

THE
STEAM MOLE

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an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2012 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover illustration © Paul Young

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16 15 14 13 12 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freer, Dave.

The steam mole / by Dave Freer.

p. cm.

Sequel to: *Cuttlefish*.

ISBN 978-1-61614-692-4 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-61614-693-1 (ebook)

[1. Science fiction. 2. Australia—Fiction. 3. Insurgency—Fiction.]

I. Title.

PZ7.F8788St 2012

[Fic]—dc23

2012025647

Printed in the United States of America

*To Rowena Cory Daniells, Marianne de Pierres, and Garth Nix,
without whom we would not be here in Australia.
Thank you from the bottom of my heart.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've had a fine agent, an excellent editor, and a great cover artist for these books. That's more good fortune than most writers get, and I am grateful to both Mike Kabongo of Onyxhawke Agency and Lou Anders from Pyr books for their advice and patience, and to Paul Young for his covers and Lou, again, for involving me in them. This is my first entirely Australia-set novel, and I want to thank the huge number of people, particularly the islanders, who have made moving here a happy and wonderful thing, and who have helped me to try to understand the culture and people I have written about. Jamie, Pippa, Peter, Russell, Mel and Eric, Bill, Tania . . . and many others who I will be in trouble with for not naming. Thank you all. And as always, thank you to my loyal first readers, and especially to Barbara, who makes my work readable.

CHAPTER 1

“Fire one!” bellowed the controller, dropping his hand to signal the order.

Tim Barnabas pushed his long brass igniter into the hole. He was rewarded by a hiss, a blast of heat, and a deep, stuttering rumble as the vast digging drill head began to turn. The drill heads flashed in the acetylene light of their lanterns in the smoky tunnel.

“Fire two!” called the controller, timing it. The next drill-man inserted his igniter. The rumble grew deeper, the stutter less pronounced. By the time they got to “Fire five,” the drill head was a blur and the rumble had become a grumbling roar. The digging head spun so fast, it, and the rotating drill heads on it, were a silver blur, ready to start cutting the red earth, clay, and shale ahead of the vast steam mole. Despite the heat, Tim pulled the leather earmuffs down over his ears, and his scarf over his mouth, and joined the mole-men heading back for the hatch. The air in the tunnel would be unbreathable soon. Already it was full of dust and smoke.

It was a world away from the coal-fired submarine that had brought him to Australia, but, in some ways, very alike. The crew of the steam mole also had to live in a narrow tube, with no real view out. Only they were underground, tunneling, not underwater.

The physical similarity was about where it ended, however. Tim had loved being a submariner. He was hating being a mole-man.

He was part of a crew, but it wasn't his crew, and he wasn't fitting in. His crew were scattered, and Tim missed them badly—nearly as badly as he missed Clara. He got a rough shove forward

from the foreman. “Get to your station, boong. You blackfellers are all the same, dreaming all the time.”



Clara Calland wasn't sure when the dream of reaching safety in the rebel Republic of Westralia—the part of Australia abandoned by the British when the Melt made it into a desert—had turned into something of a nightmare. It wasn't a real nightmare, more like one of those half-feverish dreams entirely too real to tell from life, where every time she woke she slipped back into the same dream. The *Cuttlefish* had limped into Ceduna under the cover of Westralian rockets. For a brief few hours, life had been pretty good—they'd been home free. From thinking they'd be trapped underwater, with the submarine cracking open like a dropped pumpkin under the water pressure, or, if they did manage to surface, being machine-gunned in the water, to the Westralian cheers as they came in to the quayside.

And then it started getting complicated, as if it hadn't been bad enough before.

Respectful and very complicated: The two hadn't been natural partners in Clara's mind. Nasty and complicated, yes, but she hadn't expected a mix of polite and terrible.

She'd known that reaching Westralia meant the end of her life on the submarine. It meant that she and Tim would probably go their separate ways . . . at least for a time. But she'd started to believe, somehow, that nothing could beat them, that it would only be a matter of time before they could be together.

Right now that seemed too much. Australia was too different—different from the warm wet of Ireland since the Melt, different from the flooded streets and musky damp tunnels of London, and different from the closed-in world of the submarine. Mostly it was the dryness. The air itself had dried up here, as had her supply of friends and people she could turn to for help.

The officers of the Republic of Westralia had taken her and her mother to a lovely bungalow guesthouse. It had broad verandahs and looked out onto Murat Bay over the sand rampart defenses for the huge water desalination plant, smoking away inland of it, and the city of Ceduna, huddled behind the wall.

Mr. Darlington, the big, bluff-faced official from the Westralian government, with his muttonchop sideburns and suntanned face, had smiled at her as they'd been introduced. "Pleased to meet you, Clara. Welcome to Westralia. You look to be about the same age as my daughter Linda. I was just about to pass on an invitation to dinner—erm, you'll find our hours here rather odd. We sleep during the heat, and get up once it starts to cool down. Most people in Ceduna would consider this the middle of the night." He waved a hand at the sash window and the blue of the sky and the sunlit sparkle of the bay. "But I was wondering, as it'll be a rather crusty affair tonight, with nothing much for a young lady, whether you would like to come and take tea with Linda and milady wife. I'm sorry, Dr. Calland, m'wife won't be home with them all of the time tonight, but they're not children that need constant overseeing, eh?" He straightened out the neatly embroidered antimacassar on the back of the Morris chair next to which he stood. "My wife chairs the local Westralian Women's Association, and they have their annual general meeting tonight. She can't miss it! But she will only be away for a couple of hours while we're out—this dinner is unlikely to finish much before one in the morning. I could have my driver come pick the two of you up, bring you to our home, introduce you to my daughter, and then take us on to our dinner at the Clarion. Professor Henderson and a number of other scientists and several industrial people will be there."

Clara had been a bit wary of being parted from her mother in this strange environment. But she didn't want to sound like a baby. Her mother smiled encouragingly at her. "Thank you very much," Clara said in her best St. Margaret's Girl accent. "That would be lovely."

And oddly enough, it had been lovely. Linda proved to be the sort of person Clara had always thought she might like to have as a friend, had all the girls at St. Margaret's not been so set on ignoring someone whose father was in jail, and worse, whose mother was divorced. After a first polite, but slightly uneasy exchange, Linda said something about her stepmother being home soon.

After an awkward moment Clara said, "I'm sorry. Did . . . did your mother die long ago?"

"She's not dead. Just divorced." The way Linda said it struck a chord in Clara. "She's living in Sydney. She didn't like Roxby. Honestly, I sometimes think I should say she is dead."

Without thinking about it Clara had reached out and squeezed Linda's hand, which startled the primly dressed young lady. "I know. I used to get the same back in Ireland. My . . . my parents divorced, too." That this was a paper divorce, designed to protect her, was not something she needed to mention just then.

Linda blinked. "It's like that . . . back in England, too? I heard in America nobody cares."

"Well, I'm Irish." It was odd to say that with pride. "But people treated me as if I had lice because of it. It used to make me so mad. It wasn't *my* fault."

And that was enough to seal the friendship. Within ten minutes Clara had heard a great deal about Linda's mother, stepmother, the other girls in the new school in Ceduna, and life in Westralia, and was soon subjected to an inquisition about her own life.

"Oh, I would love to have been on a submarine! You've had such adventures. All I ever do that's fun is ride. I have my own horse."

Clara had left out a few adventures that she'd rather not talk about yet. "It was fun. I miss it."

"And all those young men . . . My stepmother won't let me alone with one."

Clara blushed. Linda noticed, read it at least partly right, and looked warily around as if scared someone would notice. "A

boyfriend?" she asked in a hushed tone. "Don't tell step-mama, but I've got a beau, too, now. But . . . well, he's a bit older. He keeps asking me to sneak out to meet him, but there's not many places you can go in Ceduna. And I'm not going to Murat beach with him . . ."

The door opened. "So do tell me more about the food on the submarine," said Linda as a plump lady with curls and a kindly smile came into the drawing room. Clara stood and was introduced to Mrs. Darlington. They'd talked, eaten a meal the locals called "tea," and drank tea, which was also called "tea," and then . . . the bell on the telephone-instrument on the wall jangled.

And things started getting far more complicated.

Her mother had been whisked to the hospital, having fallen ill during dinner. Fortunately one of the leading physicians of Westralia had been there. He suspected some kind of tropical mosquito-borne disease. She was in quarantine . . . Dr. Leaming would come and examine Clara shortly. Could she spend the night here rather than go back to the guest house? No, she couldn't see her mother.

The next day Clara had at least got to speak to her mother. It hadn't been comforting. Mother had barely known who she was talking to let alone making any sense. And apparently she'd come out in a rash and was running a temperature. Dr. Leaming came to check Clara once again for any signs of either. Apparently the submarine crew had been checked too.

The Westralians, particularly Linda's stepmother—she wasn't at all the kind of wicked stepmother from the fairy stories, but rather one who tried too hard—had been very kind.

Kind, but not understanding. "Oh, we can't let you go back to the submarine crew, my dear. Not without your mother. It . . . it wouldn't be decent. No, you must stay with us, mustn't she Linda?"

Linda agreed with her stepmother immediately.

And thus the days had dragged on . . . and then things got worse.

Far worse. In an attempt to distract her, Linda and her step-

mother had taken her shopping that day . . . in the pale pre-dawn when Ceduna got most of its work done.

And she'd got the message.

A message from a spy, and a rendezvous she couldn't make.



Linda Darlington was annoyed at being used as a babysitter, this evening of all evenings. With the certainty that her stepmother was going to be out of the house for hours and that her father was going to be at this dinner at the Clarion, she'd been very daring. Nicky would visit her at home. And now . . . well, Father had said she must try and be nice to this foreigner. His idea of "someone your own age" was anything from newborn to about ten. She was, she had to admit, a little curious about life somewhere—anywhere—beyond Westralia. Or Ceduna. "Deadunda," as Nicky called it. He was a clerk on one of the rail companies, and she'd met him quite by accident at Strunkenwight's Lending Library. He'd turned around and bumped her pile of books out of her hands and apologized and picked them up for her. And then, well, he was there every Thursday when they went to change books. He was much older, and quite a catch because of it. Most of the girls at her school weren't allowed beaus. She might not be allowed one either, but she simply hadn't mentioned it.

It took Linda a few seconds to realize that this time at least, her father had been right. It had to happen if only by accident sometimes. Clara was only very slightly younger, and made up for it with a certain degree of assurance. And she didn't set her rules by Ceduna schoolgirls.

Linda had been quite looking forward to having made friends first with someone who, compared to everyone else, knew the world, who understood that your parents having gotten divorced wasn't a disease . . . and had the kind of confidence that the girls at school who ran everything seemed to have.

And then Clara's mother ended up in hospital.

And then something else happened—something Clara wasn't talking about. It was probably her boyfriend.



Tim Barnabas had had quite high expectations of Westralia, mostly thanks to Cookie, the submarine's Westralian cook. Cookie was a good 'un, kind to a hungry young submariner, full of jokes, and decent to work for. Tim didn't mind being up to the elbows in greasy water or any other dirty job. They had to be done, and Cookie did them, too.

Cookie never made Tim feel that he didn't think of him as quite human. That had happened in Westralia, quite a lot, and it was worse working on the steam mole. It seemed the overseer really didn't like "Abos" on his machine, and did his best to make their lives so miserable they left, even though it was hard to get anyone to work on the drilling machines.

Tim staggered along toward the boiler under the weight of the two steam-biscuits he carried to the furnace.

"Get a move on boong-boy!" shouted Shift-captain Vister, swinging his fist against Tim's ear.

"Ouch!" Tim ducked a second blow. "You don't have to hit me. I'm doing my best."

"If you don't like it, you can get out. Go back to your own kind. We don't want you here, anyway."

Tim didn't have his own kind to go to. Not here, out in the middle of the Australian desert. Besides, he wasn't from Australia at all. His "kind" were the submarine crew, and most of them came from Under-London. Tim's father had once come from Jamaica, long ago, before the Melt. "I wish I could," muttered Tim as he swayed down the rattling gap to the conveyor, clanking the steam-biscuits—compressed coal shaped into ovoid perforated slabs—into place in the fire-dropper.

“Aw, next time we stop, take off into the desert. It’s home for the likes of you. Hot as hell out there, which is why you beggars are all burned black,” said the foreman, who was nearly as bad as the shift-captain, only stupider.

As all of them were covered in coal dust, Tim wondered just how he could say that, but arguing only made them worse. The recruiter back in Ceduna hadn’t prepared Tim for this. He’d come to the submarine the day after the *Cuttlefish* had been pulled into the dry dock and Clara had vanished into the Westralian city. He’d come the day after Captain Malkis called them all together to give them the difficult news.

The coal-fired submarine had made it all the way to Westralia with a very precious cargo: a cargo the British Empire had gone to huge lengths to try to capture or destroy. They’d failed, and Captain Malkis and the *Cuttlefish* and her crew had successfully brought Dr. Mary Calland and the secret of ammonia synthesis to safety. It was something that the Liberty, the government that ran Under-London, and had built her submarines, would have backed them in doing.

But right now . . . the ship was broken. They’d had to leave her valuable cargo of nitrates in their drogues on Flinders Island. And though the people from the government of the Republic of Westralia had been glad to welcome the scientist, they weren’t paying the *Cuttlefish* for bringing her to them.

“As you know, gentlemen,” said the captain, “we do have small reserves of gold for paying for expenses. Normally our ventures are profitable, but this time . . . we have no cargo to sell. And the damage to our good ship is extensive, and it will cost us a great deal to repair her. It’s also going to take three to four months. So it will be that long before the boat can leave, and then that’ll only be for a local trip, to Flinders Island to pick up our cargo.”

He looked around at the crew and went on, “The Liberty will of course be good for your wages, but in the short term we’re going to have trouble paying you. Actually, we would find it impossible to

afford food for the crew, and you wouldn't be able to live on the submarine while she's being repaired and refitted. Food is very pricey in Westralia, and accommodation is just not easy to find."

He took a deep breath. "You have been a great crew, and I would hate to lose you. But . . . we have another problem."

There was a long silence. Tim couldn't imagine life now without the *Cuttlefish* and her crew. They'd all been through too much together.

"Nothing that we can't solve, sir," said Lieutenant Ambrose stoutly. "My fiancée says the Westralians are yelling out for labor of any kind in their mines and factories. And they pay well. They have to. Most of the mines provide bunkhouses and food, too. We could do three months and then come back to the boat."

"Too right we could," said Cookie with a grin. "And yer's will all get to see me country a bit. I reckon after a bit of time in the Gibson Mines or the like you'll be glad to be back to me cooking. It's easy to find jobs. There's blokes recruiting all the time. If yer give me shore leave, captain, I'll try to get someone decent and honest to talk to the lads."

Tim had been rather looking forward to the experience then. The recruiter painted a glowing picture, too: free food, bunk-space, and a short contract. And for those crew members the captain had especially commended, jobs in the toughest and best paid service in Westralia: the steam moles.

"They're like land submarines," said the recruiter. "You'd be at home in one, young man. And your captain has given you a glowing testimonial. Good experience for you."

"What's a steam mole?" asked Tim.

The recruiter grinned. "Something like a cross between a tunneling machine on rails and a termite."

The joke fell flat to a boy from the tunnels of a drowned London. "What's a termite?"

"My word! You really don't know?"

Tim shook his head.

“Well, they’re like ants—white ants, people call them. They eat wood, but the sun will kill them, so they make mud tunnels up trees and poles so that they can get to the wood while staying out of the sun. We have to do the same north of the Tropic of Capricorn. It’s so hot in the sun in summer, you can’t sweat fast enough to cool down. So the tracks to the mines up there are covered over. Shallow tunnels, if you like. The steam moles make them. They’re busy with a big push to get a whole new network going, especially to the north.”

Tim liked being in a submarine, and he was used to tunnels. He’d spent his whole life in them, up to the last year. The one rub had been Clara. He wasn’t even sure where she’d gone, or how to contact her. One moment she’d been there, and the next whisked away by the Westralians. She’d promised to come back and see him just as soon as she could.

“Of course you get a week off after every month, back here in Ceduna if you like, if you take a steam-mole job. Most of the mining jobs you’d get a day off a week, and you can’t get away from the mine for that day. It’s too far to travel to anywhere. You’d get a month after twelve months from them, but you blokes aren’t planning to stay that long. Mind you, when you get among that kind of money . . .”

No kind of money was enough to keep Tim from the *Cuttlefish*. But the figure the recruiter talked about was very tempting indeed to a poor boy from the tunnels. He could do a lot with that money. Maybe even think about a snippy girl who took going to university as inevitable.

But all that was before he got to the steam mole, and before he found out he was the only one from the *Cuttlefish* on this machine.

And before he’d found out that they hated him for the color of his skin. He was the youngest and smallest person on the steam mole, and he really didn’t know how he was going to survive for a month, let alone three.

The steam mole was one of two pushing south from the Sheba mine to meet the northbound rail. She'd work for two days then, as the new-cast tunnel needed to set for eight hours, go back along her tracks to the last station. There was a station like this every twenty miles, and a big one every sixty. When the line was complete they'd provide the power station for that section of track. The trains running on the tracks down here wouldn't have locomotives, but would be towed along in the dark by a long, endless steel cable. All the coal smoke and steam could be vented from the power station, leaving the air in the termite tunnel cool and breathable. But the steam moles had to have their own power. While they were building, the air out in the tunnel was full of coal smoke. A long, floppy air hose made of leather stretched back to the power stations, and one of Tim's jobs was to attach new sections to the air pump then wind them in and detach them as the steam mole backed up.

It was hot, hard work, and you risked losing your fingers with every unhook, but it meant he was away from the steam-biscuit line and Shift-captain Vister, so Tim preferred it. It was that or being a greaser on the brass piston fingers of the drill head, and that was noisier and even more dangerous. It was also where the news from outside first came to the steam mole.

"Hear they're upping the contract period from three months to six," said one of the other hose-men to one of his companions. "You're stuck for another four months, Fred."

"Bunch of Welshing b—" swore the other hose-man. "They promised they wouldn't do that. They're tryin' to push to Sheba before the Ogg-Nullabor line. I was lookin' forward to gettin' out of here."

Tim felt as if he'd been dunked in ice water. "But . . . but surely they can't just change our contracts without—?"

"Oh, yes they can, boong-boy," said Fred. "Do anything they please. Only that means they battle to get men to work . . . so they makes it worse for the men who *are* working. Makes perfect blooming sense, really, to some feller in a cool office in Augusta or

Ceduna. And it's not worth breakin' the contract, see. They'll put you in stir."

Tim had been in Westralia long enough to know what "stir" was. Jail. He swallowed, unable to speak.

"Someone gunna have to rein these blooming companies in. Bunch of Ned Kellys," said Fred's mate, angrily tossing down the brass connector. "S'oright for your kind, boong. You can always go bush and they can't find yer."

Tim just stared helplessly at him. Six months? The *Cuttlefish* would be gone by then. And as for "go bush," well, he might just have to. He didn't really know what it meant, but he'd lived out in the wild pipes under flooded London for a day or two.

If he could get back to the submarine in time, he was sure Captain Malkis would hide him and take him away when they left. The awkward part might be ever coming back to Westralia, and he wanted to, as Clara would be here. He'd have to check out the practicalities of it all when he got his time back in Ceduna. Mind you, it had taken two whole days and nights of traveling along the termite track in a jostling, clacking carriage with one dim Bakelite fitting to get here. His week off in Ceduna was going to amount to three days there, and four days traveling.

She was worth it, though, thought Tim. He'd get to see Clara somehow, and talk it over with her.



Jack Calland was dying. He knew this because he'd just seen his wife and daughter. And that, some small, rational part of his mind said, was impossible. He was in Australia, transported in a rusty iron hulk into this hell, and they were in Ireland.

He said so.

"They're in the rebel-held part of Australia," said the tall, slim man in tropical dress whites, who had been holding the picture.

Jack laughed.

That was a bad idea, or so said the excruciating pain that followed.

“Stop that,” said another man, in a cool, dispassionate voice. “You’ll kill him and that would be of no value to us, and I am not going to tell Duke Malcolm that we killed his pawn early. You . . . Martins, take him to the doctor. Tell McLennan I said to fix him up. I need the next letter.”

Jack was vaguely aware of being dragged out into the heat and then back into the shade. And that was all he knew for some time, as he wandered in troubled dreams, looking for, and never quite finding, his beloved Mary and little Clara, catching glimpses of them under the gaslights and in the narrow, sooty streets of Fermoy. Calling to them . . .

When he finally awoke, weak and exhausted but in his right mind again, it was in the palm-thatched “hospital” of Denong prison camp. He was somewhat cloudy as to how he’d got there, but he remembered some things very clearly. He remembered the part about Duke Malcolm and being a pawn not to be killed early.

It had to be true. The hospital, such as it was, and the medical help, such as that was, were for the warders only, not for the prisoners. The prisoners had even fewer facilities, and mostly just died where they fell.

Jack Calland, the Irish rebel, didn’t know what his ex-wife Mary had done to make Duke Malcolm, the feared head of British Imperial Intelligence take a personal interest in her. They’d divorced on anything but amicable terms when he’d been arrested. As far as the Imperial Intelligence Service knew it had been very ugly, and Jack’s value as a pawn there was nonexistent. Of course, he and Mary knew differently. Or at least, Jack hoped and believed that she did. They had a daughter to care for, and if the Imperials had thought his wife might be involved, or might even be sympathetic . . . well, Clara would have been left alone.

For Clara they would both have done anything. And she was their jewel.

Jack was terribly afraid that Duke Malcolm had worked that part out—terribly afraid he might have betrayed something in his delirium. He remembered they'd brought him paper. Made him write. That was all right, Mary knew their code. She'd know that it wasn't something he'd write of his own free will. But the fact that Duke Malcolm wanted him as a lever . . . that was worrying.

It meant he had to do one of two things: He either had to escape, or he had to die.

Only . . . here in the deserts and steaming jungles of Northern Queensland, to escape was to die.

Being Jack Calland, he decided he might as well do that, then.