

Frankie

Standing on top of an overturned milk crate that was a reminder of the previous tenant's hasty departure, Billie peered in through the kitchen window and looked around the vast room. The real estate agent had instructed her to go and have a look first, until he got the keys back.

There was a wood burning stove to one side, and on the other a rather tired oven and stove top. Still, beggars can't be choosers, Billie thought to herself as she climbed back down from her wobbly platform.

Making her way around the house, she looked in through all the windows, and knew there would be a bit of work to do before she could move in, and she would need to take the left-over furniture to the rubbish tip. Still the offer of having two weeks rent waived if she cleaned it herself was very tempting.

The afternoon was warm, and the sun was just making its way across the sky to herald the late afternoon. Billie swatted at the flies as she walked around the back yard, picking up a couple of wash cloths that had come away from the clothesline, with the faded and brittle pegs still holding on for dear life, as they both lay redundant in the tall grass. It would take a bit of work to get the garden functional, but she was already planning and designing garden beds with sunflowers bordering the edges as she took in the scene. The hills hoist prominently held pride of place in the centre of the yard, and it gently creaked in the afternoon breeze, and from atop the roof of the house, she could hear a bird calling out "Whoo!" repeatedly like it was encouraging and cheering her on.

The fence would need to be fixed if she were going to bring her two dogs here, as she was sure the neighbouring dairy farmers wouldn't appreciate them charging around nipping at the heels of their cows. She pushed the gate outwards, and the overgrown path wound its way down to a large dam and she remarked on its serenity. She supposed that it was maintained by

the owner for anyone that might stay at the bed and breakfast next door, and she walked up the bank to reveal recently mowed grass and large moss rocks strategically placed around the rim of the dam. 'Oooh that would be a wonderful place to sit with a glass of wine in the evening and watch the sunset,' she thought dreamily to herself and decided to sit in the shade of the large willow tree whose branches were hanging like a silken green curtain down to the water's edge.

For a moment, Billie was still and quiet, an action that was quite rare for her, and she appreciated the tranquillity and solitude. It was in that moment that she made her decision. How could she not move here? Sure, it was isolated, and probably riddled with snakes. There were at least a million flies, thanks to the neighbouring bovines, but it just seemed right somehow, and after all, what were her other options? Who else would willingly rent a house to a Single woman with two kids, two cats, and two dogs.

Decision made, moving day arrived and now the house sparkled from her cleaning. Well as much as it could for an old farmhouse that probably hadn't seen a duster in years. Every night after work, she brought her two girls here, and they would work tirelessly into the night, removing the stink and fug of the last residents. At least it smelt better and felt homely as she unpacked their meagre possessions and put them to rest in their newly allocated places. She stood back with her hands on her hips and admired the completed task. The place certainly looked different now that their things were in it. Arching her back in an attempt to rid the aching that was slowly building, she realised that she hadn't stopped yet for a break. Always her nature to hurry, she was hoping that this new house would make her take stock and slow down.

Billie walked down the hallway, feeling the creaking of old floorboards under her footfall, she made her way towards her oldest daughters' bedroom. Approaching, she could hear the soothing sound of giggling and the two seemed caught up in a private exchange that only sisters with a close bond could. Billie held herself back, not wanting to fracture the loving encounter. It was moments like this, they would remember forever, and she quietly slipped away, retreating into the kitchen, retrieving a wine glass from the newly stocked cupboard. She softly removed the cork from a bottle of her favourite wine, topped up her glass, and leaving a note on the bench top, she slipped her feet into a pair of Rossi's and followed the path down through the backyard and to the dam.

She wished she'd had the foresight to spray mosquito repellent, but now that she was here, it seemed too arduous to retrace her steps. She would just have to put up with the little pests and made a mental note to dig out the lavender oil later, she knew she would probably need.

Settling down on the bank, she cursed herself as she felt the wetness of fresh duck poop soak into her skirt, and she shrugged as even this small matter wasn't going to deter her. The sun was beginning to make its descent over the treetops and the reflection in the murky brown water made it appear as if red and orange flames were coming up from the depths of the mud below, and for a moment she stared into it and watched as it gently moved, guided by the cooling night breeze.

The horse appeared as if from nowhere and she hadn't expected to see it. Billie imagined she was quite the sight as she jumped onto the nearest and largest rock, spilling her wine as she did. The creature was almost a foot deep in the dam and turned to look curiously at Billie, before making its way further still into the water. There was now a low-lying mist quietly descending above the water, and if she didn't know better, she would have thought it was all in her imagination. Billie watched as it pawed its large hooves at the water like a child would

do at the beach. Oblivious to her, it changed feet occasionally and continued the gesture over and over. Eventually tiring of its game, it shook its long toffee coloured mane, and turned to look at Billie, focusing its big brown eyes on her, appearing to take in her very existence for the first time.

For a moment Billie was unsure of what she should do next, she hadn't any experience around horses, and from where she stood it was a considerable size. Somewhere in the recess of her memory she remembered that if she ran zig zag it wouldn't be able to catch her, but then she remembered that was for bears, not horses. It was then that the animal took a few steps forward and so Billie was left with no option but to stay perfectly still as it came closer and ever closer, until she could feel the hot breath on her face, and the warm velvety softness as its muzzle brushed her bare shoulder. They were almost level now, and Billie felt the mysterious pull into the horses' eyes as it focused its gaze on her, and just for a moment she felt her heart stop beating as they silently studied each other. The horse was the first to break the spell and it turned, dismissing her, and headed back towards the water's edge, and Billie felt the air rush out of her mouth, as she realised that she had been holding her breath.

Reaching her hand up towards her face, she felt wet, hot tears she hadn't known were there, and suddenly found herself weeping softly. Not since the divorce, had she had a moment to consider her position. Finding a home, keeping the girls safe and settled were her priority. Now they were established, she could relax, and she marvelled that she felt unexpectedly cleansed like one does after a big cathartic crying session. Yawning and stretching her arms out into the fading light, she knew she would sleep well tonight.

As Billie climbed down from the large granite rock, she drank the dregs of her glass and glanced back towards where the horse had gone, but it had already vanished, probably back to its paddock or whatever place a horse lives.

The next day, saw her busily getting her girls to school, and herself to work, but all the while she was counting down the hours until she could be in their haven again. Stopping to pick up some takeaway, she planned to surprise the girls with a picnic by the dam.

As the trio pulled into the driveway, they spotted the farmer, tending to his calves in the dairy shed adjacent to her house, and she allowed the girls to go and watch, heeding her advice to keep their distance and not to frighten the young cows. Placing their steaming parcel of hot chips on the porch table, she made her way down to the barn in time to see her daughters being guided by the farmer on how to give a bottle of milk to an enthusiastically sucking calf, and the grins on their faces filled her heart.

Introductions made, they chatted briefly, before she was able to withdraw her reluctant two and they politely voiced their thanks. Only a few steps away, Billie abruptly turned “Oh by the way, I wondered who owned the brown horse?” It wasn’t what he said in reply, rather, how he said it, and the look on his face. “Ahh, so you’ve met Frankie!” he stated. “She’s a special one alright. But then you must already know that if she’s come to meet you.”

“I was hoping to show the girls tonight, I just wasn’t sure if she was safe for them to be around?”

Looking Billie up and down and then glancing to the girls who were playing hopscotch on the cement path that bordered the house, he hesitated, then replied, “Well now, she’s safe, but it’s up to her whether she wants to see you again. That girl has her own will, and she belongs to no one, free as a bird.” With that he turned and left Billie contemplating how the horse can exist without anyone to take care of it, and she made a mental note to buy some carrots.

This time she was sensible enough to bring a blanket for them to sit on, and they perched themselves on the bank opposite where the sun would make its slow and vibrant descent.

A few magpies sat balancing on a low limb of the giant grey gum, and they warbled noisily to each other. A lone kookaburra laughed off in the distance before soaring gently and effortlessly closer to the water's edge as it searched the ground for tasty morsels.

She watched as the girls were now knee deep in the muddy water, a rolling mist surrounding them, in a gentle and welcoming embrace, squealing and running for the safety of the grassy bank as yabbies nipped at their tender bare feet.

The three stood together side by side, watching the sky as it changed from orange to blue and purple, the colours reflecting in the water below, They each made a wish, throwing a wild daisy into the water and Billie reached down and stirred it with her hand to make the colours dance and sway, and as the water settled, she was sure she saw the reflection of a chestnut brown horse, with a flowing silky mane gazing approvingly back at her.