

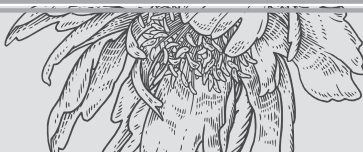
*The
Naturalist's
Daughter*



TEA COOPER
HARPER
MUSE



HARPER MUSE



The Naturalist's Daughter

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First Australian Paperback Edition 2018

ISBN 9781489242426

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Title page art by marinavorona from Adobe Stock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP data to come

CIP TK

CIP TK

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

For the storyteller's daughter, and Cooper



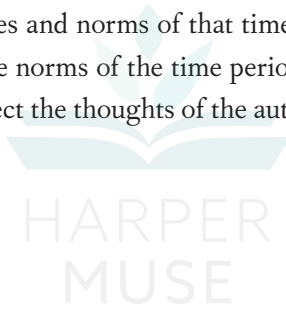
“Nullius in verba.”—“Take no one’s word for it.”



Author's Note



In a commitment to historical accuracy this novel employs the language of its era and historical setting, and in some instances reflects the prejudices and norms of that time. That commitment to accurately reflect the norms of the time period are in no way meant to offend nor to reflect the thoughts of the author.



Chapter 1



AGNES BANKS, NEW SOUTH WALES

1808

Rose loved Pa's dusty workroom filled to overflowing with notebooks and samples, paints and charcoals. A treasure chest of strange and wonderful objects. A charred boomerang; the tall, tall seed head from the shaggy grass tree; a huge *oh-don't-touch* emu's egg painted with careful patterns, more tiny dots than even she could count. Collected heads of banksia, their knotted faces leering; the beautiful curling tail feather of a bulln-bulln; and in the center of the worn table, her most favorite of all—the mallangong. Once it lived and breathed until Bunji's pa speared it out in the billabong. Now it sat, preserved for all eternity. That's what Pa said—*preserved*. She ran her hand over the dark brown fur and touched its funny little beak.

Pa rose from the chair, his brown face wrinkling as he smiled his special smile. "Shall we go down to the river, my heart?"

A trickle of excitement ran through her. She'd sat quietly waiting all afternoon for him to say those very words. "Yes please, Pa."

"Put on your boots before you tell your mother we are off."

She rammed her feet into her clodhoppers, leaving the long laces trailing, and hoisted her knapsack carefully onto her back. Pa's

supplies were precious. How she loved the wooden box with its tiny blocks of paint and brushes wrapped in fine linen. Pa promised she'd have her own paintbox when she was bigger, all her very own. Now she shared his and she had to be careful, so very careful not to break anything.

The box came from London a long time ago with Pa on the big ship when the colony was blackfellas' country. Now there were people everywhere—mostly convicts with their clattering, clanging chains and long, sad faces.

Some days Mam was sad too. She'd stare down the river and sigh as though she'd been waiting a long, long time, and every time Pa went to Sydney Town she asked him for a letter. When he shook his head, tears came to her eyes. One day she'd write her a letter so Pa could bring it back; maybe then Mam would smile. "Mam, where are you? We're going to the river to see the mallangong."

Mam turned from her seat on the ground, her fingers dirty from scabbling in the garden where she grew her medicine—herbs that made people well, helped birth their babies, fixed their fevers, and healed their cuts and bruises. That made Mam happy, but the letter sadness never left her eyes no matter how hard Rose tried to be a good girl.

"Tell your pa not to be late for tea. And don't forget to keep your hat and boots on. The sun's still strong."

"We can't come home too soon because the mallangong don't play until the sun goes down."

"You and your mallangong. I'm frightened one day I might lose you. You'll swim away and not come back to me, go and live with the billabong."

She'd never do that, never leave Pa. Why would she do such a thing?

"Off you go now. That's your pa calling; he doesn't like to be kept

waiting.”

When Pa said he had two precious treasures brought to him by the piskies, it made Mam smile. A sad, faraway smile. Rose leaned over and brushed her lips against her mother’s smooth cheek, wrinkling her nose when the curl of hair, black as black, tickled her face. “Bye, Mam.”

Little puffs of dust rose at Rose’s heels and her heart beat in time with her boots as she ran. The rain hadn’t come, and it was hot and dry and dusty. Down by the river it would be cool, underneath the big gum where the fallen branch stretched its arms into the river. That’s where the mallangong dug their burrows in the damp sand.

She skipped down the well-worn path. She was a big girl now and knew the way, but still Mam said never go alone, not to go unless Pa was there. The blackfellas mightn’t like it if she did. Mam was a silly fuss. Bunji and Yindi were her friends; they showed her all the secret paths up through the rocks where the grass trees grew and down to the swimming hole where it was never hot. Sometimes they laughed at her when she took off her hat and boots and tried to swim. Not her chemise; she never took off her chemise. Good girls didn’t do that.

A jackass made her jump right off the path and almost fall into the long grass. She waved her fist at him. He didn’t care. Just laughed and flew away.

She slowed and scuffed her feet. She hated her boots, hated them more than her pinny and her hat. Yindi didn’t have to wear boots or a hat. She plonked down onto the ground and reeved off her boots, tying the strings together and hanging them over her shoulder and tossed her hat into the scrub. Pa wouldn’t notice. By the time she got to the river he’d have his easel set and his paints—Oh, his paints! No, he wouldn’t. She had his paintbox in her pack.

Quick, quick. She must be quick. Her bare feet pattered on the

dry earth as she leaped around the tough kangaroo grass. Not much grass now, only the bunches like tiny spearheads. The bulbs tasted delicious, soft and always juicy. Yindi's mam, Yukri, had shown her which ones to pull.

When she reached the big gum tree she skittered to a halt, her heart big and pattering hard. She loved Pa so much. His big, strong arms and rumbling voice made her safe. "I'm here, Pa." She waved and weaved along the track right to the edge of the billabong.

Pa raised his finger to his lips, then beckoned. He hadn't set up his easel yet; he stood staring across the gray-green water. "There's movement over there. Can you see it?" He took the pack from her back and settled it on the grass, then her boots. He didn't say anything about her bare feet, even though his lips made a funny shape as though he was eating his laugh. "Step lightly now. Shade your eyes with your hand, like this."

She peered across to the shadows beneath the roots of the big tree. Little ripples broke the top of the water. Then she saw it. A squeal jumped out of her mouth as the sleek, dark-brown body dived and twisted.

"She's looking for food."

"Maybe she's got babies."

"Juveniles. Call them juveniles. See? Just above the waterline."

"Juveniles." She wrapped her tongue around the word, then squinted hard and moved her hand to and fro. "Yes, yes, there. I can see the hole into their burrow."

"Good girl. You watch carefully. Tell me what she does. I want to make a record."

"Can I make one too? Please, Pa, please."

He twisted one of her curls around his finger and tucked it behind her ear, not saying a word about her missing hat. Thank goodness. Mam would be mad. Perhaps the jackass had made off with it by now.

“Sit down over there and I’ll set you up. We must always record our evidence. It’s the only way.” He opened his paintbox and took out a little piece of charcoal. It was so precious and she mustn’t waste it. Then he passed her little sketchbook to her from the pack. Squirming, she turned the pages past the first few drawings. They were baby drawings. Now she did better. She could make the mallangong’s fur look wet or dry when she mixed the paint. Dark for wet and not so dark for dry, and she knew their fingers and their toes—webbed. She knew that word very well. And their bills, like a duck but not really; not hard and snappy like Mam’s ducks but soft and bendy.

Pa sat down next to her, and his special smell of pipe and grass and scrunched-up leaves made her nose prickle. She turned her head to see his face, his deep brown skin almost like the blackfellas, with big creases around his eyes. He said they came when he was on the big ship and now they were even deeper, like the cracks in the sandstone rocks at the swimming hole. Maybe he was getting old. That made her goosey even though the sun was still shining. Bunji’s grandfather was very old and he’d died. She’d snuck through the trees and seen the corroboree. Big bonfires, the dancing stomp of the feet making her chest bounce.

“So where is your drawing?”

Chewing her lip, she studied the empty page.

Hands laced, thumbs circling, Pa waited while she drew the outline and shaded it with a crosshatch of fine lines, to bring the mallangong to life, just as he’d shown her.

“I think you’ve been dreaming. Here’s my picture.”

The riverbank, the tree, and there the little hole, the door to the burrow and the mallangong swimming through the water fast, so fast it left arrows on the surface. And then another diving deep.

“I didn’t see two. Were there two?”

“No, my heart, just one. I wanted to show Sir Joseph one diving

down. Why do you think they dive so deep?”

She knew the answer and Pa knew it too, but he liked to ask her questions just to make sure. “They push their bills along the sand at the bottom of the river sucking up the fishes and—she moved her lips and tongue into place—“Crustaceans.”

“Crustaceans, very good. And what are they?”

“Maybe prawns and other shellfish. If they’re very hungry mallangongs can eat half of themselves.”

“I don’t think they eat themselves.” Pa’s big, deep, rumbling laugh made her laugh too. But then it flew away and she frowned. He was teasing. She scowled back at him. “He eats half as much as he is heavy. There.”

“That’s right. You’re such a clever girl. One day you will know all there is to know about these special creatures and I will take you to meet Sir Joseph. You can tell him and his fine friends all about *Ornithorhynchus paradoxus*. Would you like that?”

She rolled the words around in her mouth, her lips fighting the slippery rhythmical sounds. “*Ornithorhynchus paradoxus*. What’s *paradoxus*?”

“It’s an old word, from the Latin. Something that is contradictory, against common belief, differing from what people believe is true.”

“But the mallangong is true. He’s here. We see him almost every day.”

“Indeed we do, indeed we do.” Pa stared out across the water and tapped his charcoal stick against his teeth, the way he always did when he was thinking.

“Where does Sir Joseph live?”

“In London, in a very fine house.”

London! That meant a ship, a ship with big white sails, not like the lighters that traveled up and down the river with their flapping square of ragged canvas. A voyage across the ocean. As long as Pa was with

her, she might like that. "Can Mam come too?"

"No, Mam must stay here."

"Why? That's not fair. She'll be lonely if we leave her."

"Such a wise head on these young shoulders." He hugged her close, making his sketchbook fall to the ground. "You're right. She would be lonely. I was only dreaming."

"Mam says we mustn't be home too late or our tea will spoil." She bent over and picked up his open sketchbook, keeping her fingers right on the edge the way he'd told her, then blew across the paper so the charcoal wouldn't smudge.

He took it from her and gazed out across the river. The sun was setting and the mallangongs had gone home. "You're a good girl, and I love you and your mother very, very much. I will never leave her. Not after all she's lost."

What had Mam lost? Perhaps she could help find it. Then maybe Mam would smile. Everyone felt miserable when they lost something.

Chapter 2



SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

1908

Dust, ink and old paper, binding leather and hushed tones cocooned Tamsin Alleyn in a familiar tranquility. Beneath the muted hum of the incandescent lights, she took a deep breath, her heart hammering and her fingers itching to unwrap the package from London.

“I thought I might find you in here. Why don’t you come and have a cup of tea?”

“I just want to open this. I think it’s more of the correspondence from London that I requested.” She snipped the string securing the brown paper, rolled it into a ball, and deposited it in the desk drawer with a flick. Funding was tight at the Public Library of New South Wales now they were working on the Mitchell bequest, and every little bit helped.

“Come along, hurry up.”

She’d spent months writing letters, sending requests to the Royal Society asking for the return of the letters sent to Sir Joseph Banks from the early Australian naturalists. Dear God, let her hard work be rewarded.

“Bring your lunch. I’ve got something I want to talk to you about.” Edna Williams left with a spring in her seventy-year-old step Tamsin envied.

Not game to ask what it was Mrs. Williams wanted to talk about, she reluctantly left the unopened package and made her way down the corridor and up the stairs. She’d been so pushy about the correspondence, determined the letters should be returned to Australia where they belonged. Besides, the display for the museum had gone some way in dragging her out of the morass she’d waded through ever since she’d sold Mother and Father’s house. Not because of the memories, more because there weren’t any. Try as she might, she couldn’t feel any connection with the past.

She shouldered open the door to the tearoom.

“I’ve made you my favorite, a Grey’s tea with some lemon.” Mrs. Williams patted the chair next to her, her dark, beady eyes darting like fireflies around the room and her buttoned boots tapping. “Do hurry up.” The no-nonsense woman rarely showed a glimmer of impatience, yet today her feet were jiggling around like a young girl promised a strawberry ice. She was up to something.

What had she forgotten? The two librarians from the cataloguing department threw closed-mouthed smiles at her, a cloud of bemused expectancy almost visible above their heads. Whatever was afoot wasn’t a secret.

“Right. I’m ready.” Tamsin picked up her cup and inhaled the aroma of bergamot. Quite what Mrs. Williams could have to complain about, she had no idea. Ever since Tamsin had managed to wheedle her way into the job, she’d given it her all. Coming at the lowest point in her life, and facing the daunting prospect of having inherited a bundle of worthless shares and a house she couldn’t maintain, a salary of ninety-six pounds a year was not to be sneezed at.

“Are you up for a trip? It’s fairly short notice, I’m afraid.”

“A trip?” A trickle of anticipation worked its way across her shoulders and she concentrated on the slice of lemon swimming on the surface of the tea while she tried to look calm, responsible, and professional. Of course she was. It was exactly what she needed. The last time she’d left Sydney she’d been wrapped in a shawl, clutched in her mother’s arms.

“You’re the obvious candidate, given all your hard work with the Royal Society.”

Her heart took up an irregular patter. Surely Mrs. Williams wasn’t going to suggest she take a trip to England. Highly unlikely. The Blue Mountains would do. Somewhere she could shrug off the lead boots that still made every step an effort despite the job of her dreams. She still couldn’t believe it. When she’d filled in the application form, she’d simply been flying a kite, a badly balanced hastily tacked together kite at that. And she’d landed here firmly on her feet, working in this prestigious establishment with a history dating back to the 1820s. “Of course I am.”

If she was lucky, a trip might get her out of the celebration at the Missionary Society. Even after all the years it still hurt too much. She hadn’t managed to come up with anything to say that would be deemed appropriate. What could she say to commemorate her parents’ death? She hadn’t seen them since they’d handed her into the care of the Sydney Ladies Academy the moment she turned ten. She had nothing but bitterness to offer.

“It’s not too far, and you’re about the only person who has sufficient understanding of the matter. We can cover the transport and accommodation costs if you’re willing to stay at one of the local establishments.”

It must be something important if they’d managed to find the money for an overnight stay. “I’m all ears.”

“I received a letter from a Mrs. Quinleaven; she lives just outside

a small town in the Hunter. She has a book she'd like to donate to the Library. She's getting on a bit and wants to make sure it's delivered before it's too late. She has no faith in the postal service, and transport to the area is a little patchy."

Tamsin pushed her empty cup away, tapping her fingernail on the table. "The Hunter's not too bad. The train goes to Maitland. I could do the trip in a couple of days."

"We might have to consider a traveling companion. Is there anyone you would like to invite?"

Tamsin shook her head. It didn't require much thinking; there was no one she could ask, except perhaps her housekeeper, but the thought of any kind of close contact with Mrs. Birkenhead didn't fire her with enthusiasm. "I'm quite able to travel alone. It's not far."

"You really should pay more attention to these things. It's hardly appropriate for a young lady to be seen traveling alone."

Tamsin lowered her lids, mostly to cover the rolling of her eyes. "I think at the ripe old age of twenty-five I hardly classify as young. Besides, this is the twentieth century, not Regency England."

"I know, I know. I'm sure you're quite capable of managing. Please don't start on the New Woman claptrap. I'm an advocate, remember?"

"I won't, I promise. Now what exactly is this donation?" A library full of books she could understand, but one book? It must be something quite special. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, her chin cupped in her hands.

"A sketchbook. Detailed anatomical line drawings and water-colors." Mrs. Williams's dramatic pause signaled something more. She lowered her voice and leaned closer. "We think it belonged to Winton."

"Charles Winton?" Winton the naturalist, one of the first to send Sir Joseph Banks detailed information about the platypus. One of the very men whose correspondence she'd requested from London.

“How thrilling. Where did the sketchbook come from?”

“The usual sort of thing. Been in Mrs. Quinleaven’s possession for years and she’d never bothered to do anything about it.” Mrs. Williams gave a disdainful sniff as though incapable of believing anyone could be uninterested in such a legacy.

“Winton’s family?”

“No. No relation as far as we know. A promise she made, apparently. I’ve no idea how it came into her possession.”

“I can go and have a look. If it’s authentic it would be a wonderful addition to the letters. As you know I’ve requested Winton’s correspondence in particular. I think that’s what’s in the parcel.”

“The sketchbook will have to be appraised to certify its authenticity; perhaps the people at the Mitchell, although they have their work cut out preparing for the opening. I’d like you to check for signatures and dates, take a look at the paper type and construction, the illustrations, see if you can find any clues to previous ownership. You know the sort of thing. And while you’re there, you might enjoy exploring the area. I believe there have been sightings of the platypus in the local waterways, although the exact location might be a bit difficult. A personal view would give you some insight into Winton’s letters. Take a couple of extra days. It will make the display all the more relevant.”

Tamsin pushed back her chair. “It would be an absolute pleasure, Mrs. Williams.” She almost bent down and kissed the woman’s peachy powdered cheek; instead, she grasped her hand and squeezed it, inhaling her dusty scent of rosewater. “Thank you so much for thinking of me. When would you like me to leave?”

“As soon as possible. Say tomorrow, and stay over the weekend, or longer if you need to. Make it a bit of a break. You could do with one. You’ve been looking a bit peaky lately. There’s a hotel in the nearby town, Wollombi—the Family Hotel, I think it’s called. They have rooms and it’s very respectable. I’ve looked up the train times. The

Brisbane Express leaves from Central Station. You'll be in Maitland in time for an early lunch, then pick up the branch line to Cessnock. After that you're on your own. It's about eighteen miles to Wollombi. There's a regular postal service every afternoon that takes passengers; if not, there's bound to be someone who can help if you ask at the station."

"Perfect."

"I understand it's very short notice. I wanted to give you first refusal. If you don't feel comfortable, Ernest and Harry are willing to go."

Tamsin shot a look across the room at the two cataloguers trying to look as though they weren't hanging on Mrs. Williams's every word by pretending to be deep in conversation.

And then she remembered and her shoulders slumped. "There's just one tiny hitch, but it can be resolved with a telephone call. May I use the office?" Not waiting for an answer, Tamsin headed for the door, barely managing to control her desire to dance across the room. If Mrs. Williams got wind of the fact she was supposed to be attending a function at the Missionary Society, Ernest and Harry would be off on the weekend of their dreams and she'd be sipping tea and making polite conversation to a group of starchy matrons who wanted to reminisce about Mother and Father.

She closed the door of the office behind her and picked up the handpiece. "One-two-five please." She stared out of the window over the rooftops at the palm trees fringing the entrance to the Botanic Gardens.

"This is Mrs. Benson."

Tamsin stood tall. "Tamsin Alleyn, Mrs. Benson. I'm afraid I will be unable to attend the function for Mother and Father. Please accept my apologies."

"Surely not. We have several people looking forward to meeting

you. They feel they owe your parents so much.”

Tamsin bit back a groan. “It’s inescapable. I’ve been asked to go and assess a new exhibit for the Library. It’s a great honor and if I refuse—”

“You do realize this is a charity event.”

Tamsin rolled her eyes; no matter how hard she tried she couldn’t summon any enthusiasm for the society. Everyone presumed she’d follow in Mother and Father’s footsteps. She couldn’t do it. Their shoes were far too big and uncomfortable. “I’m terribly sorry. There really is nothing I can do about it.”

“In that case I shall be forced to make your excuses.”

“I’m sorry to let you down. Perhaps we can organize another time.” The receiver clattered into the cradle and she swallowed a whoop of excitement before belting back into the tearoom.

“All sorted, Mrs. Williams.”

Chairs scraped as the cataloguers threw her looks that would have frozen the Hunter River and left the room.

Mrs. Williams rubbed her hands together and opened a file sitting on the table in front of her. “I know you are familiar with the story of Charles Winton.”

“Absolutely. How does Mrs. Quinleaven know the sketchbook belonged to him?”

“Apparently some of the works are signed and dated. It’s the dates we’re very much interested in. According to the very limited information Mrs. Quinleaven provided, the drawings and notes predate the recognized timeline for the classification of the platypus. If that’s the case, Winton should be credited for his discoveries.”

“There’s so much conflicting evidence. It took scientists three attempts before they came up with the scientific name we use today. Although I have to admit I like platypus, from the original *Platypus anatinus*, even though they had to abandon it because it belonged to

a beetle.”

“That’s not like you. You’re usually a stickler for the correct terminology.”

Tamsin didn’t understand either. Platypus just felt right. “I didn’t think any of Winton’s sketchbooks and papers had survived. Wasn’t there a fire or something?”

“You’re thinking of the Garden Palace fire, well before you were born. It decimated our collection, and the few copies of his notebooks and drawings we held were lost, hence our desire to get hold of his correspondence. You’ve done a remarkable job, I might add.”

An undercurrent of anticipation swirled in the confined air of the tearoom, working its way into her blood, burning away the lethargy and inertia that had plagued her for so long. “I can’t wait.” She wanted to go now. Now, this minute. “I’ll make sure the parcel contains the letters and then collate them.”

Mrs. Williams’s lips twitched. “Just have a quick look to make sure there’s nothing relevant before you go. I suggest first thing tomorrow morning. I’d value your opinion on the sketchbook’s authenticity. There’s no point in going through with this if it turns out to be some upper-class hobbyist’s doodles.”

“Surely Mrs. Quinleaven would have checked that out before she made her offer.”

“Yes, well, time will tell. If you think it is worthwhile, bring it back and we’ll get hold of someone in the Mitchell wing and ask their opinion. Ask all the questions you can think of, and remember the Royal Society motto—*Nullius in Verba.*”

Take no one’s word for it.

Tamsin entered the small town of Wollombi just in time for afternoon tea. She’d spent most of the journey trying to make sense of the notes

she'd taken yesterday afternoon.

As soon as she'd left Mrs. Williams, she'd raced back to the package on her desk, and just as she'd expected, it contained several of Charles Winton's letters to Sir Joseph Banks.

There were twelve letters, which made twenty in all, counting those they'd already received. Written every year on the same date, July 3.

The pages were a mishmash of formality and afterthoughts. Notes crammed into the margins and small sketches littered between the words. They also made reference to enclosed illustrations, but either the Royal Society hadn't seen fit to return those or they'd been mislaid.

She'd discovered that in 1796, Winton had sent Sir Joseph Banks a platypus pelt. As a result he had seen fit to pay Winton a stipend, for which he was *eternally grateful*, and requested that he continue his research. But it was the last letter she found confusing. Dated July 3r 1818, it had gone into little detail, simply saying that with the aid of the natives he had unearthed a burrow and collected *irrevocable evidence on dissection* and that *Ornithorhynchus anatinus* were *oviparous* and possessed functioning *mammae*.

Which was where Charles Winton had suddenly become more than just one of the early Australian naturalists, in her view.

She'd had to double-check her memory and search through several books before she was certain that it wasn't until 1888 Caldwell had sent his famous telegram—"Monotreme *Oviparous: ovum meroblastic*"—announcing to the world that the mystery of the platypus was finally resolved. The platypus laid an egg just like a bird.

Winton had reported this in 1818. Seventy years earlier!

Tamsin gazed out of the window at the passing countryside, no sign of platypus or even a billabong they might call home. How had Winton's sketchbook ended up in the Hunter Valley? Why hadn't he

received credit for his discoveries? Why hadn't his name appeared in any of the reports of the Royal Society?

Eventually the postman deposited her outside the rather impressive Telegraph Office in Wollombi and pointed her in the direction of a two-story stone building down the road sporting a faded sign telling her she'd arrived at the Family Hotel. An old man sat outside, pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth soaking up a dose of tobacco and afternoon sunshine. He lifted his head and studied her with a jaundiced eye.

"I wonder if you could help me." She threw him her sweetest smile.

The barrel-chested man lumbered to his feet and circled her, then finally came to rest almost nose to nose.

She took two steps back. Charming. If all the locals were this aggressive, she'd be heading back to Sydney empty-handed. "I'm looking for a property called Will-O-Wyck."

"The Kelly place?"

"No, well, maybe. I don't know. I'm looking for a Mrs. Quinleaven."

"Might be a bit late."

"I don't think so." The sun was still high and she'd left Sydney early. It couldn't be much past four. "Can you point me in the right direction?"

He frowned and shook his head from side to side, sending a cloud of pipe smoke into her face before slumping back down on his chair.

"Please," she added for good measure.

"Five hundred yards down the road here, over the bridge, and you'll see a track on your right. Down there a piece. House is on your left. Can't miss it. Three bloody great chimneys."

"Thank you." She picked up her bag, leaving the belligerent beery-breathed old man wreathed in smoke.

His directions were better than his reception, and in no time she'd crossed the timber bridge and found a gate marked Will-O-Wyck and a gravel road lined with flowering acacias. She made her way through the dappled shadows, the air redolent with the almond scent of wattle, and came to a halt at the end of the avenue. As she rounded the bend, she spotted a man leaning against the last tree looking somewhat bored. She dropped her bag at her feet and rubbed at her wrist, trying to ignore her dusty buttoned boots and the chafing of her skin from the high neck of her blouse. He'd think she'd come to stay for the weekend. If it hadn't been for the cantankerous old man outside the hotel, she would have thought to leave her bag instead of lugging it all this way.

He pushed his hands deeper into his jacket pockets and pursed his lips. With his smart black suit, pristine white shirt, and tie he looked as though he belonged in a bank. Not at all what she expected. Everything Mrs. Williams said indicated that Mrs. Quinleaven was an older woman. He was far too young to be her husband, but he could be her son, and if that was the case, why couldn't he have brought the sketchbook to Sydney?

She pulled off her hat and wiped at her damp forehead. "I'm looking for Mrs. Quinleaven."

A flicker of a frown crossed his face before he stepped forward and eased his hands out of his pockets. "I'm Shaw, Shaw Everdene. Mrs. Quinleaven, ah . . ." He combed his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his high forehead. "She's unavailable. Are you a friend of the family?" Almost as an afterthought he stuck out his hand and raised his smoky-gray-green eyes to meet hers.

She took his hand, feeling the strength in his fingers as he gave a brief squeeze. "I'm Tamsin Alleyn from the Public Library in Sydney. I'm here about a book. A sketchbook. I was hoping to speak with Mrs. Quinleaven about her donation."

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Mrs. Quinleaven was buried this morning.”



Chapter 3



WOLLOMBI, NEW SOUTH WALES

1908

Shaw grimaced. Too harsh. He'd made the poor girl flush the color of a tomato. "The funeral party has just returned from the cemetery. Perhaps now might not be the best time. Can you come back tomorrow? Alternatively, I could pass on a message."

"Oh!" She wiped her hand across her brow and sighed. "Do you mind if I rest here a while?"

"Of course not. Have you motored up from Sydney?"

"I took the train to Cessnock, then a lift into Wollombi. I'm staying at the Family Hotel so I walked from there."

That sent her up a couple of notches in his estimation. It was a good hike, especially carrying that heavy carpetbag. He shot a look down at her dusty booted feet; at least she had the sense to dress for a walk. He could imagine his sister tiptoeing a few yards and collapsing in a frilly bundle, refusing to go a step farther. "Why don't I tell Mrs. Quinleaven's daughter you're here and see what I can arrange?"

"That would be perfect. Thank you." A pang of disappointment shot through him when she manhandled her unruly curls back under her straw hat and clamped it back down on her head. Her lack of

pretense and enthusiasm was such a refreshing change.

She didn't look the slightest bit as though she belonged in the Public Library. The only librarians he'd ever met were male and as dusty as the vast collection of books and records they tended. How had they heard about the sketchbook? Mrs. Rushworth had only come across it when she'd arrived. She'd shown him the frontispiece, flicked through a few pages, then snapped it shut before he could get a decent look. He needed to have a chat with Miss Alleyn—there might be more to this book than Mrs. Rushworth had let on.

He glanced over at his motor car parked under the trees. Given the opportunity he would have liked to offer her a lift back to the Family Hotel and see if he could find out what she was up to, but he was here to do a job, and that had to come first. Maybe he could do both. "If you don't mind waiting, I could give you a lift back. There's a bench over there under the tree in the shade."

Her face broke into a delighted smile. "That would be perfect. I should have left my bag at the hotel. I was in such a rush to get here I didn't stop to think."

"Take a seat and I'll be back in a moment."

He made his way over to the lawn where a small group of people were standing under the trees balancing teacups in one hand and a plate of rather uninspired sandwiches in the other. All talking in hushed tones and nodding sagely at each other. He hadn't much time for religion of any flavor—it caused more problems than it solved—however it was good to see Mrs. Quinleaven had sufficient friends to give her a decent send-off. She sounded like a charming old lady.

Mrs. Rushworth was standing to one side, her elegantly clad foot tapping as though she'd run out of patience and couldn't wait for them all to leave. He needed to catch her before she vanished into the house. "Mrs. Rushworth, could you spare a moment?"

"Ah, Shaw, yes, I really didn't expect so many of the locals to be

interested in farewelling my mother I suppose I should thank the woman from the telegraph office for organizing this. Let's go into the house." She led him through the open front door and into the impressive library. It as good as made his mouth water. A few of the bookshelves were empty and the books were stacked in haphazard piles on the table and in wooden tea chests. On the top of the desk sat the old leather-bound sketchbook. Watermarks and the odd blob of ink stained the cover, all very worn and used and, heaven forbid, authentic. His fingers itched to open it and have a look, but once it had come to the crunch Mrs. Rushworth had become somewhat reticent. "You had a visitor and I took it upon myself to tell her you weren't available. I thought now might not be the moment."

"A visitor?"

"A Tamsin Alleyn from the Public Library of New South Wales."

"What did she want?"

He gestured to the desk. "To talk to you about the sketchbook."

"How did the Library hear of it? I didn't even know it existed until this morning."

"It seems your mother contacted them." From what he'd understood from his father, Mrs. Rushworth hadn't spoken to her mother in many a long year, so it was hardly surprising. "Something about a donation."

"A donation! Did you tell her the book's not available?"

"No, I didn't. She's staying at the Family Hotel in Wollombi. I told her I'd speak with you and see if I could arrange a meeting."

She drew herself up to her full height. "Whyever did you do that?"

"Fate has played into your hands. What better way to get some inkling of the authenticity and value? The Library wouldn't be sending out someone who didn't have a fair amount of knowledge." If Mrs. Rushworth wanted to make the most out of her mother's estate, then this was the way to do it. And the fact that they'd found a couple of

pairs of white gloves and an ivory rule inside the desk drawer indicated that someone thought the book held some value. He'd like to get a decent look at it.

With pursed lips, Mrs. Rushworth walked over to the desk, put down her teacup, and flicked through the pages. Shaw's insides crawled. She ought to have the gloves on; any grease on her fingers would transfer to the paper. The book needed to be kept in the best possible condition.

"Do you think it's worth anything?"

"Possibly. We'd have to establish its provenance." He peered over her shoulder, only managing to snatch a glimpse of some detailed line drawings and scribbled notes. The sketchbook certainly looked old. The paper was thick, surprisingly white and fresh, so no acid content, definitely rag pulp, not wood. That dated it prior to the 1850s. "The provenance will have a significant effect on the value."

"I'll leave it in your capable hands." As he expected he'd hit her soft point. Money was her prime motivator, more than likely something to do with her husband's interest in the building boom in the suburbs. "However, I don't want the book to leave the premises. Tell her she can see it tomorrow at nine. But I'm certainly not donating anything."

"I'll do that. Until tomorrow, then."

He held out his hand, which Mrs. Rushworth ignored, then strolled back down the path. He'd have to find somewhere to stay for the night if he was going to bring Miss Alleyn back tomorrow, so he might as well see if there was a room at the Family Hotel.

Tamsin was sitting under the tree as he'd suggested staring out at the brook, her booted feet propped on her bag and her hat on the seat beside her. Her hair had worked its way loose and cascaded down her back in a delicious array of shiny black corkscrew curls and swirls. She made a delightful picture. "You have an appointment to view the

sketchbook at nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

"That's wonderful. You organized it very quickly—I was expecting to have to wait for a couple of days at least. Poor Mrs. Quinleaven. Her daughter must be devastated. I realize my timing is appalling, but it's important that I get the sketchbook to Sydney as soon as possible."

"Hold on a moment. I said you could view the sketchbook. It's not going anywhere. At least not without Mrs. Rushworth's agreement, and to be honest, I don't like your chances."

"What do you mean? Mrs. Quinleaven wrote and said she wanted to donate it to the Library. I'm simply here to collect it because she didn't trust the postal service. Everything has already been organized."

"Apparently Mrs. Rushworth, Mrs. Quinleaven's daughter, knew nothing about any donation."

"Why not?"

He shrugged his shoulders—it wasn't his place to question Mrs. Rushworth's relationship with her mother. He was just the messenger, and besides, if the donation went ahead, Mrs. Rushworth might be out of pocket to the tune of several hundred pounds, if his estimations were correct, and this very attractive little piece sitting in front of him might be able to confirm that. "I'll bring you back tomorrow to have a look at the sketchbook and you can take the matter up with Mrs. Rushworth when you see her."

"I don't seem to have much of an option." She let out a rather impatient sigh and stood up.

"Let's see what tomorrow brings." Putting her offside was the last thing he wanted to do, and if Mrs. Quinleaven had written a letter stipulating a donation, then it could well scupper Mrs. Rushworth's hopes. "My motor car's just over here." He pointed to his pride and joy: a Model T Ford, one of the first into the country. It had cost him almost as much as his tiny cottage and had eaten up the last of Grandfather's inheritance, but it was already proving to be worth

every penny.

“Oh. I’ve never traveled in a motor car before.” She positively glowed, snatched up her bag, and bounded across the grass.

He hotfooted after her and made it just in time to catch her running her hands over the shiny paintwork. “Is it difficult to drive?”

“No, not at all. It’s very simple and perfect for Australian conditions.” He offered his hand. “In you get. I’ll take your bag and stow it.”

Her face lit up like a child’s as she climbed into the seat.

“I’m afraid it might be a bit dusty. Take my goggles, and if you have a scarf you might want to cover your hair and your mouth.”

“I’ll be absolutely fine, I promise you.” She pulled off her hat and slid the goggles down over her eyes, then he handed her his gloves and she shook her head. “You’ll need them. Am I supposed to do anything?”

“Just sit tight while I crank the engine.” Thankfully he’d got the routine down pat now, although it had taken him a while. If it hadn’t been for the man who’d sold it to him, he doubted he’d even have taken it out of first gear. He gave the crank three turns to prime the engine and lifted his head.

She was standing up peering at him over the windscreen, the goggles making her look like some sort of distorted butterfly. “Is it broken?”

“Just part of the routine. Now sit tight and I’ll start the engine. One more crank in a clockwise direction and we’ll be off. Ready?”

“Oh yes.” She clapped her hands and sat back down, holding on as though she might blow away.

One half turn and the engine burst into life. He released the crank and jumped in beside her, disengaged the handbrake, put his foot on the pedal to engage first gear, and they were off.

“It looks very complicated to control.”

“Not at all, once you get the hang of it.”

“And so much quicker than a buggy, and more comfortable.” She gave a rather delightful wriggle and dragged her hair back from her face.

“Certainly quicker. She’s got a top speed of over forty miles an hour. Prepare yourself. I’m going to put it into top.” He slipped it into high gear and they bumped out onto the road, the car’s generous ground clearance making short work of the potholes.

By the time they arrived at the Family Hotel it was crowded with locals. He eased into a spot behind a wagon and climbed out of the car. “Could you stay here for a moment while I go and see if there’s somewhere I can leave the motor car overnight?” He pointed to the bank of clouds billowing above the hills, threatening rain. “I’d rather leave it under cover.”

“It does look like rain. I’ll stay and do guard duty.” She lifted her carpetbag onto her lap and sat hugging it tightly, staring straight ahead.

“I won’t be a moment.” He threaded his way through a group of gawking men toward the door of the hotel.

“Suppose you’d be looking for a room too, would you?” A grizzled old man pulled his pipe from his mouth.

“If you’ve got one and somewhere I can park my motor car under cover overnight.”

The fellow cleared his throat and hawked into the grass, then pointed around the corner. “There’s an empty stable around the back; ain’t got nothing to feed that contraption, though.” He rocked back with a laugh. “I’d offer hay, but I don’t reckon you’d be interested.”

“That’s not a problem.” He gestured to the row of cans strapped behind the seat—he’d been caught out too many times before. Motor

spirit was perhaps the biggest problem—scarce and expensive—but he'd found a pharmacist who carried it on the North Shore and he'd made sure he had enough for the round trip. "Got that all under control."

"Don't suppose you have much trouble catching it either."

Shaw refrained from answering and stuffed his leather gloves into his pocket and returned to help Tamsin out.

She untangled the goggles from her hair. "I'm fine."

"Let me take your bag."

Her wide mouth broke into the most engaging smile. "It's not necessary. I can look after myself." She handed the goggles back. "Thank you so much. That was such fun."

"It was my pleasure. I'll run you out tomorrow morning to see Mrs. Rushworth."

"Really, it's no trouble. I don't mind the walk. Please don't put yourself out."

Miss Alleyn was obviously one of those New Women who cherished their independence and right to vote above all else, although her looks were more in keeping with Charles Gibson's girls—statuesque, narrow-waisted, and totally at ease in her own skin. He might put it to the test; see if she was as avant-garde as she appeared. "Would you like to join me for dinner?"

"That would be very pleasant. Or was the invitation just to soften the blow about the sketchbook?" The smattering of freckles on the bridge of her nose danced and he had an overwhelming desire to lean forward and touch them.

"No, not at all, but if there's a story behind the sketchbook I'd love to hear it."

"Isn't there always a story behind everything?"

"It depends if you're interested in delving below the surface." Parry, thrust, parry, and thrust. They might as well be fencing.

Her shoulders stiffened and she threw him a look, which told him he'd have to step more lightly, then disappeared into the crowd. Mrs. Rushworth would have her work cut out if she thought Miss Alleyn was going to give up without a fight.

The old bloke with the pipe ambled over and ran his hands along the paintwork. He sniffed. "How many horses has this one got then?"

"Eight."

He whistled through the gap in his front teeth. "Ain't proper. These women gallivanting around the countryside on their own." He huffed, stuck his pipe back in his mouth, and rocked on his heels.

Miss Alleyn might be a lot of things, but he doubted proper was something she paid too much attention to.

"Here for the funeral, I suppose?"

"Did you know Mrs. Quinleaven?"

"Everyone did. Nice old woman, no matter what some people thought. And I'm happy to see her buried where she belongs. What's your connection?"

A good question, and not one he intended to elaborate on. "Can you give me a hand with this?" He pulled the cans off the back of the car and handed one to the old bloke before turning back for the other one. "I'll leave them outside the stable."

"There's talk of them selling this stuff up at the General Store before long. Lucky for you, you ain't got to wait." He winked, his eye disappearing into a bundle of wrinkles.

Shaw straightened up. "Who should I talk to about a room?"

"The wife. Better go and ask, especially if you've got someone to keep you company." The fool waggled his eyebrows suggestively. That wasn't what he was after. It was Tamsin's knowledge about books that fascinated him. For a day that had begun with a funeral, things were looking up.

Chapter 4



WOLLOMBI, NEW SOUTH WALES

1908

Tamsin swallowed the last of the tea and handed her cup and saucer to Mrs. Adcock. “A lovely breakfast, thank you.”

“All part of the service. Enjoy your day. Dinner is at six tonight.”

She found Shaw outside behind the steering wheel of his car drumming his fingers on the wheel.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Everdene. I didn’t realize you were in a hurry.”

“Call me Shaw.” He threw her a cheeky grin. “I didn’t think you’d want to be late.”

“No, I don’t.” A kick of excitement caught her unawares and she tied a scarf around her hat to hold it down and pulled on the goggles Shaw had placed on the seat for her.

She wanted to know a bit more about Shaw Everdene; last evening he’d steered the conversation away from anything to do with the sketchbook or his relationship with Mrs. Quinleaven and Mrs. Rushworth. “So Mrs. Rushworth is a friend?”

“Of sorts. She’s a client of my father’s.”

The silence hung while she waited for him to elaborate. Nothing

happened so she tried a different tack. "Shaw's an unusual name."

"It is, isn't it? It was my grandfather's nickname. Tamsin's pretty unusual too."

"Not really."

"Any idea where it originates?"

"No. I think my mother just liked it." Or maybe hated it and that's why she'd been landed with it. Father called her his little gypsy. Her dark eyes and untamable hair didn't bother him, but Mother had never come to terms with her Romany looks. Then she'd discovered an old book of Cornish tales, all about a witch named Tamsin, and she'd convinced herself it was one of the reasons they'd sent her back to Sydney and deposited her at school with the Misses Green. They were ashamed to have her around. Missionaries and witches didn't sit well together.

"I would have thought you'd researched your name, and your family tree." He pushed his hair off his face and shot a look at her before returning his concentration to the potholes in the road. "Because of your job, your obvious interest in history. I'd expect you to be on it like a dog with a bone."

Did that mean he thought she was being too pushy about the sketchbook? Not a lot of point in tracking down family history when you'd always felt as though you'd been left like a suitcase at a railway station, a nuisance to your parents whose interests lay in spreading the gospel, not raising a family. "As far as I know it's never been done. My parents were missionaries. Mother was a nurse and my father a doctor."

"But you didn't follow family tradition and go into medicine?"

"No. I couldn't bring myself to after they died."

"I'm sorry." He maneuvered the motor car around the bends in the driveway and made no other comment, thank heavens. She hated having to explain how horrifyingly little Mother and Father's passing had

meant to her. Her feelings made no sense; surely everyone mourned. Yet all she had felt was a huge lethargy, as though she were wading through mud.

It wasn't until she'd started working at the Library that her life began to take shape. And then with the flurry of interest in Australian history surrounding the Mitchell bequest, she'd discovered the Royal Society held copies of the correspondence between Banks and the early Australian naturalists. That had led her to the rivalries and competition surrounding the platypus. The story reached out and tugged at her heartstrings—she felt an affinity with the shy little creatures that for so long had belonged to no family in the animal kingdom. Fanciful, but the platypus had become her totem.

Shaw pulled up in front of the house under the shade of a large tree and cut the engine. Her blood hummed with curiosity and anticipation hammered away inside her skull. She could hardly contain herself.

“Just wait here a moment and I'll go and see if the time is right.”

Shaw disappeared around the corner of the house, and she climbed out of the car and pulled off her hat and scarf and repinned her chignon. The weather was warm so she left her gloves and hat on the seat, smoothed her jacket, and made her way to the front door. It flew open before she had a chance to gather her senses, revealing Mr. Everdene and his broad grin.

“Miss Alleyn, come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Everdene.”

“Shaw.”

She'd rather expected a maid or even Mrs. Rushworth to open the door, however Mr. Everdene, Shaw, looked very much at home. Perhaps he was a better friend of the family than she'd imagined.

“Is Mrs. Rushworth available?”

“She's busy. Told me to go ahead and show you the sketchbook. I want to have a closer look myself. Come with me.”

She followed his broad back into the house and down a long corridor where the dust motes danced in the slashes of sunlight from the open doors.

“I expect you’re looking forward to this.”

Was she ever! Kicking her heels last night had driven her to distraction despite the diversion of Shaw’s company over dinner. Before she fell asleep she’d read through her notes, committing the timeline of platypus research to mind. There was still so much debate about the reproduction, anatomy, and physiology of the platypus. They were the strangest of animals, and no one had managed to keep one alive in captivity for more than a few days—they either escaped or simply gave up and died. With luck she’d have time to explore the local waterways and see a platypus in its natural environment. She’d ask when she got back to the hotel. “Are you sure I shouldn’t have a word with Mrs. Rushworth first?”

“Not necessary. As you can imagine, after the funeral yesterday she’s not prepared for visitors.” He regarded her with a lively curiosity. There was no doubt she perplexed him. Every time she told anyone she worked at the Public Library they raised an eyebrow, imagining old men, dusty tomes, and a surfeit of stifling conventionality.

“Follow me.” Shaw led her into a smaller room dominated by an impressive oval table. He moved a brass work lamp to one side and threw open the heavy brocade curtains, changing the patina of the surface of the table to the rich hew of old cedar. “This is the dining room. Mrs. Rushworth is packing up the house. I moved the table closer to the window where the light’s better.”

Tamsin adjusted the curtain to let in more light and Shaw glanced up with glint of amusement in his eyes. Swallowing her impatience, she sank down onto a padded chair and clasped her hands tightly in her lap in a vain attempt to look professional.

With a swish of the cloth he wiped the table and then handed her

a pair of white cotton gloves and placed an ivory rule at her elbow. "I found these tucked at the back of the drawer with the book. Mrs. Quinleaven was obviously convinced of its authenticity."

She pulled them on, smoothing the creases from each finger, unable to contain the thrill that fizzled through her blood. Nothing in her life had ever produced this sense of anticipation and excitement.

Shaw turned to the sideboard, slipped on another pair of gloves, and opened the linen bag. Goose bumps prickled her arms and she pushed up in the chair, craning to get a clearer view. He took out the book, balancing it flat on his open palms. Soft, brown leather with well-worn edges were held together by a brass clip; a dangling piece of cotton that must surely have once held the pages in place protruded from the bottom. It appeared to be in remarkable condition.

He placed the book between them and sat down next to her. The cover was stained with ink and a few watermarks, and the brass corners were scratched and dented. It certainly looked as though it belonged to the early nineteenth century, if not earlier, and it was obviously well used.

Shaw drummed his fingers on the table, a strange reverence in his eyes. "I'll let you do the honors." She warmed to him; he was as fascinated by its possibilities as she was.

When she finally lifted the cover, a cloud of mildew and neglect billowed and the familiar blend of old paper and ink filled the air. A silverfish sneaked between the pages and scuttled away in search of freedom. Her heart pounded and her mouth dried.

"You've got the same look on your face I must have had. The sketchbook turned my innards upside down when I first saw it. I'm dying to get a decent look inside. Any idea how old it might be?"

"At least a hundred years going by the dates Charles Winton corresponded with Sir Joseph Banks."

"So you know the background of this man Winton."

Of course she knew the background. “Sir Joseph Banks dominated the scientific world, larger than life, although by the 1800s he was far too old to travel; nevertheless, his word was a command, and anyone with any desire to make a name jumped to fulfil his every wish.

“Charles Winton was an avid correspondent for over twenty years. He sent samples and sketches to Sir Joseph in London annually. Banks paid him a stipend after he sent a skin preserved in alcohol spirit. The animal had been speared by the Aborigines. From what I can gather, their correspondence came to an end in 1818, which is strange because Sir Joseph maintained a serious scientific presence until his death in 1820 and research into the platypus continued.” Perhaps the book would throw some light on Winton’s disappearance from the world of science.

“So why did he drop out of sight?”

“It is unusual, especially for a naturalist, one right in the middle of the greatest debate of the century. Such a waste of talent.” The paper rustled and her words dried in her mouth as she lifted the cover to reveal a line of copperplate:

DESCRIPTION OF THE ANATOMY AND
HABITAT OF THE *ORNITHORHYNCHUS ANATINUS*
BY CHARLES WINTON JULY 1817

“There’s no concluding date.” She turned the first page, the thin piece of waxed paper rustling with a thousand unanswered questions to reveal a detailed line drawing. And then another. Why hadn’t these ever been sent to Sir Joseph Banks? And if they’d remained in Australia, why weren’t they destroyed in the Garden Palace fire with all his other notebooks? “There’s no mention of a sketchbook in the correspondence I’ve seen, only a reference to some enclosed illustrations. Nothing of this nature.”

She didn't need to look any further to know Mrs. Quinleaven was right, it belonged in the Library. "I'll get straight to the point. I would very much like the opportunity to have the sketchbook displayed in the Library, and perhaps in the Mitchell wing when it opens. It is of enormous historical and national significance . . ." Her words died on her lips. He must know the importance of the book, otherwise he wouldn't be treating it with such reverence. "It needs to be authenticated. A scientific notebook containing watercolors is most unusual. Presuming it's original, it must be displayed correctly for future generations."

"We haven't seen enough yet." Shaw turned another page. "These pen and ink drawings are signed. I expect because they are the scientific drawings. The others . . ."

The next page revealed a painstaking watercolor showing a platypus slipping from the bank into the golden-brown waters, every one of the dark hairs on its sleek body individually painted, the light catching the top of its leathery bill. "Beautiful." She let out a sigh. "He was very talented."

"It is definitely his work." He traced a gloved finger above the signature *C Winton*.

Her heart sank. "You thought it might not be Winton's work?" She leaned closer; he smelled fresh and woody, like a forest with a touch of sweetness blending with the musty scent of the old paper and ink. The combination made her heart race.

She turned some more pages.

"Some are signed 'C Winton' and others aren't signed at all. I think it's safe to presume it is his work. After all, his name's on the frontispiece."

"What are you saying?" Creeping goose bumps flecked her arms. Were the works original or weren't they? Had someone else used the blank pages in the book for their own sketches? "*Some hobbyist's*

doodles.” Mrs. Williams’s words quivered across her shoulders. If the book had been tampered with, it would lose much of its value.

“Let’s go right through to the end. We can have a closer look afterward. I really value your opinion.” He slid the ivory rule under the paper and gently turned to the next page. A line drawing; a close-up of a platypus’s hind leg, male because the spur was clearly visible.

“Is there a date on that one? The idea the males were venomous was ridiculed until 1876, when a man named Spicer witnessed and documented a spurring.”

“Ah, I knew there was a reason you had come. This is the kind of knowledge we need.”

Another watercolor; again, the same stretch of riverbank, this time a platypus, presumably female, shepherding two tiny juveniles down the bank to the water, their fur thinner yet their bodies rounded and plump. She could almost glimpse Winton’s spirit hovering as they turned the pages, as though he was thankful to have his work acknowledged.

“You haven’t—”

“Just a moment.” She leaned in for a closer look, then gave up on vanity and grasped her spectacles from her top pocket and shoved them on her nose. A burrow. The mother lying curled, the two juveniles latched to her chest, the fur damp, and the tiniest drop of liquid visible on the juvenile’s bill. “A mother feeding her young—that was disputed for years.”

Shaw turned to the next page. Detailed anatomical drawings showing the internal organs of the male and the female, and on the facing page a cross section of a burrow showing two small platypus feeding and an unhatched egg and what appeared to be the remains of some eggshell.

“Stop. Stop right there. Is this dated?”

Shaw gestured to the scribbled signature at the bottom of the

anatomical drawings—*C Winton*. “No date.”

Tamsin's heart began to race. Here was Winton's *irrevocable evidence* he had written to Banks about. She itched to push Shaw's hands away and pull the book closer.

He must have sensed her frustration because he stood and began pacing.

“When was this drawn?” She scanned the page with the drawing of the burrow, searching for a signature, a date.

“I can't see one.”

“And the style is slightly different to the pen and ink sketches and other watercolors but there's no signature.”

“I agree.”

“So who drew it, and more importantly, when, because if it is correct, it predates all other references to the platypus being oviparous.” Her mind was spiraling out of control, the implications bumping for space, crowding out other thoughts.

“I'm sorry. You've got me beaten. Oviparous?”

“It means they lay eggs like a bird. How did Mrs. Quinleaven get hold of the book? Do we know if it's original? And if it is Winton's, was he speculating or did he have proof?”

“Wait a moment.” Shaw sat down in the chair opposite and placed his large hands over hers, stilling her drumming fingers. “Look at me.”

She gazed into his gray-green eyes, the same color as the leaves framing the corner of the painting, then back to the page, blood throbbing in her right temple. She pushed her spectacles up, pulling her hair from her face. “I don't know what to think. I'm . . . This is . . .”

“Calm down. We'll go through each painting and every line drawing, but first let's get to the end of the book.” He picked up the ivory rule and turned the pages rapidly past more line drawings and scribbled notes until he came to the back page.

Another scene on the bank of the river. Which river, for goodness' sake? A shaggy-haired, bearded man lounging against a tree trunk one leg stretched out, a sketchbook resting on his thigh, and a twig, or maybe a stick of graphite, tucked behind his ear. It had to be Winton. There was no doubting the Australian landscape.

"Look, this one's dated." He pointed to the bottom right-hand corner of the page. "August 1819."

"Where's the signature? Do you think that's Winton? A self-portrait?" A nervous laugh bubbled between her lips. "It's not Winton's style."

"I don't believe it is a self-portrait; however, it's similar to the other unsigned watercolor."

"Wait, there's something written here right down at the bottom of the page." Tamsin squinted at the faded cursive script that wound its way along the base of a fallen trunk. *Resting.*

"So there is. A phantom contributor."

"Stop playing games with me." She pushed the chair back and leaped up. The frustrating man was toying with her, that sardonic grin tipping the corners of his lips again. "Do you know who painted it?"

"No idea." He sat back, folded his brown arms. "Maybe Winton had an accomplice."

She slammed her palms down onto the table. "Are you telling me that Charles Winton, a renowned scientist and naturalist, responsible for these meticulous drawings and notes, allowed someone else to scribble in his sketchbooks—books destined for his patron, Sir Joseph Banks?"

"Hardly scribble. This is a very well-executed watercolor. Look at the drape of his clothes, his face. You can touch every blade of grass and the hairs on his beard. Look at them."

She let out a sigh, her finger hovering over the painting. "I wonder

how old he was. He arrived with the First Fleet. That would make him in his twenties in 1788, possibly older—so in his forties, more than likely. Not a young man.”

Tamsin untangled her spectacles and pushed them up the bridge of her nose. Without a doubt the book belonged in Sydney, where its provenance could be explored in the hands of specialists. It was of national significance, and it needed to be authenticated by someone with far more scientific knowledge than she had. “I must take the sketchbook back to Sydney.” She eased off the white gloves and laid them on the table.

“Not today.” Shaw caressed the book with a protective gesture.

A stab of disappointment hit her, making her heart twist. “I’m booked into the Family Hotel for another night. I must see Mrs. Rushworth and discuss her mother’s bequest.”

He gave her a light, thoughtful frown before closing the book and sliding it back into the soft linen bag. “I expect she can fill you in with a few more details. Why don’t you wait outside?”

With her mind racing, she turned to go and then stopped. “I don’t suppose you know anything about the platypus down in the brook, do you?”

“Around here?”

“Yes. I’ve been doing a lot of work collating papers at the Library, reading about Winton, and I’ve never seen one in their natural surroundings. I was told there might be some around here.”

“We could ask at the hotel. Would you like some company?”

“That would be lovely.” The words were out of her mouth before she’d even thought about it. Now he’d probably think she was being forward. She offered a smile by way of apology. More excitement than anything else; her blood still thrummed with the implications of the sketchbook. “Thank you, I’d like that. Dusk is the best time to catch a sighting.”

“Wonderful.” He looked down at her feet. “I was going to say wear sturdy boots, but I see you’ve got that covered.”

She wiped the scuffed toe of her boot on the back of her leg.

“You’ll need a warm jacket too. It’ll be chilly once the sun goes down.”

“I think I can manage to dress myself. I’m not exactly a child.” The haughty tone in her voice brought a flood of color to her face as she stomped across the old timber floorboards to the door. The man had wheedled his way under her skin with his nonchalant attitude and she’d agreed to his company to see the platypus. She was completely at sixes and sevens. “Would you please go and find out if I can speak with Mrs. Rushworth?”

He picked up the sketchbook and slipped it into the linen bag. “I’ll do that right now. Go and wait outside in the sunshine. There’s a table and chairs on the verandah, to the right of the front door.” And with that he left, taking the sketchbook with him and leaving her faintly disappointed. No matter what he or Mrs. Rushworth thought, the sketchbook had to go back to the Library. It had to be assessed.

After a quick glance around the dining room, bare of everything except the heavy cedar furniture and a brass lamp, she slipped out into the long corridor. The heels of her boots clicked on the wide timber boards as she passed the now closed doors. She rammed her hands in her pockets, trying to control the temptation to peer inside the rooms. The house felt as though no one had lived in it, as though it was crying out for love. Perhaps Mrs. Quinleaven had closed off a lot of the rooms. One woman living on her own would have rattled around in a house of this size.

The sunlight streamed in the front door, and it wasn’t until she was about to step outside that she noticed the door on her right was ajar. Curiosity got the better of her. The brass door knob was cold beneath her fingers when she eased the door open.

Everywhere bookshelves crammed with row after row of wonderful leather-bound books. They ringed the room and the dusty scent of history filled the air. A large desk sat under the window overlooking the brook. A series of half-filled tea chests stood stacked in the center of the room. Mrs. Rushworth must have begun packing up. And overlying it all was the faint scent of something antiseptic. It reminded her of her father and his persistent demands that she wash her hands.

“What are you doing in here?”

She almost jumped out of her skin. “Oh! Hello.”

A tall, thin woman with a canny look in her eye studied her from head to foot. “Miss Alleyn, I presume.”

Caught in the act, and badly. She shouldn't have taken so long. She stepped forward, hand outstretched. “Yes. I'm sorry. My curiosity got the better of me, Mrs. Rushworth. It's a beautiful house.” Mrs. Rushworth's cool hand touched hers for a brief moment.

“Come and sit outside.”

Mrs. Rushworth ushered her out of the room and along a sandstone verandah to a small table and two chairs. The view over a paddock to the tree-lined brook seemed as far removed from Sydney as she could imagine. She inhaled the aroma of slashed grass and realized with surprise that her shoulders had dropped. In the distance where the trees met the brook, she could see an old woman wandering along, bending and picking the sundry flowers growing in the grass.

“You wanted to speak with me.” Mrs. Rushworth flapped her hand in the air.

Her moment of relaxation disappeared with the words. The hint of impatience in Mrs. Rushworth's voice and her waving hand put Tamsin in mind of a persistent fly buzzing against a window. “I did. Thank you. Firstly, I would like to offer my sincere condolences, and those of all of the Library staff, for your loss. We greatly appreciated your mother's kind donation. It will not only benefit future

generations but possibly unwrap a series of unanswered questions about the life of Charles Winton.” There, that had come out all right. She had practiced and refined the words over and over in her head last night in bed. She smiled into Mrs. Rushworth’s eyes, expecting to see a softening from memories of her mother. Nothing, except a steely narrowed gaze and a charged silence.

“As I’m sure you know, Charles Winton was a renowned Australian naturalist. One of the first.” Her words spluttered to a halt. She’d made a mess of that.

“Do you have any indication of the book’s value?” Mrs. Rushworth placed a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I don’t think anyone has considered it. It’s highly unlikely it would ever come up for sale.”

Mrs. Rushworth raised one perfectly manicured eyebrow and rested back in the chair folding her arms.

“Your mother . . . Mrs. Quinleaven contacted the Library with regard to donating the book—”

“As my mother’s only living relative, I am now the owner of the sketchbook.”

“We have the correspondence from her.” Why in heaven’s name hadn’t Mrs. Williams given her the letter to bring? “It was her wish the sketchbook should go to the Library.”

“I don’t want to discuss the matter any further, Miss Alleyn. I suggest you address all inquiries regarding the sketchbook to my solicitor, Mr. Everdene. Good day to you.” And with that Mrs. Rushworth tip-tapped her way down the flagstone verandah and back inside the house. The door banged shut behind her.

Tamsin closed her mouth with a snap. Solicitor. Shaw was her solicitor? He’d said Mrs. Rushworth was a client of his father’s. Who was his father? What did it matter? She wanted to follow, hammer on the door. Didn’t the woman understand the significance of the book?

Or that her mother's last wish . . . She shook her hair back from her face and rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. What a mess!

