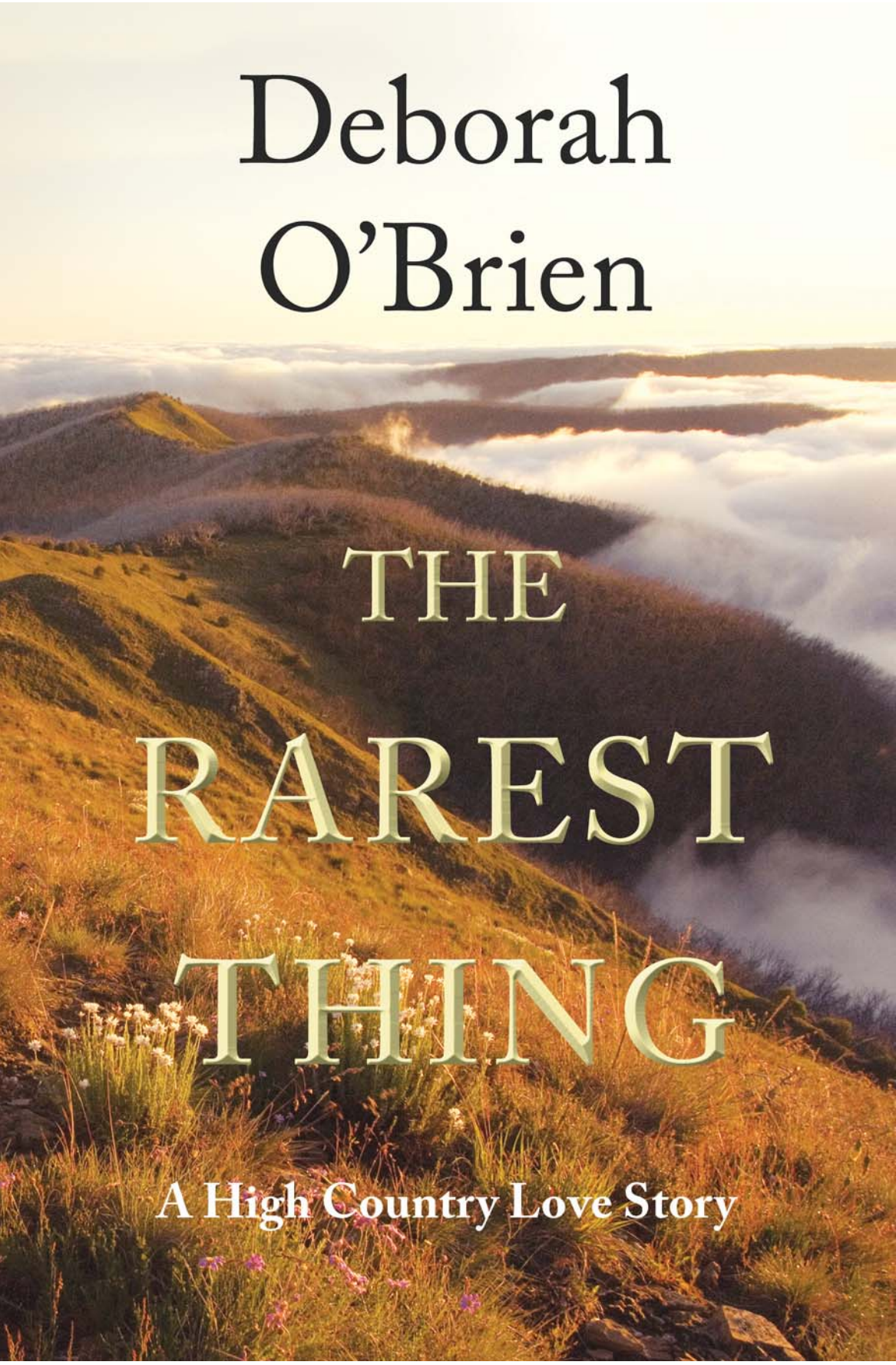
Deborah
O'Brien
THE
RAREST
THING
A High Country Love Story

THE RAREST THING

Inspired by a true event.

THE RAREST THING

Deborah O'Brien

LOMANDRA PRESS SYDNEY

First published 2016 by Lomandra Press
www.lomandrapress.com.au

LOMANDRA PRESS SYDNEY

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Creator: O'Brien, Deborah, author.
Title: The rarest thing / Deborah O'Brien.
ISBN 9780994634603 (paperback)
Subjects: Romance fiction.
Mountain pygmy possum--Victoria--Fiction.
Victoria--Fiction.
Dewey Number: A823.4

Adult Fiction

Cover Photographs: © The 4WD Guy
Map and illustrations: © Deborah O'Brien

Typeset in Adobe Caslon 11.5/17pt by Lomandra Press, Sydney.
Proudly printed in Australia by Ligare Book Printers via Inscope Books.

In memory of my mother,
and for WGH.

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‘To live is the rarest thing in the world.
Most people exist, that is all.’

Oscar Wilde

Prologue

A beach south of Sydney
March 1941

It's my favourite kind of morning – a pink one. The rosy sky matches the ocean so perfectly that you can't see where one ends and the other begins. The beach is empty, except for my father and me. With his Panama hat set at a rakish angle and a pipe clenched in his mouth, Dad strides along the sand towards the distant headland while I follow in his wake, breathing in the spicy aroma of pipe smoke mixed with the tang of salt and seaweed. This is my first fossicking trip, just the two of us.

At the end of the beach a rock shelf marks the margin between land and sea.

'Watch out for the mossy rocks, Kathy – they're slippery,' my father says, taking my hand firmly in his.

We pass a lone fisherman, perched so close to the edge that I'm afraid he's going to fall in. Every time a wave breaks I hold my breath, but the fisherman stands his ground. Keeping close to the cliff, we negotiate our way along the sandstone platform, skirting shallow pools lined with tiny shells and strange plants which resemble strings of beads. Suddenly Dad comes to a stop and starts to examine the rippled rock face.

'This is the place,' he says in such a solemn tone he might be

Moses announcing we've reached the Promised Land.

'The place?' I ask, shading my eyes from the morning sun as I gaze up at him.

He's wearing the blue roll neck jumper that Mum made for him, and I can't help thinking how handsome he is with his glossy dark hair and matching moustache. Over his shoulder hangs a leather satchel. On weekdays the satchel is his carpenter's tool bag. Today it's something far more exciting.

'What a treasure trove,' he sighs, running his hand over the rock. 'See this little creature, Kathy – it's a brachiopod. Probably been embedded in the rock for two hundred million years. By the way, how many noughts in two hundred million? If you can get it right, we'll have potato scallops on the way home.'

Dad knows I adore potato scallops. Desperate to come up with the correct answer, I picture the numeral in my head and count the noughts on my fingers: 'Two before the first comma, then three, and another three makes eight!'

'You're a chip off the old block, Kathy Wynter,' he says, opening the flap of his satchel and removing a pair of leather gloves and aviator glasses which he dons like a surgeon preparing for an operation.

'Chip off the old block, get it?' he says, as he produces his trusty rock pick from the bag.

I start to giggle. My father can always make me laugh even when I'm feeling sad, but today I'm as carefree as the seagulls swooping overhead.

'The pointed tip is perfect for cutting into siltstone,' Dad says, holding the pick aloft. Then he begins to chip away at the rock surrounding the fossil. Ping, scratch, scrape. I'm mesmerised by the process. Eventually he extracts a thin piece of stone and dusts it with a small brush.

'This is your first fossil,' he says, presenting it to me. 'We'll clean it up properly when we get home.'

'Can I keep it in my room?'

Dad chuckles. 'Only if you hide it from your mother. You know

what she thinks of my fossil collection.' He adopts a high-pitched voice: 'Dirty old dead things – they give me the creeps.'

We both laugh conspiratorially. Mum won't allow any of Dad's fossils in the house. That's why my father has built a display case for his specimens in the shed. Sometimes I'm allowed to remove a trilobite from the case and hold it for a while, an ancient creature preserved in stone like an X-ray picture.

'Dad, do you think I could be a fossil hunter one day?'

'I don't see why not, but you mustn't tell other people. Especially your mother. She wouldn't approve.'

'Because I'm a girl?'

'I'm afraid so. Nobody expects a girl to be interested in palaeontology.'

'Is that another name for hunting fossils?' I ask.

'It's the official name. They came up with it in the nineteenth century when people first took an interest in fossils. But whatever word you choose,' he says with a sly wink, 'it's not a ladylike pastime.'

Then he tells me to close my eyes and put out my hands. I do as he says, scrunching my eyes and waiting eagerly.

'All right, you can open them now.'

In my palms I find child-sized goggles and a small pair of leather gloves.

'This is the best present ever,' I say truthfully.

'Better than a Shirley Temple doll?'

'Much, much better.' I do like Shirley Temple, but I've never been fond of dolls.

Dad places the goggles over my eyes, checking that the arms fit properly. 'I bought an adult pair of motorcycle goggles and re-soldered them to fit you. Now put on your gloves. We don't want any scraped knuckles, or I'll be in trouble with your mother.'

Once I'm ready, he gravely passes me his rock pick as though it's Thor's hammer. The implement is surprisingly heavy and I'm not sure I'll be able to use it, but I'm determined to try. Dad points to another brachiopod locked in the cliff face. Part of its shell is

missing. Perhaps it met a nasty end all those millions of years ago. Anyway, in its imperfection, it's rather sweet. Gingerly I begin to dig into the sandstone while Dad reminds me to keep plenty of space around the fossil. From time to time he adjusts my grip. After a while I establish a gentle rhythm, chipping away at the surface and steering clear of the fragile creature embedded in the soft rock. I glance over at my father, seeking his approval.

'You'll make a fine fossil hunter, Kathy. Most beginners hack the stone to pieces, but you understand the value of patience. Patience is the backbone of palaeontology,' he adds with a grin.

Another fossil joke – my dad is the master of silly puns. I continue tapping until the sliver of rock is almost detached. Then Dad takes over for the final stage, removing the brachiopod and its stone framework, all in one piece.

As the sun rises higher in the sky and the beach starts to fill with people, towels and umbrellas, we sit on a rock, sipping tea from Dad's thermos. He teaches me to pronounce 'palaeontology' and I practise saying it five times quickly. Oh my goodness, it's a tricky word.

'When we get home, I'll show you how to spell it,' Dad promises. 'But now it's time to go.'

'Can't we stay for a while and dig out some more fossils?'

'No, Kathy,' he says in a serious voice, 'the tide is coming in and it's far too dangerous. Besides, we won't be removing anything else from this cliff. It's important to leave things for the future. After all, they've been here for eons.'

I'm not sure what an eon is, but it sounds like forever.

'But you'll take me fossil hunting again, won't you, Dad?'

'Of course I will. We'll go to other places and have new adventures. Lots and lots of them.' He takes my hand and we head back along the beach. The brachiopods are wedged safely in my pocket. Above us the sky has turned a brilliant cloudless blue.