

A  
WOMAN'S  
PLACE

LAINIE JONES

# PROLOGUE

Moonlight followed her uneasily, silvering her naked skin and scattering diamonds on the python spiralling around her torso. She stepped into the clearing and the chattering of night-things fell silent as she began to dance, her broad feet making patterns in the moist grass. The trees sighed, watching and waiting until she left the moonlight and joined them in the shadows they held beneath their limbs.

Pain scored her flesh. Sorrow swam in her eyes.

And her anger roared through the night.

*I sang to show them the way. I eased their hunger with the fruits of my body and gave them riches beyond their dreams, but it was not enough.*

*It was never enough.*

*They swept over me like a river in flood, stealing and murdering, raping and destroying, changing my stories to fit their own, wrapping their dirty secrets in lies and laughter, and songs from far off lands.*

*Their hard-footed creatures cut deep my skin, marking me as property of the pale ones, though fire and flood, drought and mud, told them countless times that I belong to none.*

*They crossed boundaries they were too blind to see. They ignored those they exiled and starved. They spared not a thought for the anguish they left behind.*

*I gave them my body, but they demanded my soul.*

*No more.*

*I shall reclaim what is mine and their children, and their children's children, will reap the bitter harvest.*

# JULIA

A niggling unease hits me the minute my brother drives off in our hire car, a prickle of anxiety that makes no sense because I'm actually glad he's leaving. 'Of course I won't need the car,' I'd told him. 'You'll be back before I notice you're gone.' But as I watch the red Jeep vanish in a cloud of dust, reality hits home; I am now alone at the back end of nowhere, without transport or electricity.



We'd come to Barragunyah to scatter our grandmother's ashes on the earth she loved, and to sort through her things before putting the property on the market. We'd allowed ourselves only a week and I had hoped to use this rare time together to talk about Gran, to reflect on her life and what she meant to us. But Peter has no patience for sentimentality; for him it's all about the money.

It was money that triggered his sudden departure. One phone call from his business partner about some unexpected financial crisis and he was packing his bag. It was as if he'd been looking for an excuse to leave, and I wondered if Barragunyah had been up to her old tricks again. I said nothing, of course; some questions are best avoided.

Following him outside as he headed for the car, I suggested he phone the airport first, to check if a pilot was available. He shot me a scathing look, so I let it pass. He might be used to dashing around the country in chartered planes, but if he intended to call from the

car, he'd clearly forgotten about all the random black spots around here. His problem, though, not mine.

Peter and I have never really got along. Because he was faster, stronger, and smarter than me when he was nine and I was three, he thinks his superiority is set in stone. In his eyes, my PhD in History runs a poor second to his Bachelor of Commerce degree; after all, commerce deals with the institutions that run the planet. History is just old news.

Like Gran's life.

We'd set aside our differences while we made the funeral arrangements, but our tenuous cordiality came undone when the will was read. Gran had left Barragunyah to me and her financial investments to Peter — which was fine by both of us until the solicitor explained that nursing costs and falling interest rates had whittled away most of her money. Unsurprisingly, Peter demanded a half-share of the property. I knew why Gran wanted Barragunyah to be mine, but it was hard to explain without sounding crazy, so after a half-hearted protest I agreed to the split. To be honest, at the back of my mind was the hope that sharing might offload some of the guilt I felt about selling a property that's been in the family for five generations.

But I should have known Peter's involvement meant Peter's agenda—which was to junk everything and get rid of the place as soon as possible. We'd sniped at each other over one thing or another from the moment we arrived at Barragunyah. It had not been fun.

But now he's gone and I'm blissfully alone. *Totally alone*, a voice in my head whispers, sending a shiver through my bones. I rub my arms, tell myself I'm being ridiculous, and go inside to put the kettle on. While I wait for it to boil, I give Peter's long to-do list a glance before tossing it in the wastebasket beside the stove. I have my own ideas about what to *prioritise*, but all I want right now is to sit on the veranda and enjoy the late afternoon peace, as Gran and

I had done so often in happier days.

I sit on the steps with the old rose-patterned china teapot beside me, sipping from Gran's favourite bone china cup until the sun vanishes behind the distant hills and a damp, swirling mist creeps in. When the chill gets the better of me, I go inside to light the fire. Without Peter around, the silence is so deep I can hear the hiss of the flames and the sharp, popping sounds of the wood as it catches. In the distance, the lugubrious howl of a dingo reminds me of all the empty space between Barragunyah and its nearest neighbour and I feel a rush of gratitude for the fire, not only for its warmth against the chill that seeps beneath the doors and through cracks in the old weatherboards, but for its cheerful light.

The electricity was disconnected a few years ago, so the fire and candles are all the light I have. I watch the shadows dance among the cobwebs on the high ceilings and try to imagine what the house was like when my ancestors lived here. Did the rooms buzz with visitors, ring with the laughter of children? My memory gropes for Gran's stories about those early days and I realise that most of her tales were of farming — of the Black Angus cattle she loved, of work dogs and horses and fencing and planting, as if the house itself was an insubstantial thing superimposed upon the land.

It was a large property back then. Over the years, for one reason or another, parcels of land were sold to neighbouring farms; and while barely a hundred acres now, the homestead is still quite isolated. Apart from the property agent who checks on things once a year, Peter and I were probably the first to drive down the corrugated, potholed track in years.

When we called in to see the agent after collecting our hire car at Lurradallan Airport, he'd warned us Barragunyah was run down. Even so, I was totally unprepared for the air of abandonment and melancholy that overlay everything — the fences with rotting posts and rusted barbed wire, the brown and barren paddocks, the

wooded gullies, where I used to ride my pony, choked with weeds and pocked with rabbit holes. The house, once a grand country homestead, brought me to tears when I saw its weatherboards bare of paint, and unsightly patches of rust on the iron roof. Even the lovingly tended garden I remembered was an overgrown wilderness. I was devastated to see the place so neglected. Peter was just angry Gran hadn't sold sooner, when it would have fetched a better price.

As if anything to do with Barragunyah could be that simple.

It was the agent who'd reminded us there was no electricity. He also told us the nights had been extremely cold and suggested we buy heavy-duty sleeping bags when we picked up supplies in Darrobin. In the end, we bought more than we'd intended; the sleeping bags, a couple of torches with long-life batteries, an impressive range of food that didn't need refrigerating, and a ridiculous number of candles.

The candles were Peter's idea. He'd only stayed at Barragunyah a few times as a kid, but said he still remembered how the absolute darkness of the countryside used to spook him. I hid a smile, wondering if it was the dark that had unnerved him or something else.

Barragunyah can be mean if she doesn't like you.

The house has an old Aga, a wood-fired combustion stove, but we didn't know if there'd be any firewood, so we also bought a small portable cooker and some cans of gas. As it turned out, the woodshed was well-stocked and the Aga had sprung to life with little persuasion, cooking our meals, warming the house, and heating the water as effortlessly as it had done for years. The thing about wood-burning stoves, though, is that you have to remember to feed them — and I haven't. While I've been sitting on the veranda steps thinking about Gran, I've let the fire go out.

I should fetch more wood from the shed, but I can't be bothered. There'll be enough hot water for a shower, and a can of chicken

soup heated on the gas ring will do for dinner. While the soup is warming in a saucepan, I grab a torch and wander down the veranda to the storeroom where an old tin trunk had caught my eye the previous day.

When I open the door, memories I'd bottled-up while Peter was here leap at me from every corner. It's full of junk now, but this little room neatly tacked on to the main house was once my schoolroom. The light from my torch falls on the scarred wood of my old desk and I run my fingers over it, leaving trails in the dust and disturbing a daddy longlegs. In times gone by, my mother and grandmother had sat at the same desk, no doubt as eager as I was to be finished with lessons and out in the sunshine. Now the room is cold, and bleak with neglect, and my memories seem unreliable and off-kilter. Ignoring the despondency creeping into my thoughts, I focus on the tin trunk I came for.

It's larger than I thought — far too heavy to carry — so I poke around until I come across some hessian sacks. With a bit of manoeuvring, I get one sack under the trunk, drag it along the veranda, through the French doors, and into the living room. Now I'm ready for a quiet evening sifting through Gran's memorabilia and wallowing in nostalgia.



I set my empty soup bowl on the floor beside me and begin unpacking the trunk. I haven't got far when a sudden drop in temperature reminds me that while the open fire looks cosy, it doesn't warm the house like the Aga. Torn between satisfying my curiosity while I slowly freeze to death, or facing the bitter night outside to fetch more wood, I choose a third, easier option. Leaving everything on the floor, I have a quick shower and go to bed.

This cold weather doesn't fit my memories of Barragunyah.

When I think about my childhood here it's always summer, the grass golden-brown and crunchy underfoot, the heat shimmering above the paddocks like a mirage, and everything moving slowly as if through thick honey. I remember the nights especially, alive with the sounds of frogs and insects, a black velvet sky dusted with stars.

Now, snuggling into the fleece lining of my sleeping bag on the bed that was mine all those years ago, I gaze through the window. There is not a star to be seen.



I wake just after dawn to the sound of rain thundering on the iron roof. In the faint light, I can see water dripping from the stained ceiling and the sheen of a puddle spreading across the floorboards. I drag myself reluctantly from the warmth of the sleeping bag and go searching for a mop and something to catch the drips.

The fierceness of the downpour surprises me. Summer storms were common when I lived here, but weren't the winters usually dry? A childhood memory stirs and I see myself on my pony beside Gran, both of us in oilskins, noses red with cold, faces glistening from the icy rain as we watch the rising creek forewarning a winter flood. Anything out of the ordinary was exciting to me then, but now the prospect of being flooded in makes me uneasy. Which is absurd. It's only a storm.

I'm putting a bucket under the drips in the bedroom when I remember the things I'd left on the floor last night. I rush to the living room, fearing the worst, but thankfully all the other rooms are leak-free except for a tiny stream cascading down the brick wall behind the Aga in the kitchen. The overflow seems to escape through gaps in the stone floor of the hearth, so I leave well alone and return to the bedroom to get dressed.

I need a hot drink after my efforts and the little gas cooker does



its magic again, saving me a trip to the woodshed in the pouring rain. I make a pot of tea and take a mug of the steaming brew to the window seat. Tossing the dusty cushions onto the floor, I settle on the smooth, silky-oak boards and rest my eyes on the watery world outside.

I've always loved rainy days and I sit there, daydreaming, enjoying the freedom of setting my own agenda, until my stomach growls, demanding breakfast. As I empty a can of baked beans into a saucepan and set it on the gas ring, I tell myself I can't keep doing this – I'll have to fetch wood for the Aga the minute the rain stops. Apart from wasting gas, the last thing I want is to run out of hot water for the shower.

After I've washed my plate and cup, I turn my attention to the tin trunk I'd been unpacking last night. It's filled with relics – photo albums going back years, letters, old birthday cards, some childish drawings, Christmas decorations I remember making myself from gumnuts and she-oak cones. There's even a bundle of baby clothes carefully wrapped in tissue paper. I fondle the soft pink wool of a tiny matinee jacket, wondering if Gran had knitted it for my mother.

Tears sting my eyes as I try to imagine Mum as a baby. She should be here with me now, offering motherly direction, some woman-to-woman advice about my future while we amble through the past. But she's never been around when I need her. Picking through the trunk, I pull out a likely photo album and flip through its pages. And there she is, staring out at me with that challenging expression I'd found so bewildering as a child.

My mother, Annie the rebel.

Beneath the photo is a date, December 1961, which makes her eighteen. I stare at the image, wondering, not for the first time, how we could be so different. I'd inherited her height and slim build, but my eyes were hazel instead of green, my curly hair an ordinary dark brown. Annie's thick coppery hair had gone to Peter, along with her confrontational temperament and stubborn sense of righteousness.

I was the difficult child, the sulky one, the kid who'd rather hide in a corner with a book than talk to people. At least, that's how Mum saw me. As a child, I sensed her disappointment in me, but it took me years to work out how I'd failed her. I close the album, glad that Peter isn't around to see my tears.

Reaching deeper into the trunk, I fish out an old cloth-covered notebook, a shabby brownish thing that might once have been red. When I open it and see the name on the inside page, my historian's heart skips a beat: Alice Larson, my great-great-grandmother, the first woman to live at Barragunyah. I flick through the yellowed pages and realise it's a diary of her early years here.

I've unearthed a pot of gold.