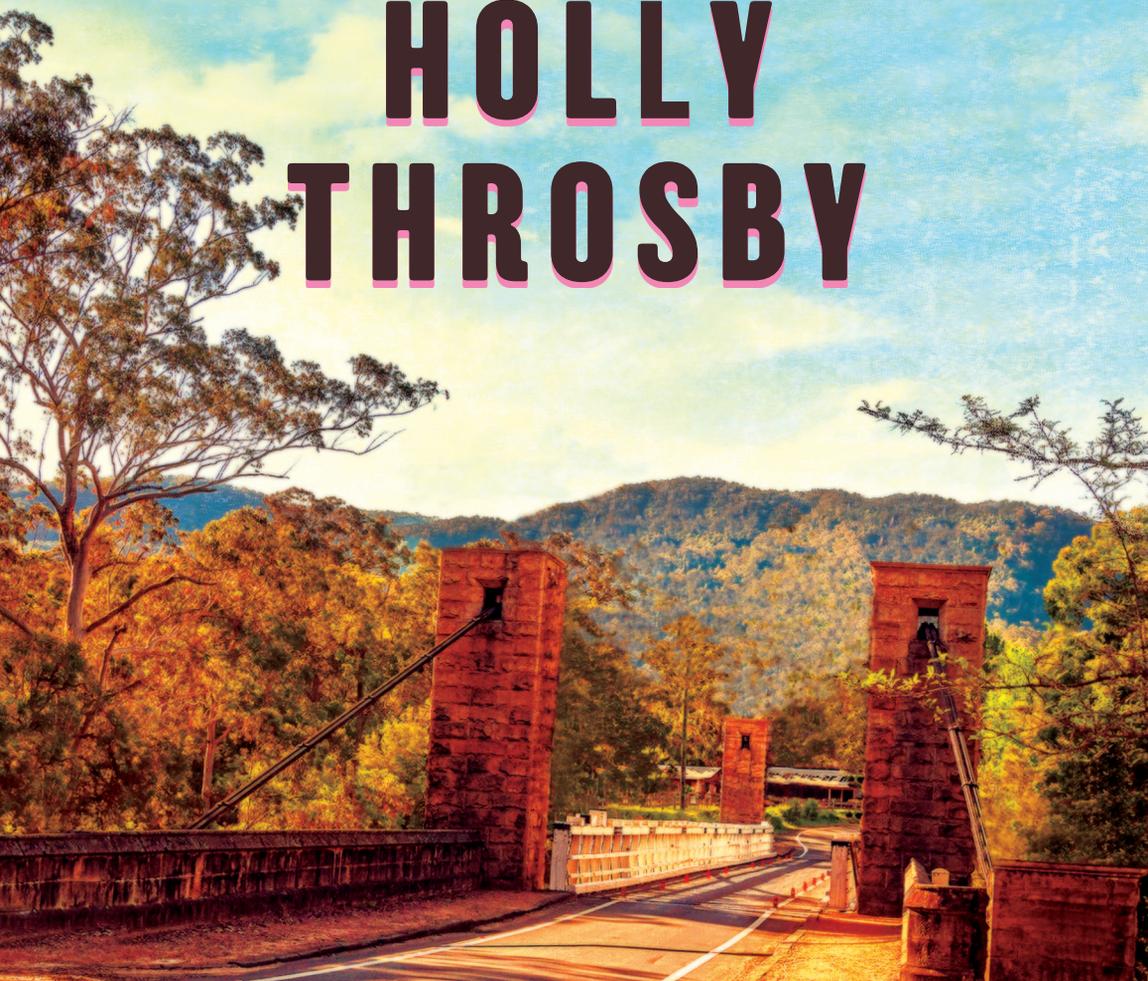


From the bestselling author of GOODWOOD

CEDAR VALLEY

**HOLLY
THROSBY**



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Benny Miller was not the only person to arrive as a stranger in Cedar Valley on the first day of summer in 1993.

A man arrived, too—a calm-faced man in a brown wool suit and a wide-striped tie, clothing too warm for the weather. He strolled down Valley Road, past the hairdresser and a small cafe. A warm wind stirred, carrying with it the faint smell of pies and horses, and the man paused for just a moment before he sat down. Benny Miller would have driven right past him in her station wagon on that bright and brimming day.

Here she was, this young woman Benny Miller, all of twenty-one. She pulled off Valley Road, concentrating on the directions she had committed to mind. A curved street lay before her and Benny eased along it, veering left at the end, two hands steady on the wheel. Wiyanga Crescent, when she reached it, was narrow and short, a cul-de-sac surrounded by bush. She stopped at a weatherboard cottage, double-checking

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the number on the letterbox, and pulled her car into a bricked driveway covered in leaves.

Benny Miller got out and stood straight as a pole. She stretched her long arms and took a moment to look around. Low-slung houses were set apart widely and neat grassy footpaths were lined with flowering trees. Boats and camper trailers sat in faded carports. Cicadas sang in the damp air. Full of apprehension, Benny blinked at the street and then turned to stare at the modest green cottage: her new home.



On that same day—the first of December—the man in a suit arrived too. He made his way along Valley Road, arousing little attention, and he sat down directly on the footpath in front of Cedar Valley Curios & Oldwares.

Curios, as it was known to locals, was a big old shop, as cavernous as a barn. It had a large glass frontage with gold-leaf signage and antiques arranged in the window. Cora Franks, the proprietor, saw the well-dressed man as he sat down and leant his back against the glass. If she hadn't been deep in conversation with Therese Johnson (about the extramarital affairs of Ed Johnson), then Cora would have got up straight away and said, 'Excuse me, sir, but that isn't the best place to sit—there's a bench for that purpose just along in front of the Coiffure.' But Therese was so upset, on the verge of tears, and Cora didn't think it a good time to interrupt.

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Therese left eventually, and an out-of-town-looking lady came in and asked to see some of the watches that Cora kept in the display cabinet. Then Mary Anne arrived and Cora got to chatting. Later, she organised the books on the back shelves, and she tried on some new blouses that had come in as part of a deceased estate, and by that time it was almost five and she had forgotten about the man on the pavement altogether.



Just a few streets away, Benny Miller had gone to the metal letterbox outside the cottage, opened the lid and fetched the key from inside, just as she'd been instructed. She walked along the path through the long grass at the front of the house and went up the steps to the verandah. The whole look of the place was nicer than she had imagined—the weatherboards, the stained-glass windows, the steep slant of the roof—although she hadn't really known what to expect on the drive.

Benny had never been to Cedar Valley before, nor to many other places either. She'd been born and raised in Sydney and was yet to travel—except for a primary school excursion to Canberra and a high school excursion to Jindabyne, both of which had been cold. Her childhood home was a terrace house in Rozelle, with a view of the power station. Her most recent home, up till this morning, was a terrace house in Glebe, a few doors along from the cinema. She'd shared it with three friends she met at university. They were good

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friends, good people, but Benny had always been wary of friends in some deep-down way, and, despite their goodness she had maintained a careful distance, perceptible only to herself. She was so grateful—almost guiltily so—when they had helped her load her car for the drive to Cedar Valley, waving and yelling their goodbyes as she pulled out of the carport and honked her horn, laughing.

But of course the laughing didn't last. By the time the outer suburbs of Sydney had become unfamiliar, a spring of sadness had welled in Benny's chest, along with an ordinary old fear of the unknown, which she did her stoic best to ignore.

Why had Benny Miller come to Cedar Valley? Well that was simple enough. Benny had come on account of Odette Fisher, her mother's old friend. Odette owned this pale green cottage, and had said that Benny could stay there as long as she wanted. The offer had drawn Benny like a magnet. She had quit her job at the pub, handed in her final assignments and sat her exams. Then she had sat in her room in Glebe, listening to Harry Nilsson and packing her clothes into an open suitcase, imagining her new life in a small town with its lonely sophistication.

The fact that Benny had never actually met Odette did not deter her. She had thought about her a great deal. And she knew her face so well from the photographs. Odette and Benny's mother were the closest of friends. Benny had keenly collected pictures of them together and kept them in a

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cardboard box, along with her other treasures. Not a month went by when she didn't look at them, these pictures of her mother, and of her mother with Odette, in various poses: sitting at a bar, standing in front of an old car, leaning against a long wooden fence, their faces fresh and free.

And then Odette's letter had arrived to sit on Frank Miller's kitchen table like a prize.

'It's from Odette Fisher,' said Frank, Benny's father. 'Her name's written on the back.'

He let out a nervous laugh and kept his eyes on the tin of cedar polish he was applying to an upholstered dining chair.

'Your, ah, your mum's friend, Odette Fisher,' he said to the chair.

The letter was addressed formally to Benita Miller, and Benny took it eagerly to read in the car.

'Dear Benny,' it said. 'I am Odette Fisher, an old friend of your mother. I write to say how very sorry I am, Benny, to hear the news. I haven't seen Vivian in some years but of course I am heartbroken. Please, if you need anything would you let me know? I am sure Vivian would want me to check in on you, and I feel awful that we have never met. Perhaps you would consider visiting me where I live in Cedar Valley, approximately two and a half hours from Sydney. It would be so nice to get to know you a little. If you would ever like to talk, do call me on this number anytime'.

A telephone number was written below in an inky pen.

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Benny sat in the driver's seat and held the letter, and then she read it again. Afterwards, she drove back to her house in Glebe, fetched her box of photographs down from the top shelf of her cupboard and sifted through them to find the photos she knew were of Odette.

Then she sat on the floor and laid the pictures in a neat row on the wooden boards.

There was Odette Fisher.

And next to her, there was Benny's mother.

A cold feeling came over Benny, like stepping into snow, and then the old familiar stirrings of yearning and shame. But on that day, something new followed. Perhaps it was something close to excitement—a bustling in her chest. *It would be so nice to get to know you a little.* Benny shut her eyes and balanced, as if on a rope, between strange divergent feelings. Then she lay on her back on the cool floor, stared at the ceiling, and decided that she would call Odette Fisher, just as soon as she'd worked out what she wanted to say. And when she did call, it was in that brief and oddly comfortable conversation that Odette had made the offer: of her accommodation; her time; her company. Benny could feel the warmth in the older woman's voice coming down the phone line. How easy it was to talk with this woman, Odette Fisher.

'That house has been sitting there empty for a year, Benny; I'd be happy to have someone in it. And you could come visit

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me as much as you like. I'm just a ten-minute drive out of town up the mountain. I'd so love to have you around.'



So here she was—Benny Miller in Cedar Valley—standing in her high-waisted jeans and T-shirt on the unfamiliar verandah with a key in her hand, while the well-dressed man on Valley Road was sitting on the pavement.

In one report, he was seen to extend his arm out and then above his head, elegantly, 'like a dancer'; in another he rested his chin against his chest, and then turned his head slowly from side to side, as if stretching the muscles in his neck. There was nothing unsavoury about the look of him. No indication of drunkenness or insanity. He was handsome enough, with kindly eyes, and in 'perfectly good condition', according to Janet Avery, who nursed at Valley Road Family Medical and was quoted later in the newspaper. Everyone who walked past the seated man that afternoon reported his healthy appearance as much as his calm and contented expression.

He just stretched and sat, and stared a little, and sat some more, and at some point—after a good while sitting on the footpath up against the big glass window under the gold leaf letters—he died.