

RIDING WITH FIRE

Brandy Ardaan pushed her mass of thick, red-gold hair out of her face and pursed her lips as she examined the blindfolded chestnut in the chute. It was a fine horse, certainly, although she had her doubts about the vendor's claims.

"How much for this one, did you say?"

"£30, Miss."

"Hmm." Brandy considered for a moment before turning to her companion.

Archibald Moses, an accountant by training, was a lanky man with overlong hair and thick spectacles, the kind of person who was easy to overlook. However, he was a wizard when it came to numbers and his accounting skills were second to none.

"The price is no issue, Miss Ardaan," he assured her.

"£30 was it?" Brandy confirmed and the vendor nodded.

"Best horse I ever caught," he said.

"£20," Brandy countered, and the seller burst out laughing.

"Get out of here, girl!"

Brandy gave him a brittle smile. "I didn't catch your name, sir."

"Horrace Wright."

He extended his hand in a superior sort of way, but Brandy did not shake.

"Well, Mr. Wright, let me tell you a few things about your horse. I'm not paying £30 for a good stallion if I have to do all the work getting him bitted and backed and broken in —"

"Very reasonable price —"

"Second, I can *see* where he's been beaten hard enough to scar, which means he's not fresh caught —"

"Now look here —"

"And finally, you've got him all trussed up like a Christmas turkey, which means *you* are afraid of him and can't ride him yourself. So I'll take that horse for £20 and be on my way."

Wright looked as if he would like to strangle her. “Break him in and you can have him for free, bitch!”

Brandy raised a cool eyebrow. “Done.”

Wright looked startled. “W-What?”

“I said ‘done’,” Brandy repeated, a slight smile playing about her mouth. “I accept your offer. If he throws me, I’ll pay double.”

Mr. Moses gave a squeak of protest that no one heard and Wright looked at her like she was mad.

“What’s wrong with you, girl?”

“You heard me,” Brandy replied. “I ride him, I get to keep him; I come off, I’ll give you £60 for him.”

Wright licked his lips.

“Can’t back out now, Horace!” someone yelled, and Brandy glanced around. A small crowd had gathered, mostly the drovers, bushmen and horse traders who were ubiquitous at such events, all of whom were watching eagerly.

“We all heard you,” a particularly weather-beaten man called out, his eyes gleaming at the promise of a good show.

“Can’t go back on your word to a lady.”

“Besides, she’ll look pretty in the hospital!”

The men jeered, but Brandy didn’t blush.

Wright considered. Bushmen were a rough sort, used to having things their way, and he had no desire to get on the wrong side of them. Besides that, the horse was near wild and it might be fun to see this uppity little brat thrown to the ground and trampled.

“Very well then,” he said graciously and the crowd roared their approval. While the men surged forward to help move the horse, Mr. Moses grabbed Brandy by the arm and pulled her away from the throng.

“Are you insane?!” he hissed.

“Undoubtedly.”

“Just buy the thing and be done with it!”

“No.”

“How exactly are you going to explain paying £60 for a wild horse to Mr. Brasher?”

Brandy gave the man a vaguely pitying stare.

“I won’t be.”

“Overconfidence is unbecoming!”

“Mr. Moses, I’ll either ride away without paying a cent, or *you* will be paying for my funeral.”

The accountant looked horrified.

It took longer than anticipated to set up. At Wright’s insistence, a small corral was built so the chestnut didn’t bolt the moment it was released from its chute, a task to which the stockmen fell gladly. During the hasty construction, word quickly got around that some upstart girl from down south had got it in her head to ride a dangerous brumby that Horace Wright was trying to get off his hands. Wright was a well-known figure up here, the kind of man to be taken at his word and treated with the utmost respect. The idea of someone challenging him was unthinkable, but nobody was going to miss it either.

Brandy waited on the veranda of the small hotel, trying to ignore the constant hissing from Mr. Moses. He only stopped listing the awful ways she was going to die when Brandy threw a glass of water in his face.

“Shut it,” she ordered, as he spluttered into silence, and one of the stockmen approached her.

“We’re ready for you.”

Brandy nodded and followed him over to the hastily built corral, a dripping wet Mr. Moses hurrying along in her wake. At the edge of the fence, she paused and turned back to the accountant.

“Are you sure you want to watch this?” she asked and he glared at her.

“I’m not going back to Mr. Brasher with anything other than a *full* account of your death,” he snapped.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, Mr. Moses.”

Deciding that she would bury the annoying little man alive once she was done, Brandy settled herself onto the chestnut’s back and placed her boots into the stirrups. A few keen-eyed observers noted she wasn’t wearing spurs and looked unusually confident at being atop such a dangerous animal. Wright saw none of this; he was too busy making bets on how quickly she’d come off.

Up close, Brandy could see further evidence that Wright had been lying about recently catching the animal. The stallion had numerous scars across his neck from overuse of a whip, and his flanks were pock-marked and slashed from spurs.

“Easy boy,” Brandy said, as the horse tried to stamp in its tight confines. “We’ll be alri—”

Without waiting for a signal from her that she was ready, the stockman pulled the lever to open the chute and ripped off the blindfold. The horse leapt forward and Brandy would have come unseated if she hadn’t been expecting it. Unsurprised that the men would play such a dirty trick on her, she remained firmly in the saddle as the horse unleashed hell in an attempt to escape.

For the first few seconds, the noise was mostly catcalls and jeers, with a few people asking loudly how far away the stretcher bearers were. Then, as Brandy showed no sign of being dislodged, things began to change. People started to clap and cheer, and the few men who had bet she’d stay on the horse began wondering if they should have put more money on it. Some of their fellows had been offering odds of ten to one on that outcome!

But the horse wasn’t done yet.

Angry and afraid, it began to race in a circle around the corral, kicking, jumping and bucking. The stirrups snapped and Brandy clung onto the saddle for dear life.

Then it charged at breakneck speed towards the fence.

Brandy had expected this too and was ready for it. She lay flat along the animal’s back and wrapped her arms around its neck, making herself as streamlined as possible and preparing for the chestnut to either jump or simply smash through the flimsy barrier containing it. She felt the preparatory bunching of muscles and then the animal was airborne. It landed with a crash on the other side, throwing up its back legs in another, desperate attempt to unseat her.

People scattered every which way to avoid the flashing hooves, but Brandy might as well have been tied to the saddle for all she moved. Mr. Moses, who had almost covered his eyes as the horse jumped the fence, was now watching in open-mouthed delight as the jumps and kicks became fewer and less passionate. The animal began to slow in its furious running until

finally, barely sixty seconds after it had come out of the chute, it stopped entirely, covered in sweat with its flanks heaving.

“Good boy,” Brandy said, patting the horse’s neck and breathing heavily herself. “Very good boy.”

There was a heartbeat of complete silence, then a roar went up from the gathered crowd that almost saw the horse take off again. Brandy brought him under control and manoeuvred him through the throng, ignoring the men who had been jeering at her just moments before, and stopped in front of Mr. Moses.

She grinned down at him. “Well Mr. Moses, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I never doubted you for a second,” he lied loudly.

Brandy burst out laughing. As she made to dismount, she caught a glimpse of Horace Wright, red-faced and furious. She touched her forehead in a mock salute. He spat viciously in her direction, and then turned and stalked away.

In the hotel that night, as she sat at the bar, she was approached by an older, clean-shaven man with an air of overconfidence she found rather attractive.

“Can I buy you a drink, Miss?”

He wasn’t the first man to offer, although he was certainly the first she liked the look of.

“If you insist.”

He brought two beers and handed her one, before introducing himself with a flourish.

“Harry Morant. Although most people around here know me as The Breaker.”

The name was familiar, and Brandy looked at him sharply.

“I’ve heard of you,” she said after several moments. “You rode Dargin’s Grey at the Hawkesbury Show last year.”

Morant looked pleased. “Perhaps I should count myself lucky you weren’t in attendance, I mightn’t have had the chance.”

He had a pleasant accent, she thought, more educated than one would usually find in these parts.

“A mistreated brumby is one thing, Mr. Morant, but I wouldn’t ride Dargin for any money.”

He smiled. “You haven’t told me your name.”

“Brandy Aarden.”

“I see.” He took in her red-gold hair as he spoke and then met her eyes again.

“What’s your interest in horses, Miss Aarden?”

“I manage a private stable in Ballarat.”

“For him?” Morant asked, nodding over to a corner table. Mr. Moses had decided he wanted a mug of ale before bed, but was now clearly in danger of dozing off, despite the raucous noise around him.

Brandy laughed. “He’s the accountant — I know horses, he knows money. Mr. Brasher sends us to the horse markets so he knows he’s getting the best animals for the best price. What’s your interest?”

“Nothing so glamorous. I break them in and put on a show every now and then, do bit of droving here and there...”

He launched into a story about outrunning a bushfire in Queensland on the back of a blindfolded mare. He was lying, of course, but Brandy was enthralled all the same. She took another draught of her beer and then glanced over at Moses, who had fallen asleep at the table.

“If you’ll excuse me, Mr. Morant, I think I’d better get Mr. Moses to bed before he loses his pocket book.”

Morant looked over at the accountant himself and couldn’t help the mocking smile that crossed his lips.

“Very wise.”

Brandy looked at him critically for a moment. He was about ten years older than her, she thought, and quite handsome despite his ruddy complexion. He had a gleam in his eye that she found alluring and the wonderful thing about such men was that they were always up for a bit of fun.

“I have a room upstairs,” she said, before turning away and walking over to the clerk. Morant watched her go.

Some hours later, he made his own way upstairs and crept along the passage. He paused at the doors, trying to work out which one of the few rooms Brandy might be in. Behind most, all he could hear was the snoring of men who had drunk too much, but the room at the end of the corridor was silent.

He tried the door and found it open.

A single candle was burning on the table beside the bed, casting deep shadows all around the room. Brandy was sitting up, her long, red-gold hair tumbling over her shoulders.

“About time,” she said. She turned to face him and Morant saw, with a thrill of desire, that she was naked. “I was thinking I was going to have to fuck myself tonight.”

“We can’t have that,” he said.

Brandy gave him a lazy smile. “Take off your trousers and get over here,” she ordered. “I might need breaking in.”

Morant closed the door firmly behind him.

Over the next ten days, Brandy moved through the horse markets with Mr. Moses, looking for new animals to fill Mr. Brasher’s stables. She’d decided to keep the chestnut, since christened Charley, for herself, and enjoyed haggling with the vendors over the magnificent thoroughbreds she knew Mr. Brasher was fond of.

Breaker Morant came to her room almost every night.

He was an exciting partner: fun, passionate and adventurous. Brandy had gone to bed with her fair share of men in her twenty-five years, but sex with The Breaker was something else. On their third night together she’d sucked him off and he’d returned the favour with enthusiasm. He wasn’t the first to offer, but most men were half-hearted about it and had no idea what to do. Morant not only knew how it should be done, but did it extremely well and it had been absolute ecstasy. He’d had to put a hand over her mouth to stop her crying out in pleasure.

Yet, beneath his seemingly boundless passion, he had an unsettling edge. He didn’t like to be told ‘no’ in bed, and became moody when Brandy wouldn’t let him do as he pleased. She was always up for exciting sex, but she drew the line at some of Harry Morant’s darker fantasies. She was also perfectly aware he was availing himself to the other women in the town. This didn’t bother her, but she disliked it when they were together and he compared her to

whatever new girl he'd been screwing that afternoon. He always said she was better, as if giving her a huge compliment, but Brandy was certain he told the other girls the same thing.

Then there had been the night at the bar.

Morant drank like no one Brandy had ever encountered before and usually held his liquor quite well. On this particular night however, he'd become outrageously drunk and had revealed a horrifying streak of violence. A man had bumped into him, causing him to spill his drink, and Morant had knocked him to the floor with a well placed punch. If that had been the end of it, Brandy could have dismissed it as drunken foolishness, but Morant had then proceeded to kick the unfortunate man into jelly. Eventually, some of his friends had pulled him off, but he'd been drunk enough to hit them too. The incident had escalated into an all out brawl and it had been all Brandy could do to escape unnoticed. To his credit, Morant been deeply ashamed the next morning, apologising to all and sundry and promising to restrain himself. While he continued to drink to excess, he never got the worse for liquor again while Brandy was watching, and she'd decided to let the incident go and continued to welcome him into her bed. Deep down, however, she knew she was playing with fire.

The night before Brandy was due to leave, she and Morant sat in the bar together. He didn't buy her drinks so much as ply her with alcohol and became upset when she refused to keep going.

"I don't have the stomach for it like you do," she said lightly, trying to play it off as a joke.

"I never took you for a girl who'd play a man for money and stand him up, Aarden."

Brandy was offended. "When have I ever stood you up?"

Morant muttered darkly about disrespect and Brandy got to her feet.

"If that's how you feel, I'll take my leave."

"No, Brandy!" He reached out and grabbed her arm. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

His grip was painfully tight. She tried to disengage, but he wouldn't let go.

"Harry, you're hurting me," she told him.

He looked annoyed. "Are you listening to me, Brandy? I said I was sorry—"

"Let me go!"

He tightened his grip instead and pulled her back towards him.

“Don’t you walk away from me, girl!”

“Get the *fuck* off me, Harry Morant!”

Perhaps he hadn’t expected her to yell, because he jumped and released her. The noise level was such that only the men closest to them noticed anything was amiss. However, the quarrel was not sufficiently interesting to keep their attention and they went back to their drinks.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Brandy demanded. She was rubbing her arm and looked both furious and wary at the same time.

Morant continued to glare angrily for a moment, then his expression faltered and he suddenly looked stricken.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” he said. “I... I forgot myself— Please don’t look at me like that, my darling!”

He reached for her, but Brandy moved away. Unbidden, the image of Morant nearly kicking a man to death floated to the top of her mind. If he could do that, what else was he capable of?

He put his beer down, looking as though he might cry.

Brandy left the bar. She’d been frightened by his outburst, but his remorse, although sudden, seemed deep and genuine. She wasn’t sure how to respond. She heard movement behind her then and was unsurprised to see that Morant had followed her out. She should have been angry, but he looked so much like a beaten dog that she didn’t have it in her heart to turn him away. Especially on what would undoubtedly be their last night together.

She allowed him to take her hand and he held it with excessive tenderness.

“Can you ever forgive me, my love?” he whispered.

Brandy nodded once.

“Thank you.” He kissed her knuckles gently. “However can I make it up to you?”

He was not perfect, but she would never see him again after tonight. She pushed her misgivings aside.

“Kiss me,” she ordered. “I’m sure we’ll think of something.”

The next morning, they shared a brief but passionate goodbye, before Brandy mounted Charley and headed south with Moses. He mentioned nothing of her affair until they had crossed the border into Victoria.

“Did he ask you to stay?”

Brandy shook her head. “No.”

“Would you have done it anyway?”

Her answer was equally forthright. “No.”

“Why not? You seemed to like him.”

“I liked fucking him,” Brandy replied, enjoying Moses’s scandalised expression. She’d had a lot of time to think about it on the ride back and knew there was nothing else to it. The sex had been wonderful, but that was perhaps the *only* wonderful thing about Harry Morant.

A little over two months later, Brandy realised her cycles had stopped.

Four years later, while Charley grazed peacefully in a paddock and her little son played in the garden, Brandy Brasher heard that Harry Morant was dead. According to the newspapers, he’d been shot by a firing squad in South Africa, after being found guilty of twelve murders.

She was horrified, but not surprised.

Later, when the child had gone down for his nap, her husband asked her carefully how she felt.

“I’m fine,” she said immediately, knowing exactly what he was talking about. “We spent a few nights together at a horse market, that was all.”

Harrison Brasher, once her employer and now her devoted husband, shook his head gently.

“Brandy you don’t have to lie to me.”

“I don’t know what I feel,” she admitted abruptly. “I wasn’t in love with him, I just liked fucking him—” She broke off as something flickered behind her eyes. “They say that he... he shot a little boy—”

She stood up.

“I’m going to go and check on Michael.”

Down in her son's room, Brandy ran her hand through his thick, blond curls. There was nothing of The Breaker in him, although sometimes she wondered if that was only because she wanted it to be true.

Unbidden, she felt tears spring to her eyes.

As much as she wanted to, she couldn't pretend to be indifferent. Harry Morant had been a hot-headed charmer with a violent streak, and she wasn't surprised he'd come to a bad end, but it was impossible not to be sad about the death of a man she'd been so passionate with.

And he'd given her something she would cherish forever.

She smiled, wiped her eyes and kissed her little boy's forehead.

"I love you, Michael," she whispered.