

River Run Deep

Rachel Treasure

Published by Preface,
An imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

All text is copyright © Rachel Treasure 2002

This opening extract is exclusive to Lovereading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Published by Preface 2008
First published by Penguin Books Australia 2002 under the title *Jillaroo*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Rachael Treasure 2002

Rachael Treasure has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Preface Publishing
1 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9BT

An imprint of The Random House Group

www.rbooks.co.uk
www.prefacepublishing.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at www.randomhouse.co.uk

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781848090859

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment



Typeset in Palatino by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Part One

One

Rebecca Saunders whistled to her dog.
'Mossy, go way back.'

In the glow of morning sunlight the little kelpie, light on her feet, seemed to float out around the mob of sheep in the holding paddock. All that could be heard was her chain jingling around her neck as she cantered and crouched on the dusty ground. The sheep huddled and turned their heads towards Mossy's motionless red and tan form. Bec turned to open the gate, knowing Mossy would bring the mob steadily into the yards. Unclipping the chain, she dragged the gate's creaking rusted frame across the dust and whistled Mossy to stalk towards the sheep. Rebecca watched the sea of ewes move slowly towards her, with the ram in their midst. He held his head high with his lip curled up. His horns spiralled pompously around his face like a barrister's wig. Bec frowned at him. His scrotum really bothered her. It had been on her mind most of the night.

She remembered her withered, wiry grandfather holding out his hands with his bony fingers curved around the air.

'Two full beer cans,' he had said. 'Two full beer cans. That's what they're s'posed to feel like.' Her grandfather had lifted the weighty scrotum of one of his rams and jiggled the hefty sack in the palms of his hands.

'Here, girl, have a feel.'

So, how come, Bec thought to herself this morning, the ram which her father just paid \$2000 for had one full beer can and one minibar bottle of gin for a scrotum? She shook her head as she closed the gate. If only her father had listened to her.

Walking briskly to the yards she wondered if she could persuade him to take the ram back. She pictured the tweed-coated stud ram breeder with the grey hairs growing wildly from the tip of his nose and lobes of his ears. She couldn't believe the man still spoke with a voice from the Mother Country.

'Yars, he's a fine upstanding sire,' the breeder had said as if chatting to the Queen. He'd folded his arms across his belly and jutted out his chin. 'Covered magnificently to the points, with a noble head.'

'Wanker,' she said out loud to the image in her head. If only they could take the dud ram back and spend the money on a performance-tested ram, one that was guaranteed to make an impact on the flock. But Rebecca knew her dad would never agree.

As she swung the splintery wooden gate open into the largest yard, she heard an outburst of barking and the rush of hooves raising dust.

'Bloody oath, Dad.' Bec shook her head, sighed and rolled her eyes.

Her father, Harry Saunders, was slipping through the wire fence yelling as he went, 'Mate, Spot, Mardy . . . *come behind!* Get back in *behind!* *You dogs!* Mardy! Come here! Get out of that!'

His crew of motley dogs were working in a pack, singling out a sheep and chasing it to the fence, biting as they went. Little Mossy was doing her best to keep the mob together while the other dogs zoned in close to the sheep, causing chaos.

'Geez, Dad. Are you sure you need all those mongrel dogs? I almost had them yarded.' She put up her hands to shade

her eyes from the sun and squinted at the circling mob. 'Useless!'

Her father, red in the face, was holding Mardy by the collar. The young pup's eyes were fixed on the sheep and his tongue lolled to the side of his mouth as he panted. So keen to work, Mardy was oblivious to the fact he was being choked.

'Don't you start, girl,' her father warned, pointing a finger at her. To prove her point Bec whistled gently and called softly, 'Mossy, come here to me.' Mossy turned one ear towards Bec, glanced at her, then trotted to her side. Rebecca turned her back to her father. She knew he hated the fact that her dogs worked so well for her, but at the same time she felt sadness for his untrained dogs.

'Yard the friggin' sheep yourself then,' she said under her breath.

'What did you say, girl? What did you say to me?'

Ignoring him, she marched off to sort out the tangle of tubes and drench-guns, which lay in a pile on the floor of the shearing shed's grinding room.

A while later her father's large silhouette appeared in the doorway of the shed. His shadow spread across worn and weary floorboards.

'You know we really don't need you in the yards today, Bec,' the shape said. He moved into the dimly lit shed. 'Your brothers will be down after they've fixed the pump. They can do the drenching and I'll shift the stock.' He wouldn't look at his daughter's face.

'But, Dad, I told you, I've finished school . . . I'm home to work. For good.' Rebecca heaved a twenty-litre drench drum onto the grinding room bench with a thud.

'Bec, you know there's not enough room for all three kids on the place. We've had this discussion before. No daughter of mine is going to make a so-called career out of farming. There's no future in it.'

'But farming's good enough for your sons?' Bec turned to look at him and stood with her hands on her hips.

Harry took off his sweat-stained hat and ran his fingers through his greying hair.

'That's different, Bec. The boys don't know anything else . . . It's what they were raised to do . . . The boys are capable of making a go of it here.'

'And I'm *not*?' Bec moved to meet his eyes.

'It's for your own good, Rebecca.' Looking away from her, he turned his attention to the drench-gun on the bench. 'Your best bet is to go do a teaching or nursing course, then you can marry a nice farmer who isn't up to his neck in debt or paying his way out of a bloody divorce and . . . then you can -'

'Bulldust, Dad!' exploded Bec. 'Listen to you! Do you know how bloody sexist you sound? I was born here and I'm staying here . . . I have just as much right to the farm as Mick and Tom.'

She threw down the cluster of tubes which were entwined around an empty drench pack. 'There's no way I'm going to become a nurse or a teacher so I can marry some conservative sexist pig who expects me to bake scones all day and join the CWA with his mum. Stuff that . . . and stuff what you think.'

'Don't you dare talk to me like that, girl.' Harry had his back to her and Bec could see his shoulders tense in anger as he pretended to adjust the dose on the drench-gun. Knowing she was pushing him, she moved closer.

'Dad. I'm not doing what you say. I'm not doing teaching. Or frigging nursing. How can you be so . . . so . . . bloody pigheaded. Chrissake, Dad! Mum's a *vet*, for crying out loud. You know all about career women who live on farms . . . and the way they have to race about to please their husbands and families and then juggle their workload. Just because you couldn't handle Mum having a brain . . . and a life, don't take it out on me!'

'Leave your mother out of this!' He turned to face his daughter. 'If you hadn't stuffed around so much with your

dog training and horses and worked harder at school you could've got into vet science, Rebecca. It's your own fault.'

'But I never wanted to be a vet! All I've ever wanted was to come home here to Waters Meeting and get this farm running how it should be.'

'What's that s'posed to mean?' Harry slammed the drench-gun down on the oily wooden bench. 'Are you saying I don't run the place properly?'

'Anyone can see this farm's run in the Dark Ages. Mick and Tom are too afraid to ask you to look at the books. You're always threatening to kick them off the place if they don't toe the line. You don't know half the things they'd say to you if they had the guts . . . like the fact that the new-beaut ram you've bought is a dud. They're scared of you. The same way you were scared of Grandad.'

At the mention of her grandad, Rebecca saw a muscle in her father's jaw flinch. She knew she should walk away now and go up to the house. But she continued.

'We're going down the gurgler, Dad, because you won't let go. So now I'm telling you. I'm not going to do teaching or nursing. I've enrolled in agricultural college next year and I'm going to get a degree in business and then come home and sort this mess out. I need a year's practical experience as a jillaroo before I go, which I'll do here and now, on this place.'

'Like hell you will.' Her father stood to his full height and took a step towards her, towering over her and pointing a large finger in her face.

'Let me tell you, Little Miss High and Mighty – you won't be doing work experience here for your useless snobby uni course. Either you respect and obey my wishes or you pack your swag up now, take your precious well-bred dogs with you and get off this property. And then you won't be coming back to this part of the river so long as I'm alive on it.'

In disbelief, tears began to well up in Bec's eyes, but her father just dug deeper.

‘Your brothers will be glad to see the back end of you, Miss Self-Righteous. I never wanted another child. I told your mother no, it will be hard enough to carve up this block for two boys, let alone a third child . . . let alone a girl. Now get out of my sight.’

Rebecca felt her bottom lip begin to quiver, so she bit it, trying to keep the hurt inside. Since the day she was born she had been her grandfather’s girl – never her father’s. From before she could remember, Grandad had rugged her up and sat her high in the saddle in front of him. They had ridden, she and he, up into the mountains looking for strays. He always muttered along the way, about the world around her, about the animals and the trees and how to find a beast and how to work a dog. She never remembered her father being there, or teaching her how to crutch a sheep or rope a calf or even boil a billy. The more love and attention her grandfather gave Rebecca, the more Harry withdrew from her. Over the years, the anger of the two men grew and the silence sizzled between them. It spilled over to Harry’s wife, Frankie, and then to his daughter.

In the shearing shed, standing before her father, Rebecca couldn’t take it any longer. The words came in an angry burst and her face contorted with grief as she shouted at him. The rest of the shed blurred around her and she raged at his face.

‘No wonder Mum left you! You can’t see it, can you – you’re going to lose the lot!’

‘Shut your self-important little mouth and get out of my sight. You’ll be off the place by lunchtime or I’ll shoot all of your wretched dogs. I’ve had it with you.’ She felt his fingertips press angrily into the flesh of her shoulders as he shoved her towards the doorway. Shocked by the violence of his touch, she half stumbled down the steps. She looked up at her father and wanted to shout at him, but no sound came. Mossy trotted to Rebecca’s side and whined. Rebecca looked into her father’s unblinking eyes. There was cold in them. Even hate. She knew he meant it. Their frequent clashes since she was a child meant

she had turned to the mountains, the soil, the plants and that beautiful river for happiness and strength. Deep down she knew her father resented her because she had a passion and a connection with the land that he never seemed to grasp, even after years of farming. She became absorbed in the world of her dogs. She trained them, loved them, talked to them, studied them. She peered deep into their brown eyes and reached their souls. Her dogs were a way of escaping her father's seething undercurrent of anger and his inability to show her love.

Now that her mother, Frankie, wasn't here to place a calming hand on her father's shoulder, she knew she had to go. She turned from his eyes and ran away from the shed. Mossy trotted after her and leapt up to lick at her hands in an offer of comfort.

Bec was almost wailing as she threw clothes into a worn rucksack in her bedroom. The sobs jarred and caught in her throat. She ran down the stairs and out of the darkness of the house. Bundling her bags and swag into the back of her old Subaru ute, she motioned for her three dogs to jump in the back. They looked at her with worried eyes as she clipped each one onto the short chains. Shaking hands turned the key in the ignition. Her sobs turned to strangled screams of anger and she pounded the dashboard with her fists as she drove. She'd been at school when her mother had packed up and gone. She wondered if her mother had sobbed and wailed, or just calmly driven off with her proud head held high. Through a film of dust on the rear-vision mirror, Bec saw her father standing with his fists clenched by his side at the door of the shearing shed.

In the paddock next to the driveway her black mare tossed her head and galloped along the fence line beside the Subaru. When the ute shuddered over the grid, the mare propped at the last minute and skidded to a halt just inches from the splintery strainer post.

From the road along the hillside, Rebecca couldn't bear to

look at the sleepy green valley below. It tore her heart out to leave her river. Waters Meeting. Her place.

Harry had watched his daughter as she jogged away from him towards the large stone house on the rise. Her light-footed dog had danced at her heels, looking up at her. How many times had he seen her swipe away the tears like that? He could still see her as an angry red-faced child screaming at him after he had said no.

No, she couldn't come mustering on the High Plains. No, he wouldn't drive her to a dog trial. No, he just wouldn't. No. When Harry said no, she would run to her grandfather, who said yes. The feelings of guilt flooded Harry. Guilt over only half loving his family and his farm. He had always been too busy for Bec. He had spent his days brooding in the machinery shed. Lingered around the homestead to avoid his father. Driving the tractor for hours sowing a crop, not dreaming of the rich green shoots which might come with rain, dreaming instead of being someplace else, of being an engineer or an architect, even a pilot. Not here, trapped on the farm, living under the same roof as his father.

Never had he heard a kind word or any praise from his old man. They were cattlemen. They were farmers. Nothing was said. As a young man, when Harry pushed the cattle too hard and they came tonguing into the yard with saliva stringing from the sides of their mouths and steam rising from their backs, Harry's father turned his back in disgust. The natural stockmanship that could never be learned had skipped a generation. It wasn't in Harry. His father made him feel he was an outsider in his own home, but he had nowhere else to go. Harry was the only son and his predetermined role in life was to take on the farm. It was just the way it was.

Harry had watched Rebecca slam the house gate and stomp through the leafy green garden. She'd marched onto the verandah and disappeared inside the old house. Squinting, he had looked for her in her room on the second storey, then

closed his eyes and sighed. What was it about his daughter that made him so angry? Why couldn't he give her a chance?

Suddenly he heard his dogs bark excitedly outside and he remembered the ewes in the yard. Harry rushed through the shed and out into the glaring sun.

'Friggin' dogs.'

Like well-fed wolves the dogs toyed with the sheep simply for the sport of it. They worked the sheep back and forth until they were tight on the rail. Some of the weaker ones were down, smothered by the weighty push of the mob. Standing on his hind legs, Mardy mounted a sheep which was jammed against the rail. He gripped his white paws around its hips and thrust his puppyish pelvis towards it. His eyes glazed over with pleasure and his pink tongue dangled.

As Harry came near, the older dogs dispersed, slinking through rails and out of sight. Young Mardy continued to thrust at the sheep.

'Git out of it. Ya dirty mongrel!' Grabbing a fistful of fur and puppy skin, Harry yanked the dog away from the sheep. The pup grovelled at Harry's feet, wagging his tail frantically and widdling all over himself and Harry's boots. Harry stooped and picked up Mardy by the scruff of his neck. He slammed the pup's body into the ground so hard that his yelp was more like a strangled cry as the air was forced from his lungs.

'Git out of that!' he yelled and shook the dog again before tossing him over the yard fence like a split log on a wood heap. Mardy rolled twice in the dust, found his feet, then cowered and scampered away under the shadowy shearing shed, tail jammed up to his belly.

Harry had still been shaking mad when he'd returned to the experting room to set the drench-guns up for the day. The white liquid had sped along the clear plastic pipe as he'd squeezed the nozzle of the gun. He'd set a higher dose, as the ewes were looking heavy. Trying to ignore the fact his hands were shaking, he'd slung the drench-pack over his back and

just then heard the engine of Rebecca's ute fire and turn over with a grumble. He'd glanced towards the entrance of the shed where the bright sun lay in a square on the wooden boards. Dumping the pack he'd moved to the doorway to look for the ute. All her dogs were on. Her swag too. The little white vehicle had buzzed over the house paddock grid and sped past where he was standing. As she'd fled by, Harry had seen her profile. Her jaw clenched tight, her pretty mouth twisted with anguish. Rebecca hadn't even slowed at the second grid as she roared down the road with a trail of dust flying up into the air.

She was leaving. She was really going. He didn't think she would. Like his wife Frankie, he didn't think she would. They were both such bright sparks, mother and daughter, both so full of laughter and ready for fun. They always had a joke to fill in the angry gaps Harry created in the huge broody homestead. Frankie and Bec had all the words. It was Frankie who always did the talking for her boys. Like an interpreter she would bridge the gap between Harry and Mick and Tom. On the day she left she ranted to him about his lack of love, and all the while, trapped in Harry's mind, were words which would not come out. He'd wanted to say, 'Don't go, Frankie.' He'd wanted to talk it through. He loved her. He would sell up for her. But the words wouldn't come. The words never came. He just stood still and watched his wife drive away. On a grey Monday morning, she simply drove away and left him there. With the kids and the farm and the huge gaping hole that was his life. And of course, with the silence that remained.

His fists clenched by his side, Harry's body began to shake in slow waves. A hoarse expulsion of air from his lungs turned into shuddering sobs. He put a big hand to the splintery door-frame to steady himself and covered his eyes as if to ease the shame. The shame of hurting Rebecca so much. The shame of crushing his sons. He was losing his family. Losing his land. He slowly walked down the rickety shearing shed steps and

sat on the bottom one with his head in his hands. From under the dark grating he saw two frightened brown eyes staring out at him. Gently he whispered, 'Here, pup. Come here, Mardy. I'm sorry, mate.'

Mick and Tom sped towards the yards on the muddied four-wheel bike. From over Mick's shoulder Tom could see his father halfway down the race, jammed thigh-deep in sheep. Mick parked the bike in the shade of a twisted old red gum and waited for Tom to get off the back. Tom could tell from the way his father handled the sheep that he was in a stinker of a mood.

Head bowed, Tom walked towards the end of the race and bent to grab the plastic straps of a drench-pack.

'Getting through them, Dad?'

'I'd be getting through them a lot faster if you two had got here sooner.' Harry pushed the metal nozzle into the mouth of the sheep and gave it a shot of drench. Its teeth rattled against the gun as Harry roughly withdrew it and shuffled forward to reach for the muzzle of another ewe. He wouldn't look at his son, but Tom had seen. He was too afraid to ask why his dad's eyes were red and his face drawn and grey. He wanted to say, 'What's the matter, Dad?' But you never said things like that to Harry. Tom could talk to him about the weather, or the river, or the price of wool and beef, but never feelings. Not with Harry.

Tom slung the backpack onto his broad shoulders and went to the drafting gate end of the race to make a start on the ewes. It was hard to believe his father had been crying. It shocked Tom.

Mick leaned against the rail, arms folded across his broad chest, not noticing his father's mood. Mick had modelled himself on his father. He used his height and size to make his presence felt, not his words.

'Where's Bec? She could muster the next mob while I get started on the cultivating,' Mick said.

'She won't be mustering today. Now get going. We'll be through these by the time you get the next lot in.'

Mick shrugged off his father's gruffness and ambled towards the bike. Tom clenched his jaw. She's been fighting with Dad again, Tom thought. Typical.

Tom had to wait until after lunch to look for his sister. In the kitchen he pushed the dry crust into his mouth and stood up to leave. He looked over to his father and Mick.

Mick was slouched at the massive wooden table which stood in the centre of the room. An old-fashioned cedar clock ticked loudly from a high mantelpiece behind him. The pendulum swung behind golden rushes painted on glass. Mick bit noisily into a carrot and chewed slowly as his eyes scanned the classified ads in the machinery section of the newspaper.

Harry didn't spend much time in the kitchen since Frankie had left for the city. He used to sit where Mick was sitting now. Instead, Harry spent his lunchtimes in the glass sunroom which had been added to one end of the kitchen. Frankie had insisted it be built to let some light into the old house. She'd demanded it when they were first married and it had at last been built when the children were in primary school and after Harry's mother had died. The room was made of glass set in steel frames, with a large sliding door opening out into the leafy old garden. Over the years grapevines and wisteria had covered the structure, bringing the view of twisted green climbers, grapes and drooping purple flowers into the house.

Tom looked at his father in there now. He remembered when he was a child sitting in a patch of sun in the brand-new room. He was home from school, sick with the chickenpox. Frankie had spread out big sheets of butcher's paper and crayons on the slate floor.

'There you go, Tom. Have a go at these. You could find your calling. You never know.' When Frankie came back in and saw the swirling colours of fish, an ocean garden and a

castle under the sea, tears came to her eyes and she put her hand to her mouth.

As a child Tom had always wondered why his drawings made his mother cry. Later, when he was much older, he realised that she was stunned by his artistic talent and at the same time devastated that his future would be determined by his father.

That day, when Harry had screwed up his son's drawings and shoved them in the woodstove, was the day Frankie had begun to loathe her husband's need to dominate his children. It was the day she'd realised he would repeat the pattern of fatherhood that he had learned. It had filled her with a quiet, endless fear.

Harry now lay back on a cane couch beneath the leafy ceiling. Rural newspapers, letters, bills and torn envelopes were scattered around him. A china plate covered in crumbs and a browning apple core sat next to a half-full mug of tea on the slate floor. His feet, clad in rough woollen socks, were crossed at the ankles, his brown arms folded over his slim stomach. An *Australian Farm Journal* magazine covered his face as he dozed.

Tom stared at his silent brother and father. Peas in a pod. Since Frankie had left, the task of cleaning up the kitchen had fallen on Rebecca and Tom. Mick always seemed to worm his way out of anything to do with housework or stock work. But Bec and Tom liked it like that. They gave each other comfort. But sometimes in the dark, in his room, Tom pulled angrily at his hair. He wanted his mother back. He felt guilt over Rebecca. He leant on her to mother him. Some nights he cried for his mother, on other nights the anger towards her raged inside. Voices in his head. Angry, wailing voices.

In the sunny kitchen, Tom sank his teeth deep in the white flesh of an apple and shut the kitchen door behind him. He needed to find Rebecca.

The concrete on the back step felt cool through his jeans as

he sat and pulled his boots on. The ginger cat smudged its stripes against Tom's back.

'There are two places to find her when she's cracked it like this,' he said to the cat.

'Come on, Ginge. Let's go find her.' He set off down the path. The cat sat and watched him walk through the garden gate and down an embankment towards the river.

He expected to find her at the river, throwing sticks to her dogs. He visualised her small frame and long blonde wavy hair stuffed under a cap. He saw her in his mind standing there with a vague smile, tossing sticks into the slow-moving water. But this afternoon she wasn't on the riverbank.

He walked to the side of the house. A clump of peppertrees shaded a line of hollow logs. He remembered the fight Rebecca had had with their father over the kennels. She hadn't wanted to put her dogs in the run with Harry's pack of barking cross-bred and inbred dogs. She'd wanted her dogs nearer the house so she could teach them to be quiet. Her father had said no and called her a dog snob, but she'd moved her dogs there anyway. At night Tom would sometimes hear her open her bedroom doors and step barefoot onto the verandah to speak gently to her three dogs.

This afternoon at the kennels none of Bec's kelpies danced on the end of their chains or whipped up clouds of dust with their tails. The chains lay in the dirt and a wind blew up and whispered in the dark pines which shut out the sun. Tom looked up at the house to the second-storey verandah and pictured his sister leaning with her elbows on the white wooden rails, her long hair blowing gently in the breeze. Without her dogs here, Tom knew she was gone. He could feel she had left Waters Meeting. It was the same cold feeling he'd had when his mother had gone. He jogged to the house and opened the heavy front door, tearing cobwebs away as the door swung open.

In the musty dark of the jumbled office Tom quickly dialled his mother's number. He glanced at the office door while he

waited for an answer. If his dad caught him using the phone in the middle of the day to speak long-distance to his mother, he'd hit the roof. At last he heard his mother's efficient but friendly voice on the answering machine.

'Hi, you've called Dr Frankie Saunders, leave your name and number and I'll get back to you. If it's an animal emergency please call our North Road surgery on 87 34592 . . .'

Tom waited for the beep.

'Mum. Tom here. I think Dad and Bec have had another fight again. This time she's taken all her dogs. She's probably headed to your place so when she gets there tonight, give me a call. Thanks, Mum. Bye.'

Tom hung up and went back to the kitchen to take some chops out of the freezer for tea. Mick and Harry were still in the same position as when he'd left them. They said nothing and didn't look up when he came into the room. Despite the glaringly bright day outside, Tom felt the darkness of the house wrap around him. It covered his shoulders and pressed down on the back of his neck. He shut the kitchen door quietly and climbed the stairs in the hallway.

On his bed, Tom curled up and hugged his legs to his chest. 'Stop it,' he told himself sternly.