

ANNA
JACOBS

A Daughter's Journey

Birch End Saga Book One


HODDER

I

Lancashire: June 1934

Jo Melling and her stepmother had to change trains at Manchester and only made their connection thanks to a kindly porter who whisked their luggage across the station on a big trolley, calling out to people to get out of the way, please.

As he stacked their trunks and suitcases in the luggage wagon at the rear of the slow, stopping train that would take them to Rivenshaw, Jo tugged the older woman towards the nearest compartment. Edna, who was too plump to run easily, panted and protested.

Thank goodness this would be the last stage in their long journey from Western Australia by sea and rail. Ten thousand miles of her stepmother's fussing and the need for them to share a cabin on the ship had nearly driven Jo mad.

Nearby, the guard was holding his whistle to his lips ready to send the train on its way. He scowled and jerked his head at them to tell them to hurry up. It was lucky that a stranger who was already on the train saw their need and opened the door again. He helped Edna into the compartment then turned to offer Jo an unnecessary hand up.

She waved him back. 'I'm fine, thank you.' She was about to make sure the door was closed properly, but the porter was there to slam it shut with a final bang. The guard's whistle sounded immediately it was closed.

The train jerked into motion as she was reaching up to put her hand luggage in the overhead rack, and that sent her bumping into the stranger, who was about to move his newspaper out of her way. He steadied her with a smile, and she murmured her thanks.

He was taller than her and perhaps slightly older, about thirty or so, and had a lean, muscular look to him. He wasn't good-looking exactly, but had a pleasant face and lovely dark auburn hair. He had good manners, too, and picked up her bag, ready to put it into the net for her.

She stretched out her hand to stop him. 'Just a minute. Is it far to Rivenshaw? It's not worth putting the bag up and pulling it down again if we're only a few minutes away.'

'It's about an hour, I'm afraid, because there are a few stops before we reach it, but I doubt anyone else will get on the train at this time of day.'

'I'll leave my bag on the seat then, if you don't mind. It has all our travel papers in it and I like to keep it close by.'

'There you are, then.' He put it beside her, picked up his own bag and went to sit in the far corner of the compartment near the corridor, leaving the two ladies to settle into the window seats.

Jo stole another glance at the stranger. He was neatly if rather shabbily dressed and had been nothing but polite and helpful, but when she looked across at her stepmother, she saw that Edna was eyeing him suspiciously. Typical! The woman seemed to think any young man who spoke to Jo would be a threat to her stepdaughter's virtue and they'd had several sharp quarrels about that on the ship.

As if Jo would behave in an immoral way. What's more, she could look after herself, if a man got too frisky, and had proved it more than once in the past few years!

'Don't encourage him,' Edna whispered.

Jo didn't waste her breath responding. It would do no good. Her stepmother had what their stockman in Australia called 'tin ears'.

Jo had been horrified when her father married this foolish woman a few years ago. She was pretty, yes, her hair only lightly sprinkled with grey, but she was rather stupid and Jo found her conversation focused mainly on clothes and food. The only reason she could think of was that Edna must be good at pleasing men in bed, or why else would he have married her? You couldn't help knowing about things like that when you lived on a farm, whether you were married yourself or not.

After Edna took over the house, Jo soon moved away from the farm to work in the city, because no one was going to treat her like an unpaid drudge. Or constantly carp and criticise. Her father had understood, thank goodness.

Her stepmother, however, had complained to everyone in the neighbourhood about how ungrateful and badly behaved the girl was. As if friends and neighbours who'd known Jo for years would believe her.

Jobs were in short supply in such times, but since Jo had been doing the farm's accounts and ordering groceries, goods and stock feed for years, she'd used her contacts to find a job working as a bookkeeper in an office in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. She'd shared lodgings with a friend and life there had been very pleasant, even though she'd missed the farm and her father dreadfully at first.

When he fell ill and was given only a few months to live, Jo of course left her job and went back home to Beeniuip. She loved her father dearly and wanted to be with him. As it turned out, she found herself doing nearly all the nursing, especially when he grew weaker, because Edna was useless about such things, not to mention bone idle.

Her father had been wonderful right until the end. He'd done everything to make their life easier 'afterwards', which included selling the farm to Harry, the neighbour who was his closest friend, and also making him the executor of his will.

He'd secured Jo's promise to escort his widow back to England to live near her family 'afterwards', because Edna had come to Australia with her first husband and never really settled there. Some people didn't. Of course Jo had given him her word. No need to tell her that Edna would be useless at organising anything.

She didn't want to make the long journey, especially with Edna, but she'd do it for him.

Since Jo had no intention of living with the woman for one day longer than necessary, she'd set to work organising the journey immediately after the funeral, using the money he'd provided.

As soon as she'd seen Edna settled somewhere near her remaining family members in England, Jo intended to have a look at Buckingham Palace and a few other famous places, after which she'd return to Australia, where she had a few distant relatives and several good friends. She probably had relatives in England, too, and from the same part of the country as her stepmother's family, because her father's family had been from Lancashire as well, so she might see if she could find some of them.

She was jerked out of her reverie by a sob, and turned to see Edna dabbing at her eyes again. What now?

The stranger had hidden behind his newspaper. Jo wished she could hide away, too.

'Why are you ignoring me?' Edna asked, with another of her easily summoned sobs. 'You know how sad this is making me.'

'I was just . . . thinking.'

Edna lowered her voice. 'You weren't too deep in thought to be talking to that young man! You wouldn't have behaved like that in Australia when your father was alive.'

Jo kept her voice even lower. 'I was only being polite. And so was he.'

As her stepmother opened her mouth to argue, Jo said, 'Not now! Shh!'

With a scowl, Edna subsided, but a minute later she found something else to complain about. 'Look at that ugly scenery. Mills and smoke and dirty old canals. Why did you insist on bringing me here? We could have settled in Perth and had sunny weather.'

Jo wasn't going to put up with these lies, whether the stranger overheard their latest quarrel or not. '*You* were the one who wanted to come and live near your family. I only came with you because I promised Dad as he was dying that I'd see you safely settled here. This isn't *my* country and I shan't be staying here after we've found you somewhere to live.'

'You're heartless, absolutely heartless! It's your duty as an unmarried daughter to live with me and look after me.'

'I'm not your daughter! And you're perfectly capable of looking after yourself.'

'But I—'

'Will you please keep your voice down!'

But Edna didn't care who heard her when she was upset and continued to complain about her stepdaughter's unkindness in her usual shrill tones.

The stranger had let the newspaper sink a little and was watching them with a shocked expression on his face. Jo felt her face flush with embarrassment.

She wondered if her father had realised how difficult the

task of taking Edna 'home' would be, especially this last part of the journey. Jo didn't know much about life in this country and felt rather nervous about the task of finding a home for her stepmother. Edna would be hard to please, she was sure, since the money she'd been left wasn't unlimited.

To make the whole situation worse, this was the second time Edna had been widowed and that had thrown her into genuinely low spirits about the future, something Jo tried to make allowances for.

As the train continued to rattle along, stopping four times at places whose names meant nothing to her, Jo shivered, still not used to the cooler weather in Britain. She would have to buy some warmer clothes and if this was summer, she dreaded to think what the winter would be like. She hoped she'd be long gone by then.

A couple of times she caught the man watching her and didn't know whether to say something or ignore him. When he winked and rolled his eyes at the older woman, she couldn't help smiling at him.

Edna had subsided into a miserable heap, sniffing into her handkerchief occasionally or varying that by dabbing at eyes that were leaking no tears that Jo could see.

As they came out of a tunnel, the man leaned forward. 'Excuse me, miss, but you've dropped one of your gloves.'

'Oh. Thank you.' She bent to pick it up. Stupid things! In Australia she had only worn gloves in cooler weather. Edna, however, had tried to impose what she called 'ladylike standards' on her stepdaughter but Jo had refused to be dictated to or to obey such silly social rules as ladies wearing gloves every time they went out of the house.

At twenty-six, she wasn't a child and didn't intend to behave like one.

A few minutes later, the man said, 'You might like to get your things ready, ladies. Rivenshaw is the next stop.'

'Thanks.' Jo made sure Edna gathered everything together and waited impatiently to get out of the train. She was so very tired of being shut up in small spaces with people.

As soon as she left the train Jo beckoned urgently to a porter, telling him about their luggage. Then she helped Edna get out while the porter hurried to unload their things from the rear luggage wagon, piling them haphazardly on the platform. As the train pulled away, he called out that he'd fetch a trolley to move them near the station entrance as soon as he'd seen the disembarking passengers away.

The two women showed the porter their tickets and walked across to the entrance, passing the man who'd shared their compartment, who was talking to another man.

There was no one there to meet them, which upset Edna. 'Where's my cousin? What shall I do if he's died? I need help settling back into English life.'

'He'll be here soon, or if not him someone else from your family will. You sent him a telegram to give him our time of arrival as soon as we got off the ship.'

They waited a few minutes but there was still no sign of anyone. 'Perhaps we should get a taxi to his house, Jo, and leave our luggage to follow.'

'You can do that if you want, but I'm not going to turn up at your cousin's house uninvited. He's a stranger to me and even you haven't seen him for a good many years.'

'He was a close friend of my brother's as well as being our favourite cousin. Why, I've known Clarence all my life. *Of course* he'll want me to go to him, and you too, if only for my sake, until you've found me somewhere of my own to live.'

‘I’ve told you before: your cousin can do that for you. He’ll know the town far better than I do. I’m going back to Australia quite soon.’

‘Your father must be turning in his grave at the way you’re breaking your promise to him.’

Jo began pacing up and down to avoid going through the same old arguments.

A few minutes later, with still no sign of anyone coming to meet them, she decided to prepare for the worst and signalled to the taxi parked to one side of the station forecourt. When it drove across to them, she asked the driver if there was some small hotel where they could find rooms for a night or two.

He studied them and nodded as if satisfied by what he saw. ‘Mrs Tucker’s lodging house is very respectable and she only takes ladies. You’ll be quite comfortable there and I hear she keeps a good table, too.’

But just as he was about to load their luggage into his taxi, a large saloon car drew up and a man got out of it, well-dressed and in his middle years.

Edna clutched Jo’s arm. ‘I’m sure that’s my cousin Clarence! Goodness, he’s grown very plump. He was such a good-looking young man, too.’

Well, he wasn’t a good-looking older man, Jo thought. In fact, she found him quite repulsive, she couldn’t work out why. Maybe it was the arrogant expression on his rather podgy face. She preferred to study his car, which was a shiny black Rover.

He strode towards them. ‘Edna? We got your telegram but I’m a town councillor and had to attend a meeting at the town hall today. I’m afraid it took longer than I’d expected.’ He looked towards Jo, clearly waiting for a proper introduction.

'This is my stepdaughter, Josephine. I told you about her in my letter. Josephine, this is my cousin, Clarence Rathley.'

'It's Jo, not Josephine,' she corrected.

He studied the younger woman from head to toe and inclined his head. 'Miss Melling.' He didn't wait for her to reply but turned back to his cousin. 'You haven't changed much, my dear. You're as pretty as ever.'

'And you're still a fine figure of a man, Clarry.'

It sickened Jo how Edna fluttered her eyelashes at her cousin – she was nearly fifty and should be past that sort of girlish trick. And she'd just told a blatant lie. The 'fine figure of a man' had a large belly, very little hair left and his mean, pinched little mouth was almost hidden by his puffy jowls. He strutted about as if he owned the world, arrogance personified.

He still didn't address her, but he looked. Oh, my, how he looked! His eyes lingered on her breasts in a way which made her feel as if she was undressed. She hated men who treated women like that.

'Is that your luggage, Edna? My goodness, what a lot there is! We'll send it to the house by taxi and I'll take you and your stepdaughter home with me in the car.'

'I'd better stay and make sure they bring everything,' Jo said. 'If you give the taxi driver your address, he can bring me along shortly, Mr Rathley.' *She* wasn't going to call him cousin.

Clarence looked down his nose at her. 'The fellow knows exactly who I am, believe me. I have a respected position in this town. And a young lady like yourself should leave those with older and wiser heads to make the arrangements.'

Edna made a tutting sound and shook her head at Jo, before turning back to her cousin, 'I'm afraid young ladies

in the colonies are rather independent in their behaviour, but perhaps it might be better if Josephine did keep an eye on our luggage. She's very capable about everyday matters. There are quite a few pieces of luggage because I don't intend to return to Australia, and I'd hate to lose anything.'

'Very well, then. Let her do it. You can come with me, Edna. Welcome to Birch End, my dear.' He offered his cousin his arm and his chauffeur moved quickly to open the rear car doors for him and Edna.

Clarence hadn't welcomed her to Birch End, Jo thought, or even given her a farewell nod before walking away. All his attention now was for his cousin. Could he be one of those people who despised colonials, and considered them inferior? She'd met such an attitude on the ship and if they'd been rude to her, she'd treated them in a similar way.

Here, however, she wasn't sure how best to deal with it and didn't want to start off on the wrong foot with Edna's family, so she said nothing.

His booming voice floated back to her. He must be slightly deaf to speak so loudly.

'It's good to see you back in civilised parts, Edna. I never did like your first husband taking you out to the colonies and what were you thinking of to marry a colonial when he died? Life must have been very hard out there for a delicately bred lady like you.'

Jo let out a scornful huff. Delicately bred, indeed. Edna was a plump, indolent woman who ate heartily and never lifted a finger to help anyone but herself.

The last thing she heard was Clarence asking Edna if her second husband had done the right thing by her financially and she paused to listen before getting into the taxi.

'Oh, yes! I have an income for life, and a generous one, too. The money is being managed by a gentleman in Australia

who is the executor, and it doesn't go to Jo till I die or remarry.'

'What did *she* get?'

'I believe she has what's left from the sale of the farm.'

'We'll have to look into that. It doesn't seem a fair arrangement to me. You should be entitled to a permanent share in his estate, Edna, and I'm sure a British lawyer would be able to deal with the capital more efficiently than a colonial chappie.'

She dabbed at her eyes. 'I never could understand money.'

The driver closed the door of the big black car just then, so that was all Jo heard. She watched it drive away. It looked expensive and Clarence had got into the back as if he were a duke, with a chauffeur fussing over him and his passenger, so he couldn't be short of money.

What a strange thing to ask a cousin you hadn't seen for over a decade before you'd even got her home: how much money she'd been left. Was that all Rathley cared about?

She was glad she hadn't told her stepmother the full details about the financial arrangements her father had made for his daughter. He'd been right about that being best kept quiet, as he had been about so many things – except his need for female company. In between her mother dying and him re-marrying he had been seen with a series of women in Perth, and spiteful people hadn't hesitated to tell her about that.

Well, that was all water under the bridge now and even though the money situation wasn't fully settled yet, she had easily enough to manage on, thanks to an inheritance from her mother's parents. She wasn't sure Edna knew about that and she certainly didn't intend to tell her.

Now that she'd met him, she wished she didn't have to go

and stay with Mr Rathley. She didn't know when she'd taken such an instant dislike to anyone. And yet she'd taken an instant liking to the stranger sharing their compartment. How strange!

As the car vanished round a corner, Jo turned to the taxi driver, who was still waiting patiently. 'Sorry about the delay. You must add something to your charge to cover the lost opportunities for more fares.'

'Thank you, miss, but Mr Rathley wouldn't like that. He knows the taxi rates to a penny.'

'Well, I'm the one who'll be paying you, so it's up to me what I give you.'

The man looked at her warily. 'You're paying?'

'Yes.' She grinned at him. 'Us Australians are rather independent-minded.'

He hesitated, then said, 'Well, if you'll take my advice, miss, you'll not cross that man. Mr Rathley is very much king of the castle in his own home, as everyone in Birch End knows. Anyway, I doubt there will be any more people looking for taxis until the next train arrives, so I'm not in any hurry. Dick Simpson, that's my name. Do you have a list of your luggage, miss?'

She tapped her forehead. 'In here. Those are our things over there, that pile of bags just inside the entrance. Will they all fit into your taxi?'

'Probably. I'd better get out the longer straps for the rear luggage rack, though, if you'll excuse me for a moment.'

She nodded. 'I'll go and check that they've unloaded everything. I should have checked before now really.'

That wasn't like her. She'd been a bit distracted by her stepmother's fussing and then the arrival of the arrogant cousin. She headed off to check that everything was in order.

She couldn't get out of going to Rathley's home for one night, but she doubted she'd stay longer, not if she could help it. But what was she going to do? It would look so rude if she were to leave her stepmother so abruptly.

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