

## The Orchard *(James Culverhouse)*



Christmas this year didn't quite turn out as planned as Jack rinsed the blood off his hands.

His brother-in-law should not have said that. Jack was always loyal to his family, even to his overbearing mother. He watched the rivulets of blood mix in with the water as it swirled around his mother's kitchen sink. The knuckles on his right hand were starting to swell, the cuts started to sting. The knuckles started to throb painfully.

He had watched his brother-in-law exit the house. His nose broken and spurting blood, his sister fussing over her husband. She looked back with hatred and Jack just stood there and met her gaze. Fury and rage had been in his eyes was now replaced with relief. Jack knew, in that moment, if Robert hadn't picked himself off the floor and exited the back door into the orchard, he probably would have had to have disposed of a corpse. Even his demanding mother, the one who pushed him to the brink so many times, knew to stay silent for this one. She was the reason for the affray. They had spoken about Evelyn and her future and it had become nasty. Jack suddenly realised that most of the rage had been directed at her. It was for this reason Evelyn stayed silent, because she knew.

Droplets of blood had already started to stain the fraying carpet, which gave Robert a convenient excuse to walk away from Jack. The apple orchard wasn't as well tended as it had once been. Tom, Jack's father, when he had been alive, had tended the orchard every day. The orchard had been his father's sanctuary. Even with the trees in desperate need of pruning, they still fruited every year in honour of Tom's memory, at least in Jack's mind. The cold, temperate weather in southern Tasmania made the conditions perfect for growing these trees.

Jack returned from his memories of the moment just passed and kept rinsing his hands, to reduce the pain. He should really go to a hospital to get his hand checked. His rage had subsided and now the guilt took over. He had ruined another Christmas for the family. Jack wasn't sorry for that, it was common for him to do so but he felt sorry for the children. They didn't have to witness Dad's rage against the family machine.

Jack had his own life in Queensland now. He was happily married, with two children. Robert and Eva had none. Eva wanted Jack and his family to move down and look after mum, even though they were already living in Tasmania. The thought of having this responsibility and the prospect of moving from his life in Queensland made Jack see red again. He sat by himself at the Christmas table and poured himself a drink, in an effort to stop himself from shaking with rage.

Christmas this year did turn out according to plan.