

Calmer

INT. RAMSHACKLE FARMHOUSE - AFTERNOON

A rough wooden table is cluttered with tin plates and mugs. MATTHEW, seven years old and dressed in the simplest of woollen clothes, clears the clutter away dutifully.

The farmhouse is small and simple, typical of a poor farming family in remote late-colonial Tasmania. Somewhere outside, a horse is whinnying.

Matthew picks up a brown bottle half full of liquid and tests the weight ruefully, gauging how much is left.

JANE (O.S.)

Put it down, Matthew.

JANE, Matthew's mother, is bedridden. Her face is drawn and thin, her hair a dry tangle. Her bed is in the main room of the farmhouse, set up next to one of the larger windows.

MATTHEW

I should pour it down the basin.

He sits the bottle on a rickety shelf and goes on tidying.

JANE

Don't judge your father too harshly. It's not easy for him.

A particularly loud whinny makes Jane peer out through the thick glass window; her husband GREGORY and an elderly neighbour MARVIN are stumbling out of the stable doors and in to the yard behind the farmhouse.

EXT. OUTSIDE STABLE - CONTINUOUS

Attached to the rough brick farmhouse is an equally rough stable. A creeping vine has claimed most of the back wall, choking most of the light out of the stable.

Straightening up, Gregory scowls at the stable doors. Marvin shrugs impassively at him.

GREGORY

Fucking willful beast.

MARVIN

Lock the bloody door and starve the mongrel, I say.

The men glance at the farmhouse window, then at each other.

GREGORY

It was worth a shot. Thanks for coming all the way up here, Marvin.

MARVIN

That's what neighbours are for, Greg. Sorry I couldn't help.

In the shadows, the horse whinnies again.

INT. RAMSHACKLE FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Matthew comes to his mother's bedside as she turns away from the window. Jane is paralysed from the waist down and any movement is an effort.

Matthew gently lifts her legs, straightening them out so that she can more easily reach the nearby books.

JANE

Thank you love. Now where were we?

MATTHEW

I told you, mother, I don't like...

JANE

Reading, I know.

MATTHEW

It's not that. I just... don't like talking about you not being here.

JANE

(gentle)

I didn't teach you to read for nothing, my dear boy. A sound mind is the best thing I can hope to leave you with. You'll read every one of these books - and one day you'll thank my spirit for it.

Another whinny is followed by a solid thud against the far wall. Matthew and Jane look at the wall, then at each other.

MATTHEW

Fine.

JANE

When you turn ten, I want you to read this book first, then this one will elaborate on what the...

FADE OUT

INT. RAMSHACKLE FARMHOUSE - EVENING

The farmhouse is lit by a potbelly stove and a small lantern. Jane watches as Gregory pours himself a drink. His hand is unsteady, his eyes distant.

JANE

There must be another way.

Gregory knocks the drink back, pours another.

On a bed in the corner, Matthew is pretending to be asleep.

GREGORY

He's gone wild, Jane. Once a stallion breaks, there's no gettin' him back.

JANE

He's fretting for me.

Gregory's lips twist angrily, but he steadies himself with a drink and a long, measured breath.

GREGORY

That horse'll kick the stable down before long and the house will come down with it. He's in pain.

He stands unsteadily and comes to kneel next to Jane's bed.

GREGORY

He has to be put down, Jane.

JANE

No.

GREGORY

I cannot care for you both...
(sotto) you wouldn't need my care if not for that damned animal.

JANE

Will you put me down as well?

Gregory returns to the table and pours another drink.

JANE

I want you to fetch the Whisperer.

GREGORY

The Whisperer? That devil!

JANE

They say he can calm any animal.

GREGORY

Bewitching beasts... he's half
beast himself! It isn't natural.

JANE

Bring him. Please. If he can
help... I would not outlive my
beautiful stallion.

GREGORY

Even if it means inviting madness
into this home.

JANE

Madness, sadness... it cannot get
any worse than it is, my love.

Facing away from them, Matthew stares blankly into the dark.

EXT. EDGE OF THE FARM - THE NEXT DAY

The Whisperer, a tough older man with hooded eyes, steps out
of the treeline and takes in the small farm. Gregory follows
just behind the Whisperer, watching him closely.

They can hear the stallion snorting in the stable, so they
keep on towards the Farmhouse.

EXT. OUTSIDE STABLE - MOMENTS LATER

Matthew waits outside the stable, awkwardly holding a
weathered rifle. As the men approach, the Whisperer regards
him coldly and Matthew takes a nervous step back.

Gregory holds back as well while the Whisperer walks to the
stable's threshold and peers into the darkness.

GREGORY

The damned beast has always been a
burden. Calm him enough to let me
approach. I'll do the rest.

WHISPERER

No. This one can be healed. I'll
calm him, then take him away.

Gregory steps closer to the Whisperer, lowering his voice.

GREGORY

The horse stays. His meat will sell
for two pounds in Campbell Town...

WHISPERER

Then you're on your own.

The Whisperer turns to walk away. Gregory scowls.

GREGORY

Wait. Wait, damn it!

Matthew looks over at the window, where Jane is watching
anxiously.

GREGORY

You can take the horse. Just... get
on with it.

The Whisperer nods and walks back towards the stable.
Matthew hands the rifle to his father and cautiously follows
him.

INT. WRECKED STABLE - CONTINUOUS

The stallion is a huge, muscled beast that skips nervously
from foot to foot in the small space. The whites of his eyes
almost glow in the dim light. He's skittish and aggressive,
his bulky frame dangerous in the small space.

Matthew watches from the threshold as the Whisperer calmly
raises his hands and approaches the horse, whispering
something too quiet to hear.

The horse flicks its head and snorts loudly, but the
Whisperer doesn't break stride. He whispers to the horse,
soothingly, mysteriously... and after a moment the stallion
lowers its head in to his waiting hands.

Suddenly Gregory strides into the stable with the rifle
raised to his shoulder. He shoots the horse point-blank.

EXT. OUTSIDE STABLE - CONTINUOUS

The sound of the gunshot echoes around the farm.

Jane's horrified face is pressed against the farmhouse
window.

The Whisperer stumbles into view. He is covered in blood,
holding his ears. Matthew scuttles out and huddles against
the creeping vine.

Gregory follows them into the yard, still holding the rifle warily. The Whisperer turns to face him in a cold fury.

Jane bashes her weak hands against the window, screaming, distracting Gregory - and the Whisperer launches at him.

WHISPERER

Murderer!

The Whisperer strikes Gregory's face and the farmer drops the rifle as he tries to fend off more blows. He lowers his head and pushes into the Whisperer, knocking him off his feet, but the Whisperer pulls him to the ground as well.

The two men wrestle in the dirt until the Whisperer rolls away and they stand up and face off again.

A loud click makes them stop and look; Matthew is holding the rifle. Tears are tracking down his cheeks. The gun is cocked, wavering back and forth between the two men.

The Whisperer is closest to him. He calmly raises his hands and take a step towards the boy, whispering something too quiet to hear.

GREGORY

Matthew! Matthew, put it down!

Matthew glares at his father furiously, pointing the gun at him, then swinging it towards the Whisperer, who is almost close enough to touch him.

The Whisperer whispers, whispers to Matthew, slowly reaches his hands forward and touches the boy on the shoulder. Matthew, calm now, looks from the Whisperer to his father.

The rifle follows his gaze.

GREGORY

Matthew?

Another gunshot rings out through the farm.

INT. RAMSHACKLE FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jane hits the window with her hand, over and over. She is trying to scream but her breath is too weak

JANE

No! No! Matthew!

Gregory falls to the ground, blood seeping away from him.

Jane gasps for breath, horrified.

EXT. OUTSIDE STABLE - CONTINUOUS

Matthew looks down the barrel of his rifle to where his father is slumped on the ground.

The Whisperer, still whispering, kneels next to him, bringing their eyes level.

Matthew regards him calmly.

INT. RAMSHACKLE FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Jane struggles to find the breath to scream. She bangs her fists against the window. She can't see her son; the Whisperer's broad back blocks her view.

JANE
(breathless)
Matthew! Matthew!

In the yard, the Whisperer is standing up. He takes a step back from Matthew - who now has the barrel of the rifle under his chin.

JANE
No!

EXT. OUTSIDE STABLE - CONTINUOUS

Matthew's eyes gaze out into the distance. The muzzle of the gun pushes into the skin above his neck. His fingers find their way down the the rifle, to the trigger.

The Whisperer watches on impassively, with only the ghost of a vengeful smirk playing across his features.

Through the farmhouse window Jane, hysterical, hits the thick glass over and over, trying to scream her son's name.

JANE
Matthew! No! Matthew!

CUT TO BLACK

A single shot rings out in the dark.