

MARY HAWKINS



*While seeking truth
and justice, two people
scarred by the past need
to find forgiveness and
real love to have any
hope of a future together.*



Justice at Baragula



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*He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful
God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*

Deut 32:4 (NIV)

“ . . . For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah

29:11 (NIV)

Chapter One

Brad's breath caught in his throat. The bride was radiant but the *bridesmaid*...

She was so beautiful he couldn't resist peeping at her again.

The very pretty matron-of-honour was keeping an eye on the small flower girl who held hands with her scowling twin brother. He clutched the now empty, satin-covered ring cushion.

But it was Madeline...Maddie...

From the moment she'd walked down the aisle in the procession behind Jillian, Emily and the twins to join the waiting groom and his attendants at the front of this old but beautifully decorated little church, he had been unable to stop glancing at her several times. He was more used to seeing Madeline Honeysuckle in her farm working gear. Even when she ventured into Baragula her usual garb was jeans and tough work boots. On the fairly rare occasions she was at church on Sundays, she usually exchanged them for tailored slacks and low-heeled court shoes.

Today...today she was more beautiful than he could ever remember. Instead of being drawn back severely in a pony tail, her dark auburn hair with those threads of gold when the sun stroked it nestled around her bare shoulders. In the past he had so often teased her about those hazel eyes that changed colour with whatever she was wearing. They would be green today, reflecting the colour of her glamorous bridesmaid's dress. But when she had joined the men waiting at the front of the church he'd felt a stab of concern. Behind her make-up she had been very pale, so pale he almost took an involuntary step toward her but she scowled at him. Colour flooded her face before she had turned quickly away. Not once had he caught her eye again during the ceremony.

Until now. She glanced at him, caught him staring. He began to smile, but she glared before looking away toward Jillian and Steve again.

'With this ring I thee wed.'

Steve Honeysuckle's deep, emotional tones brought Brad's focus back to the ceremony. He was there to help support Maddie's brother and his lifelong friend on this most important day. Jillian's brother, Doctor Matthew Davidson, stood between Steve and himself. Matthew also was obviously trying hard to concentrate on the ceremony. Brad saw him look at the matron-of-honour, his wife Emily, then on toward their twins. The latest edition to his family, Baby Sonya, was hopefully still sound asleep in her grandmother's arms at the back of the church. There was immense pride in that loving look, and when he turned back to the bridal couple he glanced at the groomsman beside him.

Despite the depth of his own hurt, Brad smiled at him. Matthew grinned a little sheepishly before swinging his attention back toward his sister as the bride's voice trembled on her own vows.

At last the bridal couple were announced to be husband and wife. They kissed so enthusiastically there were several chuckles from the large congregation. A loud chorus of 'Yuck' from two little voices in the bridal party brought laughter from all except the outraged matron-of-honour and best man. They took a firm hand of each of their children as the organ music began and the bridal party started toward the vestry to sign the register.

As part of his role, Brad moved to stand beside Madeline. She glanced up at him and to his relief the wide smile on her face dimmed only slightly as she whispered, 'Well, Emily did warn Steve and Jillian what the Imps could get up to.'

'And the reception hasn't even started yet,' he responded with a low chuckle and then couldn't resist murmuring, 'you are so very, very beautiful, Maddie.'

Large, startled green eyes stared up at him for a brief moment as colour flooded her face. Then she scowled at him before looking away. Without a word she moved to stand next to Emily and little Debbie.

Brad's heart sank and hurt lashed him once more. Despite her obvious concern that day months ago when he'd been shot, she still hadn't forgiven him for leaving the home they had all made for him at their homestead on Honeysuckle, leaving Baragula to go into the police force. In fact, he wondered miserably, it sometimes seemed as though she actively disliked him. What could have happened throughout the many years he was away to change his sweet, lovable companion and then girl friend into this cold, unloving and antagonistic woman?

He tightened his lips. This had to stop. He'd had enough of Maddie's temperamental moods. Determination flooded through him to find out just why she had changed so much. Sure, the death of her mother a few months after he'd left had badly affected them all, but where Steve and his father's faith was now stronger than ever, he knew they worried about Madeline. Until he'd at last gained his desire to be transferred back to try to serve and protect the small community of Baragula at their one man Police Station, he had not realised just how different she had become.

While he had been away he had kept in regular touch with Steve, remained good friends with him and his father, visited as often as he could, but after her mother's death Madeline had not responded to any of his letters or returned his phone calls. On his many visits she had avoided him, even been downright sarcastic and rude several times since his return.

It wasn't until after the reception Brad had the opportunity to put his new resolve into action as soon as the bride and groom had been farewelled. At last their car slowly drove off amid laughs and cheers at the rattling cans tied to its bumper and the shaving cream and streamers telling all the world newly weds were off on their honeymoon. He knew how much Maddie loved her brother. Aware of the mixed feelings that would be sweeping through her, he made sure he stood beside her as they waved goodbye.

They were a little distance back from the main crowd which included her

father Ben, his friend Barbara Page, Jillian's parents and her twin brother John who was still on crutches. Tears started to roll down her face. He slipped his handkerchief into Maddie's hand, put his arm around her waist and tugged her close to his side.

'You've been great, Maddie. Just a little longer now and we can leave this mob.'

Thankful she only stiffened for a moment and then relaxed, he realised she was trembling and his grip tightened. Her low sob caught at his heart.

'I know it's always been only you and Steve but you do like Jillian don't you?'

She was silent and then to his disappointment stiffened and pushed away from him. It was the closest she'd let him come for well over five years.

'Of course I like Jillian,' she said in a tightly controlled voice with no sign of her distress. 'She seems to be so right for Steve and I know he's liked her for a long time now but still...'

He expected her to walk away as she had so many times before when he had tried to talk to her and braced himself as he let her go. She didn't move, just stared off into the distance, watching the red tail-lights of the car until the road curved and it disappeared from sight.

'But?' he prompted at last.

It took her so long to reply he thought she wasn't going to continue, certainly not confide her thoughts as she had done all their teenage years when her life had become puzzling, sad.

Then she turned and looked up at him. 'Did you know Steve and Jillian are looking at buying their own property somewhere between here and Davidson Downs?'

For a moment he hesitated, not sure if he should tell her about the long conversations when Steve had tossed ideas to and fro about trying to satisfy his love of mountains and Jillian's love of the wide plains of the cattle station she had grown up on way out west on the edge of the outback.

At last he sighed. 'Yes, Maddie, Steve did mention that while he still wants to breed horses as well as cattle Jillian would like a place that isn't as mountainous as Honeysuckle.'

'Of course he would tell *you!*'

He hated the tone of her voice. Could it be she was jealous of his ongoing closeness to her brother?

Before he could respond she added, 'And where does that leave Honeysuckle?'

Tinged with anger and hurt, her voice had risen. Brad noticed several heads turn toward them and slipped his arm around her waist once more. 'Let's not discuss this now, Maddie. It's time to find your Dad and take him home.'

He was relieved when she glanced around, realised as he had that several folk were looking at her with concern and let him lead her away.

'Dad? I'm sure Barbara Page is looking after him. She did such a good job

when—’

She broke off abruptly, but he knew she meant those last weeks when her mother was confined to bed before she died. There was such sadness, even bitterness in her voice it made Brad stop and glance at her in dismay. So Steve had been right about his sister’s dislike of their father’s growing relationship with their old family friend.

Before he could comment she added wearily, ‘But you’re right, Brad. A wedding is no time to let me carry on about all in my life that’s making me feel bewildered, helpless, in despair about the future of a property that’s been in our family for generations, about what I’m going to do, where I’m going to live when Dad marries again.’

Brad was shocked. ‘Maddie, you know your father and brother love you, would never want you to feel like this!’

She had stopped walking when he had, but now she pulled away from him. ‘Let me go, Brad – or should I say Senior Constable Bradley Hunter.’

Her low, harsh laugh hurt but the depth of anger and despair in her voice shocked him as never before.

‘Maddie!’

‘Don’t you *dare* Maddie me! You know nothing about me, nothing about what I’ve been through, what—’

‘Madeline, so there you are,’ Barbara Page’s business like voice interrupted. ‘Your father’s been looking for you. I think...’ They had both turned toward her and she paused as she saw their faces. ‘Emily and Matthew said they’d stay until all the guests have gone,’ she added in uncertain tones, ‘so you and Ben are free to leave; that is if you are ready to go home yet? I think Ben’s feeling very tired.’

‘And he wants me to drive him home.’

The weary acceptance in Madeline’s voice brought a slight frown to Miss Page’s forehead. She glanced at Brad and added abruptly, ‘I’m sure someone else could take him if you want to stay on. Emily’s mother is still with me but he could come back with us and use the spare bedroom and leave for Honeysuckle in the morning if you prefer.’

‘No! I’m ready for home too. More than ready.’

With those last sharp words, Madeline turned and strode away, one hand holding her long bridesmaid frock well clear of the path.

Miss Page took a step to follow her, but Brad grabbed her arm. ‘It’s best to let her go. Maddie isn’t feeling too happy at the moment.’

She stood still and stared after Madeline before at last raising a worried face to his. ‘I am so very worried about her, Brad. She hasn’t been happy at all for a long, long time. At first I thought it was grief after her mother died but that’s now too many years ago. Madeline seems to have changed even more than she did after...’

He was silent for a moment as they looked at each other and then Brad sighed. ‘I know. After I left to go to the New South Wales Police College in

Goulburn,’ he finished for her. ‘Steve told me she took my leaving as rejection of her personally. But I can’t understand!’ he burst out, ‘she knew how much I wanted to be a policeman – and why. She did write to me a couple of times in the first year or so but...’

Brad paused, not willing to reveal how those brief notes had hurt him so much he had written even shorter notes back to Madeline in between the hectic hours he had to put in studying, training. ‘There was nothing just before and nothing since Mrs Honeysuckle died. We were always so close, like brother and sister all those years her mother and father took me under their wing.’ He stopped as memories of his hard childhood years flooded back. Like everyone else in Baragula at the time, Miss Page knew about him being removed by Children Services from the care of his parents into Mrs McPhee’s home and then his years at Honeysuckle.

‘As you know they let me live and work on Honeysuckle after I left school,’ he added hastily.

Her eyes filled with tenderness and Barbara smiled at him. ‘And you became sweethearts.’

And that was something else the whole of Baragula could not help knowing! He nodded but smiling back at her was beyond him. ‘She was...*is* such a special person.’ For a moment he couldn’t speak and then added abruptly, ‘I knew God was leading me away into the police force but she didn’t want me to...to...’ He swallowed and looked away from the woman watching him. ‘I was and still am sure that’s what God wanted me to do, so I had to leave but I did hope it was all so I would become independent, be able to come back here one day.’

She nodded and for a moment he waited for her to speak but when she remained silent he added in a quieter voice, ‘I never gave up on our relationship, she did. After her mother died Maddie not only never answered any of my letters, would even hang up if she happened to answer the phone when I rang. Except when she went out to Davidson Downs with you and Ben last year, she’s been avoiding me since I was transferred to Baragula. In fact, today has been the most time she’s allowed me to spend with her in years.’

‘And she gave the excuse she only came with us to Davidson Downs so she could drive instead of her father.’ A gentle hand rested on his arm. ‘Bradley dear, I am sure that same, sweet girl we’ve both known nearly all her life is still there somewhere in this hurting, changed young woman. After all, she did go out to Davidson Downs that time with Ben and me. I’m still convinced it was because she was more worried about you than Steve.’

Barbara paused and then added hesitantly, ‘I...I’ve never mentioned this to anyone before, especially Ben, but I think something happened to Madeline about the time her mother died. When I came back from Sydney to help nurse Beth through those last few weeks, while she wasn’t always very friendly toward me, at the beginning Madeline was the same loving girl she had always been. I think at first she did resent that anyone thought she needed help with her mother. She didn’t say anything but every time your name came up it was

obvious to me Madeline was missing you.'

Brad straightened.

Barbara smiled slightly. 'Oh yes, she was angry with you but still wanted to know what was happening in your life. I even caught her reading one of your letters to Steve.' She frowned. 'But then Madeline changed. Until a few days before Beth died she rarely left her side. Ben at last persuaded her to go for a ride to get some fresh air. She was away so long we were getting worried but when she did return she ignored us, rushed straight into her mother's room but Beth was sleep...sleeping a lot by then.'

Her voice trembled and Brad knew 'by then' really meant Mrs Honeysuckle would have been on the verge of going into her final coma.

'Madeline only stayed a few moments,' Barbara continued huskily, 'before she turned and actually pushed Ben and I away as she rushed to her room, tears streaming down her face. I followed, heard her sobbing in her bedroom but she refused to talk then or afterwards to either of us, became even more withdrawn for a long time after the funeral. I've wondered several times if there was more behind her sometimes dazed, wounded eyes than her mother's death and your departure.'

Brad stared at her. 'What do you mean? You think something happened to her?'

Those tortured words swept through his heart again. *You know nothing about me, nothing about what I've been through.*

He added slowly, 'But surely Steve, if not Ben despite his grief at that time, would have known?'

Miss Page hesitated and then shrugged. 'They should have but they were going through their own tough times. I've taught a lot of children and led church youth groups over many years, Bradley. Madeline was a tower of strength to both Ben and Steve during her mother's illness. Even for a few weeks afterwards, despite not talking very much to me, she seemed to cope in a very mature way with Beth's death. If a mature young woman like Madeline changes so unexpectedly in the way she did there has to be a good reason. Once I did start to try and tell Ben how worried I was about her but he...'

She looked away and added abruptly, 'It's all been too confusing and he so obviously didn't have a clue so I...I haven't mentioned any of this to him. I've not been sure whether to say anything to you before this, but perhaps you've learnt skills from your profession to find out just what that girl went through that so changed her.'

As Brad simply stared at her in astonishment and concern, she added in a much brisker voice, 'Now, I should go and make sure she and Ben are not hindered in getting away. Weddings are wonderful but sometimes there is a certain amount of sadness at the changes in lives left behind that have to be coped with.' She gave him a slight smile before turning to hurry off.

Brad watched her stride away, trying to digest what had just been said. Could Barbara Page be right? Besides his leaving and her mother's long

illness, had something happened so traumatic it had indeed changed Maddie?

When Mrs Honeysuckle had died he'd still been a young probationary officer. To his deep dismay he had only been allowed the one day off for a funeral of someone he could only describe as 'a close friend'. He had been working in southern New South Wales and had to fly up and straight back the same day to even make it at all. It had been several weeks later before he'd been able to return at last to Baragula for a couple of nights. Maddie had been cool, unfriendly. That had hurt so much he had not forced his presence on her, made her explain. He had put it down to losing her mother and decided to give her space, more time, but that had not stopped him writing to her again. After a long time waiting for a response, that letter had been returned unopened.

When he had at last been promoted to a rank where he could achieve his ambition to be transferred to the Baragula Police Station, he couldn't believe the change in the girl he had hoped one day to be able to make his wife. He knew she was a couple of years older than Steve but she had aged far more than her years. Without anything else to go on, again he'd put it down to losing her mother and having to take over the reins of the housework as well as help on their property. He knew from Steve that the economic downturn and then the stock losses from the recent flood had made it necessary to have fewer employees. In fact they only had the one temporary guy at the moment. Gary Scotty had come from down south. He was some contact through a church member, Mrs McPhee, one woman Brad had known for many years – and not all of them happy ones.

It had soon become obvious that Maddie even avoided going to church and any of its activities when once she had been the keenest young person in the whole youth group. And recently Steve had shared with him how concerned he was about his sister's determined opposition to their father's obvious love for Barbara Page. Maddie had even been bitter toward Jillian in the early days of meeting the sister of Baragula's new doctor. It was all so different, so unlike the cheerful, kind-hearted girl he had thought he knew so well. Somehow in far too brief a time she had leaped from girl to woman – and a grim, unhappy woman at that.

He knew Miss Page would never have lightly told him any of what she just had. Like most of those who had grown up in the area, he had been one of Miss Page's pupils. She had been a very good teacher, kind but firm. There was no nonsense about her and he knew she would not have told him what she had unless she too was really worried, and not only about Madeline Honeysuckle's reaction to her own growing relationship with Ben, but the young woman's physical, emotional health and, most important of all, her spiritual health.

'G'day, Copper. Never thought blokes like you ever day dreamed.'

The drawling tones tinged with amusement made Brad swing around. He stared as a tall, thin man stepped out of the shadows of a large bush. As he moved further into the light from the entrance to the reception hall, Brad couldn't help the grin that moved his lips.

‘G’day yourself, you old reprobate! I’m glad you braved coming out of hiding to see one of your kids married.’ He moved forward and thrust out his hand. The man hesitated for a moment and then reached out to shake it firmly with his own gnarled one.

‘Who’re ya callin’ a reprobate?’ The indignant tones belied the smirk on the older man’s face beneath the wide-brimmed, outback Akubra.

Brad glanced down at the man’s feet and laughed out loud. ‘I noticed you keeping your distance from me during the reception, Mister Jones, but glad to see you’ve kept those fancy McWilliam cowboy boots shiny.’

‘Wot, these old things? I’d ‘oped to be gettin’ meself a brand new pair for Jillie’s weddin’ but too many of you blokes around, like.’

Brad had last seen this old kangaroo shooter several months ago on a small motorbike shooting out the tyres of the B Double transport vehicle filled with the cattle that had been stolen from Davidson Downs. He himself had been pinned down by rifle fire and hit by a ricocheting bullet. Steve had been forced to take shelter but the old Vietnam Veteran had roared up and thoroughly enjoyed himself terrorising the thieves until they surrendered.

Despite Eddie being the hero of the hour, Brad had been forced to reluctantly give a full report of the whole incident to his superiors. Ever since there had been a police bulletin out that this man was wanted for questioning about his possession of a rapid-fire automatic weapon.

There had been something else Brad had not mentioned in his report – his suspicions regarding the escape of a man suspected of being involved in the whole criminal activity. He glanced around and moved closer before murmuring, ‘And I don’t suppose you have any idea where a certain bloke called Billy Webster might be and what he’s up to right now, do you, Mister Jones?’

The man straightened. From past experiences with him, Brad knew the real character was now before him as, in cultured English far different from the assumed outback drawl, he said firmly, ‘And haven’t I invited you before to call me Eddie, young man?’

Amused, Brad simply nodded. ‘My apologies, sir, but I’ll only call you that if you call me Brad and not that police humbug Copper stuff.’

There was a low chuckle. ‘Okay, mate.’

The Davidson family’s old friend studied Brad for several long moments. Brad waited, curious to know why he had been approached now in private after being avoided all evening. He had been astonished to see this guy at the wedding but had heeded Steve’s muttered request to leave the man alone.

From all Jillian and her twin brother had mentioned about this old friend of their father, Eddie Jones was a law unto himself and would speak what he had to say when he was ready and not before. His very presence at the wedding had shown Brad just how highly regarded he was by the Davidson family. The mere fact he had turned up also showed how correct Jillian had been when she had told Steve and himself after the incidents on Davidson Downs that he regarded

all the Davidson children as his own family. This had extended to include their neighbours they had grown up with, Scott Reed and Billy Webster.

‘You don’t need to worry about that Billy anymore, Senior Constable—’
‘Brad.’

The older man raised an eyebrow.

‘If you remind me of my profession, *Eddie*, I’ll be forced to fulfil that role in your life right now!’

There was silence again and Brad hoped he had not offended the man so he’d walk away before even a couple of the multitude of questions he had for him were answered.

‘So, where is Billy? Has he been a satisfactory offsider to help you get your Government quota of kangaroos? And have you got rid of any illegal rifles lately?’

Neither man moved. Brad wondered if he should arrest the man and be done with it. Then Eddie laughed out loud. In fact, he gave a roar of laughter that surprised Brad. He glanced around and was relieved to see everyone else must have gone back inside.

Still chuckling, the eccentric outback character at last said, ‘You guessed I whisked him away from Davidson Downs. That dear Mrs Cobby shouldn’t have left that padlock key right where I could find it, like. Well, you certainly have surprised me, young man. No fool, are you?’

‘I certainly hope not,’ Brad said crisply, ‘and now I’d like you to—’

‘Yes, yes, all right, don’t take that Cop...er, *policeman* tone of voice with me.’ Eddie had stopped smiling and glared at Brad. ‘Let me assure you that Billy is doing very well. He had a tough time de-toxing from the drugs he’d been on but he’s doing fine now. I just need to make sure he gets plenty more good, clean, outback air for some time still and away from that mob he hooked up with when he had that spell in prison. It’s not Billy you should be worried about, it’s that other bloke he met there who got him into all that mess in the first place.’

Brad stiffened. ‘You mean Joe Harding? What do you know about him? There’s been no sign of him since he walked away from Scott Reed’s plane crash! His tracks showed he headed into the outback desert without any water or food. The general opinion has been he perished.’

‘Men like him know how to survive.’ Eddie suddenly turned his head and spat on the grass beside the path. ‘That mongrel has been trying to make contact with Billy again. Worse still, I saw him the other day not far from this place.’

‘Not far from Baragula! What do you mean?’

Eddie nodded, not taken aback by the sharp reply. ‘Saw him a few days ago out at that camp near the State Forest.’

‘What were you doing out...?’

Eddie scowled and Brad bit back the question. Instead, he asked urgently, ‘You sure it was that creep who planned the whole cattle thefts, left Jillian’s twin brother to die and nearly killed Scott Reed when he forced him to fly that

plane until it crashed for lack of petrol?’

Eddie spat once more. A certain sign of his displeasure.

‘Course I’m sure. Calls himself by another name now but it was that same bloke. Wouldn’t risk talking to you if I wasn’t sure. Saw him once at the Reed’s place and even ages ago with Billy. I’d gone to that camp in the State Forest to see a couple of old army mates I’d heard were there. Asked a few questions of them. Apparently the bloke boasted he used to work on a property around here some years back. Knows the district well. They reckon he got drunk one night and mouthed off about having scores to settle here. Thought you should know, like.’

‘Eddie? Eddie Jones,’ a woman’s exasperated voice called from a little distance away, ‘where on earth have you got to now?’

Brad recognised the voice. Before he could speak, Eddie swore softly then gave a sigh and groaned.

‘Well, guess that means Ettie is ready for a lift back home.’ He moved a step closer to Brad and actually poked him in the chest. In little more than a fierce whisper he said, ‘Now, you find that rotten crook before he does more damage to people we know and both love!’ With that he turned, and disappeared back through the bushes.

Brad took a step after him and then paused as he heard Ettie Cobby’s voice close by say, ‘Well, there you are. I was beginning to think you had vanished again as you are prone to.’

Her voice was brusque but had an underlying affection that made Brad shake his head. Surely all these months since they both had travelled out west to help Steve and Jillian out at Davidson Downs, church going, sincere Christian, Ettie Cobby had not been keeping secrets from her local policeman had she?

‘Vanished? Me?’ came Eddie Jones indignant voice. ‘Now, whatever would make you think a thing like that, my dear Ettie.’

There was a brief silence and then two voices started laughing. Brad stood still, but any tendency for him to even smile had disappeared.

Eddie Jones had risked being hauled in for questioning to give him this vital information about a criminal who had caused so much pain and anguish to their mutual friends. So he was still alive but just why was Joe Harding here? And using another name? He started after Eddie. He should have insisted the man tell him what the other name was!

There was no sign of the two and Brad sighed. As far as he was aware there was nothing in Joe Harding’s record about him ever using another name. If he had been in the district for awhile, surely by now Harding knew the man who had been shot by the thugs he had employed to help steal cattle was a friend of the Davidson’s and the policeman stationed here at Baragula. Where had the man worked around here? And would he still be out at that alternative lifestyle camp Brad knew only too well often harboured characters the police were looking for?

He straightened his shoulders. Once again he had to try and put aside his

concern about Madeline Honeysuckle to try and protect this town, these people who had done so much for an abused boy growing up in horrible circumstances. There was work to be done, questions to ask of the Davidsons as well as a certain Mrs Ettie Cobby about how they managed to ‘find’ Eddie Jones to invite him to the wedding.

And there was something else he had to work out – how to explain to his superiors just why he had not brought a certain Eddie Jones in for questioning!