

Excerpt from

Shaking Trees

Stanthorpe 1957

The orchard's tranquillity was disrupted by the sound of hurried feet. Amongst the branches of a healthy apple tree, and poised high on a weathered timber ladder, was a young man. He immediately dropped his gaze to scan the rows of trees below and saw flashes of yellow and white, and bare skin through the foliage. Abruptly, the runner stopped close enough for him to hear heavy pants of breath, followed by a surprising outburst of angry words. Attempting to get a better view of who was venting such fury, the man leant down and slowly parted the budding branches. With his vision cleared, he spied beneath him a head of shaking brown curls. A scream pierced the air, and taken off guard the young man lurched, feet slipping from rungs. Vainly grabbing handfuls of leaves, he lost his balance and with a discord of snapping and thrashing fell awkwardly through the greenery, landing heavily on the dry earth below.

He let out a groan and opened his eyes. Midst the settling dust, he caught sight of two white sandshoes. Pushing himself up to catch his breath, he discovered that the shoes belonged to a pair of tanned legs leading up to a pair of yellow cotton shorts. Tilting his head back further and squinting against the sunlight, he saw that above the slender waist and white blouse was a scowling countenance. If it weren't for the incensed expression he would have described it as 'a ripper of a face'.

'What were you doing?' the young woman said coldly through a pair of pouting pink lips.

The young man struggled painfully to his feet, and on straightening found that that he towered over her by almost a foot. Though shorter, she was no shrinking violet, he thought, as she lifted her chin and glowered up at him.

Moving her hands to her hips she asked accusingly, 'Were you spying on me?'

He was momentarily distracted from the absurdity of this question by the tautness of her lace blouse and the way it hugged her shapely chest. ‘What? God, no, I was just inspecting the fruit.’

‘The fruit?’ She arched a defined eyebrow.

‘Yes...in the tree,’ he quickly added pointing upwards, and as she tilted her head to scan the overhead branches he stole another glimpse of the fetching blouse.

‘Those blossoms...are they apples?’

He spread his arms wide, ‘Well, this is a flamin’ apple orchard.’

Eyeing him from head to foot, and taking obvious note of his stained shirt and ripped khaki shorts, she stated, ‘You work here.’

‘That’s right,’ he frowned, ‘Good, honest work too.’ As she continued to stare, he self-consciously brushed dust from his clothes and twigs from his hair.

Her eyes suddenly widened and her voice dropped to almost a whisper, ‘I suppose you...you heard me then.’

‘Holey-moley, heard you?’ he scoffed, ‘You sure were spittin’ some chips. And that banshee scream, well it scared the livin’ daylights out of me.’

She looked away, embarrassed, ‘I’m a little annoyed at the moment.’

‘That ain’t half obvious.’ He offered a consolatory smile. ‘Anyway, I thought it was just rough blokes like me who cracked darkies like that. Not nice young ladies.’

The glower instantly returned as she sneered, ‘Nice? What makes you think I’m nice?’

He took a step back and held up his hands, ‘Okay, maybe I jumped the gun a bit there’.

She stamped her foot and yelled, ‘Well I am sick of being so damn nice!’

The intensity of her outburst caused the young man to hesitate a response. Should he advise against rebellious living, he thought, or offer her a helping hand in falling from grace? He knew which one he’d rather give a go. His dilemma was short lived for she surprised him yet again by changing tack.

Her face softened once more and so did her voice. ‘By the way, that was quite a dive you took.’

‘Yeah it was,’ he gave a stretch, ‘But I’m alright.’

‘Are you sure? Your face is bleeding,’ she pointed.

His hand went to his cheek and touched wetness. Checking his fingers he saw that they were smeared with blood. The woman stepped closer, and reaching into the confines of her blouse, produced a neatly pressed handkerchief. Without hesitation she raised her hand and dabbed roughly at the scratch. Though it stung, the young man felt no urge to stop her ministrations. The close proximity allowed him to examine her more closely and discover that she smelt like a bouquet of freshly cut roses, and bore an intriguing crescent shaped scar on her forehead. Their eyes met and an unusual emotion was stirred within him. One that could not be given a name for it was both exhilarating and ominous. He gave a shudder.

She pulled away, 'I really don't think it's that serious.'

He smiled. 'Then I'm sure it hasn't harmed my good looks any.'

The green of her eyes intensified, 'Someone certainly has tickets on himself.'

Then she handed him the bloodied hanky. 'You can have this now. I have more where that came from.'

Taking it, he gave her enticing bodice a curious glance, and wondered.

She made a move to leave, 'Which direction is the road?'

He pointed. 'Just take the path over there until you reach the fence line, and then follow it over the hill. You can't miss it.'

She turned, and hurried away, chestnut curls bouncing on her shoulders with each purposeful step.

Sweat dripped down his forehead. He lifted the fine linen handkerchief to wipe it away and noticed that under a bright red smear of blood was an embroidered letter M. He quickly raised his eyes, but she was gone

'Well I'll be blowed,' he frowned, for he was startled to discover that with this beguiling stranger's departure he had never felt more alone.