

Anna

"Anna! Don't throw up so much dirt!

"I'm up to four jacks, how am I supposed to grab four jacks without sweeping up a little dirt?"

"I don't know, but it's going in my eyes."

"George, you wanted to play at the gate, we could have played on the grass instead!"

George's eyebrows lowered and his nostrils flared, then he pursed and scrunched up his lips.

"I thought as much," said Anna. "Now I'm up to five." Anna tossed a jack into the air. As she did, the sun dropped behind a Kurrajong tree. Slithers of shade fell across her face, and strands of her dark brown hair fell free from her ponytail. They swung across her cheeks, diving in and out of the light. The jack twirled upwards. As it spiraled back down George let out a curse and shut his eyes. He opened them to see five jacks resting in his sister's palm. His mouth opened wider.

"How— How? They were spread out all over the ground."

"If you don't shut your eyes every time, you might see how I do it," Anna said.

They both chuckled.

"Fair enough, but I still think if you didn't throw so much dust—" A fist full of dirt showered over him. He shook his head, rocked forward and opened his eyes once more. Another jack was in the air, already spiraling back down. It hit the ground. George stared. He stared at the imprint of St George on horseback, brandishing a sword over a cowering dragon. His sister had just turned a jack into a gold sovereign! George lifted his head slowly as he did not want to miss

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the moment it turned back to a bone. His eyes met Anna's. They were wide, her jaw unhinged. In her hand - five jacks! They looked to the ground. There, resting in the dirt was a gold sovereign. The coin was not shining, it lay in shadow. Anna felt the warmth of the sun against her left cheek. She even felt it on her nose. But the coin was in shadow, it was definitely in shadow. The shade came full over her face, even as the sun poured through a gap in the tree, bathing everything around her. George gulped - Only now did Anna feel eyes upon her. Whatever, or whoever it was George must already know. Anna tilted her head back. Finding the coarse face of a man. He had a large sun-beaten nose, black hair protruded from his nostrils and blended into a thick, dark mustache and beard. A wide brimmed hat sat proud on top of his head. Anna spun her body around. He stood beside a black horse, as black as night. It was lean and strong, like its rider, and its muscles twitched as flies came to rest on its skin. Anna thought it looked like a racehorse. George gulped again. His eyes had left the stranger and were now focused elsewhere. Anna traced her brother's gaze. At the base of the Kurrajong tree, there were three men, waiting silently on horseback. Rifles hung at their sides. Bushrangers! They had to be bushrangers! Anna's arms came like lead, as fear threatened to grasp her whole. Despite it, she stood up, and turned to look at the man. George stayed silent, looking only forwards.

Anna did not know where the words were formed, but they left from her mouth. "Hello sir, what can we do for you?"

"Well little miss, we were just passing through, and thought to ourselves, those kids look like they could do with a nice surprise. Think of what you could buy with a sovereign!"

Anna's right leg began to tremble. She hooked her left foot behind it and tucked it in tight to hold it steady. She held her head up and dared to look straight into the bushrangers' eyes.

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"That's, well and good, but don't think me daft, what, what do you want?" said Anna. Her voice shook, but nothing like she expected.

The bushranger chuckled. "You are a clever little miss! The lads and I were hoping to head south, towards Carcoar. We would appreciate it, if anyone happened to come after us, that you told them we went that way." A finger stretched out in the direction of Boorowa.

"You want us to lie for you," said Anna.

"Well, not completely, we will go that way, a little. Then we will turn around and ride in the creek. We would appreciate it if you forgot the part where we change directions."

"I think we could do that," said Anna. "For another sovereign!" She had not intended to bargain; it just came out. She wished she could snivel back the words and force them down her throat. Instead, to her shock, she continued, "One for me, and one for my brother." Anna motioned at George; he was still staring at the three men under the Kurrajong tree.

"I'm not so sure he deserves a coin for his contribution," the man said. A warm grin gave life to his face, which no longer seemed so coarse. Instead, it seemed bright, calm, and friendly. Anna had not expected a bushranger to be friendly. She wasn't sure what she had expected. Her arms felt lighter. She looked at George and then back to the bushranger. "You may be right, but he is my brother, and you must look after your own."

"Quite right you are, little miss! Quite right you are, but one gold sovereign is still a lot, even split two ways."

"Ok, two gold sovereign's and I'll give you one of my jacks," Anna said. Surely, she had gone too far. Why would she say that? Why would she think she could bargain with an outlaw? He would get angry. She squinted her eyes and tilted her head to the side in preparation.

"You want to trade a knucklebone for a second coin?" he said.

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Anna had not seen his expression, but his voice still sounded cheerful. She turned back to face him. "Yes, I do sir. I have not lost more than two games to George all year, isn't that right, George? - George!"

"Hello, what?" said George, without turning his head.

"I have not lost more than two games to you all year, have I?"

"No, you haven't, but, well, you do throw up an awful lot of dust."

"Thank you, George!" said Anna.

"Ok, give me a knucklebone and I'll give you a second coin. But make it one of your best."

Anna carefully selected a jack and dropped it in the man's open hand. "This one is very good," she said.

"Thank you kindly, little miss." He reached into a satchel hanging around his waist and withdrew another gold sovereign. "Now you will have one with a terrified dragon, and one just with the Queen, seems fitting." He placed the coin gently into Anna's palm. The imprint of Queen Victoria facing up. "Just watch that this little dragon doesn't squeal." The bushranger nodded his head towards George. "If he does, we might get caught, but you will definitely lose your coins, they won't let you keep bushranger gold."

Bushranger gold! The words swirled in Anna's head. She was holding bushrangers' gold! Of course, she knew it, but hearing it!

"Don't worry Sir, he won't speak. Now, you and your friends enjoy the journey to Boorowa."

He smiled, tilted his hat and made his way over to the other men. His horse, tight by his side as he walked. No sooner was he with the, did he swing his muscular body astride it, and all

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four men galloped away. The sound of hooves on gravel faded into the distance till they could not be heard at all. Anna looked to the creek on the other side of the road, where willow trees covered the bank.

"We need to go tell Pa," George said.

"Shh, I'm trying to listen."

"Listen to what?"

"Just be quiet!"

"Anna, we need to go tell Pa."

"Will you please shut your mouth!"

George shut his mouth. They both waited. George flashed his eyes from the creek to the homestead. Then back to the creek. Then back to the homestead. Then they stayed on the homestead. Anna's eyes didn't move. Not till she heard the movement of water. She saw a hand tip the front of a hat, then she saw four men on horseback glide by. She thought they all looked like expert riders.

George did not notice any of it. "Anna, what are you waiting for, we need to go tell Pa before they come back."

"You mean you didn't hear—?"

"Hear what? Come on Anna, let's go tell Pa."

Anna didn't finish what she had been saying. Instead, she continued. "And what good would that do? Is Pa going to come down and stop them, do you want him to get shot? We should leave Pa out of it."

"I guess—, but we should tell the police, we should tell the police, shouldn't we?"

"We could—, they will take our coins away, but they will never catch the bushrangers."

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"But what if they come to ask us, they are going to come and ask us."

"We will tell them they went that way." Anna was pointing towards Boorowa.

"You are going to lie to them?"

"No - they did go that way, did they not?"

George nodded.

"And have you seen them come back?"

"No, but they said—"

"And you would believe what a bushranger tells you?"

George shook his head.

"Good, so we will tell them they went that way and say nothing of the coins."

George nodded.

"Ok, which coin would you like? You should probably have St George because your name is George."

"Yes, I would like the one with a dragon please."

"Well, you better pick it up." Anna motioned to the sovereign that was still sitting in the dirt. George reached down to pick up the coin. He turned it over in his hands and felt the weight of it.

"Are you sure we get one each?" he said.

"Of course, we do, it was your idea to play at the gate, if not for that, we would have no coins."

George puffed up his chest. "I always like to play by the gate, so you get to see people ride by, although I didn't know those men were there at all," he said.

"Neither did I, I don't think we would have known if that man didn't want us to."

"No, we wouldn't have! They were so quiet. I don't really understand why he bothered, if they were going to go that way anyway."

"Maybe he just wanted someone to smile at, and someone to smile back at him. He did seem awfully nice for an outlaw."

"Poppycock! It's all gone to your head," said George.

"Maybe— Maybe," said Anna.

Anna and George spent a long time discussing what had happened and what they might spend their gold on. George said he would buy a horse like the one the first bushranger had. He explained, because he showed no fear in the situation, it meant he would be a very good rider, probably better than the bushrangers. Anna did not correct him. She decided she would put her coin under her pillow and never spend it. She would keep it to remind herself that even outlaws had a heart. George thought that was ridiculous and told Anna so. Anna threw a fist full of dirt at him. George decided to shut up. The sun had long since dropped below the branches of the Kurrajong. It was about to dip and hit the horizon when they heard horses on the road. It was two troopers. "Make sure you keep your coin in your pocket. Don't touch it," Anna said. One of the troopers dismounted as they came alongside, the other remained on his horse, but at a slight distance. He moved his head from side to side, like a rabbit in a field checking for danger, expecting danger. The trooper on foot spoke,

"Hello, what are you kids doing down by the road?"

"We have been playing Jacks," said Anna, Showing a handful of them.

"Ahh, and have you seen anyone go by?"

"Yes," said Anna. "Four men came by not an hour ago."

The trooper directed his response to George.

"Do you remember what they looked like?"

George was starting to sweat. "Well, um." He gulped. "They were, they were in an awful hurry!" he said. Now Anna started to sweat. George nearly always caved in situations like this. She gave him a light kick in the shin. The trooper had not noticed. George turned to Anna, she looked encouragingly at him. George continued, "It was hard to see what they looked like as they rode past." George gestured as he spoke and found his index finger was now pointing towards Boorowa. He thought he might be sick. Did the trooper know he was lying? He glanced back at Anna. She had never looked prouder. Immediately, his chest rose, his back straightened, and a certainty came over his voice. "Yes sir, they went that way, all four of them, at great speed, so fast you couldn't make much out, I don't expect you will catch them. But if that is what you wish to try, they are headed for Boorowa."

Anna chimed in, "Yes sir, George is right, they flew past here on their horses! I did notice that the front man, he was on a black one, it looked like a racehorse. I didn't take much notice of the others, they were a blur in the dust," Anna said.

"Yes, well, it was a racehorse, Comus II, he stole it," said the trooper. He continued, "You two should know better than to be down by the road when it's getting dark. Best you get on home and let us track them." Anna and George agreed that it was getting late, and they should be heading home. So, they left the troopers and made their way back up the hill. The trooper's rode on.

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She pushed her right thumb up the Queen's neck, then onto her forehead. Now it began to tip, falling over her index finger and slipping under her middle finger. Her thumb moved underneath, to stop it dropping—There was a knock at the door. Anna pulled her fingers apart and let the coin fall into her left palm. Shutting her fingers tightly around it, "Yes, who is it," she said.

"It's George."

"Oh George! Come in!"

George stepped through the door. Anna thought he looked particularly sharp, so told him so.

"That's because I don't have anyone throwing dirt over me today," George said.

"George, we dig for a living—"

"Yes, I know, and look how much cleaner I am when it's just me!" They both laughed.

"So, have you found anything?"

"I might have found it!"

"What?"

George struck his hand into his pocket and pulled out a piece of thread with a knucklebone bound tightly to the bottom of it, "does this look familiar?"

Anna rushed forward and lifted herself onto her tiptoes, "you're kidding, you must be kidding!" She dropped back to the flat of her feet. "I guess it could be any old bone. There is no way to know if it is mine," she said.

"Not even if it has LM scribed on the back?"

"Why would I care that it had L—?"

"Little Miss!" They both cried together!

"Well, I'm glad we didn't tell Pa when we were kids, and I'm glad we didn't know they had just robbed a stagecoach either, we would have told the officers the truth straight away," George said.

"You mean— *You!* would have told them straight away." Anna replied.

George laughed.

"So where is it!" said Anna.

"You're going to love the spot."

"It's right by the town in Carcoar isn't it?"

"No!"

"It's close to the town though?!"

"No."

"Hmm, under a nice shady tree by the creek?"

"Yes!"

"George! That was a joke."

"I know, but my reply wasn't!"

"What?"

"Come, I'll show you." Anna went to put her boots on.

"Oh, you won't need your boots."

"What? don't be daft, of course I'll need boots."

"Ok, sure, boots would be good."

"George?"

"Well, you should wear boots, but you could do without them."

"Is it close to home?"

George shrugged.

"It is!"

"Just follow me!"

George led Anna down to the gate.

"Ok George, now where? They didn't bury it at our gate!"

"Over there!" George pointed at the Kurrajong tree! "I was on my way home, and, I don't know, I was lost in thought, and wandered over to the tree. Then I looked up, and fancied I saw something hanging a few branches up, and, well, it was your jack, he tied it on quite nicely."

Anna rushed over to the tree. "Which branch?"

"That one, just there, you can see where it was tied," George pointed out.

Anna was on her knees, digging right underneath the mark. Strands of her hair fell free from her ponytail and swung across her face. Dirt went everywhere, including over George. He didn't mind.

"They must have come back after we went to the house, well, at least, Ben, must have come back."

Then she found a satchel. She dusted off the sides, and pulled back the top, it was full of gold coins.

"It appears you were right, Anna! Even bushrangers have a heart!"