

Man Enough

'Bubs?' Miss Clara's voice echoed through the pine plantation surrounding the outback compound.

Bubs' gaze remained on the fir needles he played with in the white sand. He never wanted to look at Miss Clara again. Not after what Joel had done. He shook his head, trying to forget her screams. She didn't deserve *that*. She was different from the women who lived here. *They* let the men do that.

'There you are.' The scrunching of dried needles grew louder.

He looked at those in his hands, trying to remember what they had been in his imagination, what game he had been playing to forget.

'I came looking for you after...' She knelt beside him, folding her torn flower-patterned dress over her pale, scarred knee. 'Are you alright?'

He nodded, not looking at her. It was what she wanted to hear. And he didn't know how he felt. Not now she was like the other women. The other kids had said it was inevitable. He hadn't wanted to believe them.

'Are you sure?' She brushed his dark, curly fringe from his forehead and caressed his back. 'I'd understand if you're not.'

Bubs shrugged. 'Happens to all the women here, Miss. I'm used to it.'

She shuddered and remained silent for a moment. 'Still, it must be shocking to see things like that.'

He shrugged again. 'Just the way of the world, Miss.'

Her caressing stopped. 'No. No, it's not.'

He opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again. It wasn't nice to talk about that sort of thing.

'What?' She resumed caressing him. 'You can talk to me about anything.'

He nodded but didn't speak. He had seen the black eyes and bruised ribs on the kids who had.

A long silence fell between them. As Bubs fiddled with the needles, he wondered if they had hurt Miss Clara. He glanced at her and gasped. A black bruise rimmed one swollen-

shut eye. Cuts split her bottom lip. Her left cheek swelled. His fists clenched, crushing the needles.

'I suppose you're wondering why the men do... That. Well...' Her voice cracked. 'Adults have certain... Needs. And... Stuck out here with no one to police them... They think it's their right.'

'Even though you protested?'

She went to reply, then stopped, tears streaming from her eyes. She nodded.

'That don't seem right to me.'

A weak smile filled her face. She pulled him into a hug. 'Promise me you won't be like them.'

'I wouldn't dream of it, Miss. When I'm old enough, I'm leaving this shithole.'

* * *

Laughter sounded from the hall where the majority of the men gathered most nights. Bubs stood in the entrance's dim light, staring at them. All drank from tinnies, slapping each other on the back, or roaring at things others said. He clenched and unclenched his fists as he watched. Now one had hurt Miss Clara, more would try.

'Who's that there?'

He froze, afraid someone had read his thoughts.

An old man stumbled out of the eucalypts, six-pack under his arm. A wide brimmed hat covered his weathered face. He staggered towards Bubs, then knelt before him. 'Oi, I recognize you. You're Bob.'

'Bubs.'

'Right. What you doing out here in the dark?'

He didn't respond. Couldn't.

The old man squinted at him, glanced at the hall, then grinned. 'You want a tinnie, ay?'

A tear rolled down Bubs' cheek.

'Tell you what.' He rose, knees cracking. 'You carry this in for me and I'll let you have one.' Before Bubs could speak, he thrust the six-pack into his hands, then staggered through the entrance.

Bubs didn't move.

'C'mon, mate. I'll show you what it means to be a man.'

He tensed. He couldn't go in there. Not after what Joel had done. But the old man's words stirred his curiosity. He glanced at the poles he had hidden in the bushes, sighed, then followed him inside.

The dozen or so men sat in a circle in the room's centre on school chairs Bubs and his classmates used during their lessons with Miss Clara. Some hung over the backs, tinnie in hand, faces locked in stupid grins. Others lounged back, arms folded across their chests, expressions smug. A few bent forwards, arms gesturing as they yelled at someone across the circle.

Bubs paused. He shouldn't have come. He placed the six-pack on the linoleum and tip-toed towards the doors.

'Where you going?' said the old man.

He quelled the urge to run and turned back. Silence filled the hall. Most people gawked. If he fled now, he would never hear the end of it. Sighing, he lifted the six-pack and trudged towards the old man.

'Ain't that the little fella who won't talk?' said a familiar voice.

Bubs clenched the six-pack tight under his arm, flinching at its coldness.

'Bloke wanted to see what it meant to be a man,' said the old man.

A few laughs sounded from the group. Bubs gritted his teeth, certain Joel was among them. He scanned the crowd for him, wishing the tinnie his fingers dug into was the bastard's neck.

The old man grabbed the six-pack. 'Cheers, mate. As promised.' He twisted a can free and tossed it to him.

It slid through Bubs' right hand before his left fingers clutched it.

'What're you waiting for, cobba?' said one of the men. 'I would've given my left nut for a beer at your age.'

'It might loosen up your tongue.' Bubs didn't need to see Joel's smirk to know he had said that.

He frowned. Part of him wanted to scull the tinnie and show him up. But he didn't need to prove himself. He stared at the white, red, and yellow colours of the can. He had seen how this stuff turned them into idiots. Monsters. Bubs shook his head. He didn't want to be like that.

'Looks like the little fella's gonna dob us in to that pretty new sheila,' said someone.

'Don't worry, blokes, I know how to take care of her.' Joel thrust his hips back and forth as he moved toward the front of the crowd.

Peals of laughter filled the hall.

Bubs' fingers dug into the tinnie. He popped open the can, pressed the chilled aluminium to his lips, and took a sip. He cringed at the bitterness, wanting to spit it out.

Joel leered at him. 'The little guy can't handle it!'

More laughter rang through the hall.

'Looks like he doesn't have what it takes.'

Bubs' fingers dug deeper into the can, crinkling it. If this was what it took to be a man, he didn't want any part of it. He drew the tinnie back, aiming for Joel.

'C'mon, young fella.' The old man patted his shoulder. 'Chug that tinnie like your life depends on it.'

'Chug! Chug! Chug!' chanted Joel.

Scraping filled the hall as the men rose from their chairs and encircled him. They joined Joel's mantra, the hall ringing with it. Everyone stared at him with anticipation.

He dropped the tinnie, beer sloshing across the floor as he tried to push his way through them. Everyone shoved him back into the centre. 'Let me through!' he cried. The chanting drowned out his words. He glanced in every direction as they jostled him around, desperate for an escape.

The old man rose his hand, motioning for them to stop, then reached out and pulled him close. He scooped up the can from the pooling amber liquid. 'C'mon, cobba, don't waste liquid gold.'

Another tear ran down Bubs' cheek. When they got like this there was no stopping them until they got what they wanted. Sighing, he yanked the tinnie free, took a deep breath,

then poured its contents down his throat. He gulped it down like water on a scorching day, trying to avoid it touching his tastebuds. After several gulps, the chanting faded. He jerked the can from his lips, panting for breath, wiping foam from his mouth.

'Looks like the little bloke might have it in him,' said the old man.

'C'mon, finish it!' said Joel.

The mantra rose again, the men pumping their fists in rhythm with it.

Bubs staggered forward, feeling outside his body. He took another deep breath, then poured the rest down his throat. Afterwards, he tossed the can aside and belched.

The men cheered. One who looked like his uncle lifted him onto his shoulders, parading him around the hall, singing a joyous song the others joined. Bubs smiled despite himself. His head spun, vision blurring. When he burped again, his stomach lurched. He clutched at the pain growing there, certain he was going to barf. He tapped his uncle on the shoulder. 'Let me down.'

'He's gonna chuck!' said Joel.

His uncle slid him down his back. The song died; the men's boasts about Bubs' feat filled the ensuing silence.

He staggered around the hall, pushing through clusters of people, searching for the exit, stomach heaving. The crowd seemed endless: the more people he pushed through, the more there seemed to be. Eventually he stumbled through the foyer.

His stomach lurched the moment he crossed the threshold, its contents gushing from his mouth, splattering across the gravel. He tumbled into the bushes, stomach continuing to heave, bitterness surging across his tastebuds with an acrid tang. With each cramp, more liquid streamed from his mouth, painting the desiccated leaves tawny.

After an eternity, his stomach settled and he dropped onto his side, rolling away from the sick and onto his back. Stars shone through the eucalyptus branches and began to spin with each blink. Was this why the men drank? he wondered. The men!

He pushed himself to sitting, letting his sight settle before he slowly stood, and staggered into the bushes where he had left the jerrycan.

* * *

Bubs jerked awake to the sound of screams. His vision wobbled and he clutched his aching stomach, certain he was going to be sick again. Something wet stuck to his face. He reached up and removed a rough leaf. He peered through the darkness, making out pine trees.

More screams rang out. His head jerked in the direction of the compound. His sight blurred for a moment. When it cleared, he gasped. Flames shot into the sky, some lighting the surrounding eucalypts. He leapt to his feet and nearly toppled over, left foot landing in a sludgy substance. He sniffed, then cringed: vomit.

Bubs stumbled toward the compound as best he could, clutching branches and bushes, each step threatening his balance.

Ahead, women screamed as they threw buckets of water over the flames engulfing the hall. The fire spluttered for a moment before springing back with more ferocity. Alongside them, the remaining men pried at the poles holding the doors in place, yelping at their singeing hands.

He halted, blurred memories bubbling to the surface. He recalled splashing petrol over the hall's outer walls. Hell, he could still smell it on him. But when it had come time to light the match, he hadn't had the guts.

A snuffle sounded nearby. Bubs tensed and scanned the trees. A figure stood beneath one. He approached with caution. The closer he got, the more he recognised their features in the fire's glow: dark, shoulder-length hair, a slim, skirted figure, the bruised face. 'Miss Clara?' His voice was a whisper.

She spun to face him. 'Who's there?'

'Bubs.' When she whimpered, he said, 'Are you alright?'

She wiped away unseen tears. 'I thought I would be, but...'

He grabbed her hand. Instead of the usual softness, her palms felt rough, scarred. His eyes widened in understanding. It took a moment before he could speak. 'You don't have to worry, Miss. You're safe now.'

She gave a sad smile through the flicker of the blaze, then turned back to the hall. The men's cries rang out from inside, their bangs thudding against the barricaded doors. 'I hope so.'