

# CEDAR

KIM WINTER

# ONE

It rained. Not gentle spring rain or gusty winter rain; instead, drops the size of shillings plummeted to the ground. The water soaked the parched red sand until it could absorb no more. Sheeting across the land, running in angry rivulets, growing larger and stronger until it was a torrent cascading over dead mulga branches, through the spinifex mounds, it surged towards the dry riverbed.

Eight-year-old Matty was entranced; he could not remember rain like this. He'd felt mist on his face and seen brief soft showers, but never had he seen such a deluge. He stared up at the huge gunmetal grey clouds, his eyes squinting to keep the raindrops from splashing in his eyes. He felt as though the clouds would press him into the earth. He reached up, thinking he might touch them, but only felt the large drops hitting his hands and running down his arms.

He turned around and round, his face held up to the pelting rain. He thought that the rain was spiralling to him as he spun faster and faster until dizzy, he stumbled and fell. He giggled, slashing at the water, watching the droplets rise and mingle with the falling rain. He lay in the puddling water and reckoned his mother would be happier now that her plants would not die after all. And Father, well, Father could smile and take him riding again and Dave, Bert and George might come back now there could be work. Father would be able to

pay them again. Matty smiled as he imagined how days would get back to the way they were when he was little; maybe now he could get the horse his father had promised him. With this thought, he got up from the swirling red slush and ran, leaping the mulga stumps and scaring the few remaining sheep as he jumped and yelled, 'It'll be all right now, it's raining, it's raining.'

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Eliza was searching everywhere for Matty, knowing that sudden downpours could cause flash flooding. Her heart steadied as she watched him coming from the yard paddock, kicking the water in front of him, stopping to scoop it up and throw it high, laughing as it fell back on him. This was to be their only child, the one that Minnie had saved from snakebite, the one who constantly scraped his knees, fell out of trees, and brought home all manner of pets. The house had been home to a sand goanna and shingle back lizards, wounded birds, bush mice, and even a bat for a while. Then there was the python. Eliza hadn't known that pythons were non-venomous. Her heart stopped when Matty came in the back door to show her his new friend.

'Charlie found him for me, Mother. He's not poisonous – he's a carpet snake. Charlie calls him a *yabaa*. I'll keep him in the wood box and feed him mice and... what else?' He paused, thinking of something a snake might eat in a drought, while his hands gently controlled the writhing beautifully-marked reptile.

Eliza reeled in her wits, which had fled screaming, at the sight of the snake.

'You... will... not... young... man!' she enunciated each word. 'You will take him back to Charlie. You will say to Charlie, that the Missus has forbidden any snakes as pets. Do you understand, Matthew?'

Being called Matthew made him realise she was serious, so he turned without argument and took the snake down to the river to let it go. There were no more pet snakes after that.

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For seven years, the land had been without decent rain, life-giving, resuscitating rain. The signs of drought were all around him. Bleached bones of sheep and cattle lay where they had fallen, too weak to make the long walk from the few dry remnants of spinifex to the bore at the homestead. Most of the birds and native animals had either moved on or perished like the stock. In the homestead paddock, the bore trickled water into an old tin trough, and at dawn and dusk, the few remaining animals and birds would gather to take their fill. It was Matty's job to fill the water tank at the back door by redirecting the pipe at the bore to the homestead every day. He thought of his mother looking up at the burning sky.

'The garden is not going so well, Matthew. I fear there will be few vegetables this year,' she would say.

Matty watched his mother help Tan carry the water to the vegetable patch every day and pour it onto the struggling plants. It wasn't enough that the plants battled the hot drying winds, or that the sandy soil did not retain moisture, but they also had to rely on his mother and Tan watering two, sometimes three times a day.

At night, Matty listened from his bed as his parents talked about the prospect of rain, their voices low, despair underlying every word. For months, Matty's father had been silent and brooding, whereas before he'd been laughing and full of fun. Now his face, lined and burnt brown, never smiled. Cutting mulga to feed their remaining sheep and cattle often kept him away for days, as he went further and further out

with the wagons. Keeping the windmills from breaking down was a bigger problem. The hard work and sleepless nights had worn him out.

His mother often had accompanied Matty on his adventures into the paddocks or played with him on the verandah but now she was always weary, too tired to keep him amused. The drought had dragged on for years, banks crashed, and people were being foreclosed on all over the country. Thankfully, they owned their property and had no overdraft. They could no longer afford to keep on the governess, and so Matty's mother took over his lessons. The Aboriginal women helped her with housework, but Eliza was not a stern mistress and the girls usually made games out of simple chores, their work haphazard. The Aboriginal stockmen stayed on; Charlie, the horse-breaker; Big Jim, who was now Thomas's head stockman; Billy and Ned. They received tea, flour, and tobacco but the credit at the store was running out. Matty's father would not be able to provide even that soon. He was trying to get through without using the last of his invested money.

Thomas could not afford to kill any meat from the remnants of their sheep flock. If he were to build up numbers to make an income, he had to hang on to the remainder of his cows and ewes. He had also lost several good horses including the stallion he had bought from Bourke. The Aboriginals brought kangaroo meat to the house and Minnie showed Eliza how to cook the game meat on the fire. In return, Eliza made pigeon pies for Minnie, who had developed a liking for them. Eliza knew they would have given up and left the property if it was not for Minnie and her people.

Matty was too young to realise that this harsh, burnt, brutal land had made his parents old in thirteen years.

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Matty caught sight of his mother. Running and jumping, laughing all the way, he raced towards her and hugged her waist.

‘Mother, it’s raining, it’s raining. Do you think I’ll get my horse now?’

‘We’ll see, Matthew. You will have to ask your father,’ she answered, as she brushed his wet blond hair out of his eyes.

He ran to the kennels where his father was repairing the mulga covering that served as a roof over their remaining sheepdogs.

‘Father, it’s raining! Can I have a horse of my own now?’

Thomas straightened up and smiled at his son’s naivety. ‘It will take a bit more rain than this to get things back to normal, Matty; well, as normal as what can be out here. But we shall see, will we? Maybe, if we get follow-up rain, we might manage a horse for you in a while.’

Matty jumped and yelled with joy. To his eight-year-old mind, he was getting a horse and that was enough.

As Thomas watched Matty run to his mother to tell her about the horse, Charlie came galloping up the track leading from the river.

Charlie drew rein, his horse blowing heavily. ‘Boss, fella big trouble downriver. River risin’ fas’ an’ him git caught crossin’. Big Jim, him gone to help, we need rope.’

Thomas wasted no time. Running to the horse yard, he grabbed a bridle from the gate and eased through the gap in the rails into the yard. He walked up to the big grey gelding in the corner, having already weighed up which horse would be the best to take. Moon was half Percheron, strong enough to pull loads, if needed. Thomas put the bridle on the gelding, mounted bareback, and pushed the horse into a canter from a standing start. He guided the horse at the fence and with a boot in the ribs; the horse cleared the rails easily. Turning on landing, Thomas headed the horse to the house.

‘Get me the rope from the back step. Now!’

Matty had been watching his father since he heard Charlie gallop up, and now he ran to do his bidding. He had never seen his father ride

bareback before and realised that the matter must be urgent.

‘Eliza, there’s a bloke in trouble at the river. Put old Bess in the dray and follow us down but stop at the gully. The gully may well flood too if this rain keeps up,’ Thomas explained. ‘Bring some tea and food and blankets. We may have to stay out. Get Matty to help you throw a canvas in, too.’

Thomas reached down for the rope Matty had brought and spun his horse away, Charlie following at the gallop. As they raced towards the river, thoughts ran logically through Thomas’s head. He hoped that the bloke had been closer to this side of the river when the water hit, as it would now be too wide to help if he were on the other side. Some years ago, Thomas witnessed his first flash flood when the Paroo was nearly dry and rain had fallen heavily upstream. The water rose seven feet in two hours after the initial wave of water and getting cattle across had been too risky. The water spread out and took two weeks to drop.

Thomas pulled the horse back to a trot; it would do no good to kill it trying to get there. He trotted for five minutes then walked for two, then cantered again. It was eight miles to the crossing from the homestead and it would take a good twenty minutes there. Passing through the gully, Thomas thought of Eliza. If the water kept rising in the river then the gully would fill as the river broke its low banks. Charlie’s horse was blowing heavily, and he pulled her up, telling the Boss that he would run and catch up with him at the river. Thomas had grown used to Charlie’s extraordinary talents, one of which was to get off his horse and after loosening the girth, run beside the mare to give her a rest. As Charlie rode barefoot, he did not have the added burden of running in boots. Although the sand was deep in places, Charlie could run for miles in it.

Thomas pushed his horse into a canter again, ever mindful of the sharp mulga sticks that could open a nasty wound in the horse’s leg. Looking ahead he could see the last bend in the track before the river

and slowed, knowing that the water could be just around that corner. The true riverbed was another quarter of a mile away but the land was flat, and by now, the river would have spread out, its main bed deep and running a strong current. The Percheron's ears pricked as it heard men yelling and the frantic nickering of a horse. Thomas held him in check and as they trotted the last corner, Thomas saw what he had only heard.

A young boy hanging tightly onto a rope attached to a fine-looking thoroughbred stallion, which was rearing and pawing at the water that lapped at his hocks. The boy had taken a turn of the rope around a red gum sapling to help him hold the frightened horse. Big Jim and two other stockmen were pushing their horses into the water, calling loudly. Jim reined his horse up the bank as he saw Thomas ride up.

'Boy's father in there, Boss. Boy reckons his father with him, then the horse roll over and him, him not come up,' he said, shaking his head. The water spilled from the crown of his hat. 'We bin lookin', no sign of him. That water plenty wild.'

Big Jim pointed to the middle of the brown river where the currents swirled, dragging leaves and branches down, only to let them pop up a few feet further along.

'Get the men to ride downstream, Jim. Check the riverbank down as far as you can. Take this rope,' said Thomas, throwing it to him. 'I'll help the boy get that stallion under control and come after you.'

Big Jim called the men and, urging their horses into the edge of the rising river, they moved off slowly, the men's eyes searching every part of the bank. calling out, hoping for an answer as the water eddied around and under the turkey bush and lignum.

Thomas rode the grey over to the boy and sidling the gelding up to the stallion, spoke quietly to the frightened horse.

'Whoa then, old fella. What's this all about?'

The stallion stopped his rearing, his ears flickering back and forth,



sniffing the scents of this strange man and horse. Taking a tentative step towards the grey, who remained quiet, the stallion calmed, taking courage from the other horse.

Charlie had quietly come up and tied his mount to a sapling.

‘I take him now, Boss,’ he said, as he moved to take the stallion’s rope from the lad’s hands.

The boy passed the rope to Charlie, who unwound it from the tree branch. Speaking softly to the stallion in language, Charlie led him up the bank to higher ground.

The young fellow stood looking up at Thomas, squinting his eyes to keep out the large raindrops.

‘Come out of there, boy,’ called Thomas, as he slid from the Percheron and stood holding the reins, waiting for the boy to come to him.

Blue eyes stared back at him from under a jagged black fringe, as the boy waded out of the river. His clothes were sodden and worn, the holes in them stitched crudely. His limbs were thin and wiry, and he trembled as he held his hands under his armpits.

‘What’s your name, boy?’ Thomas asked.

‘Jack Henderson, sir,’ he replied, his lips quivering.

‘How old are you?’

‘I’m nine, I think.’

Thomas took his oilskin off and wrapped it around the boy.

‘Can you tell me what happened, Jack?’

‘Me da an’ me, we was goin’ to Gumbo to work for Mr Phillips and we was behind time. That’s why Da tried to cross the river. He said it wouldn’t be deep yet, so he put me up on Longman, the stallion, there, see, and he was holdin’ the stirrup on the offside upriver, but the horse, he hit somethin’ an’ rolled under. I held the saddle an’ come back up but Da... Da didn’t, an’ I couldn’t see him.’

His body shaking, tears dropping down his white cheeks, Jack’s eyelids fluttered and he slid down to the red sand.

‘Charlie, the young fellow’s all-in!’ Thomas called. ‘Tie that stallion up and come help me, will you?’

Thomas knelt and raised the unconscious boy’s head, noting the rope burns on Jack’s hands as he did so.

‘Looks like he was trying to hold that stallion for a while, poor kid,’ he said, as Charlie came up to him. ‘We’ll put him up on the grey and you can take him back along the track till you see the Missus. She and Matty are bringing the dray. Get a fire going and ask the Missus to put on some tea. This boy will need it and so will the men. I’ll take your horse and see how they’re going with the search.’

Between them, they lifted Jack onto the horse and while Thomas held him steady, Charlie swung up behind him. Taking the reins, Charlie said, ‘We find him by-an’-by, Boss. Water go down, we find him.’

‘That’s what I am afraid of, Charlie. We are too late.’

Thomas walked up the bank and mounted Charlie’s mare. Reaching over, he untied the stallion and, leading him, went to search with the men.