

# KIM KELLY

'A masterful creator of character and voice.' – Julian Leatherdale,  
bestselling author of *The Palace of Tears*



## Lady Bird & The Fox

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KIM KELLY



GO WEST

## ANNIE

‘Annie! Annie! Are you there? Is that you, Annie?’  
Yes, I am here. And this is what you would call a disaster. I see what it is, on the front step of our home, not yet in the door to get the fire on. It shivers up through the soles of my boots, freezing my knees with seeing it, even while my mind is busy spinning, thinking that I’ve never before this moment known just what a disaster is. It’s one of those words, isn’t it? You say it all the time not knowing what it truly means. Disaster. And so here it is. And I know, even as I am standing on this step, this moment is just the small beginning of it.

‘Annie!’

Dad’s been felled by a tree. He’s calling out to me from the shadows inside, from the parlour room. I can see his new boots up on the sofa: wrong and mad.

‘Branch got him – huge, it were – straight across his middle,’ Gudge is still going on, explaining beside me on the step. I look at Gudge – Abel Gudge, chief of our most recent lot of feckless farmhands, half a brain shared between him and that shabby mob he wandered down from the hills with. He nods at me: ‘Were at the river, Miss Annie, as I tell you, on the rocks below them experimentals. Don’t know how long he were there. Were

some hard work dragging him up through the beetroots all the way here, I tell you.'

I don't tell him he wouldn't know hard work if it smacked him a swift one between the eyes. I can only feel Dad's pain falling over me like a dark, dark dream.

'Dad?' Somehow I am in the door and beside him now, my knees dropped to the floor.

I see my dad on the sofa here before me, laid out and moaning through every line in his old face. 'Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus,' he's praying to the rafters, and his hand is crushing mine.

This is a disaster. A disaster. Oh, Heavenly Father, please help my dad. But even as I pray with him I know this is no good. My poor father is broken. As I'm looking at him here, at his pale face and the sweat streaming into his beard from his suffering, I see a great big branch off one of the trees down at the riverbank lashing out at him, grabbing him up and shaking him. Breaking him. Why? He would only have been going down there to bring up the fish trap, as we do of a Wednesday afternoon. It should have been me down there. And it would have been me most likely if I hadn't gone into Richmond with Sis, to the shops. For what? Nothing. McGowans were having a clearing-out sale on old gloves and bonnet trimmings and all sorts of remnant bits, so we went in for a bargain, but there was nothing there for us; nothing I would let Sis have, anyhow. I should have been down at the river, pulling up a basket full of mullet and sweet silver eels. The river is jumping with mullet. The tree would not have fallen upon me. I would have heard the split and crack of the branch; I would have dived into the water and swum away.

And Dad would never have been harmed. He'd be inspecting his rows of beetroot for leaf worm.

'Oh no, poor Dad,' is about all I can say of the whole great terror of it.

He doesn't care what I might say. He's talking to Jesus, lips trembling at some conversation between them.

'Dad? Dad?' I'm asking and asking him.

'I should run up to get the doc, you reckon?' says Gudge, wringing his hat beside me.

I think he should better get Reverend Thorne, but I don't say that. I don't want to think that. I feel the join of the boards sharp under my bony knees as I hold Dad's hand, touch his brow with the other. His skin is cold. He sweats so much but he is cold. Sweating and trembling like that plough horse we had that snapped a fetlock in the deep mud. Poor old horse. Dad had to —

'Dad, everything will be all right,' I lie to him with every hope I have, squeezing it into his hand even as I feel his grasp weakening in return, and I tell Gudge over my shoulder: 'Get me a glass of rum.'

'Rum, Miss Annie?' Gudge is that much of a cabbage he has to ask, and I can't help taking a second to blink at him even in this devastating circumstance: what is it about this colony that attracts so many boatloads of cabbages and sends them all tramping through here?

'For Dad,' I tell him through my teeth; Dad, who'd give a cabbage a job when no-one else would. 'Get him some rum for the pain – on the sideboard behind you.'

I turn back to Dad. My dad. He likes a rum of a Saturday evening; finds it reviving. He plays fiddle at the Coach and Horses when they have a shindy on and he's especially revived. Revive now! I reach behind his head to ready him to take his rum, and as I do I find his neck is soaked with sweat – streaming. All the water in him is pouring into my hand, taking with it all the colour in him, too; his face is so leached, he's pale as the threads of white in his red beard. He stares and stares into

the rafters, scaring me. ‘Dad – can you hear me?’

‘Annie?’ Of a sudden he does and he finds me; eyes wild and urgent, trying to grasp my hand again, but giving up. My hand thumps down to his chest. ‘Annie?’ He draws me closer still with his fearful eyes.

‘What is it, Dad? Tell me.’ Whatever I might do to help him, please, I will do it.

He says: ‘You see that Sis stays clear of that Mickey Dinnigan, won’t you, girl?’

‘What?’ These could be his last words on earth and he’s asking me this? I can no more keep Sis from Mickey Dinnigan than I can keep Dad from his suffering. Just as I can no more tell Dad that Mickey is most likely who Sis is loitering with right this minute – back in Richmond, I left her, on the road outside the Brown Jug, with sixpence for the lemonade and soda water she demanded in place of the whorish lace gloves with the tear at the wrist I wouldn’t let her have at McGowans. I was so cross from bickering about it I threw the money at her feet and called her a nasty little tart as I hoofed off without her.

In place of telling Dad how sorry I am for all that now, I bend further to him and kiss his forehead, as if I might press into him the will to fight.

But he only closes his eyes. He sinks back against me, into my arms. He is not a big man, but he is so heavy in my arms, the little of him I can hold.

‘Dad!’ I yell at him, for the want of yelling life back into him.

He’s only fainted from the pain of the injury, I tell myself over the walloping of my pulse. That’s what’s happened. I see my whole life laid out in this second, looking after an invalid father. That’s my lot in life, right here in my arms. My fate spun out in the time it takes a spindle to turn once around. And I will be a grateful daughter every second of every day, please, I pray. I will

care for my father as no daughter ever has; I never expected any more or less than to help my dad, anyhow. This is life; our life. I will get the beetroots up over May; I will get another man or two on it to help. Mr Webb will be understanding: Dad's managed these fields for him for twenty years, since the year before I was born, and I keep the books as well as any man might: two for the price of one, Mr Webb calls us with a smile, always pleased with Dad and me. We will get by.

But this isn't my lot in life. Because Dad has not fainted.

He is gone from us.

He is dead.

He doesn't take another breath. I lay him back on the sofa and stare at his stillness. I place his hands on his heart and I neaten his hair, as if I might make him ready for church.

I don't believe it.

Dad?

'Here you go.' Gudge is at my shoulder with the glass of rum I asked for a lifetime ago.

'Get away with you.' I push him back as I stand. The rum flings up in the air, time gone so slow and so fast I see it fly out of the cup in a wave. Drops falling, gold and shining. Drops of sunlight hanging before my eyes. The last of the sunlight coming in through the still-open doorway and up the hall.

I walk right out of it and down the back as the sun falls dead behind the mountains across the river. The air is cold. The light is cold. End of April cold. Clouds rising up above the range.

Dad?

Dad can't die. Not this way, not so unfair as this. He's not old enough to die – he's only forty-nine. Plenty die younger – but no, not *mine*. He's done everything right his whole life, except the one thing that brought him here. He stole a bag of oranges as a boy, fourteen years' worth of transportation to New



South Wales for it – or free passage out of the Liverpool dockyards and the terrible hunger and hopelessness there, is how he saw it. Best thing that ever happened, he always said. Said? No. No! Why is he punished now when he has paid for his crime? He found his redemption in the Lord and his strength in clean air and fresh fruit and vegetables. He is the manager of Cygnet Farm here at Castlereagh; he has been here under Mr Webb since he earned his ticket-of-leave. He is a model man. He is kind and humble and honest and respected by everyone who knows him. A hero of the floods last winter, going out on the boats, setting up tents, and feeding everyone brought up to our higher ground from Penrith where the river cut them off from the town. Sis and me made that much onion soup out of our ruined, soggy crop I can't tolerate the smell of onions anymore. Dad and his mates played and sang all night, so the children wouldn't be frightened by the storm that came again and the mud and the crowd; took the little ones around and around on Mr Nettleby's donkey, from next door. And our Lord takes only the good unto his bosom, always taking the best too soon.

Dad. Such a good man. The very best of fathers. He has brought up Sis and me so well and all on his own after our mother was taken by the bronchitis, bless her sweet memory. I was only seven; Sis not yet four. No greater testament to Dad that we never felt Mother's going as any kind of a terror: she was returned to the Lord, who took up her suffering as His own. And now Dad has been returned to her. Our parents were perfect, both of them; they always will be. Never missed church and Dad made sure I went right through school with barely a day missed there, either – a man needs someone to read the *Empire* to him of an evening, the paper he loves for his hero the Honourable Mr Henry Parkes prints it so that the common man can know the world and better himself. Dad never learned

his letters; he was very sure we did. I went right the way to the finish of primary-school lessons, as far as one like me can go – and better at those lessons than any other girls around here. Better than Sis – she stopped going when I did, no-one to pull her along by the plait. *Any man that doesn't want a smart girl can't be too smart himself*, Dad always says to us. Said. No: he will always say this to me. I can read and write as well as any man and I am so good at figures I have always been Dad's eyes on the ledger. Always. We will get by. I will get by.

I am nineteen years old, twenty in September. The cold grabs me around the shoulders like a shroud. I am a woman, sudden and now: no more a girl. No more a child to anyone. I must stand on my own two feet. Where are my feet? I have walked from the house and six acres out through the potatoes, and I am standing in the beans. Dad's prize-winning French fines, just finished picking. This field will need turning over, get the stakes up, ready for the carrots to get in there for next crop. Essie is crying out to be milked right this moment. I'm so cross with Sis. It's her job to tend to Ess. My sister is so lazy and vain. And our father is dead.

I keep walking, out across to the experimental field, where the beetroots are. This would have been Dad's next triumph, for he's got so much sweetness into them: a prize he will not see. So much work and no reward. Not here on earth, anyhow. I see him carrying a basket of the plumpest and reddest of the beetroots to Saint Peter. He will have his supper with the Lord: bright sliced beetroots and a fat roasted catfish. And a rum.

Oh, Dad. I walk the path of the torn and trodden leaves that saw Dad's last way home, dragged up by Gudge, and I follow it to the edge of the field, to the top of the steep bank here and I look down at the wide, cold river. The Nepean River. Our mother used to call it something else now and again; I can't

remember what, I was so small then. I look at the horrible trees leaning out above the rocks here. The cane basket of our fish trap lying there, pulled up and empty.

This is a disaster.

A disaster.

And I don't know the first thing about it yet.

## JEM

‘I do not care if the archangel Gabriel sent you in his stead, there is no place here at this mine for you,’ this fellow at the kerosene diggings is informing me, for the second time. A gristly old codger called Grindle. Filthy leather apron straining around a fat belly, filthy fat fingers to match and a pencil behind his ear, he appears to be made out of charcoal and lard. And he’s definitely the codger I’m supposed to see – Grindle, that’s the name all right. And there is definitely supposed to be a position waiting here for me – one I am compelled to take up or suffer a far harsher penalty as yet undisclosed but perhaps involving a custodial sentence of some kind.

I ask the man Grindle again: ‘Are you certain? There’s no-one here at all expecting me? Jeremy Fox – or Jem, or perhaps mistaken for a Jim? J.G. Fox – that’s me. You’re not in need of a, errr, a clerk of some kind, perhaps . . .? Or . . . ah . . . I don’t know . . . Hm?’ Hopefully, nothing involved with the actual mining here: I can see out to the top of the workings through the wide-open carriage doors beyond Grindle’s head, down what appears to be the bottomless drop of a cliff face, windlass creaking up and back with buckets of rock and an assortment of charcoaled men. I have no intention of going out there, except that not going might bring me worse. I am a

jeweller by trade, when I must, for God's sake. What do they want me to do here – fix their pulley chains and pick-axes? Consider the value of coal chips? Or, perhaps not too improbably, steward the draught horses? Now, that would be kind, on me, if not the team of six at work here, hauling that windlass up and back all day long. 'Erm,' I ask Grindle, as if he might yet have forgotten: 'Not someone for your horses? Perhaps the stable-master might know . . .?'

'I am the foreman here at Comet's Kerosene.' Grindle squares at me. 'I am the one who knows and says what goes and I say I am not expecting you any more than I am a cartload of mangy rabbit skins.'

'Right. Good. Fair enough.' I scratch my head. Beggar me, I am out of luck here, it would seem. And I don't know what I should do. Go back to Sydney? Perhaps there's been some sort of mistake or muddle-up, a delay in the communique advising my arrival? Perhaps I should wait here a day or two. I look out of the window the other way, back onto the road, such that it is: not a lot out there but forest. And an inn, about a mile or so back up the steep mountain track I got here upon – what was it called, Mount Something Road? Somewhere in this place called Petrolia Vale, where the coachman set me down and grunted towards some unseen depth of perdition by way of further direction.

'Well, I'll be out of your way, then, and thank you.' I nod to Grindle. 'My apologies at having interrupted you,' and I pull out what I might of a smile as I ask him: 'You couldn't tell me, though, could you, is there a possibility of sending a message by telegraph from some . . . where? Around . . . here?'

Grindle expels another gust of contempt at me: 'With your newspaper ironed and shoes shined too? You ain't in Sydney anymore. Not out here.' He waves me off behind his turning

back by way of dismissal. 'Go up and ask at the Royal.'

'Is that the inn, up along the track –?' I begin to ask and stop as he turns back to me once more with some threat now assembling around his impatience.

'Nah, it's Buckingham bleeding Palace,' he says, all Australian charm. 'What do you bloody reckon?'

I reckon I should get quite quickly out of his sight.

Nothing else for it but to return hat to head and trudge back up the track, back to that inn, and ask there, I suppose. I step out into the early evening and the coals of the enormous blacksmith's forge across the way are glowing like the maw of Cerberus warning against the idea, but apart from that, and a great iron chimney stack a little way further down the slope, whose purpose I don't want to begin to guess at, and, of course, several million weary, ragged gum trees enclosing all for a million miles around, there is nowhere else for me to stop the night, or not that I am aware of, anyway. I throw my carpetbag over my shoulder: I don't think I've so much as a box of matches in there, so hastily was I shoved into the coach – and at about two o'clock this morning, still rather drunk – I didn't think for a moment that Pa would ever do anything like this to me, honestly, seriously, I didn't. This is absurd.

But of course, being of generally optimistic disposition as I am, my next thought is: I wonder if there'll be a game on there at the inn? Doubtless there will be: what else does one do for amusement in such a place as this besides drinking and gaming? The soles of my boots slip on the rubble of the track as its incline quickly steepens, and steepens some more still: at least I'll be able to find my way in the dark safely enough, for I'll be crawling on hands and knees in a moment as this mountain pass is all but perpendicularly sat upon the earth. I don't remember it having been so steep as this on the way down.

I'm probably lost. I slip again, elbowing the gravelly turf. I'm going to ruin my new tweed, which I only picked up from Eli the day before yesterday. Would you like that, Pa? Leave a trail of ruined herringbone twill behind me through the wilderness before I disappear altogether? Did I really need to leave the comfort of home for that? A half-moon is rising over this lonely vale, the twilight is steadily swallowed by thickening cloud, and some bird shrieks over the desolation, as if to confirm that my punishment is barely yet commenced. And to remind me that drinking and gaming are precisely what has brought me here, as if I might forget: last night's doorstep, gale-force windbaggyery from the Inspector-General of Police, Douglas Fitzworthy, over the whole thing is yet fresh in my ears.

*You are fast becoming a nuisance to society, young Mr Fox, a troublesome customer, a larrikin of the worst order, a ne-er do well, a dandy and a wastrel, but nevertheless it has been decided, with your father – and with the weighty bond of his word and his esteemed repute in the community taken into consideration, as well as the fact that custodial sentence will likely only encourage your base proclivities for roguery further and irredeemably – and, I must add, arranged by me at great personal effort and inconvenience – that you will leave this town of Sydney for the Comet Kerosene Company Shale Mine at Petrolia Vale for a term of humble and honest toil under the supervision of Mr Howard Grindle there. Failure to present yourself at the mine office and failure to commit yourself to the labour you are set will see that the law be brought upon your head with redoubled vigour.*

Or words to that effect – the man can't speak in sentences less than one thousand words in length.

And the law is an ass, then, in every sense, isn't it – so is my father. It's only ninety-five pounds on the horseflesh, for God's sake – I've done worse at the club before. I'd have won it back,

eventually, as luck in its way turns around, and I'd have paid back what I owe at the Hyde Park Hotel the same way – what is it, fifty? As for the fifteen I owe at the Colonnade – that's less than nothing, surely. A bet on which of two goats in the yard would shit first, and I was stinking groggified – tight as a boiled budgie on that occasion. Who takes that sort of a punt seriously? Why were there two goats in the yard in the first place? Whoever gets charged with absconding from a debt for a bet like that, anyway – when I've done no such thing, even if I have often entertained the idea of winning enough one day to return to London and forget I was ever here. I've not absconded anywhere, of my own free will, and I have every intention of fixing up the debts, eventually. I am honourable, if somewhat profligate.

But as for Cornelia Osborne, Inspector-General Fitzworthy's niece – that charge is simply preposterous. I was never going to touch a hair on her pretty head, not in the slightest. It's not my fault young ladies have a tendency to go clucky after me – not my fault Miss Osborne hangs about the shop like a lost lamb whenever I am there. She's a scandal waiting to unfold, that one. Just happens to drop in with a broken catch chain on her bracelet, or something to be engraved by Pa, as if she has a spy set up at the restaurant on the corner, alerting her to my comings and goings. All I did was go after her runaway parasol one blustery afternoon down at the Governor's Domain a month or so ago when I was on my way through to Woolloomooloo – retrieval of parasol, brief introduction, in company of her silly, giggling friend, and that is *all* I did. Did not attempt to kiss her hand. Did not even breathe in her direction. Nice girl, really – not *my* girl. I like mine with a bit of spark to them, as if my own repute is not well known enough in that regard.

Above all, it's not my fault my father's desperate need to



cling to his social rung is more important to him than anything else, is it? He is tired of the embarrassment of me. *And who wouldn't be?* he laments, shaking his palms at me. But it is his embarrassment, not mine. He's the one who's spent his whole existence tiptoeing around on eggshells, making sure he doesn't cough out of place, making sure of every penny – careful not to contribute a farthing more to the New Synagogue Fund than to the Church of England asylum for the poor. Making sure his only son and heir is seen to be a gentleman, as he could never have been himself in London. Too small a fish, too big a pond, in England; too much a silly old Jew in any place. *Jemmy, Jemmy, please understand – with advantage comes responsibility,* he gnashed away at the door of the carriage as he sent me packing, beard trembling with dismay in every conceivable direction. *Jemmy, this coach alone is costing more than I want to pay for you anymore – you have to go. You have to appreciate things.* I appreciate he's more tightly wound than his polishing wheel, God love him – someone must.

God, but this road beggars belief. Up and up it goes, and it's not even a road. There is no such thing as a decent road twenty miles from Sydney, any and all pretence ceasing at Parramatta – indeed, the coach nearly lost a wheel at Penrith, where dawn broke over a pothole big enough to consume a house. I don't know what sort of a gentleman Pa ever expected me to become in a place such as this, wherever this is, or Sydney Town in its entirety. There is nothing – *nothing* – for a gentleman to do; nothing that one might be gentlemanly at, apart from gaming, drinking, women, or some other sport, and a nice bit of horse-flesh, not necessarily in that order – which is the very definition of gentleman in this land. Life, gentlemanly or otherwise, is not repairing the setting claws on the jewels of Hebrew wives in the hope that Pa might marry me off to one of their rare

and precious daughters, or ship out some long-lost niece from Warsaw for me, or fetch up a horrifically snobbish and expensive creature from Melbourne, so that we can do our bit for Israel by producing three hundred and forty-seven children. I could not be less interested in any of that, no matter how appealing the idea of unlimited matrimonial shagging might be.

But I'm even less interested in going to prison. Coldly sober and alone, I don't now trust that these charges hanging over me are all bluff. I let the threat of them push me the rest of the way up this mountainside – and quick as I can take it, as the night is falling blacker by the second. Twigs crackle under the movement of invisible beasts at the edges of the track. Something growls through the undergrowth. A branch trails a few ghostly fingernails over the top of my head, and I just find the fuzz of the lamp of the inn a little way off before this whole place does me in with the creeps.

I run the last few paces and bound for the door, the bell clanging as I trip up the step and stumble inside.

'Well, well, what have we here?' The fellow behind the bar grins over his counter; thickset, short as he is broad. The room is small, of bare clay and stone, dim and smoky, and crowded with grim, grey faces so that for a moment I wonder if those miners by some trick of time beat me up here. More creeps, but I grin in return over them.

'Good evening,' I greet the innkeeper. 'I seem to have found myself unexpectedly on your doorstep – looking for a room at the inn. Is this the Royal, by any chance?'

The man narrows his eyes at me as if I am lately escaped from an insane asylum; he shakes his head: 'This here is the Pigeon.'

'Right. Good.' A pub is a pub. Grey faces stare blankly at me over their glasses. God, but a pub is not a pub – there's not

even a dart board in here. 'It's a very pleasant establishment you have, too,' I say, preparing to plead my case, as it's doubtful I'll be going further than this place tonight. I ask the innkeeper again: 'So, does your fair Pigeon have a bed available, then?'

'That depends,' says the innkeeper. 'Who are you?'

'Jeremy Fox.' I must relate my story to him and his patrons as barely as possible, omitting mention of Inspector-General Fitzworthy and the so far hushed charges against me, naturally, telling them only: 'My father has lately arranged a position for me with the Comet Kerosene Company, but word of my arrival hadn't got through to them. I suppose there's been a mix-up with the mail, a message not received. Hm?' I'm getting tired of this now, and last night's efforts nobbling over billiards at Young's on William Street on the way home, together with the all-dayer in the coach after being prevented from sleeping at and staying home, have overtaken me. I might simply like to sit down in a moment.

The innkeeper shrugs and nods: 'Yestdee's mail was robbed, so it could well be the case, me lad, and today's has been delayed down the mountain.'

'Ah. Good.' I lean on the counter in my relief. 'That explains it. Good. Good.'

'Not good for them that was robbed and them that's waiting on the mail.' The innkeeper frowns and shakes his head – at my hand on his counter, clearly not a counter for me to be leaning on.

'No. No! Not good at all,' I agree, straightening up, giving his counter the respect it is due, and ask again: 'So, would it be possible for me to stop here until I can discover –?'

'Who are you but?' He narrows his eyes suspiciously.

'Jeremy Fox, as I said,' I reply, just as I find the crucifix mounted on the wall behind the bar – for Christ's sake,

what kind of pub is this? I plough on regardless. ‘Son of Solomon Fox,’ I tell him, ‘of S.J. Fox & Son, Silversmiths & Jewellers – Sydney.’

‘Never heard of you.’ The innkeeper shrugs, making a face like a toad with indigestion.

‘Well, no, I don’t imagine you would have heard of *me*,’ I must admit and be glad he hasn’t. ‘But it’s quite a well-known silversmiths – the new Governor, the Earl of Belmore, and his lady the Countess have lately commissioned my father for their incoming requirements. Otherwise, we make bespoke baubles and bijouterie for the upper crust. Continental craftsmanship, valuations, et cetera – in Sydney, George Street, with the foundry for the flatware over on Goulburn Street, on Brickfield Hill.’

‘Is it, then.’ Mr Innkeeper is in nowise impressed or intrigued. ‘Give our regards to the Guv and his missus when you see ’em, won’t you. No-one to vouch for you out here?’

‘Er, no.’ What? At this point, I might slap a pound note on the counter and be done with the charade, only I don’t have any such cash on me. ‘But – ah!’ It occurs: ‘The coachman who brought me here today – he’d have stopped with you, surely, to water his horses and himself?’ Pa would have paid him his agreed fee in advance, so the fellow will surely vouch; I peer around through the tallow gloom. ‘Is he still here?’

‘Who?’

‘The coachman, from Sydney. I suppose we came in at about three, perhaps half past?’ Couldn’t tell you exactly as I’ve left my watch . . . somewhere. ‘Tall fellow, wearing a brown coat. Gruff. Not too chatty.’

‘Never saw him.’

‘Really?’ I find that somewhat difficult to believe. It’s not as if this is George Street. You could not miss a stray goat much

less a coach outside this establishment, even if the driver rolled on past with no tip of the hat good-afternoon.

Despite having stated we came up from Sydney, conversation over the possible identity of this coachman ensues – ‘Mighta been Sid Avery from Will’s Chimney, gone Berghofer way onto his daughter’s,’ says one grim, grey face – ‘Or Bill Chilvers from back o’ Weatherboard,’ says another, ‘he never stops in for a g’day’ – ‘Nah, he give up the coaching wi’ the lack o’trade – and it consumes the entire room for a good few minutes, during which I gather that these patrons of the Pigeon are all inordinately sober, and all local bullock drivers or timber-cutters or relations thereof, before the innkeeper decides: ‘No, your coachman is no-one from round here, it looks like. No-one from the mountains. No-one known to us at One Tree.’

‘Ah well, never mind,’ I say, for if a man is *no-one* to the dozen or so faces in this spiritless chapel of a pub, he doesn’t exist, clearly – and a pity because I might have just realised I left my watch, as well as my gloves, on the seat of that phantom coach. But I must ask: ‘One Tree, did you say? Where precisely am I?’ Not still in Petrolia Vale? Not still in the realm we know as Planet Earth?

The suspicious squint comes at me from the innkeeper again: ‘One Tree Hill, this is, on Mount Victoria.’

One Tree Hill? Lying in the midst of a forest as it is? All right, then, let’s not query it aloud; I say, ‘Good. Excellent. It’s a hill up here all right, just as I am who I say I am. You can trust me.’ Best and most winning smile to convince them.

But the innkeeper only frowns more deeply, regretfully: ‘That I might, me lad, but I can’t be too careful, neither – there’s too many fakers and cheats abroad to risk it these days. We’re good Christians here all the same, though. You can sleep in the shed – it’s a cold night coming tonight.’

For God's sake, a little more mercy than that might be nice.  
'But fair go, sir, I —'

'Fair go? I'd say your go couldn't have been much fairer. Come on, follow me.' The innkeeper steps out from behind his counter and beckons me towards a door at the rear. 'I'll show you the way.'

Show me that I have no choice but to follow him, beyond the ice chest, beyond the larder, beyond one of the rustic but comfortable-looking guest beds all toasty at the back of the hearth, beyond the verandah and outside to a nest of hay bales under what is little more than an awning stretched between the inn and a water tank.

'Here you are,' the innkeeper says, tossing me a blanket and presenting me my draughty shed for the night. Positively medieval, and I can't buy my way out of it for once. I scraped my last oddments together and spent them on lunch, a rather disgusting mutton hash pushed across a greasy table at me by a spectacularly sour publicaness, somewhere further down the mountain. Well, at least there goes the temptation to put a bet on anything, I suppose. I don't fancy they'd take my credit here, would they. I don't fancy they approve of betting any more than they do drinking, dancing or darts at the Pigeon. They possibly don't approve of telegraphic messages, either.

Was this part of the punishment plan, Pa? Deliver me into the hands of some arcane cult of Methodist bullockies?

Only my guts grumble in reply, for want of dinner, but I'm too weary now that I've sat down to go back and try to beg for any. Besides, as luck would have it, I'm sure I've got that half a quince pie in my bag, left over from breakfast – too crook and crapped out at five o'clock this morning to eat it all at the time, rehorsing at some other revolting place. I shall enjoy it here, then . . . While I consider how I shall exist tomorrow.

But hang on, what's this I find as I rummage in the dark? An apple – one I'd quite forgotten I had. How could I? Comely little dollymop over her fruit basket on my way to billiards last night: *Help yerself, sweet'ear*. I did, and as fortune favours the hopeful, indeed I do find a few other comforts here in my bag as well: a copy of last Saturday's *Bell's Life* track news, my shaving case, dressing-gown, a squashed box of Faney's chocolate pastilles, a fresh pair of socks and – here we go, here we go – two sneaky little farthings. Worthless, but mine.

## ANNIE

‘There can be no delay about the burial, Annie Bird, no delay at all. With the dysentery and pneumonia a scourge throughout from all this autumn dampness in the air, your father will be buried this morning at ten o’clock. Reverend Thorne is already engaged thusly. The cost of the burial has been subtracted from the final account of Mr Bird’s wages for this month.’

I stare at Mrs Webb as she hands me an envelope with *R.M. BIRD – APRIL 1868 & FINAL* written on it, and *FINAL* underlined three times. I don’t much like her, but here she is and free of any good influence of her Mr Webb. He is away in Sydney on business, at the meeting of the council of the Board of Agriculture, attending to something about land divisions. I’d forgotten that. He won’t be back until Sunday, three days away. My thoughts are a bucket of suds turning grey with the wash of all this. Dysentery? Pneumonia? Dad isn’t gone from either of them, never been sick a day in all the time I’ve known him, for his diet of fresh fish and vegetables, he’d tell you if he could. He tells the whole district every Richmond market day, every Friday. I crunch up the envelope in my hand; I feel coins slipping around inside, heavy with all her subtractions – when there’s always five crisp one-pound notes in it. Sixty pounds



per annum Dad receives, plus the accommodations here on the farm. Mrs Webb won't be paying me sixty pounds per annum to keep the place turning over; Mr Webb neither. What's wages for a farmer's daughter? What am *I* worth? My heart starts drumming with fear and this word *FINAL*.

Mrs Webb's lips are moving as she goes on, but I'm not hearing anything, except for Sis blowing her nose again behind me here on the front step, and Reverend Thorne clearing his throat behind Mrs Webb. She is a mean old cow.

I think this even before Sis shouts out at her: 'No – you can't do that.'

Do what?

'I can indeed,' Mrs Webb goes on with her meanness and her callousness. 'There is a new manager ready and waiting for Cygnet Farm. The crops must be tended to. Life must go on. You are to be removed from the cottage this afternoon. Do not bring trouble upon yourselves by resisting the inevitable.'

I look behind me, past Sis and through the parlour room door, to Dad, laid out as he still is on the sofa there. We've got him bathed and in his best clothes, though he is grey now as my mind, so gone from this life that even the freckles on the back of his hands have left us. He is at peace; his face set into what looks almost like a smile. I whisper to him through my thoughts: *You would think that Mrs Webb arranged for the tree branch to fall on you, wouldn't you, Dad, she is so well organised.* I still can't believe he is not breathing, as I can't believe Mrs Webb is being such a nasty cow.

I turn back to her but I'm asking the sky: 'Where are we to go?'

She says: 'Wherever you must. There is no room for you here. Mr Murgett, the new manager, comes with wife and daughters of his own.'

‘So that’s it – we are put off?’ I look to Reverend Thorne. His eyes are cast at the ground. The coward. And so he should be ashamed of himself: he christened me and Sis. He also just two months ago arranged a collection of fourteen pounds from the whole district for some widow called Mrs Whitmore from Kurrajong when her husband was struck by lightning in their dairy paddock, so she could pay off his mortgage – and she’s not even from our church. Reverend Thorne only clears his throat again. Because there’s deserving poor and undeserving poor – here it is. I hope the Devil takes him. No, I don’t. That’s a terrible thought. The Devil must take Mrs Webb first, as I recall that I know that name Murgett from somewhere – from Windsor? I can’t put the sense of it together just at this minute.

She says: ‘There is plenty of work about – up at the Emu tweed mill, or at the flour mill in Richmond. There are hands needed at Eliot’s poultry farm, too, and many, many places in want of domestic servants in any town you like. You can go anywhere for miles around and ask for work, Annie Bird. *Honest* work.’

Like the work I have been at all these years for my dad has not been honest. I’ve never imagined working in any other way, or for any other master. Oh, Dad, the grief runs through me, shivering and falling, and in it I see the depth of Mrs Webb’s disregard for our predicament. There is no work at any mill or farm, not for a girl. All good-paying work is taken up by men come off the goldfields empty-handed, wanting to earn a passage back home, wherever that might be, and there is not enough work to go around for them – they’re lucky to get fifteen pounds for the year labouring if they’re in work that long. What will become of Sis and me? Girls such as us, if we put ourselves up for service in some house or other, it’d be unlikely we’d get paid at all.

Sis pushes right up beside me at the doorway now with her own question for Mrs Webb: 'Don't s'pose you'll be kicking off Gudge and all them, will you? Just us.'

'That's Mr Murgett's affair,' the old cow sniffs. 'Not mine. He may employ whomsoever he chooses.'

He may employ a crateful of brainless, sluggardly cabbages, but not us. Mrs Webb is telling us we're not chosen, not wanted anywhere. What kind of charity is this?

I look out to the distance, south to the vineyard that ranges up over the hill towards Penrith, and as I do I raise my hand to the glare of the sunrise. I see my hand against the sun: my skin dark in this light. Not nearly so dark as our mother's was, but skin that's coloured enough. Skin that is the reason why we're getting kicked off without a care.

I look back down at Mrs Webb, her lips and cheeks all sucked in and creased with the bitter corruptions of her character, and the step I'm standing on seems a mile above where she is in this life. I say to her: 'Why don't you tell the truth, Mrs Webb. You're kicking us off because, without our father here, we're just a couple of unwanted blacks.' She's never wanted us here, we know it, two little black marks in her white parish, though she would never say it to our faces while our father's labour and skill poured prizes and money into her husband's bank and into her purse. None of her five daughters allowed to sit by us at church or school; cross the other side of the road to avoid a nod of recognition at the shops, lest they might catch something of our blackness. 'Can't wait five minutes to see the back of us, isn't that right?'

She opens her mouth so wide her chin disappears into her scraggedy neck, but she can't deny what I say.

'Now, now,' Reverend Thorne finally has something to say himself. 'There is no need for incivility.'

‘Incivility!’ My voice hits the clouds and rings across the whole of the district. ‘You are only lucky that I am as civilised as I am.’

‘You threaten me!’ Mrs Webb screeches back.

And I tell her in a blinding flash of the truest of truths I know: ‘I don’t need to. For I trust that God will deal with you – He’ll send some justice more fitting than I could ever dream of.’

‘You curse me!’ She takes a step back, knocking Reverend Thorne sideways into a puddle.

And I tell her: ‘I would if I could – believe you me – only it’s not possible to curse the damned, is it.’

‘You ingrate! You – you foul-mouthed savage, you wicked little gin!’ She can’t believe what she just heard.

I can barely believe I said it.

Sis starts laughing – even in our grief and misfortune here, she can’t help it roaring out. ‘Sticks and stones, you goggle-eyed bitch – I’ll show you *thusly*,’ she spits down at Mrs Webb and shuts the door on her.

All the good it will do.

I stare down the hall and there’s a rushing in my ears, time swishing and swirling all around.

‘What are we gunna do?’ Sis is asking me.

And I truly don’t know before the words come out of my mouth: ‘Get packing.’

I walk down the hall and out to the kitchen. Pack what? My Staffordshire teacups and saucers Dad bought for me in Parramatta last year? The sideboard? The sofa? I don’t know where to start. Where to go. But from the back door, I see Dad’s swag-roll sitting in the hayloft across the yard looking back at me, and I’m running out and up the ladder to grab it.

‘Annie, what are you doing?’ Sis is running along behind me.

I don’t know, but as I throw the swag down onto the ground,

I find I do know something: 'I'm not giving them a chance to shame us one second more. We're leaving – now.'

'What are you talking about? What about Dad!' Sis is screaming up the ladder at me.

'Dad's not going to be worried, is he,' I tell her as I jump down after the swag. 'All he'll be wanting, if he could, is that we keep together and that we not be shunned as they're putting him in the earth.' I don't want to see them put him in the earth, is more of the truth; I can't. I just can't.

'Where are we gunna go?' Sis whines along behind me as I run back into the house.

'Away from here,' I tell her again, because I don't know where we're going to go. We have nowhere to go. I've hardly been across the river my whole life, hardly been beyond the Richmond and Penrith districts, and I've never been to Sydney – who would dare it? A city of two hundred thousand souls, one of the biggest in the world, four times the size of San Francisco, it's said, and who would go there, either? Dad used to swag his way to Parramatta if he ever had to go there, just him and one of Mr Webb's plough horses, as every bed in that town is full of fleas. I can't ride a horse myself, though, never had to, and Dad would never take us to Parramatta, such a rough and dirty town for all its money – worse than Sydney for thieves, he'd warn us. My heart is walloping harder and harder as I race around, ransacking the house for every last coin I can find. What am I going to do? Steal a horse I can't ride? What then? Where are we going to go?

We have no people here to go to. Dad's are all back in England, in Liverpool, whoever they might be – he never expected to see any of them ever again, never wrote because he couldn't do that any more than they could read. And Mother's family – I hardly know them better. Mother herself seems a

whisper lost across an age: a small bundle of pictures in my mind, stories told to me by Dad, and half-remembered dreams. I scramble around for these, too. Our mother's people were the black swan people, who once lived here along the riverbank. *Tragical business*, Dad would only ever say of what happened to them, and I'd never ask more for all his grief over Mother, but he'd tell us all kinds of other stories to raise our chins, make us proud – of her. He'd tell us over and over that our grandfather was a famous tracker, who'd come from way out west, from the river people there. A big man, was our grandfather, so said Dad, tall and handsome, he wore a possum-skin cloak. His name was Kulyan and he was one of them that guided the survey men through the vast, wide lands beyond the mountains. He got a medal from the government for it – or was it a ribbon? Oh Lord, please give me some firm branch-hold of something, some place where we might go.

*Go out and find your grandfather, Annie*, some kind of something replies. *Go to your grandfather's country – go west, out to the place called Blackman's Swamp*. A strange voice, if it's a voice at all, more a ripple through the air, as I look up to see nothing but the rise of those mountains framed inside the open back door. I think the voice maybe sounds a bit like Dad, I hope maybe it's his spirit guiding me; or maybe it's the voice of the Lord after all, telling me: *Find your grandfather. Find Kulyan*.

Whoever it is, that was a good and clear instruction, one I'm taking for providence, so I say to Sis: 'We're going out west. We're going to find our grandfather.'

'What? I ain't going out to some Never-Never nowhere place for some black feller I ain't ever seen. I'm not leaving my Mickey.' She doesn't move from the hallway while I keep on with scrabbling about the place for any last lost coins – in the

drawers, under the beds – wondering if Sis chooses to talk like such a trollop, or she really is one.

‘You are coming with me,’ I tell her. ‘You’re going wherever I go. I gave Dad my promise.’ I promise him again with a glance over my shoulder.

So Sis and me get our claws out over it, with Sis calling me a ‘stubborn streak of snot stain’, and a ‘screwed-up squealing black witch’, and me telling her, with her fairer skin, ‘Reckon you’re too white to walk beside me, do you? Without me, you’re on a fast road to the sluttery!’ and her telling me next with her tears streaming, ‘I’m going to Mickey right now,’ and me telling her, ‘No you are not.’ Until she hoofs out in a blubbing huff, back over to Yarramundi, two miles north and across the water. I watch her from the back door, skirts flapping across the fields as she storms off, on her way up to the spit across the river at the lagoon, where Mickey Dinnigan’s house is, if you can call it a house, rather than a heap of unsightly rubbish.

*Don’t worry too much for your sister*, the voice tells me next, a breath of wind through beet-leaves. *Mickey’s not too bad a lad*. It can’t be Dad’s guidance I’m hearing, then. Maybe it’s God being charitable; or maybe it’s just me sighing, giving up on Sis because she makes me mad as a wet cat.

I go back inside, to the parlour room, and I look down at Dad once more on the sofa: one fight between me and Sis he didn’t have to hear; one final declaration of her intentions to chuck herself at Mickey our dad didn’t have to know about, either. Such a good, God-fearing, God-loving man, our father, but with something of a harsh prejudice against Catholics, believing them all to be a bit lazy and degenerate, especially Irish ones that do nothing but go around shooting the royal family, blowing things up with gunpowder and never toasting the Queen, sinning and going to confession afterwards and

pretending you never wronged at all – they let themselves off a charge too easy. Or off a job. Mickey’s got a job, though, a good one, at the tannery. You can smell him coming, but he’s a hard worker by any reckoning, not too bad a lad, I suppose that’s true, and Sis’ll be sixteen in June. I can’t tell her what to do anymore. I’m no King of Israel to bring the hammer of judgement down.

*Let her go her own way . . .*

She’s gone whether I like it or not.

And I’m going too. Going to find our grandfather. I’m going to find us a new home, and then I’ll come back and see about Sis, drag her off if Mickey turns out a bad one after all.

I straighten Dad’s tie like he might be coming with me.

Oh, Dad.

And I am frantic mad again with disbelief, hurrying while I’m about it. I roll Dad’s swag out up the hall, the blue blankets on the inside of the oilskin canvas smelling strong of him as I start gathering all I think I’ll need into them. More pictures tumble into my mind as I rush here and there: a summer long ago, when I was very small, Mother showing me a tree, where bark had once been sheared off for canoes; Sis so tiny on her hip. Where were we? Trees so tall . . . Somewhere in the Mulgoa Forest, it must have been, or Warragamba, as they’re the only places we’ve ever gone for the holiday we take between Christmas and New Year, not five miles south of Penrith, and not for the last few years. We were fishing, swimming; I jumped off the rocks into Mother’s arms, all fun and laughter; sun sparkling on the drops of water trickling over her shoulders like stars, while Dad pegged out our tarp between two of those tall —

Tarp. Dad’s tarp. I see I might need that, too, if I’m going anywhere without a roof over my head – and I race outside to find it, right up the back of the loft, covered in chaff dust, and



heavy for all that it's only made of bran bags stitched together. As I carry it into the house, I don't know how I'm going to lug all I'll need for camping out – in fact, I don't know what I'm thinking I might be doing here at all. Tramping off up through the wild Blue Mountains, a girl all alone? I look around the room at all I've ever known; anger and doubt smack me down: this is my home. But no, it's not. It's about to belong to the Murgetts, whoever they are – and I suddenly remember who they are at this thought of them: relatives of the Billingtons, that's right, Mrs Billington being close in with Mrs Webb at the church. While I am friendless. Friendless as the moon. And no, I can't do this, I can't tramp off alone. Just as sudden, I can't move.

*Yes, you can. Don't be a girl.*

Don't be a girl? That's a nonsense. What else can I be? A lady taking the coach up and staying in fine hotels all the way to Bathurst? With the paltry five pounds, seventeen shillings and bawbees I have as a sum total to my name? Not likely. I've never been to Bathurst, but I know it's expensive. I don't even know where I'm going at all. Not truly. Only that Blackman's Swamp is somewhere out there – somewhere west.

And that my heart is broken here.

That brings me back to Dad, to look at him again before I can't see him anymore. I have to go before they put him in the ground. I can't watch that. No doubt none of Dad's friends across this valley will have been given notice to come pay respects today; Mrs Webb's sour face will only be gloating over our ousting all the while, thinking up some worse way to spite me. I have to move these feet and get going.

And just as I think I might fall to my knees once more with not being able to, I see something out of the corner of my eye: one of Dad's long field boots slowly flops down over the

other there at the end of the sofa, where they've been since I took them from his poor feet yesterday. He only got them last Thursday, and I'd put them on for a laugh when he brought them home from the cobbler at Windsor, they're so tall, but a necessity against snakes along the rows. Our feet are the same size, just about, though mine are skinnier across the toes. We are the same size pretty much all over but for an inch or two in height: we are skinny but strong. And then I see; I hear what I've been told: don't be a girl – be Dad instead.

I hurry ever faster now, before they come for him. I get Dad's gear on me: his second-best moleskin strides, his new boots, his red Crimean flannel, which he wears every Friday to market, and his good felt hat, which I hide all my hair inside. And I take his tobacco pouch as well: I put all the money I have into it, and I pull the drawstring tight, push it deep into the middle of the swag-roll, snug up against my Holy Bible, with my *Certificate of Completion of Primary Education* from Richmond Free Presbyterian Church School snapped safely shut inside as all the proof of what I'm worth in this world and a whisper of the kindness in it, too, for my old teacher, Miss Madden, who stood up for me being at the school in the first place, before she left the year after me to get married and have children of her own. *Such a bright little thing*, she'd tell Dad in the street, and he was never prouder.

And I kiss my dad on the forehead and I kiss him on the cheek, his skin as cold as mine is warm.

Goodbye, Dad.

In my sore, mad mind I imagine he smiles at me from his dream there on the sofa as I lump the swag on my shoulders and the tarp-roll over it, frying pan and billy can hanging off either side, just as he would have them. But I don't look behind me as I go.

I'm going to find my grandfather, Kulyan. I'm going to find whatever family there is of mine to find. I start walking for the Castlereagh Road, for the new bridge at Penrith – I know that leads to the way most direct across the mountains, for that's the way the railway goes, across Emu and up, with the telegraph line. I will follow the tracks. I'll be a railway tracker, I say to myself against the straps of the swag already cutting into my shoulders.

Up at the hut on the roadside, the farm labourers watch me go, three of them come out to stand at the door. But they don't say a word to me, they don't even nod a good day or mumble a condolence, the dirty, rotten-toothed things – whole river to wash in and none of them do, though they sneak a look at me and Sis whenever they can, like we're the strange ones. Or maybe they don't recognise me at all, my costume is too confusing for cabbages. I could jump at them and say, *Watch out! I am the black ghost of Richie Bird, and I am angry at being dead!* But I hardly look at them as I go, only long enough to see that Gudge is not looking out at me with them. Is he ashamed of what Mrs Webb has done? Or is he in on it? Did he push Dad onto the rocks at her bidding? Not a tree falling on him at all but foul play? I discard that thought as quick as it came: Gudge is too stupid for a life of crime. What would I do if he was in league with Mrs Webb, anyhow? Nothing. I'm no-one to speak against them or anyone, if I ever was. It's a rough, rough world, Dad always said, all you can do is hold your head up as high as it'll go above your boots and keep on the way of light.

*Come on, Kath*, he says to Mother through all time, past old rough prejudice and pain, and she keeps on with him into town, her hand in his arm, little posy of violets pinned to her bonnet, smiling like a sunny day at him, and I look up, finding the bridge ahead: the huge ugly thing of iron. But the river is huge

here itself: still high from all the soaking rain we've got this past year, bless those that suffered in the floods. It is broad and green and beautiful, black swans swimming around by the bank here, five of them, their red beaks flashing through the reeds.

My mother used to talk to this river, in her language, her toes in the mud, bending with her hands swishing through the water, calling me to her: *Come here, daughter, stay beside me.* She told me how the rivers join up like arms across the land: the Nepean, the Warragamba, the Grose and the Hawkesbury. I listen and listen now, but I can't hear her name for this place here. Her special name for this water, all the special words she spoke to it – all small pieces of me I can't catch hold of, tiny pieces of home lost to the breeze.

*See you again one day, girl. Goodbye . . .* I think it must be the river talking to me.

Goodbye, I say into the water and into the trees that climb up to the sky along the mountainside ahead. Goodbye, I say as these boots of my dad's go *rough, rough, rough* on my feet across the bridge. Rough, rough world, it is, today. Rough and slippery as a basket of silver eels.

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'Reminiscent of Mark Twain's dry humour, this rollicking ride through the 1860s' goldfields of NSW – part romance, part colonial picaresque – reveals a landscape of hatred and brutality but also unexpected acts of kindness.'

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It's 1868 and the gold rush is sprawling across the wild west of New South Wales, bringing with it a new breed of colonial rogue – bushrangers. A world far removed from hardworking farm girl, Annie Bird, and her sleepy village on the outskirts of Sydney.

But when a cruel stroke of fortune sees Annie orphaned and outcast, she is forced to head for the goldfields in search of her grandfather, a legendary tracker. Determined and dangerously naive, she sets off with little but a swag full of hope – and is promptly robbed of it on the road.

Her cries for help attract another sort of rogue: Jem Fox, the waster son of a wealthy silversmith, who's already in trouble with the law – up to his neatly trimmed eyebrows in gambling debts. And now he does something much worse. He 'borrows' a horse and rides after the thieves, throwing Annie over the saddle as he goes.

What follows is a breakneck gallop through the Australian bush, a tale of mistaken identity and blind bigotry, of two headstrong opposites tossed together by fate, their lives entwined by a quest to get back home – and the irresistible forces of love.

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