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ONLY A STRANGER



August 1872, Buninyong, Australia

A knock sounded on the door, shattering Jayne's daydream. She stopped scrubbing a moment to stretch her back. "Come in." She wiped soapy hands across her apron, then pushed at the wisps of damp brown hair that strayed around her forehead.

Jed stepped through the door and shut it firmly behind him. With big strides he moved to the fire and held out his work-roughened hands. "I just ran into a man outside who's looking for work."

Jayne's head jerked up in surprise as she studied her father's trusted friend. What was a man doing at their place in search of a job? Surely Jed didn't think they should hire him. At the same time, compassion for the stranger welled up inside of her. "Does he have a family? A home? Where does he come from?"

"Reckon he's about as homeless as a man just off the ship

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from Ireland would be." Jed grinned and shook his head. "He's keen. I know that much. Said he was willing to do just about anything. Only wants a low wage. I told him he'd have to talk to you."

Jayne shook the water off her hands and walked over to the door, hoping to catch a glimpse of the stranger. She scanned the open ground around their two-room house but spotted no one. Unwilling to give up, she stared at the stand of gum trees between the house and stable. Her gaze bored into the trunks as if by looking hard enough she would be able to see through them.

A gust of cold wind hit her in the face, making her eyes close and forcing her to retreat. Jayne turned back to Jed. "I wish Daddy—" Biting her lip, she paused and changed the subject. "So the man is from Ireland." The word rolled off her tongue, sending memories, some foggy and others more distinct, flooding through her mind.

She had been just seven years old when she left Ireland on a ship destined for Australia. She could well recall packing up their few belongings, ready to stow them on board. Tucked among the items was a small plank of wood. "To help pass the time," Daddy had said, his eyes twinkling.

For days on end, it had sat there, just a boring plank. Jayne amused herself trying to work out what Daddy would turn it into, but she struggled to see past the plain surface to what it could become. Finally she asked Mam about it.

"Daddy will turn it into something beautiful." Mam smiled at her little daughter. "Wait patiently like a good lass, and you will see soon enough."

As the days grew long and the voyage hard to bear, Daddy picked up the wood and began to carve. Jayne loved to listen to the sound of his knife and watch his hands skilfully move this way and that. It reminded her of home, and the hours she'd

lain awake listening to the scrape of Daddy's carpenter tools far into the night.

When she tried to peek over his shoulder at the carving, Daddy shooed her away and said, "It's a surprise. You must not look now. Wait and see. When we get to Australia, then I will show you."

True to his word, one day shortly after they docked at Port Phillip, Daddy called Jayne and her two younger sisters. They found him standing over a crate near the side of the ship, Mam proudly by his side. Something extended from the top of the crate, covered by a piece of cloth Mam had brought from Ireland.

At first, Jayne just stared at the fabric, not knowing what lay beneath it. Then realisation dawned, and she bounced up and down with excitement.

"God has graciously brought us safely to this new land," Daddy said. "Our voyage is over, but our adventure is just beginning. If God so blesses us, one day we will have a farm of our own. This plaque will remind us of our long voyage and God's goodness to us. It will stand on our farm as a reminder to the generations to come. We are all responsible to tell them the story of God's faithfulness." He looked at his two oldest daughters in turn and waited for them to nod. With a flourish, he lifted the cloth. Then with power and excitement radiating through his face and voice, he proclaimed the name carved into the plaque: "Auchenblae—our new home."

While Olivia and Yvonne pressed close to her sides, Jayne traced the word with her finger. How beautiful the plaque was with its elegant lettering and the happy scene that flowed across it. She wondered if their new home would be just as cosy as the hut her father had carved. Would it have trees and birds like the ones that surrounded the etched home? How very glad she felt that their voyage was over, and adventures lay ahead.

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Jed spoke, breaking Jayne's reverie. "There's all those trees that still need clearing to meet the land-selection requirements. Reckon it's more than I can get done on my own in a hurry. I could do with a man on the other end of the saw."

Jayne nodded, pondering his words. Perhaps this man was the answer to her prayers. "Do you think he is of the honest and hard-working type?"

"Yep, if looks are anything to go by." Jed ran a hand over his greying beard. "The farm's yours. You need to meet him and decide for yourself."

It took a moment for Jayne to nod in agreement. She felt certain of Jed's judgment, but as he said, the farm belonged to her and her sisters. As the oldest, the responsibility rested on her shoulders. But at eighteen, how could she possibly make all the right decisions? If they lost the farm, it would be her fault.

"The man's waiting at the stable to see you. If you think he's decent-like and you can come to some agreement, he can stay in my hut. Reckon there's room enough for two."

As Jed left to go about his work, Jayne turned to the dish she'd been scrubbing, then paused. It would have to wait. As she untied her apron, she thought of what it would mean for them to have more help around the place. For one thing, she might be able to stay on top of the dishes. She sighed. Things always needed doing faster than she and her sisters could manage. In the past they'd been able to keep up with the daily tasks, but that was before— Jayne shook her head and let the thought drift away.

Instead, she let her mind wander to the man who awaited her. What would he say when he realised his potential employer was a young woman? Would he scorn her attempts to meet the land board requirements? What if she didn't ask the right questions? As doubts continued to creep into her mind, the sound

of heavy footsteps approaching the door made her heartbeat quicken. Could it be that the man had come looking for her? Jayne's body tensed as a mixture of anticipation and fear filled her. What would she say to him?

"Jayne?"

Her body sagged with relief at the sound of Jed's voice. She stepped forward and pulled at the door. As it opened, cold wind blasted through the doorway, cutting through her sturdy dress. Jayne shivered, glad for the distraction.

Hands in his pockets as he huddled against the wind, Jed stood before her. "You'll do just fine out there. It's in your blood." His already wrinkled face creased further as he flashed her an encouraging smile. "Reids never give up easily."

Jayne exhaled, trying to release some of the nervous tension that filled her body. "Thank you"—she tried again to make herself relax—"if only I could remember." For the hundredth time, she noted God's provision in her father asking Jed to live with them after he'd been laid off from his job as a station hand.

She returned inside just long enough to grab her woollen cloak from the bedroom. As she stepped into the cold air, she slipped it around her shoulders. Already Jed was nowhere in sight. While trying to avoid the puddles, she patted her hair as she walked, but it rebelled against her touch like a stubborn child. As soon as she managed to get one piece back in place, another strand sprang out in defiance. She let her hand fall to her side. How could she face this man and do the many other things required of her when she couldn't even manage her own hair?

The sharp smell of wet eucalyptus trees stung her nostrils. As Jayne inhaled, filling her lungs with the scented morning air, she wondered when her sisters would return from checking on the sheep. She could picture Olivia and Yvonne strolling

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along, arm in arm, while Yvonne chattered non-stop about the wildlife around them. Despite her carefree nature, fourteen-year-old Yvonne was fast growing up. Circumstances had a way of making one's outlook change, and the events of the last months had matured both of her sisters from girls into young women. Seeing the change both pleased and saddened her. What kind of future lay ahead for them? The thoughts slipped from her mind as she reached the edge of the trees and glimpsed the stable.

Lifting her eyes to the sky, she prayed for courage before looking back at the familiar building. In the short time they'd been in Buninyong, the stable had grown to be her place of refuge in the winter months. Some of her fondest memories were of helping to clean harnesses and saddles inside those walls with Daddy. She could nearly smell the leather now, all fresh and clean.

Jayne took a step out into the open and glanced at the stable again, realising that once more no one was in sight. Was the man supposed to be waiting inside or outside? Surely in this weather, inside the stable would be more sensible. Making no effort to hurry, she headed for the door. Just as her fingers closed on its handle, she withdrew them and clutched her cloak.

You're a Reid. You can't give up. You must not give in. Without allowing herself more time to worry, Jayne pulled open the door. One hand flew to her heart as she spotted the stranger. Before she realised what was happening, a cry leapt from her mouth.

The tall, dark-haired man spun around. "Morning, miss." He nodded in her direction, a questioning expression crossing his face as he studied her.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to gain her composure as dozens of emotions rushed through her mind. Forcing herself to speak, she said in a trembling voice, "I'm Jayne. Jayne

Reid.” A shuddering breath sent a tremor through her body. “Owner of Auchenblae.” She grimaced. Even to her, the shocked cry and ragged gasp had sounded strange. Not to mention how ridiculous it sounded that she, a young woman, was the owner of this farm. Would he think her incapable?

After another moment’s silence, the stranger answered her introduction with an easy smile. “Name’s Cass.”

His words, and the manner in which he spoke them, made Jayne relax slightly. In a more controlled voice, she asked, “Are you experienced with the cross-cut saw?”

“No, miss. I’m afraid not. But I’m a quick learner, willing to give almost anything a shot.” His mouth spread in a grin as he relaxed against a beam.

Jayne’s shoulders loosened. Jed was right. Cass did seem eager for a job. She studied the ground, unable to meet Cass’s gaze. “I see. Well . . .” Something niggled in her mind. What was it? She forced herself to look into the man’s face. His eyes searched hers. Struggling not to look away, Jayne tried to push aside her jitters. “What was it that brought you to Australia?” she said, asking the first question that came to her mind.

An uneasy look crossed the man’s face but vanished almost as soon as Jayne noticed it. When he made no move to reply, she filled in the gap for him. “Tales of derring-do and fortune for the taking, perhaps?” Her prompting only caused further awkwardness as he shifted from one foot to the other. Jayne wanted to clutch her head in her hands. One moment he oozed confidence, and the next he seemed uneasy. Her brain was working overtime in its efforts to assess his character.

Finally he said, “Personal matter, miss.” He paused and ran a hand over his head. “But I assure you it wasn’t gold that brought me to this country.”

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When he said nothing more, Jayne gave a slow nod. A moment ago, he had seemed so friendly and relaxed, but now? Each word had been carefully weighed. Jayne eyed him. Perhaps he was a private man and didn't like telling much about himself to strangers. She decided to let it pass, though she questioned her wisdom.

Jayne drew in a deep breath of resolve. "If you will apply yourself and are willing to put in a full day of labour, it seems that you can be of use to us. My father selected this piece of crown land in the hope of securing a good future. But the land board dictates that within three years the entire property be fenced, a tenth of the land cultivated, and substantial other improvements made. We have a lot of land that still needs clearing before we can plough and plant it. If we fail to meet any of these requirements, we'll lose everything and be left with no home." Jayne stopped, fearing she might have said too much about their personal situation. Trying to act confident, she went on. "Your job, sir, will be to help us reach these goals."

Grinning, Cass nodded. "I've never been afraid of hard work."

"If that's the case, you'll do well," Jayne said and named a low wage. It was not much, she knew, but it did include a room and meals. Besides, it was all they could afford. If the man wasn't happy, then he would just have to find work elsewhere. As for themselves, if he refused, they would be no worse off than they already were.

Far from looking displeased, Cass sported a satisfied look. Jayne couldn't help but wonder if he looked too satisfied. Surely he could've done better elsewhere. Jayne knew it was partly sympathy that drove her decision. Perhaps she had been unwise. Inwardly she shrugged. If hiring him meant being able to keep her parents' land selection, it would be worth the risk. Locking

eyes with him, she said, “You’ll be staying out back with Jed. His hut is a few minutes’ walk through the trees”—she pointed to a spot opposite the door she had entered—“in that direction.”

Cass nodded. “I’m much obliged.”

Before either of them were able to make further comment, Jed entered through the large stock door behind Cass. “How’s it going in here?” he asked, looking at Jayne.

She gave him a small smile. “I believe you’ve got yourself a sawing partner.”

Jed nodded his approval. Then he turned to Cass and slapped him on the back. “Good on you, mate.” He gave Cass a firm handshake.

With the men’s attention elsewhere for a moment, Jayne took the opportunity to study their new employee. He was a well-built and strong looking man—just right for the hard work that would be required of him. From his appearance, she guessed he must be only a bit younger than her father, about forty perhaps. Her gaze took in his dark wavy hair. Seeing it brought back her earlier feelings, and suddenly, all she wanted was to be away from the men. Hurriedly, she excused herself and walked outside with a throbbing heart.

All around her the sounds of the bush filled the air, but Jayne paid them little mind. Mechanically, she placed one foot in front of the other, focusing only on putting distance between herself and the stable.

Feeling tears threatening, Jayne began to hurry. She stumbled a few times over fallen branches, but still she didn’t stop. She needed to be where no one would see her crying. Only once she reached a thick cluster of gums did she allow herself to rest.

Panting, Jayne stood there a moment. At first she wiped away the tears that splashed down her cheeks, mingling with the mud

and leaves at her feet, but it was no use. She leaned her forehead against the trunk of a tree and let her emotions tumble out like waterfalls. Sob after sob wrenched her body with scarcely time to catch her breath between each one.

When they finally subsided, Jayne had no idea how much time had elapsed. Exhausted, she sank down to the leaf-strewn ground beneath the tree. Her back sagged against the support of its trunk, while the cold seeped into her body.

Jayne tilted her head back and looked up. To her aching heart, the trees seemed to offer a sense of strength in their branches that stretched far above her head. *Strength*. Jayne lingered over the word, tossing it about in her mind. She felt that all her weaknesses and doubts were swirling about, crowding in on her. Yes, if ever she, Jayne Elizabeth Reid, needed strength, it was now. She needed strength to not only face whatever the future held, but also the scars that the past had left on her.

The five months since she'd knelt by her parents' coffins seemed like five days and yet somehow like five years all at the same time. The sorrow was still fresh and new, yet it felt like ages since she'd seen her parents.

At any moment she half expected to hear Daddy whistling a tune on his way back to the house or Mam breaking into song, singing one of the hymns that had never been far from her lips. Gail. That was what Daddy had called Mam— like the songbird, the nightingale.

When she had entered the stable to meet Cass, she thought it was her tall, strong, dark-haired Daddy standing there, waiting to greet her. In his place though, she found a stranger, only a stranger.

Another wave of emotions burst forth, and Jayne rocked forward on her knees. "Oh! Daddy, Mammy, why, why did you

leave me? The burden is too much to bear.” Her words ended in another sob.

Then as if Mam was sitting right there with her, Jayne recalled her loving voice. *Of course you cannot bear this burden, Jayne. It is far too great, far too heavy a burden to bear alone. Give your burden to Jesus, my lass. Let Him bear it for you.* Jayne murmured the words silently to herself, then buried her face in her hands.

On that sorrowful night, she never dreamed how much she would need to recall Mam’s soft words of wisdom. How many times had she played them through her mind over the past five months? Sometimes when she lay in bed at night, Jayne wondered if somehow Mam had been aware that the fever would claim her life only a few weeks after it claimed Daddy’s. How Mam’s death had shocked her. Always, Mam seemed so strong, able to cope with anything. And Daddy—Jayne shook her head as salty tears flowed down her cheeks and onto her lap.

In her anguish, Jayne spoke aloud. “Jesus, Mam was right.” She rocked back and forth, her head in her hands. “I can’t bear this alone.” She sobbed. “Please Lord, give me wisdom. Show me if I’m doing the right thing.”

As Jayne spoke, her thoughts came in a rush. Should she go back to Ireland? Surely the relatives she now knew only by name would take them in or at least give them a fresh start. But as quickly as the thoughts had come, the reply shot back quicker and with such force that it startled her. No! Dad and Mam worked so hard to create a new life here. So much energy and life had been poured into the dream of this farm. Her parents had grown to love the Australian bush and the wildness of the country. No, she must not throw it all away. She could not, and she would not. This was home now.

Jayne leaned back against the tree trunk and gazed up

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between the branches to the grey sky above. It reminded her of the storm-tossed sea that carried her family between the continents. How quickly eleven years had passed since the voyage, until her homeland remained a blur of childish memories. But there was one encounter on the day they'd embarked from Ireland that was forever ingrained in her mind and heart.

As they prepared to set sail for Australia, she'd somehow lost hold of her mother's hand amid the bustling crowds at the dock. Terrified, seven-year-old Jayne called out for her mother, trying to see through the legs and skirts around her.

After long minutes of searching and crying, Jayne caught a glimpse of the glistening sea. It called her closer and closer. When she spied the flapping sails and tall masts of a ship as it bobbed up and down on the waves, she began to picture herself as a sailor's wife, adventuring the far seas and finding hidden treasures. As her imagination drifted, so did her little legs, until she had wandered to the edge of the wharf and could look down into the depths of the ocean. Enthralled by the soothing sounds of the waves as they crashed against the wooden pillars, she leaned against a low railing and started to grow sleepy. Suddenly, her peaceful dreaming was shattered by a growl from behind her. Jerking around, she spotted the largest dog she'd ever seen—its black head almost level with her own. Teeth bared, the mongrel charged, knocking Jayne onto her back by the edge of the wharf.

Whimpering, Jayne pressed herself against the planks as the dog's panting echoed in her ears, drowning out every other noise. Its teeth loomed closer and closer. Terror rendered her limbs powerless. Even if she survived those teeth, what if the dog knocked her into the dark sea below? What lurked in the water's depths?

Jayne's entire body felt frozen. Just as she was preparing to

feel the sharpness of teeth in her flesh, a larger shadow loomed above the dog. It was her daddy. Towering above the dog, he looked fiercer and taller than a warrior. With his strong carpenter's hands, he swung her to his chest.

Relief made Jayne's body limp as she listened to the beating of her father's heart. She was safe. She could rest fully in her father's love and his ability to protect her from anything that would harm her. No matter what lay ahead here or in the new land that awaited them, she had no reason for fear.

Jayne's thoughts drifted from the faraway scene back to her present trials. What about Olivia and Yvonne? Was she being unfair to them? How could she raise and protect her sisters all by herself? Would her decision to stay at Auchenblae put them through unnecessary hardship and danger? The silence that followed her questions seemed to make them reverberate in the bushland around her.

Back to Jayne's mind rushed the words of a middle-aged woman from a few weeks ago. "You'll only cause your sisters more grief and hardship with your foolish notions. A girl, a young girl, running a farm. Hmph!" Mrs. Sterling's eyes had flashed. "What would your poor parents think? They'd roll in their graves if they knew what you were up to. I say you would do well to listen to your elders, Jayne Reid."

Once again Jayne wished she had never become acquainted with the meddling woman her mother had met at a charity afternoon tea. She had tried to explain to Mrs. Sterling on several occasions that it was not as if she were running the farm all by herself. Jed was always ready to help and offer much-needed advice. Besides, she thought her parents would whole-heartedly approve, and that she would bring them honour, not shame, by keeping their hopes and dreams alive.

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As for Mrs. Sterling's accusation of only a young girl running a farm—Jayne clenched her teeth. She was no longer a girl but a woman. Yet this time Mrs. Sterling's words had cut deep, touching on the very thing that worried Jayne most—her sisters.

A flock of cockatoos flew across the sky, piercing her thoughts with their harsh cries. Jayne breathed in a lungful of the crisp winter air, then exhaled. Their cries seemed to represent all the cries of her heart. What if Mrs. Sterling had been right? Was she being selfish? The thought filled Jayne with horror.

As if in answer to her questions, a snatch of music drifted to Jayne on the breeze. It came to her faintly at first, then grew stronger until Jayne recognised the singer's voice. It was Yvonne. Her two sisters must be walking nearby. She pressed herself closer to the tree trunk, hoping she wouldn't be discovered in the state she was in.

She squeezed her eyes shut and focused on the words, trying to figure out what the song was. After a moment, Jayne realised that the tune was familiar, but she didn't recognise the words. Her youngest sister seemed to be making them up as she went. Only one phrase held importance to Jayne. It seemed to be crying out to her.

God is our source of joy even 'midst the darkest of times.