

Chapter 1

He is Back

Silva Latham sat in secret, high on a hillside amid the long brown grass leaning against an old gum tree. She knew she was well camouflaged since she had deliberately planned it so. With a brown hat to cover and hide her red hair and wearing a dull brown work dress, which she hated. Her obscurity from below was complete.

Callaghan Homestead nestled way down on the opposite side of the valley. Sean, the old deceased grandfather — wise Irishman that he was — had built their sizable house high enough on the edge of the hill to be well away from swelling floodwater.

The beautiful Cox River sprawled in abundance on the valley floor. Today it shone in the sunlight — calm, peaceful, and innocent. Unless viewed during a flood, it is hard to imagine the raging torrent its waters quickly became.

Sean's son Rory loved to tell the story of how his father lived in a hut for three years before he had the money to begin building. As soon as possible, he sent Ireland for his teenage sweetheart, Mauve, to Australia. They were married by proxy before she departed as propriety deemed a single woman should never travel alone.

Arriving in the new land in 1898, she took to the wild, fierce terrain, thriving in the happiness of helping her beloved. They were a delightful couple who loved God and each other. Rory was born to them two years later.

Silva looked way over to the side of the homestead at a small graveyard encircled with an ornate iron fence. It was here — close by their much-loved family home — that Sean, Mauve, and their baby daughter Chavonne now rested.

Rory's eldest son, Declan, was finally home as of yesterday. His five years of studying law at Melbourne University seemed like an eternity. He had been back for short visits but never when Silva herself was there, so it was forever to her since she had seen him.

She knew she'd set eyes on him before many days passed, yet as was her custom of wanting everything yesterday, she couldn't wait a day or so for that to come. Was he the same person who teased her relentlessly? She was a gangly fourteen-year-old when he'd last seen her. To him, at nineteen, she was a mere child and often a pest, hanging around her brother, Adam, and listening to their conversations.

Declan, at that time, was a tall, dark-haired, handsome young man with flashing white teeth in his ever-smiling face and eyes that blazed whenever he discussed anything vital to him. He was an enigma to Silva.

He would get a surprise to see her all grown up. Silva fully intended that he would be highly aware of her presence, as well as, hopefully, falling for her.

Possibly many other young women in Glen Arbor would set their hearts on capturing his. That nose-in-the-air, Phyllis Granger, for one. At a year older than Silva, Phyllis was an only child, forever getting the best that money could buy. The Grangers lived in a large house on the outskirts of the town — her father being the only veterinary surgeon in the district meant that the family thrived.

Thinking about Phyllis, Silva gleefully felt she had got the better finishing school of the two, having spent two years in Paris compared with Phyllis's equal time merely in Sydney. Mrs. Granger, ever fussing over her daughter, could not bear the thought of a vast expanse of water separating them.

On the other hand, Silva's godmother, Aunt Jeanne, lived in Paris, so it had been the ideal place for her to go. Silva smiled to herself, remembering the many escapades she got into with her classmates. Aunt Jeanne, who was also the famous Madame Jeanne-Marie of the Lanvin Fashion House, would have been mortified had she known.

A movement in front of the Callaghan Homestead brought Silva's mind back to the present. Picking up her binoculars and focusing in closer, Silva's heart skipped a beat. She would have recognized him anywhere.

His shoulders looked broad, and his face now sported a goatee beard with a mustache. He looked ever so dashing and professional. He was heading for the stables. He probably intended a ride. Absorbed in watching his every move, Silva forgot to be invisible when a horsefly bit

her viciously on the arm. Jumping up and screaming, she swatted it off before realizing how her shriek echoed off the hills.

Oh no! Snatching the binoculars from where they landed, she tried to search out Declan. Had he heard her? She couldn't see him, and without waiting to find out, Silva turned and ran for home.

The narrow bush path wove in and out of the undergrowth and the towering eucalypts that canopied overhead. Sun peeked through leafy branches sparkling down on stumps, ground, and dry grasses like a pretty wonderland.

Usually, Silva wandered this path, lovingly listening to and watching the birds, lizards, and many insects. Today, she just wanted to get home, which was a good mile and a half away.

She was breathless as she reaching the homestead's concrete stairs. With pain in her side, she found it hard to drag herself up onto the veranda, even with a handrail to help. Dry in the mouth and feeling her legs ready to cave in, Silva thankfully collapsed on reaching the lounge.

She lay back and closed her eyes, grateful that there was no one there to ask questions. She could hear voices from further inside the house, and they sounded like they were getting closer. Perhaps it was time for morning tea as the rattling of China on a pushed trolley reached her ears.

Mother stepped out of the dark front door first, ready to lift the tea trolley down while Aunt Ella, her mother's half-sister, pushed.

Silva smelled freshly baked date loaf, a sign that her father and brother Adam would arrive shortly for refreshments. Everything was laden in one place, from an enormous teapot to a jug of fresh milk, sugar, and crockery; there was plenty for everyone and then some. Way over towards the wide front driveway, a horse rider entered. Silva knew who it was and, without a word, upped, flying past her astonished mother and running into the house. There was no way she wanted anyone to see her in that ugly dress.

Speeding to her room, she changed into a crisp muslin blouse and dark blue skirt. The outfit wasn't new, but it did look nice and showed up the color of her eyes to their best advantage. Before leaving her room, Silva brushed her lengthy hair, plaiting each side and then winding it

over the top of her head. The back was worn loose and hung to her waist. Taking a look in the full-length mirror and happy with her reflection, she strolled back to the verandah gathering.

"Silva!" her mother exclaimed. "What on earth are you up to?" Every eye turned towards her daughter.

"Why, whatever do you mean, Mother? What could I be up to?" With both eyes open wide, she looked the picture of innocence, and her mother knew better than to pursue any questioning in front of a visitor.

Declan rose from where he sat on one of the chairs. His eyes wandered from her face to down over her body and back to her face again; it was easy to see that he was astounded.

"Silva? You're little Silva?"

"Yes, I am, and no longer little - so surprise, surprise, gone is that skinny pest who aggravated you so much."

As a typical Australian who spoke her mind, her words penetrated, and Declan had the grace to look uncomfortable.

Silva laughed. "Don't worry. I won't hold it against you as long as you never speak meanly to me again!"

Her father frowned while pouring the tea. That will do, my girl. He looked from the cup to her and back again.

"Well, Declan," Connor changed the subject, "what's it like to be back in the sticks and away from city life?" He handed a cup of steaming tea over as he said this and then looked at his daughter for her nod before pouring another cup. Silva's brother and Declan's friend, Adam, sat between Nellie, their housekeeper, and Kelvin, who helped with odd jobs. Both the latter classed more like friends than employees of the family.

Adam helped himself to the food before settling back to hear his friend's reply.

No one was more eager to hear it all than Silva. She felt her ears burning red, wishing it was him and her alone to talk and share their adventures. No hope of that! None of the family knew or guessed how much she liked Adam's friend.

So Silva sat and listened with the rest of them, hoping her face didn't give away the romantic fancies dancing in her head.

Gosh, he was a dream. His haircut was to the new fashion of short back, and sides and his dark eyes wandered over to look at Silva often. One thing for sure, he could never call her carrot top again because her hair was now a dark rich burgundy. She smiled to herself with this knowledge, looking down as if sharing a hidden secret about something.

"How about coming for a walk around, Silva?" Declan held out his hand to help her up. "It's been a long time, hasn't it? I don't know how you feel, but I feel a little lost!"

Silva looked over at him as they walked towards the stables, out past her father's airplane hangar.

"It's different seeing everything after being away for years. Being older now, I thought that was why. However, if you feel it as well, Declan, then perhaps it's not."

He merely nodded his head, deep in thought. After a time of silence, he spoke with a barely audible voice. "Life changes us. It would be great to remain young forever without responsibilities, yet I reckon — that's a part of becoming mature."

Why was he so stern? Not at all how she remembered the fearless, fun-loving Declan. Deciding it was time to lighten the mood, she thumped him on the back and then took off, running towards the stables.

Maybe seeing the new foal born last night would liven him up.

Entering the cool, shaded interior, she needed to wait for him. Something was wrong; this wasn't Declan — what had changed him? As he came in, she grabbed his arm. "Come on, slowpoke, get a move on. I'm dying to show you something special."

Autumn, the mare, could be seen standing in the corner of her stall with eyes adjusting to the dimness, occasionally peering down.

Silva climbed the surrounding rails; it was easier to look on her new little foal.

“Well, what a cute little filly!” Declan smiled at last. “Who’s going to name her? You?” Reaching his hand over, he messed the back of her hair.

“Of course! Father said she could be my birthday gift, even though it was over two months ago. He promised me Autumn’s baby at that time. I’m still thinking of what to call her. I had considered ‘Summer,’ but that doesn’t seem to fit, so I’ll keep on thinking.”

“With what?” He laughed.

“You rat,” she exclaimed, jumping down and punching him in the leg. He dropped quickly onto the stable floor, reaching for her hand so she couldn’t repeat the act.

Holding it tightly, they looked into each other’s eyes. Time stood still — then abruptly, Declan pulled her into his arms and kissed her softly on the lips. Silva closed her eyes. Was she dreaming? Then just as suddenly as he’d pulled her to him, he gently pushed her to arm’s length distance.

“Sorry about that — I couldn’t resist. You’re a beautiful woman, Silva. Do you know that?”

Standing nearby and smelling his clean woodsy smell, Silva felt lost for words. She was trembling and didn’t know what she should do. Not wanting to miss the magic of the moment, she leaned over on tippy toes and kissed his mouth to show how she’d liked the experience.

“That was my very first grown-up kiss, so don’t you dare apologize. I enjoyed it, and you can do it again whenever you want to.”

“What!” he exploded. “What on earth did they teach you at that finishing school — to speak and act impulsively? Don’t you go saying that to any other male, you hear me?”

Silva's face burned red, and tears stung her eyes. Did he mean that she was fast? Without another word, she turned and ran as rapidly as she could for the house while Declan stood with hands-on-hips watching her.

Silva entered by the back door, not wanting anyone to see her distress. That Declan! She'd give him what-for, speaking to her like that; he better watch out! Her red-headed temper flared as she threw herself face down on the bed and cried.

