

## Wire and Blood

By

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I swallowed hard, looking into the upturned eyes of our three young daughters, and strapped them into their life jackets. *Maybe Chris is right. Children must learn to be adventurous, not to be Nervous Nellies. We've braved the Hume Weir and Port Phillip Bay before, haven't we?*

'Come on, girls. Get a move on,' said Chris, my husband. I ushered Anna, our middle child, into the bow of my canoe.

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When I crossed the vast Pacific Ocean, to this desert continent, I didn't anticipate terrifying encounters with water. Floods, rips and river surges are rare in Europe. If I did think of Australia, I thought of beaches — never of water.

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That golden morning, our small convoy slid through the rippling waters of the Upper Murray, under a canopy of towering eucalyptus trees and willows. The cattle grazing the other side of the barbed wire fence raised their heads and lowed. *Ah, tranquility, barely a breeze.* Mesmerised by the lap-lap of the paddles, I surrendered to the rhythm of the stroke, until the boat gave a jolt, then veered suddenly. With each bend of the river, it bounced with increasing violence.

'It didn't seem this fast when we started,' I cast a glance over my shoulder at the other boat. Chris said nothing. Maybe he hadn't heard. *He'd tell me if there was a problem. Or would he?*

The canoe continued to lurch, twist and turn with each new approach to the bank. *It's stable, sturdy, reliable, the rental person had said. No worries on that patch of river.*

'Don't you think the river's picking up speed?' *Significantly.* Chris didn't answer. The canoe bumped against the rocks again, spraying water into the canoe. Little Anna gave a squeak. 'It's alright darling. Just keep paddling.'

'Right, right,' called the captain.

*Dammit. Does he have to be so dominating?*

'Keep right. (Pause) Paddle harder to the right!' Anna and I obeyed. We paddled -- hard.

‘Down. Lie down. NOW. Everyone lie DOWN.’ Chris spoke in a low flat tone. ‘Anna, lie down...NOW.’

Several hard thumps followed, as the canoe swung around. In silence, I eased the child into the space between my knees. A kaleidoscope of greens, blues and yellows circled above me; trees, leaves and branches merged. *Total immersion?* I gripped Anna with my legs, but she was dry. The motion of the canoe slowed, and it glided along the bank. Not a sound, not a voice could be heard, until I sensed a small body trembling. I pulled myself up and looked down to see Anna’s little blonde head. She was whimpering.

‘She’s cut her cheek. How did that happen?’

‘Uh, barbed wire. A fence post...just above the water. You were headed straight for it.’ Chris reached across, his hand trembling and washed the streams of blood from Anna’s cheek.

‘Hmmm...hold this wet cloth against your face, Anna,’ his brow creased.

Back in the car, Chris turned off the radio and revved the motor. He had swaddled the shivering child in an old blanket; her cheek was still bleeding.

‘Should we call a doctor? An ambulance?’

‘At the hotel. We can call from there.’ The vehicle sped along the corrugated gravel road, stirring up the dust and obscuring the mountains.

The hotel proprietor raised her eyebrows as Chris carried Anna in. ‘There, there, love. You’ll be right.’ She sat them down, then leaned over to inspect the wound. ‘Lucky for you, I’m a trained nurse, This is a nasty gash.’ She began applying Betadine and butterfly strips to the slice across Anna’s cheek. ‘What happened?’

‘It...’ I said.

Chris coughed, stroking Anna’s hair.

‘Barbed wire, by the looks of it...lucky it only caught her on the cheek.’ The woman cast us both a scathing glance. I clenched my fists. *Whose damn idea was it...to go out with three kids on that river?* ‘There you go, little one,’ she gave Anna a lolly. ‘You’ll be right. Now you make sure Mummy and Daddy take you to see a doctor.’

I wanted to punch Chris. *What-a-a-t? He’s always on about making the kids resilient. What the hell was I thinking? – after those other episodes.*

‘Who rented you those canoes, anyway? Didn’t they tell you about the record flooding? The fence posts under water?’

I recalled my prickle at the sight of Chris’ ashen face. When the river came for his family, he had seen something below, taut and lurking. ‘Down. NOW,’ he said, holding back his fear; tamping down our hysteria. In a split-second, he had spotted the glint of the wire under the surging water.

Now they were safe, he stood up, his shoulders heaving, and pulled the girls close to him.

‘Yep...I’d get her a tetanus shot,’ the woman looked him over. ‘You did well to get out so lightly. As for that bloke in the shop, I’ll give him a bloody earful. He’s a local...should’ve known better.’

That Easter afternoon, I gave up thanks to the water gods and for Chris’ presence of mind, his courage, and the example he showed to his young daughters.