

Teddy wandered in from the cold one night, his work boots muddy, his coat soaking wet. He was shivering, and grinning. He'd left in the morning telling Raine he might be late back and she'd waited to have tea with him. Mr and Mrs Greene had eaten and were in the lounge room listening to *When a Girl Marries* on the wireless. Raine had been listening too, before Teddy arrived home. The program was a favourite of Mrs Greene's, who listened avidly to the ongoing domestic trials and tribulations of the heroine with no apparent sense of irony.

While Teddy changed into dry clothes, Raine dished up beef stew and mashed potatoes and set the bowls on the kitchen table.

'Starving,' Teddy mumbled by way of saying grace.

'Where have you been? Where'd all the mud on your boots come from?' Raine forked up beef stew and prayed she wouldn't be up all night with indigestion.

Teddy ate and smirked. 'Finish your stew first.'

What was going on? Did Teddy have a new job with lots more money? Had he won at the races, or the dogs? Why the drama? Raine finished her stew and took their bowls to the sink. She quickly rinsed and dried them and stacked them in the cupboard, gave the bench a perfunctory wipe and returned to the table.

'Cup of tea?' Teddy teased.

'Not until you tell me what's going on. It better be good with all this build-up.'

Teddy took her hands across the table. 'Found us our own place. We can move whenever we want.' His lips curled upwards, revealing his big white teeth.

'What?'

Their own place? How on earth?

'How? Where?'

'Do you remember in the summer, when we took the kids for a picnic in the hills?'

'Yes.' What did picnics have to do with anything?

‘And we climbed the hill and saw the cabin?’

‘The falling down cabin?’ Raine frowned. She had an inkling where this might be going. ‘And?’

‘And Alf said he could rig the electric and you suggested we could do it up in return for rent, so that’s what I’ve done.’ Teddy released Raine’s hands and tilted back his chair. He kept grinning.

‘That’s what you’ve done?’ Raine didn’t want to dampen Teddy’s parade, but ... what on earth had he actually done?

The chair was tipped forward with a slap to the floor. ‘I tracked down the farmer who owns the place, and me and Alf went up there today on Alf’s motorbike and had a chat. Nice guy, said he didn’t know whether to let it fall down or do something about it. Didn’t think anyone’d want to live way up there in the hills, housing shortage or not. So when we said we’d do it up and Alf’d get the electric on in exchange for a low rent, well, he jumped at it!’

Teddy’s enthusiasm was working on Raine’s doubts. Theirs. Her’s and Teddy’s. Alone. A bit rough. Well, Raine was a country girl as she told Teddy time and again.

‘Does it have running water?’

‘One tap, cold.’

‘Lav?’

‘Outside. No flush of course.’ Teddy’s eyes crinkled. ‘Flushing loos are for toffs, right?’ he reminded Raine.

‘Roof? Door? Windows?’

Teddy waved an arm. ‘No problem. Me and Dad’ll have all those bits and bobs sorted in no time.’

‘Heating, cooking?’

‘Look, tomorrow’s Sunday. We’ll take the bus and you can take a look yourself. How ’bout that?’

They took the bus to the stop at the bottom of a steep, stony track. Raine waddled up, huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf, and when she reached the top she decided she might indeed be able to blow the flimsy hut to matchsticks. But the sun shone, the first time in weeks. It transformed the damp leaves of the nearby giant red gum into glistening pendants sparkling a warm welcome. A kookaburra greeted them from the red gum's branches. Raine remembered the story about kookaburras heralding stormy weather.

Not today. Today gloried in a bright blue sky. The paddock by the cabin was a duckling yellow carpet of soursob, and white sheep grazed on verdant winter grass in the adjoining field. Beyond the cabin, the forest unfolded its muted grey-green blanket of eucalypts, quiet in the cool windless air except for the warble of a magpie thrilled with the sunny magic of the afternoon.

The cabin needed a new front door, planks were missing in the verandah, every window had at least one cracked pane of glass and the corrugated iron roof was discoloured with orange rust spots. That was outside.

Raine whooshed out a breath.

'Is it all right?' Teddy's swagger was gone. He jiggled his hands in his pockets, shifted from one foot to the other. 'I mean, we got some fixing to do and it'll never be flash.' He licked his lips, gave Raine a sideways anxious frown. 'It's the best I can do right now, though.'

Raine linked an arm into Teddy's, pushed herself against his hip.

'It's perfect.'