

## The Aleppo Pine

Kate Lance (2019)

'Your Basil visited our Bella again last night,' says Desmond, leering.

'You should keep her in, then,' says May and tugs the lead. Retired cattle dog Basil looks at her reproachfully and they continue.

May dislikes Desmond, but his mum is nice and always shows her the latest litter of Bella's pups, usually with Basil's distinctive markings on their velvety round heads.

May walks Basil through the Botanic Park, beneath the great oaks and pines and elms, the messmates and manna gums and soaring mountain ash. She loves the park as much as she loves her widowed dad's farm, where she's planted groves of trees to shelter the soft-eyed cows.

*Brring-brring.* Johnny brakes his bicycle in a rattle of gravel.

'You and your trees, May. Desmond says you only come this way to meet him.'

'No, just the trees, Johnny. See that Aleppo pine? Same as the Lone Pine at Gallipoli. Grows all over the Middle East and might remind you of home when –'

'Be too busy fighting to notice *trees*, May.' He takes a breath. 'Got my orders. We're shipping out tomorrow.'

'Oh ... be careful, Johnny.'

'You'll have Desmond for company.'

'Don't want his company.'

'All the girls do. Fast car, posh job. He said you kissed him the other night.'

'I didn't. Another lie.'

Johnny sighs. 'Well, when the war's over I'll get a posh job too. Had enough of paddocks and bush. Goodbye, Basil, old mate. Look after May.'

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The war drags on. May's dad dies and the bank takes the farm. Johnny is the only one she wants to tell, but she has no idea where he's stationed.

She gets a job in a cafe, but still walks Basil to the park every day. She leans against the Aleppo pine and breathes the scent of its fine green needles.

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The war ends but May doesn't much care. Lately she's been too sad to do anything, but today she forces herself to go walking again. In the park a man in khaki is gazing up at the Aleppo pine.

He turns. 'Hello, May,' he says quietly. 'Where's old Basil?'

'Dead. Hit by a car a month ago. A fast car.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Me too.' She swallows. 'Surprised to see you admiring a tree, Johnny.'

'Got pretty fond of one like this in Crete. Took a few bullets meant for me.' He pats the rough trunk. 'Told it if I ever got back to Korumburra I'd give my regards to its mate here.'

A puppy on a lead yaps. May lifts it up and it licks her, wagging and wriggling.

'Oh! One of Bella's?'

'And Basil's too – look at her head. Reckon he must have had a final fling before meeting his maker.'

'I hope so.' May wipes her eyes. 'Found that posh job yet?'

'Not so posh, but I like it. Forestry Commission. Thought I'd better come home first, get a dog and find myself a girl who understands trees.'