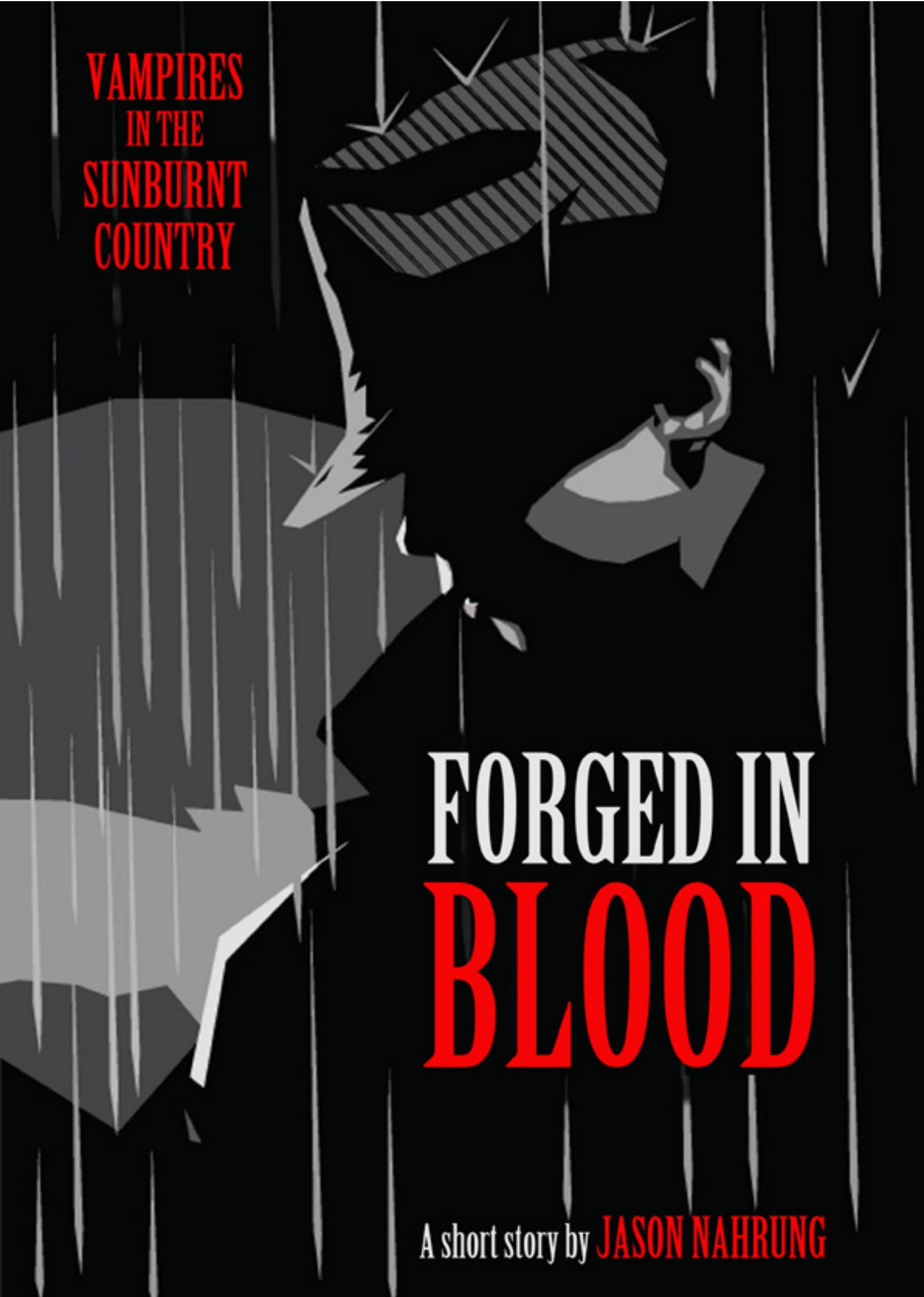


VAMPIRES
IN THE
SUNBURNT
COUNTRY



FORGED IN
BLOOD

A short story by **JASON NAHRUNG**

FORGED IN BLOOD

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A short story set in the world of
VAMPIRES IN THE SUNBURNT COUNTRY

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

ABOUT 2011, when I was working on the novel *Blood and Dust*, the first of my Vampires in the Sunburnt Country duology, I found my former police detective Phillip Reece musing about the fateful day that he stumbled into the shadow world of Maximilian von Schiller's vampire organisation: 'The moment he'd faced Mira in West End and said yes.' But what was that moment? I had half an idea that his role as a Special Branch detective in 1970s Brisbane had brought him into contact with Maximilian's right-hand weapon, Mira, and the details didn't matter so much. But as Reece developed as a character, the facts came to matter, if only so his reflections on his past had veracity and consistency. The reader didn't need to know the specifics but I did. And so I penned this 'origin' story of a major moment in Reece's life, and Mira's too, to some extent: a moment that would come to ensnare Kevin Matheson – mechanic, renegade, vampire.

FORGED IN BLOOD

Ekaterina ... Rakoczy? What kind of name was that? These Reds must've wanted to be sprung.

Phillip Reece pulled the Hungarian passport out of the collection on the table and studied the woman's picture. Pretty in a harsh kind of way. Loaded too, to be able to afford documents of this quality.

Not a bad operation the forger had going here: plenty of fanny and booze in the strip joint out the front, and a handy set of stairs out the back leading into the warren of Valley back streets. Tram, train, buses, cabs: he could have a rowboat down the river bank for all Reece knew.

He looked over to where two other Special Branch officers were persuading the forger to assist them with their inquiries. The arhythmic sound of impact on flesh suggested the little weed was still proving unhelpful, but a few more whacks with the Yellow Pages would change his attitude.

Reece sat at the desk and turned on the lamp. Morning light was only just filtering in through the thin curtains, grey with dust. The place smelled of mould and stale booze, the sinus-clearing burn of developing fluid creeping out from the jury-rigged dark room in the bathroom. Reece lit a cigarette and searched the drawers. Score. He ran a finger around the inside of a shot glass and helped himself to a nip of the forger's Bundy.

'Hey,' Perkins yelled, and huffed over. He'd taken his coat off, was showing massive sweat stains around his underarms and along the line of his braces. 'Thirsty work here, you lazy shit.'

Reece pushed the bottle across.

Perkins swigged it from the neck. 'Anything else worth confiscating?'

'False IDs. DLs mostly, but a couple of European passports.'

'Terrorists?'

'Could be tourists for all I know. We can bag 'em and send 'em down to ASIO, see what they make of it.'

‘Let the spooks grab the glory, you mean.’

‘*Firmness with courtesy.* No one mentioned glory.’

‘I’ll give you firmness with courtesy, all right,’ and he took the bottle back to the chair where the forger sat propped in his bloodied pyjamas, held in place by Sanderson.

Reece uncovered a creased note book, spiral bound, with a coffee cup stain on the cover.

Dates, initials, places, prices. Not a bad little earner; enough to support a decent drinking habit. Students, mostly, he guessed, upping their age to get into the boozers. The last page gave him pause, though.

‘Gimme that bottle back,’ he shouted, waving the glass as he considered what it meant.

Sanderson came over and topped him up. Reece sprang back, chair screeching on the floor, as rum spilled over his fingers, his pants, the book.

‘Shit, Sandy, watch ya pour, eh? Evidence and all that.’ He wiped himself off. ‘Leave the bloody bottle if you can’t be more careful.’

Sandy took a big slug and plonked the bottle on the table, right on the Rakoczy passport.

Reece swore, and the burly man stalked back to take his turn with the phone book. A man of few words, Sandy. Great front rower on the force’s rugby team. He was very excited about the Springboks’ pending visit to Brisbane; the unpaid overtime since the Premier had ordered a crackdown on protesters, not as much. He was enjoying working out some frustration; they’d stopped asking questions fifteen minutes ago.

Reece downed his drink, sucked air through his teeth, enjoying the burn of the alcohol. Sun had to be over the yard arm somewhere, he figured. Besides, he’d been up since sparrow fart waiting for this bust: a body with a false ID, the club’s card in a pocket, some snooping and then surreptitious checking that the place wasn’t on the protected list. Yeah, he’d earned a drink.

He turned his attention back to the book. The last page showed fees in five figures: that was one or even two zeroes more than most were shelling out. And one was due tomorrow. Brekkie Creek Hotel. E.R. He looked at the limp forger, held up only by Perkins’ paws.

Reece pushed the bottle aside and picked out a Queensland driver’s licence from the Ekaterina woman’s pile. Female, Caucasian, 32, 5 foot 8 in the old measurement, hair black, eyes brown. An address, probably bullshit. There was a Romanian passport, too, but a good twenty years out of date. First name, Danica. Same woman as Ektarina, though: no mistaking that picture, a kind of Faye Dunaway look to her, with those high cheek bones and penetrating eyes, hair to the shoulder, a slight twist to the lips that suggested she was about to call the photographer a name. He wondered how much of that 5 foot 8 would be legs.

He’d file a report with the spooks, but there was nothing to stop him from

making his own inquiries. Good pub, the Brekkie Creek. He slipped the passports into his pocket.

Sheilas in the police force, uni students on the streets, Reds under the bed. What was the world coming to?

The address on the driver's licence was indeed bullshit, a takeaway shop on the northside, which left him time to have a kip and make some basic preparations before hitting the Breakfast Creek Hotel in time to meet E.R. Wasn't too chilly yet, not long after dark, and the place was crowded as he made his way through. He found her in the beer garden. She wore her hair hidden under a scarf like some stylish Sadie on her way to a funeral, all in black and half her face covered by black-rimmed sunglasses. Most tellingly, she was alone and she didn't have one of the pub's famous steaks sitting in front of her.

It Don't Come Easy played on the radio, barely audible under the babble. She saw him coming and stood to leave, gathering up her small handbag in a smooth motion. He pushed through the crush, earning some scowls and grumbles, but managed to grab her elbow and steer her back to the bench she'd so recently vacated, much to the annoyance of a young couple who'd been arrowing for the space.

'Leaving so soon?' he asked.

'You aren't who I was expecting.' Her voice carried an accent, kind of heavy, dusty, playing some part of his insides like a double bass bowed slow. Very Bonnie Parker.

'Who was that?'

'Not a policeman.'

He'd donned sneakers and picked up a shabby long coat from St Vinnie's, sans tie; he'd even tried to slouch.

'You got me. So how about you tell me your name.'

She lowered her head and manoeuvred her glasses so she could appraise him over the top. A trick of the light made her eyes gleam a pale shade of green, a bit like a cat's. 'Why don't you tell me, detective.'

Her scarlet-painted lips twisted in a smile that shot a hot bolt through him. He might be in trouble here. He'd never been very good with the ladies, especially the sassy ones. Hated hauling the young'uns in, all hairy arm pits and braless and full of spit and venom. As though freedom was a right, not a privilege.

He pulled out the Romanian passport. 'This one says it's Danica, and that you're more than sixty years old.'

She smiled, teeth bright against her lipstick. 'Is there another option? That seems a little ... premature.'

'Well, this other one has the age about right, but it's for a woman called Ekaterina Rack-something. They both sure look like you.'

'Would you think me awfully vain if I asked for the younger version?'

‘What’s it matter? They’re hardly kosher, are they, love. I’m gonna have to take you in, I’m afraid.’

‘Well, I’m afraid I can’t allow that.’

‘Don’t do anything—’

She was already on her feet. He lunged, snagged her handbag. Her palm filled his vision. That flash of flesh and nail sent him to the ground like being slugged with a pile driver.

‘She got you a bewdy,’ some bloke said as he helped Reece to his feet.

‘Italian,’ Reece said by way of explanation.

‘Feisty.’ The bloke offered him a handkerchief. ‘Here. You’re bleeding.’

Tasting blood, Reece gingerly pressed the cloth to his throbbing nose. On the radio, Deep Purple were playing *Some Kind of Woman*, and a wag shouted across the space that had opened around him, ‘Nice handbag, love.’

The flats were a rundown bunch, two storeys with balcony access for the top floor, on a side road in West End. Reece stood on the other side of the road, a few doors down, breathing in the competing scents of curry and marijuana. He hugged the shadows; there were barely any street lights, the area lit mostly by the flashing bulbs of some gook restaurant on the main drag. It was pretty quiet this time of night. A few cars, barking dogs, someone’s telly, a baby squawking. No one had come by in the past quarter hour since he’d arrived.

He checked the address again, holding up to the uncertain light the sweat-smudged slip of paper taken from Ekaterina’s handbag.

Yep, this was the place. With a late-model Ford out the front and a brick shit-house of a guy with a cop’s buzzcut standing at what he figured was the door he wanted. Reece didn’t recognise him. Out-of-towner? Spook? Or just hired muscle? The gorilla didn’t seem her type. And why not haul him along on her earlier outing?

He couldn’t pick her deal at all. All he knew was that she was a hell of a lot stronger than she looked, and that she owed him for what were probably going to be sensational black eyes and a great loss of dignity.

The lights were on behind the flat’s curtained window. It was time to collect.

Reece opened another button on his shirt and yanked the tails out, ruffled his hair and stooped his shoulders. He rinsed his mouth with a swig of rum from his hip flask and spilled a little down his front. Hoping the bodyguard was more gullible than his mistress, Reece weaved across the street, up the stairs and along the balcony. Definitely the flat he wanted. The guard eyed him as he approached, as he stumbled past; frowned as Reece flipped a drunken salute. Suspicious. Poised. Keep walking? Call for backup?

Nah.

Reece beat him – just – as the man went for his shoulder holster. He rammed

the snub barrel of his .38 under the guard's jaw.

'Easy, sport.'

Reece got him turned around with his arms up against the wall. Patted him down and pocketed the pistol. Then got him to handcuff himself to the rail.

There was a strange mix of anger and amusement in the guard's expression as he watched Reece move to the door. The man's eyes reflected red, like he'd been caught in a bad Polaroid.

'I really wouldn't do that,' he said.

'Not a fucking peep outta you.' Reece made his point with a motion of the revolver.

'Your funeral.' And then the guard looked back out over the street as though taking a leisurely breath of fresh air.

Blinking, unsure if he'd actually seen the man's eyes change colour, Reece fought the urge to clip the guy behind the ear for being so fucking nonchalant. His gut was as tight as a fist; twenty years of policing was telling him this was a bad idea. But he was here now. Weapon poised, he eased the door open.

A quick scan took in a sparse living room, lit only by a tall lamp in one corner; doorways along one wall suggested bathroom and bedroom. A breakfast bar separate living room from kitchen with a Formica table near the back door.

Ekaterina sat, head bowed, at the table, her hands pressed to her chest. Blood stained her fingers.

Next to her stood a younger woman, also in black, same haircut, similar face. Another fucking do-gooder, some Commie, perhaps? But the thing that really pulled him up short was the sword that she swung to point at him like a wizard's wand.

'So what have we here?' she asked.

'Police,' Reece shouted. 'Drop the weapon.'

She wiped the blade on the sleeve of her coat, then sheathed it at her side.

'I thought they only delivered milk in this backwater. Come on in, tall and tasty.'

Reece grasped the gun tighter, the wood and metal grip slick with sweat. The room felt hot, claustrophobic. Why wasn't she caring about the revolver?

He locked the door behind him, suddenly nervous. Had he missed something – someone? He checked the open doorway again. Couldn't hear a damn thing.

'You're good, piggy,' the girl said as she leaned back against the rear door, her arms crossed. 'You got to the forger before we did. But as you can see, we still managed to beat you to the prize.'

For some reason – that steady, amused glance – he didn't want to get any closer to her. Something about the way she moved: so graceful, so assured.

'Stand away from her.' He motioned with his gun, but the girl didn't move, just raised one eyebrow in an expression of vague amusement. He edged closer so he could see Ekaterina better. 'You okay?'

'In a moment ... Aim ... for the head.'

'Shut up, Mother,' the girl said.

'So what the hell's going on here?'

'Nothing that concerns you, piggy. Although, I could use a snack.'

Ekaterina pulled herself up straight. She looked pale, her face drawn. Her breath came with effort. 'Leave him, Mira. For pity's sake, you've got me. Isn't that enough?'

'Got you? Is that why you were running away? Because we've *got* you?'

The woman made to stand, but the girl pushed her down into the chair. 'Sit still. I'll stick it back in you if I have to.'

'I said, stand away from her.' Reece held the gun at full stretch, left hand up to help hold it steady. He couldn't help feeling this situation was well out of his grip.

'Make me.' The girl pulled her sword to weave it in front of her like some marching band's baton.

Reece fired. Once. Twice.

The sword fell from the girl's hand. She slumped, dragging a chair with her to the floor.

He ran forwards but Ekaterina was already crouching over the body. 'She'll be all right. You only got her in the heart.'

She looked at the table. The passport lay there, on the edge of a pool of blood. She reached but he put his hand on the document, the gun pointed at her.

'Tell me what this is all about. Who are you people?'

The front door shivered with an impact.

'Better that you don't know.'

She reached again for the passport, but he shoved it in his pocket.

'I'm not like my daughter,' she said.

'Don't,' he said, but she was already striding to the back door. 'I'm warning you.'

She paused, only to say, 'You should leave, too. Forget all about this.'

The front door shuddered again. Wood cracked.

She opened the back door and stepped out.

Cursing, he ran onto the landing after her. Gone. Vanished into the alley.

Movement caught his attention: the girl, flopping on the floor, trying to stand.

So, not the heart. Thank God he hadn't killed her.

Another thud shivered the door as he knelt beside her, revolver pointed at the front door. He told her that she'd been shot, that she should lie back down. She clung to him, gasping, pulling him off balance.

The door crashed open. The guard stumbled through, broken chain dangling from the cuff on each wrist.

Reece jerked to his feet, shouting, gun pointing, but the girl came with him, he couldn't get a bead on the thug. The girl grabbed his arm. Then he was flying. Breath whooshed out of him as he collected the table. Spots flashed across his

vision like sunlight off water. The ceiling dimmed.

A sharp fingernail spiked up under his chin. She had him pinned, her hips against his, her other hand in his hair, holding him down.

‘So, my clever little piggy. Can you find her again?’

Her eyes glimmered green. Her teeth were very white and very sharp. She had her mother’s cheek bones.

‘Sure,’ he whispered.

‘That’s how long you’ve got, then. Hunter.’

And then she bit him, and it was horrible, and it was oh so good.



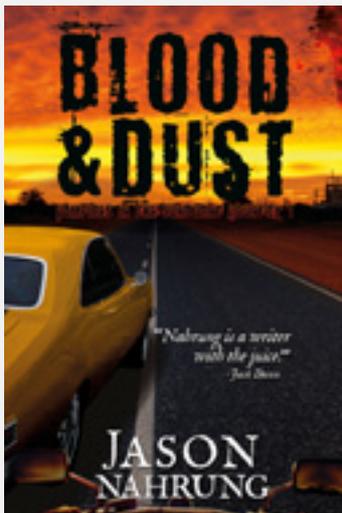
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Nahrung grew up on a Queensland cattle property and now lives in Ballarat with his wife, the writer Kirstyn McDermott. He works as an editor and journalist to support his travel addiction. His fiction is invariably darkly themed, perhaps reflecting his passion for classic B-grade horror films and '80s goth rock. The author of four books, his most recent are the Gothic tale *Salvage* (Twelfth Planet Press) and the outback vampire duology *Blood and Dust* and *The Big Smoke* (Clan Destine Press). He lurks online at www.jasonnahrung.com.



Picture: Paul Ewins

VAMPIRES IN THE SUNBURNT COUNTRY



BOOK 1: BLOOD AND DUST

For outback mechanic Kevin Matheson, it's just another summer's day. Mulga wavering in the haze, sweat on his brow, bastard flies getting in his way. And then the vampires arrive, leaving his life like road kill in their wake. Caught between vicious nomadic bikers and their brutal foes from the coast, Kevin fights to save not only those he holds dearest, but his own soul. But how far will he go to save the people he loves?

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BOOK 2: THE BIG SMOKE

Kevin Matheson heads to Brisbane to settle his score with Mira, the sadistic killer who tore his life apart. Mira's bodyguard, Reece, worn out and fading a little more each day, is determined to protect his mistress, for better or worse. But the city's vampires have their own plans. As Kevin and Reece race towards the catastrophic intersection of loyalty and vengeance, both face the question: who are they willing to sacrifice to win the war?

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