

## CHAPTER ONE

*'Earth is here so kind, that just tickle her with a hoe and she  
laughs with a harvest'.*

*Douglas Jerrod, 'A Land of Plenty'*

A new day climbed the eastern sky as the first fingers of sunlight fell across the land and washed the scrub in deep rusty hues. The old wagon creaked and rattled softly as it inched along, the ironclad wheels describing erratic double lines in the frost-covered grass on the track that receded away in the gloom. A large grey Clydesdale horse, advanced in years and clearly the worse for wear, rocked from side to side as it pressed through the emerging dawn with its burden. The metallic rattle of the harness chains seemed out of place on this cold winter's morning in 1948, mingling as it did with the songs of the waking birds in the trees.

The wagon bumped slowly over the rough track that followed the passage of least resistance through the thick scrub, meandering like a watercourse among the trees. Long morning shadows slid across the back of the old bally horse as it struggled along with the laden vehicle, its great hoofs thudding on the moist earth with a monotonous rhythm. The ancient animal leaned tiredly into the traces, snorting loudly in frequent protests and blowing clouds of steam from its greying

nostrils. Tall gum trees crowded both sides of the lane like a guard of honour, their branches sometimes meeting overhead, creating a natural arch.

Four raw-boned country children aged from about five to eleven years dozed quietly in the back of the wagon, their sleepy eyelids fluttering against the first light of day. A smaller child of about ten months slept soundly in the arms of a thin, pale woman who sat on the front seat of the wagon. She shared the seat with a solidly built man who guided the old horse down the lane with practised ease. His pale green eyes peered from below a battered old felt hat that hung low over his deeply tanned face, his gaze dreamily searching the bush that drifted slowly past. A mob of kangaroos peered back at him from a little clearing; heads high and backs ramrod straight, their ears erect until the wagon creaked out of sight.

Suddenly the lane dipped sharply, crossed over a gully beside a derelict wooden bridge and emerged on the other side in a broad clearing. It was full daylight in the clearing, the brightness hard in the eyes of the travellers as they emerged unexpectedly from the gloom of the thick scrub. The children stirred, looking around eagerly as they shook off the lethargy of sleep. The old horse lifted its head and blinked in surprise at the changed terrain, its great chest heaving and its muscles trembling with the effort of crossing the gully as the man drew back firmly on the reins.

‘Well’, the man said proudly, pointing with the handle of his whip and removing his battered old hat to release a mop of unruly black hair. ‘There she is.’ A smile danced on his thin brown face, as he looked expectantly at the children, keen to see their reaction to the scene before them. He grinned at the fair-skinned and pretty woman who sat beside him on the front seat of the wagon. She returned his smile and squeezed his

hand, her pale blue eyes alive with pleasure. She did not speak but her bright face revealed her happiness.

The eager offspring crowded forward in the wagon, squealing excitedly as they pushed and shoved to follow the man's direction. Together they stared at the outline of the small cottage that was almost obscured by the thick morning mist. A ghost of a house in a swirl of grey fog, it sat peacefully on the far side of the clearing with the early morning sun shimmering on the rust mottled surface of the corrugated iron roof. The blanket of fog rolled back as they stared, unveiling their new home and burning a collective image into their young minds that would endure forever.

Their excitement overcame their awe as the lifting fog afforded them a clear view of the old house. It was quaint and small, but it seemed large, the stocky man reflected, after the tent on the public reserve where they had been living for several months. His mind wandered back to the reserve as he watched his children take in their surroundings from the wagon. They had not been alone in their depravation; a number of families were reduced to living in makeshift humpies or tents on public reserves, enduring a legacy of hardship left over from the war and the depression.

The reserve was a few miles out of the town and the camp offered very basic amenities to the sorry collection of people who had been thrown together by poverty, or displaced from their homelands by the ravages of war. There were a few communal outbuildings, some foul smelling pit toilets, and a handful of iron tanks that supplied drinking water to the small community, provided the local council remembered to refill the tanks. They often forgot and the community was forced to draw brackish, stagnant water from the nearby creek in order to survive.

The people living on the reserve were very poor, earthy in disposition and drawn from diverse cultures, but the community was close and the friendships formed were deep and enduring. These modern-day squatters were the ‘salt of the earth’ some said, eager as they were to put the war behind them and to build new lives for their families. A number of the men had actually fought in the war, many of the women had also served in some direct capacity, and all were touched by it in some way. The primitive conditions of the camp were a small price to pay for those who for years had longed for peace and a new beginning.

The Great Depression and the years up until the end of The Second World War had brought severe hardship to many, including this family it seemed. Norm Blinco smiled quietly to himself as he reflected on the past few years of poverty and hardship. He now had a small farm and a degree of independence and the future looked much brighter. He eased the old horse eagerly towards the cottage, cutting it gently with the whip as if these next few yards would take him across an invisible threshold and away from the bitterness of the past.

The children squealed with delight as they approached the house, excitedly pointing out items of interest as great shafts of sunlight fell over the farm. They romped about in the back of the wagon until it rocked precariously, drawing a word of caution from the man. It was cold as he drew the tired horse to a grateful halt in front of the house, and little white clouds of steam rose from every mouth.

They had left Millmerran in pitch darkness, the children wailing against the bitter cold and crying for the warm beds they had given up with the tearful regret of a baby leaving the womb. But Norm had prevailed and they slipped quietly out of town before the first hint of dawn lit the eastern sky. The week with Norm’s mother in Millmerran had excited and spoiled the

children and they were reluctant to leave. They had enjoyed living in a real house, sleeping in beds with crisp clean sheets and eating regular and appetising meals.

His wife, Grace, had enjoyed the experience somewhat less. She felt overpowered and resented by her mother-in-law; the older woman's disapproval seemed to ooze like venom in her words and acid in her eyes, though Norm said she imagined it all. But she longed to move to the farm permanently, to escape to the freedom of the bush where she could raise her children as she saw fit, and to smoke and swear without censure if she felt the need. But as they had to progressively move their belongings from the reserve to the farm in the small wagon, a week with in-laws was the only sensible alternative. Reluctantly she agreed to the arrangement, as long as it was only for one week.

The fifteen-mile journey in the wagon took several hours and Norm paced the old horse to arrive at just the right moment. He wanted his family to have their first sight of the farm in the early morning so they could share the experience he had enjoyed so often. Now he looked at their bright faces and smiled in quiet satisfaction. He had spent the last week carting numerous wagon-loads of the family's meagre belongings to the farm, usually arriving just on dawn to savour that first glimpse of the cottage through the fog.

There was a special magic about the place as the sun kissed the tops of the trees and reflected from the iron roof of the house. The world appeared to linger uncertainly between night and day for a short time and Norm felt disconnected from his life as he savoured the blessed interlude – a short span of truce from trouble. He had frequently passed the farm as he worked on various labouring jobs in the area over the years, and slowly he had begun to own the smallholding in his dreams and in his heart. Now, at last, the dream was a reality.

A white frost covered the ground and a soft cobweb of mist hung in the gum trees along the creek that ran through the property. Ancient gums stood along the banks with their toes in the water, with crowns of pale leaves suspended on off-white torsos and long branches outstretched like a priest blessing the land. Knotty mops of mistletoe hung down to the surface of the stream like locks of hair, green, red and yellow strands that bobbed little ripples that spun relentlessly towards the banks. Hundreds of birds greeted their arrival with the most beautiful songs the children had ever heard and they were soon trying to imitate them, their childish voices raised in giggling magpie warbles. Showers of white cockatoos screeched in outrage as they swept away across the morning sky with wings beating the cold air, their flitting shadows racing across the landscape in a dark censure against these human invaders who had appeared in their world.

After the town, everything out here in the bush appeared so peaceful and fresh. Norm sat quietly in the wagon with his arm around his wife's shoulders, his eyes roaming about the farm as he eagerly drank in its every detail. The garden was an overgrown mess, choked with weeds as nature fought to recover its own, and some of the rooms in the quaint old house had been filled to the rafters with wooden packing cases. The cases had probably been used by the previous owners to pack the vegetables they had grown in the large garden that was still in evidence, despite the weeds. Norm had intended to remove the cases before the family arrived, but time had escaped him. Now he decided to put the older offspring to work on the task instead.

He climbed down stiffly from the wagon, rubbing his hands together briskly against the cold before helping his wife and children to the ground.

‘Righto,’ he said. ‘Let’s get to work! You big kids get those boxes out of the house and stack them beside the shed.’ He pointed to a broken down shed built from rough iron-bark slabs that propped up a peaked roof of rusty flat-iron, a pine door on leather hinges covered the entrance.

‘Mum can sit on the tailboard and nurse the baby until we get the house clear, then we’ll light the stove and cook up a feed.’

As he worked, Norm wondered how long the house had been vacant because he could never remember seeing any sign of life on the farm over the years, and there was an air of neglect about the place. Constructed of cypress pine weatherboards, the house was without lining or ceiling, the bare corrugated iron of the roof sat nakedly on the stark ribs of the rafters, and the internal walls showed the skeleton of the building. Like many bush homes, the house had never seen paint, and it would probably stay that way for many more years.

The cypress pine walls were blackened by the weather and brown rust bled from around the nails to stain the iron roof and spread like spidery wounds down the weatherboards. Two wooden shutter style windows at the side of the house were closed, like sleeping eyelids. It was almost as if the house had been waiting for someone to come along and wake it from a long sleep. Norm proudly opened the windows on their push out poles and the house seemed to come to life and to say ‘welcome’ as the sunlight probed through the cobwebs into the dark interior. He could hear birds walking about on the roof, their feet clattering and squeaking on the corrugated iron.

He stood framed in the window for a moment and winked through the opening at his wife as she sat on the tailboard of the wagon, struggling to control the excited child in her arms.

‘Hurry up you,’ she said, smiling, ‘I can’t hold this little shit much longer.’

Norm grinned and disappeared briefly into the darkness of the house before emerging with a pile of wooden boxes that he manhandled awkwardly into the yard and stacked roughly against the old slab-walled shed. Grace gazed sleepily around the farm and took in the few overgrown fruit trees that were scattered about the place. A bush lemon leaned tiredly against the small shed, as if the two were providing silent mutual support to one another. An apricot tree grew near the back door of the house and a line of peach trees marched majestically up the driveway from the front gate. The gate hung open, leaning rather dejectedly on its sagging hinges.

A pretty little trellis formed an archway from a small gate near the shed up to the front of the house, and a pale green grapevine, starved of water, covered the trellis. An old rusted-out water tank sat uncertainly on top of an elevated stand, presumably at one time designed to supply water pressure to the house. The stand leaned slightly towards the creek as it rose on stout wooden poles from the overgrown lawn. Some curious kookaburras sat on top of the tank with their heads tilted to one side as they observed the movements of the family below. Apparently amused by the new presence, they exploded in spontaneous laughter. Delighted, the children laughed along, their childish giggles joining the birds in their mirth.

‘Smart arses,’ Norm yelled, shaking his fist at the birds and failing to see the joke. ‘I’ll show you in time, we’ll see who laughs last in this story.’

While Norm opened the doors and windows of the house, the older children moved the remainder of the packing cases outside. The youngest child, a boy aged about ten months, waited impatiently in his mother’s arms, apparently eager to go inside and explore the house with the rest of the children. Norm exchanged frequent happy glances with his wife as he worked, testing her reaction to the new surroundings and beaming with pleasure as he took in her obvious acceptance.

They had endured some tough times during the dark years that had somehow been lost to the war, and for them the hardship had continued long after the war. Not for them the joyous homecomings of the conquering heroes, or the soldier’s land grants and the indulgence of an adoring population. Norm had not served in the forces, but he did not begrudge the returning servicemen their accolades, God knew they had suffered enough. Nor did he regret his own decision not to serve directly, but he often felt driven into the background and overshadowed by the hype over the war, and strangely guilty over his seemingly selfish little dreams.

And while he had not donned a uniform, it was impossible to escape the impact of the conflict. The world had gone mad, he always thought, because everyone became so singularly focussed on the war that nothing else seemed worthy of attention. One was either fighting in the war, or working on some endeavour that had no other purpose than to fuel the military monster that consumed everything in its path.

Norm’s plan to own a little farm and sideline himself from this madness was something he could never openly discuss

with anyone, because he feared the recriminations of ‘selfish’ and ‘unpatriotic’ that would erupt from every quarter. But now he felt free to contemplate a new life on his own little farm, and independence from the relentless heartbreaking search for work and purpose that had plagued his past.

They had scrimped and saved through the war years and beyond to buy the small farm, supported by Norm’s parents who had enjoyed some modest success in the saw milling business. His parents reasoned that the responsibility of developing the property would be good for him, and that it would force him hard up against his shortcomings and make him grow. He *had* been a bit wild during the war years he realised. Unruly, headstrong and fiercely independent, he often threw in a precious job on a whim, and he knew his parents did not regard the small fair woman as the best catch for their son.

She came from poverty-stricken stock and appeared too earthy for their taste, and while they knew they were not wealthy and cultured themselves, they still had hopes that he would marry into some promise of a better future. They were disappointed too when the newly weds bred like rabbits from the beginning, apparently exercising little caution in their procreation as they spawned children into a life of certain poverty and hardship.

‘Tie a knot in the bloody thing for God’s sake,’ his father implored after each pregnancy announcement, but the breeding went on regardless. Norm smiled at his wife as he remembered and a surge of desire for her seized him as he watched her sitting quietly on the tailboard of the wagon, looking beautiful in the dawn light he thought.

They were both aged only in their late twenties and already they had five kids. One, a girl they called Evyonne, had been burned to death in the open fire at the reserve, reinforcing the grandparent's view that they were having too many children too soon. The memory of the small screaming child engulfed in flames burdened the young woman with a tremendous guilt that she would carry to her grave. It was an accident of course, though some said it was bound to happen given the living conditions at the time.

But no amount of reassurance from all those around her could appease the regret that she felt. Her guilt gnawed at her heart with a constant dull ache that seemed to give her a greater focus on the other children, as if her loss had been a warning to be a better mother in the future. Breeding and mothering became her chosen lot in life, and she knew she would defend her brood to the death if necessary, like a mother hen with a clutch of chicks at her back and under her wings, cornered in the pen by a fox.

But nothing could bring back the child who fell into the open fire. No amount of guilt and tears could undo the horrible burns that covered the tiny body. No power could clear her mind of the smell of burning flesh and clothing, and the hopeless screams of pain that followed her down the years. The child suffered a slow and painful death, lingering for several weeks before she finally succumbed to her burns and died. The woman cushioned her grief somehow by bearing more children, as if to make up for the loss through sheer volume. The babies came almost every year until now she had five – and only God knew how many she would have by the end.

The old farm rested in a sweeping bend of the Grass Tree Creek, a stream that was just a lazy string of waterholes under the towering gums at the moment. Later they would learn that

it could become a raging torrent when flooded, or a procession of stinking stagnant ponds in a drought. The creek rose near the tiny village of Leyburn then meandered through flat, rich black soil farmland until it joined the Condamine River on the main Toowoomba to Millmerran road near the small town of Brookstead.

At about fifteen acres, the farm was small for the area because most properties ran to six or seven hundred acres at least. Even these larger farms had originally been part of Yandilla Station, a huge holding that once covered a great expanse of Southeast Queensland along the Condamine River. The soil on this little farm was rich and black and perfect for growing vegetables, provided there was water for irrigation.

One of the older locals told Norm that the farm, known as Eastville Yandilla, had once been a shepherd's outpost. In the early days an ancient Chinese shepherd had occupied it for many years. The old shepherd had asked the station owners to set up the area around the creek for growing fresh vegetables, a scarcity in those days. They agreed and laid an area of about one-acre with underground irrigation pipes, fed by a wind pump from a deep waterhole in the creek.

The wind pump would have been functional but unreliable and, long before the new owners arrived; a four-inch pump that required some form of engine power had replaced it. Norm always referred to the deep water hole in almost hushed and reverent tones as the 'pump hole'. He often boasted to all who would listen that it had never gone dry, even in the 'big drought of thirty-two'.

The pump fed the water from the creek through an underground pipe system into above ground spray lines. The spray lines rested on wooden props and could be rotated,

allowing a wide area to be irrigated by each one. The above ground pipes were usually removed when the land had to be cultivated, and the underground lines had been buried about two feet deep in the ground. This allowed the soil to be tilled without the risk of fouling the cultivators or damaging the pipes.

The story goes that when the Chinese shepherd became too old for regular work, the station owners surveyed off the farm and gave him title to the small plot. The retirement gift carried an understanding that he would continue to produce vegetables for the station for as long as he was able to do manual work. This act seemed very generous to some that heard the story, but fifteen acres was nothing to people who had tens of thousands of acres. Norm could never verify the tale of the shepherd, but as it accounted for the unusually small size of the farm he took it to be true. Besides, he liked the story – it gave a sense of history and triumph over adversity.

The farm and the surrounding properties were covered in scrub, except for about ten acres of cultivation around the old farmhouse itself. This made the place look like an oasis set in a desert of thick brigalow scrub that was interspersed with tall gums and stunted wattle trees. The scrub abounded with plenty of native and introduced animals. Kangaroos, wallabies, echidnas, goannas, hundreds of species of birds and parrots and an assortment of snakes. Gaunt wild looking cattle and sheep shared the bush with the natives, the farmed beasts almost as feral in appearance and disposition as were those other foreigners, the foxes and hares.

Norm Blinco felt happy. He had passed this small farm so many times over the years as he laboured about the area, always dreaming of one day owning the place. Now with the dream in his grasp he knew he was going to like living at the farm. The children were lucky too he thought, being too young

to have any past or to remember the war. Their lives were as clean slates waiting to be written, and he saw this little farm as the perfect place for them to build some memories and prepare them for the world. Norm had a sweet vision of the years ahead as they stretched out before them, and for now he could brook no ill wind.