

fiction special

THE COWRA BREAKOUT

Virginia Lloyd

EMILY LOOKED AT her watch again. She had probably checked it more than a dozen times in the few minutes she had been standing in the chill of the arrivals lounge at Sydney Airport, watching strangers rush into the arms of lovers and family members. Reeling from the battle with January heat she had fought to get here, Emily was desperate for water. But she was too nervous to move, waiting for the stranger to call her own.

The plane had landed less than 20 minutes earlier. He must be in the customs queue by now, she thought. She wondered if Australia's notorious border guards would pick on a tall, bespectacled young man with a bald head. If they were searching his luggage and discovering not drugs, but a copy of Dante's 'Inferno'.

As Emily adjusted to the cool air, her pulse quickened, imagining the worst. Alberto wouldn't recognise her. Or he would recognise her, and she would catch a fleeting look of disappointment as he realised she wasn't as attractive as he had thought. Then again, she had not seen him in four months. Would he look the same as she remembered? Or would he appear completely different, being so far removed – geographically, culturally – from the spectacular context in which they had met? Take away the lonely tourist's romantic impressions of Tuscany's vineyards, its centuries-old towns curated for daytrippers, and the luxury of having no daily routine, and what was left? A divorced lawyer in her mid-thirties who could find no one to travel with, and a 30-year-old Italian writer who worked odd jobs and lived with his mother.

In Italy, it wasn't so unusual for a grown man to live with his mother.

All Emily knew for certain was that Sydney was a long way from Siena, and

that Alberto would walk into the arrivals lounge, if not her arms, any minute. Then he was standing in front of her, all six foot three of him, broad shoulders and olive skin. He looked so young. The few years that separated them, irrelevant in Italy, suddenly felt like a generation.

"Hello Emily, how are you?" His perfect teeth were revealed in a grin both shy and triumphant. "You look very nice." He looked steadily at her as he said it, and she wilted even as she felt lifted by his gaze. She had forgotten the way he pronounced her name, which made it sound sophisticated rather than uptight. "It's good to see you," she said, struggling with a suddenly foreign tongue. They hugged awkwardly.

Walking through the automatic doors they received a wave of heat as intense as the blast from a furnace. "Oh my god!" Alberto said, visibly shocked. Emily had momentarily forgotten the conditions outside, but Alberto intuitively struggled with the heat like a newborn disoriented by the foreign and hostile territory into which he had been delivered.

"It is very hot. It is every day like this?" His hazel eyes were wide with incredulity, but already blinking from the grit in the thick airport air. "I know, yes it is, I'm sorry," she said, uselessly apologetic. "We have a heatwave this week, and there is a high risk of fire. We have a drought – you know the word drought? – and everywhere is very dry. But I have to tell you, it will be even hotter in Cowra," she added. "Really? Cowra is hotter than this? Wow." Alberto loosened the top button on his dark-green polo shirt, and Emily caught a peek at the top of his chest. That tiny triangle of smooth flesh was all she had seen of it so far in their limited acquaintance. She fumbled in her bag for the car keys and wished her apartment was air-conditioned. It was hard to feel sexy when it's too hot to move.

Emily had fled to Italy to mark the official end of her marriage to Jack, a celebrated barrister with an opinion on everything whether you wanted to hear it or not. Despite having left him two years earlier, the completion of paperwork regarding their divorce had triggered feelings of sadness as well as relief. It was only recently Emily had come to suspect her long hours in the office were not simply because she loved her work, but the sublimation of another kind of passion.

Friends noticed the lightness in Emily's step when she returned from Italy, and she was keen to confess her holiday crush. Her dilemma lay in explaining how she met Alberto. It seemed a peculiarly 21st-century conundrum that to admit having found her Italian friend online prior to her trip and arranged a meeting – as if he were a one-day wine tasting tour Emily could purchase in advance – would be less embarrassing than to admit they had actually met on a one-day wine tasting tour, during which Alberto was the tour guide and Emily the sore-thumb singleton. Her friends giggled at the idea of her holiday fling, "getting back on the tour bus, so to speak!" as one indelicately put it, and soon thought no more about it.

But their impression of her relationship with Alberto – if Emily dared call it that – was imperfect at best. Her friends did not know Emily had been in email contact with him for the past four months. They did not know she was driving him home from Sydney Airport, and hoped for something

POW camp, although her familiarity was limited to the dramatic breakout staged by its Japanese prisoners in 1944. He had explained he was just beginning to research the life of his great-uncle, in order to write a novel based on what he discovered. One thing he did not expect to find was an Australian willing to play long-distance research assistant when she returned home.

Alberto emailed her questions, and Emily began making inquiries the old-fashioned way, by telephone and postal mail. Despite the demands of her job, Emily considered these investigations a meaningful diversion. She felt confident her efforts would not be in vain, given that Alberto already had one book published. Within weeks she had located a former guard of the camp, alive and well in a leafy northern suburb of Sydney; a former POW, who had stayed in Australia after the war and become a wealthy agriculturalist; even an elderly woman, now in charge of the Cowra Historical Society, who remembered waving at the handsome young soldiers as they rattled past her childhood home on army trucks. They all inquired when Alberto would be visiting.

Like most of his university-educated friends in Siena, Alberto worked in the jobs that were available, which required no qualification more formal than the ability to read. "Tuscany is a beautiful shop window," he had said over dinner, in between mouthfuls of the most delicious pizza Emily thought she had ever tasted. "Beautiful if you're a tourist, not so much

there was more to his interest than a field trip in a summer heatwave to the heart of New South Wales.

"Wow, this is really nice," he said as they walked inside Emily's Paddington apartment. Though she had been renting it for a couple of years, Emily considered it transitional – the place she lived between her old life with Jack, and her new life as a divorced woman.

"This is your room," she said, indicating the guest room. Emily hoped she and Alberto would be sleeping together tonight, but she prepared the spare bed as if she had never entertained an impure thought about him. "Oh, okay," he said and put down his bags. "There's a towel in there for you, too. Would you like to take a shower?" Alberto nodded and Emily breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she had a few minutes to collect herself while he washed off the greasy combination of sweat and long-haul travel. She poured two glasses of riesling and hoped she didn't smell too funky herself. She kept changing position on the couch, trying to look more formal, less formal, casual rather than expectant. Emily heard the shower stop running and knew he would soon be near her again.

Alberto sat beside her on the couch and picked up his wine glass, gulping it like water. Emily started to relax at the thought he was nervous, too. The riesling wouldn't help his dehydration, but it might ease his nerves. In less than a minute he put down his glass and reached for her hand. "Emily—" he began. "I know," she said, smiling shyly, although she didn't quite know what she meant, or what he had intended to say, or what might happen next. Only hoped. She wished she could be more forward at a time like this. But for Emily there never had been a time like this, outside the pages of a novel.

The second before Alberto pulled her toward him lasted an age, but when at last they began to kiss, their lips spoke of their mutual surprise, anticipation and excitement; of their dual sense of familiarity and strangeness with each other; of the understanding that this embrace acknowledged both a beginning and an inevitable farewell.

The temperature in Cowra was over 40 degrees every day they spent there, but Alberto's olive skin responded to

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more than the one lingering kiss they had shared in Siena at the end of dinner following the tour. And they certainly did not know she would soon be driving him to Cowra, in the central west of New South Wales, to visit the only POW camp ever established in Australia. It was at this camp that Alberto's great-uncle Matteo had spent six years during World War II, one of the hundreds of Italian soldiers deployed on local farms to sow and reap the crops of Australian farmers who had gone to war.

Alberto had almost run the little tour bus off a winding hillside road when he discovered Emily knew of the Cowra

if you need to earn money." Emily felt self-conscious about the well-paid job that allowed her to be dining out in Tuscany with a local who survived on tips and a minimum wage. But over the past few months Alberto had saved enough to buy a ticket to Sydney, and meeting her had made the possibility of such a journey real for the first time. Between Emily and his mother, Alberto was saving on his accommodation costs, and Emily was amused to realise she didn't mind. As much as she wanted it to be the case, Alberto had probably not travelled across the world just to see her. But she hoped

the sun like a ripening fruit. Notebook in hand, he wandered through the POW camp in amazement at the remnants of sleeping quarters and ablutions blocks, the orange earth, the kangaroo droppings. Emily, whose skin burned despite her best efforts, longed for and dreaded the four-hour drive home. Despite Cowra's relentless heat, each day she spent with Alberto was one more day removed from the reality of their impending separation. He was enchanted by all he surveyed – the people she had found for him to interview, the local museum, and the camp itself – but when she looked around, all she saw were stumps of concrete, shimmering heat and dust. A prison.

For three nights in a row, they tried to stay cool drinking beer at the Cowra Pub, but soon retreated to the hotel, which had air-conditioning and the privacy they craved. Rain might remain a fantasy in the parched country outside her door, but Emily's drought had broken at last. She embraced Alberto with a passion that was enhanced by knowing it was imperfect, that they could communicate only in simple sentences, and that in a few days' time it would end. She was intrigued by how liberating she found the boundaries of their circumstances, exhilarated at the freedom she felt. If only this were possible with someone who lived in the same city as she did. Perhaps she would start looking outside the squares she worked with. But not for a few more days.

Alberto returned to Siena, to his tour bus and his mother's house, and finished his novel. Eventually he found a publisher, and Emily duly received her copy. It was in Italian, so she hadn't a clue as to the quality of *Matteo's War*, but there was one thing she did recognise: her name on the dedication page. The words were short enough that she could Google a translation. It read: 'For Emily, who made this story possible.' ■



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