

RAVENS
HOLLOW

J U D I T H R O O K

1

LEE PING

The stench of excrement and mud was only relieved by the slight whispering breeze sweeping across the giant eucalypts that surrounded the camp, leaving their sweet perfume lingering in the air. The trees were one of the few things Lee Ping could look at with any positivity in this journey he found himself embarking on.

Australia was a word Lee Ping had never heard. Everyone was full of talk about this country where gold had been found. This country was said to be on the other side of the world, many miles away, had gold in the rivers and in the ground, just for the taking.

The company Lee Ping had worked for since he was old enough to do so, as his father had done before him, was sending him to this far off land.

He had no choice. He was promised great wealth and that Mu, his wife of one year and his week-old son, Tay, would be paid a percentage of his wage every week. They would be looked after while he was away. As an obedient servant to the company, his country and his family, Lee must do his duty. Along with many of his countrymen, Lee Ping set sail for Australia.

Behind his brave face, Lee Ping's heart was breaking. He wanted to scream out that he didn't want to go. He would miss his loved family and his country, his home. Nowhere else on earth could mean as much to him.

As always, he would be obedient and try to bring wealth and pride to Mu and Tay's future, giving them a firm foundation. That was what Lee Ping had to believe, otherwise he would not have been able to go on.

Bravely he accepted his fate. But nothing would have prepared him for the journey and the conditions they all would have to endure.

After a year in this unforgiving land, he had almost given up hope of ever seeing Mu's sweet smile or feeling the softness of his son's skin again. He had worked hard every day. He tried to believe he would be wealthy, but he knew it was all a dream. The company would be the richer for all his hard work.

He was so tired by the end of the day it was all he could do to find his tent and crawl into his blanket on the hard ground. The days seemed so long and the nights so short. The seasons were extreme. His skin burned and blistered as the sun scorched his body. It was a fight to find and store good drinking water, but when the rain and cold came it was hard to plough through the mud. Some days, it was so deep his tired legs hardly had the strength to get through the morass to his tent. His hands were purple and his bones ached. It was hard to find dry wood for the fire. Some nights, Lee Ping wept until he fell asleep.

He had been lucky he had not come down with any of the many illnesses that spread through the camps. He was losing condition and heart, but was doing his best not to disgrace his family or country.

On good days, he would go to The Golden Nugget, the only hotel in the high street where you could get food and drink and other recreational goods the body may need. Sometimes he would share a pipe with his fellow countrymen, but that only made him more homesick than ever. So, he didn't indulge too often.

He needed new shoes and some warmer clothes, so he saved as much of his wages as he could. There was so much gold to be found and people were getting very rich, but not the ones loyal to their employers. Many left and went their own way, but Lee Ping's nature and dreams of home and making his family proud, would not let him break the agreement. He would carry on.

He enjoyed the kookaburras laughing at dusk and the bellbirds

calling to their mates. It was so special when he came out of his tent in the morning and was surrounded by wallabies nibbling on the grass. These small things kept him from going mad.

When Lee emerged from the tunnel, the sun was blinding. His eyes were red and sore from the dust and grit that was in the thick, dry air. His body was on fire. His thirst could not be quenched by the warm water from his drink bottle, so he headed to the Golden Nugget. It had been a hard day. He needed his mind to be taken away to a different place.

Tonight, the undernourished bar maid was standing in front of him asking what she could do for him. She smiled. Lee Ping saw Mu's face smiling right there in this far away land. He reached out to touch her. She felt so soft it made Lee's hand tingle. There was no way Lee could not take the comfort he was looking for. And Jane Barlow was ready to satisfy Lee's desires, for the reward of a hearty meal.

It was late when Lee left the Nugget. His tent was at the far end of town, so he had to walk through the crowded main street. There was always noise and activity going on and it was a hangout for people looking to steal whatever they could find to escape this hell hole. It wasn't easy to find your way to the city and survive without money. It was not the best place to be late at night. There was always someone looking for an easy way out.

Lee pushed his wages deep inside his shirt and headed into the night. His emotions were drained. Lee was a shadow of himself lost. He was walking but he felt nothing under his feet or any feeling of the night air on his face. He could not hear his heartbeat. The loss of dignity and the will to go on.

He never noticed the two men that had followed him. When they jumped him from behind, he was so surprised that it took him a minute to respond. It also surprised him that he wanted to fight for his life. He still wanted to get home to his beloved China, but he was no match for these two well-fed brutes.

They left him where he lay behind a deserted camp sight just off the main street, Lee Ping stared into the darkness and into nothing.

His body was found late the next afternoon Lee was almost unrecognisable stripped of every belonging that was usable to anyone that had passed by. Large ravenous black birds clustered over the corpse, enjoying his remains. They had taken his eyes, but his spirit would rise, to be left in Ravens Hollow for eternity.



Mu Ping had always known when she said goodbye to Lee, she would never see him again. The letter from the company had said Lee Ping from Shanghai, China, had died from a chest complaint on the Victorian Gold Fields. The letter said he was a credit to the company and should be regarded with great pride by his family. The small amount of money that came with the letter did not lessen Mu's grief. Mu would never know the true story behind Lee's death.

Lee Ping would watch with sightless eyes the greed, the fraud, the tragedies and the further exploitation of his countrymen. He watched the growth of the township, the building, the tents being replaced by cottages, fires sweeping through the streets, causing destruction and death. He would watch hundreds come and go, some becoming rich, some becoming poorer, the growth of stores and hotels everywhere. It became a bustling town.

Lee Ping's voice could be heard on the darkest nights, full of isolated agony. Lee watched and waited as time would create a community of lost souls that floated into the abyss. Gathering them together, embracing them without judgement with open arms. To his new family, his true nature would become evident as a loyal and supportive leader through eternity.

He watched with tears in his sightless eyes as that scrawny barmaid gave birth to his son.

2

LEE PING WATCHES WITH SIGHTLESS EYES: BUILDING THE BONES OF RAVENS HOLLOW

Irreverent to the Faith, Gustav Schmidt had convinced his wife Elva along with their two boys Dirk and Karl, to take the journey to Australia.

He had heard of the gold. This place could satisfy his thirst for wealth, along with his pursuit to spread the word of the Lord and gather a congregation of disciples. He would build a congregation that would feed his ego and prove his worth to his God and family. Gustav would be following in his father's footsteps, but well out of the sight of his judgemental eyes.

After a long and exhausting journey from their homeland, they approached Ravens Hollow. Black birds circled around the coach, contrasted against the bright cobalt blue of the clear sky. It was dazzling, making a surreal back drop for the Sentinels to perform their routine. As the birds flew around them, their wings fluttering and soaring above their heads, their shrill voices seemed to speak to Gustav. He took this as a message from the Holy Spirit. This is where he would spread the word and become The Preacher.

Elva took it as a sign of impending disaster.

They set-up on the edge of town on the north end of the main street, where most of the activity was to be seen. The Mining Exchange always

had a small group collecting the pennies from their diggings. Gold was harder to come by now. The big companies had almost stripped the land bare. Gustav erected two tents. They were to become their home and the first protestant church in Ravens Hollow.

Gustav was happy to preach to anyone who passed by. The ones that listened and the ones that didn't, the ones that believed and the ones that didn't. He would preach to the air if he had to. That was the whole purpose. That is why he existed. God is good, God will provide. He gave no thought to the family's needs, never gave any thought to how the food got on the table.

Elva cried and begged; the boys stole. That's how the food got on the table in Elva's mind. God had nothing to do with it. They tried to get help from Gustav, the man that was supposed to provide for his family. Blinded by his faith, the father and husband believed God would fill that role.

Elva cried for her lost country and longed to be home in a civilised world. She missed the snow on the mountain peaks, swimming in the lakes in the summer and the music, oh! The music, the history that surrounded her village and the bustling cities.

She would never see that history in this country. She was going to be part of the history of this place, but wanted no part of it. Begging Gustav to spend some of the money he had been accumulating to build his church, for a family cottage so they could be warm in the winter and cool in the summer. The family was always sick with coughs and colds. It was a miserable existence.

The snakes and spiders and all manner of insects invaded their tent, scaring Elva every day. She was always screaming for the boys to help her. If they were away at the small school that had been set-up for the miner's children, she would just hold her breath until the creatures moved on.

Elva hated Gustav. She didn't believe in his God, or any of his ideals. She saw the hypocrisy of his sanctimonious ranting and ravings. But she hated herself more for her weakness, for being taken in by his charm and his mesmerising words.

He played with her soul owning it, Gustav had ways of touching her

that took her breath away. Looking at her, she would do anything to please him. How could she ever live without him?

‘Tell the preacher you love him, then he will give you what you want.’

Well... Elva never did get what she wanted and now he had brought her to this place, making her leave her mother, father and sister and her beloved country, visions she was finding hard to recall now. It all seemed so long ago. Her depression was so deep her children didn't even bring a smile to her face. She wished she had the courage to kill Gustav. Elva cried.

There are souls that never feel the warmth of another.

Martha and Violet had been in the orphanage since they were born. They knew no other life. Neither knew anything about their heritage or where they came from. They had no one else but each other.

They pretended to be sisters, but the likelihood seemed remote. Martha was dark, with big brown eyes and a smile that could melt hearts. Violet had red hair and freckles and was very shy, hiding behind Martha most of the time. Martha was the smart one. Born under different circumstances, success would have been hers for the asking.

Violet idolised Martha and would have followed her to the end of the world. Together, they gave each other the strength they needed to exist and survive the misery of the orphanage. They had never known any other life, but knew there must be a better way, from things they had heard and read.

When Martha was fourteen, assuming Violet was about the same age, they would put the plan they had devised into action and escape. They had heard about the gold in Central Victoria. Everyone was getting rich there, so that was where they were going to head.

Every week, two girls had to take the vegetables that had been grown at the orphanage to the local store for resale. The girls had to take the money straight back to the matron, so their plan had to be streamlined because they wouldn't have long to disappear with the money.

When it was their time to go to the store, they were ready. The girls put the few belongings they had in the bottom of the baskets and left

the only home they had ever known without a backward glance. Putting the money in their shoes and headed west. Staying off the roads and climbed through the thickest scrub they could find. Because they had taken the money, the police would hunt for them longer than for the kids that had left with nothing.

If they were caught, they would be doomed. The matron could not tolerate thieves. Their lives would be unbearable, so they had to move fast. They stole eggs, vegetables, fruit and anything else edible. Washing where they could, in puddles and creeks. Cleanliness was the one thing the matron had embedded in their minds, but by the time they reached the gold fields their hair was matted and their clothes were rags. They'd lost so much weight they looked like ten-year-olds. Never spending any of the money they had stolen in fear of being caught. So, the first stop was to find somewhere they could wash and rest. The Sentinels let them through without a sound, just a sorrowful look. Knowing the girls' fate was sealed.



Tilly spotted them as soon as they came up the main street. A clean-up and a few feeds and they would make her a pretty profit. She wasn't sure if they were too young, but some liked them that way. She ran her Happy Place as she called it, from detached rooms beside The Golden Nugget.

The only entry was from the back lane. There was a cute shop front with lace curtains hiding the ugliness behind. The front door was always bolted. Most locals knew what lay behind. The women were sure their husbands and sons never went near Tilly's. It was just for the lonely miners that had left their families behind on their pursuit for riches.

The girls were so naïve; they thought nothing could be as bad as the orphanage. When Tilly offered them a room for a little of their money their dream was coming true. Tilly groomed the girls for a few weeks. Martha was so attractive she was sure she would be very popular with her clients. Violet wasn't as saleable, but Tilly would make her work for her keep.

It wasn't long before the girls realised Tilly was going to exploit them, but she told them they would earn plenty of money, so how hard could it be?

Martha had never known such fear as the night Tilly said she was sending one of her best clients to her room and he was paying extra because she was a virgin. So, she must be nice to him and do everything he asked of her.

Martha had no idea what any of this meant. She was trembling when a tall, handsome man entered the room. Martha detected a strange accent when he asked her name, but she couldn't speak, so never answered, trying to keep her eyes and mouth closed. He came close to her, taking her cold and trembling hand.

'This will be a wonderful thing you are doing. It is God's will,' he said in a whisper. Martha may have been ignorant to what men's needs were, but she knew this was not right.

'Just tell the preacher you love him and then he will give you what you want.' His smooth voice echoed in her ears.

His strange accent made her recoil. Her mind was in turmoil. She was screaming inside. Suddenly he was ripping at her clothes. 'Come on girl, get out of those rags you are wearing.' She looked at his hands groping at her breast. His fingernails were long, with a line of black dirt under every nail. She thought she would vomit. She couldn't fight. He brought his mouth down on hers. She felt his teeth biting into her lips and his saliva running down her throat. The smell of the sweat on his undershirt mixed with his tobacco breath was taking her breath away. He was hurting her; pulling at her untouched body, slapping her, touching her with those long filthy fingers, yelling at her, 'Tell the preacher you love him, tell the preacher you love him,' over and over. She finally got the words out. He grinned. 'That's a good girl. Now I will give you what you want.'

Martha felt something go through her like a burning poker. She was sure she would die. He was lying on top of her. His weight had the heaviness of a corpse. He wasn't moving. She wanted to cry; she wanted to scream; she wished and prayed she would die.

Tilly said the preacher was happy with her and would call on her again. Martha hoped the bruises all over her body would have a chance to heal before she had to endure his abuse again. Martha was so upset she had brought Violet into this world of abuse and violation, but she couldn't see how they could escape. They cried in each other's arms every night as they shared the stories of the horrors they experienced during their times with Tillie's clients and longed for the misery of the orphanage.

Martha hated the preacher so much. He was demanding and always left bruises and scratches all over her body. She tried to hide her injuries from Violet. The sound of Violet's sobbing in the night was unbearable; she didn't want to add to her misery. Martha wished she had the courage to kill the preacher. Some of the men were kind to her, something she had not experienced before in her life. Those days were easier to cope with, and sometimes the girls giggled over some of the men's antics.

Martha woke with severe pains in her stomach. They had been in Ravens Hollow about eight months and were learning to accept their place in society. They knew this life was all they could hope to achieve. Their room was nice enough and the food was good. Tilly did look after her girls.

When the pain became extreme, Martha crept down the stairs so she wouldn't wake Violet. Trying not to scream, she lay in the alley behind the buildings. The lamps were all out and the clouds had blocked any moonlight that may have crept through. It was the darkest night.

Tilly had suspected Martha may have been pregnant. She was a light sleeper, so hearing the groaning in the alley, she knew what was going on. Taking a blanket, she ran down the stairs to the alley, towards Martha's agonised moaning.

With a beginning, there will be an end.

Eventually, Gustav got his church. A building with a coloured glass window, Jesus hanging on a cross, sending a kaleidoscope of symbolic patterns around the church with the rise and fall of the sun.

How could something so beautiful be so horrible? Elva hated the window. Even though she received three small rooms behind the church,

she had pleaded with Gustav not to spend the money on the window and let her have an indoor stove with a chimney. But he wouldn't hear of it, saying the gas ring she had was adequate, and any way she could always build a fire outside if she wanted to. Elva cried.

They had only been in the new building for a short time when Elva woke at dawn to hear whimpering coming from the front of the church. It sounded like more trouble for Gustav to deal with. That would be his problem. She would go back to sleep. Little did she know this baby would bring meaning to her wasted life.

Gustav knew the baby was his as soon as he opened the door and knew Tilly would have moved Martha and Violet on. He would not be asking any questions.

Is this the only purpose of one's life to give the gift of life to another?

As the baby slipped from Martha's body, Martha took her last breath. Tilly had to work fast. This had to be all cleaned up before daylight. She dragged the body to the side of the alley and pushed it over into the deep gully that ran the length of the main street at the back of the buildings. The thick undergrowth quickly swallowed Martha into her grave.

Now Tilly had to take care of Violet. She didn't have to think twice. Violet would ask too many questions. She knew what she had to do. She crept into the girl's room. Violet was still sleeping. She took Martha's pillow and held it hard over Violet's face. She didn't even struggle, as if she had no will to live. It didn't take long to get the job done. Tilly thought maybe she did the girl a favour.

Somehow, she managed to get the body down to the side of the gully. It was hard to see where she had pushed Martha in. For some reason, she felt as though they should be together. She had to use all her strength to get Violet to lie with her sister. The branches, leaves, grass and rubble seemed to open like the mouth of the grim reaper, swallowing Violet. It was a shame, Tilly thought, she had started to like the girls, but business was business. She had to look after her reputation. There was no room for family affairs in Tilly's world.

The force of survival.

The baby's face was his face. He hoped no one else would see it.

He told Elva the baby was a gift from God and she was sent to them to bring joy into their lives. *Just more work for me*, Elva thought, but when she saw the girl, it was love at first sight. Gustav named her Mary. Elva wanted to argue but decided to call her Doll when he wasn't around. And that was what she became to Elva, her baby doll.

The boys had kept her alive, but Doll gave her a reason to live. Elva never thought anyone could have filled the emptiness like a gaping hole in her heart that the years of hating Gustav had left her to deal with the best she could. It was incredible to everyone in the town Elva and the boys didn't realise the girl was Gustav's illegitimate child.

He paraded Mary around town on his shoulders. He didn't think people would suspect he was her real father. Being a respected spiritual leader of the community, he was just doing the Lord's work, giving the poor child a home.

For the first time, the Schmidt family seemed to be happy. The boys laughed with Mary, and Elva smiled. She never thought about Doll's heritage, just thought some poor unfortunate girl got herself into trouble and her family couldn't face the shame. Sometimes she caught a smile she was sure she had seen before, but just couldn't place it.

The boys were working now. Maybe there would be enough money for a proper stove and chimney. Doll would be home from school soon, so Elva thought she would put the soup on and have a lie down before she had to face the trauma of the evening meal.

She didn't wake until the flames were filling the kitchen and racing towards the bed. Smoke was filling her lungs. She had to get out quickly. Moving swiftly towards the door of the church, she was suffocating. She fell to the floor just as the beautiful, horrible, coloured glass window exploded. She smiled, knowing Gustav would mourn his window more than her. Before the darkness engulfed her, she was sure she heard her mother call. Elva cried.

Lee Ping's community was growing. Martha's groans and Violet's

sobbing could be heard on the darkest nights. Their entwined bones would not be found until the next century, when the gully was turned into a huge concrete drain. Heavy rain would fill the bluestone gutters and flood the roads and low-lying buildings. This modern engineering accomplishment would control the water that rushed down the hill from one end of town to the other. The bones left of Martha and Violet were buried under the concrete. No one cared.

Elva's screams could be heard every time she heard the preacher say, 'Tell the preacher you love him and he will give you what you want.'



Lee Ping would watch as Dirk married Mary, still not knowing she was his sister. They would produce healthy children and the family grew and grew. The stories of Gustav and Elva faded and were forgotten. When Hitler and the Third Reich were destroying the world, the Schmidts had become the Smiths and the next generations lost all knowledge of their German heritage.

Gustav Schmidt's name was wiped from every record Ravens Hollow had. The church was burned to the ground without a trace of it ever being there. Dirk, Kurt and Mary wanted it that way. The weight of the cross was lifted from their shoulders.