

THE
CARTOGRAPHER'S
SECRET

TEA COOPER



HARPER MUSE

The Cartographer's Secret

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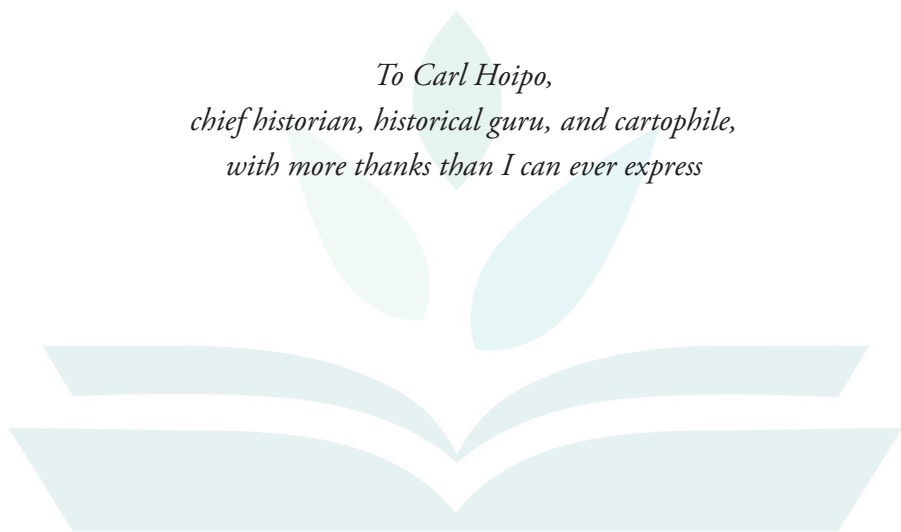
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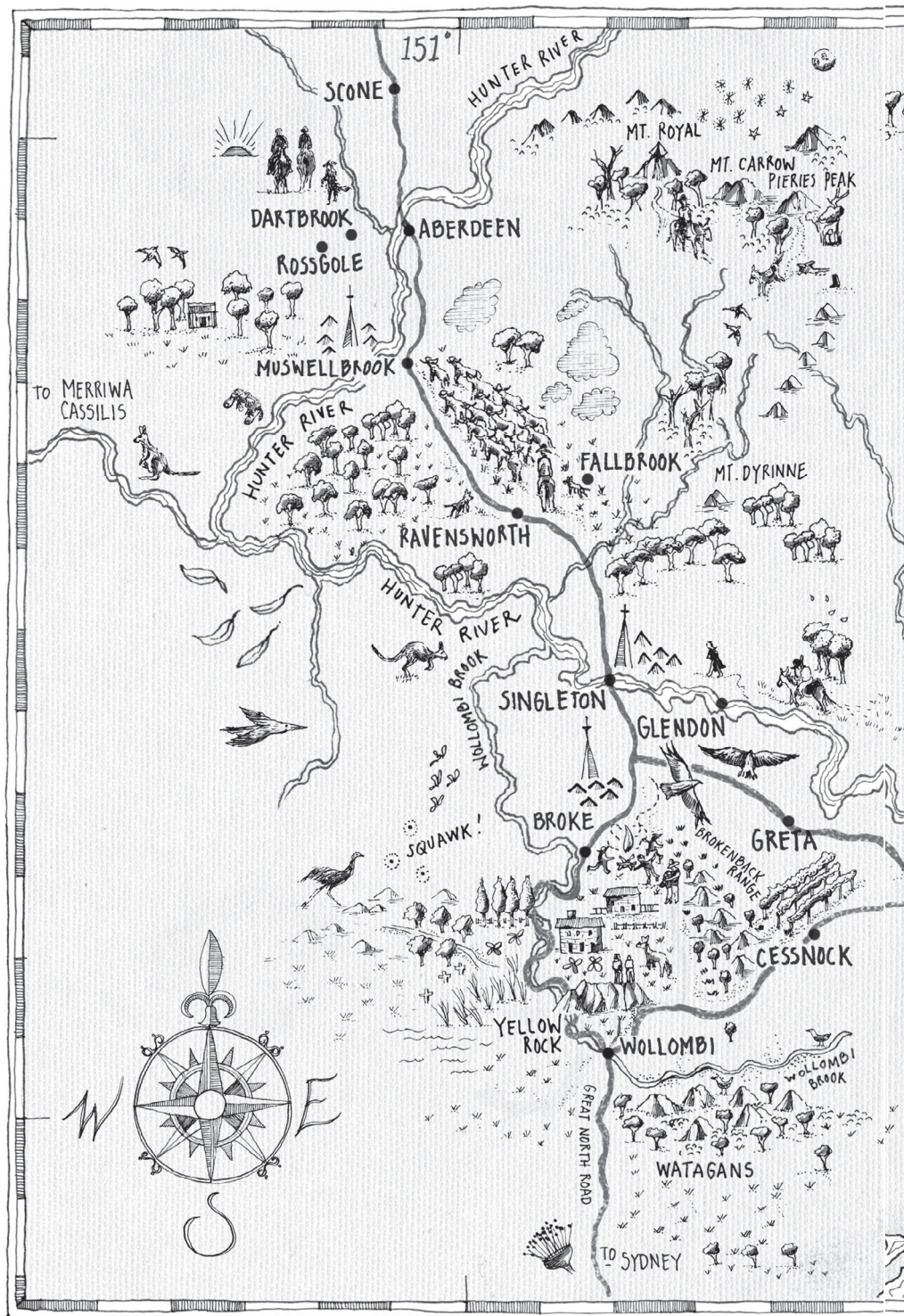
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*To Carl Hoipo,
chief historian, historical guru, and cartophile,
with more thanks than I can ever express*



HARPER
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BARRINGTON TOPS

152°

32°

EVIE'S MAP

MIRANNIE RANGE

MIRANNIE CREEK

LARGS

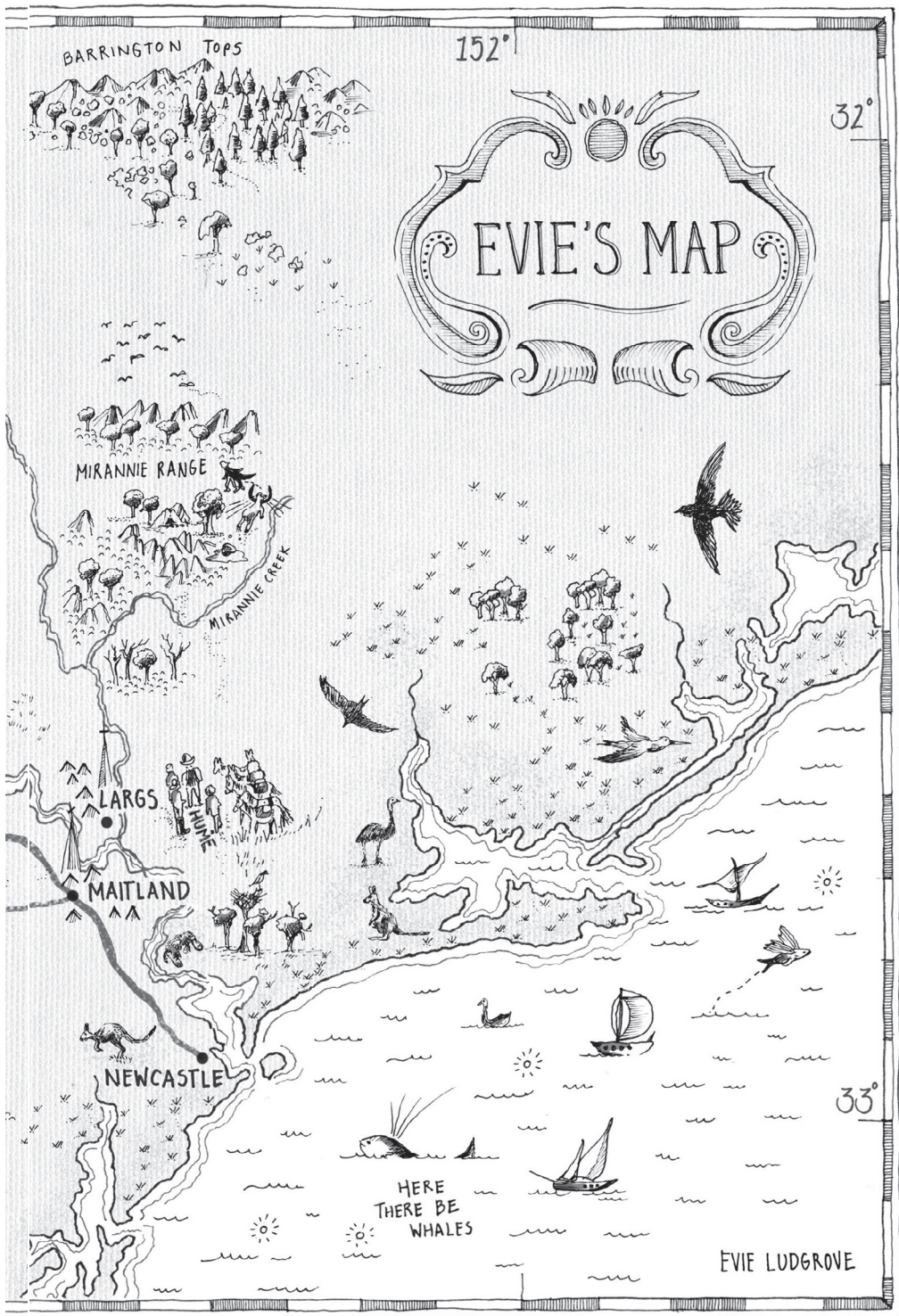
MAITLAND

NEWCASTLE

HERE
THERE BE
WHALES

EVIE LUDGROVE

33°





PROLOGUE

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 1911

Ladies, ladies. Your attention, please. It is imperative that we take advantage of this opportunity.” An air of despair laced Mrs. Booth’s voice. “Miss Fletcher is a very busy woman; her studio portraits are in high demand. We are very lucky to have her here today.”

The hands on the wall clock ticked their agonizing way to two. By the time the women were herded into place, it would be well past the hour Letitia Rawlings promised to be standing on the corner of George Street. The boat race started at three, and she had to be aboard before the starter’s gun.

Precious minutes lapsed while Miss Fletcher arranged every single member of the Women’s Club, seating Mrs. Booth in the center, adjusting drapes, worrying about height, the set of elbows, and the women’s ability to remain silent and still. When she’d accomplished those major feats, she spent more valuable moments measuring the intensity of the light while an argument ensued about who should sit next to whom.

Patience worn to a frazzle, Lettie turned to Mrs. Booth and hissed, “I really must leave. I have a prior commitment.”

“You cannot.” Mrs. Booth clamped her hand firmly on Lettie’s arm and held her steady, fixed her eyes on the camera, and nodded. “Continue, Miss Fletcher. We are ready.”

A further eternity passed until finally Lettie managed to offer her farewells and escape. She scanned the busy street searching for Thorne’s pride and joy—his motor—but the shiny green custom-built Model T Ford with its distinctive khaki roof was nowhere to be seen.

There was no sign of her brother in Pitt Street either, which was hardly unexpected. If he’d waited he’d have missed the pre-start checks. Thorne always won the sprint, and she usually made a fine showing in the ladies’ steering race, but she’d promised to attend the luncheon at the Women’s Club. There had been several of her cohort from the Ladies Debating Society present, and she hadn’t caught up with them since university days. Now she wished she’d refused the invitation.

Clamping her hat over her unruly curls and dodging the crowds, she bolted down the hill toward the Quay. The start line was just beyond Fort Macquarie Tram Depot. It couldn’t take more than fifteen minutes. If she hurried she might have time to slip into her well-worn seat at the back of Thorne’s boat before the race began.

The first glimmer of the harbor appeared between the buildings surrounding the Quay. Seven minutes until the gun. Even if she wasn’t aboard, she’d be there to cheer Thorne to the finish. Tucking her bag under her arm, she lifted her skirts and ran.

The ground shuddered.

A deafening explosion ricocheted from the buildings, thundered through her body, and shook her to her core.

PROLOGUE

And the sky lit up—an obscene ball of flame and smoke shot into the windless air. Jagged timber shards knifed toward the sky. Flames crackled and her ears rang, filling her chest with a strange, heavy thump.

A limp body arced through the billowing clouds.

All-encompassing silence. No sound, no words, just a horrendous, earth-stopping dread as the dancing blaze and floating debris mesmerized the crowd of onlookers.

And there in the benign waves lapping the small stretch of sand, a straw boater. Not a mark on it, the blue hair ribbon he'd pinched from her dresser that morning still pristine.

The gaping hollow in her stomach sliced its way to her heart, and Lettie knew her beloved brother, Thorne Ludgrove Rawlings, was no more.

HARPER
MUSE

SYDNEY, 1911

Lettie lay on her bed, eyes focused on the ceiling rose, waiting for her breathing to settle and the sweat to dry on her skin. She knew, down to the last second, how long it would take to rid herself of the flickering images.

No matter what the papers described, no matter what the eye-witness reports and the scientific evidence suggested, the result was conclusive. A careless cigarette and her brother was no more.

She reached for her sketchbook and flicked through the pages to the last drawing she'd made: Thorne at the stern of the boat, his boater at a rakish angle and his smile blazing in competition with the noonday sun. If only she'd done as she'd promised and hadn't agreed to the ridiculous photograph to commemorate the insignificant achievements of the Women's Club.

Perhaps if she'd made it to the wharf in time, Thorne wouldn't have lit the cigarette. She could imagine his impatience. She'd berated him hundreds of times for smoking in the boat—they both knew the dangers of a naked flame with the engine primed.

They'd dreamed of shared adventures and exploration, made so many plans. The biggest reminder of them sat mocking her in the old stables behind the row of terraces on Macquarie Street. Their future, their way out. And now she couldn't bring herself to lift the dust sheets covering the Model T Ford. She might as well lie buried beneath them; better still, buried with Thorne beneath the open-armed angel in Waverley Cemetery.

"Letitia! I wish to speak to you."

She wiped away her tears and rolled off the bed, squinting into the early morning sun rising over the Botanic Gardens. Donning yesterday's black skirt and blouse, she hurried along the landing in answer to her mother's call.

The creaking door echoed her silent groan as she swung it open, her mouth clamped against the stale air as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom.

Pillows plumped, bed jacket neatly arranged, and breakfast tray balanced across her lap, Mrs. Miriam Rawlings lifted her lorgnette to her eyes and surveyed her daughter from head to toe. "I imagined you'd be up and breakfasted. The time for excuses is over; a routine must be established."

Something Lettie simply hadn't managed to do. Only Thorne made their privileged existence bearable, and since his accident she'd done very little other than mope around the house. Even Pater's cherished grandfather clock no longer ticked away the meaningless hours of her existence, its pendulum tied in place marking the time of her brother's demise.

The half-light softened Miriam's features but failed to mask the perpetual shrewdness in her gaze. "I have made a decision." She patted the side of the bed, inviting her to sit.

Unnerved by the unusual gesture, Lettie parked herself on the

corner of the bed, hands in lap, feet tucked to one side, seeking to present the picture expected rather than suffer yet another diatribe about her shortcomings.

"Letitia," Miriam murmured in a soft tone, the one she used when she despaired her standards would ever be met. "You must come to terms with the situation. We can no longer leave matters to chance."

Not this again. Not the endless discussion about Thorne's inheritance. "Have you not written again?"

"I wrote before and after the funeral and, as expected, she hasn't deigned to respond. Why would I write again?"

A very good question, really. To the best of her knowledge, the ridiculous silence between the Ludgroves and the Maynards had been maintained for nigh on thirty years. Lettie examined the cuff of her blouse. "To ensure Great-Aunt Olivia received your letters and knows of Thorne's passing." Great-Aunt Olivia Maynard, the sole orchestrator of the estrangement between the Ludgrove and the Maynard families.

"I've procrastinated for too long." Miriam tapped her lorgnette against her teeth. "There's nothing for it . . . I shall have to make the journey."

Lettie squirmed under her gaze. "Shall I come with you?"

"I'll take Connors, drive down, and spend the night in Wollombi. I believe there is a tolerable hotel there." She picked up her journal and leafed through the pages, letting out a series of sighs and tuts and indulging in a great deal of head shaking. "You have so many engagements."

Lettie's spine gave an involuntary twitch. An ever-increasing pile of invitations lay unanswered, and now, after a six-month reprieve, Miriam had decided the time had come to crank up the

Hunt-for-a-Husband rigmarole and expected her to flutter and fawn and make sheep's eyes at every one of the distinguished gentlemen Miriam paraded in front of her. She had some ridiculous notion that Lettie was the best catch in Sydney, which, with her being twenty-five, was so far from the truth as to be laughable, never mind the fact she wasn't the slightest bit interested in matrimony. She enjoyed male companionship, liked nothing better than to tinker with the engine of the motor car or discuss the benefits of gasoline over electric, but she hated the societal demands Miriam forced upon her, missed her brother like an amputated limb, and was seriously suspicious of the state of matrimony. Most men were looking for a servant and a bedfellow. She craved the type of companionship she and Thorne had shared, but there were few among the upper classes of Sydney who understood the workings of a Model T Ford or the delights of motorboat racing. She refused to marry, to pander to some man's quirks and whims. There had to be more to life.

The string of gentlemen callers, conjured like rabbits from a magician's hat, had reappeared in the last few weeks, and Lettie wanted none of it. She intended to manage her own affairs. She leaped to her feet and pulled back the heavy brocade curtains with more force than intended.

"Lettie, don't, please don't."

The use of her pet name brought her to a standstill. Pater was the only one who called her Lettie. Pater . . . and Thorne.

"We must put this behind us and move on, no matter how painful it might be. Too much time has passed." Moisture leaked from Miriam's eyes, tracking down the fine lines she tried so hard to mask. Lettie had never seen Miriam truly cry. Not when Grandfather died, not when the Depression had stripped the family

of many of their assets, not even when Lettie had broken the dreadful news of Thorne's accident. It was something Miriam simply didn't tolerate.

An unexpected rush of compassion took Lettie by surprise. Miriam never offered her any show of warmth or tenderness, never had. Thorne was the sun around which every member of the family revolved; she couldn't remember a time when it had been otherwise.

"You must attend to these invitations." Miriam tightened the matrimonial net.

And in that moment Lettie saw her escape. "Why don't I go and break the news to Great-Aunt Olivia?"

"You?"

"Whyever not? It would save you the trip."

"Alone? You can't go alone." Miriam picked up the hand mirror from her bedside table and peered into it, stretching the skin of her cheeks. "However, I am not at my best. The last months have taken their toll—"

"The very reason I should go," Lettie interrupted. Hopefully alone. "I believe the road once out of Sydney is quite rough. It may aggravate your rheumatic fever . . ."

"And what about these?" Miriam indicated the list of engagements in her journal.

"Surely they can wait, be postponed. A week at most. What difference would it make?"

"You'll have to be careful. Olivia is a difficult character. She's got a tongue like acid and a mind to match. Very fixed ideas. Take Connors."

Lettie had no intention of taking Connors, Mother's lugubrious part-time chauffeur and factotum, but leaving Sydney was an

enticing option and one Thorne would thoroughly approve. He'd taught her to drive. "*One day you'll thank me for this,*" he'd said as she'd crunched the gears and stalled for the umpteenth time on the steep hills around Sydney. "*A lady should never rely on a man to see her out of trouble*"—spoken with a wry grin after another of his spectacular failures to arrive at the appointed hour. On that occasion, she'd ended up walking home alone. A journey she'd thoroughly enjoyed, though never admitted. "I'll take Thorne's motor, drive myself. You can't manage without Connors, not while Pater's so busy."

"Oh no. I don't believe—"

"It's the obvious solution, and I have long since attained my majority so there is nothing inappropriate in traveling alone." And very little Miriam could do to prevent her. Her own bank account contained a very tidy sum from her commissions. After Thorne approached the editor of *The Bulletin*, they'd published several of her drawings, albeit under a pseudonym. Fortunately, neither Miriam nor Pater had discovered Raw Edge was, in fact, Miss Letitia Rawlings. "Tell me all I need to know about Great-Aunt Olivia."

"Perhaps it is a solution. Your commitments could be re-scheduled." Miriam pulled herself a little higher up the pillows. "There's very little you don't know. Olivia is my mother's sister, your great-aunt on the Maynard side, the last of the line. She's always had an unladylike passion for breeding horses, and she has very fixed ideas." Her lips pursed. "Although I suspect her passion will have waned. She must be close to seventy." An air of evasiveness hung for a moment. "She can be very loose with the truth. Are you sure you're up to it? The meeting will be fraught with difficulties."

Lettie could barely remember the woman. She and Thorne had

visited only once, as children, after Grandfather died. A dark old house, the atmosphere thick with unvoiced grievances, Miriam stony faced, Pater cowed as he hustled them back to the carriage he'd hired, long before the days of motor cars. Thorne had wrangled himself free and clambered into the branches of a majestic angophora . . . She swallowed the lump in her throat.

Maybe a trip would help her wretched lethargy abate, provide material for some new drawings and articles, clear her mind. The editor of *The Bulletin* had sent a card only a few days ago requesting an appointment. She hadn't answered, had nothing to offer.

"Letitia." Miriam patted the counterpane, inviting her to sit again. "I'll be honest with you, there's more to the visit than good manners. Thorne was heir to both properties. You must accept your responsibilities, for the family's sake."

Miriam's words brought Lettie's head up sharply. "With Thorne gone . . ." Miriam raised her hands almost in supplication, and with a crashing realization Lettie understood the plan she'd fallen victim to.

"You want me to ingratiate myself with Great-Aunt Olivia and ensure that Thorne's inheritance . . ." She couldn't finish the sentence. The horror of the prospect sank slowly into her atrophied brain.

"Darling, it's for the best."

Darling! Since when had she ever been anyone's darling? That spot was reserved for Thorne and Thorne alone. No matter what plan Miriam might be hatching, Lettie had no intention of moving into the role Thorne had vacated.

"It is Olivia who, by her callous disregard for your grandfather's wishes, has foiled everyone's intentions. You must go and speak to her. Make her see that now Thorne has gone . . ." Miriam dabbed

her dry eyes with the soggy scrap of lace. "Letitia, you must be the one to inherit. Not just for the family but for yourself. You're no longer a young girl. A large endowment will significantly increase your odds on the marriage market."

Good God! Was she nothing but a prize racehorse?

"Thorne planned to drive out and see Aunt Olivia." The words, the secret trip Thorne had promised, tripped off Lettie's tongue.

Miriam's head tilted at an alarming angle and her mouth followed suit while she fished for words. "Why would he have wanted to do that?"

"He thought it would be the right thing. Introduce himself to the woman whose estate he may one day inherit."

"But we don't . . . we haven't . . ."

"Spoken for years. Yes, indeed, and that's why Thorne thought it was the right thing to do. He didn't want to appear grasping or rude." And neither did she.

Miriam lifted her teacup, handkerchief held to the base to catch the drips, and sipped. Over the rim her eyes glittered. Unshed tears from grief? More likely due to the prospect of achieving her aim. A hard, tight smile pulled at the lines around her mouth. "We must never appear rude."

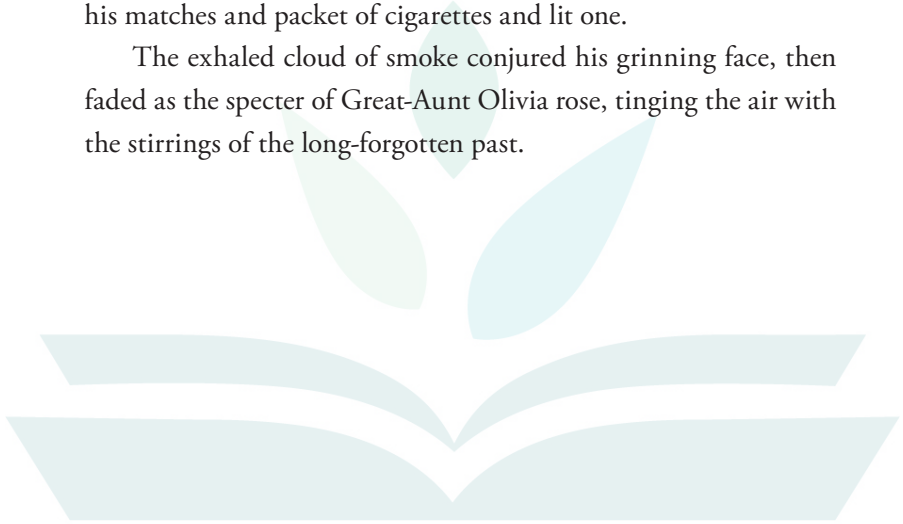
After the claustrophobic months of mourning, the hope of an escape beckoned like a welcoming wave, outweighing the horror of Miriam's contrivance.

Lettie brushed off her skirt. She wouldn't do this for Miriam; she'd do it for Thorne, do as he'd intended, uncover the secrets of the past and bring an end to the ridiculous family feud. "I'll go and get the motor out from the stables and check it over. It'll need an oil change and grease, spare tires, and extra gasoline."

Fired with a long-forgotten enthusiasm, and wanting to get

away before she had to listen to any more of Miriam's blathering. Lettie fled downstairs and into the stables. Ignoring the sudden wrench as she opened the car door and inhaled the familiar scent of Thorne's cologne, she reached beneath the seat and pulled out his matches and packet of cigarettes and lit one.

The exhaled cloud of smoke conjured his grinning face, then faded as the specter of Great-Aunt Olivia rose, tinging the air with the stirrings of the long-forgotten past.



HARPER
MUSE

2

YELLOW ROCK, NEW SOUTH WALES, 1880

The pair of wedge-tailed eagles soared high in the air, circling on the thermal currents rising from the ground below. Evie tilted her face to the sun and threw out her arms to embrace the view that encompassed her world: from the ancient rocks beneath her bare feet to the distant horizon where the pale pink clouds marked the division between reality and mystery.

All she needed and all she had ever wanted. This was her place, where she belonged.

The valley below shimmered like the surface of a vast inland sea edged by blue-gray ridges unfurling into the distance. Over it all lay an intense stillness, broken only by the jeweled flashes of the parrots and the screeches of the cockatoos. A view so indelibly engraved on her mind she could recapture every detail with her eyes closed.

A distant *cooe* rang out, echoed, and bounced back. Snatching up a spray of flowering old man's beard she'd found growing along the track, she slithered down the rock face to the clearing where her horse stood patiently cropping a patch of grass. She threw herself

astride Elsey's back and galloped down to the very spot where Aunt Olivia stood waiting.

"If you've been out on your own again you'll be for it." Aunt Olivia dusted her hands and glared.

For as long as Evie could remember Pa had insisted someone should always accompany her, although as she'd gotten older she'd learned to pick her time and sneak away alone.

"I haven't been far. Elsey needed some exercise."

"And that would tell otherwise." Aunt Olivia pointed to the spray in her hand. "Don't give me that rubbish. That grows up the top. You've been up Yellow Rock again."

"I didn't come to any harm." Throughout her childhood she'd suffered from the occasional spell that no one could explain. One moment she would be "there" and the next, someone would be sitting her up and asking if she was all right. She always was, but it was as though she'd lost a fragment of time.

"Your father wanted to know where you were."

"Did you tell him?" She tucked the spray of flowers into the metal tube she used for collecting samples. The last thing she wanted was a lecture from Pa on what Doctor Glennie liked to call *petit mal*. It was in no way evil nor an illness; simply a slipping of time and a residue pain in her head that dispersed after an hour or so. And besides, it hadn't happened for almost two years. "You better get a move on. He wants to talk to you in the study. Now."

Evie's stomach gave a lurch. Pa had never summoned her to his study in such a peremptory fashion before. "Why?"

Aunt Olivia shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea. I'm going to sit with Alice. She needs some company."

Poor Mama. A pall hung over the house, the air laden with an oppressive ambience. That was why Evie had fled, hadn't even taken

her sketchbook or her paints. She'd simply thrown a blanket over Elsey's back and slipped the bridle over her head. Then galloped off, leaving behind the strange, thick silence cloaking the house.

She pushed open the study door and tipped her head around the corner, inhaling the familiar scent of leather, old papers, and ink mixed with Pa's sandalwood soap. And dust—more dust than anywhere else in the house, because he guarded his precious mementos with a single-minded obsession and no feather duster was allowed in his hallowed space.

"Come in, my sweet. Come in." He peered up from the piles of paperwork obliterating the desktop.

She stepped inside, her hand drifting toward the two globes. When Pa was away in Sydney she'd sneak inside and wander among his mysterious collections, her fingers trailing over the fossils and shells, sharpened rocks, and strange artifacts arranged on the mantelpiece. It brought him closer, a way of feeling the essence of him during the long days without him. As she stood and spun the terrestrial and celestial globes, she'd imagine his voice patiently describing the world's wonders that inhabited her daydreams and filled the void of her loneliness.

Pa gestured to the chair across from his desk. Taking care to avoid the sprawled mass of dog on the carpet, she picked her way across the room. Pa's hound, Oxley, the shaggy bundle of bones that possibly loved Pa even more than she did, raised his head and flicked his bedraggled tail in welcome.

It wasn't until she reached the desk that she realized what Pa was studying with such intent. Her palms grew damp and her heart picked up a beat or two. She'd given it to him last evening, asked for his opinion on the task that had consumed her every waking hour for the last year.

Her map.

The map of her life—every place of significance she'd visited, every track she'd traveled, every story Pa had told her of the vast Hunter Valley.

He lifted his leonine head, eyes twinkling. "I had no idea you were so talented."

Heat rose to her cheeks, feet fidgeting, heart thumping as she fought the desire to cover her face. Pa loved her drawings. He'd hung a series in golden frames in the hallway, showed them to anyone and everyone who visited, but she knew why her map had particularly sparked his interest.

He was a surveyor, and if life had treated him more kindly, his name would rank with many of the famous explorers who had charted the wide land the Ludgroves and the Maynards called home: Blaxland, Mitchell, Oxley, Sturt, Hume and Hovell, and of course, Ludwig Leichhardt.

"I see you've marked some of Leichhardt's travels through the Hunter." Pa let out a long sigh and traced the path she'd annotated. "A prince, the veritable Prince of Explorers, the most amiable of men." His eyes took on a distant look as they always did when he spoke of Doctor Leichhardt, staring out to some far horizon visible only in his memory, a memory that still rankled despite the passing years.

"What do you think, Evie? Have you a theory? Leichhardt left us with such a mystery when he and his exploration party disappeared, never to be seen again. Five men, two Aboriginal guides, seven horses, twenty mules, and fifty bullocks cannot vanish without a trace. Can your bright young mind shed some light on this conundrum?"

She tucked a rogue curl behind her ear, then tightened her

fingers around the strap of her collecting box; she wanted to show Pa the spray of lichen she'd found, but she knew better than to disturb his reminiscences.

These were the stories she'd grown up with, her bedtime stories. Fairy tales lulled other children to sleep, fantasies of princesses locked in towers, marauding dragons, and handsome princes. She had her handsome prince, but he was no fantasy. He was a genuine hero.

"I see you have marked the spot where I first met Leichhardt."

Evie didn't respond. She knew the words that would follow as surely as any well-loved fable.

"I came across him horseless and lost on the banks of the Hunter. Here he is. You've drawn him on the map. Are the coordinates correct?" He lifted the monocle he'd taken to wearing on a long black ribbon around his neck and gripped it between his cheek and brow bone. "Why, you've even drawn his hat and long coat. Such an impractical garment. It was the array of pockets he loved. He was on his way to the Scotts' and had missed the path. When I delivered him, safe and sound, they invited our entire family to return for a Christmas feast, and very fine it was too. Tables stretched in the shade of the spreading trees, roast goose and plum pudding, figs, peaches, apricots from their trees." He let out a delighted chuckle and pointed to the little vignette marking what was once the vast property of Glendon. "And here we all are enjoying the Christmas bounty. And here are the drovers at their camp beyond the stables. Your map is remarkably accurate."

For longer than she could remember, the old maps of the Dutch cartographers had held her fascination. She tried to replicate the intricate designs and drawings and at the same time remain true to history and the local landscape. She'd wanted to mark the great

ocean beyond Newcastle with the words *Here there be dragons*, but she'd had to make do with *Here there be whales*. Any inaccuracy would have incurred Pa's wrath.

"I've always believed Leichhardt only invited me to accompany him through the Hunter in the hope he wouldn't get lost again." He allowed himself a wry laugh. "You've marked it all. The places we unearthed fossils and the ancient water courses, even our camp on Pieries Peak. A time of my life I will never forget. Armed with little more than knapsacks and notebooks, we roamed wherever we fancied. From Yellow Rock itself to the very summit of Mount Royal, country filled with stands of box, spotted gum, blackbutt and forest gum, ironbark and stringybark." He let out a painful sigh. "We could have achieved so much."

But there was no happy ending to Pa's story, no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The evidence sat before her in the shape of poor Pa. Struck down in his prime, to live forever with dreams of what might have been.

"We had such plans of exploration, for the betterment of the country, for you, my sweet, and all who will come after you."

She knew better than to interrupt, but he'd aroused her curiosity. She'd heard so many tales of Leichhardt's expedition, but none that directly affected her. "How?"

"First an overland route to Carpentaria, creating a shorter route to India, an unlimited market for our horses. The settlement at Port Essington would be our *entrepôt* for all traffic in and out of the country. And acres and acres of grazing land, enough for all the generations who would follow." He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "But for the governor. He refused to confirm the vote for supplies. Then, always impatient, Leichhardt took matters into his own hands, volunteered to lead and finance the expedition

himself. Many of us in the Hunter bred horses, the finest in the colony, our reputation established. Your grandfather raised a large proportion of the funds to support Leichhardt, and I was to travel with them. Then this . . ." Pa thumped his leg with his cane and heaved upright.

Pa, the man who'd lost most of his leg and all his dreams to an unfortunate accident.

He wasn't alone in his obsession with Leichhardt. The entire country continued to offer theories regarding his disappearance, and had ever since Leichhardt's final, fateful expedition to cross the continent from east to west over thirty years ago. A cornucopia of possibilities continued to absorb the population: Leichhardt and his party were murdered, or mutinied; they drowned in a flash flood or perished for want of water; even that they were eaten by sharks in the Gulf; and more recently that Leichhardt had lived out his days with a tribe deep in the desert—but nothing conclusive, nothing ever proven. "Perhaps he simply got lost."

"They thought him lost somewhere between the Darling Downs and Port Essington on his first expedition, but he wasn't, was he? Bold as brass he sailed into Port Jackson. Three thousand miles in fifteen months. Three thousand miles!" Another whack with Pa's cane on his wooden leg brought her out of her reverie. Pa's life's dream to accompany Leichhardt, shattered by a single misstep.

Her map showed the past, Pa's stories, where he preferred to dwell. Much of the Hunter she and Pa had traveled together—he in the dog cart he favored as he could no longer ride, the faithful Oxley by his side, and she astride a pony that she'd gradually outgrown until she'd received Elsey for her sixteenth birthday. In Pa's eyes the most magnificent Waler ever bred on the property.

Together they'd charted the paths with a compass and sextant,

camped, and as the sky darkened Pa would point out the map of the stars, tell her the stories he'd learned from the Wonnarua People, and quote his favorite line from *Hamlet*. "There are more things in heaven and earth . . .," she murmured.

"... than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Pa finished with a wistful smile. "It's time we attended upon your mother, but first perhaps you'd like to show me what you have in your vasculum. Something from Yellow Rock?"

Her cheeks heated; he'd known all along where she'd been. While he rolled her map and secured it with the faded blue ribbon she'd saved from an outgrown dress, she lifted the lid on the cylindrical collecting box and carefully took out the spray of old man's beard.

"Ah! *Usnea*. Unusual to find it flowering."

"It grows on Yellow Rock. I'd like to add a picture of it." She reached for her map.

"I'd like to study it further. I noticed there are sections yet to be completed. We should discuss those."

A flicker of annoyance danced across her shoulders. Her map was something she'd created to amuse herself, to fill the long hours she spent alone. She could hardly refuse, but she had plans for the unfinished sections.

With Oxley panting at their heels, she led the way to the top of the stairs and into Mama's room where, despite the warm day, a fire burned, rendering the bedchamber claustrophobic. It reeked of sickness and the strange air of despair that permeated the house.

The huge mound Mama assured the family was their long-awaited brother simply accentuated her pallor and discomfort. Aunt Olivia sat at the bedside, sweat beading her brow as she attempted to master the latest piece of embroidery foisted on her.

"How are you this evening?" Pa reached for Mama's hand.

She offered a wan smile. "A little cold and a trifle uncomfortable." With both hands, she cupped her stomach. "I haven't seen Miriam today."

Olivia dropped her needlework in a flurry, a look of concern washing across her face. "I'll go and fetch her." She jumped up, her hand on the doorknob before anyone could respond.

"Bailey and the drovers are in. She'll be down at the camp, kicking up her heels."

Pa hovered at the end of Mama's bed, his eyes fixed on the dwindling light beyond the rock, as though his mind still rested on Evie's map, compass points or landforms she might have forgotten to include. Keen to escape the oppressiveness of the overheated room, Evie rose. "I'll go with Olivia and find Miriam."

The plaintive look etching Mama's pale features kept Evie tied to the spot beside the bed.

"Stay with me. I've seen nothing of you today either." She reached for her hand.

"And on your way, Olivia, ask Mrs. Hewitt to serve supper here. I've got work to do," Pa said.

Evie, as well as everyone else, knew this was Pa's way of escaping Mama's confinement. She could hardly blame him. The chances of the baby being born alive diminished with each passing day. The last time Doctor Glennie called he'd taken Pa aside. Evie didn't need him to tell her, nor did Mama. Come what may, she would have to deliver herself of the child, and after the wretched losses of Evie's two older brothers, who hadn't drawn more than a few blue-tinged breaths, Mama's wait was an ongoing agony.

Evie sank down on the edge of the bed and cradled Mama's frail hand.

"I'm sorry. You must be strong."

A shiver traced her spine as she smoothed Mama's dry skin. The endless string of stillbirths, miscarriages, and misery had ravaged her face and stripped her mind and body of her vivacity. "There's nothing to be sorry about."

"I haven't long now."

"Everything will be fine once the baby comes."

A fierce, fevered light shone in Mama's dark eyes as she struggled higher in the bed. "No. You know as well as I. There will be no heir for your father, no brother for you."

How could Mama be certain this baby was a boy? Both Evie and Miriam had thrived. It was only Mama who harbored this mind-consuming belief that she'd failed because she couldn't produce a son and heir for the mighty Maynard-Ludgrove alliance. "Perhaps we will have a sister. I would like that."

"He's a boy. I know."

Only because Mrs. Hewitt had dangled Mama's wedding ring over her stomach, like some ancient water-divining crone. It hung, then slowly spun—a circle for Miriam, the first daughter; from side to side for poor little William and James alone on the hillside; another circle for Evie; and then they'd all held their breath as the ring paused before swinging like an exhausted pendulum.

Mama's face had paled as she accepted her fate. The baby was a boy, and in her mind he would not survive. He would join William and James on the hillside beneath the cedar tree along with Mama's brothers. The Ludgrove and Maynard families were not destined to produce the son and heir the vast properties demanded. "There will be another chance." Evie tried for a reassuring smile and failed miserably.

"There will be no more. God knows I've tried. Tried for you

and for your father. Joshua has already gone.” Mama’s hands cradled her stomach. “My boys and I will be together soon.”

The skin of Evie’s arms rose in a horrifying rash of goose bumps. She licked her lips, snatched a moment to force some words of comfort from her addled brain, and failed. She wouldn’t have another chance.



HARPER
MUSE

WOLLOMBI, 1911

The sudden backfire sent Lettie rocketing forward. Head down, heart pounding, hands clutched tightly to the steering wheel, furious that even in the country, as far from the sea as she'd ever traveled, Thorne's accident could still haunt her.

She pulled off her gloves, untied her scarf, mopped the layer of perspiration from her face, and exhaled slowly, bringing her thundering heartbeat under control.

No need to check the motor. She'd babied it for the last few miles. It was a gift she'd made it this far. Releasing the hand brake, she coasted down the gentle incline toward a sign announcing she'd reached the town of Wollombi.

Hardly a town, but several yards ahead there was a solid building emblazoned with the words *Family Hotel* and behind it a meandering creek surrounded by neatly fenced, well-tended paddocks and a large market garden. Easing out from behind the wheel she stretched her legs, peeled off her thick dustcoat, and pushed up her sleeves.

A straight, flat stretch of track disappeared into a shimmering

heat haze, and to her right a slight incline led to some sort of a general store and a few other surprisingly substantial sandstone buildings. Not her destination, but a necessary stop. Lizzie was going nowhere until she found her a drink. What were the chances of gasoline in a remote place like this?

Pushing her driving goggles up on top of her head, she strode up the hill.

The faded door of the general store, though firmly closed, sported a scrawled sign reading *Open*. She turned the handle and entered the cool, dark interior.

“Stinking out there. Close the door behind you.” The words came from the depths of the shop, but the owner of the gravelly tones remained invisible.

She swung the door closed and waited while the shadows took shape and resolved into a long counter covered in an array of wilting vegetables and other knickknacks.

“What can I do for you?” A heavyset man stepped out from behind the counter, his bushy eyebrows quivering as he took in the goggles perched on the top of her head.

“I’m after a can of gasoline.”

“That’d account for the extra pair of eyes then.” He gave a sigh, which may well have been relief. “Where’s the motor?”

“At the bottom of the hill. I thought I’d make it into town, but I had to coast the last little bit.”

He peered outside. Must have caught sight of Lizzie because he turned with a smile. “Get a few motors through here nowadays. Not usually driven by a woman, though.”

“So you carry gasoline?”

“Nah.”

Her stomach sank. She couldn't leave Lizzie skew-whiff on the side of the road in some out-of-the-way town.

"Where are you heading?"

"The Ludgrove-Maynard properties."

"Yellow Rock?" His eyebrows rose. "A good twenty miles. Go see Armstrong, at the forge." He flipped his thumb over his shoulder. "Just across the road. I'll keep an eye on the motor. Not that you'll have a problem. No one in town today. Too bloody humid. Armstrong'll fix you up."

"Thank you, thank you very much."

"How'd you come by the motor?" He scratched his head and studied her from head to toe.

"It belongs to my brother." *Belonged*, she mentally corrected, not wanting to get into the conversation that would ensue.

"Ah! That's more like it. Where's he, then?"

"Sydney." No lie in that. And somehow she felt that if Great-Aunt Olivia hadn't received Miriam's letter, she should be the first one to hear the news of his passing—from her, not from some shopkeeper in the local town.

"You drove yourself?"

"Plenty of practice. I had a good teacher." She slipped through the door before he could ask any more questions.

Across the road a winding flagstone path edged with faded geraniums, and the stench of cats, led to a couple of slab buildings and a sign dangling from a branch announcing *The Forge*. Following the sound of hammering, she wandered down the path and drew to a halt a good few feet from a blazing fire where a sweaty man in a leather apron hunched, belting the daylights out of a blazing horseshoe. He gave a final thump and lifted his head.

“Mr. Armstrong? I’m after some gasoline. The man at the general store said you carried it.”

He wiped his forehead on a filthy rag and tossed it aside. “Nat, can you see to that while I re-shoe your horse?”

A lean, muscular man stepped from the shadows, hat pulled low, dark hair curling at the collar of his faded shirt. “Where is it?”

“Out there. Not in here.” Armstrong sighed.

The man ambled to the back of the building, ducked his head beneath the lintel, and disappeared.

Lettie scampered after him.

“How much do you want?” he called over his shoulder.

“I’ve got three two-gallon cans to refill.”



Half hidden behind the makeshift bench, Nathaniel poked around and pulled out a few cans, most of them empty. Who the hell was she? There was something about the lilt in her voice, the way she tilted her head when she spoke, something familiar, but he couldn’t place her. “Nah! He’s only got one. Be another delivery on the Sydney dray tomorrow.” He straightened up, snatched another look, didn’t want to appear to be staring.

“I’ll take that. Thanks.” She rammed her hand into her pocket and brought out a wallet, more like a man’s than something a girl would carry, though the bug-eyed glasses rammed on the top of her head didn’t look much like something a girl would wear either.

“Where are you heading?”

“The Ludgrove-Maynard properties.”

“Yellow Rock?”

“Apparently.”

"That'll be two shillings and sixpence." Armstrong charged twice the going rate, but she wasn't in a position to argue.

Without a second thought she pulled out a crisp pound note.

He schooled his face. More money than Armstrong had seen in a while. "Got anything smaller?"

She answered with a smile, not much more than a crease at the corner of her mouth, followed by a raised eyebrow above large green-brown eyes smudged with shadows. "Keep the change and I'll come and pick up some more on my way back."

Olivia would be in for a surprise, or maybe she was expecting a visitor, though he couldn't imagine she wouldn't have mentioned it. "You're visiting? For long?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. Would the Family Hotel have a room?"

"Maybe. Thought you were going to Yellow Rock. Plenty of room there. The old lady'll love a bit of company."

"You know the Ludgrove family?"

"Everyone knows everyone around here. I do a bit of work there now and again." More than a bit now that Olivia was getting on, but she was determined not to give up the horses. The cattle had all gone, though the drovers still called in on their way north. This woman couldn't know the family well if she was calling Olivia a Ludgrove. She was Maynard through and through, and would take a horse whip to anyone who tried to say otherwise. "Where's the motor? I'll give you a hand."

"Down at the bottom of the hill. I ran out at the top of the crest and coasted into town."

"Right you are." He hefted the can. "We can go out this way."

A whistle slipped out between his lips when he set eyes on the motor, as sleek as the girl standing in front of him. He'd always

maintained a horse was all he needed, but he wouldn't mind the opportunity to take a ride. He thumped the can down and stood in front of the car, running his hand over the glossy green paintwork, brushing the road dust away. "I thought motors only came in black."

When he lifted his head, she was watching, lips tilted in another of those half smiles. "Mostly they do. It's my brother's car. It was custom-built in Victoria. He helped, and chose the paint color. It's the only green one in Australia."

And it matched her eyes perfectly.

"I need to fill her up." She held out her hand.

The can would be much too heavy for her. "Let me." The gasoline would have to go in under the front. That's where the engine was kept, wasn't it? He reached across and unclipped the bonnet. A mass of gleaming tubes and cylinders and all manner of bits and pieces greeted him, along with the smell of oil and grease. The tank had to be there somewhere. He lifted the can.

"It's under here." She swung open the driver's door and lifted the seat.

"Ah!" Heat rose to his face. "Right you are." He closed the bonnet. "Pretty engine."

"A front-mounted 177-cubic-inch inline four-cylinder engine, which produces twenty horsepower for a top speed of forty-five miles per hour."

She might as well have been speaking double Dutch, for all he knew.

He fitted the funnel she held out, tipped the spirit in, and replaced the lid. Not too difficult. Maybe he could get the hang of these things. "Will that see you to Yellow Rock?"

"I'll be good for about fifty miles."

"Nowhere near that far. Know the way?"

She pointed down the road to the bridge. "That way."

"You'll cross Cunneens Bridge about two hundred yards down. After that the track gets a bit rougher. Make sure you follow the brook; there are seven crossings. Rain wasn't too bad—you shouldn't have a problem, but don't hang around. There's a storm coming and the water rises fast. Once you ford the last crossing, follow the track and Yellow Rock's on your right. You'll see the drive. Can't miss it."

"Thank you." She pulled the goggles down, covering her eyes, and worked her fingers into her leather gloves.

"My pleasure." He opened the door and glanced down at the three pedals on the floor and some sort of brake. Couldn't be too complicated; he'd seen enough of them getting around on the Sydney roads. "Are you ready to go?"

"It's not quite that simple. There are a couple of things I need to do first." She fiddled with two levers hanging off the side of the steering wheel, then walked around to the front and grabbed hold of a bent piece of pipe poking out from the car. That was it. He'd seen blokes in Sydney winding their motors up. "Let me do that for you, Miss . . ."

She stepped back with a smile. "Rawlings. Letitia Rawlings."

His head came up with a snap. "You related to Olivia?" That would account for the familiarity in her looks and mannerisms. Denman always maintained Olivia had been a looker in her early days; if Miss Rawlings was an example of the family breeding, it would be easy to understand.

"She's my great-aunt."

"And you've come from Sydney."

"Yes."

He gave the pipe a swing. Nothing happened.

“You need to . . .”

He wiped his arm across his forehead, gave another mighty swing. Not much more happened, though he wasn't sure what to expect. Perhaps it wasn't as easy as it looked, and it was bloody hard work. Not something you'd imagine a slip of a woman handling.

“It'll fire in a moment. It's because she ran out of gasoline.” She bent down and fiddled with something tucked below the bonnet. “There, that should help prime it. Let me have a go. Stand aside. They have a habit of kicking back.” Her shoulder muscles tightened, and she set her feet square before giving the metal bar an almighty swing with her left hand. The engine spluttered and sprang to life. “Thank you for your help.” She reached for her dust-coat, slipped it on, wiped her hands, and slid in behind the wheel.

Moments later, with nothing more than a wave, she headed over Cunneens Bridge into the arms of the incoming storm.

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