either; to me, it is just the usual government bureaucracy.”

Steven nodded. “We were looking forward to that,” he said. “But we’ll do the nature drive in the morning.” He turned to Rashida and the boys and said, “We’ll turn in early tonight because we’re going to do a lot of driving tomorrow.”

Steven sat with Rashida after tea and, when the boys had gone to bed, they had a glass of white wine. Both seemed to be overcome with shyness and only managed to make small talk. Steven was the first to rise. “Er, well, Rashida, think I’ll turn in now. I’m a bit tired.” Rashida finished her wine and stood up. “All right, Steven, think I’ll do the same.”

Just before she left, Steven walked over to her, put his arms around her, gave her a warm smile and kissed her. “Hope you enjoyed the day,” he said softly. “I know I did.”

“It was great,” whispered Rashida, leaning into his embrace, wishing he would never to let go. Steven hugged her gently, then feeling embarrassed and glad at the same time he reluctantly

released her and hurried off to his room. A couple of minutes later, Rashida also went to her room, reliving the last few beautiful moments she had spent with Steven.

The next morning at breakfast, Steven and Rashida acted as if nothing had happened between them the night before. They set off, carrying with them a packed lunch which the cook had kindly prepared. “We’ll do the nature drive first,” suggested Steven. “Is that OK with everyone?”

“You bet, Dad,” said Nick. “We can show all the bird life and other interesting stuff to Rashida.”

Steven explained to Rashida that even in the dry season there was an abundance of birds, because not all of the waterholes and small creeks dried up. It was like that all the way to Cooper Creek. The route wound through a variety of landscapes. Steven stopped and pointed out the gidgee woodlands and the spinifex grasslands. “Remember how I told you about the gidgee and spinifex, Rashida?” said Steven. “Well, now you can see what they really look like.”

“What strange looking plants!” exclaimed Rashida as she alighted from the car to take a closer look.

“There are squillions of strange plants out here,” said Alex.

They travelled on slowly with Steven and the boys pointing out the interesting places on the way. Steven said, “Windorah takes its name from aboriginal words meaning ‘place of the large fish,’ and it’s true because after the wet season, you can catch huge fish here. Sometimes the water level reaches as high as 10 metres!”

Cooper Creek was their lunch stop. The boys brought out a plastic tarp and a light blanket from the Landcruiser and placed the blanket on top of the plastic on the ground.

“The plastic will keep the bogan fleas from getting into the blanket. Those things have a bite and if they get into your underwear, you never get them out!” informed Alex gleefully.

“Fleas? Whaaat?” stammered Rashida gazing suspiciously at the ground.

“Hahahah.” Nick laughed delightedly. “Alex got them in his sleeping bag once and Mum had to throw it out!”

“Where...” began Rashida nervously, looking at the boys, who were now howling with laughter at her horrified face.

“Boys!” Steven said sternly, although his eyes were bright with amusement. “Rashida, bogan flea is a short-growing plant with seeds that are very tiny, spiny burrs — about the size of a flea actually. They are high in protein so during dry periods, the cattle lick them up. Bogan flea seeds are pretty impossible to get out of clothing. They can get in your clothes and work through to your skin. They’re such sharp burrs you feel like you are being bitten by real fleas. The tiny seeds are blown by the wind and lie in the top layer of soil on the ground, just waiting to stick to any cloth, so we put plastic underneath anything laid on the ground.”

“Oh.” Rashida sighed. “Boys, you really had me with that one!”

They did not realise how hungry they were. Nick turned to his brother. “Hey, leave some of those sandwiches for me!” he cried.

“It’s so peaceful out here,” observed Rashida. “Funny to say this but I can actually hear the silence.”

“Yes, it is,” replied Steven. He turned to the boys and said, “Now, if you two are quiet, perhaps the birds will come. You shouldn’t be running around after a meal, anyway!”

“OK, Dad,” chorused the boys. They sat still for a few minutes, then the birds made their appearance. There were several varieties – some were plain brown birds while others were coloured. They flew round in the trees, and gradually flew lower to where they were eating their lunch. The boys threw little bits of food to them – not too close to the blanket but a bit further away so that the birds would not be scared to pick up the morsels of food. Rashida could see how the boys loved the bush and the bush creatures as well. They told her they wanted to be vets when they grew up.

“I’m sure you’ll make wonderful vets,” said Rashida.

“But you wanted to be policemen a while ago,” said Steven.

Nick said, "That was only because we thought it would be good fun to book our mates when they were speeding!" Rashida and Steven laughed.

Alex asked, "Do you think that birds really have a language of their own?"

"I'm sure they do. They understand each other just as well as we understand each other," said Steven.

Nick idly picked up another morsel and threw it to the chattering birds. He turned to Rashida and said, "Do you speak any other languages?" he asked.

She nodded. "Just Pashtun and Arabic," she said.

"Don't forget your English," said Nick.

"Of course not. But what about you two?" she asked. "You're going OK but you've still got a bit to learn."

Nick rolled over on his back and said, "A couple of years ago, we had a New Guinea boy staying with us, and he taught us some of his language. Want to hear some?" Rashida nodded and Nick continued. "Let's see 'lik-lik' means 'little'; a pushbike is a 'wheelie-wheel,' and 'long-long' means 'stupid'."

Alex interrupted. "You haven't told Rashida the best one."

"What? Oh yeah, you mean 'helicopter'? It's 'mixmaster bilong Jesus Christ!'" Everyone laughed uproariously at this. In fact their laughter was so loud that the flock of birds, which had been happily picking at the crumbs, flew back up into the trees.

The sun was fading when they packed up and set off back to the hotel; tomorrow they would be heading for home. Steven explained that the road they had taken on the nature drive would lead them to the Quilpie Road and once they got on that road, it would be a shorter distance to Mulga Lakes.

Later that night Alex complained of tummy ache so Rashida went upstairs to sit with him. Nick said to his father, "Serve him right for being such a guts! I'm sure he ate twice as much as I did!"

“Don’t be like that, Nick, perhaps he does have a real tummy ache. Anyway, we’d better go to bed too. Tell Rashida to wake me up if Alex gets sick through the night.”

“OK, Dad,” muttered Nick, “but I still reckon he’s bungin’ it on. He probably wants Rashida all to himself!”

Steven smiled as Nick, still muttering, climbed the steps then he turned and made his way to his room. He lay down on his bed and thought about Rashida; when he had taken her in his arms the night before and kissed her and how she eagerly kissed him back. He thought through Plan Number 2 — to solve the mystery of the two pieces of paper in Rashida’s bag. He hoped the next week would prove as interesting and as profitable as this week had been.

CHAPTER 22 ~ STEPHEN DETERMINES TO INVESTIGATE

Waving farewell to their friends at the Western Star Hotel, the travellers set off on their long trek home. They went via the nature drive again, which gave Rashida and the boys another chance to check out the interesting terrain, as well as enjoy the different plants, animals and birds. Rashida took plenty of photos, but she really thought that she would not need pictures to remind her of this trip.

“We’ve got a bit of a rough drive ahead of us before we reach the Quilpie turnoff that leads to Mulga Lakes,” said Steven, guiding the vehicle through a sandy track that wound beside a dry watercourse.

“We don’t mind, Dad,” said Nick. “We’ll just watch the scenery, and we like being bounced around anyway!”

“It’s always different,” said Alex, “and you never know what’s going to crop up next.”

Just as he made that remark, he cried, “Stop the car, Dad!” he cried. “Look what’s up in that tree!” He pointed. Sure enough there, on a branch, was a mother koala with a baby on her back.

“Congratulations, you’re a good spotter, Alex,” said Steven. They got out of the Landcruiser and Rashida took out her camera.

“I’ve never seen such a lovely cuddly little animal,” she said. As if the mother koala knew what was being said about her, she idly sucked on some leaves from the tree and peered down below at the people observing her.

“The baby is probably asleep,” remarked Steven, while Rashida was busy clicking away with her camera.

“Koalas may be lovely cuddly animals, Rashida,” said Alex, “but don’t ever pick one up.”

“Why?” asked Rashida.

“Well, some city big cheese was on TV one night. He had a real flash looking suit on, I bet he didn’t buy that at K-Mart, and he was making out how much he loved koalas,” said Alex. “He was holding the koala in a way that looked really awkward for the poor thing, but he wanted to make an impression, especially as he was on TV. Guess what the koala did?”

“What?”

“He peed all down the front of the man’s shirt and all over his trousers. Gee, it was hilarious, wasn’t it, Nick?”

“Yeah,” replied Nick. “We nearly killed ourselves laughing.” He continued, “You saw it, Dad, didn’t you?” By this time everyone, including Rashida, was laughing loudly.

Steven said, still laughing, “Actually the ‘big cheese’ was one of our prominent politicians, which made it all the more amusing. He tried hard not to look disgusted as he thrust the koala away from him. One of the koala carers came and took him away and she was trying so hard not to laugh.”

They spent some time watching the scene above until the koala and her baby moved to another branch out of sight. “Can you keep a koala as a pet?” asked Rashida.

“No,” said Steven, “because they are protected animals in Australia and have to live in the bush. Sometimes cars run over them and then, if they are injured or sick, they are taken to care centres which look after the animals.”

“There are heaps of care centres all over Australia,” said Nick.

“What happens to the animals after they get better?”

“They are released back into the wild, near to where they were originally found.”

“So why don’t they do that with the kangaroos and wallabies out here?”

“There are just too many of them,” replied Steven.

“What a pity!” said Rashida sadly.

Approaching the turn off to the track that led to Mulga Lakes, Steven said, “This is the last leg of our trip; next stop home! Now get ready for the rough ride!” To the disappointment of the boys, the trip back did not seem nearly as rough or as slow as it was when they started. “It’s often the way,” observed Steven. “The way home always seems to be smoother and shorter.”

“Great trip, Dad,” said Nick. “How’d you enjoy it, Rashida?”

“It was wonderful. I’ve never done anything like this. Everything was just so new and interesting for me – the friendly people, the plants, the animals and birds, and, of course, the scenery. I could go on forever.”

“It’s very different out here to city life,” said Steven. “What I would really like is to get more city people out here to stay on sheep stations for a while and experience our way of life first hand.”

“And I’ll bet you that some of the townies who come out wouldn’t even bother going back to the city!” cried Nick from the back seat.

“Yeah, that’d be great,” added Alex

After a while, noticing the silence from the back seat, Rashida turned to see the boys were fast asleep. She smiled to see them so relaxed, they looked so vulnerable; she felt a surge of emotion, a

fierce feeling of protectiveness, and one of peace and calm. "I love these children as if they are my own," she thought.

Yawning and stretching, Alex nudged Nick and sighed. "Home sweet home!" as the lights of the Mulga Lakes homestead appeared in the distance. Nick sat up and slowly opened his eyes, yawned, and in a sleepy voice, said, "Are we home yet?"

As Steven opened the door of the Landcruiser, two excited dogs, Boots and Pockets, gave welcoming barks before jumping up on each person in turn, trying to lick their faces in greeting. The dogs settled down when the boys patted them.

"We'll leave the unpacking till the morning," suggested Steven. "I reckon we're all pretty tired, so I guess we'll hit the hay now and get a good sleep tonight." He turned to the boys and said, "Remember, school tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, Dad," murmured Nick, sleepily, "but it won't be too bad, I guess."

After the boys had gone up to their bedrooms, Steven looked at Rashida. "Like a coffee before we turn in?"

"That would be great," answered Rashida. "I'll go and make it."

"No, it's OK, Mary will have left a thermos flask on the table," he said. "She does this every time I come home late." He made his way to the kitchen. "So you just make yourself comfortable in the lounge."

Steven brought out the coffee and a small plate of sandwiches and biscuits, and sat down beside Rashida. "I should have given the boys something to eat before they went to bed, but they looked too tired to even think about food." They sipped their coffee in silence for a few moments.

Rashida said, "Thank you for the wonderful trip, Steven. I enjoyed every minute of it."

"We'll definitely do some more trips later on," said Steven. "But next time we'll take tents and camp out in the bush."

“Oh, I’d love that. We used to camp a lot when I was small,” said Rashida. For a moment a look of sadness crossed her face.

Steven placed his coffee cup slowly on the small table, turned to Rashida and gathered her in his arms. She did not resist. She felt so comfortable and protected. “This is so right,” he thought. He felt Rashida relax. He turned and kissed her tenderly. Rashida kissed him back just as tenderly. Rashida sighed. “If only things could stay like this forever,” she whispered. Steven brushed some strands of her hair aside with a gentle movement of his hand and said softly, “I know you’ve been through so much in the last few months and I do understand, but I want you to try to put things behind you. I know it will be hard and that it will take time, but I want you to be happy here at Mulga Lakes, and I want you to share your life with us. I know the boys really love you too.” For a moment he paused and then asked, “You do like it out here, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, Steven. I know it’s the only place I want to be at the moment,” she replied, wondering if she should tell Steven about her real feelings for him.

Steven, mindful of the need not to frighten Rashida, was thinking that he should not proceed too quickly. He knew that before anything else, he must solve the mystery of the pieces of paper Rashida had in the little bag she wore. How would she feel if she knew what he was planning in the next few days?

Would that kill her love for him? These fleeting thoughts passed through his mind as he held Rashida in his arms.

Rashida had some thoughts of her own. “What if Steven is only being kind to me?” she thought. “I can’t tell him how I feel because he might just be feeling sorry for me.” She relaxed once more in Steven’s arms and shut her eyes.

Steven made an abrupt movement. “I shouldn’t be keeping you up,” he said softly. Reluctantly, he let her go, but not before he had kissed her again. “We’ll talk more about this sometime later. You’d better be off to bed, young lady. Remember, you’ve got a busy day ahead of you tomorrow.”

They stood up, still with their arms around each other. Rashida was the first to break free. “Goodnight, Steven,” she whispered, “and thank you for everything.” She wanted to say a lot more but she felt it was not the time to do so. With a final quick kiss, she hurried towards the steps. She felt that if she had stayed a moment longer, she would reveal her real feelings for him, but until she was absolutely sure of how he felt about her, she must remain silent.

Steven watched as Rashida climbed the stairs. Yes, he definitely had a lot of thinking to do about everything, but the mystery of the two papers with their messages was his top priority. He went to his own room to ponder his next move.

The next morning, when Rashida and the boys came down to breakfast, they noticed that Steven was absent. Mary said, “Your dad has a few things to organise with the men; anyway, how did your trip go?”

Rashida answered, “Oh, Mary, it was wonderful. We saw so much – I just can’t tell you how I enjoyed it. The boys did too, didn’t you, boys?”

“Yeah, it was great,” said Nick. “Next time Dad’s going to take us all camping, and we’re gonna sleep in tents in the bush. What do you think of that?”

“Yeah,” continued Alex, “Jilly can come with us next time and teach us all about bush tucker.”

Rashida looked puzzled. “Bush tucker?”

Mary smiled and replied, “Jilly knows all about the plants in the bush, and she can tell which plants you can eat and which plants you can’t. Then if ever you get lost in the bush, you will be able to survive.”

“I can also show how to get water when there is none around,” said Jilly.

“Really?” said Rashida, and Jilly nodded. Her big eyes lit up and she smiled. “I learned everything about the bush when I was small.”

“You’re not really that big now, are you?” remarked Mary with a smile.

After breakfast, the boys and Rashida made their way to the schoolroom. They took a while to get into the swing of things again, but they were soon hard at work. Rashida particularly found it difficult to concentrate. Her thoughts went back to the night before and her conversation with Steven. "I will just have to wait and see what lies ahead," she thought. She hoped that the boys did not notice her distraction but they were busy with their schoolwork, only asking the occasional question regarding their work. Smoko and lunch passed and Rashida noticed that Steven had still not appeared.

"Let's go for a ride after school," suggested Nick eagerly.

"That'd be really great," echoed Alex.

Rashida agreed, so after school, they all went to the horse paddock and saddled up. They decided not to go to the river this time as it brought back unhappy memories for Rashida. This time they went on another route, which took them past the dam. Wallabies and kangaroos were gathered around the dam to drink, and wild ducks were swimming in the water.

"You know, it's nice travelling around but it's always great to get back home," said Alex.

"Yes, it is," said Nick. "What do you think, Rashida?"

Rashida thought for a while. "It would be nice to have a permanent home some time," she said, thoughtfully, "especially after all the travelling I've done in the last few months. I'm just looking for a peaceful place where I don't have to wake up to the sound of gunfire, fighting and killing."

"That would have been awful," began Nick, "so it would be just the shot if you settled out here."

"Yeah, that would be Number One!" said Alex. "Has Dad asked you yet?"

"Asked me what?"

"Whether you'll stay out here forever?"

Rashida's heart missed a beat. "N-no," she answered slowly.

"Well, he'd better say something soon," said Alex emphatically.

Rashida quickly changed the subject and pointed to a strange bird. "What's the name of that bird?" she asked.

"Oh, that's a pelican," said Nick.

"It's got a really long beak," observed Rashida.

"Yes," said Nick. He turned to Alex. "Alex, what's that poem about a pelican we learned from one of our poetry books a couple of years ago?"

Alex thought for a while and said, "I remember now. 'What a wonderful bird is the pelican; its beak can hold more than its belly can; he can hold in his beak enough food for a week; but I'll be darned to know how the hell he can!'"

They all laughed, especially Rashida. She looked at the strange bird again and said, "I'll never forget what a pelican is now!"

They rode on for a while longer. Suddenly Nick cried, "Race you all back to the first gate!" They set off. There was not much difference between the boys, but Rashida came last by a long way. Nick dismounted and opened the gate. "We'll have to get Dad to give Rashida another horse," he said in disgust. "The one you've got now is as slow as a wet week. She can be pensioned off and live the rest of her life just eating and sleeping.

"Rashida listened while the boys explained the meaning of 'as slow as a wet week'. They unsaddled their horses, brushed them down and let them loose in the horse paddock. It was just on tea time and everyone was hungry. They sat down; there was still no sign of Steven. "Wonder where he is?" Rashida mused.

"Where's Dad?" enquired Nick.

Mary replied, "Oh, he's getting his aeroplane ready. He has to leave early in the morning to go to Brisbane."

"Why?"

"Some business, I think," replied Mary. At this stage, Steven entered and greeted everyone.

“Why are you going to Brisbane, Dad?” asked Alex.

“Just some stuff,” replied Steven.

“What stuff?”

“Just stuff,” repeated Steven.

“Wish we could go,” said the boys.

“Next time,” promised Steven. The boys asked him about getting another horse for Rashida. He promised that he would look into it when he returned from Brisbane.

Tea was, as usual, a happy meal, the boys chattered away to their father, Rashida enjoyed the way the conversations flowed so easily between them, there was sense of peace and self confidence in this family, just as it had been in hers when she and Rafi were very small, before the Taliban brought fear into every home.

Steven left the table before the others as he had more preparations to make for his trip. “I’ll say goodnight now to you all,” he said. “I’ll be gone by the time you get up in the morning.”

“OK, Dad,” chorused the boys. He gave them a hug and a kiss, and the boys were pleased to see him give Rashida a hug and a kiss as well.

“Good on ya, Dad,” said Alex. He whispered behind his hand to his brother. “Now Rashida might decide to stay here forever.”

“Hope so,” said Nick.

Rashida and Steven pretended not to hear but each saw a blush rising on the face of the other. Steven glanced at Mary, who winked at him. That same day, Steven had told her what he planned to do in Brisbane. She agreed. “That poor wee lassie has had such a hard time but since she’s been here, the house has been so different. It’s been more cheerful for you and the boys, and you know they already love Rashida.” She continued, “You’ve been different too, Steven. You’re more settled and much happier these days. Why, I’ve even heard you whistling around the house.” She took the pastry she was making from the bowl, rolled it expertly with a wooden rolling pin, and added in a

rather serious voice, “Laura wouldn’t have wanted you and the boys to spend the rest of your lives grieving for her. That’s the sort of person she was. She was such a wonderful lady, but I know she would expect you and the boys to move on.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Steven with a sigh. “Anyway we’ll see what happens when I return from Brisbane.” He was still a little apprehensive about his Number 2 Plan.

Mary said, “You go for it, Steven. I’m right behind you.”

Steven nodded. “I will,” he said emphatically. “Now I’d better get the rest of my gear together.”

“Good luck!” said Mary. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you!”

Steven made a couple more trips out to his plane and then went to bed.

Early next morning he checked his flight plan and his instruments then took off in the Cessna and headed for Archerfield Airport in Brisbane. Copies of the precious papers were in a leather document wallet on the seat beside him. He said to himself, “Crescent Moon Café, Queen Street, Brisbane.” Those were the words on one of the pieces of paper; the numbers 9-7-7-6-1 were on the other piece of paper. “What does it all mean? I’m sure as eggs going to find out!”

The journey was pleasant, with little turbulence and a slight tailwind. Steven’s thoughts returned again and again to Rashida and the great time they’d all had together over the last few days. As he approached the runway at Archerfield Airport, Steven was sure that he had made the right decision. Yes! Plan Number 2 was fully alive and well! As he landed his plane, he felt confident and exhilarated! “Inshallah!” he said to himself, “and I pray that whoever you are, you will be right this time!”

CHAPTER 23 ~ THE ELUSIVE CAFE

After landing at Archerfield Airport, Steven parked and secured his plane then made for the airport cafeteria. While having a coffee, he called the car rental company that he always used. When he identified himself and his location to the receptionist, she recognised the voice of the soft-spoken gentleman from outback Queensland and responded, “How are you, Mr West? We haven’t seen you here for a while; and how are your little boys? Not so little now, I guess?”

“We are all fine, thank you, and the boys are growing like weeds! It is just me on this trip so I won’t need the complimentary coupons for Maccas and movies that your company gave us last time. Just a map of the city will be great. I’ll rent the car for a week, but I may return it sooner if my business concludes earlier. You have my credit card details on file and I’m happy to pay for a full week even if I return it earlier.”

“That is very generous of you, Mr West, but as a regular customer, you may pay up front for the week and if you only use the car for a few days, bring it back, and we’ll refund the rest of the money to you. I hope you have a delightful time here in beautiful Brisbane. A courier will have a vehicle to you in ten minutes.” The receptionist smiled as she spoke, remembering the good-looking bushman and his well-mannered boys.

“Thanks. That’s very kind of you,” replied Steven. “I will be waiting at the usual car drop-off point.”

“Thank you for your custom, Mr West. It is always a pleasure to speak with you.” Steven smiled; his quest had begun.

It was an eleven-kilometre drive from the airport into the city and Steven had to use every bit of his concentration. The cars were bumper to bumper and most of the drivers seemed to be in such a hurry to get to their destination. “It must be peak hour,” thought Steven, then he noticed the signs for road-works ahead. “No wonder the traffic flow is slow. Ah well, I just have to be patient.” He smiled across at the driver in the car in the next lane, who responded with a savage glare. Steven, amused at the response, gave a friendly wave. The enraged motorist turned away and leant on his horn. “I’m so glad I don’t have to deal with this every day,” thought Steven as the

traffic started to move again. At the next halt, he consulted his map – a large parking garage showed close to the Brisbane River end of Queen Street. “That will do,” he decided. “Now I just have to get into the correct lane to exit at the right street.” He exited at the right place but missed the car park sign, so he drove around in a loop for a while until he found the sign again. He drove into the underground car park and found a spot at the far end of a maze of cars.

The Queen Street Mall thronged with people —shoppers, tourists, buskers and young people just hanging out and being cool. Steve’s nose led him to a cafe right in the centre of the mall. He ordered steak, salad and coffee then sat down at a table. While waiting for the food, he observed with interest the movements and interactions of the throngs of people in the mall. The mall was busier now than it had been when he had last visited. He was surprised at the number of people walking up and down, as well as sitting on seats enjoying the sun. He spotted a group of Chinese people on one side of the street, following a guide. On the other side of the street was another group – they were Japanese, some snapping photos with expensive-looking cameras. Their guide looked somewhat frustrated; he was trying to urge his group forward but was not having much luck.

Steven smiled when he looked at that particular group. They obviously wanted to take more photos but the guide kept on looking at his watch. Their poor guide was probably supposed to be keeping to a schedule. There were people from other countries too – seeming to be mainly of Middle-Eastern, Filipino or Indonesian descent, with a scattering of Africans and Islanders, mostly in their own colourful dress, sitting on seats or meandering slowly about the mall. Noticing a McDonalds close by turned his thoughts to his sons — how they loved to eat at the big yellow M! Thoughts of Rashida floated through his mind as he leisurely ate his meal. Steven admitted that he was a little apprehensive about what lay ahead of him, so he ordered another coffee.

After the third cup, he stood up and told himself firmly that he just had to get moving. He paid for his meal and set off, walking slowly along Queen Street, carefully searching for the Crescent Moon Café. Time passed quickly and Steven realised that had crossed over quite a few intersections. He continued walking slowly, carefully searching for a sign to indicate that he had found the elusive

café. He glanced at his watch, saw that it was almost mid-afternoon, and decided to have a smoko break at the first café he saw. “A coffee, or maybe two, and...” Steven almost walked right by a Greek café. He went in, sat down, and looked at the menu. An attractive waitress came to his table with a pad and pen and asked, “Yes, sir, ‘ow can I help you?”

Steven studied the menu for a short time and then said, “I would like a coffee and a ham, cheese and tomato roll, please.”

“‘Ow would you like your coffee, sir?” asked the girl.

“Black with two sugars, please.”

“‘Orright,” answered the waitress. “Won’t be long, sir.” She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Steven looked around. This café seemed to be very popular with the late lunchtime crowd. No sooner was one table free than it was taken almost immediately by a new customer. The noise was loud as the customers chatted with each other, conversations overlaid by the sporadic ringtones of mobile phones. He noted the mixture of nationalities and, just as in the mall, there was a harmony here in the interactions and flow of conversations. Steven ordered a second coffee. Just as he started to sip, he had an idea. As soon as he finished his coffee, he would ask the manager of this café if he knew of the Crescent Moon Café in Queen Street. It was a long shot but he could only try. The crowd had thinned by the time Steven stood and walked to the counter. He presumed the manager was the man handling the cash register as he was older, well dressed and had an air of authority.

Steven paid his bill and asked, “Excuse me; I was wondering if you have ever heard of the Crescent Moon Café in Queen Street?” He continued, “I’m sorry but that’s all the information I can give you. I don’t even have a number – just the address: Crescent Moon Café, Queen Street, Brisbane.”

“No, I haven’t heard of it,” said the manager, shaking his head, “but wait a minute, I’ll go and ask my kitchen staff. Someone in there might know.” Steven thanked him and waited. The manager returned, accompanied by another man. “This is Ali,” he said. “He knows of the Crescent Moon

Café. In fact he said he will take you there. He told me that it is run by a family who came from Afghanistan.”

Ali shook Steven’s hand. He wore a loose, long-sleeved ankle-length garment over his everyday clothes and he had a short turban on his head. “I am pleased to meet you, sir, and if you wait a few minutes, I will take you to the Crescent Moon. I have finished my work for today and will be pleased to accompany you.”

Steven’s heart started thumping and he felt at last that he was at the beginning of the road towards success. Once Ali reappeared, the men set off along Queen Street, with Steven trying awkwardly to convey his heartfelt thanks to the Afghan.

“Who owns the café?” asked Steven.

“The Rahimi family – Ahmed and Salima,” replied Ali. He looked at Steven. “I am curious to know why you want to see them.”

Steven paused for a moment. He replied, “Well, Ali, it’s rather a personal matter, but would you be able to tell me what sort of people the Rahimi family are? I hope I’m not offending you by asking this but the information is very important to me.”

Ali replied at once. “No, you are not offending me at all. In fact, I am glad you asked. The Rahimi family are some of the most marvellous people I have met. Not only do they run a successful business, but they are very kind, especially to the boat people. They try to find jobs and accommodation for them. A lot of the boat people eventually find their way to the Crescent Moon.” He continued, “You know, Steven, I was one of the boat people myself, and I was desperate when I came here. I was short of money, had nowhere to live, and no idea how I would get a job. The Rahimi family helped me a lot. His eyes clouded over for a moment. “The captain was drunk and sent the boat onto the rocks. He was a real bad man, a liar, a thief and everybody hated him.”

Steven tried to sound casual as he asked, “What was the captain’s name?”

Ali spat the name with disgust, “Wahid Kusomo!” Steven went pale, but managed to hide his agitation from Ali, who continued. “In fact, the Rahimi family lost a grandson on a boat skippered by the same man. They were terribly upset. Their granddaughter was also on the boat. They are still trying to find out what happened to her. I know that they have sent letter after letter to the immigration authorities, but have heard nothing.”

Steven’s heart missed a beat and he felt that he was going to faint. He stopped abruptly and would have fallen if Ali had not caught him. “What’s wrong, Steven? Are you all right?” Taking Steven’s arm Ali guided him to a nearby bench seat.

Steven felt sick in the stomach. He looked at Ali. “That’s what I’ve come to see the Rahimi family about, but I can’t explain it right now.”

Ali looked worried. Steven held his head in his hands. He was unable to think and he felt as if his brain had shut down. He looked at Ali and said, “You must leave me for a while until I collect my thoughts. I just won’t be able to meet the family today. I don’t feel well at all, this has been a great shock to me.”

“Come with me—stay the night at my home,” said Ali. “I think a decent rest and some good Afghan food will make all the difference.” Ali’s concern was reflected in his expression. “I am truly concerned for you so will you spend the night at my place? Tomorrow, when you feel better, I can take you to meet the Rahimi family.”

For a moment Steven gazed blankly at Ali then his vision cleared and he said tremulously, “That’s very kind of you, Ali. Yes, I will accept your kind offer. But let’s sit here for a while because my legs are so shaky, they probably won’t support me if I tried to get up.”

“All right,” said Ali. “You just take your time. I’ll go and get us a couple of coffees and we’ll sit here till you feel a bit better and you are able to walk.”

“I’m so sorry to put you to all this trouble,” apologised Steven, “but I am pleased you asked me, as I don’t feel like spending tonight on my own. It will be good to talk to somebody about what has happened over the last couple of months and why I got so upset.”

Steven and Ali sat on the bench drinking coffee, oblivious to the people passing. An hour passed before Steven felt his strength returning. “Ali, could you walk with me back up Queen Street? You see, I have a car parked in an underground car park at the river end of Queen Street, and then we can drive out to your place.” Steven stood up. He was still a bit shaky but Ali guided him, and the more steps Steven took, the better he felt. By the time they reached the car park, he was walking normally.

“I’ll have to tell you where I live,” said Ali.

“All right, you can direct me.”

“I live near our mosque at Mt. Gravatt. I love living near the mosque. It was built by one of the first Afghan cameleers; he had a camel train from Darwin to Adelaide in the old days. His name was Abdul Ghias, but he changed his name to Abdul Kaus for two reasons. The first was that the name ‘Ghias’ sounded a bit like ‘Kaus’ in English. The second reason was that in our language ‘kaus’ is the name of a strong wind that blows down to Kandahar. Abdul Ghias was born in Kandahar. Some people have told me that Abdul Ghias liked to think of himself as that wind – not staying in the same place for long, roaming around from one place to another. I believe also that some of the younger Kauses to this day have this characteristic. I would very much like to meet them one day.”

“Inshallah!” said Steven.

Ali smiled. “It sounds as if somebody is already teaching you some of our customs.”

“Yes,” said Steven, blushing a little.

Ali said, “We had a big celebration a little while ago at the mosque, commemorating 100 years since it was built. It was a great event; thousands of people were there – even influential people like politicians, police chiefs, doctors, lawyers and real important people like that. Of course, most of the Moslem population from Brisbane were there also.” Steven thought of Rashida and felt that she would have loved to be there too.

They drove slowly out of the city towards Mt. Gravatt but before they came to Ali’s house, he asked Steven if he would like to see the mosque. Steven nodded his head and followed Ali’s

directions. Seated in the car, he studied the mosque, it was an imposing building set in spacious surroundings. A gentle wind blew through the trees, sending leaf litter dancing with a gentle motion. Steven believed he understood why the mosque was built in such a peaceful place. White clad figures of men were entering and exiting the building. Women dressed in the traditional Moslem way sat in groups, watching their children playing happily on the grass. Ali's voice broke into Steven's reverie. "We shall go to my home as soon as you are ready, Steven."

There was a parking spot in the deep shade of a fig tree right in front of Ali's house. Steven followed Ali inside the small, simply furnished house. Oriental rugs lay on the floors; framed photographs — mainly of people (Steven guessed them to be relatives or friends) — decorated the walls, and shelves displayed various mementos from Ali's homeland, a couple of jewelled camels, lapis lazuli stones, coins and silver.

"Put your things in here," said Ali, pointing to a small bedroom. "I'll sleep here on the couch — actually it's a fold-down bed so there's plenty of room. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. You are very welcome in my humble house. Have a bit of a rest and then we'll have a small meal."

"Thank you," said Steven, and lay down on the bed. He felt so exhausted that he was soon fast asleep. When he woke up, he was surprised to find that it was dark. He looked at his watch. Nine o'clock! Good heavens! He had been asleep for hours. He sniffed the air — a delicious smell drew him towards the main room. Ali stepped out of the small kitchen and stopped when he saw Steven, who tried to apologise for sleeping so long.

"Don't worry," said Ali. "How do you feel now?"

"Great," replied Steven. "I think I'll have a shower and freshen up."

"Take your time," said Ali. "Then we'll eat and, if you feel like it, we can talk for a while."

After a delicious meal, Ali made coffee and Steven, feeling calm and comfortable with this man, who came from a vastly different culture yet had opened his home and heart without hesitation to a fellow human in distress, related all that had happened over the last few months, except for how

he felt about Rashida. That was something he could not share with anyone at the moment. Ali listened attentively and did not once interrupt him.

When Steven had finished, it was Ali's turn to look astonished. All he could say was, "What an incredible story! It's fantastic! I-I just can't believe it! Your God or my God must be watching over you!" He paused. "Now it is doubly important that you meet the Rahimis. In the morning I will take you to meet them. I'm sure they will be more astounded than I am right now, especially regarding their granddaughter. They will be so thankful that she is alive and well." He stood up, stretched and said, "Now, we'd better get a bit of sleep. Do you know it's almost 2 o'clock in the morning? We've been talking for hours!" As Steven sank down onto the bed, he could hear a voice from the lounge room saying softly, "Allah Akbar; Allah Akbar."

"I must find out what that means," thought Steven as he drifted almost immediately into sleep, too tired even to think about what might happen later on that same day.

CHAPTER 24 ~ REVELATION AT THE CRESCENT MOON

It was just on 9 am when Steven woke, feeling refreshed and eager to continue with his quest. Ali had awakened earlier and was busy in the kitchen; he handed Steven a cup of steaming coffee. “Thanks, Ali,” said Steven. “I really appreciate it.”

Ali went back to the kitchen and brought out some naan with cream and sugar. Steven looked curiously at the thin flat brown bread and Ali explained to him, “In Afghanistan we eat naan nearly every day.”

Steven took some sugar and cream, spread them over the naan and tasted it. “Delicious!” Steven took a shower in Ali’s small bathroom and checked his appearance critically – he wanted to make a good impression on Rashida’s grandparents.

When they were leaving the house, Ali carefully locked the door. “You know, Ali, we don’t have to do this where I come from,” said Steven.

“You are very lucky,” replied Ali. “Here we have to lock up everything all the time. There are many bad people in our city. They go around and check out houses to rob. Many of the house owners have expensive security systems, plus iron bars and unbreakable wire all around their houses. A few have savage guard dogs also.”

Steven shook his head. “I couldn’t live like that.”

Ali said, “I don’t need much security at all because my house is quite small, and I don’t have anything in it expensive enough to steal. So far I have been lucky that nobody has burgled my place, although a few weeks ago I saw a group of young boys hanging around outside.”

“What did you do?”

“I went up to them and asked why they were hanging around. They ran away, and I’ve had no trouble since. Perhaps they thought my house wasn’t worth the effort.”

Steven had no trouble finding his way into the city without being directed by Ali, who said, “You are very clever at finding your way, considering it’s only the second time you’ve driven in this area.”

Steven said, “Oh, when you come from the bush, you tend to have a good sense of direction.” Steven drove to the same underground park that he had used the day before. The men exited into Queen Street and walked briskly, through the busy mall, both silent with their own thoughts – Steven now getting a little nervous about what was ahead of him, and Ali eager for him to meet the Rahimi family.

“Here it is,” said Ali, turning off Queen Street and leading Steven along a maze of small shops until he came to a sign which read Crescent Moon Café. Inside was a large area with tables set and ready for the customers. Some tables had settings for four people; some for two people, and there were a couple of long tables set for large groups of people. Dotted here and there were a few tables set for only one person. The Crescent Moon Café seemed to cater for everyone. Although it was only mid-morning, there were a number people sitting at the tables – most drinking tea or coffee, and Steven noticed that some were eating naan. A small girl, about seven years old, sat with her mother. Their garments were identical, the child a miniature of her mother. By the side of their table, a small baby lay asleep in a pram. The lighting in the room was subdued — cool and quiet. Thick carpet woven in brightly coloured patterns covered the floor. Steven recognised the discreet fragrance of incense which lent an air of mystery.

Ali eyes swept the room. Catching sight of a man and a woman sitting at a small table at the far end of the room, he waved then beckoned Steven to follow him. Ali extended his hand and said, “As-salamu alakum!”

“Wa alakum salam!” responded the man at the table, also extending his hand. Ali said a few words to the couple, who stood up and beckoned Steven and Ali to follow them to another room, away from the main area of the café.

“Excuse me, Steven,” said Ali, “but do you mind if I introduce you to Ahmed and Salima first, and then I will tell them of what you told me last night. OK?”

“You go right ahead, Ali,” replied Steven. Ali apologised to Steven and told him that he would rather use his own language with the Rahimis as it would be much quicker and easier than trying to explain everything in English.

Ahmed and Salima smiled at Steven as Ali introduced them. Both Ahmed and Salima shook Steven’s hand and invited him to sit down with them. Steven handed Ali the two pieces of paper that he had copied from those in Rashida’s little bag. Ali handed them to Ahmed, who glanced at them and then looked thoughtfully at Steven. Steven leaned back on his comfortable chair and tried to relax.

While Ali was relating the story, he took the opportunity to study Ahmed and Salima, whom he now knew were Rashida’s grandparents. Both were dressed in the typical Moslem way, but Steven noticed with surprise that Salima was not wearing a veil like those he had seen on the women at the mosque yesterday. Instead she was wearing a coloured scarf around her head. Steven noted her resemblance to Rashida, especially in her facial features, but he noticed also that Rashida had her grandfather’s eyes. He estimated that they were both in their early sixties.

At this stage Ali seemed to be getting quite excited, and the next moment Salima gave a startled cry, burst into tears and started weeping quietly. Ahmed put his arm around her and Steven saw that he too had tears in his eyes. He said something in his native language and then put his arms on his chest. They both turned to Steven and Ahmed said to him, “Thank goodness Rashida is safe!”

Steven did not know quite how to reply, so he waited for a few moments until the family calmed down somewhat. Ali said, “Give them some time to gather their thoughts. As you can imagine, this has been a great shock for them. I suggest we leave them alone for a while. I’ll tell them that we will go and have a coffee.” He spoke to Ahmed and Salima and they nodded. He turned back to Steven and said, “They will join us a little later. They have a lot to talk about.”

Steven and Ali moved softly through the door into the café and sat down at table. Within a short time, they were served steaming cups of coffee and delicious cakes. Ali explained to Steven that Ahmed and Salima were astonished at the events which had taken place. He said that they had

just been coming to terms with the death of Rashida's parents when they heard about the boat tragedy. "They have been through such a lot," said Ali sadly, while Steven nodded his head in sympathy.

"It's not fair that they have had to deal with all that sadness in such a short time," he said.

Ali replied, "Yes, but they are a strong family and knowing that Rashida is alive and well will make such a difference to their lives now."

Steven felt a twinge of dismay when he heard this. Maybe now Rashida would want to live with her grandmother and grandfather. Maybe she would change her mind about him. Maybe she did not love him as much as he thought. Maybe... Ali looked at Steven and said, "Are you all right, Steven? Is there something you are not telling me?"

Before Steven had a chance to reply, Ahmed and Salima appeared, looking more composed. Salima turned to Steven and said, "Come into the room, Steven, I want to ask you a few questions." Steven felt himself turning red but Ali nodded and whispered knowingly, "Everything will be all right – you'll see." He had guessed that Steven was in love with Rashida.

When Steven sat on the edge of his chair, Salima said in a strong voice, "Now, I want to ask you first about Rashida. How is she? Is she well? Is she happy? What is she doing out at your place?"

"Steady, Salima," said Ahmed softly. "Give Steven a chance."

"Well, Mr Steven West, you look like a nice man, so please answer my questions." Salima was not deterred.

Steven took a deep breath. "Well, first of all she is happy and well. I notice that she still grieves for her family. She is working for me as a governess to my two young boys. I lost my wife to cancer some time ago. The boys have had a succession of governesses since then, but with still grieving for their mother, they have been a bit hard for any governess to manage. Rashida is wonderful with them and the boys adore her. She.."

"I'm so sorry, Steven," interrupted Selma, "but what is a governess?"

“A governess is a person who is employed on outback cattle or sheep stations to teach the children,” Steven replied.

“Don’t you have a school for your children?”

Steven explained that their property was remote and most of the owners of stations had governesses for their children until they were old enough to go to boarding schools in the city.

Salima nodded, then asked, “Are there other women living with you?”

“There’s a cook and a kitchen helper,” replied Steven. “The other people I employ are all men, who work for me. I own a big station and I employ quite a lot of men and…”

“You mean to say that my Rashida is living with so many men?” Salima exclaimed incredulously.

“It’s not like that at all,” said Steven. “Rashida has her own living quarters, upstairs in our main house. The men live in separate small houses or quarters on the property.”

“And where do you live?”

“I live in the house also, but,” he added, “nowhere near Rashida.”

“Hmm,” said Salima, looking at Steven closely.

Ahmed interrupted. “And how come she is on your property?”

“It’s purely a business arrangement,” Steven replied. “I employed her on the recommendation of the Immigration Department. She was stranded on Christmas Island with no money and had no accommodation, and the Immigration Department referred her to me. They told me that she had been a teacher aide in Afghanistan and had a good knowledge of English. I thought she was the perfect choice to teach my young sons until they are ready to go to boarding school in the city.”

“We have no time for your Department of Immigration,” said Ahmed bitterly. “They have never replied to any of our letters regarding Rashida.”

Steven replied, “That’s probably because they are so understaffed, and there are literally thousands of people enquiring about lost relatives and friends.” Steven went on to say that he would get in touch with his friends from Christmas Island who had recommended Rashida to him.

Ahmed looked at Steven with his piercing eyes. Placing the piece of paper with the numbers on it on the table, he said, "How did you get hold of this?"

Steven looked at Ahmed. He was trying to think of an answer, but in the end, he told the truth and said that he had found the pieces of paper when Rashida had lost her little bag.

"She carried that little bag with her every day. In fact I think it is her most precious possession." He paused and then went on, "I think she intended to earn enough money and then come to Brisbane and look for you."

"She didn't say anything to you?" asked Salima. Steven shook his head.

"And you didn't tell her about coming to Brisbane?"

"No," answered Steven. "I just wanted to solve the mystery of the two sheets of paper."

"Why?" asked Ahmed softly.

Steven said, "I just wanted to do it for Rashida. I want her to be happy. My boys already love her dearly, and I..."

Salima broke in and said, "So, you have feelings for Rashida?"

"Er, yes," he replied. "Yes, I do."

"How strong are these feelings?"

Steven replied, "Very strong."

"And have you told my granddaughter this?" demanded Salima.

"Well, no, not yet," he said, "but I am going to when I get back home."

"Does Rashida have the same feelings for you?"

"I-I'm not sure, but I think so."

"So, how far have you gone with her?" Salima raised her voice and said, "Mr Steven West, I want to know the truth now. I can tell if you are lying."

Steven hesitated and then said, "Well, we've kissed a couple of times."

“And?”

“And what?” asked Steven.

“Anything else?” Salima persisted, looking at Steven closely.

Steven blushing replied, “We’ve hugged each other a couple of times too.”

“I didn’t mean that,” she said.

“Oh. No,” said Steven, embarrassed, “nothing else.”

Salima regarded Steven and said, “Well, what do you intend to do about it now?”

Steven said, “Well, when I get back, I am going to ask her to marry me. That is, if she will have me. But now that she knows I have found you both, she will probably want to come here and live with you.” His face dropped and he looked sad.

Salima’s eyes softened. “Well, Mr Steven West, you’ll have to leave it all to Rashida. But I can tell you she is just as stubborn as her parents when she makes up her mind. Sometimes I think that the so-called ‘liberal education’ that her father insisted she and Rafi had, is way outside the traditional Afghan method.”

Steven brightened at this. “You mean… you mean you would approve of me if I asked her?”

“Of course.” Salima smiled. “I know a good man when I see one. But you’ll still have to wait and see.”

It was Ahmed’s turn to question Steven. “Do you know what these numbers mean?”

“I haven’t a clue,” replied Steven.

Ahmed replied, “The numbers represent the combination to a strong box which I am holding for Rashida. A friend of Rashida’s parents brought out the box some time ago.”

“What’s in the box?” asked Steven.

“A lot of money, or rather bank deeds to a lot of money,” replied Ahmed. “In fact, Rashida is now a very rich girl.”

“Oh,” replied Steven again. He thought for a while. “Well, maybe when she gets the money, she will still want to come down and live with you, and…”

Salima interrupted again. “You just take your time. Don’t presume anything and, above all, let Rashida make up her mind in her own time.” She turned to Ahmed. “What do you think, Ahmed?”

“I am in charge of most things in this family, but matters of the heart, I leave to my wife,” said Ahmed with a gentle smile.

Steven breathed a sigh of relief. “Maybe Rashida will agree to marry me after all,” he thought. “But I sure wouldn’t like to get on Salima’s bad side!”

They talked for quite some time and Steven filled the family in on little details that Ali had missed. He told them that he had no reason to remain any longer in Brisbane so he intended to return to Mulga Lakes as quickly as possible. He was looking forward to seeing the boys and Rashida again – especially Rashida. As he joined Ahmed, Salima and Ali for lunch, Steven felt a flash of inspiration. He stopped eating.

Salima asked, “What is it, Mr Steven West? What is wrong?”

Steven explained his idea and waited impatiently for the reply.

“This is your decision, Ahmed,” said Salima. “What do you think?”

Ahmed thought for a while and then smiled and said, “I think it’s a great idea,” he said. “In fact, it’s excellent.”

“Then let’s do it!” cried Salima.

CHAPTER 25 ~ HOMECOMING

It was a typical day at Mulga Lakes. After breakfast Rashida and the boys were on their way to the schoolroom when Nick said, "I wonder when Dad will be home?"

"Don't know," replied Alex. He turned to Rashida, "Did he say anything to you?"

Rashida shook her head. She'd been wondering the same thing.

"He usually tells us what he's going to do when he flies to Brisbane," complained Nick. "But this time he didn't say a darn thing about it."

"No, it's sure not like him at all!" agreed Alex.

"I wonder if Mary knows anything," said Nick. "Rashida, can I go and ask her?"

Rashida replied, "No, not now. But you could ask her at smoko time."

"OK," said Nick as they entered the schoolroom. Rashida studied the boys when they had their heads down and were concentrating on maths worksheets. She sighed and wondered just what lay ahead of her in the future. She knew she was in love with Steven, but what were his real feelings for her? That was the question.

Alex raised his head and looked at Rashida. "Rashida, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," she replied. "What is it?"

"Do you like my dad?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "Actually, I was going to ask you the same question."

Rashida could feel herself blushing. That was enough for the boys. "Ah, now we know. You needn't even bother to answer." They both looked really happy.

"Er, boys, it's just about smoko time so let's go up and see what goodies Mary has for us." The boys gleefully gave each other a high-five and followed Rashida.

"Hey, guess what, Rashida?" said Nick.

"What?"

“We saw you huggin’ Dad the other night,” said Alex.

“Yeah,” said Nick, “but you didn’t see us, did you?”

“N-no,” replied Rashida.

“Don’t blush,” said Nick. “We don’t mind.”

Poor Rashida did not know what to say. Fortunately, Mary had come out of the kitchen and was arranging the food on the table for smoko. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “The boys giving you a hard time?”

“Not really,” replied Rashida. “Tell you about it later,” she whispered.

Meanwhile Nick and Alex were dancing around

the table. “Boys, calm down,” said Mary. “What’s wrong with you this morning?”

“We’re so, so-o- so happy!” they chanted. “Guess what, Mary?” Before she could reply, the boys said, “Rashida loves our dad! Rashida loves our dad!”

“Now settle down,” said Mary. She was smiling too, but she tactfully did not look at Rashida, who was blushing furiously.

The boys settled down to eat, intermittently nudging and winking at each other. After they had finished smoko, the boys set off in the direction of the schoolroom. “See ya at the schoolroom, Rashida,” they chorused, but Nick looked back and told Rashida to take her time.

Rashida sat down and said to Mary, “Well, I’ve certainly done it this time. The boys know exactly how I feel about Steven.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, dear,” said Mary, while Jilly hovered around, smiling. “You know,” she said in a conspiratorial voice, “I have an idea that Steven feels much the same as you do.”

Rashida’s heart missed a beat. “Really, Mary!” she cried. “Have I made it so obvious?”

“Of course not,” said Mary, laughing.

Rashida told Mary how the boys had caught Steven and her hugging just before he left. She didn't tell Mary that they had shared a tender kiss after the hug. She hoped the boys had not seen that! Mary and Jilly bustled around and took the empty cups and plates to the kitchen and Rashida made her way slowly down to the schoolroom. She wished the boys would not say anything more about that subject to her this morning and that her face was a normal colour again.

When she reached the schoolroom, all was quiet. The boys were working silently at their desks and did not look up to greet her. "Strange, must be a really captivating worksheet, or ...". As she turned to her desk, she caught sight of the blackboard. Pinned from one end of the board to the other was a huge sheet of paper with the words, 'We are so glad you love our dad, Rashida'. In the middle of the paper were the following words written in running writing: 'RASHIDA , WILL YOU MARRY OUR DAD?????' There were hearts and kisses drawn on the rest of the paper which ended with 'We love you too, Rashida' and on the two top edges of the paper were small bunches of bluebells. The paper was signed, 'Love from Nick and Alex.'

Rashida sat at her desk and burst into tears. The boys came over at once and Nick said, "Aw, don't cry, Rashida," while Alex hugged her.

She told the boys to sit down and explained to them, "Well, I really do love your dad, but he has not mentioned being married yet."

"He will," said Alex. "You just wait and see!"

"Yeah, we'll fix things," said Nick in a confident voice.

"No problem."

"Why, what are you going to do?" asked Rashida, tearfully.

The boys winked at each other. "Just wait and see!"

Before Rashida could say any more, the boys looked up and said, "Listen! That sounds like Dad's plane!" They pricked up their ears. "Yes it is! Let's go, Rashida." Rashida dried her eyes. She didn't want to meet Steven all teary-eyed. She followed the boys out of the schoolroom and ran to keep up with them as they charged towards the small airstrip.

The plane was circling and preparing to land. Mary, Jilly and the boys were waving in the direction of the plane as it landed smoothly. Steven alighted and waved happily. "I'm so glad to be home." He smiled at everyone, but his eyes fastened on Rashida who felt herself blushing again, while tears came to her eyes.

"Hi!" he said as the boys encircled him. He gave them a hug and hugged Mary and Jilly as well. Then he went over to Rashida, folded her in his strong arms and kissed her tenderly. The kiss seemed to go on forever.

"Right oh, Dad, give it a break," said Nick.

"We know that you love each other, so go ahead and do something about it," said Alex. Steven and Rashida broke apart quickly.

"Go on, Dad, you can't fool us!" cried Nick.

Steven tried to look stern. "Boys, what's this all about?" he asked, but his voice did not sound at all stern. "It certainly looks as if you've been planning something while I have been away."

"Yeah, Dad," said Alex fervently, "we sure have!"

Steven and Rashida looked at each other. He smiled. "Well, you've made things a great deal easier for me."

"Wha..a..at do you mean?" asked Rashida. She looked past Steven and saw movement within the plane. "Did you bring some visitors with you?"

"I certainly did," replied Steven. He beckoned to the visitors and they slowly climbed out of the plane. Rashida gasped. She would have fallen if Steven had not caught her. A voice from one of the visitors said, "We heard everything that you all said."

"Grandmother! Grandfather!" cried Rashida as she broke away from Steven. Her grandparents embraced her, their eyes streaming with tears of joy.

"Gee," said Nick in disgust, "why's everyone crying all of a sudden? I just can't stomach this."

“Who are these people?” asked Alex. He nudged Nick. “Just look at the gear they’re wearing! Cool, eh?”

Steven explained that the visitors were Rashida’s grandparents, whom he had located in Brisbane. “I’ll tell you about it later,” he promised.

Jilly clapped her hands with joy as Mary said, “I’m so glad for you, Steven. I told you that things would be all right!”

“Thank you, Mary,” said Steven. “Now I’d better go and introduce the boys to our visitors. Come on, boys, and mind your manners!” They followed him over to the little group standing beside the plane. The boys shook hands with the visitors and Nick could not help himself. He said, “Gee, do you always get dressed up like that?”

Steven was shocked. “Nick!” he cried, aghast.

Ahmed and Salima chuckled. “Don’t worry, Steven,” said Salima. “They are only young boys, after all, and are being honest.”

Alex, not to be outdone, addressed them by saying, “Can you ride a horse?” Steven rolled his eyes and shook his head slowly but didn’t say anything.

This time it was Ahmed who replied. “Yes, I can, young man.”

“But you can’t ride in all that gear,” Alex insisted.

“I’ve brought more suitable clothes with me,” Ahmed said, “and so did Salima.”

The boys’ eyes opened wide. “You know, you both speak quite good English – nearly as good as Rashida,” observed Alex.

“Yeah,” said Nick. “That’s great. If you stay here for long, you’ll have to learn how to speak our fair dinkum Aussie language!” Everyone laughed.

“Well,” said Steven, “come up to the house and have something to eat. We can’t stand here all day. Leave your cases in the plane. I’ll bring them up later.”

It was a merry little party that trooped up to the house. Mary and Jilly had gone ahead to prepare lunch. Salima remarked to Rashida, "I brought some of your favourite naan with me," she said.

"Oh, thank you, Grandmother," she said gratefully and hugged her.

Happy chatter ebbed and swelled in the dining room as the party tackled the delicious lunch that Mary and Jilly had prepared. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. Steven was trying to tell Rashida all that had happened in Brisbane; Rashida was talking about how much she had missed him; and the boys had fastened themselves on to Ahmed and Salima and were firing one question after another at them.

Eventually Steven said, "Now, boys, give our visitors a break. They will be tired after their journey."

"Aw, Dad, can we have the rest of the day off?" said Nick hopefully.

Steven looked at Rashida. "What do you think?" he said.

"I think they have been working pretty hard lately, so it's OK by me."

"Whew!" breathed the boys in unison.

Then Alex said, "You all gotta come down to the schoolroom for a moment.

We've something to show you!"

"All right," said Steven, "but as soon as we've done that, you can both help Mary and Jilly get rooms ready for our visitors. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Dad," said the boys meekly. With knowing grins, they followed their father to the school room. When Steven saw what the boys had written, he was lost for words.

Salima was the first to speak. "That's just lovely," she said. "Isn't it, Ahmed?"

Ahmed nodded and turned to Steven. "As soon as I read it, I knew Salima would say that. Didn't I tell you that my wife always deals with matters of the heart? We think the boys' poster is just beautiful."

"You're right," said Steven softly. He turned to the boys and said, "Now you take Ahmed and Salima up to the house and we'll be up shortly."

“No, Dad, you come up too. We’ve got something else important to show you!”

Steven said, “What is it this time?”

The boys exchanged glances. “You wait and see.”

Steven was about to say something but Rashida looked at him tenderly and motioned him not to say anything. “What now?” he wondered. They followed the boys back to the house and made for Steven’s study. “What the… .?” began Steven as the boys opened the door, and there before them was a similar notice to the one in the schoolroom. However, where the notice in the school room read, ‘RASHIDA, WILL YOU MARRY OUR DAD? ’; this one read, ‘DAD, WILL YOU MARRY RASHIDA ?’

Nick whispered to Steven, “We didn’t put flowers on yours, Dad. Alex and I thought that was a bit sissy.” There was silence as everyone stared at the poster. The women had tears in their eyes; even Ahmed and Steven could not speak.

“Well, go on, Dad, ask Rashida!” said Nick.

“Ask Rashida what?”

“Ask her to marry you, of course!”

Steven was momentarily lost for words but he quickly gathered his thoughts together and said to Rashida, “Rashida, will you marry me? I was going to ask you later but I guess now is as good a time as any.” Steven was really nervous by this time and he could hardly get the words out.

Rashida was so calm. She took his hands and said softly, “Yes, Steven, I will marry you.” Everyone clapped then they hugged and kissed each other. Steven glanced at Rashida’s grandparents and he could see that they were happy. There were tears in Salima’s eyes as well as Rashida’s.

Nick said, “Can we go riding now, Dad? Now that you’ve sorted everything out?”

“What about helping Ahmed and Salima get settled?” replied Steven.

“Don’t worry, Steven,” interjected Rashida. “Grandmother and I will do it; we have such a lot to talk about.”

“Yes,” said Salima.

“Thanks, Rashida,” the boys chorused and they made for the door before their father could change his mind.

Alex said, “Well, guys, we’ll see you all later.”

Nick turned to Ahmed and Salima. “You can come riding with us when you’re all settled, OK?” With broad grins, the boys high-fived each other and ran off.

Steven could hardly believe that he had asked Rashida to marry him; Rashida could not believe that Steven had asked her to marry him. As for the grandparents, they were thrilled about the unexpected and quick turn of events.

Steven managed to stutter to Rashida, “I was going to ask you to marry me a little bit later. I had it all worked out. I was going to take you out somewhere nice and quiet and ask you.”

“That doesn’t matter at all,” replied Rashida. “I couldn’t feel happier. I will remember this day all my life.”

Salima interrupted, “Mr Steven West, you have two wonderfully perceptive young boys. Ahmed and I are going to have such fun getting to know them.”

Steven breathed a sigh of relief. He said, “Now we had better get you settled after all that excitement.”

Salima said, “We don’t feel like doing much at all right now,” and Ahmed nodded. “Everything is so different to what we have been used to, so could we all sit and relax and enjoy our new surroundings?”

“That’s such a great idea. I know we all have such a lot of things to talk about, so we’ll all go and sit on the veranda.”

Sinking into the softness of the comfortably worn chairs on the veranda the group were lost for some minutes in their own thoughts as they gazed over the tranquil landscape. Mary and Jilly

brought tea and biscuits and joined them. Steven shyly told them the good news. Jilly hugged Rashida and Mary smiled. “I’m not surprised. Yours is a match made in heaven.”

Weariness overwhelmed them all soon after dinner that night; the boys were the first to disappear upstairs, followed by Ahmed and Salima. Mary and Jilly accompanied them to their rooms, which they had carefully made up. Steven and Rashida were, at last, alone. Steven took Rashida in his arms and said, “I love you so much, and I promise I will make you happy.” He kissed her tenderly.

“I promise to make you happy, also, my love,” said Rashida. She kissed him back just as tenderly. “Now, I am so tired and I can see how weary you are as well. Let’s talk more in the morning and make our plans for the future.” They kissed again, more passionately this time.

Steven realised that Rashida was right. Reluctantly he went into his room and, just as reluctantly, Rashida went upstairs to hers. She tiptoed past the boys’ rooms, opened her door softly, undressed and lay down on her bed. Her last thoughts before she went to sleep were of her brother. “Oh Rafi, I didn’t think that something like this would ever happen to me. I now have a wonderful man that I am going to marry, as well as a ready-made beautiful family, and best of all I have the blessing of my grandfather and grandmother! I couldn’t be happier!”

CHAPTER 26 - JILLY'S STORY

The following morning as the extended family gathered around the breakfast table, Steven asked Ahmed and Salima if they had slept well. Ahmed nodded. “It was so peaceful – we didn’t hear any of the noisy sounds we hear in the city. We didn’t hear any cars or police sirens or ambulances all night.”

Salima said, “All I could hear were the night birds calling to one other.”

Steven asked, "Did you hear the dingoes?"

Ahmed and Salima looked puzzled. Steven explained that dingoes were a species of wild dogs. They were a danger to the livestock and often had to be shot. Steven said, "I know Rashida loves all animals, but she understands why we have to get rid of some of these dingoes." Steven went on to explain that the dingo did not bark like an ordinary dog but had a high - pitched howl. "It's rather a scary sound if you haven't heard it before."

"Well, in that case, I did hear a dingo, but I thought it was the cry of some other strange animal from the bush," said Salima. Rashida came down the stairs, dressed in blue jeans and a checked shirt. "You look beautiful," the words were out before Steven realised he had spoken aloud. He stood and embraced Rashida. The boys rolled their eyes and pulled faces at each other. Nick thought it time to interrupt, "Hey Dad, what are we all going to do today, seeing it's the weekend?"

Rashida catching sight of Alex's rolling eyes blushed, moving quickly to pour a cup coffee.

"Umm, well, you two could go riding for a while, and then you can watch a couple of the DVDs that I happened to pick up in Brisbane." replied Steven.

"Cool, Dad," said Alex. "What did ya get?"

"Avatar, The Lone Ranger, The Karate Kid, the latest one with Will Smith and his son, plus a few others that I thought would interest you."

"Great, Dad," said Nick. "What are you all going to do?"

"I thought that we could just relax and talk," said Steven.

"Boring!" said Alex. "Come on, Nick, "let's go for that ride!" He turned back to ask Ahmed and Salima if they would like to come riding. "You won't have to take part in all that boring talk!"

Ahmed and Salima smiled. Salima answered, "Not this time, boys, maybe next time. After all, we have many things to discuss."

As they went out the door, Nick said, "Don't know what they want to discuss because Dad is going to marry Rashida and that's the most important thing, isn't it?"

“You bet,” replied Alex. “Grownups are funny sometimes though. They can’t seem to tell the difference between what is important and what is not important.” The adults heard their remarks and could hardly keep from laughing.

“Let’s go and sit on the veranda,” said Steven. “it’s cooler out there and we’ll be more comfortable.” Mary and Jilly had already brought out a small tray of sandwiches and biscuits. This was followed by cups of hot coffee. Jilly then brought out some naan, complete with sugar and honey. She smiled at Rashida, who came over and gave her a warm hug. “Thank you so much, Jilly.”

Steven began, “Rashida, tell your grandparents about what has happened to you since you left Afghanistan.” Rashida took a deep breath and began her story. She spoke about her parents, about the evil of the Taliban, then she could not speak for some time. Steven held her hand while she dried her eyes. Salima started crying too, and Ahmed and Steven felt moistness in their own eyes. Rashida composed herself and continued with her story of how she and Rafi did not have the documents and passports to get to Australia by plane. She told her listeners of the kindness of the Afghan people and others who had helped them on their journey to Indonesia. Her voice hardened as she spoke of the wicked boat captain named Wahid and how he had pestered her almost as soon as she met him. Tears flowed as she spoke of the dreadful storm and how their frail boat capsized and sank, killing not only her beloved brother Rafi but other refugees, including a tiny baby. Her voice tailed off — the memories were still raw. Steven squeezed her hand. Rashida brightened and continued. She told of meeting Mike and Joe who worked for the Immigration Department on Christmas Island, and who were long-time friends of Steven. “....and that’s how I came to be here working as a governess, and looking after two delightful little boys,” she concluded.

“They can both be little horrors at times,” Steven said ruefully but Rashida did not agree with that at all. “Tell Ahmed and Salima about your trip out here.”

“It was so interesting and I learned such a lot about the Australian outback and about the different animals and birds,” said Rashida.

“From the boys mainly,” added Steven in an aside then he took up the story. “Everything was great out here, until that obnoxious captain Wahid came searching for Rashida.” He told of how he had left the station to do fencing and stock work a day’s ride from the main house; how he had taken the station dogs with him and left Rashida and the boys in the charge of his old friend and gardener, Jock. “By this time, the authorities were looking for Wahid in connection with the deaths of the refugees – people who had paid him a large amount of money to get them to safety. He had crammed them into a boat he knew was unseaworthy!” Anger flashed in Steven’s eyes. “Pictures of Wahid were plastered all over the TV and newspapers. That’s how Rashida knew he was after her. He had planned everything so carefully and was so cunning that he abducted Rashida right under our very noses!”

Ahmed and Salima looked at him in horror. “What happened next?”

Steven told how Rashida managed to break free and that Wahid had been stampeded by the cattle and killed. “You know the rest of the story,” said Steven. “Your friend Ali would have told you.”

“Yes,” said Ahmed, and Salina nodded. He turned to Rashida. “You’ve been through such a lot, my child.”

Rashida put her arm round her grandfather. “But now I think of all the good things that I have experienced since I came to Mulga Lakes. I think of Steven and the boys, my job here and now, wonder of wonders, I am going to marry such a wonderful man. I feel so truly blessed.”

A worried look crossed Steven’s face as he asked, “Will there be any problem in my marrying your granddaughter?”

Ahmed raised his eyebrows and asked, “Problem?”

Steven said, “You know about the religion part and…” He broke off, not knowing how to continue.

Ahmed leaned back in his chair as he considered Steven’s question.

Salima answered, “Fortunately for Rafi and Rashida, their parents gave them a liberal and worldly education, and ever since they were young, they have learned to accept other people’s way of life and religions. Their father was a very wise man. He also taught them to have a compassionate and understanding view about mixed marriages.” Steven waited for her to continue. “No, Steven, you will have no trouble marrying Rashida. Love transcends all religions and if you both love each other as much as I think you do, then there will always be an answer to any problem about religion which might arise.”

Steven breathed a sigh of relief. He heard Ahmed chuckle. “Didn’t I tell you that my wife always deals with matters of the heart?” he asked, a smile on his face.

Rashida said, “The boys have already asked me lots of questions about Afghanistan and I know they are interested in our culture and language too, so I will continue to talk to them about it.”

“One day you might even be able to take them to Kandahar,” said Salima wistfully.

“Inshallah!” replied Steven.

Ahmed and Salima looked surprised. “I can see that you have been teaching him well,” observed Ahmed.

Rashida nodded. “The boys were particularly interested in the camel drivers.” She told her grandparents how, on a trip to Windorah, they had met Hassan and that one of Hassan’s camels had bitten Steven on the arm. The grandparents laughed as Rashida described the incident. Steven added that the boys still teased him about it.

After they all enjoyed the coffee, sandwiches and naan, it was Steven’s turn to tell what had happened during his trip to Brisbane. Rashida said, “Yes, Steven, what made you go there in the first place?”

“My beautiful girl,” began Steven, “I have a confession to make and I hope you will forgive me.” He told her how he had come to read what was on the two pieces of paper she had in her little bag. “I often wondered why you wore that little bag every day. Then, when you lost it and Jilly found it, one of the pieces of paper was sticking out of the bag. I couldn’t help myself and I read it. It

happened to be the one with the address of the café Crescent Moon on it.” Rashida’s eyes were wide with surprise.

Steven went on, “Well, I might as well tell you all of it.” He took a deep breath and said, “Then I read what was on the other piece, but it didn’t mean anything to me as it was only a bunch of numbers.” He took Rashida’s hands and said, “I’m so sorry, but when I read the paper with the address on it, I determined to get to the bottom of it and so I decided to go to Brisbane.”

Rashida asked, “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking at the back of my mind that it somehow might help you, and my only thought was to solve the mystery so you could be happy.”

Rashida had tears in her eyes. “You are such a darling,” she said and leaned over and kissed him.

Salima said, “So, Mr Steven West, we now have two psychics in the family. Did you know that Rashida is psychic?”

“I figured that out a while ago,” said Steven, and he spoke of her premonitions regarding Wahid and the danger she felt she was in. “I’m afraid I didn’t believe it at first, but now I do. You see, my family never talked about such things.”

“Pity,” said Salima.

Steven went on to explain how he met Ali and how he had directed him to the Crescent Moon.

“And that’s about it,” he finished up.

Ahmed then told Rashida that she was now a wealthy girl and that Steven had told him that she might not want to marry him after that. “What a lot of rubbish,” returned Rashida, flushing. “As if I would let that stand in my way!”

They were silent for a short time then Mary and Jilly came out with more coffee. “Thank you, Mary,” said Steven. Jilly stood behind her with her big smile and laughing brown eyes. When Mary and Jilly had collected the coffee cups, Ahmed turned to Steven and said, “This little girl Jilly, where did she come from?”

“Actually, it’s a long story and she’s not such a little girl either,” said Steven. “This station belonged to my parents, and during one of our busy seasons, he had a young girl working out here as a jillaroo.” He explained the work of a jillaroo. “At the same time, my father had an exchange student from Africa staying here – he was on an eighteen-month work experience visa, studying the Australian cattle industry. Well, the two young people became friends right away and, after a while, things got serious between them. One thing leading to another and in no time the jillaroo was pregnant.

Eventually the two young people asked my parents for advice. Dad suggested that they make up their minds what to do after the child was born. He offered that they could both stay on as employees if that was what they wanted, and depending on the visa situation, of course". “However,” continued Steven, “a very sad thing happened. One night they were travelling back from a dance at Grey Rocks. Their car hit a kangaroo and spun out of control into a large tree. Both parents were killed, and the baby was very seriously injured. She had brain damage and a badly fractured hip.” Steven paused. “The baby was in the hospital for a long time. Neither my parents nor Mary wanted to see the child go into state care so my father had his solicitor complete the necessary paperwork for the baby to be under Mary’s guardianship. Jilly has lived at Mulga Lakes ever since. Mary cares for her like a mother and they are very close".

“Jilly recovered really well and was able to do some school work, but she only managed simple learning tasks. Her hip did not completely heal and that’s why she still walks with a slight limp. Jilly has a good life with Mary and if anything should happen to Mary, Jilly will always have a home here. She is a very happy girl. Although she is in her thirties, she is still very young mentally and sometimes her mind wanders. I heard her telling Rashida that she often visits her father and he teaches her all about life in the bush.”

“How very sad life can be for some people,” observed Ahmed.

Rashida gazed at Steven. “Your father must have been a very kind man,” she said, “and you are just like him.”

Steven felt his face redden as Salima said, "I told Ahmed that Mr Steven West was just the right sort of a man to marry our Rashida."

They chatted about other things until Salima called attention back to tasks at hand by saying, "Now, when and where do you want to get married?"

Rashida answered immediately. "Out here at Mulga Lakes."

Steven said, "Yes, we'll make a list of people we want to have at our wedding. It shouldn't take long." He went on. "Nick can be my best man and Alex can carry the rings."

"What a great idea!" said Salima. "And, besides me, who else do you want to be bridal attendants, Rashida?"

"I'll have Jilly," said Rashida.

"That's great," said Steven. "She will be so thrilled. And we'll fly the Charleville bush band, Ned and the Kellys, out from Charleville," he continued.

The others looked puzzled. Rashida said, "But the boys told me that your Ned Kelly was a criminal. Why would they have a band named after him?"

"Actually Ned Kelly was a bushranger," said Steven. He went on to explain to Ahmed and Salima what a bushranger was and how the band had come to be. Everyone laughed.

They were interrupted by the boys returning from their ride. "Dad! Dad!" cried Nick, "can we have the movies now?"

"All in good time," Steven replied. "Perhaps you'd both better shower and change first."

"Have you finished with all the talking yet?" asked Alex.

"As a matter of fact, we have," said Steven with a laugh.

"Nick and I have been talking too," said Alex, "and we've got heaps of things to show Salima and Ahmed when they come out riding."

"Thank you, boys," said Ahmed and Salima. "We are looking forward to it." The boys disappeared upstairs to clean up.

Steven consulted his calendar. “How about the first week in December?” he asked. “The boys will be finished the school term about then and, with any luck, we’ll be married before the wet season. So that leaves us a few weeks. Do you think that will be long enough to get everything ready?” The others nodded.

“So let’s get this show on the road,” said Rashida. Her grandmother and grandfather stared at her, puzzled by the strange expression.

Steven hugged her saying, “You’re becoming a fair dinkum Aussie, Rashida. I am so proud of you.”

The next few weeks passed quickly at Mulga Lakes. The boys were busy with the final weeks of school work and counted down each day until the wedding. All the adults participated in the planning. Mary organised caterers from Charleville; Salima was making Rashida’s wedding dress and Jilly’s bridesmaid’s dress. Invitations were mailed out, and, a week later, as Steven ticked off his guest list, he saw that everybody he had invited was coming to the wedding.

That only left one thing more to do – the rings! Steven consulted with Salima about this and she asked Steven if Rashida could accept some rings which had belonged to her mother.

Ahmed said that he would give Steven one of his own rings, if that was OK by him. Steven accepted both rings gratefully.

“Now, who do you want to officiate at your marriage?” asked Salima.

“I have a friend, in Brisbane, who is a marriage celebrant — Trisha Marks. Mike, Joe and I went to school with Trisha, and we’ve all kept in touch over the years. I reckon she’d be the ideal person to marry us, don’t you?” Salima nodded in agreement.

The days sped by until finally all was ready for the big day. Lists were checked and rechecked to make sure that nothing had been missed. Two days before the wedding, Steven, Ahmed, Jock, and two young station hands put up a marquee. “All done,” said Steven as he put down a mallet and stepped back to admire their work. “What do reckon, Jock?”

“S’long as we don’t get one of those summer storms that come out of the blue at this time of the year.” Jock tipped his hat back and gazed at the sky. Tapping his pipe on his boot to empty the

bowl, he reached for his tobacco pouch musing quietly, “Of course, a summer storm would be very welcome for the pastures, I reckon.” He cast a wry grin at Steven, who laughed.

The air was warm and sweet-smelling, the stars shone from a clear sky, and moonlight cast a soft light over the group sitting on the veranda. The boys were thrilled at their important part in the wedding. “We’re not going to sleep tonight,” said Nick, and Alex nodded his head in agreement. He was too excited to speak.

Leaning on the veranda rail, Mary gazed at the garden; the marquee seemed to float in the soft breeze. “A marriage made in heaven,” she murmured to herself.

“Hmm,” said Alex, “that’s where thunder and lightning come from too!”

The adults laughed heartily. Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Steven took Rashida’s arm and led her into the garden. Beyond the sight of the others, Steven took her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. “This time tomorrow you’ll be Mrs Steven

West. What do you think of that?” he murmured softly.

“I couldn’t be happier,” she replied gently.

As they stood enfolded in each other’s arms, Steven whispered,

“I suppose we’d better go back or those boys of ours will come looking for us!” After one last lingering kiss, Steven and Rashida walked out of the shadows, looking forward to the following day — the beginning of their new life together.

CHAPTER 27 - HEAVEN'S OPENING

The wedding day dawned bright and clear, with a few light wispy clouds on the horizon. Steven jumped out of bed, opened the curtains, his eyes following the paths of the clouds moving lazily in

the brilliant blue outback sky, feelings of joy, and of sadness washed over him. Feeling a light touch on his shoulder, he turned slightly and just for a fleeting moment glimpsed his beloved Laura, smiling as she whispered "Rashida, Steven a match made in heaven"

Upstairs in her room Rashida also pulled her curtains aside and looked out of the window. "It's going to be a perfect day!" she said happily. She dressed quickly and went down to breakfast where the boys and Steven were already at the table.

"Gee, Rashida, you're a slow coach!" exclaimed Nick.

"Slow coach? What's that?" she asked.

Alex replied, "A slow coach is a person who moves around slowly."

"Yeah," said Nick. "You should be running around sparking on all cylinders and getting ready for your wedding!"

Rashida laughed and Steven joined in. "You've lost me, boys," she said. "I won't even ask you to explain that!"

Steven said, "The ceremony is not until 4 o'clock, so we've got plenty of time!"

"OK, so let's get busy and start moving!" cried Alex. "What can we do, Dad?"

Steven said, "Well, first of all, both of you can help Mary and Jilly in the kitchen, and then you can go down to the airstrip to welcome our visitors - they should be starting to arrive any time."

"All right, Dad," said Alex. "Come on, Nick, let's go!"

After helping Mary and Jilly with the breakfast dishes, they were given the job of tidying up the kitchen and sweeping the floors. Nick grumbled, "This is a woman's job. I'll be glad when they are married and then Rashida can do all the house stuff!"

The first of the guests arrived. Stuart and Therese from the Waltzing Matilda Motel in Charleville alighted from their new shiny Landcruiser. Steven took Rashida out to meet them.

"You look beautiful," said Rashida.

“Thank you,” said Therese. “It’s so nice to see you again. Stuart and I are very happy for you both.” Jenny, from the clothing store in Roma, was the next to arrive, followed by Dorothy, from the Star Caravan Park in Charleville.

A plane circled overhead - the boys ran down to the airstrip. The plane landed smoothly and a number of people got out, all dressed in their best clothes. “Gosh, I’m gonna hate getting all dolled up, aren’t you, Alex?” said Nick. Alex pulled a face as he nodded.

Then out of the plane stepped the immigration officers from Christmas Island. Nick and Alex raced over and hugged them. “Uncle Joe, Uncle Mike, great to see you!” Joe and Mike grinned at the excited boys, who told them that Steven and Rashida were welcoming the other guests under the marquee.

On the same plane were Will Jennings, Rob, and the field officers from Immigration in Brisbane. The boys met them with a firm handshake and directed them to the marquee.

Another small plane landed and this time the passengers were from Grey Rock and Gum Tree Creek stations. As Jenny, the governess from Grey Rock alighted she looked eagerly around and her eyes lit up as she spotted Rob. She rushed over and flung her arms around him, and they shared a long kiss. "Oh boy", sighed Alex rolling his eyes at Nick, "More mushy stuff!"

A Landcruiser pulled up and the manager and his wife from the Quilpie Heritage Hotel got out. The back door of the car opened and Hassan alighted. “Gosh! Look who’s here!” shouted Alex. Both boys raced up and gave the old camel driver a hug. “Did you bring your camels?” asked Nick. Hassan smiled at the boys. “Not this time,” he said.

The last plane to arrive was the young flying doctor. He climbed out and slowly walked down the steps. He was carrying a guitar.

“I didn’t know the flying doctor could play a guitar,” observed Steven.

“Hoorah!” cried Nick. “Now we’ll get some decent music for sure!”

Several members of the band, Ned and the Kelly's, got out of the plane. They were dressed in black trousers and bow ties, and were wearing smart - looking white tuxedos. "Had to get dolled up for the wedding of the year!" drawled one.

Steven introduced everyone, the tinkling sounds of glasses and the aroma of tea and coffee floated over the buzz of conversation in the marquee. All the station workers were invited too. "All dressed up in best bib and tucker," observed Jock.

"Dad's workers scrub up pretty well, don't they?" whispered Alex. Nick nodded his head. Alex went on, "Especially old Jock. I don't think that pipe of his ever leaves his mouth. But he doesn't look very happy today in those nicely starched clothes of his."

A 4 wheel drive rental car arrived and two people got out; Trisha, the marriage celebrant, and Ali. How they both came to be in the same car was a bit of a mystery, but no doubt they would tell Steven all about it later on.

Steven and Rashida excused themselves and called the boys. "It's time for us to get changed," he said. "Go and call Jilly and ask Mary to get her ready, too."

"OK Dad," chorused the boys. "We're gonna really love this, except that we have to dress up. Why couldn't we just wear jeans, rodeo shirt and riding boots? That'd be cool," asked Nick.

"Just get dressed," said Steven while Rashida smiled. With a wave to the guests, they disappeared in the direction of their rooms.

Steven and the boys dressed in Steven's room. After checking his sons with a critical eye, Steven announced, "You'll do! By the way, the marriage celebrant will tell you when to produce the rings. I will give them to you later on, just before the ceremony begins."

Upstairs in Rashida's room, Salima was helping her into the beautiful long wedding dress, and Mary was dressing a very excited Jilly. "You look beautiful," said Salima. "Look in the mirror!"

Rashida looked into the mirror and when she saw her reflection, she threw her arms around Salima, saying, "Thank you so much, Grandmother, for making this the most wonderful day of my life!" Salima hugged her back.

Mary had dressed Jilly and she, too, looked into the mirror with a big smile. Her eyes were dancing as she hugged Mary, Salima and Rashida in turn.

Finally they all walked down the steps to meet Steven and the boys. Steven gazed with wonder as he met Rashida's eyes. "You look absolutely gorgeous," he said. She held a bouquet of flowers from their garden, and Jilly was carrying a similar bouquet.

"Come on, Dad," said Nick. "The band's ready to play. We should get moving!"

"All right," answered Steven. "I'm coming." He gave Alex the rings and Alex shoved them into his pocket. "Careful with those," admonished Steven. The group walked over to Trisha. The guests were all on their feet and smiling. The band commenced playing "Here Comes the Bride!"

The wedding group stood in front of Trisha and the ceremony began. Trisha had planned a simple but beautiful service. She had worked very hard at writing the words in honour of this special occasion. A few minutes later, Trisha nodded to Alex, who slipped outside. She would send Nick out shortly and he would accompany Alex with the precious rings.

The ceremony continued, Trisha nodded to Nick, who went out to fetch Alex. Imagine his surprise when he found Alex was missing. "Alex! Alex!" he cried, "Where on earth are you?" He looked around for his brother and said, "Come on, mate, show yourself! It's no time to be playing games! Besides, all the people are waiting!"

"H-here I am, Nick," cried a teary voice. "I've just dropped the rings somewhere! I've found one of them, but I can't find the other one!"

"What a dummy!" cried Nick. "Here, let me help you! Where did you drop them?"

"In the dirt!" said Alex.

They began frantically scrabbling in the red dirt until Nick cried, "Here it is! I've got it!" He held one ring and Alex held the other.

"Gosh, they're full of dirt, and we've got no water to clean them up!"

“We’d better spit on them then,” said Nick. “You do one and I’ll do the other!” The boys hurried and soon the rings were reasonably clean but the sleeves of their nice white shirts were dirty.

“Oh, gosh! Dad and Rashida will kill us!” They hastily brushed themselves down, only managing to spread the red dirt over a wider area of their clothes.

“Come on, let’s go!” said Nick. “Try and look cool so that nobody notices!” Attempting a confident swagger the boys sauntered back to the service where Trisha and the guests were wondering about the delay. They soon found out.

There were smiles all round as the two boys appeared. Red dirt showed clearly on their shirt sleeves. They were both red-faced and their hair was a mess. However, nobody seemed to be in the least perturbed. Trisha hid a smile and went on with the latter part of the ceremony. Steven and Rashida placed the rings on each other’s fingers and Trisha finished up with, “I now pronounce you man and wife!”

At the same time this was happening, Rashida felt Salima gently tapping her. Rashida turned slightly and Salima raised her eyes upwards. Rashida looked up. Once again her psychic abilities came into play. Only metres away, she saw four mystic figures looking happily down on them. There stood Rashida’s mother, father and her brother Rafi, plus a beautiful blond lady. They were smiling and held bouquets of flowers in their hands.

Tears came to Rashida’s eyes. Steven thought they were tears of happiness and indeed they were – but to have this extra gift given to her on her wedding day was a wonderful added bonus. She smiled back and the figures disappeared. “I will tell Steven about this some time,” she thought.

It was time for Rashida to throw her bouquet out to the guests. She turned her back and threw the bouquet. It was skilfully caught by Jenny, the governess from Grey Rock, and straightaway she threw her arms around Rob. Everyone clapped.

“More mushy stuff!” whispered Nick to Alex, who rolled his eyes.

The bride and the groom kissed, then went out among the guests. Steven turned to the boys and said, “You two had better get changed then come back and help pass the food around to the guests.”

The boys breathed a sigh of relief and hurried off. “Gee, Dad’s in a cool mood,” observed Nick. “He didn’t even seem to notice how grotty we were!”

During the ceremony, the caterers, who had arrived earlier that morning from Charleville, had been setting out most of the food on the tables under the marquee. Very carefully they placed a three-tiered iced cake in the middle of the table just in front of where the bride and groom would be sitting. Earlier Jock had placed a tiny flag of Australia on top of the cake and Ahmed had placed an equally tiny flag of Afghanistan beside the flag of Australia.

By this time the guests were seated and they cheered when they saw the wedding cake. They were soon busily eating the delicious food. Nick and Alex were helping. They both went up and hugged Rashida, Steven as well as Jilly and Mary, who were seated at the wedding table.

“For a moment I thought Steven and Rashida were not going to get married at all. What happened?” asked Mary. She had a smile on her face when the boys told her.

“And Dad wasn’t even cross at all,” whispered Alex. “I doubt if your father even noticed, as he was so happy,” replied Mary.

“Whew! What a relief!” breathed Alex.

“It just goes to show how cool Dad can be at times,” added Nick.

While the guests were occupied with eating, drinking and talking, nobody had bothered to look up at the sky, which was now completely covered in black storm clouds. Suddenly a loud clap of thunder was heard and a great flash of lightning streaked across the sky. The sky opened up and the rain poured down in bucketfuls. It was so heavy that it went right through the marquee and drenched the guests. Fortunately the wedding party were lucky but only for a moment.

Many hands helped gather up the food and the precious cake was hurried up onto the dry veranda. Ned and the Kellys quickly set up their equipment on the wide veranda. Tables, food and drinks were soon set up on the veranda too.

What a sight they were! No one had escaped the downpour. Everyone looked bedraggled. The women's expensive clothes and shoes were ruined, and their hair was a mess. Rashida's beautiful wedding gown seemed to be stuck to her skin. It was dripping wet, like the guests clothes. But at least they were now married – that was the main thing. Everyone found a spot to sit and resumed eating. Speeches were made by some of the men, who tried opening the wet paper on which they had written only to give up and adlib.

Despite being drenched the guests continued to party! When the band started playing, some began dancing. They were all laughing at each other and themselves. It was such a funny sight. Nick and Rashida danced together and Alex danced with Salima.

“Great wedding, eh?” shouted Alex above the sound of the heavy rain. Salima responded but Alex could not hear because a loud clap of thunder filled the air.

Jock, blackened pipe in mouth, leaned on a veranda rail and gestured to the sky, shouting, “Send it down, Huey!”

“Our wedding will go down in history! Won't the press have a ball when they find out!” shouted Steven, but Rashida only laughed. She thought that this would be the ideal time to tell Steven about what she had seen at the end of the wedding ceremony. Steven was astonished and he hugged Rashida closely to his heart. “I'm so glad your family were there, and I'm so glad that Laura was there also!” His eyes were moist and Rashida didn't know whether Steven was crying or whether it was rain dripping down his face.

As suddenly as it had started, the rain ceased. The thunder rolled away in the distance and only a faint glow of lightning was seen on the horizon. The storm clouds parted and white fluffy clouds took their place. Then the fluffy clouds disappeared and, wonder of wonders, blue sky appeared. Just a short while later, steam rose from the wet ground as the sun shone brightly. “Typical outback weather!” remarked one of the guests. There was a general cheer!

People ventured out into the warm sunshine, shaking drips of water from their clothing. Trisha was laughing as she hugged Steven and Rashida. She said, "I've often heard of strange things happening in the bush but I've never actually experienced anything like this!" She was amazed that everyone at the wedding had taken things in their stride. Nobody had complained about anything. It just seemed natural for these people to get on with their lives as if nothing untoward had happened. She recalled other weddings that she had been to in the city when it had rained, and the guests had complained bitterly about the weather and how it had spoiled their day. "If something like this happens again at any wedding I'm presiding at, I will certainly tell them just how different country people are!"

"Good on yer!" called Jock as she was given a standing ovation for her words. "We'll make a local out of you yet, Trisha!"

"You'll all have to stay the night," said Steven, "The road is boggy and the airstrip too. Don't worry, we've got plenty of room, so I suggest we go back to the house and get out of our wet gear!"

Jock organised a collection of clothing from the men's quarters – torn jeans, work shirts, dungarees and shorts while

Mary took armfuls of Steven's clothing from his closet to the lounge room. Eventually everyone was dressed in an odd assortment of dry clothing. The band played on, the guests danced. The atmosphere was exhilarating.

Steven wandered out to the veranda, savouring the scent of freshly washed countryside. Ali joined him. "This is lovely, Steven. Who would have thought that things would turn out so well?"

"Thanks to you, my friend," replied Steven. "Without your kindness, I would be searching still. I can never thank you enough. If you ever decide to leave the city and give the outback a try, there will always be a place for you here. I mean it. The men would enjoy having meals cooked by a real chef, or I could teach you to become a cattleman if you want to try something entirely different."

Ali laughed. "Thank you, Steven, maybe one day..."

"By the way, how did you come to be travelling with Trisha?" asked Steven.

“It was the strangest thing,” Ali said softly. “I went to a car rental place to hire a vehicle for the trip out here. I was asking about the route to Charleville and mentioned I was to attend a wedding on a station. The receptionist informed me that the lady who was waiting for her paperwork to be completed was also going to a wedding in the same district, and called her over. We **decided** to share the cost of the car hire. It was truly fortunate as I am sure I would have had difficulty following the route all the way to Mulga Lakes. I had no idea how vast this landscape would be.” Ali gestured to the expanse of stars. “It is truly beautiful although I can see that it could sometimes be a harsh and exacting life. Such challenges bring their own reward, nonetheless.”

“Ali, you are incredibly perceptive. Tell me, are you psychic also?”

“Maybe.” Ali smiled. “But right now, I could do with a coffee.”

Steven led the way to the kitchen where, in the comparative quiet, Trisha was deep in conversation with Rashida.

Steven made coffee for them all. “Thanks,” said Trisha taking a long sip. “Oh that is good. Where are you two going for your honeymoon?”

Steven replied, “We’re going to take the boys to Disneyland.”

Rashida continued, “We were all going to go on a camping trip too, but that may have to wait now the summer storm season has begun.”

Midnight passed and then one o’clock, two o’clock; just on three o’clock, energy began to flag. Mary produced an assortment of mattresses, sleeping bags and blankets — the lounge, dining room and veranda became makeshift dormitories.

Steven grinned as he made a sweeping gesture indicating the bedding. “Mulga Lakes offers guests unique style of sleeping accommodation,” he announced in the informative tone of a tour guide. This was greeted with cheers and laughter.

Steven and Rashida said goodnight to their guests. There was a chorus of sleepy “G’nites” from the floor as Steven turned out the main lights. Holding hands, Steven and Rashida stepped carefully in

the dim light. Unfortunately, Steven tripped over Nick, who was wrapped in a blanket on the floor.

“Where are you goin’, Dad?” he asked sleepily.

Steven replied, “Rashida and I are going to bed.”

Alex sat bolt upright, saying loudly, “But you don’t have to go to bed, Dad. There’s plenty of room for you and Rashida on the floor next to us!”

Steven looked at Rashida. “Er, well…” he began. Soft chuckles rose from those who had heard the exchange.

By this time, Nick was fully awake. “You two guys go,” he said. He snuggled back into his blanket and the last thing Steven and Rashida heard as they climbed the stairs was, “Alex, put a sock in it, will you? And remind me to tell you the facts of life sometime!”

EPILOGUE

Three years later…

It was early morning and a big day at Mulga Lakes for the West family. On the lounge room floor lay suitcases waiting to be filled; neat piles of clothing sat stacked on chairs; an assortment of the boys’ favourite things piled on the big table. Nick and Alex were off to boarding school in Brisbane.

Steven and Rashida sat at the table, ticking off lists. “Will you really need to take so many books, boys?” asked Steven. “You know there are libraries in the city and I’m sure you’ll find all of your favourite books will be there.”

“Yeah, Dad,” said Nick, “but we really want to take them with us. It will remind us of home.”

“And do you need so many pictures of Sarah?” Steven continued.

“Of course,” answered the boys in unison.

Rashida turned to Steven and said, “Well, let’s halve the number of books anyway. There is no need to take the printed copies of those you have on your Kindles. But it’s OK if you take all the photos of Sarah.” The boys looked relieved.

“We just love her to bits!” said Alex. There were gurgles of laughter from the little girl on the floor, playing horsies with her brothers.

Rashida gazed fondly at her two-year-old daughter. She was a beautiful sturdy little girl with a faultless complexion and a mass of black hair, like her mother’s. She had her father’s eyes. “She’s going to miss you boys,” sighed Rashida.

“Not as much as we will miss her,” responded Alex, giving Sarah Aseela a hug. She giggled and put her small arms around her brother.

Rashida rifled through the lists while the boys continued to play happily on the floor with their baby sister.

“They are such a contented lot,” observed Steven. Rashida agreed and they smiled fondly at each other. “Well, boys, it’s nearly time to go. You’d both better get ready,” said Steven.

“OK,” said the boys. They stood up. There was an immediate squeal of protest from Sarah.

“Me go,” she said, staggering on to her feet and waddling on short chubby legs after the boys.

“No, you can’t,” cried Nick, picking her up and handing her to Rashida. “Come on now, Lik-lik, stop that crying!”

“Me no Lik-lik, me Tharah,” she lisped and kicked her legs in the air.

Rashida gave the little girl a cuddle and a kiss, and then handed her to her father. They walked over to the windows and looked out. The weather looked perfect outside but it promised to be a scorcher as the day went on. The grass was green as a result of two good seasons in a row. Steven put his arms around Rashida and kissed her lightly, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes. But

they could not get away with it. Behind them, the boys were scoffing as usual. "Come on, guys," said Nick. "You've been married for years now and you still both act all gooey!"

"Yeah, what's wrong with you?" added Alex. "We're ready, Dad, and here comes Mary, Jilly and Jock to say goodbye and help us with our stuff." He picked up two suitcases. Of course this was just another reason for the little madam to struggle in her father's arms and wail, "Me go too! Me go!"

Nick said, "We'll only be gone for a few months, then you and Dad and Rashida will be visiting us in Brisbane, and then you'll see Nana and Pops too."

She brightened a little bit and sniffed. "You an' Alex be there too?" she asked. Her lip dropped a bit but she did manage a small smile.

"Of course, poppet," said Steven.

Sarah looked at him and admonished, "Me no poppet. Me Tharah," and with her little foot, she kicked Steven, catching him in the chest.

"Ouch! OK." Steven laughed, holding her out away from him, "I get the message."

Rashida looked at him saying, "She's getting so spoiled by the boys, I hope she won't be ruined by them."

Steven replied, "You know the boys. They won't let her go beyond the limit, even if it means a few tears now and then."

A relieved look passed over Rashida's face. "The boys are just wonderful with her, truly she could not have better brothers!"

Soon the plane was loaded and the boys made their farewells to everyone. One of Steven's men was piloting the plane to Brisbane, there they would be met by Nana and Pops, their Afghan great-grandparents, who would drive them to their boarding school. The Cessna took off, circled once and everyone on the ground waved as it disappeared in the distance.

Surprisingly Sarah Aseela did not overly complain. She went Rashida, who picked her up and patted her back gently. With a few sniffles, she was soon sound asleep on Rashida's shoulder. After Rashida lay the sleeping toddler on her bed, she joined Steven in a cup of tea.

"Well, I guess I'd better go back to work," he said. "We are going to be pretty busy for the next few months."

Rashida looked pensive. "I'll miss the boys so much." Steven put his arm around her saying, "Me too. We've had a wonderful three years, haven't we?"

"The best," returned Rashida. "I've never been happier in my life. I'm just so glad the boys needed a governess when I needed a job!"

Steven held her to him, kissed her tenderly then said, with a chuckle, "Well, darling, at least we'll be able to kiss now for a few months without the two monsters catching us all the time; and we won't have to put up with their clever remarks!"

They laughed together and as Steven walked out the door, Rashida patted her tummy a couple of times and smiled. She decided she would surprise Steven that night with some very exciting news. By the end of the year, Sarah Aseela would no longer be the baby of the family.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a lifetime of experiences in various parts of Australia, New Guinea, Afghanistan, Russia, Germany, Pacific Islands, and China, Jocelyn Price now lives in a small town in the outback of Australia.

At 75 years of age she was determined to try her hand at writing, but first she had to learn to use a computer – a challenge that ranked right up there with coping with an Egyptian sandstorm. Jocelyn writes across varied genres- stories for children, romantic stories set in outback Australia, and non-fiction.

More of Jocelyn's stories in ebook format can be found on smashwords.com; and print copies are available by emailing books@mulgatraining.com.au

More print books by Jocelyn Price and other Outback Australian writers may be obtained by visiting

www.charlevillequeensland.com and following the bookshop link.