

## THE CHICKEN DINNER

'That bloody sun's got some bite in it today...a real blinder.'

Colin flopped into his chair on the wide wooden veranda. Normally accustomed to the extremes of heat in the Hunter Valley, Colin sweated profusely, perspiration running down his forehead. The blistering air seemed to shimmer across the vine covered fields, even though the sun had almost set in the clear sky. He wished 'the wife' would bring him a long drink. *Where is she?* With a sigh, he lifted his hat to the back of his head and wiped his wet forehead.

Looking with satisfaction at his land, Colin smiled at the green vines, recalling the trouble he'd had when first planting them. Kangaroos had jumped all over the tiny shoots and the rabbits and hares had eaten them as fast as they grew. *But this year the grapes are big and sweet...a good crop...will bring a decent price. Soon those vines will need cutting back. They've taken a lot of hard work and a long time to yield but at last it's worth it...where the Hell is Kerry anyway?* They usually had a drink this time of day, sitting on the porch before dinner, watching the kangaroos jump around in the far paddocks. Colin was about to call her name when she appeared in the garden below, having come round the side of the house. Puffing and sweating, she carried the mail and looked ruffled...upset. Red-faced and panting, she looked up at Colin slouched on the porch.

'Those bloody free-loaders are in the woods again. Went to get the mail and they're still sitting there.'

'Did they give you lip? Colin sat up straight in his chair. Kerry shook her head but her husband continued. 'It's a fair walk to the front gate... and in this heat! Anyway, why didn't you take the car?'

'Wanted to give the dog a walk and stretch my legs. Thought I'd be cool walking through the trees but they were there...had to walk on the road.'

Colin scowled as he shouted 'Did ya tell them to bugger off?'

Kerry sighed...'they're on the opposite side of the road...on Crown Land.' She'd had this conversation before and, seeing her husband's expression becoming angrier, she continued. 'Look they're entitled to be there. Yeah, I know...but...' She sighed, 'I do wish they'd go and stop making trouble.'

'Did they say anything to you?'

Kerry could see Colin's dander rising and shrugged. 'No, nothing Col' she replied quickly as she dropped the mail on the table before him.

Colin was about to continue when his attention was drawn to their cattle dog, running through the fields towards them. In its hurry to clamber up the porch steps, the dog fell noisily and flopped onto Colin's feet, who shouted angrily as the dog shook himself dry.

'Stupid bloody dog, you're all wet...been in the dam again. What's the matter with you? Sit Digger...SIT. Ug...get away from me, you stink!'

Kerry turned and hurried into the cool of the house, away from the shouting and the heat. She took Colin a cold beer and returned to prepare their evening meal. Earlier Colin had killed and cleaned a chicken for dinner and she set about cooking. As she worked, Kerry thoughts returned to the brooding men in the woods. They actually *had* frightened her. She knew all about the bad blood between them and Colin because he wouldn't return their horse.

They had taken the horse to the farm in the previous year's drought, paying for one month's rent. The horse had been in a poor state of health - very skinny and nervy and its hooves were worn thin. Colin loved horses. He re-shoed and hand fed the horse and gradually 'Midnight' calmed down and filled out. Now the horse's coat was glossy and he didn't shy away when approached. The men had not been in touch nor left a forwarding address and Colin had paid for the horse's keep for over a year. When the men arrived at the farm one night, stealthily trying to take the horse, Colin had surprised them in the fields. They had no money to pay their debt so, hunting-gun at the ready, Colin told them outright; if they wanted the horse, they paid. If not, the horse stayed where it was.

The men hadn't gone away – they'd camped under the trees. They'd yelled at Kerry as she passed on her way to the mailbox. It was a half-hour walk each way, through the trees along the unmade grit road. She had been afraid they might attack her on the return journey but they had just jeered. They kept hollering but Kerry couldn't make out what they were saying. She'd not been involved with these rough Aboriginal types before and felt intimidated by this young group of fist shaking, shouting men. Trying to shrug off the memory of the angry group, cooking took over. Colin liked his dinner hot, no matter what the weather. He always had his chicken coated in spicy breadcrumbs, then deep-fried and served on a bed of creamy mashed potatoes with green peas and thick gravy. Kerry prepared dinner in the hot kitchen but her mind kept slipping back to the tree-lined track and the threatening youths.

Eventually, dinner on the table, Colin opened a bottle of his good Cabernet Sauvignon. In an orange sunset, they ate on the veranda where the evening air had cooled. Colin scoffed his meal with relish, starting on the peas and mashed potato before attacking the chicken. Kerry ate her small chicken portion with salad, not having much of an appetite after the frightening scene in the woods. Early in the day, Kerry had made desert - apple pie, to eat with ice cream; Colin enjoyed her pies and looked forward to something sweet at the end of a meal.

Returning to the kitchen with her empty plate, Kerry opened the oven to take out the pie and heard a loud coughing noise from Colin. The coughing sound became louder - a strangled harsh rattle. He was choking.

Kerry stopped what she was doing to rush to her husband just in time to see him heaving and spluttering and turning blue in the face. He fell to his knees on the wooden floor, clutching his throat and gasping. He couldn't catch his breath. All he could do was cough and gurgle and point to his throat where a chicken bone had become lodged. Kerry promptly banged him hard on his back but he continued to splutter and choke, struggling to breathe. By now a distraught Kerry began to scream. She didn't know what to do. Blindly she rushed inside, frantically phoning a neighbour for help whilst Colin lay on the ground moaning on the porch.

The rest of the night merged into a nightmare. The neighbour arrived and tried to assist but they both knew it was too late. Colin just lay there, lifeless and silent on the wooden floorboards. He had stopped panting and turned grey. She vaguely recalled the ambulance arriving, the paramedics, the hospital, comforting arms around her as she screamed in anguish. It had all happened so fast, it was so unreal, so final.

Days later, Kerry was still in a dream when the hearse with Colin's body, and cars carrying the mourners, left the farm and passed the Aboriginal group. The young men sat glowering and silent in the grass, under the trees, watching the long black funeral limousines make their way down the winding dirt track to the farm exit. As one, they stood up. The untidy bunch made their way along the gravel road to the deserted farm, sombre and silent. Eventually one spoke.

'Man...that old time Dream-time stuff really does work. It really worked!'

They all nodded in awe. In a daze, two of them held open the farm gate.

One of the lads shook his head in wonder and said 'Hey, I never thought that old 'point the bone ceremony' would work either but...man, it did. The white fella's dead.'

'Powerful stuff, man' another replied. 'When you 'point the bone' you have to make sure it's not just a grudge. It's got to be a real problem, y'know.'

'Yeah, that Dreamtime law...it blows you away,'

Leaning up against the opened gate, the young men looked stunned. Above them a kookaburra's laughing call broke the silence as it watched the lads walk up the path to the field to collect their horse.