

KJLR

Romona Hilliger

# A Blue Bird On His Shoulder

*Romance  
at Heart*



PUBLICATIONS

*\*A BLUE BIRD ON HIS  
SHOULDER\**

*By Romona Hilliger*

©Copyright 2006 by

**Romance at Heart Publications E-Novels**

ISBN#: N/A

Edited by

Cover Art by KJLR

Publication by Romance at Heart ©2006

<http://www.rahpubs.com/>

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information and storage retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*\*A BLUE BIRD ON HIS SHOULDER\***By Romona Hilliger*

*Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled...* Wanda smiled at the age-old carol. Its beautiful message came from the ancient utility truck's radio. The old warrior, a legacy from her father, had been left for her use. She let herself out of the driver's seat and, greeted by a blast of icy winds, she tugged her old coat about her and pulled up the collar. Strange weather for November, but then not entirely unknown on the edge of the southernmost tip of Australia's southernmost state—Tasmania. *Next step Antarctica*, she thought with cheery incredulity.

Wanda lifted her bag of meagre shopping from the passenger seat and peered toward the old stone hut that she called home, but a movement on the veranda stopped Wanda dead in her tracks. The dying rays of sunset picked up a figure sitting against one of the support posts, his arms hugging his drawn-up knees.

"Who are you?" she called, her heart pounding and her suspicions at peak. *Could he be...?* A chill shot through her, and it wasn't just the thinness of the Indian cheesecloth dress she wore, nor the icy winds. 'What do you want?' she shouted, effecting bravado, though she felt none.

"Don't... be alarmed," a male voice croaked. "I lost my way... Bush walker..."

Cautiously, she took the few steps toward him, the earth beneath her old sneakers still chill from the day's Antarctic blasts. The man's head lolled to one side, and he breathed heavily.

'I just... want ... a drink of water...a bite to ...eat,' he faltered.

A morsel of food and a cup of water she was more than willing to give, but Wanda was unsure of whether she should let him into the house or not.. at that moment he

slouched over and instinctively, she reached out to steady him. Now there was no alternative, she had a sick man on her hands.

Wanda had come from England, three years before to live on this small block of wilderness land, bequeathed by the father she'd never known. Her mother had made sure of that, after their divorce. The best twenty-first birthday gift she could ever have received. After her fiancé's deceit, and with her best friend too, all she'd sought was a quiet life, as far away as possible from all that had hurt her, just writing her books. , Another man was the last thing she needed—*not again*, she thought bitterly.

"You'd better come in," she found herself saying, with resignation. He raised his head and muttered something that came out like a muffled moan more than anything that made sense. She just crouched down and encircled his waist with her free arm. "Put your arm over my shoulder," she said, and he did as she asked. Gripping him firmly and with a good deal of lift, she helped him to his feet. He was cold and shivering, his teeth chattered and his breath turned to vapour as it broke from his lips. He was tall and strapping, and it wasn't easy taking his weight as they struggled to get inside and into the welcoming warmth of the small but cozy room. The last light of day poured in from the back window and wrapped the room in a soft peachy glow. It provided the only lighting, but enough for him to get a glimpse of an old dining chair, set at an equally old oval dining-table, to which she led him. He took a long ragged breath and dropped into the chair. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Wanda lit the candle in the centre of the table, and in that light it was easy to see, besides a tired five o'clock shadow, he had a bad case of sunburn. His lips were cracked and dry, his eyes red-rimmed and feverish, but none of this could hide the striking good looks and deep blue eyes, but more than his handsome face, she had to be sure who exactly, she'd let into her home A lost hiker, as he'd claimed, or was he... again a shiver rode her spine.

That afternoon, when she'd gone to the highway store to do her monthly shopping and the few Christmas goodies she could afford, the woman at the counter was prattling on about the police hunt for the remaining prisoner of the three who had escaped custody a few days earlier. He'd been sighted in this general area, the woman had said and, gloating, she'd added how the bitter cold and Antarctic winds would soon render him helpless. Wanda tried to recall the descriptions the woman had given, according to the police report - *Mark...Mark something. Twenty-nine years old and blond hair cut to his earlobes.* Looking at him, it seemed to fit. *And a blue-bird tattooed on his right shoulder.* Wanda fixed a gaze on his arm. All she needed was the smallest, conclusive, glimpse, but how? His sleeve had been pulled down, against the cold of course. She could put on a brave face and ask him to show his shoulder. The thought was brief and fell flat. *Yes Wanda,* she ridiculed herself. *Mister, could you let me have a look at your right shoulder please? I want to check for a blue bird.* Hardly likely, without raising his suspicion and then who knows what he'd do. No. She'd have to find some other way, in the meantime she'd just play it nice and easy.

"I'm Wanda," she said, attempting nonchalance "And what do I call you?" He made no comment, nor offered to tell her his name. He looked dazed and maybe he hadn't heard her so, still in a quandary, she went over to the fireplace. The wood was running low but it was too cold to go out to get some. She rummaged through what was there and relit the remaining pieces of kindling and wood. A fire burst into flame and blazed bringing instant heat to the room. She returned to the table, watching him, and somehow his presence no longer unsettled her, rather she felt pity for him, whoever he was. The sight of him all hunched over with cold and shivering in just a pair of cotton trousers and the remains of what had once been a shirt, prompted her next move. Besides there was still that little matter of the bluebird tattoo.

"I'll help you get those things off and you can have a hot shower. I've a big bath towel that will serve the purpose, until your clothes dry or I can find something for you to wear. In the meantime you can sit by the fire," she said.

He looked up and stared at her hesitantly, wondering if he was going to end up in one of her dresses or something female like that, when she plunged on.

“Well, it’s up to you, but you can’t stay in those wet and filthy clothes— you’ll catch your death.”

His teeth chattered and he felt miserable. He was just about freezing and a hot shower sounded good. “I guess,” he said in a hoarse whisper. He pushed back the chair and with the support of his palm on the table, he rose shakily to his feet.

Wanda rounded the table and approached him. She felt small and vulnerable standing before this man whose height and build overwhelmed her. She reached for the panel of his shirt and he just let her go on, watching her with indifference. She slipped the first button and then the next, and as each one slipped open, more and more of a broad bare chest was being revealed to her, inch by exciting inch. The heat of his skin against the brush of her fingers was unintentionally seductive and all at once she had this irresistible urge to curl her fingers through the shadowing of chest-hair and running them across from one dusky nipple to the other, but she took a short sharp breath and drew quickly away. It had been a long, long time since she’d had such wanton thoughts and God knew, they still felt so good. Wanda heard the sound of the zip of his trousers and she left the room to pick up the only two towels she possessed from a pile of clean laundry. She returned and, facing the fire, his back was to her. Powerful shoulder muscles bunched and moved as he slid down his jockey shorts and cast them to the floor, the line of his body curving into slim hips and the neatest butt she’d ever seen. Her heart began thudding painfully and her pulse set to racing. Naked! A stranger, naked and in trouble, in her little cabin, seemed incredible but so wonderful. He half-turned and she handed him the towel— thrust it, more to the point, not daring to look at his maleness. He wrapped one towel about his waist, the other around his shoulders. Had he done that on purpose so he could hide that tattoo? “I’m pretty bushed,” he mumbled, “might shower later.” He returned to the chair at the table and fairly just flopped into it.

“Yes. You do that,” she said. “Would you like some soup? I think you could do with some food.”

“You’re kind,” he answered, but the effort to smile split his lip and he dabbed the watery-blood with his finger. Wanda handed him a tissue from a box, then she went to the shelf above the stove and came back with a pack of tablets. “You take Aspirin? It will ease your pain and help if you have a fever.”

He nodded once and she popped two tablets from the pack and laid them before him.

“I’ll get you some water,” she said.

His glazed eyes followed her back to the stove. It was his turn to wonder. What on earth was a woman, barely in her mid-twenties, doing living out here like a hippie? A face like an angel, her eyes like the first stars of evening and her beautiful dark hair fixed into two severe braids hanging over breasts that were nothing short of breathtakingly seductive. But this was no time for making observations about her womanly attributes. He took a look around, scanning the room for a phone; he must contact his father. But save for a bed in one corner, shelves of books, some *durrie* rugs scattered about the floor, from India, no doubt, and a laptop at the far end of the table, the room boasted no modernity at all. No TV, radio, and a phone? Surely there was one! A mobile, perhaps? The question burned on his lips. “May I use your phone?” he asked.

“Haven’t one.”

“Then, how do you—?”

“I don’t.” She sliced his sentence in half. Let him wonder at that, she thought. She owed nobody any answers for the way she chose to live. She loved the isolation as her poor father must have too. She was grateful for this home, humble as it was. She didn’t earn a lot from her work but enough to sustain her. Yes, this place provided a haven from the outside world, society, and all its ills. Even her laptop. She seldom accessed

the Internet. It was the word-processor she made use of. *Now the soup.* When she lifted the lid of the old saucepan, she found there was barely enough for one person. He was ravenous, no doubt. He'd asked for a bite to eat when she'd seen him on the veranda. *Well, there was no help for it.* She stood squarely with her back to him so he couldn't see, and she added a small cup of water. It made her feel a little guilty, but goodness, at least there was enough now to go around. She set the soup to heat and cut two slices of her one precious loaf of bread.

Wanda poured water from a metal jug into a glass, and placed it on the table.

He popped the tablets into his mouth and lifted the glass to his lips with his left hand. He drank thirstily, spilling some down his chest. He tried to wipe it off, and she was sure she heard him mutter something angrily under his breath while he favoured the right hand lying in his lap and his face contorted in pain.

Wanda reached to dab at the dribble of water. "Are you hurt?" she asked in a low voice.

"No, its okay..." He motioned her to keep away and tried to pull the towel firmly over his shoulder.

She wanted to help him, but she also needed to see that illusive blue bird. "Let me..." She insisted, turning him and he flinched. The towel fell away, revealing a jagged edge of torn flesh and above that—the tell-tale tattoo.

He snared her wrist and his teeth gritted. "Found what you're looking for?" he snarled, his tongue taking a swipe at the freshly-opened cut lip.

Wanda's heart lurched in shock but she had no intention of showing it. "So, you *are* the escapee the police are hunting?" she said softly, amazed that, after all, she now, felt no fear. He hardly seemed the hard-bitten criminal type.



The last traces of resistance vanished, he let go of her, and his voice broke as he tried to speak. "I didn't..."

Wanda put her hand up palm out. "Please, you don't have to tell me."

He dabbed his finger at the bleeding lip trying to staunch the ooze and Wanda handed him a fresh tissue. "Use this, and after you've eaten, I'll get something to clean that wound on your arm"

He was a big and powerful man, yet somehow he looked like a lost little boy. Something deep inside was hurting him and for some unknown reason pity stirred her heart Should she let him stay on, or let him eat, take a shower and send him on his way? She really shouldn't take chances, but it was dark and cold outside, one wouldn't do that to a dog, and then, the words were out of her mouth before she knew it. "You can sleep on the veranda bed." She left the room and minutes later she returned with the box of whatever 'first aid' she had, and found him lying across the table, asleep. She was glad she hadn't turned him away, it would have been cruel. She touched his shoulder to waken him and his head jerked up.

"It's okay," she said in a soothing voice. "Your soup is getting cold, perhaps you should eat it, get something into your stomach," she added quietly. "You can sleep after that." She pushed the bowl toward him and picked up his damp and ragged clothing, laying them across the old upholstered chair she had by the fire for reading over her manuscripts and other beloved authors. Her one concession to love.

The 'wild-eyed' look slowly melted to a softened gaze. "Thanks." The word was a hoarse whisper and barely audible.

"I've made up the bed on the veranda. It's screened off to keep out the cold, so you should be all right out there." But you leave in the morning," she added, abruptly. "You do understand that."

“Yea.”

They ate in silence and when the meal was over, he rose unsteadily to his feet. “I’m so grateful,” he said, “if you hadn’t taken me in... One more day...” She fixed a hard gaze on him that made him uncomfortable. It was quite obvious she didn’t want him around and why would she. Who’d want a criminal under their roof? But his eyes gritty from want of sleep, and hardly able to think, he hadn’t the energy to care one way or the other.

“What about your shower and your shoulder? I need to dress that gash you have there.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “I’m too tired.”

“I’ll come and do your shoulder once you get to bed.”

One step at a time he shuffled to the back door and out into the cool and darkened anonymity of the veranda. He fell to the bed and Wanda, who followed behind, lifted his legs to have him lie across at full length, then she pulled the doona over him. He snuggled into the quilt’s warmth. His head no sooner hit the pillow, when he fell into the deep sleep he so desperately needed, only stirring when Wanda came back in with a candle in one hand, the medical kit in the other. The light bathed his tired and worn face but he patiently allowed her to clean the torn festering flesh on his arm. He’d never realised how badly thorn bushes could tear at a man’s skin. He groaned, and stirred uneasily as Wanda dressed his wound. “Sorry. It’s nearly done,” she said, then with feather-light fingers she stroked antiseptic cream on his poor bruised lips. She sat by the bed a moment longer, and her eyes searched his face. What could he have done? He’d spoken of a woman, and why not? He was a good looking man. Well, whatever it was, it was no concern of hers. She picked up the small medical kit and started to leave.

“You won’t turn me in, will you?”

“No *Mark*,” she said pointedly. “I won’t be doing that.”

“You know my name,” he said, a little surprised. “How?”

“It doesn’t matter” She wasn’t going to tell him about the gossip at the shop and how she’d discovered his name. “I don’t give a damn, who or what you are,” she said, pulling away and capping the ointment tube. “You needed help, I gave it and that’s all I care about it.”

He fell back on the pillow, with a grunt, and whether it was from gratitude or pure fatigue, she didn’t know but she was glad the poor man could rest, and now she knew there was no way he could leave in the morning. He was ill. Three days’ roaming the harsh wilderness, and in this unseasonable weather, had taken its toll. She knew too, if he needed to stay, she couldn’t turn him out.

The wind screamed outside, and Wanda sat bolt upright. For a moment she forgot about the man on the veranda. The weather was strange indeed. It should be summer but it wasn’t. Climate Change was the new term they were using these days. Then it all came back. She jumped out of bed and tiptoed to the veranda—the man she’d rescued, still lay asleep. Maybe he’d be better today, after all.

In order to save the hot water, Wanda took a very quick shower. She changed into the only pair of jeans she had, hoping that they’d keep her legs warm. Then came the thick wool jumper, and bending over she laced up the only shoes she possessed, her worn pair of sneakers. She breathed in the chill air, it would soon be Christmas. For her it would be just the Aboriginal people, or at least the descendants of those noble tribes long gone with the coming of white men. They came to camp at the stream each year to celebrate the birth of the holy child, recall generations past and rekindle their lost tribal ways. And then there were the marsupials with whom she shared the stream and the

land, these things met all she desired of life, and it would be that way again—once he was gone.

“Morning,’ Mark called. He stood on the veranda clad only in his khaki trousers. “Thanks for drying these out.”

“Sleep well?” she asked, trying to sound as though his broad bare chest wasn’t playing havoc with her emotions.

He shrugged. “Okay, considering...” Then he smiled. “I need to get a bath pretty badly, is the stream okay?”

Her heart fluttered crazily at the way his deep blue eyes crinkled when he smiled. Good heavens! What was wrong with her? All he was asking was where he could clean up.

“In normal weather it would be the best place. I use it myself. Private and all,” she said. “You can use my bathroom. It’s nothing fancy but the shower is good. Hold on, I’ll get you something to wear from my father’s things.”

“Your father’s things?”

Wanda smiled. “He died and left me this place.”

“I see,” Mark said, now able to fathom the reason of her being here, in this wilderness, but all alone?

Mark looked clean and fresh when he returned from his shower, and even the stubble of growth at his jaw somehow looked good. He took a furtive glimpse outside the window and turned. “I guess I’ll move on,” he said. Even though his head ached, and his brow felt hot, he didn’t want to impose on Wanda. The kindness of this strange but gentle young woman had touched him. He could grow fond of her—more than that,

he could easily love her. Perhaps, had it been another place, another time. Different circumstances...

She set the table with that pretty Indian tablecloth she'd had tucked away. Its gaudy reds and greens seemed beautiful today, the gold thread embroidery setting it off, making it fitting for the Christmas that was just about due. She picked up the toast from by the fire, set the two slices on a plate beside a small jar of honey and coffee poured out in two cups. "One more day won't hurt, if you don't feel up to it," she said softly, fully realising that despite her resolve, she'd allowed him to break through, and now she found herself wanting him to stay.

There was no choice, she tried to convince herself. In any case, he'd be gone in a few days, and things would go back to normal.

"Besides, you'll be safe here, too," she said. "People rarely come this way, and the road, all but a track, is hardly visible, except to those who know of its existence."

"Are you sure?" Mark said, taken aback.

She tried to sound casual. "It's up to you. Anyway, for now, just have some breakfast. Sorry I don't have much, but you're welcome to what's here."

"Thanks *Wanda*, it's great. Everything looks just fine," he said.

A smile blossomed on Wanda's face, somehow her name on his lips sounded special. She wanted him to say her name again and again.

It didn't take long for Mark to regain his health. Three days' rest was the best medicine. Besides he was conscious of her meagre existence and hated having to delve into it. But for Wanda, it was his pleasant conversation and easy smile that mattered more than anything.

“I’m planning to leave,” he said, dropping, what for her was a bombshell, even though she knew it would come at some time .

They sat on the back veranda step, sipping coffee. Mark leaned against the post facing her. “You’ve been so good to me,” he said, “shared your food, tended my wounds, and even lent me your dad’s clothes.”

Wanda smiled, “I wanted to.” It was all she said and he knew she wasn’t looking for thanks.

Leaning down he pulled a long stalk of grass. “You’ve never asked me what I did to deserve a stint at Her Majesty’s pleasure.”

Wanda shrugged. “Does it matter? Unless you really want to tell me, I don’t want to know.”

He glanced away and then, back. “I do.” He rested his arms on his knees picking at the stalk of grass, “I was getting on so well,” he said, “I had my accountancy degree in my pocket and after some searching, found a position with a well reputed firm.” He stopped and took a long breath and let it run out in a hiss. “Then this girl came into my life, her father was a wealthy businessman, and one of our clients. ‘See how you can help Miss Austin,’ my boss said.” He gave a short laugh. “I almost gasped when I saw her. Boy! Was she gorgeous. She must have seen the look on my face and a little satisfied smile touched her lips, as though she had been given proof of something she already knew. Instead of sitting opposite me, confidence written all over her face, she walked around and stood beside my desk, looking down at me, her hand on the back of my chair.” He snorted derisively. “I was not to escape the exquisitely perfumed form standing a bit closer than was polite, and to test out her power over me, she used her smoothest tone. “I want you to take me to dinner tonight.” She was the pampered *daddy’s little girl* one hears about. Well, fool that I was, I fell head-over-heels in love.” Mark’s eyes locked directly on Wanda seeking her reaction. She smiled, and he went

on. “The trouble all began when I found she kept trotting me out to show off to her friends. ‘Isn’t he beautiful?’ she’d say, as though I was some prize bull or something,” he said, disgust edging his tone. “I had to wear only the clothes *she* bought for me and that went against the grain, so I told her I didn’t want to see her anymore.” Now Mark laughed out loud. “Well, I got more than I ever bargained for. She told the police I had stolen a large amount of cash and a very expensive ring. Both wrong, but I had no proof. So I had to take the consequences.”

Wanda sensed truth in his words, and saw sincerity in his eyes, making it hard to believe otherwise. “It was incredible how you escaped. In a bakery van?” she said incredulously.

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Mark let out a laugh. “Pure chance, I guess. I overheard these other two guys discussing their escape, with help from their friends. I managed to get in—for the right sum of money of course. I gave them all I had.”

“You could have worked something out with your father and his lawyer.”

“I *am* innocent, you know, and I was too furious to sit patiently and wait. I longed for Melanie—she’s my fiancée. She’s a sweet girl. Both her parents and mine are very old friends and like Melanie and I, they are thrilled about the marriage.”

Wanda felt a little jerk in her heart at another woman having his affections, but what else did she expect? “Well, she’ll be waiting for you.”

He shook his head “It was a stupid thing to do, and now look at the trouble I’m in?” He gazed at her intently, and she hated the pain in his eyes. “Anyway, I must leave now, you know that, Wanda, don’t you? I must get in touch with my father.”

Wanda took a deep breath and swallowed the painful lump rising in her throat. She'd been dreading these words, yet a smile etched her lips. "I'll go to the highway shop and phone him, if you like."

His eyes lit up and a smile curled at a corner of his mouth. "Would you?"

~~

Mark paced ceaselessly like a caged animal. Each time he looked at the clock, the hands had hardly moved. It felt like an eternity. Where was she? He peered out of the window and scanned the distant road that ran by, and he paced again and again, until the sound of the ute eased his tormented mind. She'd come back. Mark opened the door and made a dash outside. Somehow he didn't care anymore if someone happened by and saw him.

"Your father is coming right now. He should be here in a couple of hours. He's so relieved that you're okay and he's sent good news for you, too. The woman's maid had been in the know that Miss Austin had lied, and under enquiry, she spilled the beans," Wanda plunged on, all in one breath. "You've been exonerated!"

"What?" he shouted, jubilantly. His arms ached at his sides as he looked at her sweet open face, mentally caressing her, wanting to say he loved her, but he knew he couldn't do that. He loved Melanie, he told himself. But the resolve was gone in a flash. He couldn't resist pulling her close against him and impulsively kissing her. Not just a light friendly kiss between friends, but one that was deep and hot, knocking the breath out of her.

He framed her face in his hands. "You're beautiful, both inside and out, and I'll be back to see you." Another kiss and he was gone to the back veranda to collect his few things.



Wanda knew the solitude she'd sought was now shattered—but she didn't give a damn. The only thing was, he'd be going home to Melanie, she was the one who was waiting for him—waiting to be his bride. She swallowed hard and turned away. *Fool!* She chided herself.

The early morning had been sunny and bright but it had done little to temper the cold. In the distance the sky was looming dark with deep ominous clouds heralding a violent storm. "Mark, will you give me a hand to bring in the washing?" Wanda called. Half dressed, Mark returned and they strolled out together.

"How come you have that blue-bird tattoo, anyway?" Wanda said, touching Mark's bare shoulder. "You've never told me."

Mark kept taking the washing off the line and a laugh broke good-naturedly. "You never asked."

"I am now."

"A dare, by a mate at school," he returned. "Like it?"

"Mmm, it's pretty, but kind of sad."

"Sad?"

"Yes, as though it's all alone and needs a mate."

Mark stopped picking off the washing and reached for her. "Maybe we should get one for you, then," he said huskily, pulling her into his arms.

"Mark, you shouldn't...Melanie..." she trembled against the heat of his chest. But Mark's mouth was on her moist parted lips, his tongue seeking the tender warmth of the recess within. He pressed her to him with an urgency that openly declared the arousal

she was awakening in him. A moment of sheer joy washed over them, then they felt the pinpoints of icy raindrops. Wanda pushed at his chest and Mark let go, not because of the rain, but they each knew that they could be overstepping the bounds of decency. And as though nothing had happened, they grabbed up the washing and, like children, laughed and ran inside.

Mark watched her as time ticked by for him to go. A tear teetered an instant, and rolled down her cheek. His heart ached to see the sadness on her face and he came over to her, lifting her chin so she could look at him. He traced the tear with the pad of his thumb, all the way down her cheek. "Don't cry," his voice broke, huskily. "I just wish I'd met you before all this ever happened."

She drew back a step, her eyes downcast, so she could hide, exactly how she felt. "There's no use wishing for what is not. It's here and now that counts."

Mark gazed at Wanda. The sweet young woman who'd cared for him. A strong and independent young woman, who hadn't much in material wealth but certainly a great deal in character and kindness. He wanted her more than anything. This was no 'one off' thing, either. Suddenly, he realised it was deeper than that, something that had crept up on him, and in a few days too. Something that was aching to reveal itself. Love. Yes, he loved her. Reaching for her, he ran the crook of his finger along the delicate curve of her cheekbone, unselfconsciously offering her the powerful evidence of his desire. He gathered her up in his arms and when she leaned into him, he knew that she felt the same way. He kissed the crown of her head tenderly, and carried her to the bed, laying her gently across it. Wanda heard his shoes drop one at a time and watched him unzip his trousers. Her heart thumped in wild anticipation. Once more, he stood naked before her. Every curve, every line of his powerful body a mesmerising temptation; more than anything else, she quivered at the sight of his jutting arousal. "You are so wonderful," she said curving her fingers over his erection.

Consumed with desire his eyes roved her body, followed by his hands, and she felt him suck in his breath, his eyes full of passion. He took her clothes off, slowly, discarding them one at a time. He gazed on every facet of her nakedness and groaned his pleasure. "Wanda, I've never had feelings like these, you do things to me I cannot control. I want you," he said, his voice gruff and on the edge of wildness. His hands covered her breasts, her nipples protruding between his fingers. He thrilled at her shiver of delight when he flexed his fingers. He bent to nuzzle her neck, tantalising her and revelling in her little giggle.

He took her velvety nipples into his mouth, first one then the other, and she cried out, impulsively tangling her trembling fingers into his thick blond hair, holding his head deeper into her breast. "Mark, love me..." she breathed brokenly.

He kissed her open mouth, her tiny moans and whimpers arousing him to fever point. He pressed the length of his swollen male flesh against her stomach and she realised she was sexually aroused, the tension in her lower belly, the hardening thrust of her nipples against his body and the warm flooding of her loins no surprise to her.. Her legs were trembling and she couldn't move. His hands skimming down either side of her body awakening her to a whirl of passionate sensations. His palm found the mound of curls at the apex of her thighs and the mastery of his fingers delivered erotic feelings she'd never before experienced. She moaned with hunger for more. "Mark," she groaned, clutching at his waist, pulling and urging him down to her. "Do it," the words broke from her lips in a torrid whisper.

He lowered himself and sliding into her moistness he plunged into her, feeling how deep inside her he was. He thrust gently at first, stroking her warm satin flesh, then he thrust harder. Exquisite pain seared through her with each stroke of heart-throbbing rhythm, his sweat drenching her, and she shivered, her tongue swiping the moisture from his chest in carnal wonder

His breath grew shallow and hard with each measured stroke and finding the tempo of sensual harmony, they abandoned themselves to the exploding sensations that came with waves of ecstasy and with one final thrust he spilled into her, wet and hot.

In the aftermath of their passion they lay exhausted and clasped in each other's arms. She nestled her face in the softness of his throat. His palm stroked her cheek possessively, drifting into fitful sleep, aware that he was still inside her, feeling her gentle throbbings, still encircling his spent penis.

~~

A car stopped in the yard. "Dad!" Mark's voice rang out. At last his father had arrived.

"It's not! Mark, run for it!" Wanda urged.

Two men stepped out. It was the law. She knew by their uniforms and badges.

"So, I'll see them," he said.

She grabbed his arm panic clouding her face. "Go! Don't take chances until I find out who they are. It could be anyone after you."

Reluctantly Mark sprinted into the bush just out of sight, while Wanda answered the door. The men showed their badges, and asked for Mark Hamilton.

Wanda's explanation about his innocence, met only ridicule from the younger man, and he grabbed her arm. "Harbouring a fugitive..." he gritted, sarcastically.

"I'm not."

The man drew his pistol, waving it in her face. 'Now, cut the garbage, hippie lady. Where is he? We know he's here, we got a tip off from someone at the shop.'

"What the hell are you doing?" the older man admonished in no uncertain terms. "Put that gun away."

The man laughed without mirth. "She's lying," he hissed.

"Please," Wanda pleaded, drawing upon all the bravado she could muster. "Ring his father! He'll back up my statement."

Wanda's tough response had the older man inclined to believe her. "I'll ring headquarters, find out exactly what's going on," the older man said, and headed for his squad car.

Mark had been watching and could stand no more. In total disregard for himself, he left his cover and made straight for Wanda, stopping only as she ran toward him. "Come to me, darling," he called, trying to soothe her. But the report of a single shot ripped through the bush, its sound ricocheting from hill to hill and all living creatures were momentarily silenced.

"*Mark!*" Wanda's scream rent the air with his name. She watched horrified as dust flew up where he pitched forward and fell to the ground. She knelt beside him, his lifeless body cradled in her arms.

"He...was coming at me," the young officer babbled stupidly, the pistol still clutched in his hand.

~~

“Merry Christmas, Wanda. Chilly day today, but nice aye?” It was Molly. She’d been here when Mark had been taken to hospital, but now she was back with the rest of the Aboriginals for their annual visit.

“Merry Christmas to you too, and it certainly is chill, but nice.”

“So why do you look like there’s a thunderstorm coming up?” Molly said, squatting down beside Wanda. “I read the newspaper. They say the maid found that ring hidden in the back of the woman’s sofa!”

“Yes,” Wanda said sarcastically, “not so clever after all, but it cost Mark a year in prison and a month in hospital.”

“Well, Mark’s body wounds are healed now,” Molly said, “and he has you and the little one there, to heal his soul,” she added good-naturedly. “Ever heard from him?”

“I saw the newspaper in the shop. A big society wedding to take place the day before Christmas. He’s marrying someone else.”

“That’s today. Didn’t he know about the baby?” Molly asked with more indignation than incredulity.

“I’ve never told him.”

Wanda knew Molly was waiting for some answer but there was none. When they’d made love, she knew well enough that he was Melanie’s fiancé. And as for taking protection? With Mark, somehow she didn’t want to. She loved him and that was all that counted. And now, she could see the little printed announcement in her mind’s eye and she blinked the tears that stung the back of her eyes, trying to ease the hurt.

*Mr. and Mrs. Mark Hamilton Senior announce the coming wedding of their son Mark Hamilton Junior to the daughter of Doctor and Mrs. Jones, Melanie... her thoughts were*

jerked to the present. So, maybe he was gone from her life but a part of him would always be with her. The most wonderful part, his baby.

Through the bush, now dappled with unseasonable snow, it seemed it was going to be a white Christmas. Climate change, they called it. Strange indeed, snow in high summer, but it was Tasmania after all. The back porch light caught the pair of black, Tassie Devils, standing on the other side of the stream. They seemed to shiver as tiny flakes of snow filtered down while they waited to come up for a drink. The silence in the bush could only be heard in her soul.

*Silent Night... Holy Night...* it was Molly and her family going down to the valley and the little church. Midnight... the bells began ringing. Wanda placed her hands on the gentle bulge of her belly and the child moved again. A hand rested on her shoulder and she spun round, her eyes wide

“Mark?” She must be dreaming, but dreams don’t talk.

“My darling Wanda...” He was hugging her, and on her forehead she felt the dampness of his tears. “I love you.” He held her a little apart and placed his hand over hers. “Our baby...” It was a statement, not a question..

Wanda nodded. She choked, pressing her face to his heart. “I thought...they said...your wife?”

“No, darling, I couldn’t go through with it and neither could Melanie. We both realised it wasn’t love, but just something we wanted to do for our parents.”

“I thought you’d have been married yesterday.”

“Not when it’s you I love, and now this wonderful child. For God’s sake, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wasn’t sure if that would be right, seeing as you and Melanie—“

“Nothing is more important than my child, and the love of my heart, the woman who is her mother.”

“Oh, Mark,” she sobbed, not in sadness but pure joy.

“So, what do you think we should call her?” he smiled.

At Wanda’s loving touch another movement occurred in her abdomen and she smiled. “Bluebird,” she said simply. “I know she’s going to be a girl.”

“Bluebird,” he whispered above her head. “I love that.”

A powdering of snow filtered down and Christmas carols rang out with the bells from the little church. Mark smiled at his good fortune, holding Wanda close in his arms.

**The End**

***Romona Hilliger copyright A blue bird on his Shoulder. Dated 29/11/06***