

There was no way out of it. I had to cross that bloody *terrifying* bridge again. I took a few more deep breaths, waved to Lizzie who was kneeling on the grass the other side, blood trickling from her head. As I mounted the log, she jammed her hands into her mouth, as if to prevent herself from screaming. Thank you, Lizzie, I thought, just the vote of confidence I needed.

I was about halfway when what remaining confidence I had deserted me. I wavered, nearly losing my balance, and lurched forward bending low, throwing my arms straight out on either side. For one split second, I saw those dreadful rocks grinning up at me, like bloody great broken teeth ready to crunch me to bits, but I steadied just at the very moment when I thought I was a goner. Where to look? Not down. Not at Lizzie, to add her terror to my own.

I looked up the track a little—and there was Jack! His arms were stretched out towards me, as if he were standing on this very bridge coming to meet me. In truth, his arms were a lifespan from me, yet the sight of them gave me courage. He was walking slowly, quietly, *purposefully*, until he was indeed on the other end of the log, only yards away. This was it. Two quick steps and I fell into those waiting arms outstretched to receive me. I clung to him and sobbing with relief, I kissed him passionately, bang on the lips.

‘Oh Jack ...’ Words were ready to gush forth, as they would from the heroine’s ruby red lips in the best romance. Yes, *romance*. My hero, you have saved me, and here I am in your arms! Oh bliss! Oh ecstasy!

But Jack was reading from another script. He had turned to stone, rigid, unyielding. He stepped back out of my embrace and mumbled, ‘Miss Teresa, I ... er ...’

I couldn’t have felt any worse had he slapped me. Had I had been so *forward*? Surely some licence must be granted to one just snatched from the very jaws of death itself! I felt myself flushing, curse it, so I said briskly, as if to walk as quickly as possible away from any hint of intimacy, ‘Thank you, Jack. I am well now. But poor Lizzie has been wounded. Not seriously I think, but she needs medical attention. And there’s another matter.’

By this stage Charlie and Constable Rogers had joined us. I related, coolly and *politely*, how we had found Wu Ying’s cave just across the gully and how we tried to stop him escaping. Constable Rogers stepped in front of me, elbowing his ungracious way into my explanation, his moustache erect as porcupine quills. ‘Do you mean to say you had the scoundrel trapped and you let him *escape*? Didn’t I *order* you two to return to Thomas Plains? You bloody interfering bints, I’ll have you charged with obstructing the law!’ roared he, huge and purple. Wasn’t our Constable Rogers such a *nice* man?

‘Lizzie’s HURT!’ I shouted back. ‘And so’s Pete, you know—the missing party? Who we found, didn’t we? He’s badly injured and he’s in the cave, in case you want to know. You weren’t even warm where you were looking.’

‘That’s the fault of these two.’ He jerked his head at Jack and Charlie, the latter carefully inspecting Lizzie’s wound.

‘We saved your lives as well as Pete’s, for Christ’s sake,’ I shot back. ‘He was going after you with a bloody great rifle, if you’d let me explain! If you charge us, when we did the job *you* were supposed to do, which was to find *Pete* if you remember, I hope you enjoy hearing us

give our evidence in court!’ Steady on, Terry, steady on, don’t push him too far, I told myself. I can only say that I was more than a little *tetchy* after Jack’s rescue, followed so closely by his strange rejection.

‘If it wasn’t for you, I’d have apprehended the criminal by now,’ he trumpeted. Then something seeped through the brickwork of his thick skull. ‘*What* did you say? Coming after us?’

I thought it wise to change tack. Girls of our calling ought not to get on the wrong side of a copper. ‘I’m sorry, Constable, my tongue sometimes has legs of its own. But see here,’ I said patiently, ‘he crossed the bridge with a gun in his ... er, with *that* gun slung on his back,’ I quickly corrected myself, pointing to Wu Ying’s rifle lying on the ground, ‘while we lay hidden. When he’d turned his back to raise this end of the bridge, we rushed out and each of us struck him with a heavy stick. In the struggle, his rifle discharged and wounded Lizzie, in case you hadn’t noticed. Then he disappeared down the track. I’m sorry I wasn’t fast enough to catch him for you.’ I placed my arms akimbo, half-closing my eyes, looking sideways at him.

But he wasn’t listening; he wasn’t even looking at me. He’d bent down to pick up the rifle. ‘Hmmm, a Martini-Henry Mark II. Bonzer job, these. Dead accurate, if a bit on the heavy side. But no safety catch on these early jobs. That must have caused the ...’

‘For Christ’s sake, you great *blockhead*,’ Lizzie shrieked, ‘can’t we fetch Pete out from over there and take him to the doctor?’

Rogers’ eyes bulged murderously, the porcupine quills under his nose standing to attention. Lizzie was due for dire punishment.

I thought I’d do well to pour oil on these troubled waters. ‘I’m sorry, Constable, but Lizzie is over-wrought. I understand your concern with the weapon, but Pete does need a doctor. Both his legs appear to be broken.’

Rogers couldn’t argue with that. Without saying anything, he hauled himself upright and squinted at a nearby tree, sizing it up. He took a small hatchet from his belt and set to felling the tree. At least he got *that* right: it nicely spanned the chasm. He lifted our end of the tree and placed it beside the existing bridge to broaden it. Charlie and Jack fashioned a stretcher from a couple of saplings, threading the arms of their coats through the poles and buttoning the coats together.

The three men crossed the bridge to the cave. I followed—happy now there was a bridge I could use without staring death in its gruesome face. Jack, Charlie and I bent over Pete and gently inched him onto the stretcher. Fortunately, Pete was still senseless otherwise he would have *suffered*. With Jack at one end and Charlie at the other, they carefully bore him across the bridge. I returned to the cave to see about my precious brooch.

Our masterful Constable Rogers meanwhile was searching the cave. I watched him bend down, delve into a box and slip something into his pocket. It looked like a gold watch. He straightened up—then he saw me standing there.

‘Get *back*, you crazy cow, or I’ll have you charged with obstruction!’ he shouted.

‘Wu Ying stole a brooch of mine, and I want it back,’ I retorted.

‘And you can’t have it back. It’s *evidence* until he’s convicted. Now get back to the other side, before I throw you there!’

Well, thought I, there’s one little piece of *evidence* right there in your pocket that’s not waiting for Wu Ying’s conviction. But I thought better of sharing that observation with our nice policeman.

I returned to the other side, Rogers a few minutes later. ‘There’s a swag of stolen goods there,’ he reported. ‘But not the cash. I shall organise a proper search party as soon as I am able.’

With that, he kicked the second tree he’d cut for the bridge into the chasm. ‘Don’t want him to know we’ve been prowling around in his little den, do we now?’ Ye gods and little fishes, was there *no* end to this man’s stupidity? Did he think Wu Ying would imagine Pete had sprouted wings and *flown* away?

We carried Pete back down the track to the cart with great care. Luckily, we made it before he regained consciousness. Constable Rogers had tethered his horse to a tree near our cart—at least that’s what appeared to have been the case when he saw it wasn’t there. His horse had evidently been shanghaied by Wu Ying.

‘That filthy, thieving, fucking, yellow *devil!*’ he screamed. ‘I’ll choke the bastard with his own guts ... *arrrrgh!*’ Rogers’ command of English failed him at that point. Fists flailing, he stamped on the ground with his heavy policeman’s boots, both feet simultaneously. I dared not look anyone in the eye for fear of bursting into laughter at the spectacle.

Rogers rounded on us, his face working like a beetroot stew on the simmer. ‘And you! *You* lot! Don’t just stand there like shags on a rock, I need a fucking horse. Take me to Moorina, that’s nearest, and I’ll *commandeer* one!’ Then he completely stunned me, stunned all of us.

He started weeping. ‘Not that any horse could ... ever ... replace ... *Horatio* ...’ After a couple of shuddering sobs, he looked up suddenly. Seeing us gaping at him, he hurriedly pulled himself together.

‘Now, you lot, get aboard that cart of yours. We’re going to Moorina.’

‘But what about Pete here? The nearest doctor’s at Thomas Plains,’ Lizzie shouted. ‘E’s more important than your fuckin’ horse!’

Which was true enough, wouldn’t you think Hermione? But our Constable Rogers thought not. Head between his shoulders, chin thrust forward, ‘*Moorina,*’ ordered he, through gritted teeth. So Charlie, who was at the reins, turned the horse back along Frome Road.

We hadn’t gone a half mile when we heard galloping and a furious whinnying. A large chestnut stallion burst from a side track onto the road, just twenty yards ahead of us, looking confused. ‘Christ Al-bloody-mighty!’ Rogers stood up in the dray and bellowed ecstatically: ‘*Horatio!* My Horatio.’

He leapt from the cart and ran, arms outstretched, to the animal. The horse reared up on its hind legs, then sank on all fours, nuzzling against the constable, who patted its neck, and, if I am not mistaken, kissed it. Rogers drew back with a start, wiping his lips: ‘The *bastard!*’ he yelled.

We were now close enough to see the welts and blood along poor Horatio's neck. They didn't look serious but they must have been painful.

'Horatio must've thrown 'im; he's a terror with anyone but me!' Rogers paused to pat the horse and kiss him again, while Horatio flared his lips and whickered. Well, at least his horse loves him, I thought.

Rogers calmed down. 'It's as plain as day. Horatio took to the bush, bucking and rearing and threw the little yellow fucker, or else he wiped 'im off his back. Either way, I hope it fucking hurt.'

'In which case, Wu Ying might be lying unconscious in the bush near here.' A suggestion I immediately regretted—for Rogers ordered a search party.

'My clever Horatio will know where,' Rogers chuckled. Inspecting Horatio for more damage and finding none, Rogers swung into the saddle, and bending low, whispered something into the horse's ear. Rogers let the reins go slack, and sure enough the horse walked off purposefully, like it knew where it was supposed to be going.

'Follow me, you two,' he shouted over his shoulder to Jack and Charlie.

Lizzie was beside herself. 'Shit, we gotta get Pete to the doctor, Terry! That man's bloody mad.'

'I agree. We'll have to go back without them. Jack, Charlie,' I called, 'we must take Pete back to Thomas Plains. Sorry, but you'll have to walk.'

They waved their assent. Constable Rogers reined in Horatio and turned back to us. High and mighty in the saddle, he loudly advised that he would be spending the night at Derby, where he would be able to make all the necessary arrangements for a *police guard* on the cave; that we were *under no circumstances* to return to the cave; and that he would return on the morrow to take our *individual statements*.

Rogers then clapped his heels against Horatio's flank, causing the horse to break into a light canter and forcing Jack and Charlie into a fast run in order to keep up.