



# KIM KELLY

# Black Diamonds

‘Marvellous depth and authenticity.’

*Daily Telegraph*

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# ONE

MAY–JULY 1914

## FRANCINE

The first part of him I see is his hobnail boots, soot-black and massive, a few feet from my nose. I'm crouching, about to pick up the apples that have fallen through the bottom of the string bag, and there they are among the rolling red bobbles, and then his hands reach down, and then there's his face, black as his boots, black crescents on his fingers. I look away quickly, over my shoulder; not sure if I'm embarrassed about the apples, the man, the grime, or myself for being here in this place.

There are others, grey streaks of charcoal heading home from the mines after the shift, I presume. I don't know any of them, and have no reason to. They are just parts of the machine that digs the coal from the earth and keeps us in apples — and the rest. One of them glances at me, a flash of blue-white question, but keeps going, talking to the one he's walking with.

I can't ignore the one in front of me any longer. He's holding out the apples he's gathered for me, three in each huge hand. I don't know where he's going to put them; the bag is no good. So I look at him, finally. My cheeks are scalding already and then he smiles, teeth startling out of the black, and his eyes are green, glinting amber. Oh dear.

There's nothing else for it: I grab up the rest of the apples from the ground, four of them, and put them in my lap, scrunch two handfuls of skirt to hold them there. He's on his haunches, staring at me. Then he lets the apples fall, slowly, not touching

my skirt; they roll in and bump against the others, and for the smallest of moments I watch them. And he's still looking at me.

He's going to ask me if I'm all right, I can feel it coming, but I don't give him the chance. I stand up and fairly fly away across the street to the trap, skirt still hitched up over my dusty black-stockinged knees as I drive off and I don't care. I didn't even thank him. There's no real reason why I should have acknowledged him at all, but by the time I reach the house, I feel more scalded than ever.

'You took your time,' Polly says from the kitchen when I get in. She's the housekeeper, and always rude. That's the way things are here. She's unaware that she's a servant, it seems; unlike our old housie, Hanna — for Mrs Hanrahan — whom I'd always thought to be about as animate as congealing porridge, but now, belatedly, appreciate for that very virtue. In any case, I suppose I have taken my time. Polly wanted the apples two hours ago, for a pie, and I said I'd go, just for something to do, but I went to the post office first — I'm waiting for a copy of *Native Flora and Fauna of New South Wales* I've ordered from Sydney; still not in — and then I took the trap a little way out of town to watch the sunset. At least, not the sun setting, but the way it hits the mountain foothills as it begins to sink: the rocks sticking out of the scrub look like fire trapped in glass, and the scrappy gums almost look graceful, the white patches on their peeling trunks like streams of pearl shell. There's so little else of colour here, except the sky that screams so blue into the valley it hurts sometimes; it's autumn now, but what'll it be like when summer comes? Anyway, I got my tiny glimpse of beauty before I had to turn around and face the town again, with its belching smokestacks like fat cigars, and its hills bald around the edges from all the poison; I only just made it back to the grocers before they closed.

No point in telling any of that to Polly as I tip the apples from my skirt onto her kitchen bench.

'No time to make a pie now,' she says. 'I'll poach them with

brandy instead. It'll have to do. My pastry's gone to waste, mind.'

Tisk, tisk, tisk. Wouldn't matter what I said, she'd heave her great bosom in weary contempt. She came with the house; we're just pesky interlopers to her, my father and I. No doubt she thinks me a brazen little thing, too, wandering about on my own. I have no interest in her opinion; if she thinks I think I'm too good for this place, if she thinks I don't belong here, then she'd be right.

Polly sighs as she inspects the fruit: 'These are bruised.' But I barely hear her. I'm still thinking about that incident with the miner. Or not thinking of him exactly, but me, and why my face is still burning. It's not like me, not like me at all, to blush and flutter like this. I tell Polly I'm not feeling well and I can sense her eyes rolling as she washes the apples, and I'm glad she never seems to look at me. She says, 'There's dust on them too,' with disgust, but I've already left her. I see a faint black smudge on my skirt as I climb the stairs to my room; something else for her to be disgusted with.

Upstairs is some kind of refuge, but there's nothing *mine* about this room. It's just a place where my things are now, since we lost the house in Sydney, almost a month ago, though I'm sure few here in Lithgow know that, apart from my father's partner in the mine, Mr Drummond, who organised this new *place* for us. I don't pretend to know how the world of business works, but if you read the newspapers it appears that Sydney is one big betting ring of booms and busts; everyone's a gambler and a skiter for it. My father especially. He even tried to convince *me* that we were moving over the mountains because the mine needed his full attention for a time. Why, then, were we taking every stick of our furniture with us? I didn't bother asking. I might be somewhat ignorant, but I'm not stupid; and I don't need to rub it in for him. He's busted. Why else would he have sold our home, my beautiful rambling sandstone home, the only home I've ever known, on the water at Rose Bay?

He'd say I shouldn't crinkle my lovely brow with any such

thoughts, but there's not much frowning involved in putting two and two together: he's hung on against some kind of ruin only because of this mine, which is doing very well, he's boasted. But I have to presume he's had to sell off just about everything else to square up his debts, and now here we are, with all our eggs in a coal basket, or whatever you call those little rail trucks that carry the stuff all about. I don't think Father knows anything much of mines or making anything apart from money — he's an investor, someone who puts up the finance for ventures, then takes his portion of the profits. Mr Drummond is the one who actually runs the mine and has for as long as I can remember, so there's no reason for Father to have come here, except that property is cheaper by far, and since the town is growing such apace there's no real shame in being here. Father still gets to strut and tootle around in his motor car and proclaim that Lithgow is the next best thing. *The Birmingham of Australia!* And it is, I suppose, judging from its growling pits and furnaces, factories and mills, turning out everything from iron and copper to chimney pots and tweed, rifles and bricks. And mountains of coal, of course. The whole town is black with it — truly. A grey film lies on every surface.

As much as I loathe this town, at least we're here together, Father and I. He's always good company, when he's about; he's quick to cheer me, mimics Polly's heaving and sighing to perfection, and pours forth his rich raw baritone against clumpy piano when he's had too much drink after dinner, which is most evenings now: 'There once was a boy from Dublin who ...' he begins and makes up a different song every time, sometimes fabulously vulgar, depending on consumption. He's a marvellous disgrace, and bleary or not his eyes sparkle when he looks at me. He is an Irishman, a drunk and a devoted punter, the full cliché, who came here, he tells me often enough, as a boy on a freighter from Dublin, and skipped off in Sydney *town* to make his fortune. What he never talks about is how he made that fortune; I suspect that's probably too vulgar for my ears. And it doesn't really



matter in this country where wealth in itself buys respectability; if gossip is to be believed, then there are plenty here who are coarser than my father, and they are not all Irishmen — or the progeny of felons, as the English like to call us all.

There's another thing we never talk about and that's the future. There's been no mention of beaux or belles or, God forbid, marriage — for him or me. I turned eighteen on Sunday, and Father said to me after dinner, as he does: 'Lord, no, you can't be more than twelve, my girl,' slid his present of a silver filigreed pen across the table and then changed the subject. I do, however, fancy I understand the reason for this. My mother died suddenly in 1901, of influenza, when I was nearly five; three days after Queen Victoria, and I remember thinking all the black armbands were for us. Father still gets tears in his eyes when he speaks of her, his Josie, or when he sings 'My Little Blue-Eyed Nell', and sometimes I know when he is thinking of her; he has a look that pulls at my heart. But my mother is little more to me than a photograph of a pretty woman, the smell of hyacinths and the memory of a soft hand on my plump little cheek; before a lady called Miss Una came to take me up the hill to school, before the tram came and I learned to take myself. I know that's somehow much more a part of why I feel so strange this evening; how could I ever leave Father? But it's ridiculous to imagine I would stay with him forever in this hole in the ground just because I can't bear that heartbroken look of his. It's even more ridiculous to imagine that my present confusion has in any way been provoked by the filthy, nameless miner I stumbled upon in the middle of the road. The problem is, I can't imagine ... anything.

My days were clear in Sydney, calm and contained as the harbour I looked out across every day. I had my garden that tumbled down to the sea, and my painting — watercolours, of animals mostly — to keep me busy. While Father was out, I'd ramble about, catch the tram into town to lose some hours at the David Jones emporium, or go riding out to South Head, or walk



the foreshore near home, most often alone, sometimes accosted for a chat about nothing by Sister Terrence from the convent taking her constitutional. I've never really had any friends to speak of; never made a connection with any of the girls at Our Lady, not a lasting one anyway. I'd sometimes go on picnics and attend parties with the local crowd, naturally, but really I've always preferred my own company, and Father's, or that of a decent, fat novel. Or the water, swimming alone at sunset at the edge of my garden in my little sea pool ... But now I don't even have a garden, just gums towering over a yard of spindly grass in the back and a small spread of mangy flowerbeds and moth-eaten hedge in the front of the most hideous dark-brick monstrosity that was ever built: it looks like a two-storey temperance hall whose grounds have been attended by a wayward member. And as for painting, I've had to resort to ordering *Native Flora and Fauna of New South Wales* for the colour plates as inspiration, since there's little else but ugliness outside my windows here. For the first time ever I am, I think, lonely. That's what's wrong with me, of course; I'm simply burning with resentment and have no one to tell it to.

I'll talk to Father again tonight about the yard; there must be someone in this town who can help me make a garden. Then, in the morning, I'll go to that early Wednesday Mass and talk to Father Hurley about seeing if there's some way I can make myself busy. He seems a pleasant, approachable sort of a man. Perhaps I can teach at the school. Is there even a school? There must be. Regardless, I need to spend less time in contemplation of things I can't change ... and adapt. I've never done a day's work in my life, but perhaps a job is the thing — everyone else here seems to have one. It's a *workers'* town.

The sun has well and truly vanished now, and from the window I can only just make out the lines of cottages dog-tailing beyond Main Street, away from the town, or peppering up the hill towards this house, fuzzy splotches of light here and there. And then my stomach lurches: that miner's eyes loom out at me

from the darkness. He lives out there somewhere; what does he see now? His town. Perhaps he is remembering a strange, rude girl. Why I should care I have no idea, but somehow I do.

I hear the engine of the Austin putter up the drive, the creak and bang of the front door; Father is home. Thank God.

## DANIEL

I've hardly slept. Keep waking up, then waiting for the wake-up whistle, then dozing again. I can hear Mum by the stove, checking our clothes, turning them over. She's washed them all, even though it's only Tuesday, or maybe Wednesday by now. She has to go to Bathurst in the morning and she's not sure when she'll be back; Miriam's expecting another baby and Mum's going to help with the others. Mim's got six already, and getting dippier with each one, is my sister, averaging a kid a year ... fascinating. She's so quiet, Mum, I can barely hear her. She's quiet anyway, in everything she does. Wish my own quietness would shut up.

Stop telling me I don't want to go to work tomorrow, today, again. I keep seeing pit top in my mind, and I just don't want to go in. Everyone flows round me and down, and no one says a thing, not even the ponies. I've not choked, and I'm not worried; I'm just invisible. And I walk away, float away, back into the light.

Anyone'd think I've got a mental problem if they could hear what my mind's like when I'm like this. Yes, I'm so bloody different, aren't I. Remind myself now that I do actually have to go to work tomorrow. And go to bloody sleep.

Can't.

Any more than I can help being ... a bit separate. Why? I don't know: it's obvious one second and nothing the next.

It'd be easy to say it's because I'm German, except I'm not. Just Australian, but not quite. Can you know that sort of thing? I know Dad would disown me if ever I was caught singing God Save The King, but he is German, except he's not. And he'd laugh himself stupid if ever he caught me with a Bible. No fear there. Though having an Almighty to jabber to in the middle of the night might've been handy at the minute. Can't just make one up for yourself, can you. Not when you're a red flagger from nowhere with no idea. No one'd ever rag us for a lack of religion, though, or lack of loyalty ... no one'd ever rag Dad, for anything. Except me, within reason.

He's a legend, is Dad: isn't everyone? More than obvious with him, though, I suppose. According to legend, he came off the boat in 1882, said he wanted the gold mines, but with his bad English and heavy accent and bad timing they told him to go off to Kembla — lots of coal there. He turned up, got a job first day spragging and shovelling shit, and worked out pretty fast that all the gold was black at Kembla. He went to the face quickly and he was champion, one time taking three ton a day for seventeen days straight on his own, including Sundays, unbeatable effort, and not just because you'd get arrested for working Sundays now. He took my eldest brother in with him when he turned thirteen, and in his first week there my brother, he was Daniel too, got his face blown off from left shot and he died where he fell. No one said a word either way, but the firer moved on quietly. Wasn't his fault, apparently; he was working like he had a bee up his arse to keep everyone going. I know there's more to it than that, of course, and half of it is no doubt bullshit, but Dad's not likely to fill me in: he doesn't talk about the past beyond 1894. Ever. And I wouldn't dare ask Mum about it. Jesus.

Can't fail to know that that was the year I was born, a few weeks after the first Daniel copped it, and that eight years later, after Kembla blew out, killing nearly a hundred, my father moved us on too. Here, to Lithgow, since there was an amalgamation of the mines and a stronger labour movement to match

it. Joke. A union of capitalists talks louder than a miners' federation, does it? Pull the other one. The other mines here are mostly all tied up together with local iron, steel and copper, or swapping grades with Sydney and Newcastle, and the owners are all mates, with government mates, setting prices and gipping the workers; but pretty much all we do is feed the railways with clean black bituminous coal and aren't amalgamated or associated with anything much other than steady government contracts, and we get gipped just the same.

Things are just as good or bad, wherever you are, but in all this time no one's been blown up here, not at Wattle Dell at least. Dad doesn't say anything about it, but he's more responsible than anyone else for how few serious accidents we've had. He's been there since just after it opened, and he's been doing the bastard fixing ever since: blowing and stabilising the worst spots, as necessary, or as others won't touch them; and it's him others go to on questions of stability, more than manager or deputy. We've also got compulsory safety lamps because of Dad; another chapter in the legend: four years ago he raised half the money passing round the hat and then went and had a quiet word with the boss, Drummond; no one seems to know what was said, but it was obviously very effective. I asked him about it once and he only said: 'Some things are no one else's business.' End of story. Typical. But if Dad catches you with your lamp open in-pit, he'll give you a mouthful.

And I should remember to be grateful. I am too. By comparison, we're well off because of Dad: he gets paid a quarterly extra for the time out with the fixing, and so do I, since that's what I do now too, when we're not just hewing, and even when we are just hewing, as we are at the moment, we earn above maximum. Always together, and always on day shift, special privilege of always reliable father and son, there's no competition for our hauls at the Wattle and no financial concern in our house. Unlike others who only make enough to live on, and even then miners are better paid than most other workers, before expenses

and contributions and lay-offs anyway. It's enough to turn you red, what others have to put up with.

But Dad's not a fist thumper and neither am I. We keep well out of trouble. He keeps the records for our meetings, keeps a note of everything, he's that meticulous about it, about everything he does, and staunch for the union, obviously, everyone of all persuasions is, but I think he takes most of his fight to the coal; lays in like he'd rather kill it than hew it. He says to me, 'Where would I be if I lost my temper one day? In prison, that's where.' They say you've got to watch the quiet ones.

Like me, driving myself round the bend turning all this over now. Looking for sense where there is none.

Avoiding thinking about what's really cut me. Dad's dusted. He's started coughing it up, a lot now; had the wheeze for I don't know how long; still ignoring it. And he'll push on, as he'll expect me to, even when he can't ignore it any more. I'd like to think this is stupid, to tell him to stop, but you don't tell my father anything, and if he's going to die, then he'll want to be earning up till the day he does. He's never seen a doctor in his life, and he's not about to start; unlike me: I average a trip to the hospital once a year for some little thing or other. When I burned myself again last year, Dad said to me: 'If that quack could fix your clumsy head, he'd go broke.' Nothing the doctor could do for Dad, though, even if he got seen to. Of course I'll keep on, look after Mum. Worry about financial concerns when I'm looking at them.

And I'm the only one who will be looking at them, since my other brother, Pete, took off four years ago, to Newcastle. Twenty-five and he'd had enough; talked his way into a job on the docks doing bugger all, directing traffic; he writes to Mum now and again, says he doesn't miss Lithgow winters. Dad doesn't say anything, never mentions him, and wouldn't go up to Newcastle even when Pete got married last year. I can understand, sort of. As much as I've been thinking I'd rather never go in again, I could never walk away like that. There's too much of me here. Don't have

to think too hard about it: I can still see Jimmy Skelton too clearly, same age as me, on our first year in, caught by a runaway skip and cut almost in half. I had to run on to his family, because I knew his mum well, to tell her before they brought his body home; his father was a wreck; died the year after from the shock of it, they reckon. That's a lot to walk away from, just there. Not to mention letting Dad down; I'd never do that.

But I also don't have to think too hard to remember that Mum didn't want me to go in in the first place. She argued with Dad, the only time I can remember them arguing, the day I came home from school and said I'd go in with Dad, as the other boys from school were going in with theirs. He came back at her in German, which he never speaks unless he's really shitted-off, and he'd have been thinking I wasn't following the conversation through the bedroom wall. But I was. Thanks to Mum who, up until that day, had taken a particular interest in my education. Always making me read, despite the fact that I've always hated it; asking me about school all the time, which I hated even more, because I've never been the best at sitting still doing bugger all; and teaching me German, talking to me in German every day after school, on the sly from Dad. I don't know, I'm the youngest by a long way, and I suppose Mum had time to put the effort in. She speaks French as well, and reads like it's going out of fashion, and when I was younger I was impressed by it, but by the time I'd made the decision to go with Dad, I'd dropped the Deutsch. It seemed disrespectful to keep going with something he disapproved of — 'This is Australia — speak English, not that ugly rubbish,' he'd say whenever she'd let it slip in front of him — so I stopped listening, and Mum stopped bothering. Still, I have to call Dad *Vati* on occasion, because, well, he does love his cabbage. Anyway, what else would I have done with myself? Miners can earn more than government schoolteachers and there wasn't much alternative. Getting fried alive at the furnaces? Good money, and it'd want to be; same difference as mining. Be a plumber



and deal in shit all day? Or some other idiot trade job trying forever to edge into the middle class? Like my brother-in-law. No thanks. So I went in. I read *Australian Worker* and *Radical* and that new dippy one, *Direct Action*, while we're all waiting for the socialist revolution; that'll do. How's that for a desperate shot at justification?

Don't think Mum would buy it. She never makes a disappointment known; not to me anyway. But somehow I can hear it now, in the way she's turning our clothes again. There are secrets in her that are not legends and maybe I want to live long enough to catch wind of them.

Maybe I should hit myself over the head with something to shut off this rubbish.

My head is like stew. And now here comes Francine Connolly, making her hundredth appearance, scrabbling for her apples in the street, not looking at me while I help her pick them up.

I've seen her once before in town, and Evan Lewis, who's Dad's best mate and our representative to the union, and whose socialism is matched only by his Methodism, saw me looking and said she was one of the owners' daughters. I put her out of my head then. It's not that hard to be a stand-out in this town full of so many men, and married women, but even with her red hair falling out of the coil under her hat as she walked up Main Street, her pretty body hugged by that slim grey skirt, I looked away again. She's an owner's daughter. And probably only here for a spell, and certainly out of bounds. But when I saw her again today, yesterday, when I picked up the apples, she made me feel a bit worse than invisible. Sure, I did just want to get a closer look, but I thought I was being polite about it. For me; I'm not usually known for my politeness. She looked at me like I was some kind of an animal, and ran away from me. I don't know why I did it. Maybe just for lack of stand-outs. I hardly ever go into town looking like that; I only wanted to ride in quickly to pick up some linseed oil before the co-op closed. But what difference should it make? I'm a fucking miner. That's

what I look like after work, and I'm not on my own there: there's a couple of thousand of us round about the place.

Forget it, for the hundredth time. She's bourgeois rubbish. What else did I expect?

The whistle sails across the valley, and I get out of bed like my legs know what they are doing before I think it. I look out the window into the blackness and the tree next to the house lights up in a cloud break. It's an apple tree, standing there like a ghost looking at me. No fruit on it.

I hear the pan hit the stove as Mum starts breakfast. I hear Dad yawn, cough and scratch his head in the next room. I open the window and piss on the tree and already it's just another day.

## FRANCINE

For the third morning in a row I've been woken by the kookaburras. It's hard to believe they don't do that deliberately. At Rose Bay they were so bold that they'd sit on the balcony rail and look at me; they'd say, *It wasn't me laughing*, unconvincingly. Then, just to rub it in, one of them would dive headlong into the garden below, as if in fright, only to reappear with a lizard in its beak. I look into the tired old gums of now, drearier for the hazy dawn. I haven't seen a single one of those puffy-chested, cheeky birds here, though I can hear them loud and clear; perhaps Lithgow kookaburras mock by stealth. Oh, stop it, Francie. I break my resolutions against negativity so easily.

I should be pleased. Father said last night that he'd already approached someone to help me with the garden design and choosing the plants. Some friend of Mr Drummond's knows some fellow in Bathurst, and he'll be coming on Friday on his way through to Sydney to have a look at the yard. Father seemed very chipper himself, too, said that the mine would turn a healthy profit this quarter and there was more to come; whatever that means. Always good news he gives me. Still, when I went down to meet him in the parlour last night I could smell the sharp whisky sourness on his breath already. Not like him to drink spirits before the sun goes down; he's always been strict about that, if nothing else. Perhaps he'd been celebrating impending healthy profit with Mr Drummond.

I wash and dress, shifting flowerbeds and feature trees around in my head and, downstairs, gulp a glass of water in the empty kitchen. I'm sure it tastes of coaldust, but I tell myself instead how pleasant the kitchen is at this hour of the morning — with no Polly in it. She's still asleep, not to be woken before seven o'clock, *thank you*, and she'll have done breakfast by the time I get back from Mass, so I can fix myself something to eat then, when she'll be out the back doing the washing.

Hayseed, my new little chestnut pony, greets me with a snort and a nod outside his stall in the rear of the yard, and the ancient McNally, who looks after him and other odds and sods — and also seems to have come with the house — has already got him ready with the trap, as I told him to yesterday. No sign of Cranky McNally, though; lucky day!

He's a dear pony, Hayseed, most delightful being I've met so far. He snorts again as I climb up, and we set off down the hill towards the town.

Already the place is alive with bustle and the sun is barely risen; I can feel it seething as we come closer, carts and traps and bicycles and working men, feel it all press in upon me along Main Street, and I rush too, turning off and up again to the church, as if I don't have all the time in the world to get there.

Inside, it is still, and the cool old bricks smell fresh, like river pebbles steaming rain. Cross myself, genuflect, I can hear myself breathe. There's hardly anyone here. Just a few old women and some working types scattered amid the pews. Father Hurley has put on this extra midweek Mass for Lent, so says his yellowing notice pinned on a little board inside the door; clearly the enthusiastic response has caused him to extend it well beyond the season of sacrifice. Not many have chosen to extend themselves this morning.

I go through the motions, let the Latin wash over me. *In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti*, burble, burble, burble ... I've never listened at Mass, but I am bound to the ritual of it. It's dreamlike, removed, and induces me to meditate upon

higher thoughts; I always feel cleansed afterwards, and always feel compelled to return, as if prayers are more significant here. Father Hurley's voice is wondrously dull and does the job. He looks like a dirt farmer from one of those *Bulletin* sketches with his thin, lined face and pale eyes tired from squinting eternally in a paddock in the middle of nowhere, mourning for his drought-stricken flock. I'm thinking about my attitude, which is my higher thought for the day, and how I shall improve it and impress upon Father Hurley that I am indeed keen to find a purpose here, so he will provide an interesting suggestion for me.

Father Hurley wearies himself and it's all over remarkably quickly. I've barely crossed myself before I'm down the aisle to accost him before he leaves for the vestry. 'Ahem.'

He turns around, peering through the motes.

'I was wondering, Father, if I might have a quick word with you, if you've a moment?'

His squint opens a little with a slim but kindly smile. 'Ah, Miss Francine Connolly,' he says, emphasising the *Francine*, I imagine, to remind me of my saint, my best intentions, and the fact that I haven't been to confession since I arrived in this town and am therefore not entitled to sacraments of any sort. 'Yes, of course. Tell me, how is your father? We didn't see him on Sunday.'

'No, that's right. He was unwell,' I say, with one part gravity to six parts mortally coy. My father's attendance at Mass is ever sporadic to say the least; he only went the week we first arrived because I badgered him. 'How odd will it look, me turning up alone and introducing myself?' I'd snipped at him and he'd indulged me.

A look of concern from the priest: 'Is he recovered?'

'Oh, yes. He's very well now, thank you. In fact, he's sent me here to ask you if you might suggest some sort of work for me, to keep me from idleness,' I fib, having decided during my meditation to give my enquiry more weight this way. Father's not the slightest bit interested in what I do all day when he's out.

Father Hurley's pale slots brighten; he thinks for a moment and then says: 'What sort of work do you think might suit you, lass?'

'I thought perhaps teaching? Is there a school where I might be useful? I especially love the little ones.' That's true enough: very little ones are the only little ones I might abide; most children are ratty or dimmed above the age of five, I suppose because that age is the threshold for strapping and rote. Oh, but little ones smell of all sorts of foul and mysterious things, don't they. At this point I have to admit to myself that this is a lost cause; despite my prayers, I don't really want to do this sort of work at all, noxious odours, preparing youngsters to have their spirits broken. Much as I owe the convent sisters for my education, they beat something out of me, or into me. I'm not sure which.

'There are a few schools here,' he says, looking at me thoughtfully again. 'But none that I know of that require a new teacher. I shall enquire for you, if you like.'

I'm about to say, *Don't go to any particular trouble on my behalf*, when he adds: 'They do need a nurse at the hospital, though, quite urgently, I hear. Mrs Moran, the matron there, is stretched to her limit. Do you have any experience at that?'

I am horrified, couldn't think of anything more hideous than tending the sick. I say, ruefully: 'No, none at all. I think I'd be all fumbles with that.'

He smiles his kindly smile again, knowing, I'm sure. What a silly, spoiled girl I am. I thank him after he says he'll have a further think on it, and I leave for the post office, perhaps my book will be in this morning. I shall go back to pretending that I can be an artist instead, fill my days communing with the sublime in order to create ... what a load of old rot.

'No, it's not in,' Mr Symes, the postmaster, grunts without looking for my package from Angus & Robertson; I am becoming a pest. But he adds, for my crestfallen face: 'Why don't you call in at the bookshop, they might have something for you instead, while you're waiting? Or the library?'

They have a bookshop here? And a library? Well, that's something. But I'm too glum to ask him where they are, and embarrassed, yet again. I nod a thanks and slink away back to Hayseed tethered to the verandah pole outside. As I climb into the trap my eyes wander along the railway tracks to the buildings backing off Main Street — and fall directly on the bookshop just down from the bakers. I must have passed the front of it at least half-a-dozen times. Why didn't I see it? Then, within a blink, I see a flicker of red apples rolling through tawny-grey dust. My cheeks are burning again and my heart is hammering all of a sudden. I grab at the reins and thwack them, swimmy-headed and the blue light blinding me as we move out from the shade. What on earth is wrong with me?



## DANIEL

Dad's always that careful, I can't help ragging him for it, but I don't this morning. Too busy yawning. I watch the way he smells the air as we come back round after firing, then he listens as he's tapping everywhere above the fall with his pick, like he's talking to God, as if, before laying in. There is a point to it here, though, round this blind pinch in section three; we've cavilled that for this quarter and the place is full of bumps and low-roofed with cranky shit shale — I've got a ridge of scrapes down my back to prove it. I'm way too big for this sort of thing, they should make it Taff-only work; I didn't mean that. The rock above us groans softly, and we wait a little longer: tap, tap, tap. It settles and Dad says: 'Yep.'

I'm fighting my pick before I lift it, and already thinking about crib break, already blinking. Next time I have trouble sleeping I will hit myself over the head. The light's streaking in my eyes like there's water running down the face, and I'm boiling after five minutes. It's always hot of course, but it's too hot too quickly. It feels like there's a fire above us, gusting down. I take off my shirt, but it doesn't make any difference.

I'm turning around to look at the brattice cloth, back towards the fan shaft, to see if the ventilation's right or if we are on fire, when it bumps again, very loud this time, with an unscheduled spill of rock somewhere, and we stop. Even the rats stop. There's dead silence; we've all heard it. And we all wait.

I hear Robby Cullen say, 'Jesus Christ' and hoick from the next stall up. This section is so slow in parts he hasn't met his present darg of two ton a day for a few weeks, and it doesn't help that it takes the ponies ten years to get down here to collect. His wife is having her second one already and he's feeling the pressure. Stupid bugger, shouldn't have got married so young. He's only a year older than me.

Then it comes again, and somehow I know this time it's going to come down in a big way. I see myself at pit top, going in. And everything speeds up, I'm flying down the drift to the face. Here I am. And now I'm not. I've dropped the pick and I'm running back. Not panicking. Just running, as if I can outrun whatever the roof has in mind.

'Move!' That's Dad, behind me, with a shove: '*Achtung!*' Don't worry, I'm fucking moving.

It keeps coming and the sound is everywhere. I look over my shoulder and it's just black, and dust flying towards me like a fist. I keep running, and even as I'm running I'm thinking this is no good, I can hardly see a thing, but I keep going. Then something catches me on the back of my leg and I'm flat out, winded, and I definitely can't see a thing. And I reckon it's all over. I'm waiting for the rest to hit me.

I lie with my face on the floor and I think I can't breathe for a second but I am breathing and I must have moved because I feel the roughness against the side of my face. And it's warm. Just warm. I hear the trapper above, it's Billy, with his high voice, calling down something, and then it's all quiet again.

I wait.

A light swings through the dust way ahead with footsteps. 'Jesus fucking Christ!' That's Robby, loud and to my right; I can hear him frigging around for his lamp, and I try to get up now, but I can't. When I try to push up against the floor, pain rips through me like you wouldn't believe. I must have made that plain because Robby says: 'Hang on, mate.' I can't see him but he's right near me now. I'm staring up at the light ahead and the

footsteps coming closer and I'm wanting it to be Dad but I know it's not. He's behind me, where's it's come down. I close my eyes, I can hear the others now, I don't want to know.

There's a hand on my shoulder and it's Evan, Evan Lewis saying, quiet and steady: 'Who's here, then?' And Robby says: 'Just us so far, this way.'

I can't say anything. The weight is lifted off the back of my leg and it wasn't much after all, only a prop; probably one I laid up: I hear it thud next to me. The four whistles blow for evacuation; says it all.

Hands slide under me, one two three, and I bite down against it this time as they lift me onto the stretcher that stinks of iodine; it's so old it's a wonder it holds the weight of me. I keep my eyes closed, I don't want to know. I wonder if Mim's had the baby yet. I panic for a minute thinking Mum's not at home, and then I'm thankful she's not. Evan says, 'Easy!' and I'm out to it then. Won't be riding my bike home today.

I'm in and out, not thinking, but every step they take up that drift is branded into me. It takes ages and it doesn't take long enough and on reflex I open my eyes when we come out and they put me on the ground, but I can't see anything through the brightness anyway.

Evan's saying something next to me, but I don't catch it; everyone's out and milling around, wondering what's going on, wondering in the back of their minds whether they'll get back in today, though no one would ever say that. When I focus there's a man looking at me I think I've seen once or twice before, and he pats me on the chest. Who the fuck is he?

Evan says across me: 'Well, that's very good of you. All right, then.' And then he says to me: 'Well, up with you then, boyo.' I'd rather stay here, thank you.

My head's spinning right off as they get me up and onto the back seat of this new beaut motor car. Light blue panels, black leather: very flash; in any other circumstances I might be

impressed by the service. I know every pothole in the road up to the hospital too by the time we get there.

Must have known I was coming because there's Mrs Moran shoving a brandy at me. I push it away — can't stand the taste let alone the smell of grog — and she says to me: 'Drink it, Danny. Be a good lad, and I'll knock you out in a minute. The brandy won't kill you but what's coming might.' I drink it, and she strips me and washes me down. It hurts to buggery but somewhere I'm grateful to feel in my skin again. Till Nichols, the doctor, gets started prodding; he says it's not too bad by the looks of it, though, not too much bleeding inside. 'X-ray will confirm it.' X-ray does, apparently, and in any other circumstances I might be impressed by that machine too.

'Hold on, Danny,' Nichols says as he goes round to my feet. I look down at my left leg, doesn't look like there's anything wrong with it to me, but I start feeling it worse before he has a proper go at it, and I can say that the brandy does not help.

Now Mrs Moran knocks me out. Thank Christ. When I come back round and it's all over I don't argue about more brandy. A lot more. There are tears in my eyes now, and they are not all for me. There's someone yelling over the other side of the room; I can't see him and hope it might be Dad. Know it's not. Dad wouldn't carry on like that.

## FRANCINE

So, I've tried to sketch a kookaburra from memory today — it looks like a duck — and I've paced around the garden imagining it till it bored me witless. At least I've calmed down now. Halfway home this morning, my heart still battering like a bird hitting a window, one of those work whistles started blowing shrill above the incessant crunch-crash din of the place and I just about jumped out of my skin. As if it were demanding, *What are you doing, Miss Connolly!* before setting off a chorus of every like whistle across the entire valley. This place is conspiring against me.

Good God, I even contemplated looking for my old needlework, which I haven't touched for at least a year — a twee thing of violets and lobelia I had planned to place under glass on my dressing table before the tedium set in: didn't get halfway round the border. It's here somewhere, in one of the packing cases in the spare room. Leave it there. I had a long, hot, drowsy bath instead. I suppose I could have done a little more unpacking to wile away some time, but I can't face it. Really. I'm turning into one of those girls I've always despised; next I'll be peering into the mirror worrying about the fashion of my hairstyle and reading cheap romances to assuage the meaninglessness of my existence.

That's it, I'm going out. I'm not the best at landscapes, but I'll go and have a shot at the hillsides out of town, wait for the

sun to come around. I gather up my sketchbook and pencil box and I'm heading for the stairs when I hear the Austin pull up. Father's home, from whatever he's fortunate enough to have been doing out there all day.

'Francy!' he's calling as his head appears around the front door, waving at me to come down, before disappearing outside again. He's in a terrible excitement.

'What's happened?' I say, following him out, and I can smell the whisky lingering around the doorway. Oh dear.

Oh dear indeed. There's an unconscious man in the back of the vehicle; he's covered in a blanket and there's a graze on his cheek, and I think the worst. Father's run someone down. Well.

'I'll explain in a minute. Stay here while I get McNally to help me,' he says, already striding down the side of the house. Help you do what?

I step closer to the Austin and look at the fellow. His head is lying back on the folded canopy and he's frowning; he winces, then sighs. He's wearing pyjamas and there's a cast on one of his legs sticking out from under the blanket and shoved up diagonally against the front seat. He looks extremely uncomfortable, and quite young too. This is not quite real. I'm still holding my book and pencil box and have a strange compulsion to sketch him.

'Go up and turn down the bed in the spare room, will you, Francy?' Father says behind me, McNally lumping crankily along with him.

'Shouldn't he be in a hospital?' I say; he surely shouldn't be here, should he?

'No,' says Father, quite sharply, and that jolts.

So I go back inside the house and Polly meets me in the hall saying: 'What's all this fuss?'

I shrug, casually, and say as I walk past her: 'We have a visitor, apparently.' My grasping for a small moment of condescension overriding my sense: I should have told her to go upstairs and turn down the bed. No, I should have asked her to help me.

I am a first-class fool: there is no bed to turn down. Well, the bed is there but it's not made up. I have never moved so fast in my life. It's a sloppy job, in accordance with my inexperience and haste, but I don't imagine our guest will care. I can hear them awkward and heaving on the stairs. I push the higgledy-piggledy cases into some order against the wall and feel like saluting. Five minutes ago I was wondering what to do. Asketh and the Lord shall provide.

Father looks as if his face is about to explode as he and McNally come in. Our visitor dwarfs his bearers ridiculously; I can't believe they made it up the stairs. Father looks at me urgently and I take the poor man's feet, trying to be gentle against the weight, and help heft him onto the bed. The man lets out a pitiful groan but he doesn't rouse. I look at my father, my eyebrows fairly off my face. He cocks his head; he'll speak to me outside. I look back at the man as I turn to leave and realise we've just left him sprawled there, with his feet off the end of the bed. Nothing I can do about the length of the bed, but I pull the covers up over him, and follow Father out of the room.

*What?* my eyes are saying to him; he's still catching his breath.

Then he runs a hand through what's left of his hair and he says: 'Oh, Francy.'

My eyes are still asking but I'm waiting for him to tell me that he ran the man over.

Instead he says: 'There was a terrible accident at the Wattle today, a cave-in. Three men killed. One of them this lad's father.'

That is unspeakably awful, but I still don't understand what he's doing here in our house. He's a *miner*.

'And his mother's out of town,' Father adds, shaking his head, but that's not an answer.

'Shouldn't he be in hospital?' I repeat, with some proper compassion this time.

'No. There's a man they've got in there with gallstones, moaning to wake the devil. And that Doctor Nichols said the



lad'll be all right; just groggy from too much brandy — he passed out on the way here. Needs a comfortable bed, that's all. When I realised he had no one at home, I said we'd take him, till his mother comes — just overnight possibly. It seemed the very least ...' He grabs at the top of the balustrade as if off balance.

'Are *you* all right?' I ask. He looks ill himself, face pale now, and tired.

'Yes,' he bellows, summoning a grin at my concern and heading down the stairs with the spring back in his step. 'Nothing a malt won't fix.'

I follow him down, wondering why it is he feels so personally responsible. I'm sure Father doesn't know a jot about this mine of his, and a sense of responsibility is not generally known to be a high point in his repertoire.

But I don't get a chance to ask any more questions before Mr Drummond clumps through the open front door.

'Francine,' he says, taking off his hat as he sees me at the bottom of the stairs.

'I'm so sorry to hear about the accident,' I say to him above my own confusion.

He nods very gravely in my direction but he's looking at Father. 'I need to have a word, Frank,' he says and, although Mr Drummond has never displayed too much good humour at the best of times, he appears positively grim now.

Father nods in return and they head without further word for the parlour. The door closes with a soft click behind them. I have never eavesdropped in my life — I'm confident that the majority of closed-door conversations between Father and his associates would not be worth the bother — but, naturally, I can't help myself now. I slip over to the parlour door and press my ear to the wood.

I don't hear anything at first since Polly heaves down the hall behind me and shuts the front door with a forcible sigh. She stops as she turns back, and stares at me, but I have no shame; I wave her away with a scowl.

The first thing I do hear is Mr Drummond saying: 'You've no business taking this sort of thing into your own hands. You're a bloody liability!' I couldn't fail to hear it, since he's not making much effort to keep his voice down or hold off the expletives.

I can't make out what Father says in reply but there's a dismissive quality to it, followed by the stopper plipping out of the decanter, then Mr Drummond says: 'What message does that send the men, you strolling in here and promising Lewis such terms? Every bloody industrialist in this country would think you a fool — a dangerous one. You've got no bloody idea!'

'What difference will it make to the company ledger?' Father says and I can hear a scoff in his tone. 'They are my profits too — I can do what I like with my bit.'

'The difference is that it won't stop at compensation, Frank. Give them an inch on this issue and we'll never hear the end of it. The union could well use this as a precedent and run with it.'

'And they'll hit a brick wall, won't they, in you and every bloody industrialist in the country. But three men died today, in *our* mine, that's all that concerns me. And their three widows. The piddling payout from their own fund won't amount to enough for those families to live on beyond a few months. The lad upstairs will be off for weeks — is it his fault he won't be able to work?'

'It's not ours either. This was an accident, pure and simple — as the enquiry will show. We're not culpable for something so completely unpreventable. As *that lad's* father would have known: he was one of our most valuable workers; where's our compensation for losing him? This is not a charity. You can't act on your emotions here.'

'I've never acted any other way, John,' Father laughs, then cuts it off. 'I'm going to make them a reasonable offer and be done with it.'

'Why?' There's genuine bewilderment from Mr Drummond now. 'This is madness. You've never shown the slightest interest in ten years and now ...?'

‘And now I am. Look, John ...’ and it goes to mumbles now. Mr Drummond says, ‘Oh,’ a soft blow. Father laughs again, more mumbles. Mr Drummond says: ‘All right, but make certain it’s unofficial — just between you and them, and don’t involve Lewis. Keep the union out of it. I still think you’re mad, though.’ He no longer sounds angry, just resigned.

‘Done,’ Father says cheerfully. ‘And I’m going to build a lavatory as well, if it’s the last thing I do!’

‘They won’t thank you for it,’ Mr Drummond adds, ‘if that’s why you’re doing it. Believe me.’

‘Oh no, it’s far more indulgent than that.’ Father’s moving towards the door. ‘Stay for dinner?’

I scurry to the stairs and bound nearly to the top before they come out.

‘I think I’ve had enough excitement for today,’ Mr Drummond says; he’s so terribly dour; Catholic like us, but from Yorkshire. He adds: ‘And so have you. I’ll see you tomorrow.’ And he’s gone.

Well. That all says a lot and a little. Father’s had some kind of epiphany by the sounds of it and appointed himself philanthropist, which is at once as baffling as it seems fabulously noble, but that soft ‘Oh’ echoes. I shall make a big deal of his kindness at dinner tonight, since it is evidently so important to him, whatever the reason. I frown; can’t put two and two together with this lot.

I look across the landing into the open doorway of the spare room and another whisper slips through me. I can see through to the window, and see myself sitting on a rock futilely trying to capture the sun on the hills with a piece of charcoal. That’s where I’d be right now. While this man in the bed ... I can’t begin to think. I don’t even know his name.

## AUTHOR NOTE

*Black Diamonds* is fiction, a ballad of two spirits inspired by history, but not confined to it. In order to sing it freely, I invented Wattle Dell, and my omission of any reference to specific units or regiments in the AIF is deliberate. I made these decisions not only for freedom to tell the tale, but out of respect for the memories of those whose true stories ignited my imagination, including those of my forebears, both German and Irish.

This story is my celebration of my funny, beautiful country, with its quirks, imperfections and mistakes as I interpret them, and its deepest truth is its allegory, its love song for my own darlings, in my own sometimes fractured fairytale.

Originally published in 2007, I will always be grateful to Linda Funnell, who first brought these pages into print; thanks, too, must go to the editors of that edition, Julia Stiles and Jo Butler. To my friend and publishing colleague, Jody Lee, who gave me the good oil on my very first draft of this novel, 'thanks' is just not an adequate word. Gratitude, too, to Dr Christine Winter for helping me sort my German all those years ago. To my publishers at Booktopia, David Henley and Franscois McHardy, thank you for this beautiful new edition. And as always, my muse de bloke, my husband and best mate, Dean Brownlee: none of this is possible without you.

But this novel belongs most of all to the town of Lithgow, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Mountains: the place where

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'This is the story of a love greatly tested  
and of the resilience of ordinary Australians  
sucked into a pointless war by propaganda.  
It's enough to turn you into a war protester.'

– *Australian Women's Weekly*

It's 1914 and the coal town of Lithgow is booming.  
Daniel Ackerman is a serious young man, a miner, a  
socialist and German; Francine Connolly is the bourgeois,  
Irish-Catholic, too-good-for-this-place daughter of one of the  
mine owners. When a tragic accident forces them together,  
this class-crossed pair fall in love despite themselves.

Before the signatures on their marriage certificate are dry,  
though, war erupts, and a much more terrifying obstacle  
confronts them. Against his principles but driven by a  
sense of solidarity, Daniel enlists; Francine, horrified,  
has no choice but to watch him go.

Thrown into a daunting new world of separation and grief,  
they learn things about each other they might never have  
known in more certain times - hard lessons about heroism,  
sacrifice, and the thin line between bravery and stupidity.

Told with freshness, verve and wit, *Black Diamonds* is the tale  
of a fierce young nation, Australia, and two fierce hearts who  
dare to discover what courage really means.



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