



LEGACY SAMPLE EXTRACT

PART ONE

Homeward Bound

On the tracks, October 1849

Ruby pulled the collar of the oilskin coat up to her chin and shivered as the mare splashed through the mud. This was not the most romantic way to begin married life, and although she could sense the warmth of her grandmother Nell's spirit travelling with her, she hadn't expected to feel quite so down-hearted.

The latest drought had broken with devastating ill timing, for there were still many miles to go before they reached the valley beyond the Blue Mountains, and as the rain hammered on Ruby's hat, it bowed the brim so the icy water ran down her neck and soaked her to the skin. The downpour was the only sound to be heard as the four oxen plodded through the valley, for even the roar of the nearby waterfall was muffled in its thunder. Talking was impossible, and anyway, the six of them had nothing to say to each other in the misery of trying to ignore sodden clothes, keep the sheep and string of horses together, and the overladen dray from getting bogged down in the mud.

Ruby had met James Tyler a year ago, and it had been love at first sight for both of them. He'd arrived at Moonrakers looking for work, bringing with him an energy and hunger for adventure that matched her own. He'd swept her off her feet with his charming ways, good looks and roguish smile, and when he had expressed his desire to follow Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth's route through the Blue Mountains to the endless pastures and plentiful water that were so perfect for rearing sheep, she'd known she had to go with him. Her childish passion for Finn was exactly that, and James – kind, sweet-natured James – was the man she'd been waiting for. When he had proposed six months later and slipped the ring on her finger – when he had kissed her for the first time and held her close in the moonlight – she had known without doubt that this was the man with whom she would share the rest of her life.

Her father, Niall, had at first refused to countenance her marrying an English Protestant when there were good Catholic husbands to be found among the ever-increasing Irish community. He'd been further disturbed by the young couple's intention to travel into the wilderness, where frequent native attacks were being reported ever more regularly by the squatters. Yet he'd eventually yielded to her unswerving determination to follow in her grandmother's pioneering footsteps, and Ruby had married James three weeks ago on her nineteenth birthday. Niall's gift to the newly-weds was the lease for several thousand square acres of prime grazing land.

Niall, whose keen eye had yet to fail him, had exploited both the market crash five years before and new legislation by buying offloaded sheep at sixpence a head, cattle that had once cost six guineas each for seven shillings and vast parcels of land for pennies. His forward thinking meant that as long as the demand for wool continued, Ruby and James's futures were secure.

The four oxen lumbered along as they pulled the enormous dray, which was loaded with supplies. The sheep had lost their skittishness and formed a bedraggled mob as they were chivvied along by the young Scottish shepherd and his dogs. The three ticket-of-leave men – convicts who'd been freed to earn a wage for the remainder of their sentences – led the string of horses through the rain, ready to put their shoulders to the wheels if they got stuck again, and James had abandoned his seat on the dray to grasp the leading oxen's harness and encourage it to keep going.

As the rain fell in a blinding curtain, the surrounding trees trembled beneath its force and Ruby huddled deeper into the oilskin coat. The oxen managed twelve miles on a good day but only three or four on days like this, and she was beginning to wonder if they would ever reach the valley, for the precipitous mountain trail still lay ahead. Yet the dreams she'd nurtured since listening to the stories from Grandma Nell and Aunt Alice remained, as did the yearning to experience her own adventure. Her imagination had been fired by those stories, and although the reality of experiencing the hardships and battles of the pioneer was daunting, it nevertheless strengthened her resolve. With the spirit of Nell to guide her, she and James would survive this trek into the unknown and would raise their flock and their children in a landscape far from the crowded settlements that now surrounded Sydney and crept along the coast.

She was startled from her thoughts by a shout and peered out from beneath her dripping hat-brim. James had brought the oxen to a halt. 'What's the matter?'

'The river's about to run a banker,' he shouted back. 'We have two choices: stay here and get flooded out or cross and risk getting drowned.' He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his fair hair in frustration.

Ruby eyed the swiftly flowing river, noted that it seemed shallow enough a bit further upstream and looked back at her husband. 'We can't stay here. The land isn't high enough to give protection if it floods, but if we take the dray further up, there's a way across.'

James regarded her, his brown eyes thoughtful as he tugged on the hat and turned to the others. 'What do you think?'

It seemed the men agreed with her, and James climbed back on the dray and took up whip and reins. With grumbling unwillingness, the animals headed upstream to where the water tumbled over a bed of rock and shale, and offered dubious passage to the other side.

Ruby dismounted as the shepherd and his dogs brought the mob of sheep to the riverbank. The oxen bellowed in fear. She understood how they felt, as it was a daunting prospect. The river raced over glossy shale, eddying around boulders and dragging at tree roots and reeds that clung to the banks. Broken branches and clumps of weed raced past, and in the rapidly dwindling light she could see the bloated corpse of a wallaby that had become stuck between two rocks.

‘I’ll cross first and find a way,’ shouted James. He handed the reins to Fergal, the sturdiest of their hired men. ‘When I signal, bring them over.’

His wink to Ruby before he waded into the water was one of bravado and her heart began to thud as she realised he was as scared as she. Step by step he found purchase on the slippery riverbed and countered the force of the water. It reached his hips and then his waist, but still he ploughed on.

Her heart hammering, Ruby’s mouth dried as she willed him to reach the other side.

And then he was gone.

Ruby screamed and would have plunged in after him if the shepherd, Duncan, hadn’t hauled her from the edge. ‘James,’ she yelled. ‘James, where are you?’

‘There!’ shouted Fergal. ‘He’s over there.’

James was clinging to a boulder downstream, but he was still in danger. Ruby’s breath was a sob as James strained against the current to drag himself clear. She urged him on, every muscle tensed as if she too was battling for survival. James grappled with the slippery boulder and, with inexorable slowness, began to gain leverage. Inch by inch he dragged himself up until he was slumped on what appeared to be a rocky outcrop. Scrambling and slipping, he used this natural causeway to gain the other side. Ruby burst into tears as he waved from the opposite bank.

‘Och, there’s nae time for tears, lassie,’ muttered Duncan, the shepherd. ‘I have tae get these sheep across yet.’

Ruby was so relieved James was safe she lost her usual reticence with the dour Scot and gave him a beaming smile. ‘Then you’ll need all the help you can get,’ she said. ‘What do you want me to do?’

He glowered and mumbled something she couldn’t hear above the rain, then turned and began to marshal dogs and sheep. Ruby shrugged. Duncan Stewart was a free man and a skilled shepherd, but he’d never win prizes for his manners. She turned to the most senior of the ticket-of-leave men, who was checking the ropes that tied their possessions to the dray. ‘What’s the plan, Fergal?’

The Irishman surveyed the river. ‘James has signalled that there’s a sharp dip where he lost his footing, so I’ll have to be taking the beasts midstream and then south to those boulders.’ He nudged back his hat, eyes narrowed against the rain as he gloomily surveyed the river. ‘The sheep are another matter,’ he muttered, scratching the stubble on his chin. ‘If the flow’s strong enough to sweep away your man, then a woolly stands no chance.’

‘We can take the lambs on horseback,’ she replied.

Fergal glanced at the milling sheep and shook his head. ‘You’ll have your hands full with the packhorses. I’ll get the dray across, unload it and come back for the sheep. It’s the only way.’

Ruby gathered up the reins of two of the extra horses and climbed back into the saddle as Fergal told Duncan his plan and the others followed suit. Fergal clambered on to the dray, and, with a crack of the whip, set the oxen lumbering towards the water. They baulked and snorted as it sucked at their legs, but the sting of the whip and the shouts of the men kept them moving and the dray was soon up to its axles in water.

Ruby nudged her mare out of the shallows, and as the chill swirl rose beyond the stirrups, she had to fight to keep the horses calm. Their ears were back, eyes rolling with terror as their necks arched and they yanked on the leading reins. The mare's hoofs slithered over the shale, and at each shout and crack of the whip Ruby felt her flinch.

'Steady girl,' she murmured, as she struggled to maintain a grip on the leading reins and her purchase in the saddle. The water reached her thighs, the packhorses were being buffeted by the current, and the heavily laden saddlebags threatened to drag them down.

'Gerrup there!' yelled Fergal, as the oxen stumbled and bellowed and almost came to a halt. 'Gerron, yer bastards.'

The oxen strained as the dray's wheels scraped over the treacherous rocks that littered the river bed and threatened to sink in the soft shale. The tightly sealed barrels at the bottom of the load were soaked as the dray approached midstream, and with each jolt of the wheels the precious cargo began to shift. Ruby knew there was nothing they could do if it came untied, and as she and the two men urged the oxen on, she prayed it would hold until they reached the other side. The whip cracked repeatedly as Fergal used every oath he knew to keep the beasts going. As they scented the sanctuary of the far bank, they at last began to pull their burden willingly.

Ruby was soaked, her hands numb with cold as she urged the horses on to firm ground. As she slid from the saddle and searched for James, she realised he'd gone to help the others, who were still fighting to get horses and bullocks ashore.

One by one the men reached the bank and the spare horses were hobbled so they wouldn't stray. Fergal's voice was gruff from yelling as the bullocks dragged the dray away from the water. 'Hurry,' he rasped to the men, as he jumped down. 'The river's rising every minute.'

In silent desperation their numb fingers fumbled with sodden ropes, and the bundles, sacks and casks were carried into the trees. Tools, seed, furniture and clothes were quickly unloaded and placed beneath the oiled canvas that had kept most of it dry thus far.

Ruby helped Fergal unhitch three of the bullocks and get them hobbled, and then adjusted the harness so the remaining beast could pull the dray. She glanced repeatedly across to the far side of the river where Duncan waited, surrounded by sheep, the faithful dogs panting at his feet. The river seemed higher and swifter – the bullock would take time to cross and would then have to make the journey back. It was a huge risk, but they had no choice.

'I have an idea,' shouted James. 'Take off the wheels, tie the ropes to the rear corners and lash them round these tree trunks. We'll float the dray but guide it with the ropes so it can be pulled across the flow.'

The sturdy hubs were swiftly knocked away, and the iron-rimmed wooden wheels were hauled off the axles. Once the ropes were secured, James sat astride the bullock as it dragged the dray through the mud and into the water.

Ruby added her meagre weight to the ropes as the men used the tree trunks for leverage and slowly eased them out. They held their breath as the current began to batter and tug at the dray, but the ropes kept it steady and it floated neatly behind the bullock. As the beast finally reached the other side, they gratefully released the ropes and James reeled them in, lashing them round the nearest tree. It would be up to him and Duncan to pay them out on the return journey.

Peering through the rain, Ruby could just make out the two men who were coaxing the bell-wether, the lead ram, on to the dray. She was about to get back in the saddle when Fergal stopped her. 'Stay here,' he ordered.

'You're going to need every pair of hands if we're to get them safely across,' she retorted.

'James doesn't want you at risk again,' he shouted over the thunder of rain and river. 'Do as you're told and stay here.' Without waiting for an argument, he took his horse back into the water.

Ruby clenched her fists. Fergal might gain his freedom in less than a year, but he had no right to order her about, and it was infuriating to be made to feel useless when she was perfectly capable of helping. She stood on the riverbank, burning with frustration as Fergal and the others headed for the other side.

Duncan's dogs worked swiftly, nipping and nudging the reluctant sheep until they followed their leader on to the wooden flat-bed. With the two smallest lambs tucked safely in the vast pockets of his coat, and one tethered by its feet round his neck, Duncan stepped on to the dray as the bullock was hurried back into the water.

Ruby held her breath. The sheep were tightly packed and beginning to panic, and the makeshift raft was fast becoming unstable. Two of the rams locked horns as the ewes jostled, their lambs in danger of being trampled as they bleated in terror. The dogs ran across their backs, nipping and snarling to bring them to order, but they were too badly spooked. One of the ewes took a flying leap, landed in the water and was swept away, to be swiftly joined by a second.

Fergal managed to grab its fleece, haul the beast out of the water and dump it across his saddle. The others placed their mounts to form a barrier on either side of the dray, preventing more of the stupid creatures following suit. The riders had to contend not only with terrified horses but the pull of the current, and the sheer instability of the makeshift raft that seemed destined to drown its cargo.

Ruby swung into the saddle. The ewes were bumping and boring, and unseen by the men, a lamb had been knocked into the water. Digging her heels into the mare's flank, she set her in a gallop along the bank. The lamb was bleating piteously as it was swept along by the current, and Ruby knew her only hope was to head it off further down.

The current was stronger now, the mare whinnying with terror as it was forced to swim. She could see the lamb being tossed and spun by the raging eddies. The mare was struggling against the tide, but Ruby clamped her thighs, let go of the reins and reached out. Her fingers touched sodden wool and she grabbed the lamb by its neck. Hauling the terrified creature out of the water, she stuffed it down the front of her voluminous oilskin coat and snatched up the reins. Now all she had to do was get back to the bank.

The river tugged and pulled and almost knocked the mare off her feet as Ruby coaxed her to keep going. The lamb struggled and bleated, its little hoofs battering her chest as it tried to escape the coat, but Ruby ignored the discomfort, determined to get the three of them to safety.

They emerged to shallower water and at last gained higher ground. Ruby was trembling so badly from cold and fear she couldn't dismount. She sat there in the teeming rain, the lamb quieter now, its head peeking out of her collar as the bullock finally dragged the dray out of the river. She began to sob with relief as the sheep skittered off into the bush, the dogs giving chase. James was safe, and although they had lost a ewe and two lambs, the majority of the mob had made it. Her tears were a release, for until now she hadn't fully digested the very real danger they had all been in.

She handed over the lamb to Duncan, who glared at her and turned away without a word, and as she was gathering enough energy to dismount, she was yanked from the saddle by James.

He clasped her to his chest. 'Don't you *ever* pull a stunt like that again,' he said fiercely. 'I thought I'd lost you.'

She clung to his sodden coat as the rain battered them and was soothed. There were still hundreds of miles ahead of them, but no matter what dangers lay ahead Ruby's faith remained unwavering. As long as she and James were together they would survive.