

PART ONE

‘Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.’

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

CHAPTER 1

TO NOAH VALE

1955

The Sunday train which snaked into Noah Vale that verdant, midwinter afternoon brought with it fire, sending an inferno of small-town gossip roaring up the valley.

Olive Emerson, a sprightly middle-aged figure on the crowded platform, shot off one last fretful prayer as the train jerked to a stop, then wandered slowly along its length, scanning each carriage for the first glimpse of her nieces – three newly orphaned girls come home to their outcast mother's birthplace.

And here they were. The fifth carriage was set to burn, flaming with redheads: the first, richest red, hauled back in an austere bun; the second, flowing strawberry flames striated with gold; and lastly, the burnished auburn curls of a clinging three-year-old. Olive marvelled at how Esther's radiant colouring had filtered down through her daughters. Each girl carried that wild, red streak in her own way – enough of their tragically beautiful mother to bless or curse, accordingly.

Superstitious fool, Olive rebuked herself. She'd vowed to wipe the slate clean with her nieces – a mercy Esther was never afforded.

Olive's eyes fixed on the carriage window, imploring the girls to acknowledge her before the murmuring crowd. She was acutely conscious of her assumed status here as rescuing aunt, when, in truth, she was naught but a stranger to these girls.

Olive had *heard* the voices down Main Street dripping with scorn over the latest Hamilton tragedy: the long-ostracised daughter of Noah Vale finally getting her comeuppance, and Esther's bastards coming home in repentance for her.

Even after all these years, Olive could not stomach what had happened to her kinfolk. The Hamiltons had been a founding family of this insular rural valley and, for generations, bastions of respectability in church, school and farming life. No one would have predicted it – least of all themselves.

Malcolm and Lois Hamilton, coming late to parenthood, had raised two girls who would take vastly different paths in life. Olive, the eldest, had finished school at fourteen, married a nice local boy and settled into her expected place. Though Olive and Gavin Emerson had produced no children of their own, they'd always given back to the community, and tried to be a light to others. Side by side, their shop shingles proudly hung: EMERSON'S HARDWARE, and EMERSON'S FASHION AND FABRICS.

Then there was Esther.

A change-of-life baby, born more than a decade after Olive, Esther had been an aspiring writer, with a bright intellect and astonishing beauty. The most promising debutante to have ever graced the stage of Noah Vale School! Or so they once had said. Esther Hamilton was only remembered now as a ruinous Jezebel.

The Hamiltons had lived with that shame chafing their infamous family pride for nearly two decades. But Lois and Malcolm had both passed away in recent years, unreconciled with a daughter who'd proven herself, time and time again, a woman of ill repute.

For twenty years, Olive had borne the comparisons between the Hamilton sisters, suffered their estrangement, and prayed unceasingly for little Essie to be brought to her senses and home to the family fold. But pride on one side, and shame on the other, had proven insurmountable on both counts.

Of the Hamiltons, only Olive had sustained tenuous contact with Esther. Odd letters and birthday cards, occasional phone calls, all attempted gently, through indirect routes. Mostly they went unanswered, or took so circuitous a journey back, they were hardly relevant anymore. But what more could Olive have done?

The question haunted her.

The Hamiltons' last contact with Esther, eight years ago, had been to inform her of Lois's funeral arrangements. What daughter *wouldn't* come home for her mother's funeral? Well, Olive knew now: the one who was telephoned for the first time in twelve years by her gruff-voiced father and expressly forbidden to attend, lest she bring shame on an honourable woman's memory. There was no question of Esther coming home for her father's funeral a few short years later.

Banished Esther had stayed, until her own wretched end three months ago – in a red Hillman Minx skidding across a wet, lonely road, with Japanese maples raining down. Drunk, as far as Olive could determine. What an ignoble ending for the girl who'd seemed likely to outshine them all.

Olive winced as the foot worrying at her calf began to cramp. She hadn't even received news of her sister's death until two months ago. There she was going about her quiet, orderly life for weeks with no idea her baby sister had been wiped from the face of the earth.

And here, now, were Olive's homeless, fatherless, friendless nieces: Sonnet, Fable and little Novella Plum, whom they apparently called Plum.

Unease prickled beneath Olive's collar. Perhaps she should have been more forthright on the phone with Esther's girls about their mother's history in Noah. It had been on the tip of her tongue, burning. But how *did* one initiate such delicate topics with grieving girls? And what right did Olive think she had to tell them anything?

No, they would have to take it one step at a time, together.

Finally, her eldest niece turned to the train window. Her weary gaze swept over Olive, taking in the sea of peering faces. Olive raised a shaky hand. Sonnet's eyes settled on her with an unsmiling nod before she turned away to snap shut Plum's tiny suitcase.

Olive wondered if she had time to swallow an aspirin before the girls disembarked.

First was Sonnet, new legal guardian, who, twenty years earlier, had caused her mother's belly to swell beneath her school uniform. Sonnet had never stepped foot in Noah Vale, yet she'd been the talk of the town for decades. Olive shivered. Unlike her willowy mother – all curves and slender limbs – Sonnet was tall and toned, matching a queenly athleticism to her mother's generous bosom. The severe hairstyle did nothing to flatter her strong features, but she was undeniably striking with her sharp green eyes.

Following close in Sonnet's wake was Plum. Olive's heart squeezed at the sight of the chubby girl cleaving to her sister's hand. To her chest, she clutched a comfort bear. Ringlets framed aubergine eyes, a heart-shaped face and full cheeks.

Twelve-year-old Fable was last to step down from the train, and when she did, Olive's lungs faltered on a disbelieving breath.

It was Esther in the doe eyes and full lips. Esther in the long, spilling mane, Esther in the slender limbs, and Esther plastered all over those fine features. Only the hair was different. And while Esther's eyes had

shone vixen green, Fable's were a sunlit amber floating in a pool of violet shadows.

This young girl was lovelier than even her heartbreaking mother had been.

Four Hamilton women stood in silent regard of one another. All around them, curious eyes and ears strained; whispers crackled.

Blood of my blood, Olive thought, scouring her nieces for traces of herself.

She stepped forward to embrace the girls, and was rebuffed. Sonnet bore a frown that would intimidate the best of women. Fable, poker-faced, glanced rapidly between sister and new aunt. Plum quaked against Sonnet's skirt, reaching and mewling to be carried.

This was no place for intimate first meetings.

'After all these years, you've finally come to Noah Vale!' Olive said. 'I can't tell you how glad I am to have you here.'

She extended a hand to Sonnet. Instead of taking it, Sonnet leaned forward in tight-lipped appeal. 'Can we go straight to your car? This is too much. The girls are exhausted.'

Olive reached for the first of three shabby suitcases. 'Follow me!'

Sonnet heaved the last suitcase into the back of the Holden, then hurried an escaping red tress back into her bun. Olive straightened the smallest bag. Both women stared at the suitcases for a strained moment.

'Okay, then,' Olive said, slamming the boot. 'Let's get you girls home. I've got lovely chicken soup on the stove.'

Sonnet dallied, hand on boot.

Olive paused. 'Sonnet?'

'We'll go directly to the cottage.'

Olive made for the car door. 'Oh no, it's late. Gav and I will take you over in the morning. First thing.'

‘We want to move in immediately,’ Sonnet said, with eyes fastened on two small redheads through the back window.

‘Goodness, we haven’t prepared the cottage. It’s not fit for living in – the electricity hasn’t even been restored yet.’

‘Not a problem.’

‘No, dear, it needs plenty of work first,’ Olive said. ‘Gav was going to look at all that for you.’

Sonnet’s jaw jutted. It was an expression Olive suspected she would come to know – and resign herself to.

‘I told you on the phone, we intend to move straight in. I won’t camp out in a stranger’s home.’

Olive’s forehead puckered. ‘But we only want to take care of—’

‘I’ve been caring for my sisters since they were born, and exclusively since our mother’s passing. We don’t need *taking care of*.’

Oh yes, Olive could only imagine how it must have been, living perpetually in flight – switching cities, homes and friends at their mother’s whim. How could this young woman be anything but fiercely independent?

Olive was torn. Pursue, or let them be? ‘I fear you’ll be disappointed, dear. The cottage is run-down and infested with pests – gecko poo everywhere! Rainforest rats, too.’

‘It’ll be fine for us.’

‘But it’s hardly proper for young girls to be living all on their own. We’ve plenty of room at the main house. You’ll hardly know we’re there—’

‘It’s not up for ruddy discussion,’ Sonnet snapped, ‘I outlined my plans specifically before we left Canberra.’

‘Yes, I recall. But, by golly, you must want a break? You’ve had so much to bear. Surely we could help shoulder your burdens?’

But she’d pressed too hard. Sonnet was about to blow her top.

‘As you wish, then, to the cottage we’ll go. I’ll let you see for *yourself* the condition it’s in.’

‘You’ve arrived at our mildest time of year,’ Olive intoned as the car began a steep ascent from the station. ‘Winter in the tropics is paradise: picnics and swimming every day. We love life away from the big smoke. And we’re a close-knit community.’

In the passenger seat, Sonnet sat in taut silence.

‘Noah Vale is an old sugar town. You’d have seen our mill as you came into the valley. Cane all round these parts, but we can also boast of our tobacco, mango and banana plantations. Lots of historic properties.’

They emerged on a wide curve. Below, within a steep bowl of mountain ranges, atop a rolling patchwork quilt, lay Noah Vale.

‘*This* is our town.’

Late-afternoon sunlight, having loitered all day behind blanketing rain, broke forth at the mountain rim now, sweeping golden beams across the misty vale. It was a technicolour scene; overblown hues slickly accentuated by rain.

Olive cast a glance at the back seat and saw Fable’s lips part wide. Plum, straining to see, was so bug-eyed as to be comical. Only Sonnet remained rigid, unreadable.

They began the descent into Noah Vale: past a tractor idling in a freshly tilled field, with egrets strolling the red rows; along an avenue of vermilioned mango trees; and onto a bridge spanning a wide, shrouded creek gorge.

‘Serpentine Creek,’ Olive said, nodding below. ‘Winds right through the middle of the valley.’

‘*Oh*,’ Fable breathed, rousing from her slumberous enchantment. ‘Sonny, it’s *Mama’s* creek! Remember? How she always talked about her Serpentine Spells . . .’

Olive tsked. ‘What nonsense. Esther barely looked up from her books to notice the creek existed! And if she loved the creek so much, then why did . . .’ Seeing Fable’s face shuttering up, Olive halted. Tension infused the air.

Olive momentarily removed her hand from the steering wheel, to touch the foil of tablets in her skirt pocket. She’d make a cuppa for the girls once they arrived at Heartwood, and take a couple of aspirins then.

‘Well, never mind,’ Olive muttered. ‘You’ll be close to the creek at the cottage, so you’ll see for yourself: it’s just an ordinary, non-magical watercourse. At least until the wet season – then we have our own raging river!’

Plum’s small face pressed worriedly against the window.

‘The bridge into Noah floods over each year. All our bridges do in the Wet, cutting us off from the outside world. Wettest region of Australia, we can go weeks without a ray of sunshine. Practically need an ark!’

They were entering Main Street now. Impeccable art deco buildings with pretty, rustic facades lined the street front. Veritable institutions presided proudly: the Post Office, the Canecutter’s Hotel, the Paragon Cafe – all respectably closed on a Sunday afternoon.

‘There are our shops,’ Olive said, slowing the car to a mere putter, as they passed the adjacent stores.

Olive admired her shop-window mannequins, garbed in modest, ladylike dresses for the occasion of her nieces’ grand arrival. ‘Not quite what you’re seeing in winter fashion down south, I imagine, but we don’t really *do* winter here.’

Seeing the wrinkle between Sonnet’s eyes, Olive added, ‘I’ll be glad to have young women to inspire me now. My largest demographic is our middle-aged ladies, and I lose many debutantes each year to the big department stores in Cairns. I’ve got plenty of work for you girls in my shop . . . if you’re interested.’

Sensing Sonnet bristling, she pressed her foot on the accelerator, leaving behind, for now, her dream of graceful nieces swanning between clothing racks, sprinkling youth and vivacity all about.

Main Street forked out around a large park, fronted with a wrought-iron gate. The giant trees within, their branches spreading so widely they might have roofed a house, seemed to pique Sonnet's interest.

Olive quickly resumed her tour guiding. 'Rain trees. They've been in Noah Vale since we were settled. In winter, our church – you see, just over there – hosts a Sugar Festival in the park, to kick off the cane-crushing season. Every family in town has a table. There are rides and stalls – you girls will love it!'

She'd lost Sonnet, however, to glazed indifference at the first mention of 'our church'.

They wound over another hillock, blanketed in banana crops, passing a school on the crest. Fable wound down the window.

'Is this my school?' she asked, eyes combing old timber buildings and the banyan trees spilling their long tendrils.

'Yes, primary and high are both together here. You'll be the fourth generation of Hamiltons to step over the threshold of Noah Vale School . . .' Olive paled, the rest of her story unuttered. . .

But the last Hamilton here was howled off the school grounds.

The journey continued where the proud commentary did not, as Queensland homesteads spread out between farmland. The valley narrowed and deepened; looming mountains, implausibly green, enclosing them. Through one last grove of rainforest and there, proudly overlooking flowering cane, was the Hamiltons' colonial-style plantation house.

'This,' Olive said grandly, 'is Heartwood.'

Olive heard Sonnet's intake of breath as she clapped eyes on the sweeping veranda and hanging ferns, white shutters open to the

bending pawpaws, coconut palms standing sentry around, and showy tropical gardens bursting against the white wood.

‘It *is* nice,’ offered Sonnet. ‘I can see why you’re keen to host us.’

‘Gav and I inherited this home from your grandparents. The very land I was born on. It was a working cane farm back then, but most of the cane I roamed as a young girl is now farmed by the Hulls on one side of us, and the Lagorios on the other.’

The Holden pulled to a stop.

‘And now,’ said Olive, ‘we make the short trek to your new residence.’

A golden retriever bounded over the grass towards the newcomers. Plum screamed, throwing herself onto Sonnet.

Olive tutted as the dog gambolled around them. ‘Oh, never mind Zephyr, he’s friendly.’

Plum wailed while Sonnet bobbed a hip to hush the crying. ‘Olive, Plum’s terrified of dogs!’

‘Oh dear,’ Olive said, with more peevishness than intended. ‘Zeph adores everyone, so don’t take his enthusiasm too personally. Down, boy, down!’

Zephyr sat with a grin and Olive shrugged. ‘She’ll get used to him quickly enough.’

‘Or maybe we’ll have to steer clear of his house.’

Zephyr was promptly removed to the veranda. His gaze followed the Hamilton sisters longingly as they girded themselves with suitcases.

Bypassing the main house, they climbed an orchard hill filled with exotic fruit trees. Fable reached out to touch a swollen fruit with reptilian skin.

‘My custard apples,’ Olive began. ‘And wait till you try . . .’

But Sonnet wasn’t stopping for anything now.

Atop the hill, they gazed over a flood-plain paddock stretching to a thick remnant ribbon of rainforest-shrouded creek. Nestled at the base

of the slope was a ramshackle wooden cottage encircled by trees and a garden choked with allamanda shrubs, molasses grass and climbing mandevilla. In the falling darkness, the cottage was a beacon of homeliness against lush, dark forest.

Fable sighed.

‘The cottage is Edwardian era, built by your grandparents,’ Olive explained as they trotted, with increasing momentum, down the hill. ‘I lived in the cottage myself during my early married life, and after me, it was always promised to your mother. Even after she . . . left Noah Vale, it was still hers. We’ve used it as a guest house, and more recently as a storage shed. But now, it’s yours.’

As the younger girls streaked off ahead, Olive stopped. Sonnet turned questioningly.

Olive sighed, long and hard.

‘Here,’ she said, pressing her key into Sonnet’s hand. ‘You go ahead, make yourselves at home. I wish you’d believe me – it’s really quite unliveable. But at least there are clean sheets on the beds, hurricane lanterns, and on the bench you’ll find sugar bananas, fresh bread and passionfruit curd for your supper. I had suspected you’d insist on staying here tonight. You are your mother’s daughter, after all. It will be rough for you, but if it’s what you really want . . . ?’

Sonnet was a horse, already bolting.

Fable was first to step through the rickety gate and under the rotting archway. She paused to admire the crumbling gables and attic windows winking in the last golden light; lifted her nose to receive the scent of gardenias blooming in the wild overgrowth; tiptoed over frangipani blossoms scattered on the stone pathway; and, hearing the creek song, felt her pulse beat double. Here was more beauty than she’d ever beheld in her young life. Here, her broken heart could heal.

Sonnet, striding up the stairs, picked at the peeling clapboard paint as she entered the fusty darkness, and began her inspection with a mental spring cleaning – obliterating years of dirt by force of imagination. She scoured the claw-foot tub in a mould-acrid bathroom, swept cobwebs from the exposed beams, chased dust bunnies down the long central hallway, banished clutter from the window seat in the sunroom, excavated furniture from debris, and scrubbed grime from the front bay window. She traced a finger along a grimy bookcase, counting spaces for each book she might one day display, and nodded approval at a simple, albeit cluttered kitchen. She finished her inspection with a sigh, as if after physical work. In all, she saw potential for a real home at last.