

Belly of the Beast

Volume One: The Major Work

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Table of Contents

Volume 1: “Belly of the Beast”

Table of Contents	iii
Abstract	v
Declaration of Originality	vii
Acknowledgments.....	0
Prologue	1
Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	6
May 1990	11
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	22
Chapter 5	27
May 1990	28
Chapter 6	32
Chapter 7	36
May 1990	39
Chapter 8	42
Chapter 9	47
November 1990	54
Chapter 10	58
November 1990	63
Chapter 11	69
November 1990	78
Chapter 12	84
Chapter 13	90
November 1990	96
Chapter 14	100
Chapter 15	104
November 1990	108
Chapter 16	111
November 1990	115
Chapter 17	117

Chapter 18	120
Chapter 19	122
November 1990	127
Chapter 20	131
Chapter 21	137
Chapter 22	140
November 1990	147
Chapter 23	150
Chapter 24	154
November 1990	157
Chapter 25	161
Chapter 26	166
November 1990	169
Chapter 27	173
December 1990	176
Chapter 28	180
December 1990	183
Chapter 29	189
December 1990	192
Chapter 30	196
December 1990	200
Chapter 31	203
Chapter 32	205
Chapter 33	209
Epilogue	211

Abstract

Australia and The United States share diverse topography and colonial origins, as well as a rich and varied road writing tradition. In light of these similarities, why do American texts continue to dominate the road story genre? Why is violence a prevalent theme in road stories from both Australia and The United States?

Through the lens of Richard Slotkin's theory of the mythogenesis of the frontier, the exegetical component of the thesis proposes that the circular process of analysis and regeneration of the violent mythology of the frontier in both Australian and American literature has dominated the road writing genre. The triumphant frontier narrative of America and the transcendent failure frontier narrative of Australia repeat in contemporary road writing. Stories written by women and writers from positions of cultural, ethnic, class, religious and sexual difference offer one possibility for the disruption of this process. Australian road stories *Hiam* by Eva Sallis, *All the Birds, Singing* by Evie Wyld and *Floundering* by Romy Ash offer a reimagining of road stories beyond the frontier legacies of racial, sexual and class oppression. Ross Gibson's theory of badlands in Australia, which are narratives set in natural locations which attract more atrocities to occur, informs my approach to the reading of these texts.

The major work, "Belly of the Beast," is a subversion of the traditional Australian explorer narrative. A young pregnant woman embarks on a road journey into the remote outback and finds empowerment and independence through work on a remote cattle station, rather than punishment for her refusal to accept patriarchal control. Protagonist Nico is a contemporary picara in her working class origins and her status as a teen single mother. The sub-narrative of the novel engages with Australian

frontier tropes such as the ‘Aussie battler,’ the hapless colonial explorer and the antagonistic landscape, thus illuminating and disrupting the circular process of the mythogenesis of the frontier and the recycling of cultural archetypes. The frontier legacies of gendered landscape, class divide and oppression of females and racial minorities are reflected and subverted in contemporary road narratives, and my hope is that my own creative piece continues this important work.

Declaration of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Prologue

Nico Race was ten weeks pregnant and not yet showing. She stood at the edge of the hotel car park, an abandoned hub cap at her feet.

‘Hey,’ a local boy called, following her gaze down the deserted highway. ‘They comin back for ya?’

She sighed and picked up her bags.

Lucas would be nothing now, without her. He’d be nothing without his muse, and her lucky left tit (the bigger one), her dirty jokes, her wicked stir-fry on the portable hot plate, her long hair wrapped around his fist in the night like a bandage. Her love. She hoped the next gig was a bomb. The last one was such a dud that Ray had to give his guitar to the manager as payment for their tab.

‘It could be worse,’ the old man had said, holding the guitar away from his body like a fish he’d just caught. ‘The real pissheads will offer up their wives for a beer.’ He’d crooked his finger, forcing Ray to lean closer. ‘Sometimes when the tab runs really hot, they might even give me a daughter.’

The memory of the man brought a fresh wave of nausea. Nico held her palm against her belly and turned to the local boy. She couldn’t see his eyes beneath the low brim of his cap, only his button nose and plump, smirking lips.

‘This is the worst day of my life,’ she told him.

The boy pointed at the pub wall. It was painted with a mural of a giant kangaroo, hopping over a map of Australia.

‘Then make like a roo, and bounce,’ he said.

The kangaroo looked ecstatic, soaring over the country with one great leap.

I’ve been everywhere, man, it said, underneath.

Chapter 1

Once clear of the bus fumes, Nico inhaled deeply. The salty ocean air invaded her body, dissipating all of the dry, red dust. Hunger pains immediately followed. Staring at the hordes of tourists, the ice cream shops and souvenir shops and fish and chipperies, she was overcome with the urge to turn around and get back on the bus.

‘Nicky, is that you?’ a familiar voice called.

A middle-aged woman bearing an eerie resemblance to her sister waved a hand tentatively in the air. Nico stared in bafflement, before realising that Massy had somehow aged ten years, over the course of four.

The sisters did not hug. They surveyed each other silently beneath the bus stop sign. Nico watched as Massy’s eyes swept over her short shorts and exposed stomach, before landing pointedly on her cleavage. *Isn’t little sister all grown up?* Nico thought. She stuck her chest out further, though her bare skin was pimped with cold.

‘How was the trip?’

‘Fine.’

‘You and Lucas finally split?’

The smile dropped from Nico’s face at the force of her sister’s judgment, levelled from beneath the brim of a sexless sunhat. Her feeling of tentative sibling affection promptly disappeared.

‘We’re meeting up in the next town,’ she lied.

Massy inspected the bag handle before picking it up. As she leaned down, Nico noticed the role of fat sausaged around her midriff. The black tracksuit was designed to hide these sorts of flaws: it had delicate gold beading embroidered across

the hips, breasts and arse. As she followed Massy to the car park, Nico ran a hand along her own still-flat belly, and some of her equilibrium returned. This was how it had always been with the two of them. Deep blows followed by surface wins.

‘Aren’t you freezing?’ Massy asked. ‘You’re probably not used to the sea breeze anymore.’

‘I’m fine.’

The wind picked up force, the sudden gust of a north-westerly pushing Nico backwards like she wasn’t wanted.

‘Champion Beach was voted best tourist town in South Australia, last year,’ Massy said.

‘Yeah?’

Lofty green pine trees and apartment blocks loomed overhead, shielding the weak, wintery sun from their skin. Already, Nico missed the outback three-sixty-degree sky, the ever-changing cloud patterns she could read like a book. Here, there were only two kinds of sky: summer pastel-blue or fuzzy winter-grey.

When they reached Massy’s Datsun, Nico was surprised to see a booster chair sitting in the back.

‘I take Donna’s kids on Mondays,’ Massy said, catching her eye.

They didn’t talk about Massy’s struggle to get pregnant. One ovary and a reluctant one at that. Nico was going to have to tell her that she was pregnant first. Without even trying, without even wanting it.

Settling into the passenger seat, she smelled the warm spicy caramel of Massy’s Angel perfume, the same one she’d been wearing since she was twelve years old. Nico wondered if the scent had soaked permanently into her sister’s pores,

so that she secreted Angel naturally from her skin without even needing to spray it on.

As they drove along the foreshore, passing the salmon pink surf life-saving club and the faded, disused tennis courts, the flood of familiarity made her feel hot and claustrophobic, like she was being hugged too tight. Nico closed her eyes. She allowed herself a second, just a second, of pretending she was back on that bus. Not the Stateliner public bus she'd ridden to get here but the tour bus, her real home. Shabby but loveable Frances Farmer, with her faded red velvet curtains and aroma of motor oil and weed.

'Is this ...?' Massy said when Nico turned up the volume. 'The Stabs are on the *radio* now?'

'They've been on the community stations for ages.'

Nico feigned a nonchalant air but secretly she was proud, proud as anything. She'd only heard them on the radio once before.

'They actually sound quite good,' Massy said.

Nico listened to Lucas's howl, Ray's fuzzy guitar and Jimmy's urgent drumming. *Her* band. The band she'd inspired. The band she'd organised, coddled, managed and kept going despite the boys and all of their stupid antics. She knew she should have felt angry at that moment, hearing Lucas's stupid love song. She should have felt resentful; she should have kicked the radio until it fell silent. But even as she thought it her knickers were already wet, in preparation for the post-show fuck that wouldn't happen now.

Weak, just like your mother, Nico thought, squirming in her seat with every cheesy, heartfelt lyric. *Even when you hate him, you still bloody want him.*

People reckon four years is a long time to spend driving around Australia. But they don't understand travel like Nico does. They don't know that the road is elastic, just like time. It contracts and expands depending on where, exactly, you were.

She'd seen some things, on tour. She'd seen a woman's jaw dislocate under the heel of a man's boot. She'd seen the contents of a kangaroo sprayed across the front of the bus. She'd seen a truckload of watermelons roll down the highway like an avalanche. But the things Nico saw only existed in temporary time. In a place she was just passing through, a place where she left no trace of herself. So the things she saw couldn't really touch her.

Nico knew what happened to people when time caught up, when their youth ended and they realised the hours they had left were not infinite. Then, they turned all of their hopes into trying to control time: shape it into something like plasticine, time moulded with the inanity of daily routine. Nico saw what happened when time caught up with her mother. A woman marking time only by her desire to escape it. Nico had seen all of this, and knew without a doubt.

She would never, ever stop moving.

Chapter 2

Nico woke up under attack with a snarling monster inches away from her nose. She threw up her hands, and her sister snorted with laughter.

‘Gotta protect the face,’ Massy said, as Cleo, her poodle, balanced her paws on the windowsill and slowly tongued the glass. Nico reddened as Massy hopped out of the car, patting the dog casually as she passed.

Reaching for the handle to follow her sister, Nico paused. The path to Massy’s front door was lined with rose bushes. Rockford work boots next to the doormat, a dog leash hanging from a hook on the wall. Signs that once she entered the house it would be impossible to escape. Up the garden path and consigned to domesticity forever. Just like them.

Massy waited behind the breakfast bar, leaning against the marble counter with the nonchalance of a bartender. She wanted Nico to notice her lovely home and her lovely things. The hall carpet looked softer than the bed Nico slept in.

‘Nice things are for people who forgot how to fuck,’ Lucas said once, when she told him she wanted a teapot to brew her Peach Oolong tea. He took a tea leaf from her hand and placed it on his tongue, so that when he kissed her, his mouth tasted of peaches and musty corners.

‘Whereabouts is your loo?’ Nico asked.

As soon as she found the bathroom she shoved a hand inside her shorts. Leaning against the door she rubbed herself hard, in a way that wasn’t sexy, or pleasurable. More like punishment.

She washed her hands with Massy's lavender-scented soap, and dried her hands with Massy's lavender-coloured towel. The shower screen had a cursive stencil across the glass, reading *Naked*.

Running her finger over the ornate lavender writing, Nico wondered what the hell she was doing there. Then she remembered the time bomb inside her belly, the reason her skin felt like bruised fruit.

Her pussy felt like sandpaper, and her heart about the same.

Their worst gig had been two months ago, in Roxby Downs. The pub was so empty she couldn't bear to stay and watch. She'd played with a stray in the car park instead, throwing around a tennis ball found in the scrub. The kelpie was so excited by the game it knocked her on her arse into the dirt. As she scrambled to her feet the opening chords of "Don't Want it All" echoed out of the pub.

When Lucas finally emerged he had no post-show buzz, no horny kiss for Nico. At the sight of him, all of her optimism drained away.

'Pathetic,' she said. 'That crowd.'

Lucas shrugged and pulled his pouch from his pocket. She leaned against the wall, watching him roll a smoke. She could tell by the grim set of his mouth that he was worried. Too cold to think. It was midnight and minus three degrees. They wore identical torn jeans and blue flannel shirts, no jackets. She wore nothing under her flanny. Her nipples rubbed against the material in a way she usually liked, but tonight the scratchiness just made her more irritated.

'What are we still doing out here?' she blurted.

'What?' Lucas frowned. 'We've got heaps of time to get to Coober Pedy.'

He knew what she meant. The crowds were getting smaller, their pay too.

Three men crossed the car park, wearing clean ironed shirts and carefully-trimmed beards. They glanced at Nico before entering the pub, their expressions kept carefully blank. Farmers, labourers, she'd seen hundreds of their type. Yet the heaviness of their boots on the pub steps sounded somehow sinister.

Ray and Jimmy came out of the pub, lugging the equipment.

'Fucked up, right?' Ray muttered, and Nico didn't know if he was talking about the gig, or the fact that they'd taken more pills. She'd promised herself not to start another fight. But the sight of the boys' pinned eyes against the dark, moonless night filled her with a sense of foreboding. Something was waiting for them, further down that road. She could feel it.

'We're going to disappear out here, you know that?' she said. 'It's a dead end.'

'The dead heart.' Lucas threw his smoke against the wall, making sparks scatter.

'What?'

'That's what they call central Australia. Cause there's no water and nothing survives. They call it 'The Dead Heart.'

She looked at him. Was he trying to piss her off? It didn't take much these days.

'I saw a bad omen this morning,' she said. 'A Cumulus cloud in the shape of a falling bird.'

'You and your bloody signs,' Ray huffed as he carried out a speaker. 'You could find a secret message in a toilet bowl.'

'Come on,' Nico said. 'We've got to *do something*. Make an album, move overseas, whatever. But no more touring. No more fucking country pubs.'

‘I thought you loved it out here,’ Lucas said. ‘All you ever talk about is your outback childhood.’

‘All I ever talk about?’ she snapped. ‘Seriously?’

He shrugged and picked up a speaker.

Nico stood for a moment with her head tipped back, searching for a pattern in the stars. But there was only a chaotic smattering, like splashed paint. She had managed The Stabs since high school, their promotion, budget, bookings, everything. Cheered them on through endless fights, cancelled gigs, equipment failure, and innumerable hangovers. Nico couldn’t remember the exact moment she realised they were never going to make it, but it was clear by the way they were turning on each other that something had to change. She hadn’t known then, that the catalyst for change was already inside her.

As Nico left the bathroom she heard Darren’s voice, dashing her hope that he was still at work. She paused in the hallway, licking the sweat from her upper lip. She felt like he would know she’d been touching herself just by looking at her.

‘Hey, guys,’ she muttered from the doorway.

‘Yeah. Alright. How are ya?’

Darren sniffed loudly. She attempted a smile as their shared history flooded in, images she’d tried so hard to erase flashing once more through her mind. A sudden tightness seized her throat, a sick cloying feeling like she was drowning in something sweet. Her flesh puckered and she wished desperately for a jumper to cover herself.

‘Couldn’t believe it when Mass said you were comin. Four Chrissies, you’ve missed.’

‘Yeah, well. Bit hard to pop in for a visit when you’re four hundred k’s away.’

Darren’s hairline had receded and his pot belly looked round and hard, like she could pop it with a pin. In high school Darren had too much hair: long, mousy-brown strands that hung over his high forehead and delicate chin. Now he was just another bald, fat bastard like all the other bald, fat bastards in Champion. It pained her to think of Massy having sex with him.

‘So, how long are we puttin’ ya up for?’ Darren asked.

‘It’s just a quick visit. I’m meeting up with them in Alice.’

‘You’re going back on tour?’ Massy cried.

‘What else would I do?’

Their eyes bored into her. There was no air in the room. *Get a job*, she could almost hear the thoughts beam out of their heads. *Get a job, get a house, and grow up*. The truth was, she had no idea what she was going to do now.

‘You’re here for money, aren’t ya?’ Darren sneered.

He couldn’t give her five minutes of politeness.

‘I never said —’

‘Told ya,’ Darren turned to Massy. ‘She doesn’t give a shit about family.’

‘Family?’ Nico laughed, placing her hand on her stomach. ‘Funny you should mention.’

Massy’s eyes dropped to Nico’s belly, and in her misery she looked youthful again with her sad eyes and pouty mouth. Nico watched the shift in her sister’s facial expressions as she processed her envy, turning it into resentment.

‘So who’s the daddy?’ Darren asked. ‘The drummer, or the bass player?’

May 1990

This is a region into which it requires extreme precaution to go, for there is no knowing how soon we might be cut off, and perish miserably — Charles Sturt, 1845.

‘Now what you have to understand,’ Dad says. ‘Is that clouds manifest according to the environment above and below them. Wind currents, bodies of water, smoke, smog, ash ... all of these things affect the process of cloud formation.’

Mum nods, her eyes wide with concentration. She lifts one bare foot up to the dashboard, and I stare jealously at her apple-red nail polish.

‘Clouds move in cycles, and you can often determine the approaching weather from their shapes. These Cirrocumulus, for instance.’

He points and I crane my head. Patches of tiny white cloud sit high in the sky above us, scattered like spilled salt. ‘Cirrocumulus can mutate into Altopumulus, the mid-sized, puffy clouds that emerge in the middle troposphere. With a sudden drop in air temperature, they can quickly multiply.’

Dad’s hands dance in the air as he speaks, tracing the passage of clouds in the space above the steering wheel. I watch the shifting forms in the shape of his hands, their endless metamorphosis into something new. Clouds are never satisfied with their physical form, they are always in a state of continuous becoming. Like Dad and me, they don’t like staying still.

Mum lights another smoke, watching Dad’s face as he speaks. She has that dreamy look again.

‘By the time we reach Glendambo these clouds will have gone through massive transformations,’ Dad continues. He grips the steering wheel and tilts his

head, peering up into the sky. ‘First into Cumulus congestus, then into the storm clouds Cumulonimbus. And that’s when it gets really interesting.’

‘Doubt it,’ Massy mutters, turning another page of her book. I nudge her with the toe of my shoe and she shuffles further back against the door. Still sulking, as usual. Yesterday, on our last day of term, Dad tore into the kitchen while we were eating breakfast and grabbed Mum around the waist. She squealed as he hauled her into the air, the knife she’d been using to spread our sandwiches raised above her head.

‘I got it, love! You bloody ripper.’

‘But my job ...’ Mums’ face was still creased with sleep, her hair a red halo of curls. ‘I’m on nights this week.’

‘Already told Margaret,’ Dad said, quickly. ‘I got the full bloody advance. We can stay in hotels! Room service and pools, whatever you want.’

Mum squealed twice as loud, the wings of her dressing gown flapping as she hurled herself into his arms.

Massy and I sat frozen at the kitchen table, our Weetbix going soggy. ‘Is this for National Geographic, Dad?’ I asked.

‘But I’m going to Rachel’s.’ Massy’s lips made a round ‘O’ of despair. ‘You already said.’

Dad was too busy making plans to answer. Mum handed him a coffee before hopping up on the kitchen counter, our sandwiches forgotten. Her eyes shone their brightest emerald green as Dad leaned into her body, gripping her thighs with his hands. They were alight with imagining. It always started this way.

‘For fuck *sake!*’ Massy shoved her chair back with a screech. She dropped her cereal bowl in the sink, splashing Mum with dirty dishwater. I braced myself for the hiding to follow, but she just laughed.

‘You’re going to have a ball, I promise,’ Dad called, as Mum leaned her head against his shoulder. Their faces were giddy and flushed, like teenagers caught kissing. Dad’s beard looked especially wild. I felt a familiar, dreaded feeling. That Massy and I were the grown-ups, and Mum and Dad the children.

‘Another bullshit story,’ Massy said to Mum. ‘Are you really going to fall for this again?’

‘Don’t ruin it.’

Mum’s voice was sharp with warning. Massy looked at me, her eyes hopeless and flat, but I was already excited about the trip. I focused my attention on my cereal instead, stirring the Weetbix to mush.

Now, I’m stuck with Massy’s sulking. I wish I could sit in front with Dad and leave Mum to deal with Massy’s moods. I hate how long she holds on to things. Stubborn as an old boot, Dad says. I have a temper too but at least mine blows over quickly. Massy’s moods linger too long, like the smell of a mouldy sandwich in a school bag.

Dad whistles, pointing out Mum’s window. The sunset casts a fiery orange glow on the flat ground and sparse heads of saltbush. In the distance, mountains of rock shine a royal purple. The land is lit like a forest around a campfire and I lean my head against the glass, staring at the sun until my eyelids burn orange when I close them.

‘What do you think, Mass?’ Mum calls. A cigarette dangles, forgotten, from her fingers. ‘Bit different to seeing it over the water?’

‘Looks the same to me,’ Massy mutters.

‘It’s awesome,’ I say, and Dad turns to give me a wink.

I don’t have to look at Massy to know that she’s mouthing ‘suck up.’ But I like the way dirt spreads in every direction, baked and lumpy like an Anzac biscuit. No people, just space and land and roos and lizards and dry warmth like a hug for every inch of your skin. At home, we are never alone for long. Even the ugliest section of beach, the most seaweed-covered, rockiest stretch with those evil pines that give no shade but litter the ground underneath with spikes: even the most private spot is eventually stolen by a drunken group of townies or backpackers.

Though I watch it closely, willing it to stay, the sun slips away. The light changes from yellow to deep blue and Massy raises her book up to the glass, squinting at the words. Mum and Dad go quiet as darkness descends. Dad shuffles forward in his seat, straightening his back. The headlights illuminate swarms of insects, hurling themselves at the windscreen. Dad switches on the wipers, cursing when no water comes from the jets.

‘Are we nearly there, Charlie?’

Mum’s voice startles me from a half-dream. I notice the song playing on the radio.

Hit the road, Jack, and don’t you come back no more no more no more no more.

‘Close,’ Dad says.

I recognise his bluffing voice. Mum lights a smoke, her narrowed eyes indicating that she does too. Dad can’t read a map but will never admit it. Otto reckons Dad could get lost looking for milk in the dairy aisle.

‘Robert Burke got lost on his way to the pub once,’ Dad sometimes says. ‘But he still managed to lead the first successful expedition across inland Australia.’

I know all about the explorers because Dad used to read to me from their journals when I was little. I’m good at reading maps: more Charles Sturt than Robert Burke. It makes sense to me to measure time by how far we’ve come. When we drive for two hours I don’t see a clock face and the steady ticking of the hands. I see a road, twisted and curving, crops and grasses flashing by and the flicker of sun through the treetops. One hundred and ten kilometres per hour: if you factor in one stop and a winding road we’ve covered two hundred and fifteen kilometres. We are in Ceduna, we are in Bendigo, we have moved on, moved out, moved forward. Time is something we leave behind us, framed and receding in the rear view mirror.

The deep blue dusk disappears, replaced by impenetrable blackness. The road starts to curl and bend, with more and more trees appearing by the roadside. The gum trees move closer the further we get, extending their branches to form a canopy above us. I try to catch the trees with my eyes as we pass, their dark and mysterious shapes. I see figures shifting among the trunks. An Aboriginal man, red ochre shining on his nose and forehead. My grandmother with her hands raised, fingers clasped together in prayer. I feel like we are flying into darkness. A place no one has ever been before.

‘Stop!’ Mum screams, a second before Dad slams on the brakes.

The breath leaves my chest as I whip forward, head-butting the back of Mum’s seat. Massy does the same, her book falling to the floor.

‘You girls ok?’

They turn to look at us, identical shocked expressions on their faces.

I peer through the gap between the front seats. The road ahead is filled with kangaroos. Hundreds of them, frozen, every head turned in our direction. Their brown eyes shine intelligently in the headlights.

‘Have we stumbled across some sort of town meeting?’ Dad jokes.

‘Jesus,’ Mum whispers. ‘Check out the size of them.’

The roos look like they are waiting for something. Their forearms are raised, paws dangling in the air.

‘Why aren’t they moving?’ Massy’s eyes are wide, her head almost touching mine.

‘They’re waiting for us to leave,’ Dad says, inching the car forward.

‘Careful, Charlie,’ Mum hisses. ‘If one goes through the windscreen we’ll all be killed.’

Dad steers the car to the edge of the road and creeps us forward. A tree branch scrapes against the window, making Mum gasp.

‘A buck,’ Dad says, as we pass the first roo in the mob. The buck turns his head to watch us. One of the biggest, his fur is light grey, almost white. Even when the side mirror brushes against his flank, he remains frozen.

We crawl along, gawking at the dark, frozen bodies. As we clear the last one and Dad veers back onto the road, we turn to look out the rear window.

Every head is pointed in our direction. Hundreds of eyes, calmly watching us go.

‘Hell,’ Dad says, returning his attention to the road.

Massy and I stay hunched forward, our heads pressed together. The four of us observe the highway ahead, united in our vigilance.

Chapter 3

They sat side by side at the counter of the Champion Hotel, running their fingers over the frost on their glasses. The boisterous chatter of drinkers around them made their silence feel even more obvious. Nico sipped her beer, eyeing her sister over the rim. Sensing Nico's gaze, Massy stared vacantly at the dusty barracuda mounted over the bar.

'Place hasn't changed.' Nico ran her hand over the bar, which was made from the hull of an old boat. The paint was in the eternal process of peeling, giving punters something to fiddle with as they drank. 'Does Deb still work here?'

'Drug overdose,' Massy said. 'Nurse gave her too much morphine during cancer treatment.'

An image of their mother, her wild red hair spilling over the starched white of her uniform. 'Not all nurses like people,' she'd told Nico once. 'Some just like a regular wage.'

Nico looked around the bar, relieved not to recognise anyone. She was an outsider now, a townie. It felt safe to not be a local anymore. An evaluating stare burned the back of her head. Good. Let them see that she was better than them now.

'You spoken to Mum lately?'

'No way. You?'

Massy shook her head. 'Last time I called it said the phone was disconnected.'

The waitress slid a plate across the counter, a slab of meat and chips, dripping with gravy. Nico lifted her knife and fork, briefly closing her eyes. Shovelling in the

food, she knew already that no matter how fast she chewed she would never be full. It was like throwing a single stone off of the Champion jetty into the sea.

Massy cleared her throat, adopting a businesslike tone. ‘Have you seen a doctor yet?’

‘I’m not keeping it.’

Massy put down her glass.

‘You knew that,’ Nico said. Massy’s silence was thick with judgement. ‘Do you know how much money I have in my bank account right now? Do you know how much we’re getting per gig? We can barely feed ourselves, much less ...’

‘So that’s why you’re here? Where’s Lucas in all this?’

The chips congealed into a brick in her gut, threatening indigestion.

‘He doesn’t want it.’

The frown on her face made it clear what Massy was thinking. *Little sister, making a mess of things again.* But there was satisfaction in this for both of them, because at least some things hadn’t changed.

‘I can’t pay for it,’ Nico said, her voice catching. ‘The band’s not doing so good.’

‘You come back here after four years, to ask me.’ Massy pressed her lavender-painted nails to her chest. ‘*Me.*’

‘I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.’

‘Darren won’t —’

‘*Fuck* Darren,’ Nico said, immediately regretting it.

‘I don’t know why you hate each other so much,’ Massy said, primly, picking up her glass.

‘We don’t hate each other. We’re just different people.’

‘He’ll never let me give you the money.’

When Nico opened her mouth to argue, Massy raised her hand.

‘There might be something else you can do.’

Scraping the breakfast scraps into the bin, Nico watched the eggy mess slide off in a slick of grease. She dumped the plate on the bench, resting her hands on her hips as vomit rose in her throat.

‘Mick, where are ya with the roast?’ Darren stuck his head around the kitchen door, his eyes swivelling to Nico’s tits. ‘You can do lunch set-up.’

Mickey paused his chopping to make a sympathetic face. She smiled back at him, grateful to have a friend in this place. As Nico left the kitchen another wave of nausea came over her, stronger this time. She dashed for the loo, kneeling in front of the foul-smelling toilet. She rested her forehead on the cool tile wall. If Lucas was there he would hold back her hair and make a joke about how sexy she looked.

It was a shock how much she missed him, and so soon.

After rinsing her mouth out with water, Nico glanced up at her reflection in the mirror over the sink. Her face was pale, highlighting the dark shadows beneath her eyes. She felt weak and tender, pulsing with blood. Had her mother felt this way when she was pregnant? As if she’d been taken hostage by an enemy?

The dining room carpet was a swirl of blue and brown, the chairs upholstered in bright orange. When she unfocussed her eyes, the restaurant looked like an ocean full of empty life jackets. She picked up a tea towel and a handful of cutlery, longing for a cold can of Coke. The place stunk of roast beef and Band Aids.

Darren strutted in, clicking his pen while she set the tables. It was a habit of Darren's to click his pen while he walked around the hotel. She heard it even when she was alone: *Click-click-click*. A warning that danger was coming.

'Excuse me?'

A man with a walker approached, edging his metal frame towards her. 'I'm looking for my wife,' he said.

'Would you like me to check the bathroom?'

'My wife's not *here*,' the man said. 'She's *missing*.'

Nico looked around the room, as if doing so would make his wife appear. On the wall behind the man was a desert painting, a single melaleuca tree the only sign of life in a sea of thick red clay.

'How long has she been missing for?'

'It doesn't matter how long, it matters *why*, it matters *where*.' The man was agitated, wiping his eye with the corner of his jacket. 'I thought you would understand.'

The painting triggered a sudden flash of memory. Her father's tall silhouette, black and wavering on the surface of a flooded plain.

'I don't know what you mean, I'm sorry,' Nico said. She held her breath as another wave of nausea rose. 'Do you want me to call somebody?'

'No, I don't want you to call anyone!' The man banged his hands on his walker. 'You're useless, girl. Bloody useless!'

She watched the old man shuffle away, hearing a *click-click-click*. The sound of danger approaching.

'Get a bloody move on, would ya?'

She put down another fork. Darren's pen ticked, marking the passage of time. Every minute she spent in this hotel took an eternity to pass, while the parasite inside her feasted and grew.

Chapter 4

The sunlight pouring in through the window illuminated a scene from a cereal box: Massy sitting at the table with a mug of coffee, fresh-faced in a plum-coloured dressing gown. Darren buttoning his shirt by the window before turning his attention to the morning paper. All that was missing was the beautiful baby, cooing in a spotless high chair.

A large cloud moved in front of the sun, momentarily extinguishing the sunlight flooding through the kitchen window. Darren plucked a green apple from the fruit bowl, widening his eyes as he took a big bite. Nico imagined a worm inside the flesh, the brown rot working its way from the core right out to the skin.

‘When do I get paid?’

They looked up, startled, like they’d forgotten she existed. Massy’s eyes flickered quickly down to Nico’s stomach.

‘Payday’s not until next week,’ Darren said, examining the fruit closely before taking another bite.

Nico braced herself against the back of the chair. ‘I have an appointment. I need my wages by tomorrow.’

Darren laughed. ‘I don’t think so.’

Sweat broke out under her arms. She couldn’t wait another day. She needed to get this parasite *out*.

Massy loaded the dishwasher with a terrible clatter, keeping her back to them. Nico had to raise her voice above the noise.

‘It can’t wait until next week.’

‘Guess you’re fucked, then.’

Darren gave Massy a smug kiss goodbye before strolling out of the kitchen. A cloud of aftershave hovered in his wake, the sickly smell of dying flowers.

‘Mass.’

She turned to her sister, hating how desperate she sounded. The parasite was making her weak.

‘Is living with your own sister so unbearable?’ Massy closed the dishwasher and turned to face the window. Her dressing gown was worn at the back, the lower half faded to violet. The sight of it reminded Nico of when her sister was young: her thin, angular body. Maybe that was the real reason Massy couldn’t have a baby. All those years she was reduced to bone.

‘I have to get back to Lucas,’ Nico lied.

‘You have to get rid of it, you mean.’ A look of spite crossed Massy’s face. ‘Erasing things, that’s what you’re good at.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You tell me, *Nicky*,’ Massy said.

Nico laughed to cover the discomfort of hearing her old name said aloud. ‘You’re still going on about that? Change yours if it bothers you so much.’

‘You can’t change where you came from,’ Massy said. ‘You can’t just run off and erase who you are like Dad did.’

‘Dad didn’t run off.’

Massy’s eyes bored into her. ‘Didn’t he?’

Nico’s blood ran hot, forcing her into movement. She stormed out of the kitchen, pulling the front door shut behind her so hard a piece of wood splintered right off of the frame.

‘Hurry up.’

Nico stumbled, grabbing Mickey’s arm for balance. His wrist was so small she could encircle it with her fingers.

‘Careful!’

The pub was silent, their footsteps muffled by the dining room carpet. Moonlight poured through the windows, illuminating the Bain Maries.

‘This place isn’t so bad when it’s empty,’ Nico said. In fact, the room was spinning. She’d drunk much more than she planned.

‘That’s cause Dickhead Darren’s not here.’

The tables and chairs looked frozen in time, awaiting their next guests. She could almost hear the distant clicking of Darren’s pen.

Mickey grabbed two beers from the fridge and hopped up onto the bar. She joined him and they clinked bottles, exchanging a cheeky grin.

‘I don’t know how you stand it. Living here, working here.’

Mickey shrugged, running a hand over his shaved head. ‘What’s so good about up north? Just dirt, isn’t it?’

‘My band is there.’

‘Your band,’ he smiled. ‘Haven’t you heard, mate? Grunge died five years ago. April 4th, 1994.’

She laughed.

‘No joke,’ Mickey said. ‘Cobain killed the whole fucking scene with one bullet. You can’t bring back the dead, mate.’

‘You don’t know what you’re on about.’ Her cheeks burned. She’d heard it a million times already: grunge is dead, punk is dead, rock is dead. She liked Mickey’s know-it-all humour when it was directed at everyone else. But now, looking at his smug, pointy face, she couldn’t stand him.

‘Techno’s the future,’ Mickey continued, bobbing his head like a chicken. ‘Doof, doof, doof.’ He slid off of the bar to stand in front of her, grinning as he slid his hands up her thighs. Without thinking, Nico raised her fist.

‘Jesus!’

They looked down at his beer bottle, emptying itself into the dining room carpet.

‘Psycho.’

‘Sorry.’ She didn’t mean it. Mickey watched her throw a handful of paper towels on the floor, tamping them down with the toe of her shoe. When she looked up, he was still sulking.

‘I’m pregnant, ok?’ Nico said, surprising herself.

‘What?’ Mickey recoiled, looking at her stomach. His near-repulsion made her want to cry. ‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty.’ Her throat closed up. Mickey reached for her and she leaned into him, embarrassed but grateful. He was too small and skinny but he was warm, and kind. She kept her eyes closed when he pulled away, thinking of Lucas. As soon as Mickey’s lips touched hers she realised her mistake.

‘Oi!’

They turned to find Darren, standing in the dining room entrance.

He held up his keys and shook them like a jailor.

‘Nic, Nic, Nic,’ Darren said. ‘What did I tell you about shitting where you eat?’

Chapter 5

‘Mass?’

The house was silent. Massy’s slippers were all that was visible, poking out from the end of the couch. Nico crept around to find her sister fast asleep, clutching a copy of Princess Diana’s biography. She looked so young, with her face squashed against her arm, and Nico had a sudden urge to tell her everything. Regardless of how differently their lives had gone, they had the same roots. The same pain. They understood things that were never said.

Nico reached down to shake Massy awake. At the same moment she noticed a piece of silver paper, sticking out of the pages of the book. It was the same paper as her planner, the one she kept on the bus to record all of the gigs and payments.

I’m sorry, the letter said. Come back. Come as you are.

The coffee table buzzed. Darren’s name flashed up on the screen and when it clicked off, Nico saw eleven missed calls.

She stopped, her hand inches from Massy’s shoulder. Why had Massy kept this from her? When had Lucas sent this note?

Come back. Come as you are.

Her eyes stung as she took a step back from the couch. The silence of the house filled her ears. The air was preserved, the pressure building. A rush of love swept over Nico and a certainty that no matter what happened, they would be ok. Lucas loved her. He wanted her to have his baby.

Massy slept on, secure in her lovely house with her lovely things, while Nico raced back to her life.

May 1990

The day was terrifically hot, and the blasts of wind were so scorching in truth, that it was impossible to endure them — Charles Sturt, 1845.

We reach Coober Pedy by dinnertime. Before the town is visible the excavated mines start to appear, eerie domes of dug-up earth looming across the landscape. Our headlights illuminate a solemn line of domes, standing like a welcome party along the empty highway.

‘I guess they’re not finished yet,’ Dad replies, when I ask why they didn’t fill the holes in once the mines were dug.

‘Maybe they’re left as reminders of the tragedy,’ I say. ‘All the men who died of suffocation. I bet there are still bodies under there, buried in the dirt.’

‘You’re so depressing,’ Massy mutters. I give her the finger with a smile.

We drive slowly down the main street. The opal shops are lit with neon lights, rainbow-coloured and glittering to remind us of the jewels kept within. *No ID, no grog*, reads The Liquorland welcome sign nailed over the mesh wire on the windows. An Aboriginal woman emerges from a pergola in the reserve as we pass, signalling to us to stop. A policeman immediately crosses the park, taking her arm roughly and steering her away.

‘Jesus,’ Mum mutters, shaking her head.

I wind down my window and the hot wind carries the scent of dust and clay. Beyond the rattle of our engine I hear party sounds of laughter and bass-heavy music. Dad turns off the main road, crawling uphill alongside an enormous sandstone rock face. We park in front of what looks like a fish and chip shop built into the rock face, with coloured ribbons hanging over a glass sliding door.

‘We’re staying *here?*’ Massy says.

Rooms have been carved into the rock on either side of the main entrance. The doors are open, revealing long, dark corridors. The fluorescent reception sign in front of the door flashes red, then blue, then red.

‘Someone must be around,’ Dad says. ‘The office hours are nine to nine.’ He rattles the locked door handle before darting across the car park, heading for a separate building that looks like a shed. We wait patiently for Dad to return, used to this sort of thing.

‘Look,’ Massy points to a display in the nearby window.

The opals are nestled on a dark velvet cloth, spot-lit with an office lamp. Mum and Massy lean close to the glass, the glimmer of the stones reflected in their eyes. I don’t like jewellery much and I especially don’t like opal set in earrings and bracelets, made to shine dully on sweaty skin. I prefer the stuff that’s deep underground, seamed through the earth like irregular veins. *Occurs in the fissures of almost any rock*, the note card reads, *most commonly in limonite, marl, basalt, rhyolite*. The stones look dead on the black cloth, as if prepared for the wrong kind of burial. *Vitreous to resinous. Opaque, translucent, transparent*. The words sound like diagnoses, medical terms for the sick.

The party sounds increase, punctuating the night. Dad and I were only here a year ago, when he took some photos of the opal mines for a tourist brochure. I remember Coober Pedy as a sun-bleached town in blinding shades of white. I remember the townspeople being friendly and quick to laugh. It doesn’t feel so friendly now. There is a harsh, burning smell on the wind and the laughter from the party sounds wild, almost savage.

‘G’day,’ a voice says, making us jump. A man stands behind us in an olive green shirt and shorts. His pale legs glow in the reception light. As his eyes roam up and down Mum’s body, his lips press together in an expression of pained amusement.

‘Are you the manager?’ Mum says, stiffly.

The man holds her stare a moment longer before stepping between us to unlock the door.

‘These are my daughters, Nicky and Massy.’

He gives me a cursory glance and I’m glad to be dismissed. He lingers a little longer on Massy.

‘Had to get my son to footy practice,’ he says, finally. ‘Sorry to keep you waiting.’

‘Are there any pokie machines here?’ Mum asks, and when the manager shakes his head, her face relaxes.

As the manager slides the door open there’s a sudden crash and a dog barking, which changes abruptly into a squeal. Dad darts across the car park towards us, wild-eyed and clutching a stick.

‘This your fella?’ the manager asks.

Rather than dropping it, Dad swaps the stick from his right hand to his left. He smooths his beard and smiles winningly before extending his hand for a shake. ‘Great place you got here,’ he says. ‘Top notch, very secure.’

‘You lot from down south?’ The manager pumps Dad’s slim hand inside his own larger one.

‘Yeah, mate. Taking the family on a little holiday.’ Dad leans forward conspiratorially. ‘She misses me too much when I’m on the road.’

The manager's laughter reverberates along the rock face. He claps Dad on the back as they go inside and Massy follows with a roll of her eyes.

Mum lights a cigarette, tilting her head back to exhale the first stream of smoke.

'The blokes love their stories,' she tells me.

She's talking about Dad's explorer journals, the passages he reads to me from Sturt and Stuart, Burke and Wills. She doesn't understand why we love them so much.

She reminds me of a statue with her neck extended, long hair rippling down her back. My mother has not softened with age. Her beauty is like a blade that only sharpens with time. When I was little we would touch and hug, and she was something accessible and every day. Now that I am twelve we no longer touch: we glance and hover and hint. It exhausts me, the secret codes of us. Yet Massy, four years older, has somehow stayed close to her. I picture my mother, her ice and fire beauty, arranged on dark cloth like precious opal.

'I like stories,' I say, before following the men inside.

Chapter 6

Once she'd finished packing Nico crept into Massy and Darren's room. She flipped up the mattress but there was nothing underneath. She rummaged through the bedside drawers, finding only candles, fishing magazines and hand lotions. She rifled through jewellery boxes and peered underneath shoe racks but the bedroom was spotless, a blank space. She moved quickly, afraid that Massy would wake at any moment. But she would only take what she was owed.

Reluctantly, she moved on to the dresser. The first drawer was full of underwear, and Nico cringed as she made contact with some of Darren's boxers.

'If you wanted a souvenir, you should have just asked,' a voice said behind her.

Jumping a foot in the air, she scraped her wrist on the drawer.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'I'm searching for the money you owe me,' she said. She turned to face him, her jaw set. 'I'm not staying any longer.'

'Look,' Darren paused, his head cocked, as if he was listening for Massy. 'I've got your money. I'll give it to ya.'

Her body sagged with relief.

'Four hundred. But there's one more thing we have to sort out.' Darren patted his pocket, then turned to pull the door shut.

Nico laughed, and the nervous sound rang out in the quiet room. 'If you think I'm going anywhere near your tiny prick—'

'As if I would let you near it. You're a slut, just like your mother.'

Her stomach churned. With the door closed, she could smell him.

‘Show me,’ Darren said.

‘Show you what?’

He shrugged.

‘Get fucked.’

Massy was asleep downstairs. Her own sister. Her face burned with shame.

‘Johnno has a car, a Corolla. Yours tonight, for free, if you want it.’

Nico paused. She pictured herself flying up the freeway, back to Lucas.

Giving herself no time to think, she unbuttoned her shorts and pulled her singlet over her head. When she went to undo her bra, Darren held up his hand. She looked at him in surprise. *He didn't want to see her tits? What the hell did he want?*

She straightened her shoulders and gritted her teeth. She jammed her hands on her hips so he couldn't see them trembling.

Darren stared at her stomach. Studying it. His face was strangely lax, like he was sleepwalking, and his chest rose and fell noticeably as he stared. A wave of nausea came over her, a hot, rippling swell that started from her toes and broke out at her scalp, making sweat bead on her brow. She remembered her younger self, blinking up at Darren from the bleachers as he bounced his basketball in front of her.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

All the year six girls do it.

‘Give me my money.’ She stepped forward and held out her hand.

Darren shook his head slightly, as if coming out of a daze. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of notes.

Nico took the money and quickly stepped back. She counted the notes, peeling the fifties back one at a time.

When she looked up, Darren was gone.

‘She’s a feisty little bitch.’

The bright orange Corolla had a black racing stripe wound around it in a wavering line. The left tail-light was broken, the driver’s door dented and two hubcaps were missing. Its orange was the bright shade of Halloween pumpkins.

Johnno patted the rusted roof.

‘She may not be very pretty, but she’s a good little car. She’ll get you where you want to go.’

As Nico slid into the driver’s seat, a cheeseburger wrapper crinkled under her feet.

‘Nice of you to clean up first.’

Johnno tugged the brim of his cap. ‘Mate, Darren called me ten minutes ago.’

The Corolla trembled when she turned the ignition, as if in nervous excitement. *Let’s get the fuck out of here*, the engine hummed, and Nico agreed.

Johnno tapped the windowsill, making her jump.

‘Is Darren a mate of yours?’

His eyes were wide with concern. In the kitchen window behind him, a woman stood over the stove, slowly stirring a pot as steam rose into the air.

‘He’s my brother-in-law,’ Nico said, firmly. If Johnno wanted to protect her, he was six years too late.

He waved her off at the top of the driveway, giving her the thumbs up when she finally found third gear.

She whipped down Stuart Highway in a fog of exhaust. Pumpkin tore up hills and around corners with more power than expected from such a beat-up little car. Nico put her in fifth gear and kept her foot to the floor.

The headlights were pitiful against the endless black night. When another car shot past, nothing stood between them except a thin yellow line. The passing truckers would look down and see an orange bullet, a flash of blonde hair and a black racing stripe. Nico gave a leery grin as the next truck tore by. She was like them now. Free.

She focussed on the road ahead, trying to forget the look in Darren's eyes as he studied her shivering body. Returning to Lucas gave her a feeling of alignment, as all the factors of her life came back into focus. At the same time, she was finding it hard to breathe. Pumpkin wavered across the dividing line as Nico clutched her stomach through a wave of sudden panic.

She pulled over and switched on the stereo. She put the scarred Nirvana CD in and closed her eyes, skipping through until she found their favourite song.

She'll come back as fire, to burn all the liars, and leave a blanket of ash on the ground.

The music took her to a better place, a place where she and Lucas could be in love again, like before.

Nico opened her eyes and started the engine. Pumpkin wheezed a hopeful greeting.

The road unspooled beneath them.

Chapter 7

Crossing the border into the Northern Territory felt like coming home. Nico switched the CD to Bowie, because the central Australian desert was like Mars. She rolled down the window and stuck out her hand, cool desert air slipping between her fingers. Kamikaze insects rushed headlong for the windscreen, smearing her vision with their ruined bodies. Her eyes blurred, the road ahead taking on the endless, unreal quality of an arcade racing game. A hamburger sign gleamed under a spotlight on the road ahead and the sight of a greasy bacon rasher inspired a fresh wave of morning sickness, giving her no choice but to pull in.

Two trucks and a road train idled in front of the Kulgera roadhouse, hissing and sighing like sleeping giants. The car door squeaked when she opened it, and a trucker filling his tank looked down at Pumpkin with a grin.

Nico made a Milo at the drinks station and paid her fifty cents. Sitting down outside she found the same smiling trucker, rolling a cigarette. They exchanged nods, and she sat down at the furthest table. Her drink was three quarters Milo, with a little hot water and milk to soften it. The sound of her crunching was audible, even over the rumble of the truck engines. She looked yearningly at his tobacco pouch. She'd have to give that up, now.

‘Where you heading?’ the trucker asked.

Nico shrugged. ‘North.’

The man sparked his lighter. The flame lit up his long nose and the dark shadows beneath his eyes. He had the gaunt features of an old man, but he couldn't have been more than thirty. Something about his leanness was familiar. A man who cast a long shadow before the sun.

‘Katherine,’ he said, though she hadn’t asked. ‘This is my last big job for a while.’

She hunched her shoulders, in no mood to chat. Truckers were always talking about their last job. The younger ones especially always yapped on about their big plans. Nico liked the older truckies, the granddads with grown-up kids. They talked to her about the past, rather than the future.

‘You like little girls?’ the man asked.

Nico jumped, spilling Milo on her jeans. ‘What?’

His face twisted in confusion. ‘I said do you want to see a picture of my little girl?’ He stood up and took the seat opposite, his hands trembling as he pulled the photo from his wallet.

Nico took the photo. The man flicked his lighter, illuminating a newborn baby wrapped in a pastel hospital blanket.

‘She’s cute. How old?’

‘Six months.’ He smiled proudly. ‘It’s crazy, hey? I had a bad time growing up. Alco Mum, Dad couldn’t get a job, everyone drinking and fighting. I always thought, “This family is gonna fuck me up for life!”’

Nico laughed along with him.

‘But I didn’t know then — that I could just make my own! Make my own family from scratch and leave the old one behind. Does my head in, how easy it was.’

They shared a smile as he stood up to go. The man crossed the servo in a few strides, his legs casting tall shadows across the ground. He swung himself lightly into the seat of his truck and she realised who his gracefulness reminded her of.

You can't change where you come from. You can't just run off and erase yourself like Dad.

Suddenly exhausted, Nico stumbled across the car park and took off at a crawl. The darkness felt overwhelming. She pulled in at the first rest stop she found and curled up in the back seat, pulling Lucas's shirt from her backpack to use as a pillow. She dreamed of the tall trucker and his long arms cradling her own newborn baby. *Isn't it crazy, that we can do this?* He said. They watched as another baby tumbled out from between her legs, and then another, then another, then another.

May 1990

There is no peace in truth here either day or night — Charles Sturt, 1845.

Our apartment smells strongly of dirt and insects. The stink is ineffectually masked by a heavy dousing of lavender carpet freshener. I hear Mum banging around in the kitchen, her voice high with forced positivity. ‘So much cupboard space, Charlie. And all these extra soaps!’ She’s making an extra effort because Dad picked a hotel with no pokies.

Massy climbs onto the top bunk, re-opening her book with a sigh. I drop onto the lower bunk. The sandstone wall beside my bed looks frothy like a wave, but when I touch it the texture is scratchy and sharp.

‘It stinks even worse in here,’ Massy mutters, the springs squeaking as she changes position.

My pillowcase has a large brown stain and I flip it over, finding a similar stain on the reverse side.

‘Your attitude stinks.’ I reply, too tired and hungry to resist.

Massy squeals in delight. She hangs over the edge of the bed, a grin smeared on her upside-down face. ‘Is Daddy’s precious little explorer upset cause she’s not getting enough attention?’

‘You’re the one who’s desperate for attention. Pity your crush only likes rich, skinny girls.’

I immediately regret this. I’ve seen Massy throwing her lunch in the bin. I’ve heard her coughing into the toilet bowl after dinner.

‘Do you really believe that National Geographic is paying for all this?’ Her face is tomato-red from all the blood rushing to it. I wonder what colour it will change to if I give it a kick.

‘Girls!’

We follow Mum’s voice to the end room. When I open the door, expecting to find another bedroom, Massy inhales sharply behind me. We step into a long, curved hallway, with a low ceiling and sandy floor. The small lights attached to the sandstone walls flicker like flames.

‘Get your swimmers on, girls!’ Dad’s voice echoes like he’s speaking into a megaphone. We dash through the tunnel, kicking up dust as we tear around the bend. We slide to a stop in front of a waist-high railing.

‘Wow,’ Massy whispers, finally impressed.

From our raised platform we look down into an enormous cavern. Steps lead to a spa and a lap pool, big enough for Olympians. At the other end of the cave is a pool table, and a bar and lounge area with a pinball machine.

‘Welcome to the best of dugout living!’ the manager calls, slicing lemons at the bar. Mum and Dad smile beside him, stubbies in their hands, and eerie green light dances off the pool water and onto the walls.

‘It’s like Aladdin’s Cave,’ I whisper, and Massy nods.

Another family walks into the cave through a separate door. We gaze down at the two teenage sons, tanned and broad-shouldered and strutting around like they’ve seen it all before. With that, Massy is off, and I chase her back down the tunnel to our room. We yank our bathers from our bags, returning to the pool in two seconds flat.

‘Is it cold?’ Massy sticks her big toe into the water. The boys consider the shape of her butt as she extends her leg.

It’s a fine line, between pleasure and pain, Chrissy Amphlett sings on the stereo. I feel Massy and the boys forgetting about me. I feel Dad’s daring coursing through my blood. I trot upstairs to the platform and climb over the guardrail.

‘Nicky!’ Mum screams as I drop silently into the pool. The water is warm, almost hot, and I sink into it like a stone. When I pop back up Mum is shaking her head while Dad claps and hoots. The boys give me the side-eye. They look a bit impressed, mostly jealous.

‘Nah, not cold,’ I say, reaching up to grab Massy’s ankle.

She jumps in beside me and we laugh and splash, our fight already forgotten. When the boys start talking to Massy I paddle down the shallow end to sit on the top step. The other parents talk shyly with Mum and Dad. Farm people, their clothes are practical and worn, their stretched track-pant bottoms shoved into the rim of their gumboots. My mum wears a bright green slip dress that compliments her red hair, and Dad’s white cotton shirt is tight-fitting and still somehow spotless. Even his beard looks well-groomed for once. It’s only when I see them near other parents that I realise how young they are. Mum is telling a funny story, and as she waves a hand in the air her bracelets dance up and down her arm. The others listen attentively, rapt with her. Dad notices me watching and gives me a wink.

Dipping my mouth under water to blow bubbles, I try to decide what scares me most. The times when Mum and Dad fight or the times like this, when their contentment feels as temporary as a gap between clouds.

Chapter 8

Nico arrived in Alice Springs the late evening of the following day. Alice was so remote it had the feeling of a mirage; like she could turn her back and the whole place would fold up and disappear into the ground. The buildings were uniformly rectangular and flat, neatly arranged like Lego blocks waiting to be constructed. Red dust circled lazily up into the air by the roadside. A man waited beneath a McDonalds' sign, shading his eyes so he could get a good look as she passed.

Nico braked hard for a rock wallaby, squatted casually in the middle of the road. Like all locals, it took its time moving on. She wound down her window, the mild air a relief to her skin after the bitter chill of winter in the south. *I'm never going back to Champion*, she thought. This certainty gave her peace.

Big Red's parking lot was nearly full. With the noise of the engine suddenly cut, silence descended. When Nico stepped out of the car she could feel the heat of the day still seeping up out of the ground and through the thin rubber of her thongs.

The sudden screech of an electric guitar tore into the quiet. A cockatoo burst from the neighbouring tree. Nico rushed through the front doors, the force of the air conditioning blowing back her hair. The opening chords to "About a Girl," started, as if her arrival had been pre-planned and perfectly timed. She pushed her way through the crowd, barely noticing when a girl elbowed her in retaliation. She got to the middle, near the front. She looked up.

There he was. Her man. Brown wavy hair covering his face like a curtain. Eyes squeezed shut and all his energy focused on the strings of his guitar. She couldn't decide how to arrange her face. What if Lucas hadn't missed her as much as she'd missed him? Then their eyes met and the pub seemed to lift, rotate ninety

degrees, and then drop. Everything re-aligning, knickers wet, lips dry. Pulse accelerating to normal.

Lucas gave her that dimpled, cheeky grin she knew so well. He stopped singing and leapt off stage to a roar of crowd approval.

Nico laughed, enjoying the sense of drama. Audience members were shoved aside. A drink was spilled, followed by a shout of protest. Then Lucas was in front of her, his face sweaty and flushed. He fell to his knees with a pitiful expression until she reached down and wrenched him back up.

They kissed, long and hard. Jimmy took Lucas's absence as an opportunity to launch into a drum solo, and the floor beneath them started to shake. Lucas cupped her arse cheeks with his hands. She pressed her body against him and breathed in his familiar smell.

There was nobody else but them standing in the middle of a crowded pub with Jimmy's frantic drumming sending the audience into a frenzy. Lucas pulled away and jumped back on stage, leaving Nico gasping for breath, fizzing with happiness. He yelled something and Ray rolled his eyes before starting the opening riff to "Smells like Teen Spirit." Lucas sang *I'm so happy* like he meant it, and Nico felt girls' eyes on her, jealous girls, wishing Lucas was theirs. She felt like she was in a movie, the camera taking in her sparkling eyes and ecstatic smile before panning wide, returning to the stage to capture Ray's bowed head as he played his perfect riffs, and Jimmy's sinewy arms and wild drumming. The camera settling finally on her man, his beautiful face and his sexy body. A young Jim Morrison, people said. And he belonged to her.

She laughed, jumping up and down with her fist in the air. In that tiny room she felt the love they shared swell up and fill the space, getting bigger and bigger

until it went beyond the pub and out into the endless sprawl of desert, filling all the space and heat that surrounded them, spiralling up into the cloudless sky.

While they shared a few jugs Nico told the boys about working at the pub and the nightmare of being Darren's employee. Telling funny anecdotes about the Champion locals they all knew, she omitted any mention of the real reason she was there. Drinking and having a laugh with the boys made her feel as if the pregnancy had been nothing but a bad dream. The beer filled the bottomless hole in her stomach, making the morning sickness disappear. She felt like herself again.

'So now you're gonna follow us in that Corolla?' Jimmy said, doubtfully. 'Looks like it will cook faster on the road than Frances.'

'She'll be right,' Nico said. 'Besides, there's only three gigs left.'

Ray and Jimmy exchanged a look, but Nico was too happy to dwell on it. She bounced up and down in Lucas's lap and felt his arms tighten around her waist.

'A toast,' she said, raising her glass. 'To the end of this fucking tour!'

'It's good to have you back, mate,' Ray said, not meeting her eyes. 'It's been a pain in the arse moving all the gear on our own.'

Stung, Nico glanced at Jimmy but he avoided her eyes too. *Fuck them, then.* She focused all of her attention on Lucas, wriggling and feeling his hard-on through his jeans. She whispered in his ear and he danced his fingers over her bare midriff, making her giggle. She noticed that Lucas refilled his glass almost constantly. She watched him walk to the toilet, noting the lurch and sway of his long body.

Jimmy and Ray chatted up some local girls, rough-looking chicks with tight, scraped-up ponytails and home-done piercings. As soon as the boys were distracted she grabbed Lucas's hand and pulled him out of the pub. The sight of the bus waiting

in the car park filled her with joy, and as she climbed the steps, all of the remaining tension in her body finally eased.

‘Oh Frances, I’ve missed you,’ Nico cried, taking in the crushed velvet curtains, the original red faded to a carrot brown. She’d designed the bus with the theme of a 1920s smoking lounge: chocolate cushions and burgundy lampshades, beads and feathers stuck on the walls and a hatstand layered with scarves. Everything was exactly how she’d left it. The rolling tray was filled with tobacco bits and grass and the unfinished poker game was still spread across the table. The mug she’d been drinking from the day she left still sat on the ledge above the mattress. The only difference was Lucas. He’d lost some weight in the two weeks she’d been gone. He looked older, his body more wiry, his dark eyes less sparkly than she remembered. Was he even glad that she’d returned? A queasiness came over her, but not from the pregnancy this time. Instead of joining her Lucas sat opposite, on Jimmy’s bunk.

‘Did you do it?’

The anger in his voice caught her off guard. Nico shook her head, the memory of Mickey’s kiss making her cheeks burn.

Lucas fiddled with the edge of the Soundgarden poster blue-tacked on the wall. He looked lost, and Nico couldn’t stand it, so she reached across the space between them. He let himself be pulled onto the bed beside her. But when she tried to place his hand on her stomach, he pulled away.

‘We can do this ... can’t we?’ she whispered. ‘You and me?’

Lucas nodded, staring down at the floor. She hugged him from behind, pulling him around to face her. She kissed him, hard, pushing his hand into the waistband of her jeans.

They fucked just as good as they always had. Yet she felt as if there was a buffer between them, a cold, impenetrable layer.

The boys snuck onto the bus in the early hours of the morning. The windows were open and the desert night air had crept into her bed and iced her skin. Nico climbed up onto Lucas's bunk and tried to burrow under his arm but he rolled over to face the wall. Before he turned away she saw his eyes open briefly and then close, like curtains being pulled shut against the light.

Chapter 9

The bus was empty when she woke the next morning. Propping herself up on one elbow, Nico reached for the packet of biscuits she kept on her shelf to ward off morning sickness. After she'd eaten two and kept them down, she stood up.

Rifling through the pile of clothes at the end of Lucas's bunk, she pulled on a Rolling Stones T-shirt and a pair of his boxers. It was strange to be alone so early. She felt somehow abandoned, even though the boys were probably just eating breakfast.

Out in the open air, her solitude felt like a blessing. The land was completely still, not a whisper of breeze rustling the grasses. Tilting her head back, Nico took in as much clean blue sky as she could, hoping for some kind of sign. The brightness made her eyes water, and when she closed them she saw white pinpricks of light against her lids.

As she walked into the empty pub, Nico pressed her hand against her stomach. The smell of stale beer bought another wave of nausea. She ducked behind the bar to pour a lemonade, and the sugar hit gave her instant relief. Then she wandered down the corridor, following the sound of an acoustic guitar.

Her three boys were in the private dining room, perched in a circle of rapt attention. And in front of them was a girl, singing and playing guitar.

Nico froze in the doorway. Lucas's enthralled face gave her a rush of envy, then rage. The girl's heart-shaped face glowed a ghostly, flawless white and her rosebud mouth made pretty shapes as she sung the lyrics.

When Nico entered the room they all looked up at once. The girl stopped strumming and smiled politely.

‘This is Jade,’ Jimmy said, his cheeks looking flushed. Nico crossed the room, dropping into Lucas’s lap without invitation. She must have sat too heavily because he made an audible *hmmph*.

‘Jade’s our support act till the end of the tour,’ Lucas said.

‘What happened to Andy?’ Nico asked, and there was an awkward silence.

Jade smiled, giving Nico the head-to-toe evaluation that city girls always give. Her loose, floral dress exposed her bony collarbone and slim shoulders. *She has no tits*, Nico reassured herself. *No cellulite either. Not a sliver of fat.* Was Jade doing an inventory, too? *Big tits, blonde hair. Brown eyes that looked mean and dark.*

‘Jade has a recording studio in New Zealand,’ Jimmy said, proudly.

‘Wellington,’ Jade corrected, her accent making it sound like ‘Willington.’

When Nico opened her mouth to reply, Lucas jumped in. ‘The boss needs to be fed,’ he announced, squeezing her leg. Nico gave him a flamboyant kiss on the cheek, grateful to be called the boss in front of Jade.

As they left the room, Jade resumed playing. A sweet little song Nico didn’t recognise, with so many chord progressions she was obviously showing off. *Don’t turn around*, Nico thought to herself, but of course she did.

Just as she’d suspected, Jade was singing her song directly to Lucas’s departing back.

A kookaburra mocked her passage from a nearby tree as Nico trudged back to the bus. She held a bag of shopping in one hand and a chocolate Paddle Pop in the other, and the ice cream cooled her throat nicely after the chips she’d just devoured. She had it in mind to make toasties for the boys. As long as she kept her mind focused on food, she would not have to think about Jade. Jade, the wispy, leggy sprite who

bought a light back to Lucas's eyes. The second Nico left the band she'd been replaced. She chucked her ice cream stick at a nearby tree, the cloudless sky making her want to scream.

A man stood on the side of the road, leaning against a wildlife crossing sign. He stared at something on the ground, and she craned her neck to see what he was looking at. She hoped he'd found a baby joey or an echidna. It was only when she saw the steady stream of urine hitting the dirt that she understood.

The man looked at her over his shoulder and waved his free hand.

'Ged-hey,' he said, as Nico carried on down the road. 'Ged-hey.'

The boys were slouched on a bench behind the pub. She smiled at the sight of her scruffy three, hung-over and pale in the bright afternoon sun.

'Pretty hot,' she said, loudly, hoping Lucas would offer to take the bags from her.

Lucas's head remained bowed over his guitar. She carried the shopping onto the bus, putting the Coke in the fridge to cool. She opened the sandwich maker to find that it was full of crusts and mould. In the time she'd been gone the boys had let everything go to rot, and in a way this both pleased and dismayed her.

'Legend,' Jimmy said, when she bought out a tray of ham and cheese toasties. He took one and ate it in two bites. It never ceased to amaze her, the way Jimmy ate and ate yet stayed as skinny as Iggy Pop.

'Get any Coke?' Ray asked.

'It's on the bus.'

Ray shrugged and kept eating, making her want to slap him.

Lucas snaked his arm around her waist, planting a kiss on her neck.

‘We should head off soon if we’re going to make it to Tennant Creek,’ she said.

Lucas squeezed her leg. She caught him and Ray exchanging a look, too obvious to be ignored this time.

‘What?’

‘Jade’s car broke down,’ Lucas said, carefully. ‘It’s gonna take a week to get the parts in so she’s coming along with us.’

‘But ... Where would we put her?’

‘You’ve got that Corolla, haven’t you?’ Ray said. ‘You were gonna have to follow in that anyway.’

‘She can’t have *my* bunk.’ Nico pressed her lips together, giving Ray a filthy look.

‘She can probably afford a hotel room, sounds like she’s pretty loaded,’ Jimmy said. ‘Her dad has a full studio set up at their place in New Zealand. She recorded an album there.’

‘I bet it’s shit,’ Nico said.

‘She said it’s like ... organic soul, hip-hop and reggae fusion mixed with acid jazz,’ Jimmy replied.

She stared at him.

‘Kind of like The Fugees,’ Lucas added.

‘I listened to it, she’s good.’ Ray picked up Lucas’s guitar. ‘Plus, she’s fucken sexy.’

He played the opening chords to “She’s a Rainbow.” Lucas laughed and shook his head.

‘She comes in colours everywhere, she combs her hair, she’s like a rainbow,’ Ray sang. His voice sounded weak, like milky tea. Jimmy joined in, then Lucas, and the boys sung the lyrics loudly while Nico faked a smile. As they sang, a flock of black cockatoos swarmed the branches of the Bloodwood tree above their heads. The birds’ cries were harsh and grating, competing with the boy’s song. The red streaks on the underside of the birds’ tails flashed and disappeared as they danced and shrieked. Nico used to love these little performances, but looking at them now, she just saw grown men behaving like children. Jimmy’ drumming was too slow, Lucas’s guitar was out of tune and Ray’s voice was terrible. Had the boy’s magic finally worn off, or was it her that was changing?

Leaving the boys to their song, Nico got up and returned to the bus. It was still relatively cool inside but wouldn’t be for much longer. At precisely 1:30pm each day, after Frances had spent a sufficient amount of time warming in the sun, their home transformed from a cool, comfortable oasis into a blazing furnace of hell.

She sat down at the kitchen bench, unwrapping her cards from their cloth and sticking the pack under her bra strap. She lit a stick of sandalwood incense and once the cards were warmed she shuffled them, then cut the pack three times.

Unsurprisingly, her outlook wasn’t good. For her past conditions she had the Ten of Wands: an uphill battle. For her present situation she had the Seven of Swords, which meant subterfuge and deception. When she closed her eyes, trying to visualise the card in her mind, it wasn’t Jade’s face she saw, but Lucas’s.

The final two cards were the big ones. She plucked one out and almost laughed. The Queen of Wands: a magnetic, feminine leader. Any time before today she would have assumed the card meant her.

Nico took a deep breath, letting the sandalwood calm her mind. She blocked out the sound of the boys singing outside and the rumble of road trains on the highway.

The final card was the Hanged Man.

‘Oi!’

She shrieked, knocking over the incense.

Lucas laughed. ‘You nearly done with your witchcraft? We’ve gotta start packing up.’

Nico stuck out her tongue. ‘Two minutes.’

As Lucas turned to go back down the steps he paused. ‘What did the tarot tell you?’

Surprised, she thought for a minute. ‘They told me I have to trust you. And that as long as we’re together, everything will be ok.’

‘The cards never lie,’ Lucas said, giving her a wink.

The Hanged Man dangled from the tree trunk, yellow light beaming from his head. Nico had divined her own warning: the threat that Jade posed. Fear drummed up and down her spine and yet, when she looked out the window at Lucas, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he collected the lunch plates, she knew he was still hers.

‘The clouds never lie,’ her father used to say. ‘You can’t count on people and you can’t count on God. But if you plug in to the world around you and observe yourself and your surroundings you can make patterns, make sense of things. You can begin to trust yourself.’

Nico didn’t trust herself. Her body had betrayed her and now it was making her sick. Her hormones rushed like waves, moving to rhythms she didn’t understand. She was projecting needs and emotions onto the cards that were not to be trusted.

She scooped up the tarot cards, re-wrapping them in their silk cloth. Then she went out to help the boys pack up the gear, refocussing her mind on their next destination.

November 1990

Duty may oblige me to hazard all on the cast of the dice, and in such case I would that as few as possible suffered with me — Charles Sturt, 1844.

‘See that Cumulus humilis over there?’

Dad points out the window. A single white cloud hovers in a sea of blue, lonely-looking, like a sheep that’s lost its flock.

‘That little fella is the result of a sudden burst of moisture. A collection of water evaporating into the air and being swept upwards in a fast convex lift.’

I am the only girl in the front bar. Dad is the only bloke not wearing an orange vest. When he takes out his notepad, a tradie at the next table gives us a suspicious look.

‘You see, Nicky,’ Dad continues, his eyes bright. ‘Everything that happens on the ground is reflected in the sky. Every tear, every sigh, every drop of sweat ... it evaporates, gets swept upwards into the troposphere. The clouds hold all of our emotions and our pain. They’re always telling us things, if we just learn how to read them.’

I remember Mum rolling her eyes as she threw Dad’s bag into the boot of the car. *Everything’s a sign, a bloody clue to something else. Forget clouds and tarot cards, your father could make meaning out of a pile of fish bones.* I didn’t tell her that Dad once found the lucky number thirteen in the shape of a prawn tail. We had to go straight to the pub so he could place a bet.

When the food comes I tear into my fish and chips. We’ve been driving all day, with nothing but a two litre bottle of Coke and a packet of Saladas to share. I cover everything on my plate in salt, the salad included.

‘The thing about Australia is the population’s so low,’ Dad muses. ‘Imagine what the clouds would be like in denser countries, like China or London.’

He scribbles in his notepad, taking occasional bites of his schnitzel.

‘Do they have more clouds in China?’

Dad doesn’t answer so I look out the window while I eat. Mountains of rock and grey silt loom, silent and still, as if they have always been there. The mullock heaps make all the buildings look squat and small by comparison. Along the streets roll dust-covered trucks and utes with hairy forearms propped on driver’s windows. I listen to the hiss of truck brakes engaging and tyres shuddering over speed bumps. Beneath the noise of passing vehicles there is the sound of earth moving: steady machinery, a distant chug of turning cogs and digging shovels. I hear this sound when we come to Broken Hill — this chug chug chug — even in my sleep.

‘In the Australian outback the clouds are truer, less congested,’ Dad mutters, his brow furrowed. ‘More revealing of human experience, fate and destiny.’

Fate, destiny. I hear Mum reply. *Your father has only one true destiny. And he’s not taking us down with him.*

‘You gonna go on the pokies, Dad?’

‘A little later, darling. Once you’re asleep.’

I sigh. I hate waking up in the hotel room alone.

A ripple of interest stirs as a woman enters. Eyes slide from her heavily-permed hair down to her shapely calves. I feel a bit put out. I liked being the only girl.

‘Imagine if I created a new language,’ Dad says, paying no attention to the woman. ‘Words matching clouds to moods. People could look up and find out how

the job interview would go, or if their partner was cheating. I could make a guide. A book of signs.'

The permed woman sips on a white wine spritzer. She props one foot on a stool so her skirt rises, exposing more leg. 'I told Murray to go fuck himself,' she tells the barman. 'I've got four mouths to feed, and my kids can't live on promises.' She looks around to see who is listening. I tune back in to Dad, muttering urgently as he scribbles his notes.

'That's what's missing from my photos. A story. A *mythology*.' Dad strokes his beard. 'If I can accompany the photographs with the guide book ... publishers would be fighting over it.'

'He's a selfish bastard,' the woman says, her voice rising. 'Wouldn't even give me money for the meat raffle! Two weeks' worth of meals that could've been.'

Her blue eye shadow is smeared, a giant hole visible in the toe of her boot. I look at the hole and feel a rush of anger.

'I'll help you, Dad. I'll help you write your book of signs.'

Dad swaps his pen for his cutlery. He cuts another piece of schnitzel, a perfect triangle of meat, cheese and sauce. 'You can come with me to Burketown but just until the weekend. Back to school next Monday, my dear girl.' He points his knife in warning. 'You've already missed far too much. And I have to patch things up with your mother.'

'Lazy old bugger,' the permed woman shouts. 'Goddamn Murray. Spends all week on the road, driving his truck over the countryside doing God knows what. And then when he gets home and I ask him to take me out he has the nerve to say he's too tired. All dolled up with my nails done and my new heels and he doesn't even want to show me off!'

Her cheeks are puffy like she has wads of cotton wool stuck in her mouth. I'd stay home too, if I were Murray.

Dad scribbles in his notebook, oblivious to the ranting woman. He's always been good at paying attention to just one thing. When you are the focus of his sharp blue eyes you feel bigger, a better version of yourself. I see it with Mum, how she looks smaller since they started fighting. Her head hangs heavy like a flower Dad forgot to water.

The permed woman totters out into the hallway. The air in the room becomes lighter, easier to inhale. I scrape my last chip through a pile of salt and watch another truck pass by, clanking on through to the next town.

'Fuck that greedy bitch,' says one of the men in the fluorescent vests.

I think of Mum, coming home from after-work drinks with her lipstick smeared and bloody-bright.

Instead of looking up to the sky for a sign look right here, in your own house.

Yeah, I think, as Dad continues scribbling.

Fuck that greedy bitch.

Chapter 10

The afternoon sun heated the bus to boiling. Nico lay sprawled across the bunk, the fabric tag inside her t-shirt scratching her neck and making her irritated. The boys were joking around about the solo acts they would start after the tour but she was too tired to laugh and play along. Without her, they would all fail. This was a bad thought for her to have, but bad thoughts were all she seemed capable of lately. As if hearing what she was thinking, Lucas climbed down to her bunk. He moved Nico's foot into his lap, massaging it gently. She felt his cock move under her heel.

'Hey, guys.'

Jade climbed up the bus steps and stood next to the poker table, holding a dark leather overnight bag and a vintage green American Special Stratocaster. Nico's top lip curled with satisfaction. She hated rich people. They all did.

'Tight set-up,' Jade said, looking around.

Ray leapt off his bunk to take her things. Nico waited for him to make a joke like 'Geez, you rip that off or something?' But he just laid the guitar gently across the table.

'It's all Nic,' Lucas said. 'She designed the whole bus, takes care of everything.'

Like a maid. She'd spent an hour cleaning and re-arranging while the boys half-heartedly made up their beds. She'd spent ten minutes on her knees in front of the toilet, scrubbing at the thick coating of piss around the base.

Jimmy rolled another joint, arranging each individual sliver of grass and tobacco with trembling fingers. Jade dropped onto the bunk next to him, shuffling back until she was leaning against the wall. She extended her long legs and accepted

the joint, the bells on her anklets jingling. When Jade leaned forward with the joint, Nico extended her hand. As their eyes met a look was exchanged, of mutual threat and respect.

‘Don’t smoke?’ Jade said, when Nico handed the spliff to Lucas.

‘Pregnant,’ Nico replied.

Jade looked from her to Lucas in surprise.

‘My friend got knocked up when she was thirteen,’ she said. ‘Her brother punched her in the stomach until she lost the baby.’

Nico cringed, her hand involuntarily covering her belly.

‘Jesus,’ Lucas muttered.

‘It’s a big problem in New Zealand,’ Jade continued. ‘People don’t have anything else to do. They drop out of school but can’t get jobs. Easiest thing is to have a baby and live on welfare.’

‘I don’t take Centrelink,’ Nico said, hotly. ‘Not everyone thinks that way.’

Jade continued, as if she hadn’t heard her. ‘We have coppers go door-to-door, handing out frangers after school on Fridays. Makes no difference.’

Nappy Valley, that’s what some people called Champion Beach. Nico flushed, feeling the familiar hometown shame that they’d all hit the road to escape. An awkward silence filled the bus. She felt Jade’s eyes on her body, thinking about the baby, judging her. *Skank*. She was thinking. *Cheap, nasty skank*. Nico blinked back tears in surprise. She’d cried more in the last two months than she had in her entire life. Her mind was cluttered, thoughts flying around everywhere, smacking into each other like birds.

‘I might take the first shift in the Corolla,’ Lucas said, breaking the silence.

The bed shifted as he rose. Nico wanted to ask him to stay, but she couldn't bring herself to do it in front of Jade.

As Jimmy started the bus, Ray and Jade started talking about guitars. Nico listened to the pluck of strings and the murmur of musicians, sounds that had become like a lullaby over the last four years.

For the first time, a terrible loneliness bloomed inside her.

The next day, Jade knelt on Jimmy's bed, staring wide-eyed out the window as they drove through Tennant Creek.

'I've never been to the Territory before,' she said. 'Lots of blackfellas.'

Nico bristled. They did not use that word. That word did not belong to them.

'So?' she replied.

A group of children playing in a front yard looked up at the bus, calling to each other in excitement. Jade stuck her head out the window, waving hello, and the children laughed and waved back before running out onto the road.

'Now you've done it,' Ray laughed.

The children, six of them, chased after the bus. Jimmy dropped his speed and they quickly caught up, shouting and laughing as they ran. A little girl waved at Nico. She had a pink baby blanket in her hand, and she shook it merrily in the air like a flag.

'You're in deep north country now, the Barkly Tableland,' Ray said, importantly. 'Aboriginal people are fifty percent of the population round here. More in some places.'

'You're not scared of em, are ya?' Jimmy yelled over his shoulder.

Jade scoffed. 'As if.'

They fell silent as they passed another house. The yard was strewn with old couches that were slashed open with the stuffing pouring out. At the next place, bed sheets spilled out of the wreckage of an old car. There were tires and oil drums lying on the ground, broken strollers, cans and empty bottles. They passed makeshift humpies, houses made out of tin sheets and bare posts. Nico saw one place with a bed made of a mattress propped on petrol cans and wooden planks. She felt a sense of foreboding, the threat of chaos that sprang out of deep and constant hopelessness.

‘Cheeky buggers,’ Ray said.

She followed his gaze to two small children, staring down at them from the branches of a tree.

‘It’s gotten worse since the last time we were here,’ Nico said.

Ray shrugged, turning away from the window. ‘Like you give a fuck.’

Shocked, she spun around to look at him. ‘What’s your problem?’

Jimmy accelerated and the children ran faster. The smaller boys picked up sticks from the side of the road, throwing them at the rear of the bus when they could no longer keep up.

‘I want to see the Devil’s Marbles,’ Jade announced.

‘They’re actually called Karlu Karlu,’ Ray said. ‘That’s just the stupid tourist name the Brits gave em.’

Jade raised an eyebrow. ‘You a local?’

Ray went red and picked up his guitar. ‘Been here heaps of times,’ he muttered.

Nico couldn’t help but grin. Catching her eye, Jade gave her a wink.

Maybe this chick was going to be okay. Maybe they would even be friends.

Turning back to the window, Nico noticed that the Cirrostratus haze curtaining the sky was finally starting to disperse. The white sheets were separating, and as the Cumulus clouds broke off and drifted away they left patches of clear blue sky in their place. She watched the jigsaw puzzle forming, keeping her eye on individual clouds and timing their transformations.

‘Pretty,’ Jade said.

‘Don’t get her started on the fucking clouds,’ Ray groaned. ‘You’ll never hear the end of it.’

Jade looked at her curiously.

‘Cirrostratus,’ Nico said, pointing at the upper white band of cloud. ‘And that’s Cumulus humilis over there.’

‘How do you know the names?’

‘My dad,’ she replied, proudly.

Ray climbed up onto his bunk, covering his ears with a pillow. ‘Now you’ve done it,’ he moaned.

Jade smiled encouragingly as Nico began her father’s story.

November 1990

When the country assumed such an appearance as almost to deprive us of hope ... we were being led to a spot where all our wants would be supplied, and ourselves relieved from the painful anxiety in which we were. The country in truth is not to be understood — Charles Sturt, 1845.

‘See that paddock?’ Dad points to a field of yellow water that looks like burned caramel. ‘Crop harvesting churns up the land: taking all the nutrients and leaving the waste. Then the rain comes and the wasteland fills with water. As soon as the wet season passes the farmers will till it again, churning it up and pumping it full of fertiliser and weedkiller. And each time they start the process they take more nutrients and leave more chemicals. Eventually there’ll be nothing left. The cut will be so deep the wound will never heal.’

I nod while Dad talks, not really paying attention. We are on our way to Burketown to photograph the Morning Glory, and I’m excited to finally be seeing it for real. I have a vision of it moving overhead, its white doughy softness slowly filling the sky. The vibration of the cloud will be like a full-body handshake from God. It will bless me for life.

‘These farmers think they can control the earth the way they control their machines. It’s an illusion, as pointless as an umbrella in a tornado. They can’t control the crops any more than they can control the weather.’

In a cheekier mood I would have bought up cloud seeding and the way scientists sprinkled dry ice and silver iodine into the clouds to make them rain. But I stay quiet, letting Dad talk. We have a long drive ahead and the stereo is broken: the soundtrack to our trip the wipers squeaking against the windscreen. It has been

raining steadily for seven days straight. No matter how long I hold my feet under the heater, my socks remain damp.

‘Is it ever going to stop?’ I sigh, tracing a raindrop down the glass.

Dad grips the steering wheel, tilting his head to look up at the grey sky. ‘Don’t wish it away, Nicky. Most of the red centre’s annual fall comes in just a few weeks. This rain may be all they have to sustain them for the rest of the year.’

‘Boom or bust,’ I reply, and Dad reaches over to ruffle my hair.

‘That’s right, kiddo. Boom or bust.’

We pass a tractor buried in deep mud, its wheels half-submerged. The road shines as if it has been freshly waxed.

‘Your mother loves the rain,’ Dad says, and the wistful tone in his voice makes me sad. Massy likes the rain too, and she is happiest curled up in bed with a book and her thick, rainbow socks pulled up to her knees. My sister. I realise I’ve traced the word on the glass and quickly scrub it out.

‘We’re about to head through Kulgera,’ Dad warns. ‘Could be floods up ahead.’

I wind down my window and the muddy smell of beets slaps my face like a wet towel. Sure enough, as we descend into town a flat, glassy plain of water stretches out in front of us.

‘I hate being right,’ Dad sighs.

‘No you don’t,’ I reply, and he laughs.

We stop at the edge of the large bank of water. Dad and I look at each other.

‘Can Dolly make it?’ Dad says.

‘Dolly can make it,’ I reply.

He grips the wheel and we fly down, down into the unknown. I wind up my window and watch the water rise up the side of the car, seeping onto the floor so I have to lift my legs onto the seat. Dolly forges ahead, water cascading over her bonnet. She struggles, and I feel the suck of water and a pause as it pulls her backwards. With a sudden rev Dolly breaks free, launching out of the water and up the other side.

‘Woohoo!’ We high-five as we climb the embankment. Dolly is half-car, half-beast.

The first house we pass is on raised pillars, an island in the flood. The second house has water up to its windowsills. The paddocks on either side of the road are flooded too: water creeps up tree trunks, lies still over stretches of drowned grass. The main street of town is empty and still.

‘Where is everyone?’ I ask, and Dad shakes his head. In every direction the town is dripping and empty, like a globe full of raindrops instead of snow. There’s no sign of townspeople anywhere and the only living things are the wading birds. I see ducks, an ibis and two egrets, their wings speckled with droplets.

We drive slowly down the deserted main street. The water level gets higher and higher, reaching almost up to Dolly’s bonnet. Dad’s face creases with worry.

‘Look, Nicky!’ he points. On the other side of the highway a man rides through the flooded grasslands in a dinghy. I wave, and he tips the brim of his cap like a cowboy.

We leave the town behind us, and it seems like we have made it. The town recedes in the rear-view mirror, and I feel a bit sad that we didn’t get to do anything heroic.

‘Shit!’ Dad slows down. ‘Here’s the party.’

Up ahead, the servo car park is filled with cars and people. It looks like some sort of festival or truck convention: there are at least five road trains spread across the highway along with trucks, cars and buses, twenty at least. A hundred metres down from the gathering more floodwater obscures the highway. The water down there is deep and black and unmoving, the red roof of a car just visible underneath it. We park and get out, and I stick out my hand. The rain has finally stopped.

People have set up deck chairs and tents and children are playing, their arms bright with floaties. A table in front of the servo is heaped with soft drink cans and trays of sandwiches.

We approach the nearest group, their heavy boots and woolly jumpers a sure sign that they're local.

'There's no passing it,' a man says, when Dad asks what's going on. 'No way for us to get home until the level drops.'

'They're saying it could be weeks,' his wife says. Her eyes are the same washed out grey as the sky. 'They might have to do aerial drops to feed us.'

My heart sinks. We're going to miss it.

'We'll find a way,' Dad says firmly, giving me a wink.

The man laughs. 'Better get your swimmers on.'

A bunch of kids tear past us. They look like they're holding prawn tails, but I know that can't be right. Khe Sanh blasts from one of the truck stereos.

'Bloody ten inch or nothing country,' the man continues. Water drips from his Akubra, widening the wet patches on his shoulders. 'Only thing that could get us across Stuart Highway would be Moses himself.'

'My poor tomatoes,' his wife says. 'I just hope the sheep are staying put.'

The frown on Dad's face makes me worry more so I take a look around to distract myself. One family is sitting on the bonnet of their car, passing around a bottle of champagne. I see another group of truckers, big, tattooed men gnawing on some sort of orange meat.

'Want one?' asks a boy, flicking his skateboard up to catch it. He has two mangos in his other hand.

'Where'd you get *those* from?' I say in amazement. I haven't seen a mango since last summer.

'Truck,' the boy says. His mouth is purple like he's been sucking raspberries. I say no to the mango, even though I really want it. Taking food from weird kids is just plain stupid.

'Nicky,' Dad calls. 'Come this way.'

I follow him in the direction of the road trains. The two biggest ones are parked alongside each other, their rear doors thrown open.

'What can I get for ya, mate?' a trucker says. He is short and squat with a beaming smile. His mouth opens to reveal more gaps than teeth.

'What's in there?' I ask, and the man's smile widens.

'We were on our way to the Alice Springs casino, choccas with fancy shit for the high-rollers. Of course, it goes bad in this weather. The humidity. Better to eat it than chuck it out.'

'What sorta stuff you got?' Dad asks, stroking his beard.

'Ah, you know,' the trucker replies. 'Crayfish, lobster, champagne, single malt scotch. Gelati,' he adds, with a wink.

Dad looks at me. 'You sick of dry Weetbix yet?'

We climb up into the back of the truck. Dad and I gaze at the shelves of treasure, the esky's and crates loaded with fine food.

'This truly is the land of untold riches,' Dad says, bending down to open the first ice box.

Chapter 11

They looked as if they'd always been there together. Haloed in yellow light, staring straight ahead with dazed, unfocused eyes as if heaven waited just beyond the edges of the audience. They held their guitars in the exact same way, low on the strap, with the neck pointing up towards the ceiling. Jade looked at Lucas with her eyelashes lowered. Her smoky voice harmonised perfectly with his higher register.

The music echoed out of the old tin shed that housed the stage. The night was calm and clear, cold enough to keep the mozzies at bay. Nico stood at the back of the beer garden, watching the reactions of the hypnotised crowd.

'I take each day, like a needle jab. Look away. Breathe. And keep the wound covered.'

Nico sighed. So Jade was a poet, too.

When they finished Jade's original song, they started playing "Come as You Are." The familiar tune was a welcome relief after the intensity of Jade's lyrics.

Lucas caught Nico's eye in the audience and gave her a smile, but she didn't return it. She felt nervous, on the edge of panic. He and Jade were too good together; he looked happier up there than he'd ever been. Her heart rattled in her chest, out of beat with the music. She pushed her way through the crowd, heading for the bar.

She tried to ignore the row of ties brushing the top of her head as she asked for a beer and gin. The Daly Waters was more of a souvenir shop than a pub, packed with all of the random crap international travellers left behind. There wasn't a single surface that didn't have some piece of memorabilia stuck on it: foreign banknotes and coins, football guernseys, stubby holders, thongs, road signs and hats. A row of

bras and undies hung from a length of rope above the bar. They weren't even nice ones. Faded pastel underwear with broken straps and missing bows.

The man standing next to her snorted when she downed her gin in one go.

'You right, love?'

Nico ignored him, looking for a place to drink her beer. Even with most of the punters out back there was still no quiet place to sit. She leaned against the wall, looking up at the street sign above her head: 'Didjabringabeeralong?' *Fair dinkum ugly*. The line of ID cards left behind by backpackers gave her the creeps. Didn't the girls need those cards when they left?

'How's it goin?'

The man who'd spoken earlier stood in front of her, swaying slightly. He had the unmistakeable look of a tourist: sandals and cargo shorts, a brand new Adidas t-shirt. His eyes were focussed on Nico's tits.

'Fine,' she sighed.

'Not enjoying the band? I didn't think much of em either.'

She laughed. 'I like the band, mate.'

'Just noise, kids havin' a whinge,' he continued, as if she hadn't spoken. 'As if they were the ones who had to live through the war and the depression. You lot have it so easy now. What are you even complaining about? Fleetwood Mac, now that's a great band, Real music, real emotion.'

'*Fuck* Fleetwood Mac,' Nico said, finishing her beer.

The man looked wounded, his head sinking into his fat neck.

'You'll learn, kid,' he called as she walked away. 'You'll learn.'

She pushed her way into the crowd. Onstage, Ray flailed around with his guitar, a look on his face like he was just about to cum. Jade swayed along to the

music, her long skirt swirling bewitchingly around her ankles. Her voice was smooth and rich, her accent untraceable. She was a better singer than Lucas and the audience actually seemed to like her original music. The Stabs had stopped playing original songs over a year ago, switching to covers only. ‘It’s just what the people want now,’ the manager in Bendigo had said, spreading his hands wide. ‘Don’t take it personally.’ Thinking about it now made her even more anxious. No one cared about grunge anymore. No one seemed to care much about her, either. She tried to think of something to comfort herself with, the bright vision of her and Lucas’s future together that she’d been carrying around with her since they met. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t recollect it.

What the hell were they going to do anyway, on the road, with a baby?

Back to the bar. Another gin. Another beer. Bad for the baby. The set finished while Nico’s back was turned. She kept drinking, trying to stem the rising tide of anxiety.

‘Hey babe, what did you think?’

Lucas stood behind her, looking sweaty and happy. His post-show buzz had returned.

‘Who cares what I think,’ Nico slurred.

His smile fell. ‘What’s the matter with you?’

Don’t kick the puppy for not being a dog, her mother used to say. Remembering this made her angrier. Lucas expected her praise as if nothing had changed, as if he hadn’t just looked at Jade like he loved her. Nico turned back to the bar, trying to get the waitress’s attention. Two girls at the other end of the bar nudged each other, eyeing Lucas like he was a prized horse they wanted to ride. They didn’t

see Nico beside him, didn't even register her as competition. She was a mother now. She was getting old and fat.

'Didn't you watch the show?' Lucas frowned at her empty glasses. 'What are you drinking all that for?'

'Why don't you just fuck off back to your new girl?'

Lucas recoiled. The waitress finally spotted her, and Nico ordered another beer and gin. When she turned back, Lucas was gone.

'Fuck him,' she muttered, downing the shot before taking her beer outside.

That night the stars seemed fainter, more distant somehow. Bougainvillea hung in hot-pink clouds over the front wall of the pub and she reached up to pick a flower, sticking it behind her ear. The Daly Waters wasn't so bad from this angle, as long as she ignored the old carcass of a helicopter perched oddly on top of the pub roof and the McDonalds flag with the words 'Mac-choppa' spray-painted across it in big black letters. A few tourists milled about, snapping photos of each other before heading back to their hotels and caravan parks. They posed, pointing excitedly up at the helicopter or grinning with hands on hips next to the old parking metres and telegraph poles scattered around the car park. Like this pile of random junk in the middle of nowhere meant something to them. Like any of it did.

'Mummy's sleeping,' a voice said.

Nico spun around, spilling her beer. A little girl stood behind her, barefoot in Scooby Doo pyjamas.

'What's that, hon?' Nico bent down. 'You've lost your Mummy?'

'No, she's sleeping,' the girl cupped a can of Fanta in both hands, her brown eyes glittery and bright.

Nico looked around. The tourists were making their way back to their buses, and one drunk guy staggered around the side of the pub to piss against the wall. No one seemed interested in claiming the child.

The girl turned, showing a dark nest of hair at the back of her head. Nico followed the direction of her hand. She was pointing towards Frances.

‘Your mum’s on that bus?’ Nico pressed her lips together. ‘Wait here, ok?’

She crossed the car park, taking one last look around the empty lot before going quietly up the bus steps and through the open door.

It was dark inside, but she could see that someone was on Ray’s bunk. As her eyes adjusted further Nico saw an arm dangling, swinging with the force of movement. Ray was crouched over a body, thrusting violently into it with his face turned away. Underneath him Nico saw a woman’s long neck, her head dangling like a flower on a drooping stalk. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open. She looked like she was dead.

‘Ray, what are you doing?’ Nico screamed.

At the sound of her voice there was a flurry of movement. Ray slid off the woman and Nico saw the shadow of his lifted arm, heard a noise that sounded like a slap.

‘You fucking bitch,’ Ray hissed, as Nico fumbled for the lights.

‘Mummy?’

Reaching behind her to shield the girl, Nico found the light switch. Ray knelt up on the bed, blocking her view. Red scratch marks were visible on his back.

‘Hey,’ Nico’s heart hammered in her chest. ‘Is she alright?’

‘For fucksake.’ He jumped off of the bunk and onto the floor, picking up his jeans. The body had curled up into a ball beneath a white sheet. The woman uncurled and sat up slowly, and at the sight of her movement, Nico breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Mum?’ the girl said, stepping out from behind Nico.

‘Casey! What are you doing in here?’ the woman said, pushing her hair from her face. She looked down at Nico, her eyes narrowing. ‘What are you doing with my kid?’

‘Was he hurting you?’

Ray laughed. ‘You’re losing your shit.’

‘CASEY,’ the woman turned to the child. ‘Get outside, now.’ The child trotted obediently down the stairs. ‘What’s the problem, this your girlfriend?’ she said to Ray. She climbed slowly down off the bunk, careful not to catch her skirt on the rungs. She grabbed a pair of light-blue undies off the floor and quickly pulled them on under her skirt, stumbling a little.

‘You were passed out,’ Nico said.

The woman’s head snapped up, as if she was just waking. She cut across the room and grabbed Nico’s arm, her bitter breath on her face.

‘Watch your mouth,’ she hissed. There was a small cut beneath her eye and a dark smudge surrounding it, forming the beginnings of a bruise. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘What the fuck sort of mother are you?’

Ray laughed again. ‘Like you’re Mother Teresa.’

The woman’s fingers dug into her skin. Nico bunched her own fists, feeling a rush of adrenaline at the possibility of a fight, the familiar mix of dread and excitement.

‘What’s going on?’ Lucas called from outside.

Without another word the woman let go of her arm and hurried down the bus steps. Nico and Ray followed, watching the woman and child disappear down the road.

‘Ray just took advantage of some poor girl,’ Nico blurted. Her legs felt weak after the burst of adrenaline, and she was about to reach for Lucas so she could crumple into his arms when she realised that Jade was standing next to him.

‘She’s fucking cooked.’ Ray moved closer, leaning over her. His bare chest smelled of sex.

‘I saw you,’ Nico turned to Lucas. ‘She was passed out and he was fucking her.’

‘You’re pissed,’ Lucas replied, before turning to Ray. ‘What’s going on, mate?’

Nico recognised Ray’s smirk. It was the look of a man who’d done something he would never admit to. He was laughing at her.

‘You’re a fucking rapist,’ Nico said, in amazement.

Ray laughed. ‘You crazy bitch.’

Was she crazy? She felt so confused. Lucas looked drunk and fed-up. Jade stood next to him, her beautiful mouth hanging slightly open.

Did they walk out here together? Alone?

‘You’ve lost control of your woman,’ Ray said to Lucas, snaking his arm around Nico’s waist. She tried to duck out of his grasp, gripping his fingers to loosen them, but Ray reached out his other arm, forcing her into a suffocating embrace.

‘Get *off!*’ Nico wrestled with Ray, her body going hot with panic.

Lucas stepped forward. ‘Pull your head in.’

‘If you’re going to knock up a bitch you have to at least keep her leashed,’ Ray said.

Lucas lunged forward and Ray let go of her, falling backwards. There was a loud crack, then the thud of their bodies hitting the ground.

‘Fuck!’

Lucas climbed off of Ray, sprawling onto his back in the dirt.

‘Fuck this,’ Ray hissed, standing up. He pinched his nose, trying to stem the blood. ‘We’re done, *mate*.’

He stalked off into the pub and Lucas stood up, looking dazed. Seeing that he was unhurt, Nico’s heartbeat slowed. She noticed how quiet the bush was around them. A soft, chucking noise came from the scrub nearby, a *ch ch ch* like an engine turning over.

‘Far out,’ Jade muttered.

‘Hey,’ Nico touched his arm. ‘You ok?’

‘Are you even sure?’ Lucas said. ‘You’re fucking pissed.’

She wasn’t sure. All she could remember was the length of the woman and her long, slim neck. Nico thought of herself when she and Lucas fucked, the way she sometimes just lay there, and took it.

‘Ray hates me,’ she blurted. ‘He wants you all to think I’m trouble, but he’s the trouble, he’s the creep, the fucking rapist —’

‘Jesus Christ!’

‘You don’t believe me.’ Nico spun around at the crunch of footsteps, but it was only Jimmy.

‘I might go to bed,’ Jade said, after a pause. ‘I’ve got a mate from Darwin coming to get me tomorrow. Guess I’ll see you guys in Melbourne?’

‘What?’ Nico said. ‘Who’s in Melbourne?’

Lucas shrugged.

‘We’re gonna try some new sounds,’ Jimmy said. ‘A new direction.’

‘But we’re taking a break after this tour. We all agreed.’

‘We changed our minds,’ Lucas snapped.

A burst of laughter erupted behind them. A man and woman stumbled out of the pub, the woman nudging the man playfully with her hip.

‘A break might be good for you,’ Jimmy said, gently. ‘And the baby.’

Nico waited for Lucas to deny it but he stayed silent, staring at the ground. Her anger rose, the alcohol in her veins making her feel itchy and out of control. As drunk as she was, it wasn’t enough. It didn’t dull the feeling that everyone was turning against her.

November 1990

It is not the advance but the retreat that is so much to be dreaded — Charles Sturt, 1845.

As we crest the hill I see the sickle-shaped curve of the bay below us, homes dotted neatly around it like Monopoly houses. I sigh and sink deeper into my seat, averting my eyes from the salmon pink surf life-saving club and the faded, disused tennis courts.

‘Don’t be like that,’ Dad says. ‘It’s good to be home.’

I know Dad is putting on a brave face, pretending he isn’t upset that the floods made us miss The Morning Glory. We spent a week camped out at Kulgera with the other flood families. The rich casino food gave us stomach-aches.

I wind up my window to muffle the hiss of the ocean. Seeking distraction, I pull Dad’s notebook out from under my seat. The pages are filled with pencil sketches and notes scribbled underneath. The word *Sundog* is written beside a sketch of two circles, pale loops around them like the rings of Saturn. Another drawing, *Pileus*, is of a puffy cloud with a pale circle on top of it like the brim of a cap. I flip through the pages, concentrating on the drawings so I don’t have to think about home. Towards the end of the notebook the pictures are replaced with notes. The handwriting is in a messy, rushed scrawl.

*I must learn to read the signs. Like a blind man fluttering his fingers over
brail, so too must I run my hands through the drift of the clouds, searching out the
meanings behind the forms ... There are no coincidences in this life. I must find the
connections, the patterns in these incarnations. What else is a cloud, but a mood?
Something that hovers, enveloping us ...*

I look up at Dad and his bright, fake-happy smile. The writing on the page looks like his but the words are too posh, too formal. It sounds like a passage from Charles Sturt's journals, the ones Dad used to read to me when I was little. But Sturt didn't write about clouds.

All signs of life cease as the dead heart is approached. Gaiety is impossible. One fears to break the silence. There is the indefinable feeling of the presence of death.

The radio signal drops out and the car goes quiet. My spine tingles, the hairs on my arms standing up.

'Oi!' Dad snatches the notebook from my hands, dropping it into the pocket of his door. 'What did curiosity do to the cat?'

'Nothing. Cats have nine lives, it takes more than curiosity to kill one.'

Dad laughs, swearing when another driver cuts him off.

'Bloody townies,' he mutters.

The main street of Champion is packed with tourists. Families in saggy, ill-fitting bathers clutch greasy packets of fish and chips, their feet bare on the hot cement. The sea breeze stirs the coloured flags hanging along the street, rippling the beach towels left to dry on car bonnets and benches. Already the red dirt of the centre seems like a lifetime ago.

'Clear skies, once again,' Dad says. He grips the steering wheel tightly, tilting his head to peer upwards.

'We could stop in at The Bait on the way home.'

Dad's eyes light up, then he shakes his head.

'Your mother would kill us.'

'We could get some Moreton Bay bugs for tea. Her favourite.'

He laughs, flicking on the indicator. ‘Geez you’re getting sharp.’

As soon as Dad stops the car I jump out and run inside. The smell of fresh fish hits me like a slap.

‘Who’s this grommet?’ Otto’s deep voice booms. ‘The great explorer returned! What did you learn in the red centre?’

I lean on the counter, considering my answer.

‘I learned that trucks don’t like kangaroos.’

Otto and Marty bellow with laughter as the streamers behind me flutter open.

‘Not wrong ay? Not wrong.’

Dad shakes Otto’s hand, and then reaches across the counter to shake Marty’s. Marty’s left hand is gloved in blue rubber, and his small knife shines with fish scales.

‘Rescued a couple of townies from a capsized tinny this morning,’ Marty tells Dad. ‘Shivering so hard I’d be surprised if they had any teeth left in their heads.’

‘They take a banana on board?’ Dad asks, stroking his beard.

‘Worse,’ Otto says. ‘A bloody woman.’

Otto looks the way I imagine Bluebeard does in the story: tall and brawny with a bushy black beard and dark, devious eyes. Otto has only two outfits: grey overalls and black overalls, chosen depending on the tides. He wears the grey ones today, and his lucky red cap is squashed tightly over his large head.

‘Any bites?’ I ask.

‘The fishing was good,’ Otto replies. ‘It was just the bloody catching that was bad.’

A voice shouts something from the loading dock but I only understand the swear words.

‘Don’t mind him,’ Otto’s smile is barely visible beneath his beard. ‘Original Pirate’s got the curse.’

I make a sympathetic face. There are so many ways for a fisherman to get bad luck: wearing blue on the boat, eating ham or bacon on the boat, fishing from the wrong side of the boat, whistling on the boat, letting a redhead on board, saying the word rabbit, sleeping in late, doing things in the wrong order ... Just when I think I know them all I learn a new one. Otto says there is a controlling force we have no knowledge of, which we will never understand. That’s why Dad gets on with the Fishies so well, all of them looking up at the sky, trying to read it like an instruction manual for life.

I study the photos on the wall, tuning out while they discuss the day’s catch. *World’s largest squid measures 43 feet long. Shark devours Yorkshire terrier at Spit.* I’ve studied them so many times that I can picture every word and photo with my eyes closed. The afternoon sun pours into the shop through the western glass window, making the off-white walls shimmer and shine. I run my finger along the bottom of a newspaper clipping and push the paper firmly into the blue tack.

‘Right!’ Everything Otto says is a shout. I follow him out to the loading dock and sit down on one of the crates. Across from me hunches the Original Pirate. He acknowledges me with a grumpy nod. Strands of long white hair hang over his face and his bottom lip juts out, cracked and dry. I look away. People with the curse are best avoided.

‘Your first time to the top end,’ Otto speaks with his back to me, and his large shoulders shift as he makes the coffee. ‘How did you find it?’

‘Awesome.’

I want to tell him that the Simpson Desert was even bigger than the ocean. That the red dirt trapped in the grooves of my sneakers is silkier and smoother than sand.

Otto brings over my Milo, his giant hand making the mug look tiny.

‘The kid prefers land to water,’ Original Pirate says. ‘She must get seasick or something.’ He giggles, a high-pitched sound.

‘She doesn’t get seasick, Pirate.’

The truck idling on a nearby street slowly rumbles away. With the departure of the noisy engine it gets quiet, so the only sound remaining is the distant crash of waves. I feel anxious all of a sudden, and I sip my Milo so fast it burns the roof of my mouth.

‘A cuppa for Dad?’ I ask.

‘Him and Marty got something to go over. Don’t stick your nose in,’ Otto warns, when he sees the look on my face.

I stand up, reluctant to disobey. But a sudden shout from inside the shop makes me turn and run inside.

‘Where’s Dad?’ I say to Marty, who stands calmly behind the counter, a fish splayed open under his knife. He places the fillet gently in the window tray, then wipes the guts from his knife onto a tea towel.

‘Hang on, love.’

The streamers flutter as Dad comes back inside. His face is sweaty and pale.

‘It’s bullshit, Marty,’ he says. ‘You know it.’

Marty gives him a pointed look, jerking his head in my direction.

‘Filthy gossip. Lies,’ Dad says, pointing a trembling finger at Marty. ‘And fuck you for believing it!’

I look from Dad to Marty, trying to put it together. I guess Dad owes somebody money and they are tired of waiting. People are always hounding him. They just don't understand the unreliability of the photography industry.

'You know the way it is here,' Marty points his knife carefully before sinking it into the guts of another fish. 'And she never tried, neither.'

She? The streamers flap as Dad leaves the shop again. Otto watches us from the loading dock entrance.

'Tight lines,' he says, using our standard farewell.

'Tight lines,' I reply, unsure what the look on Otto's face is telling me.

Outside, the sun is bright and burning.

'Dad ...?'

He walks a little way up the street, then turns back. His confusion makes him look older and it frightens me.

'Your mother ...'

I cross my arms. Mum has a knack for pissing off the locals. Eight years we've been living in Champion, and we still get treated like outsiders.

'What's she done now?'

Dad rounds on me, standing so close he blocks out the sun. 'She did *nothing*,' he hisses. 'Don't you talk about your mother like that.'

Shocked, my eyes fill with tears. As Dad returns to the car I feel a chill, as if his shadow remains, hanging over me.

Chapter 12

Nico sat on Pumpkin's hood in the Daly Waters car park. Numb with beer and gin, she listened to the sounds of the nearby bush. She heard rustling and gnawing and slithering and sliding, the sounds of snakes and wallabies, geckos and spotted quolls. All those different animals mixed up together, sharing the same land as they ate and slept and hunted and fucked.

She couldn't even share a tour bus with three of her own kind.

'You know it's inevitable, right?' Ray said, sneaking up on her.

She swore under her breath. Or maybe she said it out loud, she wasn't sure.

'Jade and your man,' Ray smirked. 'They're inevitable.'

'Fuck off.'

Nico turned back to face the bush. She wished it was daytime so she could look up at the clouds, watch the wind buff their edges into smoothness.

'It doesn't matter how much you love him. Because they have something you don't.'

Had Ray hated her this much, all this time? It was frightening to think that his resentment had been simmering away all these years, waiting for an opportunity to spill over.

'You think you're part of this band,' Ray laughed, leaning in. 'How could you be? You're just another brekko kid who latched onto Lucas when he was too young to know better.'

Nico flinched. She hadn't heard that word in years. Brekko's were the poor kids who got a free breakfast every morning before school started. She still

remembered the stale, scratchy Weetbix. The runny noses and watery juice and bruised fruit.

‘Why are you being such an asshole?’ she snapped. ‘Ever since I got back, you’ve had it in for me.’

‘This isn’t about you and your failed abortion,’ Ray smirked. ‘Not everything is.’

‘Do you have a thing for Jade? Is that what this is about?’ She swayed a little, seeing two Rays instead of one.

‘Are you really that fucking stupid? Don’t you know they’re together *right now?*’

A garbage bin slammed shut behind the pub. Nico looked up in confusion. Wasn’t Lucas here, somewhere, with her?

‘You had a good run, leeching off of us all these years,’ Ray said. ‘But I reckon your time’s finally up.’

Nico marched back into the pub. Only a few punters remained, the ones who had nobody to go home to. Midnight Oil played on the stereo, too loud. It pressed in against her like the souvenirs and objects that cluttered every corner and surface.

‘Fuck Ray,’ Nico muttered. ‘Fuck the band.’

She kicked a bar stool, knocking it to the ground. Alcohol rushed through her bloodstream as a reward for her violence.

‘Oi,’ the bargirl said, wagging her finger back and forth. Her generous breasts danced with the movement.

Nico ignored her, stumbling through the bar and out into the empty shed. The main lights were switched off and the stage looked small and sad.

There he was. Her Lucas, seated at one of the tables. Jade sat across from him, so close their knees touched. She leaned in towards him. Her fingers were in his hair.

Nico started running, silently, stealthily.

‘Slut!’ she screamed, pushing out both her hands. Jade tipped back in her chair and fell to the ground as Nico jumped on top of her, gasping as the point of one of the chair legs rammed into her thigh. She yanked a handful of Jade’s hair until a clump came out. The shriek of pain was satisfying, but what Nico most wanted was to land a punch on that pretty face.

‘Get off, bitch, get off me!’ Jade screamed, writhing underneath her as Nico tried to pin her down. Lucas shouted something from very far away, but as she lifted her hand to strike, his arms wrapped around her. Lucas dragged her backwards along the ground, his hands locked tight around her middle.

‘We were just talking, baby,’ he said in her ear. ‘Just talking!’

‘You fucking bitch.’ Jade scrambled to her feet, her hand clutching the back of her head. It was clear that for all of her tough New Zealand talk she’d never won a fight in her life.

‘I’ll talk to you tomorrow,’ Jade sniffed, to Lucas, before scurrying away.

‘No you won’t, bitch,’ Nico called, watching her go.

She felt Lucas’s chest rise and fall against her back. She loosened his arms from her stomach so she could shuffle around to look at him.

‘I didn’t do anything,’ he said.

‘Stop lying.’

When he met her gaze properly, she saw what Lucas was trying to hide. The warmth that had always been there for her was gone.

‘Nic ...’ His voice was tight and strange. ‘I thought I was ready to be a dad.’

‘What?’ Her mind stumbled and stopped. Adrenaline kicked in again, telling her to get away before he could say anything else.

‘You said ...’

‘It’s not because of her. I just know, for sure now. You were right; we’re not ready for a kid. You were right all along.’

Lucas reached out to hug her and she caught a whiff of Jade’s perfume.

‘Oh, God,’ she moaned, struggling to her feet and running for the toilets.

She fell to her knees, heaving up a rush of thick brown vomit. When she was done she rested her head against the rim of the bowl.

‘Are you ok?’ Lucas said, behind her.

‘Just fuck off!’ she screamed, as another wave of sickness rose.

It was a relief to give in to the push and heave, the calm of thinking nothing. When she was finished, she stood up too quick and had to wait for the wave of dizziness to pass.

No one was waiting outside to check if she was alright. Obviously, Lucas had gone looking for Jade.

Nico wiped her mouth and climbed on stage, surveying the empty shed. The chairs and tables were scattered haphazardly, as if everyone had popped out for a smoke and would return at any minute.

Not even Stevie Nicks could save *this* band.

Nico laughed, and her anger made her feel strong. She swiped the microphone stand with her right hand and it landed with a bang on stage, bouncing once before it settled.

It felt good to see it fall.

She went over to Jimmy's drum kit and grabbed the ride cymbal, attempting to yank it off. The cymbal was stuck fast and she stumbled backwards, falling onto her arse. This time she tried the high hat stand. That came off. She threw it across the shed into a group of chairs, and it crashed. The noise gave her a shiver of pleasure.

Nico picked up the microphone stand again, aiming the sharp end at the bass drum. The calf skin tore with a delicious rip. She ran to the rear of the stage, searching in the shadows. She found Jade's American Special Stratocaster, casually propped behind the curtain as if its owner was so well-loved that no one would dare steal from her.

Holding the Stratocaster by the neck, Nico brought the belly of it down onto the stage. She cried out with excitement at the smash before raising it again, watching the guitar crack open and spill its innards, green wood splintering all over the stage.

Once the belly of the guitar was completely gone Nico used the neck as a weapon, shredding the remains of Jimmy's drum kit. She stabbed and ripped, panting and laughing, her arms aching and sweat beading on her skin. She found Lucas's guitar and Ray's bass and smashed those too, one at a time, holding them in the air like golf clubs and bringing them down with a triumphant shout.

When she raised them again, only the necks remained. Her cries bounced off the tin walls of the empty shed, reverberating with the crashes and thuds. This was Nico's first solo performance, all original, rock 'n' roll.

Once she was satisfied there was nothing left to break Nico stopped and bent over, hands on her knees, gasping for air.

Lucas, Ray, Jade and Jimmy stood in front of the stage. They looked up at her with their hanging mouths open, like a row of carnival laughing clowns.

‘Rock ‘n’ roll, right guys?’ Nico screamed. And then she jumped off the stage and ran out the rear door, out of the pub, and into the night.

Chapter 13

An anvil cloud sprouted from a Cumulonimbus, its white, lumpy top billowing upwards before flattening. Anvils were a warning of instability, and meant rapid changes in temperature and air pressure. She still remembered these things. Nico imagined the anvil cloud was a bomb, falling through the sky with a sound that only dogs could hear. She saw the shadow of the bomb as it approached the ground, Jade and Lucas looking up in terror a second before it hit them. The image made Nico smile: the sloppy grin of a drunk. She hurled the empty wine bottle over her shoulder and the chink of glass in the backseat sounded celebratory.

A black and white sign made from punctured tin welcomed her to Western Australia. She opened another bottle of wine to toast it. A convey of grey nomads were up ahead and one caravan lagged behind, trailing black smoke. The engine groaned in protest as she flattened her foot to overtake it, willing Pumpkin along. The driver of the caravan grinned when she finally drew up alongside, his bald head shining like a polished apple. *Fuck You*, Nico mouthed, feeling a brief burst of joy when he frowned in confusion and Pumpkin rallied, increasing her speed to sixty five. *Fuck him, fuck men, fuck em all*. Her anger felt right and good, like a return to her authentic self. Returning to her lane, Nico watched as the temperature gauge shifted from hot to boiling. Her ecstatic rage was dampened by the sudden realisation that if Pumpkin broke down she had no one to call for help.

She turned up the radio, taking regular swigs from her wine bottle. *Like a Virgin*, she sung, in-between sips. *Touched for the very first time*.

She *was* like a virgin. No longer encumbered by a man. Free to embark on a brand new adventure. The possibilities were endless now that she didn't have to

spend all of her time caring for Lucas and the band. That drama was all Jade's problem now and she could do anything, anything at all. She had her pay from the hotel; she had wheels and the wide open road. *But the baby.* A wisp of words in her ear, the quick flip of her heart before she brushed it away.

A truck appeared on the horizon. A road train with three hundred-ton trailers trembling behind it, swallowing the horizon with its bulk. Gripping the wheel, she held Pumpkin steady. As the truck passed by, the bomb Nico had been imagining suddenly dropped: not on Jade and Lucas but on her. She cursed them, cursed the sky and her fate as a giant black bomb exploded in the centre of the windscreen. The glass shattered and Nico screamed, wrenching the wheel, hard, to the left.

A rush of grey, then green. Her stomach heaved as she hurtled off road and through the scrub. The car sped narrowly between two tree trunks before being spat out into a paddock of kangaroo grass.

Stunned, Nico continued to grip the steering wheel. Her forehead itched, and when she scratched it her hand came away smeared with blood. A star of broken glass shone in the windscreen. She turned gingerly to peer over her shoulder but the truck was long gone. *Thanks for your concern, buddy.* Scattered along the highway were the shredded remains of the truck's tyre.

So this was what the anvil cloud was for. A warning of her own brush with death.

The door swung open into silence. Nico grabbed the bottle and stumbled out into the paddock, her heart still pumping with fright. She was alive, and the joy of it was suddenly dizzying. She was young and free, forging a path that was hers alone. *Nicky the adventurer*, her dad used to say. *Nicky the brave pioneer.*

Her hips swayed with the breeze as she drank and the sun felt warm on her scalp. Once the adrenaline wore off she felt sleepy. Nico headed for a gum tree in the centre of the paddock. She lay down beneath its sparse shade and looked up at a branch, lulled into sleep by the white bone of it, the gentle creak and sway in the wind.

She woke ascending into the air. Dad was carrying her from the car to their hotel room. Keeping her eyes shut, Nico smelled the dust and clay carried to her by the hot wind. She smiled, a child again, safe in her father's arms.

When she shifted, her hand crashed into a warm, fleshy thing that could have been a nose or an ear. Her dream evaporated, and Nico opened her eyes into the glare of the headlights.

'Relax,' a voice said over her screams. 'I've got you.'

She struggled harder, thrashing against the man's chest.

'All right! Jesus.'

He lay her back down on the cold ground. Breathing heavily, Nico scabbled backwards. The man hunched in front of her, his face blurred and hard to define in the darkness.

'I thought you were dead.' He pointed at the smashed windscreen of the car, then the empty wine bottle. 'Were you in an accident? Or trying to drink yourself to death?'

She remembered the shadow of the anvil as it fell, sunlight flickering through the branches of a tree. Had all of that been a dream? Was she still dreaming now? Nico touched a finger to her face, feeling the urge to be sick.

The man's face bobbed vaguely in the air, seeming to detach from his neck while she watched.

'I think I have a concussion,' she said, and her eyelids felt heavy, like curtains.

The man sighed and stood up. A hand appeared before her with the same blurred edges as his face.

'You better come with me. The name's Dave.'

Nico swallowed, unsure what to do. Then she reached up and took it.

The country flashed by in a brief illumination of headlights. Dead limbs of gum trees, curling spines of spinifex. Occasionally a gate or a name, hand-painted on a wooden sign. It was hard to imagine anyone living at the end of those long dark roads.

They drove in silence, Dave staring straight ahead as if he'd forgotten she was there. He reached out to switch on the tape player and the sudden movement made Nico jump, worsening the throb in her skull. A looped baseline started, quiet at first, then a voice singing low, almost whispering. The car filled with a lavish, orchestral sound. She realised with surprise that it was one of Jimmy's favourite bands.

She studied Dave from the corner of her eye. Dark eyebrows framed his pale face. He had short, white-blond hair and wore dirty jeans and a plain grey t-shirt. He was average looking, but there was something about him that she liked. He didn't ask

her questions, or stare at her tits. He took her presence for granted like she was just another thing he had to deal with. Whoever this guy was, if he hadn't come along she would be unconscious and alone, in the middle of nowhere.

She turned to give her hero a smile but at the same moment Dave braked hard, making her whip forward. They turned off the highway onto a dirt road and the tyres spun on the loose dirt and rocks, making the ute rattle and shake. Nico gripped the sides of her seat, trying to keep her head and neck still. The pain was so bad she struggled not to cry out. The winding road was narrow, so narrow that if an approaching car hit a bend at the same time as them they would surely collide. As if hearing her thoughts Dave sped up, and the corner of his mouth lifted into a small smile.

Hey, calm down, she wanted to say. *It's not funny.* She opened her mouth but the words would not come.

Dave gripped the wheel tight with both hands. He was enjoying himself. She tried to get a look at the speedometer; they had to be going one-forty at least.

'Hey,' Nico croaked, but her voice was almost inaudible. 'Hey ...'

On the next corner the tyres skidded on the gravel, and the view through the windscreen changed from road to scrub. She braced herself against the dashboard as they fishtailed, her heart thumping in her chest. Once they were facing the road again Dave calmly accelerated, shooting them blindly forward through a cloud of dust. A proper shit-eating grin was on his face now. His straight white teeth gleamed in the darkness.

Was she supposed to be afraid, or impressed? Nico cursed herself for trusting a stranger. Alone only a few days and already in the hands of a lunatic. How the band would laugh if they knew.

Finally slowing down, Dave gave a sigh of satisfaction. As quiet returned, the orchestral music rose again, the vocalist whispering muted threats. Her grip on the seat finally loosened, but Nico didn't dare look at him.

'Each man has two sides which are always at war,' her Dad used to say. 'Some are strong; making sure the good side wins every battle. Others are not so strong, and they let the bad side win.'

'What about women?' she'd asked. 'Do they have two sides?'

'Women are the same, kiddo. But sometimes they have to fight against the bad in men, too.'

Nico had accepted this burden, never questioning its fairness. Her mother hadn't had the strength to fight her own battles, much less Dad's. But Nico was strong. Strong enough for herself, and her father. Perhaps she was strong enough for this one, too.

November 1990

Setting aside the difficulties of traversing such a country, the very elements appear to be against us — Charles Sturt, 1845.

We go into the front bar and find the usual suspects. The regulars welcome us, clapping Dad on the back.

‘Where ya been, ya daft cunt?’ Reggie says blearily, tipping forward on his stool.

‘Watch your language in front of the kid,’ Deb warns. Deb is always kind to me, even though her and Mum don’t get on.

I swivel on my stool, leaning on the bar which is made from the old, cracked hull of a boat. An enormous barracuda mounted on the wall overhead bares its teeth, smiling at nothing.

‘Who were you dodging this time, Charlie?’ Murray asks. ‘The missus or the tax man?’

Deb gives me a packet of Twisties and tells me to go and sit on the couch. There’s a footy game on and I pretend to watch TV, my mind going over Dad’s argument with Marty. Is it true, what Marty told Dad about Mum? Whatever it is, it must be bad.

The men’s boots squeak on the sticky floor before they settle into their stools. Cheeky jokes slip from the corners of their mouths, each one triggering a fresh wave of laughter. Usually, when Dad’s with the boys his voice gets louder and the crowd’s feet around his eyes deepen. But this time he doesn’t laugh and smile. He just stares down into his beer glass like he’s the loneliest man in the world. I know a few goes

on the pokies will cheer him up, but if he does that we'll be here all day. I wait quietly, hoping it's just one beer like he promised.

As I jam the last handful of crumbs into my mouth two high school girls take the couch opposite. They adjust themselves, giggling and preening, pushing greasy hair behind their ears. It's obvious by their sly looks that the girls are scouting for attention. None of the old blokes are interested, so they switch their focus to me.

'Is it male or female?' The thinner one says, cupping a hand around her mouth in a pretend whisper.

'No tits on it,' the other one says. 'He's a she-she? She's a he-he?'

They crack up, their stupid laughter making some of the blokes' heads turn.

'Why don't you shut your gobs?' I say, keeping my eyes on the TV.

'What's that?' The thinner one leans forward, her nose ring glinting.

'You heard me.'

Their bracelets ring like cat bells. I am the mouse.

'Oi, Mandy!' A tradie calls, from the pokie room doorway. The girls giggle as they get to their feet. The thinner girl stumbles, elbowing the other one in the chest.

'My boob!' the girl cries, rubbing her nipple.

'Aw. Does it hurt?' The thinner one runs her thumb across the girl's left breast. The pub is silent except for the game on telly and the tinny cry of the audience at a goal missed. All the blokes gawk at the girls, Dad included. He sees me watching him and looks away.

The tradie whistles, the high, quick summons of a dog, and the girls are gone. I breathe deep, smelling a trace of something they left in their wake. Iron and roses.

Jordy says something rude and all the blokes laugh.

‘Don’t you have a daughter about that age?’ Dad says.

‘My girl’s not like them sluts,’ Jordy says.

‘They’re mates. They run around together.’

The other blokes go quiet. Sensing a change, Deb looks up.

‘I see her on the jetty when the boys come in,’ Dad says. ‘She’s not waiting for the catch.’

‘Nah mate.’ Jordy says. ‘That’s your missus with her mouth open. Doesn’t surprise me you’re getting confused, she’s always been partial to two at once.’

Dad slams his glass on the bar before launching himself at Jordy. I gasp, knowing that Dad has no chance because Jordy is twice his size. They tumble to the floor, Dad landing one good punch before Jordy gets on top and starts laying into him.

‘Dad!’ I scream, and Jordy freezes.

Normally when there’s a fight the other blokes get all red in the face, shouting and cheering them on. This time they are quiet, averting their eyes as I help Dad to his feet.

‘You’re all fucken liars,’ Dad says, hoarsely.

‘Maybe if you got off the horses, your woman might stand by ya,’ somebody mutters.

Blood drips from Dad’s beard, staining his shirt. He suddenly looks old to me, his face wrinkled and his arms flabby and weak. My stomach tumbles like I ate something rotten.

‘*Stop it*, Dad,’ I hiss.

I drag him outside, onto the street. The afternoon sun is still blindingly bright, like time stopped while we were inside. Dad sways on his feet, giving me a hopeless look.

‘She’s broken me, love,’ he says, his open mouth a pool of blood and spit. ‘She’s broken me.’

I march us to the car, resisting the urge to give him a hard push in the back. Instead, I put the keys in his hand and tell him to get us back on the road.

Chapter 14

Nico woke in a hot, stuffy room, the sun beaming through a gap at the bottom of the blinds. Her skin felt slimed with a thick coating of sweat: the horrible, viscous kind of sweat that only comes from illness or alcohol. She located her hands, which were buried at odd angles beneath her body. Pins and needles fired through her fingers.

The room contained just a bed, a cupboard and a single chair holding a glass of water. A guest room maybe. A holding room? Remembering Dave's crazy driving; she got up and checked one of the doors. The handle turned easily, and as her heartbeat slowed her headache returned.

The white ensuite bathroom was coated in a layer of red dust. Spider webs covered the shower head and toilet, confirming the fact that the room hadn't been used in a long time. On the vanity sat a cracked blue vase holding a single lily. Nico stroked the petals, strangely comforted by the smooth plastic surface.

Catching her reflection in the mirror, she froze. A bandage was taped across her forehead, the edges reddened with blood. Her face was the colour of old dishwater, dark hollows indented under her eyes.

'You in there?' The bathroom door creaked open.

He didn't look like the saviour Nico remembered. This man was stocky and shorter than she was. His white-blond hair was shaved to a spiky inch and his eyes were the kind of pale blue that looked watered down.

The intensity of Dave's stare left Nico feeling exposed, although she was fully dressed. Looking down, she noticed her footprints in the dust on the floor.

'How's the head?' he asked, and she smiled and winced, hoping she looked brave.

When he held out two white pills she fumbled them gratefully from his palm. The painkillers had a sour coating she didn't recognise.

Dave handed her a can of women's deodorant and a half-used bar of soap. Thanking him, she wondered who the deodorant belonged to before.

'Hey!' she blurted, as he turned to go. 'Where am I, exactly?'

Dave smiled, his lips curling up in the corners. 'The middle of bloody nowhere, mate,' he drawled, before closing the door behind him.

She emerged from a long shower to find jeans and a plain white t-shirt laid out on the bed. It felt odd to wear another man's clothes, but the guilt disappeared as soon as she remembered Jade. Jade with her pale, sneaky eyes. Jade with her fingers in his hair. Fuck them both. She'd make the best of it, whatever it turned out to be.

The walls seemed to recede as she walked down the hallway. Weak and unsteady, she couldn't figure out if it was the accident, the hangover, or the pills that were making her feel so strange. Her chest felt tight, packed full of Styrofoam. Everything seemed impossibly far away.

Nico froze in the kitchen doorway, dropping a hand to her stomach. What if the accident hurt the baby? The thought of it was like a flash of light, too bright to look at directly.

'Take a seat,' Dave said, glancing over his shoulder.

She perched at the end of a long table. The wood was covered in nicks and scars, as if someone had been chipping at it with a knife over a long period.

'I've asked the boys to collect your car and bring it back for you,' Dave said.

The sizzle of hot fat filled her ears. The floor was tiled in black and white diamonds, just visible under a layer of dirt and grease. The stainless steel oven and stovetop were covered in the same layer of filth.

‘The boys?’ she said. The smell of bacon made her stomach heave with a mixture of hunger and sickness.

‘My staff,’ he replied, and she heard a faint accent, something strange and clipped at the edge of his words. Was he British? South African, maybe? He didn’t look older than twenty-five.

Dave cracked an egg into a bowl using one hand. He repeated this once more before sliding the eggs into the pan of boiling water. When he said nothing further she stood up, wandering through the archway into the lounge. The room contained two patchy leather couches, a coffee table and a TV propped on a chair. The same layer of dirt and dust, the same feeling of emptiness and neglect like the family who lived here left a long time ago.

She walked groggily to the window, nervous of what she would see. Beyond the front porch and an abandoned rockery, a dirt driveway was the only feature in an expanse of stark, flat land. An inch of straw-coloured grass stuck up out of the ground, spiky and mean-looking. She searched the horizon for a single living creature, but couldn’t find one. Nothing moved, and as Nico stared the prickly grass seemed to grow another inch, warning her to stay off of it. The sky was a uniform blue void, offering nothing. She sighed and returned to the kitchen.

‘This your place?’

Dave dropped two slices of bread into the toaster. ‘Pretty much.’

‘Where are your parents?’

‘Somewhere in Europe, I guess.’ He arranged two paper towels on a chopping board before placing the cooked bacon strips neatly across it. His precise movements reminded Nico of a barman in a hotel, stiff-necked and deft in a way that was designed to intimidate, rather than impress. ‘You’re in Wither,’ he added.

‘Wither,’ she repeated, resting her cheek on the table. The coolness of the wood was a relief to her hot skin.

A sudden flurry of movement made her lift her head. Dave slid a plate in front of her, an immaculate arrangement of eggs, bacon and toast. At the top right of the placemat sat a glass of orange juice and beside it, a steaming mug of coffee.

He handed her a knife and fork wrapped in a napkin and sat opposite with only a coffee for himself.

‘This is like a restaurant,’ Nico said.

She felt flattered and uncomfortable. After all the years she’d spent taking care of the boys, suddenly someone was taking care of her. She sliced into an egg and sunshine-yellow yolk burst out of it, soaking into the bread. Dave watched her closely as she lifted her fork. Stalling, she glanced around the kitchen, spotting the shrivelled-up corpse of a rat beneath the oven.

‘You’re not going to have any?’

‘I already ate.’

That smile again. Something about the way his lips hooked in the corners made her heart drop. Not with attraction but rather the sensation of being cast adrift and unsure of what came next.

Chapter 15

Nico was watching Rikki Lake, an episode called 'Women Who Use Men for Money,' when Dave's ute pulled up out front.

'Don't you feel guilty about what you're doing?' Rikki asked the guest, her brown eyes wide with judgment. 'Don't you feel a sense of personal responsibility?'

'I've got four kids and a baby daddy living it up somewhere in California,' the woman replied. She crossed her sinewy arms. 'I've got no money, no support, and no skills. Do I feel bad about doing what I have to do, to survive?'

No, you don't, Nico agreed, yanking off her jeans. It was too hot, and besides, it wouldn't hurt to turn on the charm. She still felt groggy but the nausea and headache were gone. She felt a fresh new anger at Lucas's betrayal: a full-bodied, prickling fury. Even as she lay still and calm on the couch, her heart beat too quickly and her fingers and toes twitched. She'd never been with anyone but Lucas. But she knew this was what people did, to get over their ex's. They got under someone else.

A wave of hot, dry air blew across her bare legs as the front door opened. Dave dropped his keys on the hall table, giving her a cursory glance. Nico stretched languidly, yawning as her shirt lifted to expose her underwear. Nonplussed by her half-nakedness, Dave poured himself a glass of water.

'Rick said he can replace that windscreen for you tomorrow.'

So she was free to stay a second night. Nico thanked him, not asking about the cost in the hope that it was free. She wondered if she would sleep in the spare room again, or if he would invite her into his bed. She didn't like sleeping alone. She thought longingly of her cosy little bunk. She missed being lulled to sleep on the

road, and the music and chatter and even Jimmy. Lucas could drop dead, Jade and Ray with him.

‘Where were you headed yesterday?’ Dave asked. ‘Before you crashed?’

‘Perth,’ she said quickly. Had she been driving to Perth? It all seemed so unreal now, like a dream.

‘And where are you from, originally?’ He drained his glass and looked bored, like he was asking out of obligation rather than interest.

‘Champion Beach. A few hours south-west of Adelaide.’

‘You’re a long way from home.’

‘I won’t bore you with the whole story.’

Dave nodded, apparently satisfied, and came to sit beside her on the couch. He picked up the remote and leaned back, his knee just touching hers. She liked the way he didn’t say more than he had to, the opposite of Lucas’s anxious, twitching energy. Dave moved calmly, as if sated by a hard day’s work. The sort of man a woman could depend on.

They leaned back into the cushions, side by side, to watch a documentary about sharks. Nico sat very still, waiting for him to put a hand on her bare leg, or shuffle in a little closer. But all they did was watch TV and when she turned to look at him, she saw that he was fast asleep.

The dinner Dave prepared was even fancier than the one at breakfast. Pasta, soft and thin like lengths of unspooled cotton, with sauce the colour of egg whites. Mixed in were different kinds of nuts, and green leaves she didn’t recognise. The sauce was creamy and spiced in ways that were unfamiliar. Sweet and salty at the same time.

‘This is delicious,’ Nico said, unsure.

Dave nodded, expertly twirling his pasta using a fork and spoon. 'I'm glad you like it.'

The house was silent except for a clock ticking faintly from the lounge room. Something soft and spongy stuck in the back of her throat and she coughed, reaching for the water. The quiet that had seemed so calming earlier felt oppressive now that darkness had descended. She missed Lucas with a sudden, full-body yearning. A momentary forgetting before all of her rage returned. She studied Dave as he ate his food. What does he normally do with strays, after he takes them in?

'They must be cooking in the fire pit tonight,' Dave said, when a burst of laughter outside broke the silence.

'That sounds fun.'

His fork stopped twirling. 'You can join them if you want.'

She kept eating, feeling admonished.

Once the dishes were done they returned to the couch. She rubbed her arms, the chill of the desert night giving her goose bumps. She'd left all of her jumpers on the bus.

'You're cold,' Dave said, making her jump.

He held out his arm, and after a moment's hesitation she shifted over, resting her head on his shoulder. He smelled like the herbs he'd used in the pasta, and underneath it, something sharp and medicinal. The feel of a man's body gave her heady relief. He was sweet, really. A man of few words.

She tried to act casual when Dave pulled a pipe out of his pocket. A liquid she guessed was meth bubbled in its hot glass bath. The flea powder smell reminded her of Jimmy, and the life she'd left behind. She'd only done it a few times, enjoying the high, but hating the come down. Alcohol was her drug of choice.

When Dave offered her the pipe Nico smiled and shook her head. In the light of the TV his eyes had faded from blue to milky white. He held the pipe aloft after she declined it, waiting patiently. She accepted the pipe. It was a small price to pay for another night of hospitality.

Instead of the twitchy, aggressive high Nico remembered, the drugs made her feel mellow and dreamy. They watched TV for hours, not touching or talking, and she drifted in and out of the screen, zooming in on people's eyes, their lips, unable to make any sense of what was happening beyond the movement of bodies.

I will just live here, now. The words appeared before her on the screen, neon yellow and dazzling. *I will simply start my new life, here, in a place where the past can never reach me.*

November 1990

We are now within 300 miles of the centre of the continent, but the road is beset with difficulties, and doubts — Charles Sturt, 1845.

Mum's waiting for us when we get home, smoking at the kitchen table. I inhale the familiar smell of burned, buttered toast and her sweet, musky perfume. Everything looks the same. The same patches of mould bloom on the ceiling, the same saucer of Ant Rid is filled with insect corpses, and the same seashell tea towel with the iron mark hangs from the oven handle. Nothing has changed, yet it all seems cheaper and uglier than it did before we left.

Dad watches Mum from the doorway. His lip is starting to swell where Jordy hit him. Mum says nothing about the blood on his beard and shirt. She stands to hug me, still in her nurse uniform. The stiff blue dress and flat, sensible shoes make her look smaller.

'You've grown again,' she says, cupping my chin with cigarette-smelling fingers and forcing me to meet her gaze. The flecks of blue seem to drift in her green eyes like dust. 'I've missed you.'

I smile, before remembering that we're angry at her. I pretend to go to my room and stand in the hallway to listen.

'You were supposed to be back a week ago,' Mum says.

Dad laughs, a mean bark. 'I heard you've been too busy to notice.'

A pause.

'And you believe them? Your little redneck buddies?'

I cringe at her mocking tone. I hate it when she talks about Otto and Marty like that.

The back door swings open and Massy comes down the hallway. I put my finger to my lips and she shrugs, kicking off her shoes before going into her room. She doesn't even try to act happy to see us.

'I only got three shifts this week,' Mum says. 'The power will be cut. Did you even get a single photo?'

When I was little I used to cup a glass against my bedroom wall, listening to them fight. The louder they argued, the louder Dad turned up the television. Sometimes the combination of Mum and Dad yelling and the actors talking on TV made it sound like the house was full of people.

'It's true, isn't it?' Dad whispers.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you? To be let off the hook for good.'

'You broke me ...' Dad's voice cracks and I want to cry with him. 'You've broken me.'

'You're being pathetic.'

A crash as something sharp is smashed. I peek around the doorway and see Dad gripping the sink, his shoulders rising and falling. When Mum lifts her gaze from the smashed plate to him, her lip is curled in disgust.

I grab the camera bag from the table, careful not to step on the smashed ceramic.

'Let's go, Dad.'

'I know you love your father,' Mum says to me. 'But love doesn't pay the bills. Love doesn't put food on the table.'

'I should have listened to them from the start. You're nothing but a slut.'

Mum reels backwards, grabbing the edge of the table to steady herself. Suddenly, everything falls into place. I see the flash of her red silk dressing gown,

the way she lifts the corner of her mouth when she smiles. All the men in town want her because my mother makes their women look frumpy and fat. The thought of her with another man gives me an icky, crawling feeling.

‘Sweetie —,’ she says to me.

I sneer at her, like she’s garbage. Then I turn away.

When we get to the car I speak calmly to hide my pounding heart.

‘Let’s go, Dad,’ I say, and he puts the keys in the ignition.

Massy watches us from her bedroom window. By a trick of the light on the glass, it almost looks like she’s crying.

Chapter 16

Nico was awoken by the sound of chains rattling. Coughing. A terrible, hacking sound she'd never heard before.

She sat up. The air in the lounge room felt balmy despite the night being cold and clear. There was the sound of water running.

'Dave?'

She found him kneeling on the shower floor, water bucketing his bowed head. He looked depleted under the stream of water, his chest caved in and his shoulders hunched. Her eyes were drawn to his narrow hips, his surprisingly large cock.

'Dave?'

He raised his head and scanned her face with bloodshot eyes. When he started to speak the intake of breath caught in his throat. She stood uncertainly, feeling like an intruder. Was it flu? Asthma? His body jerked under the water like a puppet.

She grabbed a towel and held it up, pretending to avert her eyes. Slowly, Dave rose to his feet and turned off the shower taps. His neck and chest were streaked red from the heat of the water. He took the towel and ran it brusquely over his body.

'You want anything?' Nico asked, following him into the bedroom.

'No.'

He lay down on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, as if deciding on something. Finally he shifted over, making space for her.

Nico lay with her head against his shoulder, listening to his breath squeak and rattle. Every few minutes Dave's body would tremble and twitch, little aftershocks that stirred them both in sleep.

She was watching Video Hits when the back door clanged open. 'Oh,' said a female voice, making Nico jump. A girl stood in the doorway, a wash basket jammed on her hip.

'Who the fuck are you?' Nico blurted. She felt caught out, like she'd been doing something illegal.

'I work here,' the girl said. 'Who the fuck are *you*?' She wore shorts and a loose singlet, exposing her muscular upper arms and thighs. Her lower lip stuck out readily, like she was ready for a fight.

'I'm a friend of Dave's.'

'A friend, really?' The girl smiled. 'All his mates are blokes, as far as I can tell.'

Nico shrugged, pulling her shirt down to cover her thighs. Dave had mentioned a housekeeper, but he didn't say she was Nico's age and had long, caramel limbs.

The girl looked meaningfully at the coffee table, which was piled high with dirty dishes and Dave's smoking paraphernalia. Nico blushed, feeling as if the girl knew somehow that she was pregnant. That she'd smoked that pipe too, white trash that she was.

After banging around in the laundry for a while the girl strolled past the lounge room with a can of Coke. This annoyed Nico. The girl seemed to think that she was in charge but she was mistaken.

Nico marched into the kitchen. The girl narrowed her eyes and sipped her Coke. Nico grabbed a stack of bowls from the dishwasher, opening the cupboard doors one by one. *Where the fuck were the bowls?* She couldn't find one anywhere and she tried to hide her frustration, feeling the girl laughing at her. She'd found one just that morning for her cereal. Or had Dave gotten it for her? Everything was becoming blurry and indistinct.

The girl put her Coke down on the bench and took the bowls from Nico's hands.

'Crockery goes in the cabinet,' she said, going to the glass cabinet behind the dining table, the one place Nico hadn't looked. She stopped. 'You know these haven't been washed yet.'

A blush roared up Nico's cheeks.

'You should get some fresh air.' The girl laughed. 'Or that boy's gonna make you crazy.'

The girl skipped out, the screen door thwacking shut behind her. Nico stood impotently in the kitchen, the bowls a deadweight in her hands.

The appearance of the housekeeper had ruptured Nico's dream. The scornful look the girl gave made her skin crawl. She paced up and down the hallway, trying to figure out what to do. Who the fuck did she think she was, anyway?

Hearing a loud rattling out front, Nico looked out the window. A green tractor trundled up the driveway, a bearded man at the wheel. The tractor stopped and the

man climbed slowly out of the cab, his belly leading the way down the steps. Dave appeared from a storage shed nearby, and when he reached him the bearded man spoke for a long time, gesturing animatedly. The man seemed to trail off, and after a few words from Dave he climbed back onto the tractor. His belly sagged as he ascended the steps, looking more forlorn than it did on the way down. Dave watched him go, head tilted to one side. He didn't change position until the tractor was far off down the driveway. Then he turned towards the house.

Their eyes met through the window. Dave stopped, his mouth set in a firm line.

The front door opened and he pushed up against her, filling her space. She tried to kiss him back, move with him, but he had her pressed against the wall, pinned down by his mouth and arms and chest. When she was with Lucas they flowed together like water, but this was something different, more violent. Nico took a breath and moved back, trying to quell her panic. She stroked the hair on his forearms, closing her eyes, letting him in. She sighed, and it was the same feeling she got when she'd been driving for a long time, and the car seemed to stop so it was the earth that moved, rushing up beneath her like a wave.

Afterwards, in the bathroom, she sat trembling on the edge of the tub. Steadying herself as she remembered Lucas's flushed cheeks, his warm tongue and gentle hands. Grief folded her up in the middle, so she had to press her palm over her mouth to contain her cry, and the realisation that she'd had everything once, and now it was gone.

November 1990

Every hour is of value to us, and I really grudge every day that we are now obliged to remain idle. Every day also now tells on the water and it disappears from before us at so fearful a rate as to make one shudder — Charles Sturt, 1845.

We tear down the Stuart Highway, past a treeless plain as flat as a fruit Roll-Up. I prop my feet up on the dash, getting comfortable while Dad tilts his head to look up at the sky. He never wears sunnies because he says they dull the view, but there isn't much up there to see. Just miles and miles of Altostratus, milky white clouds stretching wide and flat to form thick, identical layers. Altostratus are tricky because they seem to block out the sun, reducing it to a dusty circle. But really the clouds are absorbing all the heat, reflecting it back at us twice as hot.

‘Where’s the storm, Dad?’

It’s the first time I’ve spoken since we left home, and the sound surprises us both. I don’t look at him. I don’t want to be reminded of the fight by his split lip and puffy eye.

‘North west of Alice. You need to stop?’

My bladder is starting to tingle but I shake my head.

‘What happened at the pub,’ Dad says. ‘You shouldn’t have seen it.’

‘It’s alright.’

‘Your mother,’ he sighs.

An enormous black heap appears on the highway ahead, a dead roo or maybe a camel. I’m about to tell Dad to look out when the crows lift and separate. Once the swarm is gone a tiny wallaby remains, its entrails strung out like Christmas lights.

‘She made a fool of me,’ Dad slams his palm against the wheel, a look of helplessness on his face.

My stomach growls. I want to stuff my face with hot chips and chocolate milk. Usually when we go storm chasing I get so excited that I lose my appetite. This time, everything feels wrong.

‘I don’t know what we’re going to do, Nicky,’ Dad says. ‘I can’t go home now.’

I shake my head, not wanting to hear any more.

‘We just have to catch the storm, Dad,’ I say, patiently. ‘Get some good photos. That’s all.’

‘Good photos.’ Dad strokes his beard, as if he’s forgotten the reason we started all this.

The last time we were all in Coober Pedy, Mum and Dad drank cocktails all night while Massy and I swam. Once the boys had left we crouched at the bottom of the pool, flapping our arms to keep from floating upwards. Massy made a funny face as the bubbles slipped from her mouth. And I realised what good sisters we could be, if we only tried a little harder.

‘We have to catch the storm,’ Dad repeats, surer this time.

Far off in the hazy white sky I spot a whip of blue and a smear of Cirrocumulus, the curls only just appearing. I keep my eye on the clouds, willing them to merge and multiply.

‘Hurry up, Dad,’ I whisper.

Dad nods and presses his foot down on the accelerator, rushing us towards our fate.

Chapter 17

Nico was dreaming about the baby, the strange sensation of nursing it, when Dave pressed himself against her. He woke her with force and everything felt wrong: his thin, hard body, the metallic taste of his mouth. She closed her eyes as her blood roared with adrenaline, every nerve ending telling her to get away from this man who wasn't Lucas. Dave didn't know about the baby. He didn't know anything about her, and as they fucked she left her body, flying up into the clouds to drift along the swelling banks of cotton-white Stratocumulus.

Dave rolled off of her when he was done and she lay still, waiting for him to go to the bathroom. As soon as he left, she relaxed. The morning sun crept along the floor beneath the curtains. A cow mooed distantly before silence fell and the world seemed to pause for a moment, then resume. The shower clicked off and she pictured Dave drying himself methodically, removing every droplet of moisture. She reached for the pipe on the bedside table, determined to feel nothing.

Dave stepped back into the room, his skin pink with heat. Smoke seeped from her open mouth. His towel dropped to the floor as he knelt on the bed and parted her thighs and she watched him do it, feeling numb.

After Dave left for work, Nico stayed in bed. Her stomach churned, but not with morning sickness. She recognised this feeling from long ago. The heavy sickness of loss.

She smoked until she felt numb again. The room got hazy with smoke, stinking of cat piss and carpet cleaner. She dreamed of the door opening and her father appearing, his dark eyes wide with amusement.

‘This is a right old mess you’ve got yourself into, Nicky,’ he would laugh, cupping her chin with his palm. ‘But it can always be worse.’

The explorer stories he used to read to her taught Nico that there were no heroes in this world, only fools, and lucky fools. The explorers made relentless mistakes, and their decisions were often stupid or just plain wrong. Yet they never stopped believing in fate and destiny, and their God-given right to be legends.

Wrapping the sheet around her naked body, Nico finally got out of bed. When she opened the front door the light made her wince. She stood, blinking on the front porch. An outdoor setting stacked with fishing gear was on her right, a filthy barbeque to her left. An expanse of unbroken plains lay beyond that, wobbling with heat.

She looked up to find not a whisper of cloud; the blue had swallowed everything. She stumbled down the porch steps, searching the heavens for a single spot of Cumulus, or even Stratus. She walked further, the sheet dragging through the dust.

Just one sign. One little sign was all she needed.

Sturt stands at the top of the hill. He is sun-baked and nonsensical, yet he scans the horizon with an outward calm and focus. Just one sign, he whispers. Give me just one sign of water so I can plot our course forward.

She passed the little, shed-like houses Amy and Rick shared. Dongas, Dave called them. The curtains were drawn on the tiny, square windows. She found Pumpkin parked behind a tractor shed, her paint darkened with dust and the windscreen still shattered. She kept walking, her sweat dampening the sheet. Beyond the shed she saw a cluster of paperbark trees encircling a marsh. The trees were blackened as if by fire, their bare limbs stripped and bent. Was that a sign, the

blackened limbs? She looked up; the sky was still clear. Cows grazed in the adjacent paddock and large, muddy heads lifted to observe the intruder. One of the older-looking cows stomped her foot before depositing a pile of shit on the ground. Was that a sign? There were no signs. There were no clouds, no tarot cards, no Lucas. There was only Nico, pregnant and alone, stoned and staggering through a place she did not belong.

Chapter 18

The next morning she left the pipe alone when Dave got in the shower. The highs were starting to scare her as well as the lows and she had visions of the baby's birth: a hushed silence, followed by the wail of sirens.

Plus, she didn't want to end up like Jimmy. Sometimes people talked about Jimmy right in front of him, as if he was asleep and could not hear them.

The next time she went walking, the cloudless sky held no menace. Its blankness was like a fresh sheet of paper. A warm breeze caressed her skin, and in the adjoining paddock a calf kicked up its heels, seized by a brief buck of joy.

Nico decided that she would put the radio on. Triple J, up loud, filling the house with rock, grunge, punk. Anything.

On the walk back she spotted some small clouds forming in the west. She extended her right arm, forming a fist and holding it up in the air.

'Is the cloud as big as your fist?' Dad asked.

She shook her head, no.

'As big as your finger?'

No.

'Smaller than your fingernail?'

Yes.

'Cirrocumulus, my dear girl.'

She felt him standing beside her, his arm extended just the same. Her mother used to joke that one day the wind would change and they would be frozen in place, necks craned back, eyes on the clouds.

When she returned to the house Dave's ute was out front. The house felt different when she opened the door, as if by leaving she had somehow betrayed it.

Dave was slicing an eggplant, the flesh beneath the purple skin a startling white.

'You've been here nearly a week now,' he said.

'Yes.'

Nico watched him sprinkle salt on the eggplant slices, his fingertips dancing in the air. He said nothing more, but she had a sense that something had been decided.

Her belly was just starting to swell.

Chapter 19

She was flicking through Dave's CD collection when a knock sounded.

'You're coming with us today, boss said.'

'Where?'

Amy smiled prettily, her dark wavy hair framing her face. Stuffed full of bacon and Cocoa Pops, Nico felt bloated beside the willowy girl. They stepped onto the porch and Amy reached down to the shoe rack, handing her a pair of muddy gumboots.

'We've got an empty ready to go,' she said.

'What?'

'Boss said you wouldn't be queasy.'

Amy didn't say anything further, so Nico followed her towards the marshy area she'd noticed on her walks. Clumps of saltbush circled a shallow-looking swamp, and she could hear the faint buzzing of mosquitoes. A lone cow stood in the far corner, her hide almost touching the electric fence. She mooed, a long, sorrowful sound, and the cows in the neighbouring paddock raised their heads in reply.

Amy opened the gate as a forklift and ute approached. The bearded man Nico saw previously jumped out of the forklift. He looked her up and down before giving a short nod.

'This is Rick,' Amy said.

'Station manager,' Rick added, turning away before she had a chance to say her own name.

A short, stocky man got out of the ute, a gun swinging from one hand.

‘G’day,’ he growled. His arms and legs bulged with muscle and his left eye was squinted almost shut.

‘This is Old Tom,’ Rick grinned. ‘Best marksman in W.A.’

‘How do ya like that?’ Old Tom said. ‘After I went blind in one eye I became an even better shot.’

Nico smiled nervously, saying nothing, and Old Tom turned his good eye to the cow. She looked lonely, standing all by herself. Her hide was a dark, chocolate brown, going grey in patches. As Old Tom neared her ears started to twitch. The cows in the neighbouring paddock raised their heads, calling out to her in warning. She gave a long bellow and her tail cut the air.

Run, Nico wanted to scream.

The cow’s eyes widened as Old Tom raised his rifle. Her front hoof raked the dirt. Then there was a sharp crack like a piece of firewood being axed before she dropped to the ground.

‘See that?’ Old Tom nudged Nico in the ribs when she came to stand beside him. ‘What did I tell ya? Right smack in the middle.’

A dark hole in her forehead was visible, as neat and small as a button. The cow did not lie flat like a withering corpse. Her bulk rose up from the ground, a mountainous thing.

Rick opened his leather bag and Old Tom handed Amy the rifle before selecting a knife. She felt Amy’s eyes on her as Old Tom raised his blade. Was this an initiation? A punishment? The sight of the cow’s small triangular ears made Nico want to cry.

Old Tom knelt down, pressing his left knee onto the cow’s front legs. He plunged the hunting knife into her throat, tearing it in a wide arc down towards the

ground. Blood poured out of the wound, pooling underneath her as her legs continued to twitch. The four of them stood watching as the blood of the old girl pumped out. A calf in the neighbouring paddock called out in alarm before the farm returned to a watchful silence.

‘How you been, anyway?’ Rick said to Old Tom. ‘Keeping busy?’

‘Ahyep,’ Old Tom replied, breathing heavily. ‘Bit slow, this one.’

He picked up the cow’s front leg and yanked it back and forth like he was cranking a water pump. Another, final gush poured out of her neck, and at the same moment Nico heard a high buzzing in her ears, and tasted something strange. She stumbled backwards, falling hard as blackness descended.

When Nico woke up, Amy was looking down at her. Laughter was in her big brown eyes, her pretty face framed by the sun.

‘What happened?’

‘Holus-bolus, ya bloody fainted, love,’ Old Tom called. He and Rick were winching the cow up into the front loader. The hooks jammed into the backs of her haunches were attached to long chains, and the sight of them made Nico’s dizziness return.

Rick gave her a pitying look. If this was a test, she had failed it.

‘Not a place for the young lassies,’ Old Tom said to Rick. ‘They simply cannot hack it. That’s it, thanks for playing. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.’

‘This one’s alright,’ Rick grinned at Amy. ‘Blackfella’s are tough.’

Amy ignored him, shading her eyes to watch the cow rise into the air. Droplets of blood rained onto the ground as she rose.

‘Come on,’ Amy sighed.

‘I can stay and help,’ Nico protested, running to catch up as Amy unlocked the gate and held it open.

Amy was quiet as they walked back to the house. She stopped at the bottom of the porch steps, looking properly into Nico’s eyes for the first time.

‘You’re having a baby.’

There was no point in lying, Amy’s expression made that clear.

‘It’s fine. I’m not keeping it.’

As soon as she said the words Nico felt a sudden, horrible wrongness. The words were thick and foul, like the iron of cow’s blood, or Old Tom’s rifle. She bent slightly under the force of this realisation, pressing her hands to her knees.

‘It’s fine,’ Nico said again. Amy shrugged and walked away.

She pushed the bathroom door open to find Dave standing at the sink. He looked paler than usual. A container of pills sat on the vanity.

‘Are you ok?’

Dave shoved the container into his pocket. ‘I’m fine. You’re the one fainting all over the place.’

‘I just smoked too much. Give me another go.’

She wanted to work, more than she expected. She wanted to be out there on the farm with the others.

Dave coughed and then spat. There were deep hollows under his eyes, and she remembered him tossing and turning through the night. The secretive way he

hoarded his pills made her think that this wasn't just a cold. She'd noticed a chemical taste to his mouth, and the sound of his chest rattling.

'Is it flu?' She pressed her palm to his forehead and he pushed her away.

'What's the problem?'

Dave wiped his mouth on a tea towel. 'Just because you're crashing here, doesn't mean you're my girlfriend.'

'Who said I wanted to be?'

She was only living with him, working with his staff, eating his food, doing his dishes. She was Amy with benefits, but no pay.

'Do you have asthma?' Nico pushed. 'Cancer? Whatever it is, I can handle it.'

'Woman!' He raised his fist in mock-anger and she laughed.

'I'll teach you to fuck with me,' he said, picking her up and lifting her with surprising ease over his shoulder.

Nico was still laughing as carried her into the bedroom, giggling into his warm mouth as they kissed. She wondered, in an abstract way, what she would do if Dave was very sick. But it was just a cold, surely. Men always made such a fuss about these things.

November 1990

The very elements had combined either to prevent our retreat or, by rendering our stay in these horrid regions still more insupportable, to deter civilised man from venturing into a place that seems almost proscribed by the deity — Charles Sturt, 1845.

Something in Dad loosens when we get to Coober Pedy. He relaxes his grip on the wheel and tilts his head to look up at the sky.

‘That family trip we took here last year. Did you and your sister have fun?’

‘Why are you asking me that now?’

Dad strokes his beard, then holds his fingers up in front of his face. He looks shocked to see the blood on his hands, as if he’s already forgotten the fight.

‘Remember all those roos on the road?’ I say. ‘Remember how scared Mum was?’

‘Like bloody guard dogs,’ Dad laughs, but it sounds off key.

As we approach town I see the familiar mounds of dirt from the mines, piled up by the roadside like dug graves. I remember the stale air of our underground hotel and the smell of earth and insects. A little green sign flashes past, telling us we have six hundred and eighty seven kilometres to get to Alice Springs. My chest tightens, and my forehead feels sweaty and hot.

‘Do you need to stop, love?’ Dad says, as if he can read my mind.

‘I don’t want to stop here.’

Dad looks at me. ‘How about we shoot through and I’ll tell you a little tale?’

I nod, wiping the sweat from my face.

‘Righto,’ Dad clears his throat. ‘Now this one I picked up right here actually, from this fella named Eddy on the slots.’

Dad’s always collecting stories from the old folks on the pokies. I almost smile, but my chest still feels tight

There was once a little boy named Eddy. Eddy and his Dad used to go camping together all the time when Eddy was little. To this day, he has many happy memories of that time, fishing and hiking and shooting the breeze with his Dad.

Two years ago, when his Dad got diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, Eddy decided to take him on a camping trip, just like old times.

As Dad talks I watch the shadows shifting on the road ahead, cast by fat Cumulus clouds shuddering across the sky. I feel the tightness in my chest start to ease, just a little.

So they went up to Kuinto forest and set up a tent and a fire. Eddy bought his dog, Bandit, because Bandit went with him everywhere.

Once night fell the temperature dropped very quickly. Eddy realised that they didn’t have enough wood to get through the night. He told his Dad he was going to get more, grabbed Bandit and jumped in the car. Once he was on the road, Eddy was glad to have Bandit. The road was barely visible, trees crowding in from all sides. The headlights felt like the only thing between him and the end of the world.

I wrap my arms around my knees, imagining Eddy hunched over the steering wheel. I would go and get firewood too, if Dad were sick. I wouldn’t need a dog to make me brave.

Eddy spotted the same dirt road he’d noticed earlier and turned in with relief. The pile of wood was still there, neatly stacked and shining in the glare of the headlights. He opened his car door and the forest was very quiet. He took a step and

the sound was like the cracking of a gun. When Eddy turned to close the door he noticed Bandit, still sitting in the passenger seat.

'Oi!' Dad's sudden shout makes me jump. 'Come on Bandit!'

But Bandit didn't move. The dog's nose quivered but he kept staring straight ahead. A hot prickling went up Eddy's body, from his toes to the top of his scalp. Bandit whined, just once but very high, and Eddy was ready to bolt. But then he thought of his Dad, sitting alone in front of a dying fire. So he pulled himself together and went over to the woodpile. When his arms were full of logs he turned back to the car. He stopped and the logs tumbled out of his arms. He felt the pain on his toes from very far away.

A kangaroo stood, two inches from Eddy's face. It was the colour of ash, and tall enough for its eyes to be level with his own. The roo stared with an expression so blank a scream of horror rose in Eddy's throat. It was completely still except for the mouth, which made small circular motions, as if chewing something very small. The tiny movement was somehow terrifying, either in its repetition or its silence.

Dad looks at me, moving his mouth as if he is chewing, mimicking the movement of the white kangaroo. For a minute I want to laugh, but something about the movement makes me shiver instead.

Eddy didn't breathe. He didn't move. He stared into the white kangaroo's eyes and waited for it to kill him. Suspended, he had no idea how much time passed. Gradually, he became aware of his shallow breathing and the ache in his bruised toes.

After what seemed like an eternity, Eddy attempted a small step backward. The roo didn't move. He waited a few more minutes and took another step. Still nothing. The breeze rippled the roo's fur, bringing with it a meaty smell of damp

earth and blood. Eddy took four big steps then lunged for the car door handle. As he turned around he could almost feel the roof's hindquarters slamming into his back. But he fell unharmed into the front seat.

Dad goes quiet, staring at the road ahead of us.

'What happened then?'

'When Eddy returned to the campsite his father was gone,' Dad says. 'Never to be seen again.'

I cross my arms. 'That's not true.'

'That's what he told me!' Dad lifts his hands from the steering wheel and holds them in the air. 'The world is full of mysteries, my dear girl. It's up to you to decide what you will and won't believe.'

'I remember a white kangaroo,' I say. 'When we were on holiday.'

'The buck,' Dad nods.

'And that's just a coincidence, that there was also one in the story?'

Dad smiles, pointing at the road ahead. I gasp as a flash of pale white crosses the road, followed by a dozen more kangaroos, all dark brown in colour.

'The story was told long before us,' Dad says. 'This is just our chance to play a part in it.'

Chapter 20

The ute hurtled down the road, and Nico turned to look out the back window at the cloud of red dirt rising behind them. It was good to be moving again, and as they drove she felt hopeful and free, more like her old self. She wound down the window, smelling cows and the sharp, vinegary scent of Roundup. Amy was quiet as usual, but on the road her silence felt companionable, rather than judgmental.

On the rise up ahead a white ute approached. It was strange to see another car in such isolated country. The ute was going very fast and as it passed them Nico caught a flash of a dark, wild-looking beard. She saw the driver gripping the steering wheel as he passed them, his head tilted as he looked up at the sky. She whipped her head around to follow the car, her heart pumping fast in her chest.

‘What’s wrong?’ Amy looked at her curiously.

‘Nothing,’ Nico replied, turning around. The sun was playing tricks on her.

They turned off the road into an unmarked driveway. The road descended into a green valley, far greener than Dave’s property. Cows were dotted over the hills, docile with plentiful feed. Friendly tufts of *Cumulus humilis* dotted the sky above them.

Nico followed Amy into a small room at the back of a shed. Knives and saws hung from hooks on the walls. It was freezing yet the air felt dense with exhalation. Though every surface was spotless she could feel the presence of death. Life had been drained away in this place but never fully erased.

Rick and Old Tom came in and she and Amy faced them across the bench.

‘Back for round two?’ Rick smirked.

The men struck their knives against the sharpeners with a ringing sound that set Nico's teeth on edge. An enormous cut of meat swung silently from a hook like a wax sculpture.

'Pretty good,' Amy said, examining the meat. 'More fat than I expected.'

Nico was surprised. She'd always thought that fat was a bad thing. Amy threw a roll of plastic bags at her and Nico attempted to catch it, fumbling the roll to the floor.

Old Tom jammed his knife into the meat, hacking off a chunk and throwing it onto the bench. Tearing through the centre of it, he handed half to Rick. Old Tom's cleaver hit the bench with a loud thunk and his one good eye squinted and widened. The muscles on the two men's arms bulged as they slashed and hacked. They worked tidily, wrestling bones and bristle into neat sections and chatting as they worked. Amy joined in only occasionally, but when she did they listened to her closely. Local families were discussed according to their output: who was making money, who was having babies and who had lost crops from the drought. As if the workers were all cogs in one giant machine: produce, like cows in the paddocks. Would Nico be acceptable to the people of Wither as a young baby-maker herself? But she was unwed, a city girl, with no family or property. *Or skills, or talent.* She heard Ray's voice in her head and felt a surge of relief that she wasn't on that bus with him anymore.

Rick stared at her chest. The cold air had hardened her nipples and Nico crossed her arms to hide them.

'Where you from, love?' Old Tom growled, flicking fat off of a cut with his knife.

'Champion Beach. Down south,' Nico replied.

‘Holus-bolus. Surfer girl, are ya?’

‘Not really.’

Amy slid a cut across the bench, indicating that Nico should put it in the bag. The meat was cold and rubbery in her fingers.

‘You went to the beach though,’ Rick said. ‘In an itty-bitty bikini?’

His hands plucked and tore. She pictured her own insides being filleted, the fat of her breasts wobbling in a bucket as her bones were thrown to the dogs.

‘Topside,’ Amy slid more cuts along the bench, saying the names as she wrote them in texta on the bags. ‘Scotch fillet. Schnitzel. Porterhouse.’

Once the cut of meat was done, Rick would get another from the walk-in fridge and jam it onto the hook. A single cow filled ten eskies. As the morning passed and the room started to heat the meat warmed, blood starting to seep and creep. It dripped onto her shoes and jeans, coating the cracks in her hands. She felt wetness on her face as she bagged another fillet, and when she wiped her cheek with her forearm she only succeeded in smearing it.

‘Stewing steak. Oyster blade. Osso buco. T-bone.’

Old Tom plucked out a kidney, nestled in fat, and the dark red organ squeaked under the knife. The smell of meat strengthened and the texta slipped from Nico’s hands. The lights dimmed, and as Old Tom slid the ribcage through the electric saw, spraying gristle across the workbench, she started to sway on her feet. The metallic taste filled her mouth again but she exhaled slowly, standing up straighter. Her thoughts weren’t of meat but of the baby; the future that could be here for them if she proved herself.

Rick tore a long strip of fat from the carcass, throwing it behind him without looking so it slid slowly down the wall before plopping into the bin. Nico gritted her teeth, forcing herself to focus. She would not fail this time.

‘Scotch fillet?’ she asked, when Amy slid more cuts down the bench.

‘That’s the one,’ Old Tom agreed.

When the next lot passed through her hands she was less certain. ‘Porterhouse?’

‘Close. Try again.’

She continued naming the meat as Amy passed it on to her. The Scotch fillet was small and thick and rich-red in colour. The Osso buco looked like dog bones. The oyster blade was small and dark and shone like a jewel. Old Tom cut a leg open. The knee joint shone from within the split, clean, white and perfect.

‘Can I have a turn?’

Surprised, the men stepped away from each other, forcing her to stand between them. Shoulder to shoulder, she smelled the heat in their skin, activating a stale tobacco smell, mixed with sweat and dirt. Old Tom pointed and she inserted the knife.

‘That’s it love, all the way down. Then across, twice. You got three oyster blades there if you’re careful.’

She was surprised by the ease of the blade into the meat. It seemed to know already the line of the flesh to follow, and she simply had to apply pressure, and go along with it.

Amy looked less pleased with Nico’s progress than Old Tom.

‘How did I do?’ Nico asked. She looked up at Old Tom with her head cocked, giving him her most charming smile.

‘A natural, holus-bolus!’ Old Tom cleared his throat. ‘You want to do more, love?’

When they were finished, Old Tom lit a cigarette outside. He offered her a cuppa before clapping his hands, and a moment later two girls appeared, barefoot in wrap skirts and singlets. Nico stared at them in surprise. Amy had said Old Tom lived alone, the wife chased off a long time ago by his shotgun after a night of drunken fighting.

Old Tom turned to the girls. ‘Two coffees, two teas. Make sure you use my personal mug.’ He picked up a mug from the bonnet of his truck. It had a picture on it of an aproned man, cutting up a steak. *Nobody Beats My Meat*, it read underneath. The girls nodded, the blonde one taking the mug. It was obvious from their clothes and deep tans that they were travellers.

When Nico asked about the backpackers, Old Tom gave her a wink. ‘The girls live with me in the house. The fella's stay in the tents.’

He pointed to a group of tents out front, positioned around the remains of a campfire. A string of fishing line between two tree branches was hung with boxers and socks.

Rick said something about a freezer that she didn't catch, making Old Tom chuckle. Amy raised her eyebrows at him, nodding her head in Nico's direction.

‘What?’ Nico said, but nobody answered.

The backpackers appeared a few minutes later. When Nico thanked her, the dark haired girl wouldn't meet her eyes.

‘That's a pet,’ Rick said, before turning to Nico. ‘This one used to help out on Dave's farm. Same as you.’

Nico returned his gaze steadily. ‘Is that right?’

The girls scurried inside and the conversation turned to seeding and which properties had already tilled their paddocks. But Nico knew that secretly, they were all laughing at her.

On the way home with all the windows down, blood was still the only thing that Nico could smell. When they turned into Dave's driveway she was surprised to feel a rush of fondness, triggered by the now-familiar flat yellow paddocks and the brown roof hanging low on the veranda. This place was becoming her home.

'Does Old Tom have sex with them?' she asked Amy. 'The girls?'

Amy wrenched up the handbrake and switched off the ignition.

'Do you really want to know?'

Nico found that she didn't.

Chapter 21

When she came into the bedroom that night, Dave was lying on the bed with his back to her. She had the strangest feeling that someone else was in the room with them, breathing heavily, before she located the source of the noise.

‘This is new,’ she joked, pointing at the humidifier sitting at Dave’s feet. She saw by the stillness in his face that this was the wrong thing to say. She didn’t know why he was so secretive about his health. She knew people with asthma and it never seemed like that big a deal.

Dave shucked his jeans and they lay side by side, listening to the clicks and sighs of the machine. He wrapped his palm around the base of her throat and slid his other hand between her legs. She closed her eyes, thinking of Lucas. She didn’t enjoy sex as much with Dave, he was too rough sometimes. But she liked the gentle way he was with her after.

‘I heard you did a good job today,’ he said.

She felt a rush of pride, before quickly changing the subject so he wouldn’t see what his approval meant to her.

‘You’re always stuck in that shed. What do you do in there?’

Dave sighed. ‘I told you, I’m working on a new fertiliser for the crops.’

She put her ear to his chest and listened to the rattle in his lungs.

‘It can’t be good for you, being stuck in there all day with those chemicals.’

Dave shifted to look down at her, his blue irises as pale as mist. Now that she’d stopped smoking with him, a gap was widening between them. They didn’t talk as much. She was scared he was getting bored of her.

‘Always so worried about my health,’ he said. ‘Like a good little wife.’

‘Piss off,’ she laughed.

He lifted himself onto one elbow. ‘Maybe you *want* me to get really sick. Maybe that’s your big plan: to kill me off and take the farm for yourself.’

‘Oh no, you’ve got me,’ she joked, raising her hands into the air. Even though Dave was smiling, he watched her reaction closely. Her face warmed as if she was under a spotlight.

‘Why don’t you read my fortune?’ he said.

‘Sure, I’ll just grab my crystal ball.’

‘I mean with your special cards.’

Nico’s heart beat a little faster. ‘How do you know I do tarot?’

‘I got them out of your car when we were fixing the windscreen.’ Dave jumped up and crossed the room, opening his top drawer.

‘You can’t just take my stuff,’ she blurted, snatching it from his hands. The lid of the box popped open and the familiar scent of sandalwood and dope gave her a pang of homesickness.

‘So it’s fine for you to live in my house and use all my shit but I can’t touch your little box?’

He was right. She sighed, pulling the deck out and unwrapping the cards. ‘They have to sit next to your skin for a bit.’

Dave’s face lit up with amusement but he accepted the cards, lying on his back and placing them on his chest. While he waited, Nico lit the incense.

‘You’re pretty serious about this hippy dippy shit,’ he said.

She lay down each of his cards and sat quietly for a moment, thinking.

‘Well? What’s my fortune?’

‘The Four of Swords means ghosts from your past.’

‘Ghosts?’ he laughed, shifting position so he was up on his knees.

‘This is the High Priestess. She means the attitudes of others. Secrets. And this next one is the Ace of Swords, which means wounding.’ Nico paused. ‘Maybe a sign that you should see a doctor.’

‘You really believe in this shit, don’t you?’ Dave jumped off the bed, making the cards slide around on the quilt. ‘What does this one say? The date and time of my death?’

‘It’s the Star. It means truth revealed.’

With that, Dave left the room. Nico listened to the sounds of him flicking through the TV channels, before the inevitable bubbling of his pipe. The High Priestess stared back at her with knowing eyes. She was warning Dave not to trust Nico, but he hadn’t been paying attention.

The only card she wasn’t sure about was the Four of Swords. She picked it up, studying the image of the nobleman, standing beside a stream. As he leaned in to drink a ghostly woman appeared in the water, her arms outstretched. She was coming up to collect him and take him back down with her into the underworld.

Chapter 22

Dave never spoke to Nico about the work that needed to be done. Every day he disappeared into his shed, so it was up to Rick and Amy to instruct her. Under Dave's orders she spent a week in the paddocks with Rick. Their time together was uneasy but useful, because their mutual dislike motivated Nico to work harder. She wrestled bucking calves into the choker, not wincing when their hooves cut into her shins. She spent days in the sun carrying posts and wires while Rick repaired the fences. She stood on top of the seeder in ninety kilometre wind gusts, guiding the long hose into the top while grain flew into her eyes and nose. By the end of the week she had a deep, even tan, and her upper arms were swelling with muscle. Her stride lengthened, as if the heavy farm boots had given her legs new purpose. She felt as if the hot sun and hard work had sheared her, stripping something away that she no longer needed.

'Gotta stop by Mum's,' Amy said, on the way back to the farm. The tone of her voice made it clear that Nico wasn't to ask questions.

They pulled up out the front of a big transportable, with two smaller buildings added on each side. Nico spotted a green shade cloth around back, covering vines and veggie patches and what might even have been an apple tree. It was strange to see so much green, like an oasis in the middle of the desert. Two kelpies came running, jumping all over them. Amy pushed her hand across their snouts, shoving them away.

‘Hey, you,’ a woman called, coming around from the back. Her floral apron and gardening gloves were covered in dirt. She threw her secateurs to the ground and beamed at them, her eyes crinkling in the corners.

‘Hi Mum,’ Amy said, looking embarrassed after she gave her a big hug.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Nico, the new worker.’

Her mother’s wide smile dimmed slightly, as if she’d caught a glimpse of something she didn’t like. But just as quickly the darkness was gone, and she beckoned them both inside.

‘Come on then, quickly, I’m halfway through the zucchini’s.’

She was told to make herself at home but Nico waited politely in the hallway. The dark look had left her feeling ill at ease. From where she was standing she could see into the lounge room, where a big TV presided over a mismatched collection of couches and chairs and a single mattress piled with blankets. The waterfall poster behind the TV was the exact same one they had on the ceiling of the tour bus. She heard music and talking from other rooms, the hum and tumble of a washing machine.

‘You the new chick at Dave’s place?’

A teenage girl appeared in the hallway, her black hair streaked with fading strips of red. Her friend fidgeted with a cigarette behind her, a less pretty but equally-streaked version.

Nico smiled, thrown by the appearance of two punk teens in the middle of the outback.

‘We heard you were a groupie or something,’ the first girl said.

‘Who told you that?’

She laughed, showing the silver fillings in her back teeth.

‘Freezer did.’

‘Who?’

‘Bet you wish you kept going to Perth.’

‘How old are you?’

Both girls laughed. Their jackets danced an inch above their jeans, flashing their toned stomachs. Nico felt a rush of envy as the girls walked away.

‘Those cousins,’ Amy’s mother shook her head, hands on her hips. She was a large framed woman but her footsteps down the hallway hadn’t made a sound.

‘They’re cheeky ones.’

The note of pride in her voice made Nico smile. ‘What are you baking?’

‘Almond bread.’ She tilted her head as if she could hear it cooking. ‘Nearly ready.’

‘I wish I could bake things.’

‘Your mother didn’t teach you?’

Nico shook her head.

‘That’s a shame. Mums should know these things.’

Amy’s voice came down the hallway, yelling something at the teens. A moment later she appeared, munching on a piece of cake.

‘This one could give you some baking lessons.’

Amy stopped chewing. ‘Jesus Mum, we’re already teaching her how to farm.’

‘It’s alright,’ Nico said. ‘I can learn as I go.’

Amy’s mother waved them off out front, after giving Amy another big hug.

‘Your Mum’s really nice,’ Nico said.

‘She’s busy,’ Amy snapped. ‘Just like I am.’

‘I said no, didn’t I?’

Stung by Amy’s silence, Nico crossed her arms. ‘I don’t know what your problem is, I was just being nice.’

They didn’t talk the rest of the way home, and Nico remembered why she’d never had female friends. Jealous bitches. You can never trust them.

After dinner, Nico sat on the porch steps to watch the sunset. The sky didn’t hold much promise: only a few Cumulus clouds dotted here and there. She shifted her gaze to the farm, watching the changing colours of the paddocks as the sun dropped away. When she was little she thought that all deserts looked like the African Sahara. In books and on TV the desert meant red rolling hills and endless rows of rippling sand made uniform by the whim of the winds. *Seif* dunes, her dad called them, which was the Arabic word for sword. She’d never imagined how flat the Australian outback would be, or the way a muted green or brown, when suddenly illuminated, could attain the sparkling clarity of an opal. The first time they crossed the Hay Plains her dad had warned her she might be bored. Instead, Nico hung out the window, dazzled by the enormity of the space and the way they sped forward into a landscape so unchanging it seemed like time stood still.

She’d been thinking of him a lot lately. It was strange that after all their years on the road together, her memory of him would come clearest when she finally stopped moving. Pondering this, Nico nearly missed a shadow crossing over and the arrival of a Cumulonimbus. The mammoth storm cloud cut through the sunset, refracting the orange light and splitting it into millions of tiny, glowing rays. A pool

of gold fell on Nico's face, warm like her father's hand. She closed her eyes and bathed in the floating light.

'Dad,' she whispered.

A second later, the warmth was gone. The Cumulonimbus cloud billowed off to the north and the sky faded to a pale, dull blue. Coldness pricked her arms and Nico swallowed repeatedly, trying to shift the lump in her throat.

Rick and Dave emerged from the darkness, lugging heavy black bags. They dumped their weapons proudly on the porch at her feet.

'This here's a 22 Rimfire,' Rick said, clicking a bullet into the chamber. 'Not a semi, bloody Howard took all them from us. Now your boyfriend there,' he nodded at Dave. 'He has a 410 bore, which basically means he's a sadistic cunt.'

Dave laughed, clearly enjoying himself. Nico forced herself to smile.

Her job was to crane her arm out the window and hold the spotlight in place on the roof. As they drove off, she noticed that Rick's rifle was casually propped against the centre console, its barrel pointed right at her.

In the glare of the spotlight, everything looked sinister. They stopped in a paddock she didn't recognise and the men gripped their guns, the tension palpable. She swivelled the light slowly along the bordering tree line, alert to any tiny movement. The set of Dave's jaw and his grim concentration reminded her of the way he looked when they fucked. There was a single mindedness to his desire and it turned her on, his stubborn wanting. Seeing it now in a different context made Nico feel uneasy.

Dave gave a shout and she steadied the spotlight, seeing two little eyes flash momentarily amongst the grasses. A sharp crack of the gun, and then he shook his head.

‘Shit.’

Rick was silent with judgment, making her almost wish Dave had hit it.

As they crossed into the neighbour’s property two more spotlights were visible. It made her nervous to see other hunters, all these guns circling in the darkness with no one in charge of them.

She could hear Dave wheezing in the front seat, breathing lightly to try to hold off a coughing fit. The open window and freezing air could only be making things worse for him.

‘Did you notice how red that little bunny’s eyes were?’ Rick asked. She shook her head. After a week together working the farm he was used to explaining things to her. ‘Animal eyes reflect different colours in the spotlight. Horses’ and cows’ eyes look blue, sheep and goats’ look greeny-blue. Foxes eyes are usually yellow and rabbits’ are bright red. Kangaroo eyes, though, they shine a dull red. Just like people.’

Nico shivered, remembering a story her Dad once told her. The glare of the spotlight in a young man’s eyes, followed by the crack of the gun.

‘Don’t move,’ Dave said.

In the spotlight beam a pair of golden eyes stared back at them. A fluffy tail bobbed in the air, disappearing when Dave pulled the trigger.

A tiny crack and a life stolen, dispensed with a puff of smoke. Surprising herself, Nico discreetly wiped a tear from her cheek. What remained was a hollow

pocket of air, a stillness in the place where the creature had been. No satisfaction. Only absence.

She got out of the truck to stand over the body. The fox's mouth was open, baring small, triangular teeth. The hairs of her bushy tail rippled delicately in the breeze. Dave glanced out the window at the body, an impassive mourner.

'Pregnant,' he said, baring his teeth in a smile before turning back to his gun.

'One down,' Rick said. 'Two million, three thousand and seventy two to go.'

November 1990

I saw clearly from the nature of the country yesterday that an attempt to persevere in a course to the north would only involve us in difficulty. The aspect of it was so terrible that it left not a ray of hope — Charles Sturt, 1845.

We pass through Kulgera as the sun is going down. A hamburger sign gleams under a spotlight and I look at the bacon rasher hanging out of the burger like a tongue.

‘What do you reckon, Dad?’ I say, and he shakes himself, as if from a dream.

‘Just once,’ Dad says when we go inside and look up at the menu. ‘I’d like to come in to one of these places and eat a nice, fresh piece of Barramundi.’

‘You’re dreaming,’ I laugh.

The girl in front of us in the line has a packet of Kotex pads under her arm. She is trying to keep them hidden, and when our eyes meet, I blush.

We eat our burgers by the window, watching the truckers come and go. Every bloke looks different: fat or skinny, short or tall. But none of them ever look awkward or embarrassed. None of them ever look like they have something to hide.

‘I wish I’d been born a boy.’

Dad stops chewing to stare at me. ‘Where’d that come from?’ he says, once he’s swallowed.

I can’t tell him what I’m thinking, which is that I don’t ever want to be that girl buying pads and trying to hide them.

‘It just seems like boys are more free,’ I say instead.

Dad thinks on this as we finish our burgers, and when we get back on Stuart Highway, he starts telling me another story.

A few years back, I met a bloke on the slots, and he had a brother named Joe. Farmer Joe had a son named Billy who really loved horses, especially his racehorse, Polly.

Billy wanted to be a jockey all his life, and he was a little guy, perfect for it. But Joe thought horse riding was a girl's job. Wanted his son to be tough, like him. Farmer Joe decided that he would teach Billy how to shoot and this would be the beginning of his journey into manhood. But Billy hated guns, so he always pretended to miss. Joe knew what he was doing and it made him angry, so to punish Billy, he made him join the local gun club.

At the club, Billy was a perfect shot. Never missed a target. Yet when they went out in the paddocks, he didn't hit a single thing. Joe got more and more pissed off about it, but no matter what he said, Billy just kept missing. He was a good kid, did well in school and always obeyed his father. But he never gave up his dream of being a jockey, and he never shot to kill.

On Billy's sixteenth birthday his dad bought him a new gun: a 22 Rimfire, top of the line. He took him out shooting that evening to try it out. On the way home, Joe pulled over suddenly. He raised his gun, pointing it into the paddock across the road, and Billy looked at the reflection of the animal's eyes and couldn't figure out what it was. It was tall, like a kangaroo, but the eyes in the light reflected a bright blue colour, when he knew that roo eyes always reflected red.

The gun went off and Billy screamed. He jumped out of the ute and ran, and when Billy finally found Polly he searched her flanks in a panic, trying to locate the gunshot wound. But his horse was unharmed, and when Billy returned to the car, his dad was waiting.

'Billy,' he warned. 'I only ever miss once.'

After that, Billy killed rabbits and foxes and roos. The lifeless bodies piled up against him, filling his dreams with their furry corpses. Billy started drinking more and riding Polly less. He started going for long drives in the bush.

One night, Billy went out in the ute with a bunch of his mates, totally shit-faced. Four blokes were in the tray, shooting in every direction. They had a few bottles of rum and things got a bit wild. They shot a few roos before realising they were hungry. It was only when they got back to the farm that they noticed Billy was gone.

It turned out that Billy fell from the tray when they crossed over the bridge. One of the boys must have mistaken him for a roo. Kangaroo eyes shine red in the spotlight, you see. Just like people's eyes.

I shudder, imagining the boy scrambling to his feet as the spotlight fell upon him. The look on his face when he realised he wasn't being saved, but hunted.

Chapter 23

‘Mackerel sky and mare’s tails make lofty ships carry low sails,’ Otto whispered in Nico’s ear. Every fisherman knew that mackerel clouds meant trouble. She gazed up at the Cirrocumulus undulatus, the high, dappled clouds that meant a storm was coming. Soon it would be wet and windy, but for now the air remained still.

They drove past a rectangular sign welcoming them to Wither. *The Land of Golden Grain*, it read, underneath. A roadhouse called Angry Bob’s advertised triple fish burgers. Out front, a child dragged a skipping rope through the dust, whipping it in the air next to the bowsers like a snake.

‘Are you ready for this?’ Amy raised an eyebrow. She’d been quiet on the drive in, and Nico knew by now to give her space when she was in a mood.

‘No worries,’ Nico replied. ‘This is my natural habitat.’

A hush fell over the punters as they entered the bar. Glassy eyes gave Nico a stern once over but she didn’t care; the wood panelled walls and dusty trophies made her feel right at home. Every surface of the bar had an old, dull shine, like a bottle that had washed up to shore. A cloud of smoke hovered, exacerbated by the room’s dimness. A ceiling fan turned slowly, barely disturbing the smoke.

Rick had a table waiting. Nico took the seat furthest away from him, and the cracked leather stool top scraped painfully against her inner thigh.

‘This’ll be better than that weak piss you lot drink down south,’ Rick sneered, picking up a jug and an empty glass. The sight of him licking spilled beer from his wrist made her stomach turn.

Nico drank quietly while Amy and Rick chatted to other farmers. A steady stream of blokes visited their table, seeking advice about calving and seeding and

comparing their progress and timing. She was surprised by how well-respected they were. She was lucky to be working for them: very lucky, judging by the looks she was getting.

A cry of recognition rose as Old Tom strutted in with one of the backpackers: the lighter-haired girl, a smile stiff on her face. Nico tried and failed to catch her eye. The girl looked dazed, and bluish marks were visible on her neck.

A man at their table said something about a freezer, and Amy's eyes flicked briefly to her face.

'What did you just say?' Nico asked. The three of them turned to look at her.

'Where's this one from?'

'She's South Australian,' Amy said, and they stared at Nico like she was a two-headed calf.

At the next table, Old Tom leapt to his feet. In one smooth movement he grasped a man's shirt with his left hand and landed a punch with his right. The impact almost knocked the man from his chair, but another bloke held him firmly in place while Old Tom kept punching.

'What did he do?' Nico asked, trying to keep her tone casual. She'd thought Old Tom was the nice one. Looking at him now made her realise how much she relied on the kindness of strangers.

Amy shrugged. 'Tom's not the hardest bloke to offend.'

Old Tom paused to give his sore hand a shake. Taking this as a signal, the onlookers resumed their conversations. The man remained slumped in the seat with his head tilted to one side, like he had a question that needed answering.

'I guess this is a regular occurrence,' Nico said, but no one answered her.

Old Tom said something to the backpacker and she drained her glass of wine. Watching the girl stumble out to the truck, her head bowed in submission, Nico thought again how lucky she was that Dave had been the one to find her.

As Old Tom reversed out of the car park a white ute pulled out behind him. The driver had a dark, wild-looking beard and his head was tilted as he looked up at the sky.

Before Nico had time to cry out, the man was gone.

A brown line appeared on the surface of her skin, starting beneath her naval and ending at her pubic bone. She ran her finger along the line and was surprised to feel a feathery, tumbling feeling coming from inside.

‘Hello baby,’ she whispered. It was only in the quiet moments when she was alone that her pregnancy felt real. Working in the paddocks, or watching TV with Dave, the baby was just a dream.

She pulled down her t-shirt and continued brushing her teeth. Since she started showing Nico had taken to going to bed clothed, and she dreaded the moment Dave commented on it. Her plan to say that she was cold was a stupid one. It was springtime and getting warmer every day.

Dave looked up when she came in and lay beside him. He propped himself on one elbow, his hand on her breast lazy and slow. She closed her eyes, and the clicks and sighs of the humidifier sounded like a sleeping child beside them. She was shocked when Dave flipped her over, yanking a handful of her hair. Her breath caught as he pulled her head back.

‘Wait...’ she croaked, as he slid her underwear down. But he didn’t wait.

When he rolled off of her Nico flipped onto her back, seething.

‘I didn’t like that.’

‘Relax. Have a smoke.’

‘Sometimes I think you hate me,’ she said, but Dave didn’t reply.

A shower did nothing to improve her mood. She liked living on the farm, and she enjoyed the work and Dave’s companionship. But there were moments when she sensed something dark beneath his simplicity, a nastiness she wasn’t permitted to see.

Expecting Dave to be asleep when she returned, Nico emerged naked from the bathroom. Instead, he was staring up at the ceiling, hands neatly folded under his head. He was laughing already at a joke he was about to make, probably at her expense. But he quietened as he turned his head, his eyes on her swollen belly, which was just starting to tilt.

Nico froze, unprepared, as Dave rose to his knees. She climbed into bed and lifted the sheet to cover herself. Just as quickly, he yanked it off.

‘It’s not —’ she started to say, unsure how to finish. Dave drew in a sharp breath, and immediately started to cough.

She put her hand over the dark line, trying to hide it. *Not his? Not real? Not a problem?*

Dave’s coughing finally stopped, and the silence in the room was thick.

Before she could decide what to say, Dave got up and left the room.

Chapter 24

It was a relief to be assigned to Amy. With Rick the car always felt too cramped, his legs spread out wide, his forearms finding a way to brush up against hers. With Amy, Nico could relax. She slouched in the seat with her feet up on the dash as they slowly herded the cows along the road. The sky was blue-black and mottled like a bruise; no rain yet but a dampness in the air, steadily cooling the wind. The clouds looked bloated, hovering with calculated menace as they chose their moment to unleash.

‘Have you felt it kick yet?’ Amy asked.

Surprised, Nico nodded. ‘Feels weird. Like someone’s flipping a pancake in my guts.’

‘What does Boss think about it?’

‘He’s fine.’ She hadn’t seen him in two days.

‘If I was having a baby I’d want to be home with my family, in my own place,’ Amy said.

‘I don’t have a home.’ Even as Nico said the words she could smell the salt on the water, hear the seagulls’ shriek as they fought over discarded fish and chips.

A bottleneck formed at the end of the road as the cows realised they were being herded into the crush. The mothers bellowed a warning to their calves. Amy beeped the horn to move them forward and Nico jumped out, opening her arms wide to discourage any rogue cows from escaping. It was only once the crush gate closed behind them that the cows realised they were trapped. The mothers bellowed, cleaving the dirt with their hooves. Excited by this new game the calves circled the pen, head-butting each other and kicking their heels up in the air. When a calf lost its

footing, skidding across the dung-covered grass before looking up in amazement, they both cracked up laughing.

‘Have you got any kids?’ Nico asked, the thought only just occurring to her.

‘Yeah mate, I’ve got five rugrats already, all taken by social services.’ Amy thumped her on the arm. ‘You bloody racist!’

The punch felt like validation, a signal of her acceptance. Nico had to concentrate to stop herself from smiling.

They were halfway through tagging the calves when a noise made them stop. It was the high, sharp sound of glass breaking. They turned in the direction of Dave’s shed.

‘Do you think he’s ok?’

Amy shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t worry.’

‘He’s never let me in there, you know,’ Nico sighed. ‘Reckons he’s come up with some amazing fertiliser that’s going to double the return on the crops. I think the chemicals must be what’s making him sick.’

Amy let go of the railing to look at her. ‘You’re kidding, aren’t you?’ Her eyes were wide with disbelief. ‘Come on. Are you really that fucking stupid?’

The ear punch dangled from Amy’s hand. She was looking at Nico with resigned disappointment, as if all of her suspicions had been confirmed.

Yes. Nico really was that fucking stupid.

The house was silent upon her return. She sat heavily on the porch to wait. After Amy’s revelation they’d worked quietly, finishing the calves without speaking. Just when they were becoming friends, Nico had fucked it up. At this rate no one would ever take her seriously, no matter how hard she worked.

Of course Dave wasn't making fertiliser. *Of course he wasn't.* Hadn't she known all along?

Nico stepped down from the porch to stand under the sky. No rain yet but the air swirled wet and thick, the land rumbling as if a monster lay underground, digging its way up to the surface. A crow cut the air with its wings before landing on the scant branches of a paperbark tree. It took off again, perhaps returning home to organise its nest before the storm.

A sudden flash of lightning made Nico jump. The porch light behind her cast her long shadow on the ground. To her horror, another shadow appeared, a taller, larger one.

Gasping, she spun around. But nobody was there.

She dashed into the house, slamming the door shut behind her as the first droplets of water fell. She heard another sound, but not from the storm. She followed it into the bedroom, where Dave convulsed on the sheets. His knees were drawn up to his chest. His asthma puffer lay discarded on the floor.

She rushed to the bathroom and slammed on the hot water taps, all three. Sliding her arm around Dave's shoulders, she helped him into the bathroom. He tried to push her away and close the screen but Nico pushed back, kicking off her jeans. He pressed his hands against the tiles and bowed his head beneath the water. She put her arms around him, listening to his lungs struggle to fill with air.

This was what they had in common: their bodies harbouring something they could not control. She closed her eyes as Dave's coughing finally started to slow. It seemed as if this cycle of intimacy and distance would go on between them forever.

November 1990

I sat for more than an hour on that burning hill before I could make up my mind to turn back, and I am free to observe that I believe it was some unknown influence, not my own inclination that ultimately determined me to do so — Charles Sturt, 1845.

Our hotel room in Alice Springs stinks like burned hair. Even with all the windows open the smell is super strong, making our eyes water and our noses tingle like a sneeze is coming.

While Dad has a shower I watch Fast Forward on TV. I try to laugh at the jokes but I can't stop worrying about what will happen between him and Mum when we get home.

Headlights flash against the closed window curtain and I get up to open it, pressing my face against the glass. A family of five pile out of a blue station wagon: Mum, Dad, and three kids. I watch the smallest child stop and reach up their arms, until the tallest one bends down and hitches him up in a piggyback. They cross the car park in a pack, and as they step through the restaurant door the light briefly illuminates each person: a pear-shaped Mum with a frothy perm and a short and big-bellied Dad. The children all have small, dark heads and long, skinny arms. They talk and joke and touch each other constantly: me and Massy never laugh and joke like that and I wonder if it's because there's more of them. Five people are a tribe, enough so they never have to worry about being left alone.

When the restaurant door swings shut the car park is returned to darkness. I wonder if any of the children saw my face at the window and if they did, what they thought. Did I look cool and brave in this room all by myself? Or would they see me as lonely and pathetic?

Dad comes out of the bathroom wearing his lucky gold shirt. He shakes his head when he sees the look on my face.

‘I’ve been driving all day long my dear girl; you cannot begrudge me a few throws of the dice.’

‘I can’t sleep in here, Dad.’

‘This room does stink like a dead horse doesn’t it?’ he sighs, before sitting down on the edge of the bed. ‘How about I tell you a story before I go?’

‘A horror story!’ I cry, feeling a sudden need to prove that I am brave and not some sad girl in the window.

‘Alright, I have something special for you,’ Dad says. ‘I picked this one up at the servo in Marla while we were waiting for them to unblock the fuel lines.’

Once upon a time, in 1861, there was an explorer named Charlie Burke. Charlie was on a mission from the Queen to explore and map the northern interior of Australia. He was hailed as a hero in Britain, but in Australia he was regarded as a terrible racist. He yelled at Aboriginal people when they approached, threatening them with his gun if they tried to prevent him from using their waterholes. Charlie’s men were afraid he would one day start a war.

The waterhole at base camp was drying up, so Charlie left base camp to try to find a way forward. For two days he tried and failed to find a path through for the bullock carts. Rocky mountains spread in every direction, and Charlie knew that the animal hooves and cart wheels would be destroyed on this terrain. As he turned his horse in another direction an Aboriginal man appeared. The man was very old and he kept pointing at the sky, repeating a word that sounded to Charlie like ‘Yippee.’ Charlie yelled at him to go away and brandished his gun. Eventually, the man retreated.

After spending a restless night camped alone beneath a mulga tree, Charlie again tried, and failed to find a way through the mountains. His horse, Bawley, lost his footing, and he had to dismount and lead Bawley carefully back down to the plains. Charlie fell twice himself as he led him. His scurvy, caused by a diet of nothing but salt pork and sugar, was worsening. Once again Charlie set up camp at the base of the mulga tree and the next day he went out on foot, using his binoculars to try to determine a way forward. His last sack of water was almost empty. Shading his eyes from the scalding sun, Charlie saw the old man again on a nearby rise. The man pointed up at the sky, repeating that strange word again. 'Yippee,' the man yelled. 'Yippee.' He had a spear in his right hand and he pierced it into the ground. Furious, Charlie pulled out his gun. When he fired it into the nearby shrubs, the man disappeared.

As darkness fell Charlie returned, forlorn, to his camp. He thought he saw a glimpse of the old man again, an outline of his profile on a distant rock. Afraid that he was becoming delirious, Charlie fell into a restless sleep.

He woke in the night to the cry of the old man. 'Yippee,' he yelled, and the sound seemed to be coming from every direction, bouncing off of the surface of the rocks. The call went on and on, louder and louder, and Charlie clutched his ears as it became unbearable. He stumbled away, desperate to escape the noise. He must have walked for a long time because when Charlie woke up the next morning, he did not know where he was. The scurvy had paralysed his legs so he couldn't move and he contemplated screaming for help, but he was afraid of what might come. The dark, rocky mountains towered over him, slowly lightening to a bloody red. As Charlie stared upwards, an enormous roll cloud appeared. It looked like a smooth, white tube, a meringue that stretched across the entire planet. The massive cloud was

slowly illuminated by the sunrise, the morning sun dappling the cloud in shades of watermelon and coral. Charlie was filled with elation. The majestic sight was so beautiful, so godlike; that this was surely confirmation that heaven existed. Charlie bathed in the resplendent sunlight and the stillness of the air bought him a feeling of calm and communion. Just as the roll cloud rippled out of sight and the first storm cloud of the wet season appeared, Charlie died.'

Dad turned his head away from me, looking out the dark hotel window. I waited for him to say something more, but he didn't.

'What was the Yippee, Dad?'

'It was an Aboriginal word for the Morning Glory, the roll cloud that always appears before the wet season. The man was trying to tell him rain was coming.'

Chapter 25

As the months passed on the farm Nico found a new measure of time. Instead of the road and the distance between one sign and the next she started to measure time as Rick and Amy did, by the dry. They scanned weather forecasts with their hands clasped. They spent hours consulting the annual rainfall diary, flicking through it for patterns and clues. And all the while the land crisped and crackled, and the cows nosed the dry earth with scabbed snouts.

Nico tried to think like a farmer and to understand the science of fertiliser and farrow. But all she could think of was the pointlessness of these rituals when trade winds and ocean currents moved weather around the world at its whim. Charles Sturt measured time with a barometer. Each morning he prayed for the increase in air pressure that would mean approaching rain. His worship continued until the day the pressure soared so high that the mercury exploded from the glass.

In Nico's body, change was happening every day. Her hair shone and her skin was pink and dewy. Her round stomach got in her way. When she tried to lift an esky or catch a calf, Amy or Rick would wordlessly step in and remove it from her hands. Dave smoked his pipe and said nothing, although sometimes in the night he would still let her care for him. His wracking coughs upset the baby and she felt it tossing and turning inside her, long after he returned to sleep. Each morning Dave disappeared into his shed and Nico watched the ribbons of black smoke curl out of the air vents. She feared the chemicals were being absorbed by the clouds, to be exhaled finally when the rains came to poison all the water.

If the rain did ever come.

Dave cooked a roast dinner on Christmas Day. The four of them sat around the scarred kitchen table, talking only of drought. Aside from a few brief storms in November they'd stayed dry all spring. Now, summer was here, and the starving cows looked like coat hangers from behind. Rick pleaded with Dave to sell and put the old girls on the truck for meat.

'The livestock aren't my business,' he said, and that was the end of that.

No, Nico thought. Drugs are your business.

She and Amy were moving hay one day when the sky suddenly darkened, turning an unnatural shade of green. They lifted their faces and stuck their hands on their hips as a splatter of raindrops fell, so few Nico could count them on one hand. There was a single, silent fork of lightning before a breeze lifted the hair from their necks and the storm clouds drifted away.

'Rain too light to even lay the dust,' Amy sighed, returning to the hay bales.

A heifer stood watching under a melaleuca tree, her skin hanging loose from her ribs.

Dave swerved to avoid the body of a kangaroo. A buck, judging by its size, with a coat so pale it was almost white.

'Heard you saw the doctor in town,' Dave said, smoothly steering them back into the left lane.

'Who told you that?'

'You can't do a thing round here without somebody noticing.'

Nico was relieved when he said nothing more. She fingered the ultrasound photo she kept in her pocket, wondering how much longer they could maintain their

uneasy truce. She would have to go into town and buy baby clothes, nappies, and a cot. She would have to ask to pay for it, too. Would he still say nothing then?

They pulled up out the front of a large brick house. A ceramic statue of a poodle sat on the top step, its little mouth wide open, frozen in mid-yap. A woman answered the door in a sunhat, looking cool in a loose cotton shirt and pants. She smiled warmly when Dave introduced her. Nico liked her straight away.

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ Dahlia said, as they walked towards the shed. ‘Gives me something to think about besides the heat.’

She showed them to a box filled with tiny chicks. The babies looked cartoonish with their fluffy bodies and matchstick legs. To Nico’s surprise Dave reached in first, plucking out a chick and passing it to her. She could barely feel its weight in her hand. The chick’s head swivelled in her palm, blinking its beady eyes. Dave took a chick for himself and it was dwarfed in his larger hand. They grinned at each other and for a moment, everything was perfect.

Returning to the house they passed a line of cages. A Rottweiler jumped up, resting its front paws on the wire.

‘Rush was our best hunter,’ Dahlia said. ‘Silly bugger got caught in a trap.’

Nico took a step closer. A long red gash shone in his chest. He opened his mouth to let out a howl and she shivered. The sight of the fine, vulnerable skin and open sore made her feel slightly sick.

‘Without Rush I’d be losing more sheep,’ Dahlia said. ‘They run through the herd at night, taking bites out of them like it’s a game.’

‘Foxes?’ Nico asked.

‘Dogs. They tear out a kidney or liver and leave them there to die. I find my sheep walking around in a daze, legs soaked in blood. They stand there dying and

looking at me with ... bewilderment.' Dahlia's voice cracked. Dave put a hand on her shoulder and she wiped her eyes, looking embarrassed.

'I'll go and take a look at that hose for you,' Dave said, gently.

Dahlia smiled, her tears making the green of her eyes bright.

'We'll have a cup of tea then, shall we?'

Dahlia's kitchen was homey and cluttered, the benches strewn with cookie jars and tea cups.

'The grandchildren,' she said, nodding at the Lego trucks and dolls strewn across the lounge room floor.

Nico moved a stack of cookbooks to sit down while Dahlia made the tea. It was so much nicer here than at Dave's. Perhaps it was time for her to start making some changes, add a feminine touch to the place. The thought of painting a nursery made her smile dreamily, placing a hand on her stomach.

'Have you thought about whether this is the right place to raise your baby?' Dahlia said carefully, putting down her mug.

'What do you mean?'

'Do you know about him?' Dahlia's eyes darted from Nico to the back door. 'Has somebody told you?'

The door slid open and as Dave stepped inside Dahlia adopted a bright smile.

'How did you go?' she asked, cheerfully.

The tea dried in Nico's throat.

On the drive home she balanced the egg cartons in her lap, stroking the cool, creamy shells. While Dave talked about the drought she replayed her conversation with Dahlia. She wished she'd had time to ask what was meant. It was obvious that Dahlia was afraid of Dave, but why?

She realised from his silence that Dave was waiting for her to speak.

‘What?’

‘Ten-Eighty. Poison. We need a dogger out here to protect the sheep. It’s impossible to get all of them with guns.’

‘It’s horrible,’ Nico agreed, picturing the massacred sheep, their fluffy white corpses staggering around in a spray of their own blood.

A white ute was parked on the roadside up ahead. She could see the shadow of a man with a dark, wiry beard sitting in the front seat.

‘What is it?’ Dave asked, as she craned around in her seat, trying to get a look at the man’s face.

‘Nothing,’ Nico said, watching the ute get smaller and smaller.

Chapter 26

‘You said you weren’t keeping it.’

‘Things change.’

‘*Some* things.’

In Massy’s voice Nico heard the echo of home, the crashing of waves and the flap of seagull wings beating along the ocean’s surface. It surprised her, this rush of nostalgia.

‘When were you planning on telling me?’

‘I’ve been busy. It’s hard to explain.’

‘I spoke to Mum.’

Nico’s back hit the wall and Amy paused from rummaging in the fridge to stare.

‘She called me on New Year’s Day. She’s been living on a farm for the last few years, like you.’

Nico clenched her teeth. She was nothing like their mother. ‘So what?’

‘She’s stopped drinking,’ Massy said.

‘She told you that?’

‘And I could hear it. Her voice was different. The way it was before Dad ran off.’

‘Dad didn’t run off,’ Nico snapped. ‘He died.’

‘Sure Nic,’ Massy sighed. ‘And that gambling debt he left behind was just a funny coincidence.’

Nico inhaled sharply. Tears pricked her eyes.

‘I’m going to be an auntie,’ Massy said, with wonder.

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t have to do this alone.’

‘I’m not alone,’ Nico said. Amy glanced at her again.

‘Lucas called, asking where you are.’

The baby gave an enormous kick. Nico clutched her left side, breathing deeply before telling Massy she would call her back.

‘What was that about?’ Amy asked.

‘Just my sister.’

The sadness in Massy’s voice left her rattled. She had a sudden urge to smoke or drink something, to drown out the rush of mixed-up feelings.

Amy filled the sink with hot water and detergent. Automatically, Nico picked up a tea towel.

‘If I were having a baby I’d want my family around me,’ Amy said.

Nico groaned. ‘Not this again.’

‘Do you really think Dave’s gonna take care of your kid? Send it to school? Pay for its uniform and textbooks?’

‘I earn my keep.’

‘Oh, I know you do,’ Amy laughed, and Nico threw her tea towel onto the bench.

‘Why are you being such a bitch?’ she snapped. ‘Do you want me to go home so you can have Dave all to yourself?’

The cutlery rattled in the sink.

‘You’re crazy.’

‘Why can’t you just be my friend? Why do you have to make me feel like shit?’

Amy said nothing. Fed up, Nico reached for the cigarettes on the counter.

‘Don’t take my smokes!’ Amy spun around. ‘All you do is *take!* You think just because we’ve cared for you we’ll care for that baby too.’ She pointed a butterknife at Nico’s belly. ‘Not gonna happen.’

‘Fuck you then!’ The anger felt good, reenergising Nico’s tired body. ‘I don’t want my baby around a bitch anyway!’

She slammed the door behind her, glad to be out in the fresh air and sun. The sky had no clouds: it was clear, like Nico’s head. She didn’t care about that bitch anyway. She had Dave, and he was all she needed.

November 1990

No one can form an idea of the nature of the country, and the many risks there are in entering it. It is utterly impenetrable to any excepting to one who like me am prepared to encounter difficulties, and expect to find them — Charles Sturt, 1845.

We are nearly there. The sky is darkening to denim. I can sense the presence of the distant storm, the electricity crackling distantly on the air.

Dad knows it too. His hands clutch the steering wheel at positions ten and two. He hunches over the steering wheel, tilting his head at regular intervals to scan the sky.

Once we pass Tennant Creek things always feel more intense, like a magnifying glass is being held in front of my eyes. The colours are thick and bright as if freshly painted, and the sun's heat is concentrated and intense. I wind down my window and smell a scent of water on the wind. The clouds above us are fattening like cows.

'Look out,' Dad says, pointing as a Cumulus congestus ripples overhead. 'Reckon we're only an hour or two away.'

The grasslands by the roadside are littered with termite mounds, rising sombrely from the ground like gravestones. A python whips across the highway and Dad swerves neatly to avoid it.

'Can you go any faster?'

'Hold your horses love,' Dad says. 'You know if we get into trouble out here there'll be a long wait for help.'

Wave rocks appear, rising up out of the desert. The rocks are layered with stripes of burnt orange and cream, with green grass growing in intermittent patches

like mould. I try to imagine what it would have been like for the explorers tracking through these rocks, the hot wind always blasting them backwards. I shiver, and my mouth fills with spit.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I’m starting to feel a bit crook.’

Dad presses his palm to my forehead, and the coolness feels good.

‘Keep your eyes up,’ he says. ‘Don’t look down. I’ll tell you a story to take your mind off of it.’

‘There was once a young girl named Amity,’ he begins. ‘And she had a very strict father. He wouldn’t let her go to parties, movies, road trips—’ he winks at me and I try to smile. ‘Nothing. A local boy, a young fella by the name of Peter, had quite a crush on the girl. But he was an outcast, a bit of a quiet type, and she never noticed him.’

I listen closely as another wave of nausea ripples through my belly. The road darkens as a Cumulonimbus cloud passes overhead.

During a soccer game at school one day, Amity fell down and stopped breathing. Her classmates were terrified, thinking that she was having some kind of fit. But it turned out that she had severe, sudden onset asthma. Peter’s Mum had asthma too, so he gave Amity some advice. They became friends and eventually they became a couple. Her Dad wouldn’t let Amity see him outside of school but every minute they could, they spent together.

In year twelve they started having troubles. Peter’s grades weren’t good and Amity was set on getting into Sydney University. Peter started working for an insulation company after school, spraying liquid insulation into the ceiling of

greenhouses and freezer units which would dry and set overnight. He was saving money for an engagement ring.

On the last day of school there was a graduation party. Peter had a quick job to finish after school and Amity went along with him. As they drove, Peter talked about the life they would have after school: marriage, couple of kids, big house. But Amity said she wasn't going to live with him. Now that she was finally free of her strict father, the last thing she wanted was to move in with another fella. Peter was shattered. The engagement ring was still in his pocket. In a state of shock, he did a rush job at the freezer unit, not bothering with the protective gear. When Amity came in to ask him how much longer he would be, Peter snapped at her to wait in the car. She turned to go back in a tizz. And that's when they realised the door had locked behind her.

I picture Amity rattling the door handle, the whites of her eyes shining in the dim light.

It turned out that Peter left the keys in the truck when he was carting the gear back and forth. The place was sealed up tight. No windows, just that one side door and a main entrance that was padlocked from the outside. And the foam Peter just sprayed the place with? Toxic.

While Peter tried to think of a way to get them out, the tiny little fibres of foam were starting to harden and particles drifted into the air. Amity covered her mouth and nose with her jacket but the fibres had already triggered her asthma. She started coughing, and as the coughing got more intense she struggled to catch her breath between fits. Peter gave up and held Amity in his arms, trying to calm her she struggled for breath.

When Amity's dad heard she hadn't turned up to the graduation party he called Peter's parents and got the job site address. He drove straight out to the freezer unit, but it was too late.

I picture the two of them in the half darkness, Peter cradling her in his arms like Sleeping Beauty. Dad looks down at me with an expression that I can't read.

'But it was an accident,' I say, and his eyes widen. 'Wasn't it?'

'That's up to you to decide, my dear girl.'

Chapter 27

Lolling on a dining room chair and dazed with heat and hormones, Nico felt her whole body liquefy. She bubbled and sloshed like an aquarium and it was as if a baby piranha had moved in, devouring her from the inside out.

Dave cut slithers of fat from a steak and dropped the edgings into an ice cream container. He wore nothing but a pair of black silk boxers, the fine hairs on his legs golden in the midday light.

‘Lunch is green bean, avocado, and prosciutto salad,’ he announced, though she hadn’t asked. He slid open a draw to retrieve a spoon, moving within a silence so complete that Nico breathed lightly for fear she’d disturb it.

Every way she arranged her body was unnatural. She couldn’t sit right. The curve of the baby’s back was tucked in against her left side, and sometimes a hand or foot rippled along her belly’s surface: a casual greeting that made her shudder. She gave up on the chair and crossed the kitchen to heave herself up on the counter. She swung her legs and watched Dave cook, pleased with this small accomplishment.

A bellow sounded, making Dave smile. ‘The bulls went in yesterday,’ he said.

Nico shuddered, thinking of those weak, starving cows, staggering and dazed beneath the weight of a one tonne bull. They had barely stopped feeding the last round of calves. There wasn’t enough feed and water for another round of pregnancies, everybody knew that.

Dave wiped his hands on a tea towel and reached under her feet to hang it back on the oven rail. As she raised her legs he caught them, lifting them up so she fell back against the bench with a gasp.

‘Ow!’ she yelped, her head clunking on one of the stovetop burners. His tongue in her mouth tasted of meat. She turned her face away as Dave pushed his nose into her breasts, hooking her knickers aside with his finger.

She looked down at her bare, swollen belly, the map of veins marking the baby’s territory. A mountain, her baby was impossible to ignore, yet Dave continued pumping away as if nothing was there. Her disgust rose as he continued thrusting. Absent Dave with his rotten lungs. She couldn’t bear it any longer.

She shoved him off of her and he grunted in surprise, taking a step backwards. It was only then that she noticed the paring knife, still clutched in his hand.

‘What the fuck?’ Nico stammered, shuffling back onto the bench top.

‘What?’ Dave threw the knife into the sink. ‘Forgot I was holding it.’

Do you know about him? Dahlia’s words echoed in her mind. *Has somebody told you?*

She slid slowly off the bench. ‘I’m going for a drive.’

‘You’ve got half an hour.’

‘Is that how it is?’ Nico said, turning around to look at him.

Dave smiled. ‘That’s how it’s always been.’

Nico knocked and waited. The ceramic poodle was exactly where she remembered it, guarding the front door with its little teeth bared. An empty bag of fertiliser danced up the driveway, chased by a trail of dust and leaves. The storm clouds roiled and tumbled above her in the rapidly darkening sky.

She knocked twice and waited, but no one came. Reluctantly returning to the car, she heard the rattle of an engine. Nico dashed across the property, past the shed

and the empty kennels. In the adjoining paddock, a boy about her age was tinkering with a tractor motor.

‘Hey,’ she called.

The boy turned to look at her. He was tall and slim, his curly dark hair pulled back into a ponytail.

‘Hello,’ he said, slowly, his thick accent unmistakable.

‘Do you know where Dahlia is?’ As she got closer Nico noticed his pupils were tiny pinpricks.

‘Dahlia in town for shopping. She return by three o’clock,’ he said carefully, as if repeating instructions.

Nico looked at her watch. ‘Hey,’ she leaned forward. ‘Do you know Dave, up the road?’

‘Dave ...’ he wrinkled his nose. ‘The property next to Old Tom?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Oh ...’ the boy seemed to forget about her for a moment, looking into the engine. ‘Freezer!’

‘Freezer? Why do people keep saying that?’

‘That’s what they call him, your boss.’ He nodded, kept nodding, while she debated whether or not to believe him.

‘Do you know why people call him that?’

‘Oh, yes,’ the boy nodded, pleased he had another answer. ‘In school times, you see. Young days. He lock her in a freezer unit, the girlfriend. Killed her.’

December 1990

Day after day, week after week and month after month had passed over us and had at length left us in hopelessness and almost in despair, but now thank God we are free. The face of the country sparkles with the glittering of water, and we have no longer any dread of our suffering from the want of that life sustaining fluid — Charles Sturt, 1845.

‘Yoooooooo bewwdy!’

Dad’s bellow of victory is barely audible. I feel his excitement more than I hear it as the car speeds along, flying over anthills and shrubs.

‘Look at her! Just look at her!’

I try to look but my body is being thrown from side to side. I grab hold of the door handle with my left hand and clutch the dashboard with my right, keeping my eyes focussed and praying we don’t hit a fence or a tree.

A willy-willy whips across the dirt alongside us, the funnel of red dust like a spinning-top gone mad. The car tilts as we climb a giant anthill, and my head bumps against the window.

‘Oof!’

When Dad asks if I’m alright I say yes, even though I’m scared. We’ve been driving off-road for hours, on who-knows-whose land. If any cows or bulls are grazing I don’t see them moving out of our way in time. And no chance Dad is slowing down for anything.

‘Look how fast she’s moving!’ he shouts. ‘Tripled in size in the last two minutes!’

I crane my neck but all I can see is the flat, featureless grey of Nimbostratus. Whatever Dad's so excited about is directly overhead. I shiver with the feeling I always get in a storm: of being tiny and unimportant, a leaf in the breeze.

The wind howls, 'Yooooouu, yooooou!' as it hurls sticks and dirt at our windscreen, coating it in filth. Dad flicks on the wipers and they drag scum from one side of the glass to the other. Rocks rain on the underside of the car as he slams on the brakes. Throwing open his door, Dad leaps into the wind. His camera thumps against his chest as he runs, his head thrown back, eyes scanning the sky.

When I open my own door the wind snatches it away from me. Leaving it open, I run towards Dad. My hair whips across my face, stinging my eyes and lips.

'Nicky, Nicky, have a look at this!'

It isn't the Morning Glory but it's something big, something massive. I open my eyes wide, trying to take in the enormous black clouds stacked like death towers in the sky. The rain hasn't started yet but the clouds swell with water, breathing it into the air, sucking out all of the warmth.

'Get a look at the curvature of the mammatus!' Dad shouts. 'Feast your eyes on the layers of the anvil! I don't think I've ever seen such smooth formations!'

The Cumulonimbus is a dark, grapey purple. It ripples over us, bubbling like detergent under a tap. Its top is as high as a skyscraper and a rippled Mohawk spikes up out of its billowing folds. Dad lowers the camera and pulls the voice recorder from his pocket, talking rapidly as his legs skitter him this way and that. Fresh sheets of wind fly across the plains, flinging grit and dust into my eyes. My face and hands are damp and cold but underneath my jumper, I'm sweating.

'Geez Louise. Just look at her.'

As I peer up into the centre a streak of bright blue light shoots across the sky, joining the Cumulonimbus directly above us to the one beside it. The forked light illuminates the layers of the clouds, just as quickly returning them to darkness.

‘That was cloud-to-cloud! A discharge from the negative region of one Cumulonimbus to the positive region of its neighbour! Do you know how rare that is?’

Dad’s voice is drowned out by the thunder. The vibration seems to come from under our feet, rather than from above. I look down, half-expecting the ground to crack open.

Then the rain comes.

The first drop of water falls into the centre of my forehead, as hard as a finger tap. I tilt my head back, wincing as the Cumulonimbus opens her dark roiling belly, hurling raindrops down upon us like harpoons.

‘Dad!’ I shout, as the needles get sharper and sharper. ‘Are we going back?’

‘Alright love, you go on! I’ll be there in a minute.’

It’s only mid-afternoon, but so dark I can barely see him. I want to ask when he’s coming back, but our voices are choked with rain. As I turn back to the car another fork of lightning fires directly into the ground. In the brief illumination I see Dad clearly. He isn’t taking any photos. He just stands there staring upwards, a joyful smile spread across his wet face.

‘Go on, love!’

The storm roars. We are inside a washing machine, spinning faster and faster. I stumble towards Dolly’s shadow, my trembling hands outstretched.

The inside of the car is soaked. I wrench the door shut behind me, groaning as I step into a puddle of water. I lift my legs and wrap my arms around my knees,

watching as the lightning ruptures the shadows with jagged tears of electric blue, purple and white.

Cumulonimbus clouds are made up of water droplets, ice crystals and a little dust. Not monsters or spirits, only vessels for Earth junk, Dad taught me that. But still, as they thunder overhead I sense something following, something I can't see. A face hidden in the folds of the clouds, malevolent and concealed.

Dolly trembles, groaning in protest as the wind tries to snatch us away.

I grip the dash and keep my eyes open, waiting to see Dad in the next bolt of lightning.

Chapter 28

Nico sped through the paddocks, her hair streaming behind her. She kicked the pedal upwards into third, and the bike jolted violently before accelerating. The sky was as black as her tyres, the clouds churning themselves into savage shapes. A shelf cloud hovered low in the sky, far-east, but headed straight for them. The wind dipped for a moment as if taking a breath, before coming back twice as hard.

Locked in a freezer unit, the girlfriend. Killed her. Nico tried to remember where her Dad had said his story was from. Kalgoorlie? Was that right?

‘Sorry,’ Nico called, as she scattered a herd of heifers. The motor struggled against the headwind and heat radiated from the metal. When Rick spotted her he lifted his hand with a frown.

‘You’re going to cook that fucken motor,’ he said, when she reached him. ‘You’re too bloody fat to be on that bike.’

‘Where’s Amy?’

‘Gone to her cousin’s.’

‘Which cousin?’ Nico rubbed the burned skin on her thighs, looking back in the direction of the house.

Rick snorted. ‘Do you know how many cousins those blackfella’s have?’

‘Can I borrow some money?’

Rick regarded her with deep disappointment. A Murray Gray heifer, ghost-like with its grey-white coat, watched them silently from behind a tree.

‘Go have a bloody lie down!’ Rick called, as Nico hefted herself back onto the quad. ‘Get those hormones under control!’

She gave him the finger before knocking the bike into first gear, then second. The storm clouds ducked and rolled, chasing her all the way back to the house.

When she stepped inside everything was just as it should be: the filthy coffee table, the stink of cat piss and carpet cleaner. She listened for the sound of footsteps or the shower running. His ute was still out front but she hadn't checked for the bike.

'Boo!' Dave leapt out of the hallway, laughing when Nico jumped back in surprise. There was a strange pitch to his laughter, and when he pulled her in for a hug the sour, chemical smell was unusually strong. Nico smiled, carefully extricating herself from his grip to pour herself an orange juice.

'Where have you been?' he said.

'Helping Rick.' She gulped down the juice, suddenly very thirsty.

'Before that,' he insisted.

'I went to check on a heifer.'

Dave yanked the glass from her hand, spilling juice on the floor. 'Stop lying.'

Had he seen her at Dahlia's? Nico's mind raced. He seemed suddenly different to the man she'd been living with for six months, a darker, more threatening version. Or was it just her perception that had changed?

Dave took a deep breath and the coughing started, a rasping, painful sound as if layers of his throat were coming away with each convulsion. There was a bluish tinge to his lips. She lifted her hand to run a finger over the skin beneath his eyes, tracing the routes of his sleeplessness.

'You're not going to leave me,' Dave said, softer now, and her fear was replaced with pity.

The baby shifted, moving a little higher. Nico straightened, trying to make more space for her lungs.

‘No,’ she said, softly.

Dave smiled, taking her hand and holding it to his chest.

Wind whistled through the open kitchen window. The sky was almost black and rippled with smooth, globular bubbles like udders. Mammatus clouds, the ones that made Dad blush when he described them. The smell of rainwater filled the air.

‘I have to head into town. I’ll grab us something for dinner on the way back,’ Dave said. He gave her one more smile before he left, satisfied with her obedience.

Nico stood still to listen, finally relaxing as the engine faded. Outside the wind moaned, a low, steady *ooooooh*. She looked out the window and the Mammatus clouds were gone, the sky transformed into a curtain of midnight blue. Trails of silver threaded through it like locks of hair.

Nico exhaled, long and slow. Then she picked up the phone to call Massy.

A bolt of lightning made her jump as she lifted the receiver to her ear. It took a moment for Nico to realise that the line was dead.

December 1990

A parrot flew over us from the hills and passed away to the north, but he was screaming and his flight was indicative of perplexity and alarm. He flew about bewildered like a bird that has been blown out to sea ... it had a powerful effect in convincing me of the utter desolation of that terrible desert — Charles Sturt, 1845.

I lift my head from my arms. My face is wet. The last storm clouds tear north across the smoke-coloured sky.

‘Did you get the shot?’ I mutter, before realising Dad’s gone.

The floor is pooled with water, the upholstery soaked through. I peer out the windscreen, searching for him through the beads of rain left on the glass. My body stills with the sudden thought that I’m alone. I pinch my arm — hard — to be rid of it.

When I open the car door my feet sink into a warm, dark pool. The muddy water slips into my sneakers and up the legs of my jeans, silty and smooth. I wade into it, bending to drag my fingertips across the surface. I am in the centre of a low red ocean. Not a river, running in a single direction, but a mass of water deposited by a force more powerful than any current.

‘Two years of drought,’ Dad had said. ‘And then two years of rainfall in a single day.’

Only heroes and fools travel through the red centre in the height of an Australian summer. When Robert O’Hara Burke led the 1860 expedition the daily midday temperature was 42 degrees, the waterholes dried up from two years of drought, the heat shimmer so potent that entire deserts rippled before his eyes like water. Burke never got to see a summer monsoon.

I turn back to the car. The water is still and flat, as if the violence of the storm had all been a dream. Had the water level risen while my back was turned? Was it only halfway up the tyres before?

I wade out further but the water doesn't go over my calves. I stop to scratch my chin the way Dad does when he's thinking, forgetting my muddy fingers.

'Dad,' I shout. 'Oi!' Instead of echoing like it normally does out here my voice falls flat, blocked by the wet air.

'Oi, Dad!' I yell again.

The air ripples with the flapping of wings. A small black bird with a white patch on its breast lands on a tree branch floating by.

'Good, hey?' I ask, as the bird bends to wet its beak. The tail trembles in reply.

Dad said the drought was so bad this time that the native animals had been jumping in front of road trains just to end their thirst. 'Suicide,' he said, every time we passed another splattered roo or fox. 'Hari Kari.'

My stomach does a little flip, a voice in my head saying, *what if?*

Dad always comes back. Always.

Leaving the bird to her long drink, I wade out a little further. A single melaleuca tree is visible a few hundred metres south. It looks lonely but strong, rising up out of the red sea. Somewhere behind me is the Stuart Highway. West, it is, but all I can see in the west is more water. The highway is safety, the line down the middle like a yellow brick road, carrying us home. We should never have left it.

I breathe in the familiar post-rain smell of eucalyptus and beets. And something else, something different. Sweet, like a mouldy orange. I extend my arms like two hands of a clock and close my eyes, trying to remember how long we drove

for after turning off the highway. How long would the walk back take? A day? How long does a day's walk take when you're wading through a pool of desert clay?

'Nicky!'

I drop my arms. Dad sloshes towards me, his camera swinging around his neck and the bottom of his shirt stained red. His beard looks wilder than I've ever seen it, as if he was zapped with electricity and it made all the hairs stand on end.

When Dad reaches the car I see that his face is flushed, his eyes a bright, strained blue.

'Did you get sunburned, Dad?'

He scoffs. 'Cumulonimbus don't tend to let through a lot of sun. Come on Nicky, you know better than that.'

I don't tell him that I meant before the storm. After driving for four days through bright, hot sun that streamed through the windscreen like a spotlight my lips were peeling and my head felt thick and slow, drained of water and re-packed with wool. Dad had been worse. As we travelled further north each day, a kind of sickness came over him. His hands trembled when he loosened his grip on the wheel. The car filled with a sharp, sour smell which I realised, much later, was fear.

'Right then. Shall we?' Dad says, as if we're about to leave a party.

We get into the Landcruiser and he reaches for the ignition, eyes fixed on the dashboard.

'Come on, Dolly.'

He turns the key. Nothing. Not even a little squeak or groan to let us know she's alive.

'Come on, old girl.'

I watch the flick of his wrist as Dad tries the ignition once more. Instead of leaping up with a plan like usual he stares helplessly at the wheel. A matt of dark curls gather at the folds of his shirt collar.

‘How far is the highway from here?’

‘I can’t remember.’ Dad looks at me from the corner of his eye without turning his head. ‘Can you?’

I remember us driving for hours after we left the highway. I remember the tear of saltbush under the car, dirt and plants flying as we raced across the plains. I remember the land changing as we drove out into a deep, rocky red, cratered and alien like the surface of another planet. My head smacked the roof as we clambered over the rocks, and Dad pointed at the low, purple clouds gathering on the horizon, their edges jagged with pouring rain. The first bolt of lightning seemed to tunnel into the ground right in front of us, and water came from every direction. I was sure that at any moment we’d be picked up and destroyed, hurled right up into the belly of the anvil. But would it be such a bad way to go? Atomised inside the soft folds of a cloud?

Dad pats the steering wheel as if bidding Dolly a fond farewell. A whip snake passes, centimetres from Dad’s ankles. The long, dark body slides confidently through the rust-coloured water.

‘I’m coming with you.’

Dad reaches for his wallet on the dash. I know his answer from the set of his jaw.

‘What if the water rises? What if I drown?’

‘It won’t,’ Dad says. ‘You won’t. You’re in the best place you can be.’

He leans down to give me a stiff, one-armed hug. I wince at the sharp jab of his elbow.

‘That was some storm,’ he says, smiling. ‘Even your mother would have been impressed.’

‘Did you get the money shot, Dad? The one National Geographic wanted?’

‘Sure did. From now on, it’s all gravy.’

We grin, and I picture the life that will begin when we get home. A new house, rat-free, with air-conditioning. Cupboards stacked with brand name food. Clean, new-smelling clothes. Mum and Massy smiling again.

‘Gave us a real beating, though.’

For a moment I think he’s still talking about Mum, until Dad shakes his head at the murky sky. His expression is a mixture of awe and exasperation. The same way she used to look at him.

‘Finally got that inland sea Charlie wanted,’ Dad says, picking up an empty water bottle. ‘Only a hundred and sixty years too late.’

I lean my elbows on the dash, watching his long legs lope easily through the sea that Charlie wanted. Dad’s been telling me explorer stories since I was little. Charles Sturt, lugging his whaleboat through the desert, ever hopeful of sailing it through the inland sea. Robert Burke and his wild blue eyes, purposeful and directionless as he marched his expedition to their deaths. William Wills and his meticulous navigations, half-blind through measuring distance by gazing directly into the sun. These men are Dad’s heroes. And mine.

I put my feet up on the dash, surveying my private ocean.

I’m not worried; I don’t doubt Dad’s return for a second.

Yet watching his long body grow smaller and smaller, my heart starts to race and my ears roar with the sound of rushing water.

Chapter 29

Nico returned the receiver to the cradle. A gust of wind made the front door rattle.

‘It’s just the storm, knocking out the phone lines,’ she said, loudly. The house did not reply. It seemed to be holding its breath, watching and waiting to see what happened next.

‘Dad’s story was an urban legend,’ she said, firmly. ‘Dave would never hurt anybody.’

A sudden crash at the end of the hallway made her jump. She listened for a moment, her heart banging in her chest. Dave was gone, so it could only be the storm. Squaring her shoulders, Nico entered the hallway, checking to see if something had fallen. Each room she entered had the feeling of a conversation interrupted, a thick, leaden pause that made the hair on her arms stand up. She stood at the end of the hallway, the bedrooms at her back. The radio in the lounge room switched on.

‘Should I stay or should I go now?’

The music played clearly through the empty house and Nico ran down the hallway, her heart hammering in her chest. The lounge room was empty, the stereo power button glowing green. The music played on, the chorus getting louder and louder. Then, it switched off. The singing abruptly stopped and the power button faded to black. She felt it at her back: a sudden drop in air pressure as something came rushing towards her. Her nose filled with the meaty scent of white kangaroo. *Don’t turn around*, a woman whispered, and Nico bolted for the front door. She yanked the door open and ran down the porch steps, struggling against the force of the wind.

She was certain Amy's place would be locked; that she could not escape what was coming for her. But the door was unlocked and she dashed inside with relief, locking it behind her.

Outside, the roaring wind fell silent. Nico stood for a moment, catching her breath and listening. Then she checked all the windows and doors before picking up Amy's phone. As soon as she realised it was dead, her body flooded with relief. It had simply been a power surge. Some fallen phone lines in the storm.

As the adrenaline drained away, Nico started to tremble. She decided to rest until the lines were reconnected. The baby hadn't moved in ages, as if it too, was scared. She turned on the TV, flicking through the channels before selecting Wheel of Fortune. The contestant had the answer; she could see it in his eyes.

'Riders on the Storm,' he blurted, his neck flushed red over a tangerine tie. The audience clapped as the hostess crossed the stage to reveal the final letter.

A crackle of electricity. A disembodied voice, floating through the night.

'Rick, can you hear me? Rick?'

Nico sat up slowly, disoriented. How long had she been asleep?

'What?' Rick's voice burst out of the two-way radio on the bench.

'One of your heifers is in the troubles,' the other voice said, and she recognised the accent as the boy from Dahlia's farm. 'She was agitate when I pass her this morning and now she lying very strange near the silo shed.'

The two-way crackled, followed by a long pause. 'I'll take a look in the morning.'

'Ok. Ok, yes, for sure.' It was clear he thought she should be looked at now. Another stuck calf, probably.

Rick wouldn't help her. The cow would probably die before it was born.

Nico jumped off the couch and grabbed the two-way, pressing down the talk button with her thumb.

'Hey,' she said, quickly. 'Rick. The phones are down.'

The static muffled his response. She pressed the speaker to her ear.

'... bloody help that.'

'Can you give me a lift to the bus station in the morning? To Kalgoorlie?'

Another crackle of static.

'Hello? Rick? Hello?'

She clutched the two-way, waiting for a reply. But none came. Nico went to the window and checked for any signs of Dave, but his ute wasn't there. She checked the landline but it was still dead.

Only then did she hear the thunder, a low rumble from far away. And underneath it, something else. A deep, guttural sound. She waited for the thunder to finish. Then she heard the noise again.

'Fuck,' Nico whispered.

Responding to her rising heart rate, the baby shifted. A sharp pain bloomed briefly at the front of her pelvis, and then disappeared.

The cow bellowed once more. The sound was followed by a lightning flash, illuminating the donga briefly in pure, blinding white.

Fuck.

December 1990

It was in truth a degree of heat that we were unable to bear, aggravated by the wind that was blowing, a steady regular hot blast, with falling or rising the whole day long. This made our eyelids heavy and caused a weariness and listlessness that was impossible to overcome — Charles Sturt, 1845.

It's been six days since he left, wading away from me through the floodwater. It took five days for the flood to drain away and only one for the sun to toast the ground a dry, crusty brown. I dream about water. I wake up with tracks of dry salt on my cheeks and a cry dead in my throat.

The slightest puff of wind carries waves of red dust, coating the insides of my ears and nose and mouth. The dust has baked into the cracks of my skin and coloured my t-shirt a burnt orange. I part my lips to taste blood, and the liquid stings the deep cracks in my mouth.

Water is all I think about. Pressing my fingers into the hollows under my eyes, I wonder how easy it would be to scoop out my eyeballs with a spoon and suck the juice from them like grapes.

Every time I hear Dad's voice I jump out of the car, forgetting the painful rip of my sweaty skin from the vinyl. The ground bakes the soles of my feet and the sun cooks my scalp, forcing my retreat. Sometimes I think it's his ghost, that voice in my ear. Then I dismiss the thought, because Dad always comes back.

During the day I sleep in the backseat. I dream of swimming and wake with my arid mouth open, trying to drink the pool water. Sometimes I dream I'm Robert Burke, my men dead or delirious, my camels sick and horses starved. When Burke looked out over the desert he was certain that there was no hope but he kept on

marching regardless. A hero must always go forward, never backward, but the heroes in Dad's explorer journals spent a lot of time staying still. Sometimes they had to camp for months in one spot, waiting for help or supplies. I've only been alone for six days, and already I feel like I'm going crazy. What did the men do for months and months, sitting beside a dried-up riverbank with nothing but heat and time? Did they fight each other? Did they share stories? Did they come to know things the rest of us didn't?

When Dad finally returns he will be followed by a team of rescuers. Men in uniform, official men carrying water and ice and those silver blankets on TV emergencies. Mum and Massy will be there too, eyes shining with love and also shame for how badly they've treated me. Dad will lead the rescue team, loping determinedly through the desert with his forgotten camera dangling from his neck. He will reach in and carry me out of this car. His heroism will be famous. We'll be all over the news.

Today, I dream that I'm John McDouall Stuart. My horse, Polly, is squat but fast. We travel alone, Polly's hooves tracing scorched lines across the desert. I see an Aboriginal man approaching and fire my musket, confident he will cower and run away. When the spear pierces my back I slide silently from the saddle, too shocked to call Polly back as she gallops across the saltbush plains without me.

Massy told me once about the rule of three. A human can survive three weeks without food, three days without water, and three minutes without oxygen.

As the sun sets, I wake up and climb slowly out of the car. I lean against the bonnet as silence falls heavy and sudden, as if all the insects and lizards have paused to watch the sunset too. I sigh as the sun drops away. The darkness is a relief to my thick, pounding head and the constant fear that I will die. At night, my mind works

better. I can follow a thought from beginning to end. During the day, I think only about the single bottle of brackish water I have left to drink.

When the darkness comes, it is thick and absolute. When I was little I begged Mum to leave my nightlight on to scare off all the monsters in the darkness. But Dad made me get up and walk right into it, leaving the safety of the bed and stepping out into the night. My trembling hands patted the air for obstacles as I followed the sound of his voice. First I walked the bedroom, then the hallway, then the backyard. Dad took my hand and dragged me into blackness, his deep, booming voice becoming a kind of light. He taught me that darkness was nothing at all, just a mirror reflecting all my fears right back at me.

The cold air tickles my skin. Soon it will be freezing, and I will start to shiver. Sitting cross-legged on the car bonnet, I crane my neck to play games with the stars. I dare them to move or fall. I connect the dots to make dragons and whales. The Clash plays over and over in my head, the soundtrack to my isolation.

Should I stay or should I go now?

Should I stay or should I go now?

I am piecing together the outline of a white kangaroo when bad thoughts start coming in. I remember a day when I was eleven years old, Darren standing over me in the school gym and the hypnotic bounce of his ball.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

‘I’ll tell you what to do.’

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

‘You don’t have to be scared.’

Images of crows pecking me open, their sharp beaks darting into my open mouth. To shake them I search even harder for the kangaroo, finding the stars to

shape her long tail. My tongue sits thick in my mouth like a wedge of cheese. Crows crowd around it, enjoying the rubbery taste.

If I go there will be trouble ... If I stay it will be double.

The kangaroo disappears, replaced by the shape of my mother. Her hair is twisted into a tight bun, her feet clad in flat nursing shoes. A line of stars form her dainty nose and the outline of her high forehead. My heart twists, making its own funny shapes, while Mum shuffles around the hospital in her cheap canvas shoes. It suddenly seems strange to me that she is the one with the job, yet it is Dad I always have to ask for money. Sometimes, when he comes home from the races Mum will pat him down in the doorway. Massy and I wait in the lounge, listening for a shriek of happiness, or the more-familiar sigh of resignation.

Maybe Mum's hardness is a good thing. Maybe Dad's softness is the reason we stay so poor.

I try to make another shape but the bad thoughts press in. My chest is tight and I feel a gooey breathlessness, horror pressing in from all sides. I have visions of mincemeat, fatty corpses, the cawing of crows. I crawl into the backseat, slamming the door shut as loud as I can. When I open my eyes I see Mum again in the stars, the slow, graceful turn of her neck. I sleep to the shuffle of her nurse's shoes, coming right for me.

Chapter 30

Nico struggled forward, her head bowed against the wind. Her eyes streamed and her torch light was swallowed by the darkness.

‘Hello girl,’ she whispered, when she found her. The cow was sprawled awkwardly on her right side. Small and dark with a glossy coat, she looked young, too young for a baby. As Nico approached her eyes rolled and her rear legs spasmed in the dirt.

‘Ok, L6,’ Nico cooed, after shining her torch on her ear tag. ‘Come on, girl.’

The cow stilled at the sound of her voice. The calf between her legs was dark brown, unmoving and coated in liquid.

Holding the torch between her teeth, Nico dragged the dead calf a slight distance away. The tips of its hooves were bright green, like buds that hadn’t bloomed.

‘I’m sorry about your baby,’ Nico said. ‘But you have to get up now.’

The cows’ ribcage rose and fell, her gaze steady. L6 planned on going nowhere. Another wind gust almost lifted Nico off her feet.

She took two steps back before running full pelt at the cow, screaming and clapping her hands. ‘Yahhh!’ she shouted, stopping inches from L6’s nose. ‘Hiyah!’

The cow gazed back at her, indifferent.

Propping her torch on the ground Nico took hold of the tail, curling it into a loop around her fist the way she’d seen Rick do it. Even when she twisted with all her might, L6 still didn’t move.

Taking one last wistful look into the darkness, Nico took a deep breath and crouched down. Then she placed her hands over the cow’s mouth and nose.

L6's eyes widened. The wet nose twitched and a scratchy tongue grazed Nico's palm. Still, she did not get up.

'For fucksakes,' Nico yelled. 'Do you *want* to die out here?'

At that moment, the sky cracked open. A sheet of water poured on top of them, the raindrops as fat as marbles. Lightning darted from the belly of a cloud and forked into the ground, briefly illuminating L6's cavernous body and her eyes blank with resignation.

'Fuck!' Nico shouted, running for the shed. The ground was slippery and she skidded, banging her shoulder into the door. With the torch in her teeth Nico grasped one of the hay bales, digging her fingers into the twine. The wind roared in disapproval as she dragged it along the ground towards L6 before returning to the shed for another. The ground was choked with hay and mud, and she struggled even harder to drag the second one. After moving a third bale, her legs trembled with tiredness. Nico returned to the shed to get a roll of blue tarp. As she unrolled it the tarp billowed, slapping her wetly in the face. She used her whole body to flatten it, and as she did so the rain increased, filling the plastic with water.

'Goddamnit!' she shrieked, trying and failing to hook the tarp over the bales.

The baby pressed harder into Nico's pelvis. Her belly pulsed and cramped, a living thing, separate from the rest of her.

You're a stubborn cow, Massy reminded her, and Nico felt a surge of determination.

Using her body as a shield she managed to unroll the tarp, finally hooking the corners under the bales. Returning to the shed she grabbed a handful of hay and a water bucket, pushing them into the mouth of the shelter.

'Ok,' she said, peering into the tent. 'Ok.'

The moment Nico relaxed, pain gripped her lower back. A sharp, hot pain, so much like lightning she thought for a second that she'd been struck. She dropped the torch and pressed her hand against her spine: the skin there burned white hot. Bending down to retrieve the torch she felt another pain and she cried out, her whole belly cramping. Panicked, Nico stood up, blinking water from her eyes. She walked with her hands outstretched, in what she hoped was the direction of the house. The walk seemed to go on forever, the wind and rain fighting her every step, and when her hand finally hit something she thought perhaps it was the porch railing, or the ute. But then she smelled the hay.

Nico fell with a cry on a pile of damp straw. She'd walked in a full circle, right back to the shed.

This is the point every explorer reaches, Nicky, her father told her. When decisions must be made and your fate is decided. PNR, they call it. The Point of No Return.

A light flashed across her closed eyelids. Disoriented, Nico slipped back into the past. Her mother's voice, barely a whisper. *It's ok, baby. I've got you.*

'What are you doing in here?'

Can you walk, honey? Where's your father?

Patient crows, black wings and black bodies, lined along the bonnet. Eyes fixed on her through the window. Waiting for her to die.

A sudden pain jolted her upright. Nico bent forward, pressing her fingers into the twin burning points in her lower back. The crows. They must have gotten her while she was still alive.

'What's going on? Are you hiding from me?'

The beam of Dave's torch swung away, pointing at L6's shelter. 'That's quite a fortress you built.'

The pain lifted for a moment, allowing Nico to speak. 'She lost her baby.'

Dave laughed, the sharp intake of breath making him wheeze, then cough. His shadow seemed to heighten, filling the doorway. Another pain gripped her and she leant forward, suppressing a moan. Three weeks. The doctor said she wasn't due for three more weeks. Where was Amy? Where was her friend now?

'I haven't even bought nappies yet,' Nico gasped.

Dave glanced over his shoulder. His face looked different in the torch light. Harder.

'Please,' she breathed. 'Can you help me up?'

Dave looked over his shoulder a second time. Who was he looking for?

Nico tried to stand up but her legs were too wobbly. She tipped backwards, falling spread-eagled into the hay.

'The funny thing about storms,' Dave said, finally. 'Is that just when you think they're over, that's when they do their worst.'

The torchlight crossed the shed wall, falling briefly on her open mouth. And then he left her, locking the shed door behind him.

December 1990

A more fiendish climate ... cannot be imagined. All nature drooping under its effects. No grass, no herb is springing much less in flower as it was this time last year, not one bird or animal for the thousands that were here before are here now, and the region is altogether the most dreary and fearful desert that can be imagined —
Charles Sturt, 1845.

A gecko slides along the ground, carving a line through the dust with its tail. My whole body tenses. I go completely still.

In one quick leap I am on top of it. Red dust billows, clouding my eyes so I can't see, only feel the rough skin with my fingers. I wrap both my hands around its dry belly. I raise the gecko into the air in triumph.

As the dust clears, my eyes focus on the twig in my hand. I drop it, my mouth falling open to let out a groan. I am too thirsty to cry.

I crawl back into the car and the vinyl burns the raw skin of my back. I try not to think about the relief of the gecko blood, the way it would have soothed my swollen throat. When I close my eyes I see Dad's skinny shoulders and the camera bumping against his chest like a second heartbeat. But instead of coming to find me he walks down the street, turning into the Champion Hotel. He sits heavily on a worn stool, sliding a coin into the slot machine. A beer glass slips from his hand to the floor and I fall to my knees, sucking the dregs from the carpet.

'Now you understand,' Dad says, turning to look at me. His face flashes red and gold in the pokie lights. 'Now you understand how you can love something and hate it at the exact same time.'

When I wake it is night-time and freezing. I sit up, shivering, and feel an itch on my nose. When I scratch it a sheaf of skin peels off, floating down into my lap. Looking at the skin makes me feel as if the Earth is tilting sharply downwards. I return to the refuge of sleep.

Nicky.

A kangaroo calls, a female. I know somehow that it is the white kangaroo.

Nicky.

It's strange to hear a kangaroo speak. Even stranger that she knows my name. The white kangaroo's voice becomes clear as she draws closer. I wonder what will happen when she arrives. I wonder if, in this dream, I will finally kill her.

'Nicky!'

I drag myself out of sleep. My heart starts to beat very fast, jumping around my chest cavity, trying to find a way out.

'Nicky. Are you in there?'

I sit up and see a torch light in the darkness. A perfect circle, dancing in the air. It gets closer and closer as I lean forward, wriggling across the backseat towards the open door.

'Dad!'

The light beams straight into my eyes, piercing them like the prongs of a fork. Blinded, I make a strange little cry, before two arms encircle me and I feel the warmth of a human body.

A drink bottle is pressed to my lips and I gasp, trying to swallow. My clumsy tongue is a brick, pushing the water out of my mouth and over my chest.

'It's ok, baby. I've got you.'

I draw back in horror when I hear her voice. The torch light illuminates bright green eyes and a halo of red hair.

‘Where’s your father?’ Mum whispers, as more water leaks down my throat and chest, surging through my body, making my blood run again.

I don’t know what she is asking me. I feel empty, the abandoned skin of a snake.

‘Can you walk?’

Mum reaches underneath my arms to help me out, and her grip on my sunburn stings. We stagger out into the black night and I see a rescue vehicle waiting. Two men in high-vis jackets walk towards us.

It’s only then that I realise Dad is really gone. As Massy leaps, wide-eyed from the back of the car, I slip through Mum’s grasp and fall to my knees.

Chapter 31

Outside, the storm raged. Runoff flooded acres of crops, soaking into the roots of paperbark trees and ripping them from the ground like matchsticks. There was no drainage or resistance to the force of the water. Rain splash stole the topsoil before rushing along unimpeded, taking everything else along with it. The land became a whirlpool until the storm finally stopped and the water stilled, then rose.

Nico laboured on in the darkness. As her back pain increased it drew her down, deeper and deeper into herself. Yet still the sound of water filled her ears, and having long since given up calling for help, she screamed now for release. Her cramps came every few minutes, and when she reached down between her legs she was horrified to feel a hot, damp bulging.

‘Fuck,’ she screamed. ‘Jesus!’

Another contraction took over, drowning out even the storm. Nico bore down, her whole world narrowed to the thing between her legs. When the contraction passed she tried to think of her beautiful baby. Instead she pictured L6’s bloody calf, emerging from between her own legs.

As the beginnings of dawn crept into the shed Nico moaned regularly, a low, robotic sound like an engine turning over. Squatting with her hands propped behind her, she thought only in pictures: Osso buco, gritty chops and rib eye, all mashed together in a bloodied bag. Dave crouched over her, his teeth gritted and his pink cock gleaming with lubricant. Road kill and roo entrails, bubbling dark purple in the sun. Viscous substances, vulnerable bodies torn to shreds: from the inside-out or the outside-in. Nico started to scream as her own body opened. Like a rabbit hole, she fell and she

fell. She reached down as the hole opened as wide as it could go, and a baby dropped into her hands.

She was nothing like Nico had imagined. Small and strange and sultana-wrinkled, an unnatural, waxen blue. She opened her mouth and wailed in disgust at what her mother had done. Her mouth was a damp, wet hole. Nico removed her shirt, wrapping it around the tiny body. The place between her legs contracted still, but it was a good pain. An ending.

‘Hello,’ Nico said, looking down at her daughter.

Here she is.

Chapter 32

Rick removed his hat in the doorway. Tufts of his fine, light hair danced in the breeze.

‘Holy hell,’ his eyes darted away from Nico, in bloodied bra and jeans, to focus on the baby. ‘I knew you loved those cows but this is taking it a bit too far.’

Nico blinked. ‘Dave locked me in here.’

It sounded absurd in the light of day. Was Rick real? Was the baby? Holding her sleeping daughter in her arms she felt anchored, inflated with power. At the same time, her body felt so weak that a dandelion could knock her over.

‘Is it alright?’

‘*She*. I think so.’

‘Are you alright? Do I need to call another bloody ambulance?’

‘*Another* ambulance?’

‘He’s not in a good way. But you knew that.’

Nico tightened her grip on the baby, feeling a strange kind of relief.

Rick took in the bloodied hay, the placenta lying on the straw with the umbilical cord still attached. He patted the pockets of his shorts, pulling out the small army knife attached to his key ring.

‘I’ll do it.’

She reached for the knife and Rick averted his eyes. The baby slept on as Nico laid her on her lap, sawing through the gristle that connected them.

When she stood up her legs trembled, then steadied. The sun felt good on her bare skin. As they passed the tent she peered in to see L6, munching on a mouthful of hay.

‘You did that?’ Rick pointed at the shelter. He whistled when she nodded.

‘When is he coming home?’

Rick shrugged. ‘Sometimes it’s a few days, sometimes a few weeks. But this was the worst I’ve ever seen him.’

‘He has lung cancer,’ Nico said. ‘Do you know that?’

‘He doesn’t tell me anything.’

‘But you know what he did.’

‘Love,’ Rick sighed, helping her up the porch steps. ‘I reckon you got bigger things to worry about right now.’

The house looked different, like a childhood home she was returning to as an adult. Nico headed straight for the kitchen, filling a glass of water one-handed and gulping it down before filling it up again. A drop of water fell on the baby’s head, anointing her, but she didn’t wake.

‘You got a cradle?’ Rick said, behind her.

Nico pulled a blanket from the couch, carefully wrapping the baby in its centre and placing her on the rug.

‘You got bottles?’ he stood uncertainly in the doorway. ‘Baby clothes? Anything?’

Nico laughed, pausing outside the bedroom door. She looked back at the trail of blood she’d dripped along the floor, and for some reason, this made her laugh harder. She bent at the knees, feeling a crazed lightness, and it seemed as if her whole body was about to float upwards as she laughed and laughed and the baby slept and Rick slowly backed away from them.

The days passed in a blur of feeding. Nico's world had shrunk down to the size of a rosebud mouth. At night, Alba became more animal than baby: clawing arms, sharp nails, bobbing head. She writhed against Nico's shoulder, her tearless eyes squeezed shut, and when she finally slept deep enough to be laid down on the bed Nico stood looking down at her with a mixture of awe and desperation.

In the wake of the storm the nights had been quiet and cool. She went out on the porch for some fresh air and the stars winked down at her, as if to say, *who, us?* Out of respect for the stillness, Nico also moved quietly. She sat in a porch chair, gazing out into the blackness. The shed was just visible, its floor forever stained with her blood. Rick locked it tight after they spotted a flock of crows darting in and out, pecking at her discarded placenta. L6 was out there too, quiet inside her shelter. Rick had been lifting her with the tractor several times each day, a little longer each time. Watching from the window, Nico's heart expanded at the sight of L6's little hooves dangling in air. She noticed the slowness with which Rick lifted the harness, his patience and care as he moved her.

What scared Nico more than the sleepless nights and Alba's constant wailing was the arrival of Dave's parents. Rick and Amy had started already looking for work; they were so certain the place would be sold. Amy had moved back in with her mum. She visited a few times but it was clear that she thought Nico should go home, back to her mother and sister. When Nico tried to imagine going home her mind stilled. A show reel played of thumping car stereos and sunburned toddlers, the pounding of the waves and the shriek of hungry gulls. She couldn't go back, being alone out here made her strong. In Champion, the aloneness was a different kind. The kind that aged you, made time slip through your fingers unnoticed.

‘Alba, meet L6,’ Nico said, pointing over the fence. L6 batted her long lashes. Alba cooed, the sun so bright she kept her eyes squeezed shut.

‘Over there is Rick’s house, and that’s Amy’s house,’ Nico continued, the drawn curtains of Amy’s empty donga giving her a pang of sadness. ‘Over there is the shed where you decided to be born. And here’s our ride to the bus station,’ she added, as Rick’s truck came up the driveway.

Alba stirred as her mother tensed, caught between resignation and panic. Maybe she could still go into town and beg for work. She’d learned some good skills and Rick would give her a reference. *Maybe she could stay with Old Tom.* She shuddered, remembering the backpacker.

The dust, still loose from the heavy rain, rose in great plumes behind the truck. As Nico watched, she realised there were two dust clouds. Another, smaller car was following Rick’s.

She froze, fighting the impulse to run and hide. Instead, she anchored herself at the porch railing, waiting for the guests to arrive. Rather than the expensive four wheel drive she’d been expecting, Dave’s parents drove a small, silver Commodore.

Rick parked the truck. He gave her a small nod before walking over to his donga.

‘No worries mate,’ she muttered. ‘Thanks for the support.’

The Commodore pulled up and the doors opened. As recognition dawned, she staggered backwards.

Her mother’s hair had dulled to a softer, earthier red. The colour of the land that Nico had learned how to love.

Massy laughed, sunlight glinting from her long, sparkly earrings.

‘Found ya.’

Chapter 33

The calf writhed in the chokey, his hind legs bucking, as Nico widened the handle of the elastrator. She quickly hooked the rubber band around the calf's testicles and up the scrotum, before letting go of the band. The calf bellowed in outrage, his pupils shrunken in his wide, startled eyes.

'Sorry buddy,' she said, tapping him on the hindquarters as Rick opened up the choke to let him out.

'You see how much she enjoys this?' Rick called, over the fence. 'She'd hack em off with a sharp blade if we let her.'

'If only we had a similar process for human males,' their mother called back.

Massy laughed, jiggling Alba up and down.

Once the work was done the women strolled back to the house and sat down on the veranda. The sky was high and blue, and at the top of it white clouds with curled ends drifted like music notes.

Nico finished feeding Alba and handed her back to Massy, who patted and bounced her off to a quick and easy sleep.

'You're both naturals,' their mother said, and Nico and Massy exchanged an awkward smile.

'I used to tell you girls stories, to get you off to sleep.'

'That was Dad,' Massy said quickly, shooting a look at Nico.

'You remember Dad's stories because you were older,' their mother said. 'But until you were about two it was me filling your heads with princess and fairy nonsense.'

‘I remember a few from Mum,’ Nico smiled, and it was only as she said the words that she realised they were true. She remembered the smell of her mother’s musk perfume, her red fingernail pointing to a page of the picture book. When Nico was afraid of the dark it was her father who led her out into it to prove that she was brave. But it was her mother who sat up with her afterwards, reading her fairy tales until she went back to sleep. The sudden memory made Nico feel slightly sick, as if she had been looking down too long in the backseat of a car while the road rushed forward without her. What of all the other memories she had forgotten? What if her very character was built on a tower of memories that would eventually collapse?

They’d spent a week together but still, every morning when her mother emerged from the bedroom, hair brushed straight and wearing no make-up, Nico had to look at her twice. Gone were the dark nails and elaborate make up, the long and fiery red curls. Nico was not the only one who had changed.

‘What are you going to do when they find new owners for this place?’ Massy asked, as Rick climbed up into the forklift, giving them a wave.

Massy wasn’t just asking for her own welfare. Her sister seemed to be enjoying her holiday from Darren a little too much.

‘Let’s just take it day by day,’ their mother said quickly.

Alba woke and started grizzling so Massy handed her back. Nico cradled her in her arms, and instead of gazing up at her face Alba turned in the direction of the sky.

‘Eyes for the heavens already,’ their mother said. ‘Just like her Grandfather.’

They smiled and looked out at the sunset. The sun’s rays alighted on their upturned faces, holding them all for a moment in its warmth.

Epilogue

The house is quiet while Alba sleeps.

Outside, the wind passes, inspecting everything with care. It sifts through every leaf of grass and every head of barley. It whips through paperbark branches, and then rushes between the twitching ears of a cow. It passes cold fingers over everything, and once it ensures that all is in order it moves along to the next property, the next town.

Once the wind has gone the cows call out to each other. They like to check in too, announcing where they are and where they might be headed. Their bellows are low and comforting, a reassurance that all is as it should be. Alba sleeps to the comfort of cows, ordering her natural world.

Amy and Rick have a new apprentice. The three of them roam over every inch of the paddocks, their tractors marking the passage of time and the change of the seasons. Not a leaf of weed can arise without them noticing. Not a centimetre of soil can move without replacement.

In the main house, Nico is also taking measure. Mapping the exact length of Alba's fingers and the colour of her eyelids and cheeks. Nico observes how the present is shaped by the past, and how this isn't necessarily a bad thing. A new well of strength sits in the centre of her ribs, and she wonders if it was her hardship that grew it.

Nico's mother and sister are taking measure, too. They sip from their teacups and consider this new baby, how she's knitting them all together. They are daughters and mothers, at the same time. They are beginning to understand each other.

A Cumulonimbus cloud drifts past the window, catching Nico's eye with its bulk. As Nico kisses Alba and lifts her to her shoulder, the cloud drifts away. It has already shifted into a different shape, its transformation continuing on, unwitnessed.

The Road to Nowhere

Myths of Homeland and Expulsion in Australian Road Stories

Volume Two: The Exegesis

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Table of Contents

Volume Two: “The Road to Nowhere: Myths of Homeland and Expulsion in Australian Road Stories.”

Table of Contents	iii
Abstract	iv
Declaration of Originality	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	24
Chapter 2	37
Chapter 3	50
Chapter 4	64
Conclusion	78
Works Cited	83
Bibliography.....	90

Abstract

Through the lens of Richard Slotkin's theory of the mythogenesis of the frontier, the exegetical component of the thesis proposes that the circular process of analysis and regeneration of the violent mythology of the frontier in both Australian and American literature has dominated the road writing genre. The triumphant frontier narrative of America and the transcendent failure frontier narrative of Australia repeat in contemporary road writing. Road stories featuring women and characters from positions of cultural, ethnic, class, religious and sexual difference offer one possibility for the disruption of this process. Australian road stories *Hiam* by Eva Sallis, *All the Birds, Singing* by Evie Wyld and *Floundering* by Romy Ash offer a reimagining of road stories beyond the frontier legacies of racial, sexual and class oppression. Ross Gibson's theory of badlands in Australia, which are narratives set in natural locations which attract more atrocities to occur, informs my approach to the reading of these texts.

Declaration of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Elizabeth Allan

Introduction

In both popular culture and academic debate, the road story is understood as a quintessentially American narrative form. Road stories from the United States, in both film and literature, have been widely theorised and politicised since the release of Jack Kerouac's seminal publication *On the Road* in 1957. The American road story tradition includes iconic films such as *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) alongside novels such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Australia has a rich and varied road story tradition of its own, with films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *The Rover* (2014) alongside novels such as *Gone* by Jennifer Mills and *Road Story* by Julienne Van Loon.

As well as a rich road writing tradition, America and Australia share disparate topography that varies from desert plains to mountain ranges, Arcadian pastures to tropical rainforests. These vast spaces and long stretches of highway provide immense opportunity for road story narratives and the diversity of the landscape is reflected in the genre. In addition to film and fiction road writing can be found in memoir, travel writing, history and autobiography: often it is a hybrid of these genres. While the American road story genre has been studied extensively by scholars seeking to catalogue road story texts and create a paradigm for identifying its traditions and themes, this exegesis will instead focus on the particular theme of violence in Australian road stories. Characters in Australian road stories frequently experience violence, for example the brutal murder in crime movie *Mystery Road* (2013) and the kidnapping and violent destruction in the *Mad Max* film series (1979-2015). Themes of sexual and physical violence, corporeal

punishment, death and suffering are prevalent in the road story genre, particularly in Australian horror films such as *Wolf Creek* (2005) and *Road Train* (2010).

This exegesis will propose that the repetition of the violent mythology of the Australian frontier is one possible explanation for the theme of violence in the Australian road story genre. America and Australia share colonial origins in terms of frontier expansion and the displacement of Indigenous people, however, the mythologies of the two frontiers exhibit notable cartographic differences. Traditionally, American frontier narratives have often been characterised by the triumphant discovery of rich and fertile land as the explorers journeyed west. The Australian frontier moved in multiple directions, but often towards a desert centre described by Charles Sturt as “altogether the most dreary and fearful desert that can be imagined” (304). Speaking back to the American example, I will identify how a mythology of (un)settlement emerges in relation to the theme of violence in Australian road story narratives. Drawing on Richard Slotkin’s theory of the mythogenesis of the frontier, I will propose that the circular process of analysis and regeneration of the violent mythology of the frontier in Australian literature has been recycled throughout the road writing genre. As a response, I argue that female and non-binary protagonists, and characters from positions of cultural, ethnic, class, religious and sexual difference, offer one possibility for the disruption of this cycle. The paradox of this approach is that by engaging with the mythology of frontier violence, I also run the risk of recycling cultural archetypes and tropes. However, I will argue that the foregrounding of voices outside the dominant patriarchal centre allows for a revision of this mythology, by acknowledging the past and signalling a new way forward that questions, challenges and rejects the powerful structures of traditional gender, class, cultural and social difference. While this Australian road story exegesis must by necessity take into account American road texts and analysis by virtue of the country’s dominance of the canon, this study will focus

primarily on Australian texts with the use of American texts as points of comparison and difference. In addition to scholarship on the road story genre and the spatial history and narratives of the Australian road, this exegesis also draws on scholarship about the Australian frontier. Theorists such as Ann Curthoys, Amanda Nettelbeck, Deborah Bird Rose and Richard Davis, Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster have problematised the notion of the frontier in Australia by foregrounding the silenced violent history of clashes between the colonial settlers and the Indigenous population. This exegesis will draw upon this work and the theory of key American frontier theorist Richard Slotkin to explore the theme of violence in Australian road stories in connection with frontier mythology.

Defining the Genre

Rowland Sherrill states in the introduction to *Road Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque* that American road stories are so varied in their genre specifications and content that “any presiding rubric or containing pattern or common denomination for them might seem at first blush quite improbable” (2). This exegesis proceeds against a considerable background of work that has already sought to define the slippery boundaries of the road story genre since the publication of Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The complexity of the material has created challenges for scholars attempting to define the genre, and any exploration of Australian road stories must recognise previous studies in order to identify where this study departs from its predecessors. In comparison to the American canon, Australian road story scholarship is a relatively newer field. Australian road films such as *The Back of Beyond* (1954), the *Mad Max* series (1979-2015), *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and *Mystery Road* (2013) have been analysed in relation to themes of auto-mobility, sexuality, masculinity and race in Australian cinema. Paul Carter and Stephen Muecke have analysed the Australian road as a key site of spatial

history and cultural and historical significance while Delia Falconer has also written extensively on the central themes and texts of the Australian road story genre.

However, in order to set the parameters for the definition of a road story which will be applied to this exegesis, I must turn to American road story scholarship. In *Romance of the Road: the Literature of the American Highway*, Ronald Primeau defines the road narrative as “fiction and nonfiction books by Americans who travel by car throughout the country either on a quest or simply to get away” (1). Primeau privileges fiction in his study, in contrast to the quotidian dominance of film studies in the scholarship of road texts. In her study of American women’s road narratives, Alexandra Ganser is reluctant to define the genre, stating that “perhaps the only common diegetic characteristic shared by all road novels is that the road is the major setting which informs the narrative plot” (40). In light of the hybrid nature of the genre, any definition must necessarily be flexible. The scope of this exegesis is limited to Australian and American mid-century texts that were written after the publication of Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 1957. The term ‘road story’ in this exegesis refers to Ganser’s definition with the additional caveat that the character in the story must also experience an internal journey which provides commentary on the collective identity. This additional framing allows the exegesis to focus on texts which align with the major themes of the creative work, those being class, gender and race in contemporary Australia.

I selected the three central texts discussed in this exegesis according to the preceding definition. *Hiam* by Eva Sallis is the story of grieving Jordanian Muslim woman Hiam’s drive through the central Australian desert in her deceased husband’s taxi, and her arrival in the northern tropics symbolises her empowerment and the affirmation of her Islamic faith. *Hiam* is a significant Australian road story text because it illuminates racial

intolerance in Australia while also creating a positive representation of Islamic faith and migrant identity. The second text, *All the Birds, Singing* by Evie Wyld details the female protagonist Jake's traumatic past and her escape from first sex work and imprisonment to farm work and freedom. *All the Birds, Singing* is a significant Australian road story text because of its treatment of gender binaries and its illumination of the recurrence of frontier tropes such as pastoral masculinity, constructions of gender and the bush, and archetypes of nationhood. Although the majority of the plot in *All the Birds, Singing* occurs on a British island, the sections which do occur on the Australian road are pivotal to the central plot and themes, in keeping with the Ganser definition. The final central text is *Floundering* by Romy Ash, a road story about the reunion between young single mother protagonist Loretta and her two young sons. *Floundering* is a significant Australian road story text because it illuminates class and gender disparity in Australia by portraying the struggles and eventual failure of Loretta in her attempts to be a responsible parent despite social and economic disadvantage.

I selected the three key texts because the internal and physical journeys of the characters illuminate contemporary concerns of race, gender and class in Australia: the central themes of my own creative work, *Belly of the Beast*. The three women protagonists in the novels all exhibit a desire to escape: Hiam from grief, racial intolerance and bigotry, Jake from her abusive past and sexual captivity, and Loretta from the constraints of poverty and single parenthood. The protagonist Nico in *Belly of the Beast* similarly desires escape but her motivations are less clear at the beginning, becoming more concrete as the novel progresses. The central concerns of race, gender and class in the three core novels are explored in the exegesis in the context of decentred subject positions: characters from the margins. It is through the journeys of these subjects that the circular process of analysis

and regeneration of violent frontier mythology can be renegotiated, and the status quo can be challenged.

Kerouac and the Masculine Road Story Tradition

Prior to the release of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac in 1957, the road story was predominantly a journey or quest narrative, lacking defined themes. The release and subsequent popularity of *On the Road* coincided with the postwar, Beat Generation movement and the rise of the mass-manufacturing of cars and the modern highway system connecting towns and cities. Following the success of the novel, generations of youth in America were inspired to travel, causing the road narrative to soar in popularity. As Katie Mills argues in *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving through Film, Fiction and Television*, contemporary auto-mobility transformed the road into a symbol of rebellion with “the democratization of mobility that characterized the postwar years” (2). Following Kerouac’s novel, new narratives of diversity and difference enabled rebellious protagonists to question social hierarchies and prewar class systems. So-called ‘transcendentalist’ road novels such as *Blue Highways* by William Least Heat Moon and Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* continued the tradition of narratives such as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, in which men left the domestic home to ‘discover’ America, and in doing so explore their own spiritual and cultural identities. Films such as *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) and *Vanishing Point* (1971) used the road story genre to question cultural norms. Protagonists ‘rebelled’ against society’s expectations with symbolic escape, not only in the form of mobility but also through the use of drugs and alcohol, sex, violence and hedonism.

Despite the rebellious nature of post-Kerouac road stories, the protagonists were overwhelmingly male, white and heterosexual, creating a paradox whereby the structures they rebelled against were already geared overwhelmingly in their favour. ‘The Journey’ in the West has a long history as a masculine experience, so much so that historian Eric J. Leed labels male journeying as “spermatoc” travel (114). In contrast, women have traditionally represented that which is left behind – the feminine home: “Whatever particular women may be doing in their everyday lives, the idea of woman as ‘earth, shelter, enclosure,’ as ‘home,’ persists, anchoring femininity, weighing it down, fixing it as a compass point” (Smith x). While the postwar accessibility of automobiles to the masses was significant in increasing the mobility of women, the road story remained a traditionally masculine domain. The accessibility of cars and expanding social mobility for Western women created the opportunity for increased female voices in the genre, but these voices were not afforded the same audience, recognition and acclaim. A second paradox is that the protagonists used the same technologies produced by the Industrial Revolution in order to rebel against it. The Industrial Revolution resulted in mass-produced, affordable vehicles and multi-lane highways, what Smith calls the “technologies of motion” (xi). This paradox is summarised by David Laderman as “the dialectical wrestling match at the heart of the genre, between the dominant cultural ideology and rebellion against that ideology” (55). This ‘wrestling match’ will be explored further in this exegesis, specifically as a site for the potential disruption of the mythogenesis of frontier mythology and the continued oppression of women and ethnic, cultural, sexual, class and religious minorities.

End of the Road: The Proliferation of Violence in Australian and American Road Stories

As well as masculine rebellion, violence is a prevalent theme in road stories. American novels such as *Americana* by Don DeLillo and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson portray the road as a place of excess and excitement, violence being a necessary product of this excess. *Americana* ends with a lengthy and debased group sex scene, and *Fear and Loathing* is littered with allusions to the protagonist's random violent impulses. Risky behaviour is often rewarded, and when it does end in tragedy, such as in *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Easy Rider* (1969), the protagonists are celebrated as heroes rather than victims. This theme of sacrifice is a popular one in American road stories, in which the rebel or a loner is punished for living outside social norms. Protagonists Thelma and Louise, in exposing sexism and misogyny in contemporary society, must choose to either be punished for their rebellion or die as heroes. As Ireland states, "The outsiders and antiheroes of the road are frequently punished for their behaviour by a society that perhaps does not deserve them" (509).

Australian road writing shares similar themes of violence, punishment and rebellion. Highways in the nation's fiction have frequently been imagined as sites of terror, and of sudden and unexplained acts of savagery. In David Malouf's short story "Lone Pine", an elderly couple caravanning across the outback is brutally executed by the side of the highway. In Tara June Winch's novel *Swallow the Air*, the protagonist May undertakes an arduous road journey to escape a history of witnessing violence committed against Indigenous women by white men. The presence of haunting – meaning past violent acts on the road that revisit travellers in the present – is another prevalent theme. In Robert Drewe's short story "The Bodysurfers", the protagonist takes his family on a weekend getaway and dreams of a violent double murder that happened nearby just weeks before. In *Gone* by Jennifer Mills, a man hitchhikes after his recent release from prison, but instead of enjoying his freedom, finds himself trapped in a cycle of revisiting past trauma.

Unlike in the American tradition, Australian road story protagonists are rarely given the opportunity to play hero. There is often a sense of futility and hopelessness to their journeys, as in Max's grief-stricken vengeance after the loss of his wife and child in *Mad Max* (1979) or Rex's drive to Darwin for euthanasia after a terminal cancer diagnosis in *Last Cab to Darwin* (2015). While the theme of violence is shared by the two countries' literature, the perceptions of this violence and its outcomes are markedly different. An analysis of the two countries' mythogenesis of the frontier – the recurrence of ideas, symbols, narratives and metaphors as a result of interactions between natives and settlers – offers one explanation for the proliferation of violence across both countries' literature.

Richard Slotkin's Theory of Mythogenesis

This exegesis will employ Richard Slotkin's mythogenesis theory as a lens through which to investigate the recurring theme of violence in Australian road stories. In the first book of his trilogy on the mythology of the American West, *Regeneration through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860*, Richard Slotkin traces the contemporary attitudes and traditions shaping American culture back to the anxieties of European settlers during colonisation. Slotkin argues that the mythogenesis of the American frontier is a continuous process of legitimising cultural archetypes that were formed during the colonisation of the country, and the perception of American land as an opportunity to find fortune through violent possession caused the myth of regeneration through violence to become "the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5). The term "mythogenesis", generally used to describe the creation of myths, is employed in Slotkin's work as a paradigm through which to explain how frontier mythology has been created, applied and maintained to influence the national character. The frontier is a socially constructed cultural symbol, and Slotkin theorises that the "cultural leadership

recalls and deploys mythologised ‘memories’ of the past as precedents for understanding and responding to contemporary crises” (1). Applied to the regeneration of frontier violence, Slotkin uses mythogenesis to explain how trauma can lead to myth repetition: “Over time, through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalised and abstracted, until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, ‘icons’, ‘keywords’, or historical clichés” (1). Examples of these frontier symbols include the trope of the native savage, and the untamed wilderness awaiting cultivation and ‘taming’. Slotkin theorises that in connection with the perception of American land as an opportunity to find fortune through violent possession there was also a refusal to acknowledge Indigenous land ownership. European settlers, in their pursuit of wealth and land ownership, maintained a belief in their entitlement to land, regardless of the Indigenous presence. This belief in their entitlement and superiority to the native culture enabled the justification of the use of violence to remove Indigenous populations from desired land and resources, and the regeneration of this myth continues in the contemporary hostility between opposing cultures.

Slotkin’s mythogenesis theory can be similarly applied to the violent possession of Australian occupied land, and I will explore in this exegesis the similarities between Australian and American frontier mythogenesis through an analysis of road story texts. I will also explore the points where these myths differ: namely, through a cartographic metaphor. The mythogenesis of the frontier is a cyclical production that contradicts the sequential view of the frontier as a linear event that has been left behind in history. On the contrary, the violence of the frontier repeats, in myth, memory and the cultural narratives imagined onto the landscape. This notion of the circularity of frontier mythogenesis corresponds particularly to the cyclical, non-linear and often frustrated

movement of the Australian frontier, as opposed to the more straightforward westward movement of the American frontier.

While the study of myth is a complex and expansive field of scholarship, Slotkin's theory is particularly useful in its application of myth theory to the socially and culturally constructed symbols of the American frontier. Slotkin's study is particularly translatable to the Australian frontier because of his focus on the cyclical nature of frontier mythology, and his theory that the repetition of culturally produced symbols creates opportunity for narratives of violence to repeat in contemporary narratives. This exegesis will apply Slotkin's theory of the cyclical nature of frontier violence to the three road novels under analysis: *Hiam*, *All the Birds, Singing*, and *Floundering*. The Australian frontier myths of homeland, exile and expulsion function in *Hiam* as symbols of the frontier legacy of white oppression of racial minorities in contemporary Australian society. These myths are dissolved through the self-immolation and subsequent religious affirmation of protagonist Hiam. In *All the Birds, Singing*, the repetition of Australian archetypes of nationhood is explored in relation to rural masculinity and frontier tropes such as 'the good bloke' and 'the Aussie battler'. The protagonist Jake's corporeal body in *All the Birds, Singing* functions as a symbolic badland, a site of gender stereotyping and 'othering' which is a legacy of the violence of the Australian frontier. *Floundering* is analysed according to the myth of frontier individualism, which is destabilised by the single mother who fails in her quest and subverts the frontier myth of success and prosperity through violence and possession. Finally, the creative work, "Belly of the Beast," continues the work of the three central texts, by both acknowledging Australian frontier myth artefacts and their influence by the repetition and assimilation of these myths into national culture, and also deviating from this process in the staging of decentred positions within these texts.

This exegesis is concerned with metaphorical violence and its literary representations, most significantly the impact of their ongoing cultural influence. My aim in using the lens of mythogenesis is not to produce a detailed comparison of the two countries' historical narratives, but to employ frontier mythology as one method with which to interpret road story texts and themes. According to Slotkin, "a people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them" (4), and contemporary road stories are ideal sites from which to acknowledge the mythological traditions that inform culture and history. But in the act of engaging with frontier myths, I am also engaging with notions of homeland and expulsion. Frontier myths are cultural symbols: narratives that exist in order to construct an agreeable national history. These narratives of 'taming the wilderness' cannot exist without the displacement of local populations. Both Australian and American pioneer ideology entailed a belief that native 'savages' should give way to the rightness of Christianity and industrialised civilisation. This pioneer mythology was founded on a belief in their entitlement to 'uncultivated' land and their superiority over the native occupants. As John Escobedo asserts, "one man's quest to settle the wild frontier represents another man's displacement and subsequent subjugation" (177). In the process of the settlement of the colonised lands, the critical importance of homeland for the original inhabitants, and their inevitable *unsettlement*, is forgotten. Yet this violent unsettlement is not truly forgotten: it repeats, in literature, culture, and local knowledge. The unresolved violence of the frontier manifests in both cultural archetypes and the contemporary lived experience of travellers.

Frontier Mythologies: American 'Manifest Destiny' and the Great Australian Silence

Australian roads have a long history as places where travellers come to violent ends. The infamous abduction and murder of British tourist Peter Falconio in 2001 by Bradley John Murdoch (Gans 415) occurred near Barrow Creek, the location where two telegraph station employees were murdered in 1874 as retribution for the settlers' repeated abduction of local Indigenous women (Koch 11). The violent killing and burial of seven backpackers in the Belanglo State Forest by Ivan Milat (Hess and Waller 118) occurred along the Hume Highway, a route that crosses through numerous regions of settler conflict such as Benalla, where eight men were killed in retribution for the massacre of Indigenous people at Ovens River in 1838 (Bassett 18). In his book *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, Ross Gibson explores the history of colonialism in Queensland in relation to the Bruce Highway (known as the Horror Stretch) to argue that unresolved colonial trauma leads to further acts of violence occurring (63). Despite many atrocities going unrecorded and Indigenous people being almost totally excluded from Australian historical records until the 1960s, local knowledge survived. Gibson claims that awareness of these stories is activated when people encounter certain landmarks and sites, certain "badlands" that are narratives set in natural locations that can attract more atrocities to occur (15). The events of the past "leave marks in documents, in bodies, in communities and places, in buildings, streets and landscapes" (179). The displacement and murder of Indigenous people continues to haunt contemporary Australian landscape and memory.

Gibson's exploration of colonial trauma begins with the 'settlement' of Australia, and the violent clashes between settlers and Indigenous people. Going back even further, Australian settler foundational history begins with the convict's expulsion from the British motherland to a newly 'discovered' country. Ann Curthoys argues that history books often avoided comment on the criminal histories of the expelled convicts, instead

portraying them as victims cast out from the Promised Land in order to bravely conquer a hostile place: “Foundational in white Australian understandings of their own past are stories of the convicts, expelled from their homeland and motherland, people who, in the old saying originating with an English journalist, ‘left their country for their country’s good’” (5). The settler frontier myth idealised Europe as the homeland, and the pioneers and settlers as heroes creating a new homeland in an alien landscape. The Australian frontier is one founded on silence and secrecy: the silence of a war between settlers and Indigenous people that went undeclared and undocumented. In his 1968 Boyer Lecture, Professor W.E.H. Stanner coined the phrase ‘The Great Australian Silence’ to define this phenomenon, revealing that what was often passed off as inattention was the symptom of a greater structural problem: “What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale” (25).

The shame and secrecy surrounding the history of the Australian frontier is markedly different from the portrayal of the American frontier. The foundational American myth is one of destiny and escape from the motherland in pursuit of a more prosperous life, and this desire for prosperity was fulfilled in a landscape with abundant agricultural potential and expanses of fresh water. American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny and the pioneer belief in the Promised Land are frontier myths that continue to influence national literature. Manifest Destiny is a term coined to express the inevitability of Americans taking over the West, bringing ideals of democracy and liberty and ‘improving’ the living conditions of the Mexican population. The term is also connected to the Christian belief that Americans were selected to bring their ideals to the West by providence. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the belief in the righteousness of the pioneers created a nostalgia in national narratives for a frontier victory and bravery that endures in road stories to this

day. Route 66, the famous American highway, is celebrated as a site of great potential and adventure. Route 66 has been immortalised in songs, television shows and canonical literature such as *On the Road* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. A representation of celebratory optimism for the beat generation, Route 66 remains a symbol of national nostalgia despite it having been superseded by the larger highways. Brian Ireland connects road journeys with "the search for the elusive 'American Dream'" (474), and theorises that Americans are a restless people and the road genre is "a microcosm of America itself" (474). Restlessness and the pursuit of a better life are universal human traits that can be found in any nation's literature; the optimism with which road journeys are undertaken, however, is more prevalent in American road stories. Slotkin's mythogenesis theory offers one explanation for these themes.

'Hideous Blank': The Legacy of Settler Landscape Perceptions in Contemporary Culture

Like the United States, the Australian landscape features wide open spaces and long stretches of highway carrying unique histories and myths, such as the Birdsville Track. The Birdsville Track is a cattle walk between Birdsville and Marree that was immortalised in the documentary *The Back of Beyond* (1954) and is now a popular tourist destination. Another example is the Canning Stock Route, a watering route for cattle across the Western Australian desert that was established in 1906. The history of the Canning Stock Route was explored from an Aboriginal perspective in a multi-platform art exhibition, *Yiwarra Kuju: the Canning Stock Route Project*, from 2010 to 2013. The road in Australia has been a catalyst for important political and social change, such as the 1965 Freedom Ride advocating for Indigenous rights, and *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin, a novel documenting a road trip to research the dreaming and songs of Indigenous people that

sparked a nationwide debate about Indigenous culture and land rights. Brian Ireland theorises that America has commanded the road story genre because no other country has the same vast amount of 'empty' land and great open spaces combined with a westward movement to the frontier (484). The Australian frontier, rather than unfolding in a linear, westward progression, was characterised by a cyclical, repetitive movement, and the explorer's progress was often thwarted by difficult terrain and lack of water sources. Rather than one direct movement, the Australian frontier moved in multiple directions, often inwards but also east to west and west to east, depending on settlement locations. Because of obstructions, failures and delays, the Australian frontier unfolded over decades, unlike the single decade that characterised the American frontier. In American mythology, the West was 'conquered and won'. As a result, the American road story is characterised by celebration and triumph. The Australian frontier, on the other hand, is characterised by frustration and the knowledge that success and settlement are not always guaranteed.

The myth of the landscape as reward in America versus the myth of the landscape as a challenge which must be overcome in Australia persists in contemporary narratives. The colonial settlers who brought with them conventional expectations of a European landscape often recorded the so-called 'horrors' of the Australian landscape and the 'hideous blank' of the desert. As well as their fears of thirst and death, the central Australian desert also symbolised the new settlers' inner anxiety at being 'off the map' and exiled from cultural Europe. In contrast to what British settlers viewed as a parched and empty centre, pioneers seeking the Western frontier in America were rewarded with green and varied vistas, as well as an enormous central river system. American road stories reflect the frontier tradition of taking possession of the landscape in a linear and triumphant expedition, hence reaching the endpoint of the road story. Australian

narratives reflect a more cyclical expedition to a frontier that was never quite ‘won’. Journeys often stop and start, reflecting moments of self-doubt and defeat. One of the most enduring myths of the Australian frontier is the death of Robert Burke and William Wills on their ill-fated expedition to the centre, and the great ideological significance attached to the men has only increased through multiple representations over time. As Roslynn Haynes observes, initial written impressions made by the pioneers remained influential due to the isolation of central Australian desert areas (83). By extension, they also became “extraordinarily influential in the literary and artistic representation of the central desert, and thus over the subsequent direction of Australian history” (83). It is through the repeated tellings of pioneer myths that Australian settler history is determined.

End of the Road: Post-Apocalyptic Road Stories

The dystopian road narrative is one subgenre in which American and Australian road story themes align. The dystopian road text is a narrative set in a future in which Western democracy has ceased to function and the world has become hostile to human survival. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel share similar themes of environmentalism and the critique of Western capitalism and industrialisation. The journeys are violent, often ending without resolution, yet at the same time offering hope for regeneration and survival. In *The Road*, the young protagonist finds a new, protective couple to travel with after his father dies. At the end of the 2014 film *The Rover*, the man carefully buries his beloved dog, showing that even in the midst of the most inhumane circumstances, humanity can survive. The dystopian subgenre is a counterpoint to the central exploration of the differences between Australian and American road stories, demonstrating instances where social and political themes align.

In his study “Errand into the Wilderness: The Cursed Earth as Apocalyptic Road Narrative”, Brian Ireland suggests that positioning a narrative in a devastated landscape has specific origins in the American frontier experience: “The apocalypse – whether it is nuclear, biological or environmental in nature – denudes the landscape of people and creates an Arcadian landscape similar to that facing America’s original European settlers” (503). ‘Purging’ the land of human life can be interpreted as an attempt to recreate the original frontier experience for colonial invaders. This devastation of land is replicated in Australian films, the *Mad Max* series (1979-2015) being an example. The Australian landscape in these films is a void of suffering and desert heat, and within this extreme setting, characters are given opportunities for salvation. These dystopian texts will be analysed in the exegesis through Slotkin’s lens of mythogenesis, to determine whether the act of ‘purging’ the landscape does indeed symbolise a disruption to the frontier violence myth, or whether it simply re-enacts an idealised frontier experience.

Furiosa on the Road: Women and Border Crossing in Contemporary Road Stories

By the very nature of the form, road texts cross borders and enter contested space, creating conditions for collisions and encounters. Road stories allow space to imagine liberation from social conditions, and when a marginalised person experiences a sense of freedom, their mind is at liberty to wander, to imagine a life beyond the socio-economic boundaries of gender, race and class. The road narrative’s relentless focus on the present invites the traveller to engage in “the active process of cultural imagining that goes into the creation of Australian space”, offering a challenge to “nationalistic versions of our history that privilege a fixed and deterministic point of view” (Falconer 10). A dialogue is opened between the driver and the landscape, the driver and their passengers, the driver and their own sense of self.

Especially relevant to the theme of border-crossing are road stories written about women. While the road story is rooted in the frontier narrative and the masculine adventure, contemporary road novels written about women allow for a reimagining of road stories as narratives of liberation from patriarchy. In *The Red Car* by Marcy Dermansky, a woman is left a red sports car in her friend's will. This car enables her to escape a servile and violent marriage and reclaim her sexuality and autonomy. It is not just mobility given to the protagonist, but a sports car: a symbol of speed, privilege and wealth. The sports car is an instrument of power and virility rarely gifted to women in literature. Similarly, in *The Flamethrowers* by Rachel Kushner, a young woman races a motorcycle across the salt flats of the American desert. She races not only to set a speed record but also to explore her art, pursuing a sense of excitement, creativity and danger traditionally afforded to male protagonists.

Alexandra Ganser uses the example of the fairytale "Little Red Riding Hood" to critique the masculine tradition of the road story and the "normative spatial behaviour dictated by prevalent gender roles" (13). When a woman transgresses or goes off-road, she is viewed as being at risk of physical or sexual violence. Like *Thelma and Louise*, who decide to keep going down the road rather than turn themselves in, women who transgress have traditionally been punished. Following the increased mobility of women since the 1970s, however, women have used the road story format to question this tradition.

Women writers from various cultural and social backgrounds have used the matrix and the formula of the road narrative to challenge dominant literary and spatial formations by means of engaging multiple cultural differences – differences not

only of gender, but also of ethnicity, class, age, religion, sexual identity, or (sub)cultural identification (Ganser 14).

In the contemporary women's road story, detouring can lead to possibility rather than punishment, such as the happy ending of a single mother's road trip adventure with her children in *Heroes of the Frontier* by Dave Eggers, or the heroic soldier Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), who rescues imprisoned women from their male captor.

Continuing the tradition of feminist rewriting in literary practice, women writers have used the road story tradition to question patriarchal limitations on women's geographical and social mobility. The patriarchal and symbolic order dictates that women must stay within the borders of house and home, their paths both familiar and practical. So how do these borders function for contemporary female road story protagonists? In *All the Birds, Singing*, by Evie Wyld, Jake becomes a sheep shearer, blurring the boundary between her female body and traditionally masculine work. In *Steam Pigs*, by Melissa Lucashenko, Sue's access to mobility enables her to cross borders of racial and class oppression and access a university education. In *Hiam*, by Eva Sallis, the eponymous protagonist drives alone through the Australian desert and reclaims her Islamic spirituality, thus crossing both spatial borders and boundaries of religion and culture. This exegesis will discuss the ways in which my own novel "Belly of the Beast" contributes to this tradition of feminist road story rewriting.

The car can be regarded as an extension of the American frontier experience (Ganser 15), thus continuing American myths of mobility that "largely reflect the historic perspective of the white (male) Anglo-Saxon Protestant" (16). One could argue that the car in Australia similarly enacts the frontier experience from the point of view of the settler:

repeating tropes of possession and masculine hardship borne of an antagonistic landscape. However, I will argue that minority voices enable both the acknowledgment of these tropes and their subversion. While the masculine heroic quest for freedom has also questioned and rebelled against socio-economic, cultural and ethnic boundaries, this exegesis is primarily concerned with the ‘other’ in road story texts, and their speaking position from outside the dominant ideology of the patriarchal centre.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One, I will discuss *Hiam* in relation to haunting issues of race and violence, reflecting the continued frontier legacies of settler dominance and the disempowerment of racial minorities in Australia. I will also explore the road in *Hiam* as a site of ideological decolonisation and an opportunity for the transformation of this legacy and reimagining of a more egalitarian contemporary society. In Chapter Two, I will discuss *All the Birds, Singing* as an example of a road novel that both speaks back to and subverts the frontier legacy of the feminine landscape ‘tamed’ by the male aggressor. In Chapter Three, I will explore *Floundering* by Romy Ash within the framework of the picaresque, “an innocent but (mildly) delinquent figure” (Sherrill 3) who, as a result of social or economic disadvantage, lives in the margins. Through the failures of the single mother picaresque Loretta in *Floundering*, class and gender in contemporary Australia are critiqued, and the landscape is mapped with both broken and repaired familial relationships, disrupting the frontier myth of the explorer mapping an ‘empty’ landscape. The protagonists in each of these novels engage with mythogenesis from the margins, thus acknowledging historical mythology without perpetuating the frontier myth of violence through regeneration.

The fourth chapter of this exegesis will situate my own creative work, “Belly of the Beast”, within the road story tradition. “Belly of the Beast” continues the work of the previous novels discussed, eschewing the prevailing narrative of male aggression dominating the hostile outback and instead portraying the remote highway and small town as destinations of opportunity and empowerment for a young single mother. Class and gender form the central considerations, with the road story offering the ideal ‘vehicle’ to explore how these themes influence single parenting and identity formation. “Belly of the Beast” is significant in its suggestion of the road and the cattle station as sites of self-determination for a young single mother and child. It is also significant in its setting: the 1990s were a period of intense political and social change in Australia. The protagonist was raised with the understanding that an underprivileged woman cannot survive without a man’s support. She therefore pursues a relationship with the station owner before discovering her own aptitude for farming, and it is through work and discipline that she discovers an alternate path. This final chapter will discuss the ways in which “Belly of the Beast” disrupts the frontier legacy of violent oppression in Australian road stories in relation to the central themes of ethnicity, gender and class.

As the road genre is varied and made up of hybrid forms, this dissertation adopts a similar multimedia approach to research, encompassing postcolonial theory and history, film and literary studies, and social and cultural criticism. The object will be to find intersections between Australian and American postcolonial theory and literary and cultural analysis, connecting the two countries’ frontier mythogeneses and correlating themes in road story texts. Interpreting road stories through an engagement with myths of homeland and expulsion enables greater insights into the ways in which frontier mythology informs current postcolonial texts. The history and mythology of the frontier are not static, and continue to be “a key site for reflexive critique of contemporary society” (Rose 49). The

frontier narrative repeats in contemporary society and in collective memory. The colonist and the colonised both continue to be 'unsettled' by the violence of the frontier.

Chapter 1

Hiam by Eva Sallis follows the eponymous protagonist on a road trip through central Australia from Adelaide to Darwin. After her husband Masoud's suicide and her estrangement from her daughter Zena, Hiam takes her deceased husband's taxi, driving in a directionless and grief-stricken fugue along the Stuart Highway. In a fractured narrative told through flashbacks, fables and hallucinations, the events leading up to Masoud's death and the family's struggle to adjust to life in an anti-Muslim, anti-immigration Australia are revealed.

Exile on the Road: Cultural and Racial Oppression

Edward Said defines exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (173). The archetype of the eternal wanderer, traceable back to ancient civilisations, is inextricably connected to the notion of exile. The anti-Semitic archetype of the Wandering Jew, in perpetual atonement for the murder of Christ until his second coming, repeats in the contemporary myth of the exiled wanderer (Gebhardt 11). Mary McCarthy explains that this notion of exile is derived from political banishment; thus, the exile is left in a perpetual state of waiting until their banishment is lifted: "The exile waits for a change of government or the tyrant's death, which will allow him to come home. If he stops waiting and adapts to the new circumstances, then he is not an exile any more" (par. 3). The political exile is distinct from the internal exile, who McCarthy defines as "a man who has taught himself to behave as if he had already crossed a frontier while refusing to leave his house" (par. 34). The internal exile's waiting period is a product of exclusion, as internal exiles feel a sense of being out of, or perhaps wrong in, place.

During her road journey, Hiam reflects on her experience of internal exile as a Jordanian-Muslim woman migrant in Australia. Flashbacks reveal repeated interactions in which she feels socially alienated. Her culture is habitually reduced to anti-Muslim stereotypes, such as being asked by a stranger if she was mutilated as a child (Sallis 22). Hiam's awareness that her culture is viewed as inferior causes her to withdraw from Australian society, thus strengthening her feeling of objectification and exacerbating her internal exile further.

Intercultural interactions between Hiam and other Australians are veiled by reductive assumptions: Hiam mistakes a brothel for a restaurant, and the stereotype that Australian women are immoral and mistreated is confirmed when Hiam describes the encounter to her Muslim friends. However, Hiam does not mention the brothel worker she spoke to, who works there to finance her education and who "did not have the look of a degraded exploitee, of a B-grade, Lebanese movie" (27). Miscommunications symbolise a greater cultural divide for Hiam, which reaches a pinnacle after her husband's suicide. With the dissolution of her family unit she is no longer compelled to maintain an appearance of belonging to either culture: all social ties are severed, and with her retreat into the central desert, her exile from culture, society and self becomes literal as well as metaphorical. Hiam drives "in a form of blank shock" (3), her status as an outsider so complete that she is "more outside of something she had been in (which had also been an exile from something else)" (3).

'Blood on the Roadside': Bodily Violence and Self-Annihilation

Hiam's departure from her polarised community is a self-imposed exile that creates space for reflection. Her exile is a kind of mental immolation through which Hiam dissolves the

boundaries that have so far ordered her understanding of her cultural and spiritual self. As she drives further into the desert, Hiam suffers delusions and psychotic fantasies: “A mad, dishevelled woman, posing and talking, miming another woman to nobody, alone in a car” (59). Hiam’s willed self-destruction and acceleration towards a mental break is in direct contradiction to the explorer trope, which has evolved from the mythogenesis of the frontier. The frontier myth is a quest for survival and a heroic desire for exploration and discovery that is often at odds with the basic needs of survival. In contrast to the heroic quest, and particularly the frontier archetype of the explorer hero who enacts violence on the landscape and its occupants in the necessary pursuit of survival, Hiam seeks self-annihilation.

In *Swallow the Air*, the teen protagonist May encounters badlands in homosocial sites such as rodeos and truck cabs. For Hiam, the desert operates as a kind of badland, a narrative that she is compelled to enter despite the physical and emotional discomfort promised. Not haunted in a literal sense, badlands are sites activated by imagining. According to Ross Gibson, a badland is “a narrative thing set in a natural location. A place you can actually visit, it is also laid out eerily by your mind before you get there. It is a disturbing place that you feel compelled to revisit despite all your wishes for comfort or complacency” (15). Badlands exist externally in physical space as well as in the community imagination. In the act of ‘hitting the road’ in Australia, travellers cross boundaries, often from the cities into less-populous areas. A prevailing outcome of these crossings is violence. Hiam’s body marks the evidence: her chest is crisscrossed with scars, and she is dangerously dehydrated, sick and hallucinating: “Hiam’s act of ‘mapping’ in the outback therefore becomes a reciprocal process wherein she is written into the earth and the earth is written into her body” (Claringbold 42). This cartographic metaphor subverts the trope of the desert as a blank space upon which desires can be

projected. Instead, Hiam imprints the violence of colonial history on her body, while the violence of her own internal exile is mirrored in the landscape, often through encounters with wildlife and visions of death and decay. She sees a dead kangaroo with “deformed looking hands clasped together, strange legs stretched out away from its body in a disturbingly human repose” (7). There is “blood on the road, on the roadsides, on the battered heads of stiffening black cattle lying on either side” (36). The horror of her husband’s death manifests in tormented visions, and Hiam engages with the mythogenesis of the frontier in the cartographic act of mapping violence in the landscape and on her body.

A Bridge between Cultures

In an interview in 1998, Sallis was asked if she was trying to form a bridge between “two vastly different cultures”, and also questioned as to why she chose to write from the point of view of a Palestinian woman (Sallis et al. 36). In a similarly polarising approach, a *Bulletin* review stressed the cultural differences in the novel, particularly Hiam’s sensitivity to her husband’s honour and the “close-knit” Muslim community’s persistence in “their firmly held views” (Nelson 68). Sallis expressed frustration at this often antithetical public reception, deeming it an imagined construct which maintains “us and them” ways of thinking through lazy definitions and stereotypes (Sallis et al. 38). This ‘us and them’ reaction to the novel reflects anti-Muslim and anti-migration sentiment in the Australian community at the time of publication. Yet anti-migration sentiment and refugee policies have improved little in the eighteen years since. With the return of One Nation Senator Pauline Hanson to the Upper House in August 2016 and the ongoing controversy over the Australian Government’s imprisonment and inhumane treatment of asylum seekers in offshore detention camps, the issue of racial oppression in Australia is

as relevant in 2018 as it was in 1998. The reception of Sallis's novel focused on the importance of Hiam's reconnection with Australian culture rather than her reconnection with her own Islamic spirituality, prioritising total assimilation as the end game of the narrative: Cleo da Silva comments in her review that "through a chance encounter with a handsome young Australian petrol station attendant, [Hiam] can for the first time in eighteen years see beauty in Australia" (da Silva 125). The assumption here is that Hiam's salvation lies in her becoming more Australian. The expectation of Hiam's perceptions changing as opposed to static and nationalistic perceptions of migrants and racial minorities is repeated in reviews, thus minimising Hiam's Islamic spirituality and culture. This reception often missed the function of the novel in exposing cultural and racial oppression.

Hiam highlights not only anti-Muslim and anti-migration sentiment in Australia, but also the continued oppression of Indigenous Australians as a legacy of the recycling of the mythology of the frontier. While Sallis does not explicitly link the immigrant experience with Indigenous Australian history, she parallels Afghan and Indigenous travelling cultures by alluding to the Muslim cameleers who traversed the Australian desert. Hiam sees wild camels crossing the desert and questions whether they are a dream (62). Later she meets Noah, who she describes as "almost Sudanese" (128), allowing for the possibility that he is Indigenous. References to Muslim cameleer history are significant as they highlight non-white histories of mobility that have been largely absent from Australian historical narratives. By engaging with the cultural heritage of Muslim cameleers, Sallis depicts one of many non-white histories that are extant alongside the dominant narrative. As Hiam reconnects with her Islamic spirituality, she re-imagines the desert as a site where multiple narratives cross and converge, intersecting like the road itself.

In her paper on being and kinship, Melissa Lucashenko describes the sense of deep belonging “on country” that is part of Indigenous culture: “Aborigines who are born on to their country and practise their traditional religion simply cannot fail to belong. Sacred sites can be damaged, human relationships can fail or falter, but essential belonging is still assured by the web of intense meaning which our religion ascribes to every living thing” (63). This form of belonging is no longer readily available, colonisation having “smashed families and linkages to land” (Lucashenko 63). Internal exile from homeland and culture is reflected in road stories written by Indigenous novelists, such as *Swallow the Air* by Tara June Winch. In *Swallow the Air*, May embarks on a quest to learn her cultural history after her mother’s death. When she locates her distant cousin Jack, he refuses to engage with May’s questions: “There is a big missing hole between this place and the place you’re looking for. That place, that people, that something you’re looking for. It’s gone. It was taken away. We weren’t told love; *we weren’t allowed to be Aboriginal*” (Winch 182). Oral narratives that May learned as a child are interspersed with her present experience in which her aunty and brother struggle with addiction and domestic violence, symbols of the continuing challenge to overcome institutionalised racism. May’s violent memories are triggered by objects in place, such as the sight of blood at a rodeo fight. Childhood memories appear more real, the past more vivid than the present. At the end of the road section, May observes that she is able to turn around because “only when I remembered, could I finally forget” (Winch 89). Badlands exist not only in physical space but also symbolically, for instance in the absence that is left for May when her mother dies and she no longer feels connected to her history and Aboriginality.

Frontier Mythogenesis and the ‘Whitewashing’ of Australian History

In both *Swallow the Air* by Winch and *Snake Cradle* by Roberta Sykes, Indigenous women suffer violence and sexual abuse at the hands of white men, symbolising the continued frontier legacy of settler oppression of racial minorities. Acts of colonial violence against Indigenous people have historically been minimised or ‘whitewashed’, and often erased altogether from written records. One reason for the rejection of the oft-termed ‘black armband’ view of history is white Australia’s fear that acknowledgment of past abuses further legitimises Aboriginal land claims: “In this phenomenology, if we fully recognise Indigenous claims to the land, if we have a sense of living in someone else’s country, we are, in a metaphorical if not a literal sense, perhaps in danger of homelessness again, of having to suffer yet again the original expulsion” (Curthoys 18). This fear has created a refusal by white Australia to acknowledge its position as a beneficiary of colonisation.

As opposed to the American narrative of a pilgrimage to the Promised Land, the Australian frontier myth is one of suffering and stoicism in the face of overwhelming adversity: “There is a special charge associated with the status of victim in Australian historical consciousness, and it is notable how *good* non-Aboriginal Australians are at memorialising their own sufferings” (Curthoys 3). An emphasis on victim status legitimises land ownership and enables pastoral workers to invoke the ‘Aussie battler’ title to sanction their claims to land. The mythogenesis of the frontier has replaced Indigenous people’s traditional ownership with the myth of settler emotional title, which Richard Slotkin describes as “charged with a passionate and aspiring violence” (17). On the cattle farm I worked on in Gibson, Western Australia as research for this project, the station owners claimed that the Indigenous people in the area were nomads, and had never actually lived in Esperance. Yet according to the 1901 Western Australian census, there were some 826 people of Aboriginal descent in the Central and Eastern districts of

Western Australia in 1901, and these estimates would have been conservative (Australian Bureau Statistics 204). This repeated claim of Indigenous nomadism enables pastoralists to legitimise land ownership, as well as to memorialise their victories and defeats: primarily drought and flood, but also the rise and fall of crop prices, the soaring expense of chemicals, and the unreasonable control of farming practices by state and federal governments. The frontier myth of a land that has always been theirs prevents modern society from reaching a shared history, and therefore a shared identity: “Reconciliation, fervently desired in some quarters and despised and rejected in others, consequently remains unachievable in a society profoundly unsettled by *ressentiment*” (Curthoys 18). The near-exclusion of Indigenous people from Australian historical records until the 1960s and the proliferation of regional knowledge have led to narratives that repeat in local folklore the brutality which defined colonialism. Unable to celebrate “simple, righteous sovereignty”, the settlers stayed quiet, thereby lodging the badlands in the colonial mentality (Gibson 91).

The Righteous American Frontier

In his landmark 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, Frederick Jackson Turner argues that American history is defined by settlement westward (201). His argument for the Western frontier as the primary influence on national character was so accepted that, according to Henry Nash Smith, “it has been worked into the very fabric of our conception of our history” (250). The argument for the inevitability of westward exploration aligns with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which was the belief that Americans were fated to bring ideals of freedom and democracy to the Mexican population: “America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been

open but has even been forced upon them” (Turner 227). Righteous pioneers dominate American frontier mythology, permeating road stories in which movement toward the West rewards the traveller with prosperity. In contemporary American road stories such as *Heroes of the Frontier* by Dave Eggers and *The Lauras* by Sara Taylor, westward movement leads the protagonists to self-discovery and freedom. As John Escobedo states, “frontiers are socially constructed cultural symbols enacted to carry out historically specific political agendas that are usually veiled by national imageries” (177). The mythogenesis of the frontier as a site of righteousness and fulfilment conceals the displacement of Native American people, and the violence with which the land was taken possession of.

Repetition is an essential stage of mythogenesis. According to Philip Wheelwright, the process of myth-making begins with a “mythopoeic mode of consciousness” (473), by which the myth-maker’s perception shifts from logical analysis to “reasoning-by-metaphor” (Slotkin 7) and poetics. This mythopoeic state of mind requires the repetition of a myth artefact such as an oral narrative or written story to make the myth perception concrete. Once repetition has established the myth, the second, romantic stage occurs, during which the myth is maintained and elevated to the status of ritual. The third and final, consummatory stage is the point at which the myth achieves the concrete status of cultural or historical ‘truth’ and the ‘innocence’ of the original myth artefact is perceived to be lost. The consummatory stage signifies the regeneration of the myth-making process, as artists create new myth artefacts in an attempt to recapture the ‘spirit’ of a previous time.

A key challenge of using mythogenesis analysis to attain cultural insight is the risk of participating in this cycle. As Slotkin warns, “in order for us to examine myth, we must

rely on artefacts which are translations of the mythopoeic perception of reality” (19). The analysis of literature inevitably involves the analysis of myth-making, and the dangers of recycling inherent in this process. According to Slotkin, scholarly critics addressing the problem of myth in America end up engaging in the manufacture of myth in order to “reshape the character of their people or to justify some preconceived or inherited notion of American uniqueness” (4). *Hiam* offers one possibility for a disruption to this circular process of analysis and regeneration. *Hiam* utilises violent imagery and references to non-white histories on the Australian road to acknowledge the violence of the frontier while also subverting cultural archetypes such as the violent and possessive explorer. Rather than recycling frontier myths, Sallis uses the frontiersmanship of the protagonist to highlight racial and cultural oppression in Australia, and also to imagine a more egalitarian future. The frontier legacy of settler oppression of racial minorities is reflected and interrogated in Hiam’s journey.

Frontiersmanship and Ideological Decolonisation

Frontier mythology is problematic in its polarising and limiting connotations of success or failure, especially when the definition of success is characterised by the oppression of Indigenous people. The explorer hero’s journey is defined by triumph or defeat, and the enemy in American myth is predominantly ‘the native’, while in Australian myth the landscape is an antagonist which must be ‘tamed’. Yet the masculine frontier hero does not necessarily require success to be immortalised in history. The mythogenesis of the frontier has created canonical male explorers in both countries. American heroes such as Daniel Boone symbolise victory and prosperity, in contrast to Australian frontiersman such as Robert Burke, William Wills and Ludwig Leichardt, who in spite of their abject failures were also immortalised as heroes. According to Susan Hayward, road movies can

be categorised as ‘frontiersmanship’ because they revolve around exploration and encounter: “The road movie is about a frontiersmanship of sorts given that one of its codes is discovery – usually self-discovery” (313). Hiam’s frontiersmanship is a success of a kind, in that she emerges from a landscape of suffering into the green tropics of the north, symbolising a spiritual rebirth. In contrast to the conquering explorer, Hiam’s transformation occurs through social withdrawal and her subsequent reconnection with Islamic spirituality, triggering a re-acquaintance with her spiritual self: “She was smelling the earth, reeking, rising, swelling, stretching the wonderful soil. A rough, raw, rank joy tolled in her mind, recalling a high, modulating song too loved to be heard without pain. The call to prayer” (124). Hiam’s transformation is mapped on her body. Unlike the explorer archetype, she makes no claims or cartographic records, and leaves no trace of her exploration.

After her collapse in the abandoned hut, Hiam hallucinates a vision from the Prophet Mohammad, symbolising the beginning of her spiritual renewal: “Maybe she was going somewhere and it didn’t matter that she didn’t know. She drove on. *God is the All-knowing*” (126). It is through what Erin Claringbold terms “ideological decolonisation” or “the dissolution of mental boundaries” (37) that Hiam is able to liberate her Islamic spirituality. Helen Tiffin defines decolonisation as a “radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses. This has frequently been accompanied by the demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered ‘reality,’ free of all colonial taint” (95). This desire for total freedom is a perhaps unrealistic imagining of a pre-colonised landscape free of historical violence. However, postcolonial subversion suggests both an acknowledgment of colonial violence and a disruption of the continued cycle of frontier mythogenesis. Hiam prays in the newly-watered desert earth, fusing the Australian tradition of linking rain to blessing and the

Muslim call to prayer. Her arrival in the green space of the Top End symbolises the completion of her ideological decolonisation, and her arrival coincides with a dream in which a child Hiam discovers that prayer can be performed anywhere away from home, even in “an unfamiliar valley” (133). It is not her physical departure from the desert landscape that is important, but her passage functioning as a symbol of mental transition.

The Road as a Site of Translation

At the beginning of the novel the highway is a discomfiting space for Hiam. She sees dead bodies and hallucinates images of death and destruction. At the completion of her journey, the road is no longer alien, and the removal of the taxi sign from her car symbolises this new sense of belonging. The road can be viewed as a metaphor for migration and the translation of meaning through movement. In her thesis exploring this theory, Anette Svensson hypothesises that migration is a process that involves cultural translation in order to achieve a sense of hybridity and cultural identity, and a feeling of having “arrived” in a new country (Svensson 10). As well as achieving a kind of hybridity, Hiam arrives at a sense of her Islamic spirituality that exists independently of cultural and physical place. The road functions as a space of translation, where the physical act of crossing borders triggers a sense of mental displacement and dissolution of boundaries, and the potential for ideological decolonisation. By entering its liminal space, Hiam reaches self-acceptance beyond cultural binaries and stereotypes. In *Swallow the Air*, May also achieves a kind of spiritual reconciliation through the journey, and through the re-telling of oral narratives: “Even though this country is not my mother’s country, even though we are freshwater, not saltwater people, this place still owns us, still owns our history, my brother’s and my own, Aunty’s too. Mum’s” (194). The traditional stories that nourished child May continue to connect her to culture as much as physical place.

Conclusion

Hiam observes that “It was frightening to know that this road had waited through the years of her incomprehension. It had been here the whole time” (49). Both Hiam and May have internalised feelings of alienation as a result of Australian bigotry, nationalism and racial intolerance. The denial of violence, specifically the violence of colonisation and the oppression of Indigenous people, leads to further acts of violence occurring. In *Hiam*, the road is a technology that allows both the acknowledgment of the legacy of racial oppression, and also an opportunity for liberation from the recycling of the mythogenesis of the frontier. In Hiam’s act of physical freedom she reconnects with her Islamic spirituality and overcomes her sense of social isolation and marginalisation. The ambiguity of the road as both a technology of colonisation and an opportunity for freedom is embraced in the novel as a way of inciting discourse rather than a simple binary of ‘us versus them’. The emphasis in Australian history on the settler as victim myth and the denial of racial crimes prevents understanding and reconciliation for future generations. Road stories such as *Swallow the Air* and *Hiam* interrogate this ideology and subvert the mythogenesis of frontier violence through the journey and characterisation of the female protagonists.

Chapter 2

The protagonist Jake in Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* is haunted by an invisible monster. Whether the creature is real or imagined remains ambiguous, but what is evident is the fact that Jake has endured significant trauma. Flashbacks to her Australian past reveal Jake's culpability for a catastrophic bushfire in her hometown and her subsequent youth living on the streets. Her experiences as a sex worker and shearer are violent and traumatic, leading to her eventual escape to a remote farm on a British island. Yet violence follows Jake there, too, manifesting in the form of a shadowy spectre methodically killing her sheep.

Female Corporeality and Frontier Justice

Reviews of Wyld's novel describe Jake as a "reticent", "taciturn" and "rough" character, qualities most commonly attributed to male protagonists (Connolly 59, Harrison 10; Hinrichs 226). Nicknamed "Brick Shit house, the Whopper" (219), Jake is bullied because of her muscular physique, and in her home town there is a "silence of so many people looking" (205). These repeated reminders of her corporeality and otherness transform her body into a kind of badland: a site activated by imagining. As Ross Gibson states, a badland is a "paradoxically real and fantastic location where malevolence is *simply there* partly because it has long been *imagined there*" (178). Jake's body also becomes a site of punishment. She is brutally whipped for arson until she resembles "a wet bag of meat" (206), and during sex work she is choked and abused, losing weight so that she is "easier to pack away" (154). The violence and trauma she tries to suppress manifests on her body: Jake cannot leave the site of violence because she *is* the site of violence. The cyclical nature of myth-making as a justification for violence is replicated

in the purging of Jake's body. She vomits repeatedly after escaping her captor, cleansing her physical self of the sexual violence she has endured. Yet it is made clear that, like the myth of regeneration through violence, the assaults on Jake's body will repeat. The notion of "frontier justice" (Ireland 505) – acts of violence being right and good in a particular context – has been repeated in the American Western genre, beginning with cowboy narratives, fictional lawmen such as Dirty Harry, and outlaws such as Jesse James and Bonnie and Clyde: "These archetypal figures offer simple explanations to complex problems and they deliver justice immediately, rather than arbitrated through an often frustrating legal system" (Ireland 506). Symbols of the frontier and the American West such as cowboys, rebels and shootouts are replicated in American road stories. Rebels who 'drop out' of society, such as the protagonists in *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* (1969), were considered an homage to the powerful, masculine frontier spirit. Female outlaws such as Thelma and Louise were also sacrificial heroes; however, their deaths were a result of their refusal to accept patriarchal control rather than the simple anti-authoritarian rebellion of the motorcyclists. Justice in *All the Birds, Singing* takes the form of Jake's whipping by "nameless men" (206). She is forced to kill a sheep after disobeying her captor, and another man attempts to blackmail her in exchange for sex. In spite of her masculine body, Jake is still a woman, and when women disobey patriarchal rule, justice must be enacted.

'The Bush' as a Repository for Male Longing

It is notable that Jake experiences violence only at the hands of men. In her paper on frontier violence and settler manhood, Angela Woollacott demonstrates that frontier violence was intrinsic to definitions of settler masculinity (11.12). The mythogenesis of frontier masculinity was influenced both by the extreme isolation and the lingering

ideologies of the British Empire, creating an alternative masculinity which emphasised “physical strength, hunting skills, skills with firearms, horse-riding skills and perhaps, in a way that was understood but not to be articulated, preparedness to kill” (Woollacott 11.12). Alongside the violence accompanying land claiming, a second narrative celebrated man’s ‘taming’ of a hostile, feminine landscape. Early explorers such as Thomas Mitchell declared Australia paradise, until attempts to settle were not realised as easily as anticipated and the land of Eden turned sinister. Whether heaven or hell, the bush is a construct, historically a repository for men’s longing. Kay Schaffer describes the bush as “animated by man’s desire, it takes on the seeming attributes of woman, whether described as a passive landscape or an alien force; a place of exile and belonging; a landscape of promise or of threat” (61). Female writers such as Catherine Martin, Katharine Susannah Pritchard, Janette Turner Hospital and Thea Astley have also engaged in the desert and bush writing traditions, and their writing has been analysed in academic texts such as Susan Sheridan’s *Along the Faultlines* and Kay Schaffer’s *Women in the Bush*. However, the foundational narratives mythologising the Australian landscape were written overwhelmingly by, and about, white men in a land troped as female. A dichotomy exists in both Australian and American literature whereby nature is coded as female, yet simultaneously regarded as the territory of men who exert force to control it. The ‘virgin land’ of America was destined to be invaded, in contrast to the often malevolent ‘mother nature’ of Australian texts. Writers such as Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson wrote lyrically of the romantic bush, stereotypes from which emerged the construct of the ‘Aussie battler’: a Caucasian male, usually accompanied by a stoic, uncomplaining wife who keeps his house and cares for his children. Sue Kossew, in her analysis of re-written versions of Lawson’s iconic story “The Drover’s Wife”, argues that women continue to rewrite versions of this story because the gender representations established during the colonial period persist in contemporary representations: “One of

the most striking aspects of contemporary Australian women's writing is its ongoing preoccupation with contesting stereotypical gender roles that gathered momentum in the 1890s when discourses of new nationhood constructed a legend of Australian national character" (Kossew 24). These discourses of new nationhood which acclaimed maleness as the pinnacle of cultural identity continue to recycle in contemporary Australian literature.

The 'Good Bloke' and Other Archetypes of Nationhood

The Herald and *The Bulletin* newspapers were instrumental in elevating the bushman type and settler to the status of national hero. Over a hundred years later the 'Aussie battler' is an enduring cultural archetype, reflected in contemporary road films such as *Last Cab to Darwin* (2015). In *All the Birds, Singing*, Jake earns the respect of the shearers with her work ethic, shearing skill and uncomplaining focus. Masculinity is also privileged in the British scenes, when a farmer sends his delinquent son to prison to "do him some good, some rules, some toughening" (150). Like Jake, the son is punished for resistance to established gender norms. Jake's alleged masculinity is both complimented with "You're a good bloke" (26) and insulted: "You might look like a man but you're sure not one, ay?" (142). Jake's 'masculine' personal qualities, such as her quick temper and reluctance to share personal information, are learned social responses to the trauma of sexual violence. Masculinity is performative, a construct which is taught and learned rather than a purely essential aspect of self (McCann et al 505), and it is the Australian cultural archetype of the 'good bloke' that is critiqued in the novel.

The 'bond of mateship' is another particularly Australian phallogocentric myth, founded on the privileging of the sanctity of the group over the individual. Settlers working in

homosocial environments and withstanding intense hardship valued solidarity and egalitarianism over singular progress and success:

There is a dual functioning to the mateship celebrated in the Australian legend. In its exclusivity, it positions women and other (marginalised) men outside the 'Australian,' the 'national' and the 'masculine;' in its inclusivity, it authorises masculinity within the group, ensuring that dominant masculine values are reproduced in the male subject (Murrie 74).

The strict binaries of gender in contemporary culture are gradually shifting, resulting in an increased awareness of LGBTTTQQAAP rights. Yet the ideology of mateship persists, dominating sports culture and national events such as Anzac Day and Australia Day. Richard Slotkin describes two variations of the American explorer myth hero: the first, a heroic destroyer of 'savage' Indians during the Indian War, and the second, a nature lover in the form of a farmer or surveyor: "An American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars" (Slotkin 22). The 'Aussie battler' myth, in contrast, has endured without variation, perhaps because attempts to disrupt this myth have failed to capture the national imagination as effectively. Repetition is the essence of the process of mythogenesis, and the popularity of a narrative ensures its continued retellings. Or perhaps this failure reflects the more wilful refusal to acknowledge the history of frontier violence and the ways in which Australians continue to benefit from the oppression of Indigenous people.

The Animal as 'Other' in *All the Birds, Singing*

Don Watson argues that “the bush has always been as much for hiding pathologies as repairing them” (354). The Australian bush has traditionally been portrayed as an ideal retreat for outsiders because of its isolation, allowing for the expression of less civilised, more bestial urges. These ‘urges’ correlate with the animal themes in *All the Birds, Singing* and Jake’s kinship with animals. When forced to kill a sheep, Jake empathises with the animal: “As her strength goes, so does mine, but I hold her to me, I press my face into the wool at the back of her head” (96). She identifies human emotion in the neglected sheep in Otto’s care, describing them as “resigned” (138). Otto’s treatment of Jake and the sheep are determined by his level of control. When they transgress, his loving, ‘fatherly’ manner abruptly shifts into that of the despot. In her paper “‘The Distance Between Them’: Sheep, Women, and Violence in Evie Wyld’s *All the Birds, Singing* and Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies*”, Lucy Neave explores violence against women and animals as a method for reading human-animal relationships in the bush. Neave argues that the novel “purposefully juxtaposes the physical relationships between men and sheep and men and women in order to link women and sheep as subject to the desires of men, whether amorous or violent” (130). Otto desires an exertion of his power over the passive ‘other’.

The ‘other’ in foundational Australian narratives is frequently Indigenous people, and their otherness is a product of frontier mythogenesis and political colonisation. As Barry Morris states, “the exploration of otherness is more than an epistemological question; it is an exercise of power” (74). The othering of Indigenous people, women or animals is determined by the representation of men as the central Australian identity, and the masculine gaze which constructs the position of those outside the phallogentric order. The kinship Jake feels with the flock is part of her resistance to her vulnerability to the exercise of power: “Wyld stresses the connections between Jake and her animals, rather than a

hierarchical relationship” (Neave 133). It is important to note here the degrees of otherness. Unlike animals, Jake has subjectivity and awareness of the male gaze. While Jake is othered for her masculine body, her privilege as a white woman is also acknowledged when Denver, a local Indigenous boy, is accused of Jake’s arson. Denver acts heroically, trying to rescue his girlfriend and family and suffering horrific burns in the process. Yet he is accused of the crime, despite his good character and innocence. Class is another influence, in addition to issues of ethnicity and gender, that determines degrees of access and otherness. Jake has the economic resources to react to her oppression with increased mobility and resistance to patriarchal control.

Australian Masculinity and Female Subordination in *All the Birds, Singing*

Farmers Clare and Otto in *All the Birds, Singing* follow a convention of sexually sadistic psychopaths in Australian mythic texts. In *Wolf Creek* (2005), an unassuming bushman is revealed to be a sadistic serial killer. In *Wake in Fright* (1971), schoolteacher John Grant is stranded in a remote outback town and coerced by new ‘mates’ into gambling, fighting, and kangaroo slaughter. ‘Aussie battlers’ can quickly transition into nightmarish examples of extreme Australian masculinity. The horror engendered by these men is elitist in nature: unlike wealthy American psychopath Patrick Bates, the monster Australia fears is the working-class killer. A supposedly trustworthy masculinity can be transformed by poverty and isolation into something sinister and threatening. The juxtaposition of the everyday with extreme violence and terror unsettles the viewer, creating a sense of *Unheimlich*: the uncanny. When the marks of the ‘ridgy didge’, ‘true blue’ bloke are made menacing, the audience is forced to consider that danger might be closer than they think. It was found in the 2016 Personal Safety Survey that women were

almost three times more likely to experience partner violence from the age of fifteen than men (Australian Bureau of Statistics cat 4906.0).

The monster in *All the Birds, Singing* can be construed as the physical embodiment of Jake's trauma, or the mirroring of predatory aspects of Australian masculinity. Yet the monster is also visible to Jake's friend Lloyd, thus problematising its imaginariness. Unlike the other male characters, Lloyd presents an unthreatening version of masculinity, and his ability to recognise the monster is potentially a symbol of his rejection of hegemonic masculinity. There is also the suggestion that this dual recognition of the monster signifies the finality of Jake's perpetual movement: "If you have wheels, I realise, you are free", she claims (138), but this freedom is illusory when the trauma of memory repeats. Jake's thwarted escape attempts are borne of fear, contrary to the American 'grass is always greener' optimism, the "perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life" (Turner 200). On the Australian frontier, the putting down of roots was desirable; the colonial squatter mentality was driven to claim, map out territory and fence it in. Yet with the majority of domestic violence occurring in the home, private space does not necessarily signify safety. In narratives such as *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Vanishing Point* (1971), the action of road-tripping recreates the male rejection of the domestic home and the heroic pioneer triumph over the frontier. Domesticity can function as a means of subordination, preventing women from entering public space: "It is crucial to remember that first, the historical limitation of women's mobility has served as a tool of control and oppression, that secondly, the domestic continues to be seen as inferior in economic and cultural value in contemporary Western cultures and that third, it is above all the freedom of choice at stake here" (Ganser 74). When Jake is trapped on the farm, Otto runs over her bike and takes away her keys, thus ensuring her subordination by limiting her mobility. Women's road stories demystify public space. The road offers an alternative to fixed, nationalistic

narratives, subverting types such as monologic pastoral masculinity and determining identity outside of strict dichotomies of female/male and public/private.

Frontier Violence and the Myth of Pastoral Prosperity

Pastoral tales such as *My Brother Jack* by George Johnston and *Such is Life* by Joseph Furphy paint a bleak, anti-agrarian representation of farming in Australia, building on images of a desiccated land in colonial stories such as Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" that are replicated in contemporary road novels such as *Bitter Wash Road* by Gary Disher. In *All the Birds, Singing*, Otto's land is dry and impoverished and the sheep are listless and sick, with "patches of wool missing, ribs poking out" (133). American farming is portrayed with far less fatalism, celebrating the farmer's heroism even in cases of failure, as in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. As Don Watson states, "The American agrarian legend speaks more eloquently of success than the Australian version, but that to some degree reflects other, non-agrarian realities" (226). Watson refers here to the mythogenesis of the American frontier and the perceived inevitability of the colonisation of Native American land. Frederick Jackson Turner claimed that 'primitive' Indian life passed away naturally: "The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader's 'trace;' the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads" (Turner 209). The reward for destined colonisation was Arcadian prosperity and a "composite nationality for the American people" (Turner 215). The individualism of frontiersmanship became tied to the nation's ideology of democracy and freedom. Exceptions such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which a family finds only poverty in the West, expose the "American Dream" as an illusion. Yet even this novel ends with hope, proving that even in the most despairing of circumstances, the potential for transformation remains. The possibility of transformation is often notably

absent in contemporary Australian pastoral narratives such as *The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan and *The Dry* by Jane Harper. In *All the Birds, Singing* the sun, flies and heat of an Australian summer are described in brutal scenes of horror, as opposed to the more muted, dreamlike English scenes: “There’s that solid heat that gets bounced down on us from the tin roof, and the flies in here are fat and damp – when they land on your mouth you feel like you’ve been kissed by something dead” (63). This sense of hopelessness and the desert’s ‘dead heart’ is in contrast to the American myth of regeneration through violence. In the Australian pastoral, violence begets more violence, while the land continues to resist attempts to farm it. Violent destruction does not necessarily lead to success, as illustrated by the listless neglect of Otto’s property, the “hairy-looking paddock” (131) and dried-up waterholes.

Dystopian Purging and the Myth of *Terra Nullius*

The arson Jake commits in her hometown as a teenager could be interpreted as a dystopian symbol of purging: a complete destruction of landscape and an attempt to erase the frontier legacy of male-against-female violence. Yet the crime does not create a fresh start for Jake. She runs first to homelessness, then to sex work, and at each destination, violence repeats. Jake is coerced into sex work and then physically and sexually abused throughout this period. Her escape to remote farm work provides a brief respite before she is threatened and sexually harassed by a shearer. There is the sense, both in the actions of the character and the reverse-chronological structure of the book, that distance and time are illusory. Jake exists in a cycle of violence repeating in perpetuity, and her purgatory offers no possibility of redemption because she cannot erase her history. Brian Ireland argues for a complete erasure of landscape in dystopian road story narratives (503). However, this apocalyptic purging results in the replication of the original frontier

myth of a 'blank slate' upon which to begin another cycle of mythogenesis, thus re-enacting the myths of *Tabula Rasa* and *Terra Nullius*. This glorification of the colonial adventurer demonstrates a Western romanticism and desire for an 'uninhabited' land that never actually existed. Radical erasure is not the way forward, and writing dystopia as the new frontier may result in the shaping of cultural archetypes into newer, more justified forms.

It must be acknowledged that the dystopia often being imagined in post-apocalyptic texts – a land where people's rights are stripped and their culture and beliefs destroyed – is already a reality. Dystopian themes such as incarceration, slavery, stolen children and the loss of language, religion and identity have all happened, and continue to happen, to Indigenous Australians. While dystopian road stories do serve an important function in subverting frontier romanticism, they also run the risk of regenerating the very myths they seek to subvert. However, one example of a successful dystopian text which does not repeat the myth of regeneration through violence is the television series *Cleverman* (2016), in which the 'Hairies' (a group of marginalised people living on the outskirts of a wasted dystopian city), act as a powerful symbol of the continued oppression of Indigenous people in contemporary Australian society. The mythogenesis of the frontier must be acknowledged rather than erased, and this acknowledgment is ideally conducted by people from the margins. Contrary to the frontier myth of explorers laying claim, a road story written by a woman, particularly a woman further marginalised by race, class, or in Jake's case, refusal to adhere to gender norms, is less likely to perpetuate the regeneration of violence mythology. An LGBTTQQAAP person, non-white woman or single mother speaks from the margins, and from a less mythic, less storied position. This places her in the ideal position to reconnect to landscape, history and self.

Conclusion

This dissertation is concerned with metaphorical violence and its literary representations, most significantly the impact of their ongoing cultural influence. In *All the Birds, Singing*, the frontier gender binary of hegemonic masculinity is illuminated as one of the enduring legacies of the mythogenesis of the frontier. Jake is tormented for her physical difference and her refusal to adhere to social norms of femininity such as sessility, domesticity and subordination. While Jake displays great physical strength and ‘masculine’ behavioural norms, she also yearns for ‘feminine’ customs, such as elaborate tea house service rituals, and Cokes shared with a friend. Women are a symbol of comfort and safety, yet Jake is rarely permitted access to these rituals. In the tradition of the *Mad Max* movies (1979-2015) Jake is an outsider, and the narrative reflects masculinity and the regeneration through violence myth while problematising these representations. As Kay Schaffer states, “historical interpretation represents women within the master discourse. Deconstructing the discourse can give evidence of a plurality of meanings and shifting subjectivities through time and circumstance” (69). By establishing the connections between animals and women, Wyld also questions the validity of claims to male/female binaries: “The novel asks, if the estrangement of women’s and animals’ bodies is problematic, then is the conception of predatory and animalistic men as wholly other similarly ethically vexed?” (Neave 134). At the conclusion of the novel, Jake imagines she is a child again, returning to the domestic home. Her reunion with her estranged family is a dream and a form of wish fulfilment. Yet perhaps this reunion is a symbol of Jake’s circular road journey and the violence she was forced to endure in order to begin again. The reunion imagines a future for Jake without the erasure of the earth through arson, and thus a future without the sexual abuse and captivity that followed. Jake’s ambiguous return to the family fold could be interpreted as a symbol of the futility of the

romanticism of radical erasure. This suggests that the mythogenesis of the frontier cannot be stilled, but can be re-directed in the form of narratives that are driven by women and other minority protagonists and their re-mapping of landscape through family connection.

Chapter 3

Narrated by the innocent yet perceptive Tom, Romy Ash's *Floundering* is the story of an ill-fated family road trip. After an absence of several years, Loretta surprises her two sons at school, taking them across the Nullarbor Plains to a remote town on the Western Australian coast. Loretta then abandons her sons without food, money or water, the novel ending with the fact of her desertion and the boys' resigned phone call to their grandparents for rescue.

'Pulp Histories': Poverty and Internal Exile in *Floundering*

In contrast to the road journeys in *All the Birds*, *Singing* and *Hiam*, the key justification for violence in *Floundering* is poverty. For Tom, the fleeting moments of relief from relentless hardship are almost euphoric, and treats such as chocolate bars serve only to exacerbate the vulnerability of their existence: "I bite through the chocolate and let my saliva melt the honeycomb. I look out at the night and a tear surprises me, just one, slipping down my cheek" (Ash 63). The precariousness of their journey is exposed when Loretta steals food and performs sex acts in exchange for petrol. Yet juxtaposed with her debasement is Loretta's naive optimism, as she attempts to create an idyllic childhood holiday for her sons. Loretta begins to unravel as her expectations and the reality of her estrangement from the boys becomes apparent. Tom observes her growing vexation, painting an often dispassionate picture: "Loretta's at the table crying, our blankets at her feet. For a moment, because it's so hot and dry, the strangest thing is just that her face is wet" (126). As a young single mother without money or support, Loretta feels excluded by the communities they visit. This exclusion creates an internal exile, triggering violent eruptions from Loretta when confronted with community prejudice. Unlike Hiam's

spiritual redemption and Jake's validation of her imagined monster, there is no illusion of salvation at the close of *Floundering*. Tom's stubborn attention to the physical present and his often bleak observations betray his awareness of Loretta's imminent failure: "I can't see any more birds here, just the grass that's patchy right the way to the edge of the cliff. There are no fences or nothing. Just a sign saying BEWARE and a picture of a crumbly cliff and a stick figure man falling into nothing" (31).

Badlands are inescapable for Loretta due to her low socio-economic status. In his analysis of poverty and class in relation to badlands, Ross Gibson summarises the conditions of a "pulp history of Australia":

Rootlessness and poverty-struck itinerancy; the imposition of imported law; the geography of vastness, deluge, heat and erosion; the rural culture of firearms; a landscape composed of devolving ecologies; the mind-altering pressures of isolation; nervous, nocturnal predation; prejudice and violence visited upon Aborigines; sex grabbed perfunctorily and illicitly; regionalist resentments; migrations impelled by the shove of hopelessness and bitterness rather than the allure of optimism (49).

This 'pulp history' is a combination of social, political and historical legacies, repeated through the mythogenesis of the frontier since colonisation, and mirrored in culture and landscape. Thus a badland is both a form of imagining and a physical place. Badlands are inescapable for Loretta because of her poverty and her single parent status. Her internal exile and poverty are reflected in her surroundings, for example in a sign "pockmarked with bullet holes" (65) and the dilapidated caravans with antennas that "look like they've been here forever, like they've grown from the ground and then died of thirst" (70). Violence is a constant presence in the remote communities they visit, manifesting in

couples who laugh and stare, and the line of men watching Loretta dance in a bar, who “all look a little bit the same, not like they’re related, but that working the same jobs in the same sun has given them all the same hard faces” (61). Loretta travels west from the centre in a cartographic replica of the American route to the Promised Land. However, the Western Australian desert landscape offers no such possibility of redemption.

‘Pulling Yourself Up by the Bootstraps’: The Myth of Frontier Individualism

Badlands are often, for single-mother protagonists, the hometowns they grew up in. *Steam Pigs*, a 1997 novel by Melissa Lucashenko, tells the story of a young Indigenous woman, Sue, who moves from an impoverished outer suburb to the inner city with the aim of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty: “Remembering home, where every second Murri girl dropped out of school, stomach bulging at fourteen or fifteen, ready for a life of welfare” (116). May, in Tara June Winch’s novel *Swallow the Air*, also shares a single mother and a childhood of socio-economic challenges and racial tension. May chooses flight rather than fight because “as a young, marginal, vulnerable Aboriginal girl, fighting is not a good option” (Lucashenko par. 20). May and Sue escape the exile caused by poverty, isolation and racism through mobility, their destination or distance a lesser priority than the act of creating space. Yet this refuge is a temporary illusion, because when the journey ceases the structures of power will still be in place. The legacy of frontier individualism and the ‘Aussie battler’ does not apply to young single mothers. In fact, frontier individualism no longer applies to the majority of the population. With the rapid decline of the middle class in the United States and Australia as a result of the higher cost of living, increasing casual and contract work and unattainable house prices the working poor are multiplying, as are the wealth and capital of the top one per cent. The ‘Australian Dream’ of a steady job, home ownership and nuclear family is unattainable,

and with it the hopes of the ‘Aussie battler’ and the self-made man. The working class in the United States faces similar challenges with the rise in casual work and the lack of health care and living wages. Richard Slotkin’s warning that the mythogenesis of frontier violence has created a “frontier psychology” that has “crippled” progressive society is just as relevant today as it was in 1973:

Our adherence to the ‘myth of the frontier’ – the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top – has blinded us to the consequences of the industrial and urban revolutions and to the need for social reform and a new concept of individual and communal welfare (5).

Contemporary ideals of success or failure are still fuelled by frontier individualism, yet romanticised notions of ‘pulling yourself up by the bootstraps’ and living off of the land are no longer applicable for the working poor. The frontier myth of regeneration through violence contributed to the polarising and limiting notions of success and failure, in that success relied upon the exploitation of people and land. And while the Australian frontier hero did not require success to be immortalised in history, they required at least the possibility of success – something unavailable to women like Loretta.

Self-Destruction and the Idealised Past

Despite the ongoing threat of violence in the novel, Loretta and her sons avoid any real physical harm, a rare blessing in an Australian road story. A greater risk to Loretta than external violence appears to be the risk she poses to herself. Loretta’s self-destruction is reported through Tom’s observations, and also through the slightly overwrought symbolism of a gummy shark whose death the boys fail to prevent. Unlike Hiam, who

seeks violence in a linear form of self-immolation, Loretta seeks an idealised past. Her only objective is to maintain basic needs and survive until they arrive at the caravan park, the destination of Loretta's childhood memories. Hiam's destruction is a symbolic form of regeneration through violence, but contrary to the frontier myth, the violence is self-directed, lacking an heroic quest of exploration and possession. Loretta seeks neither self-destruction nor exploration, yet her quest for an idyllic past leads her in a circular motion. The hopelessness of the Australian frontier is mirrored in her pursuit of something that never existed. Slotkin's theory of mythogenesis suggests that the myth-maker must shift from logical analysis to a perception of the world in poetics (7), in what Wheelwright refers to as a "mythopoeic mode of consciousness" (473). While Loretta idealises a childhood past, she lacks the myth artefact to make this perception complete. Instead of a mythopoeic mode of consciousness, she oscillates between total denial of reality and focusing on the practical realities of being a sole provider. Unlike Hiam's mythopoeic mode in the desert and Jake's mythopoesis manifesting in an invisible monster, Loretta is too preoccupied with survival to impart her own meaning to the desert. Tom engages in the manufacture of myth most notably at the close of the novel, after his mother departs and the landscape is transformed from a place of threat to one of possibility:

Out the back of the roadhouse I can see a car doing doughnuts. The headlights making long beams of dust. I can taste the dust. The squeal and rock-pop bangs of fireworks. The sky bursts into colour. It breaks into beautiful pieces. The pieces fade and fall. The car is still there, going round and round in circles (201).

Tom's altered perception of the landscape can be interpreted as the mythopoeic stage of the myth-making process. The sacrifice of his mother gifts him with new possibilities of imagining, in the tradition of the frontiersmanship trope of a boy leaving the domestic

home in order to become a man. This trope is repeated throughout the road story genre in the escape from the maternal in a quest for respectable manhood and freedom.

‘The Logic of Travel’: Reappropriating Masculine Travel Metaphors

In her introduction to *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women’s Travel Writing*, Sidonie Smith argues that prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the logic of travel was enduringly masculine: “We cannot imagine Odysseus without his travels, or Aeneas, or the knights of the Round Table, or Columbus, Captain Cook, Boswell, Byron, or Loti, or, closer to our own times, Jack Kerouac” (ix). Despite women’s increasing mobility since the late nineteenth century, made possible by “the new technologies of motion that drove modernity” (Smith xi), travel narratives continue to be coded by male-dominated ideologies. Janet Wolff argues that this ideological gendering as male both “impedes female travel and renders problematic the self-definition of (and response to) women who *do* travel” (Wolff, 234). The scarcity of women’s quest narratives and the traditional masculinity of travel render the metaphors and cultural critique problematic. “You can go on a quest to save your father, dress like a man and get discovered upon injury, get martyred and raped, but God forbid you go out the door just to see what’s out there” (Veselka par. 10). The *Bildungsroman* road story such as *On the Road* has not traditionally been available to women, and the lack of mythology surrounding female road stories makes women travellers less visible. As demonstrated by Loretta’s often-threatening encounters with men in public space, a young woman with children ‘belongs’ in the domestic, private space. Disregard of this rule makes her not only unsafe, but an irresponsible parent: “The meanings women make of travel are inflected with the protocols of gender out of which, through which, and against which they negotiate their movement from sessility to mobility” (Smith 11). The patriarchal centre dictates that

narratives in which women or minorities dominate must be regarded as rebellion: writing from the edges, off-road. In this way, travel vocabulary reinforces the dominant ideology even when appearing to rebel against it. One strategy Wolff suggests is the reappropriation of travel metaphors, “a good postmodern practice which both exposes the implicit meanings in play, and produces the possibility of subverting those meanings by thinking against the grain” (Wolff 236). In so far as *Floundering* is the narrative of a woman who kidnaps her children and runs away with them in pursuit of idyllic motherhood, *Floundering* reinforces these patriarchal meanings. Loretta’s eventual failure and abandonment of the boys, however, can be interpreted as subversion. Loretta continues on her quest in the tradition of the male traveller, choosing self-discovery over sessility and the domestication of child-raising.

New Narratives of Possibility and Change

Women’s road stories provide opportunity for narratives of possibility and change. In her exploration of the lack of female road narratives, Vanessa Veselka observed throughout her own road trip the frequent warning of incidents of female rape and murder in nearby localities. Due to the lack of quest narratives for women and the proliferation of tales of ‘rogue’ females coming to harm, Veselka was expected to encounter similar dangers: “We turn away. We don’t want to see. We sanction this invisibility, because her visibility forces a choice: whether or not to save her. Left with the pressure to rescue or run, it’s just easier not to see. This is the exact place where narrative poverty renders women on the road socially invisible” (Veselka par.11). This ‘narrative poverty’ is explored in Gabrielle Brand’s study “You Don’t Know Half the Story: Deepening the Dialogue with Young Mothers in Australia”. Brand argues that negative discourses influence the self-perception and decision-making of un-partnered mothers (Brand et al. 360). Despite the

steady decline of the patriarchal nuclear family structure since the introduction of the 1975 Family Law Act (Hayes et al. 2), social stigma regarding unmarried mothers persists, particularly for those who are young, lack economic privilege, or are members of an ethnic minority. In her case study, Brand demonstrates how real and perceived social stigma have a profound impact on the development of identity and self-perception. Like Loretta, whose awareness of her undesirable status manifests in her defensive refusal of help and directed verbal abuse, the women in Brand's study are objectified by the stranger's gaze and their mothering is on display for public examination. The women's identities are shaped by their feelings of exile in the local community, and their awareness of their public perception as a social and economic burden. The paucity of narratives of adventure and empowerment and the lack of effective role models create a sense of powerlessness to take control, to *plot*: "From a narrative perspective, the young women's stories are based on narrow identity descriptions, with a pre-determined 'closed' plot that has been socially and culturally scripted within the broader socio-cultural context" (Brand et al. 364). Loretta acts impulsively, and her choices are chaotic and unplanned. Underlying her short temper is a deep confusion as to her next action, which often renders her motionless, standing still and gazing into space. Loretta flounders from one catastrophe to the next because she has no self-perception of agency and control. Similarly, in *Riding in Cars with Boys* by Beverly Donofrio, the pregnant protagonist accepts her status as a teen mother with resignation, blaming "God or the will of the world or fate or whatever it is that determines a person's life had turned against me" (33). This is a gendered helplessness that Donofrio links to the freedom of auto-mobility, a freedom that does not extend to women: "It had been men who'd knocked us up, men who'd left us with kids, and men who got the cars" (109).

Wierenga advocates “storying” (54) for un-partnered mothers, which is the act of “listening to, telling, or re-telling or revising a story” (54). Brand advocates the practice of storying as a creative method of challenging existing stereotypes and preconceptions and “re-authoring life scripts and future possibilities and opportunities for change” (356). In *Heroes of the Frontier* by Dave Eggers, a mother takes her children on a road trip across Alaska. Triumphant after their survival of a violent storm, Josie realises that “without movement there is no struggle, and without struggle there is no purpose, and without purpose there is nothing at all. She wanted to tell every mother, every father: There is meaning in motion” (Eggers 363). A second example of this re-authoring is *The Lauras* by Sara Taylor. In this mother-child road trip across America the mother recalls her daring and adventurous youth, inspiring a sense of boldness and self-acceptance in her daughter. Road novels provide an opportunity for single mothers to imagine new narratives of possibility and change, creating a narrative tradition from which to draw new, more inclusive identity formations. Storytelling validates human experience by investing it with meaning, thereby enabling young mothers to mobilise out of their “static, socially scripted storylines” (Brand et al. 366). It is important to note that in both Eggers’s and Taylor’s novels the protagonist is a Caucasian, middle-class woman, thus aligning these women with the triumphalist road story narratives. Yet these narratives also break from tradition, with the androgynous child Alex in *The Lauras* and the alcoholic, rebellious mother in *Heroes of the Frontier*.

‘Picaresque Wandering’ and the Transgressive Picara

Rowland Sherrill, author of *Road Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque*, employs the trope of the picaro or picara to organise road story genres (4). Picaresque narratives centre on a rogue, an adventurous ‘trickster’ typically from a low

social class. The picaresque narrative interrogates cultural norms and exposes the boundaries of race, class and gender:

By virtue of the socially marginal character of the picaro or picara, his or her ingenuous demeanour, and a fair degree of literary license, the figure easily (or impishly) trespasses social boundaries, thus serving as a catalyst or a 'lens' for one of the major purposes of the old picaresque narratives – namely, running the social gamut of the culture in question (Sherrill 4).

Sherrill advocates a new form of picaro, one emerging from the old traditions of social trespass, exploration and adventure, but whose objective is deconstruction rather than satire. In contemporary America, which he describes as “fluid, heterogeneous, regionalised and fragmented” (5), Sherrill proposes a picaresque narrative that is coded less by satire than by a form of “map making” (5) and that explores the social structures of postmodern America. Sherrill’s examples are overwhelmingly male, and his brief mention of picaras and the matter of gender are summarily dismissed because characters are “defined less by sex and gender and far more by shapes and movements of the road life that define picaro and picara alike” (5). This claim is somewhat contradictory, as by virtue of cataloguing social difference, gender inevitably influences the ordering of these observations. Taking inventory of postmodern society cannot be divorced from matters of gender any more than it can be divorced from questions of ethnicity and social and economic capital. The very act of recognising the ‘otherness’ Sherrill describes involves defining the ‘other’ against the dominant patriarchal centre.

Alexandra Ganser argues for “picaresque wandering” (258) as a central trope of movement in contemporary women’s road stories, providing “a rich generic tradition of literary deviance and errancy to act upon and revise” (258). This tradition, evident in such

masculine novels as *On the Road* and John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, is an ideal location from which women can deviate from Brand's "pre-determined closed plot" (364). Contrary to the woman's picaresque narrative as defined by its difference from the masculine picaro, Ganser argues for the importance of transgression as a metaphor for movement in women's road narratives (265). Regardless of the nature of the breach, it is the act of transgression itself which is important, and the emphasis is on the journey itself rather than the logic of arrival and destination: "It is obviously due to the genderedness of the fictionalised spatiality of the American highway that both a literal and more metaphorical transgression of the L/laws of space become vital in women's writing on the road" (Ganser 265). Transgression has the potential to break the mythogenesis cycle of regeneration through violence. As a cartographic metaphor, it functions as a diversion from the linear production of the mythology of the frontier.

If picaresque mobility symbolises a refusal to be defined by class, gender or ethnicity, then the single mother narrator is perhaps best placed to do this. By virtue of the fact that she lacks the narrative canon and visibility of conventional road travellers, the unpartnered mother is uniquely placed to test boundaries. For instance, 'Ma' in *The Lauras* fiercely defends her child's right to not articulate their gender, while at the same time challenging her child's own conventional beliefs about ethnicity, culture and privilege. In *Riding in Cars with Boys*, teenage single mother Beverly is highly aware of economic inequality and her own working-class status. The automobile functions in the narrative as a symbol of both class aspirations and the reproduction of gender inequality in consumerism. Labelling herself as a "hood", Beverly describes "speeding around Wallingford in crowded cars with guys who took corners on two wheels, flew over bumps, and skidded down the road to get me screaming" (Donofrio 17). By engaging in the sort of adolescent behaviour deemed normal for boys and risky for girls, Beverly

becomes a ‘bad girl’, and consequently, a bad mother. However, the narrative conclusion is a conventional one, in which Beverly attains a college education and achieves middle-class respectability. Thus the picara does not always succeed in her act of transgression. In *Floundering*, the picara fails in her mission to break out of her script of ‘no-hoper’. But Loretta’s failure is perhaps more useful for social stocktaking than any potential success. In her failure, Loretta transgresses the narrative expectations of maternal reunion and return to domestic sessility. According to Sherrill, bad picaros – being those who somehow fail in their attempts to trespass social boundaries because of “dis-eases’ of social relation” (129) – should be interpreted as narrative devices, or “specific authorial tactics, as their narrative tilts instructs the reader” (130). The failures of the picara can be interpreted as further commentary on the complexity of finding solutions to social marginalisation, and can be just as revealing as the successful tricksters. The failed picara also serves a second, symbolic function as a subversion of the frontier myth of success and prosperity through violence and possession. The death of the American and Australian Dreams suggests the opportunity for new definitions of contemporary failure and success.

‘Mapping’ the Road with Familial Relationships

One of the most ubiquitous approaches implemented in all three of the central texts under analysis is the cartographic act of ‘mapping’ landscape with family relations. The mapping of the Australian landscape by familial relationships is one such method by which women can diverge from the continued production of frontier landscape mythology. Family and domestic relationships, especially the search for long-lost parents and lovers, are a dominant theme in Australian road stories. Delia Falconer connects this narrative strategy with attempts to solve “the broken, unfinished business of our

landscape” (9). The fact that these family reunions are not always successful in stories such as *Floundering* and *Swallow the Air* can be interpreted as a renegotiation of borders and heteronormative narratives. Road stories in which a single mother succeeds in her quest for self-determination and parental bonding, such as *Heroes of the Frontier*, *The Lauras*, and *Riding in Cars with Boys*, perpetuate the triumphant mythology of American road narratives. In Australian novels, the criminal single father on the run in Denise Young’s *Last Ride* and the re-abandonment of the children in *Floundering* offer a bleaker outlook on life on the road for families. Yet while they are less triumphant than American road stories, Australian narratives are not without hope, providing alternative trajectories to the traditional pairing of the mother with a new partner and return to the domestic fold. Rather than the single mother ‘finding a new man’, the mother may simply find herself, as in the ending to the American road story *Anywhere but Here* by Mona Simpson. These narratives are useful as potential sites of ideological decolonisation, for example through the young single mother determining that she is not necessarily ‘bad’ just because she is alone.

The cultural archetypes that emerged on the frontier must now be identified and written back to, yet this is not as simple as replacing white male protagonists with people from the margins. Women create their own mythology, as demonstrated by Jake and Hiam, yet these myths also differ from the mythogenesis of the frontier in that they engage with, but do not originate from, cultural archetypes. These women exist in landscapes which are Arcadia-free, neither in harmony, nor at war. Instead of mapping the landscape as explorers, some female protagonists may map it with both broken and repaired familial relationships. They engage with mythogenesis from the margins, acknowledging historical myth without perpetuating the myth of violence through regeneration.

Conclusion

The road story's status as an anti-authoritarian site of rebellion and revelation makes it an ideal narrative for a single mother to determine herself outside of patriarchal society and social and economic limitations: "The genre's attractiveness for writers with a socio-political agenda has to do with the fact that it has inherited from the picaresque a tradition that depicts the road as a privileged public space in which difference is negotiated and selves and others are brought into dialogue" (Ganser 38). One of the conflicts that emerges when using metaphors of travel to explore social rebellion is the acknowledgment and reinforcement of the patriarchal centre. As Silbergleid argues, the proliferation of heterosexual ideology ensures the reproduction of the patriarchal centre:

Until we can create narratives that operate under a non-heterosexual metaphor, the stories that we tell about the family will continue to reproduce, rather than challenge, dominant ideas about the family, ensuring that single motherhood remains either the enviable outcome of Hollywood wealth or the deplorable stereotype of the welfare mom (Silbergleid par. 18).

The road story, instead of simply reinforcing patriarchal values, can become a discursive space where dominant ideologies are adopted and transformed. This space allows for increased *visibility*, and creates opportunities for empowerment and re-authoring of life scripts in contemporary narratives: "The search for the maternal ultimately becomes a search for representation. Existing outside symbolic institutions, the road allows for this query" (Paes de Barros 125).

Chapter 4

“Belly of the Beast” is the story of pregnant groupie Nico, who is abandoned by the band while on tour in central Australia. After being taken in by local cattle station manager Dave, Nico discovers she has a natural affinity for farm work. Interwoven with this story is a second, flashback narrative detailing her childhood on the road with her father Charlie, a cloud-chaser and photographer. Child Nico is traumatised when Charlie disappears during a violent storm, leaving her alone in the desert. In the present-day narrative, her growing pregnancy and Dave’s drug addiction create increasing tension between the couple, and Nico goes into early labour while assisting a cow during a storm. The novel ends with Dave hospitalised and Nico settled on the farm with her baby daughter.

“Belly of the Beast” had its genesis sixteen years ago, in February 2002. I was nineteen years old, pregnant, and lacking both economic resources and support. Having been raised by a single mother myself, I knew the difficulty that lay ahead. Seeking reassurance, I spent my spare time in used book stores, searching for protagonists in similar circumstances. But these protagonists simply did not exist. The only novels featuring single mothers as the leads were romance novels, in which the woman was inevitably ‘saved’ by a dashing male hero. When I commenced writing the creative work I had a simple goal: make the single mother the hero. Immersed in the plotting process, I failed to consider the political, economic and cultural conditions I wrote from. What I produced in the first draft was a novel which actually recycled some of the same patriarchal mythology I had aimed to disrupt. My protagonist was disenfranchised and mistreated by the two male sexual partners she depended on for economic security. Furthermore, the end of the novel included the return of the child’s father, thus re-establishing the nuclear

family unit and the protagonist's place as subordinate mother and partner. The draft included several scenes of sexual violence, including violence enacted against Indigenous women by white men. I had perpetuated myths of race, gender and class which have been re-cycling through Australian literature since colonisation.

'Compelling Metaphors': A Shift from Mythopoeics to Logical Analysis

The frontier mythology I had perpetuated in my first draft was a result of my writing in a stage of mythopoesis: reasoning by metaphor instead of reasoning by nuanced analysis. Richard Slotkin defines a mythology as "a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors" (6). One metaphor which manifests in both American and Australian road stories is the representation of the landscape as wild and untamed, thus legitimising representations of women as being of a similar, natural wildness requiring male control. Another example is the binary representation of Indigenous people as 'wild' versus Europeans as 'civilised', and the use of this metaphor for Christian ideas of the human battle between good and evil. In the process of investigating the violent mythology of the frontier, I must rely on artefacts which have reproduced these metaphors. Charles Sturt's expedition journals, Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*, and contemporary road films such as *Last Cab to Darwin* (2015) recycle metaphors of exploration, domination and repression. The solution to the problem of legitimising cultural archetypes came to me gradually in the rewriting process. Instead of the research and creative practise being two separate activities as I had anticipated, they become a kind of two-step: a partnered dance, so that each shift in the direction of the research was reflected in the creative drafts. The process became a kind of reversal of Slotkin's mythogenesis theory, whereby I commenced writing in a mythopoeic mode of

consciousness, using reasoning by metaphor and poetics, and then shifted into a mode of more nuanced analysis. This shift is reflected in the creative work, which now balances the portrayal of violence against women with scenes of their empowerment. Similarly to the three road stories analysed, the creative piece reflects both an acknowledgment of the legacy of frontier violence and the possibility of ending its renewal. This final chapter will discuss the ways in which “Belly of the Beast” disrupts the frontier legacy of violent oppression in Australian road stories in relation to the central themes of ethnicity, gender and class.

‘The Trappings of Domesticity’: Home as Badland

Returning to her hometown of Champion Beach to obtain money for an abortion, Nico is overwhelmed by childhood memories: “She attempted a smile as their shared history flooded in, images she’d tried so hard to erase flashing once more through her mind. She felt a sudden tightness in her throat, a sick cloying feeling like she was drowning in something sweet” (9). As in the novels *Swallow the Air* and *Steam Pigs*, the protagonist’s hometown functions as a symbolic badland, triggering past anxieties and insecurities. As Ross Gibson states in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, “the troubles we’d like to contain ‘over there’ tend to turn up repeatedly in our own lived experience. Our badlands are vital because they can disturb us into recognising the issues that we wish we could deny, ignore or forget” (179). Massie’s partner Darren functions as the most potent symbol of Nico’s past, while also functioning as a symbol of her own fears and desires. Darren represents an acceptance of terms as he strives to secure a house, full-time job and nuclear family despite the challenges of inherited intergenerational poverty. Nico fears the trappings of domesticity, the “Rockford work boots next to the doormat, a dog leash hanging from a hook on the wall” (6). She is caught between a yearning for financial

security and the fear of being abandoned and trapped into the role of parent and provider. Whether Darren abused Nico in their adolescence or not is left purposefully unclear, signalling the unreliability of memory and the potency of myth regardless of its accuracy. For as Slotkin asserts, “man is essentially a myth-making animal. He naturally seeks to understand his world in order to control it, and his first act in compassing this end is an act of the mind or imagination” (7). Nico perceives Champion Beach as a site of oppression and conformity, when in reality it is simply a beachside tourist town, no more threatening than any other. Champion Beach is a site activated by imagining, and this particular badland functions as a symbol in the text of the lifelong impact of growing up in a lower socio-economic class in Australia. Leaving the badland for the road is Nico’s symbolic rejection of the terms of her upbringing and the status quo of intergenerational poverty. Yet, just as the protagonists in the three key texts analysed discover, Nico soon realises that mobility does not equal escape.

The Australian Landscape: Neither Abhorrent nor Sublime

The inclusion of quotations from Charles Sturt’s 1844-1846 expedition diaries at the beginning of each flashback chapter illuminates the difference between European explorer expectations and the reality of the Australian landscape. Sturt’s recordings detail his often hyperbolic impressions, such as the “dreadful nature of the country we traversed today, worse in truth than any we have ever entered. Plains dark with samphire, or perfectly bare and white with salt, Sand hills rising higher and higher, the wind erasing our tracks the moment they were made and blowing the salt over the flats like smoke” (251). This perceived alienation identified by numerous explorers has persisted in collective memory and modern representations, resulting in the landscape being depicted in either/or extremes as either abhorrent or sublime. In “Belly of the Beast”, Nico’s

experience of the Australian desert is defined by more practical matters, primarily the resources she has at her disposal. On first arriving at the farm she perceives the landscape as menacing because she has no sense of belonging: “She searched the horizon for a single living creature, but couldn’t find one. Nothing moved, and as Nico stared the prickly grass seemed to grow another inch, warning her to stay off of it” (102). Commencing work on the farm changes her perceptions from emotional to practical, and Nico comes to view the land in terms of farming and agriculture. In one sense this is a repetition of the frontier trope of the settler taking possession of, and then exploiting, the land. However, Nico’s characterisation as a young mother who exhibits empathy towards animals and a disinterest in profit-making and possession signals an alteration to this narrative. This alteration is also demonstrated by Rick’s sensitive handling of the injured cow. Although it is unclear whether Rick’s behaviour is different, or whether Nico’s perception of him has changed, there appears to be a new respect for the animals and a sense of harmony on the property that did not exist before: “Nico’s heart expanded at the sight of L6’s little hooves dangling in the air. She noticed the slowness with which Rick lifted the harness, his patience and care as he moved her” (207).

As a child Nico is taught by her father to ‘read’ the landscape, searching cloud arrangements for meaning. She continues to pursue these signs as an adult in cloud and desert landscape formations, and her pursuit of external direction reflects her personal desire for meaning. The signs Nico seeks are illusory and temporary, and as she matures she realises that her father’s quest for signs was a symptom of his weakness. It is unclear to what degree Charlie employs these symbols as an excuse to avoid responsibility for his gambling problem and failing marriage, but a key component of Nico’s personal journey is the realisation that the pursuit of signs and symbols is disempowering. Nico creates a new narrative for herself, of hard work, discipline and motherhood, and in the process,

the landscape is de-mythologised. Her father personifies the landscape, viewing it as a reflection of his innermost fears and desires: “That’s why Dad got on with the Fishies so well, all of them looked up at the sky, trying to read it like an instruction manual for life” (81). The Australian desert is an organism which fluxes and changes, but it is not malevolent, and Nico’s realisation that there is no existential absence or presence is a metaphor for the explorer narrative of inhospitable Australia. Literature portraying nature as the antagonist was an easier narrative to acknowledge than the genocide of Indigenous peoples during colonisation. As Roslynn Haynes observes of the colonists, “if they could not always deliver news of fertility, they could at least imply that it was free of potential conflict” (32). Yet the frontier struggle was not simply people against landscape; it was also people against people. The narrative of the inhospitable desert displaced the conflict between intruders and Indigenous peoples, and allowed explorers to ignore the presence of Indigenous people in the accounts sent back to Britain.

Australian Frontier Tropes: the Hapless Explorer and the Aussie Battler

Australian settler narratives created problematic definitions of defeat and success, with success often being characterised by the oppression of Indigenous people and the possession of their land. The character of Charlie functions in the text as a parody of the sometimes hapless and ignorant early explorers of Australia. Some of the first explorers were selected because of their connections, rather than their proven survival skills (Murgatroyd 55), and this resulted in expeditions that were highly disorganised and fraught with errors and miscommunications: “Armed with only a commanding gaze and an inflated sense of their own importance, they blundered around and died miserable deaths from nothing more glamorous than a dose of scurvy” (Murgatroyd 340). Charlie fails in his career aspirations and his marriage, and most importantly he fails as a parent,

abandoning Nico in the desert and leaving the family in substantial debt. His destiny relies too much on luck and the goodwill of others, just as so many explorers relied on Indigenous people to lead them to waterholes, food sources and shelter. Nico's story is characterised more by defeat than by success, as her career with the band fails, both of her relationships fail, and the farm is struggling after a lengthy drought. Yet there is also the possibility of renewal, symbolised by the heavy rains and the birth of her child. In *All the Birds, Singing*, the failure of Otto's farm echoes the hopelessness and futility that characterises many Australian road stories and anti-pastorals. While the farm suffers from drought in "Belly of the Beast", the novel ends with the possibility of transformation, thus aligning more with the American Arcadian tradition than the Australian anti-pastoral. With Dave's departure, this transformation is also a disruption of the patriarchy. The passing of the storm and the new female leadership symbolise a kind of rebirth, and a new beginning at the station.

As well as functioning as a parody of the colonial explorer, the character of Charlie also represents the fallibility of the 'Aussie battler' trope in contemporary fiction. While well-meaning and conceivably talented, Charlie prioritises his own personal ambition over his family's survival. Nico's mother must financially support them, as well as raising the girls and maintaining the home. Similarly, the cultural archetype of the man as provider and woman as nurturer is subverted in the characters of Nico and Dave. At the close of the novel, Dave succumbs to the pressure of the farm, while Nico delivers a healthy child, alone and in confinement. It is important to note that conceptions of 'strength' and 'weakness' depend on a character's level of privilege. Nico and Amy work tirelessly on the farm because they are aware of the precariousness of their position: in a homosocial environment such as cattle farming, a woman's place is commonly viewed as the kitchen. During my own cattle station farm stay, I experienced a similar challenge, in which I had

to argue for my ability to participate in actual farm work against the owners' expectation that I would only prepare meals. A woman has to fight for her access to the front-line in farming, a position men often take for granted due to the frontier legacy of monologic pastoral masculinity. In "Belly of the Beast" it is Dave who cooks, not because he has to but because he enjoys showing off his skills: "His precise movements reminded Nico of a barman in a hotel, stiff-necked and deft in a way that was designed to intimidate, rather than impress" (103). Unlike Jake in *All the Birds, Singing*, who is repeatedly punished for disobeying patriarchal rule, Nico suffers no punitive justice. Instead, like the frontiersmanship narrative of the 'Aussie battler', Nico's hard work is rewarded with respect and opportunity.

Animal Symbolism in "Belly of the Beast"

In "Belly of the Beast", animal imagery is employed as a symbol of both freedom and oppression. Like Jake in *All the Birds, Singing*, Nico feels empathy towards suffering animals: "A dark hole in her forehead was visible, small and neat as a button. The cow did not lie flat like a withering corpse. Her bulk rose up from the ground, a mountainous thing" (123). On a shooting trip Nico fears for the hunted animals, her fear suggesting that she understands the experience of being preyed upon. Nico's empathy derives from her experience of being subject to hierarchical structures of power. Like the animals, she is outside the phallogocentric centre. Frontier mythogenesis has produced a masculine master-narrative from which Indigenous people, other racial minorities, women and LGBTTTQQAAP people are often excluded. By representing women and animals as the narrative centre, novels such as "Belly of the Beast" and *All the Birds, Singing* provide alternative representations. The white kangaroo, an animal that reappears throughout the text, functions as a symbol of recurring violence and oppression. The kangaroo is "the

colour of ash” (129), a metaphor for death and destruction, and functions as a silent witness, remaining “completely still except for the mouth, which made small circular motions, as if chewing something very small” (129). The kangaroo invades the text with a powerful and threatening silence, symbolising the frontier legacy of violence against Indigenous people and other racial minorities, and the lack of documentation of colonial violence in historical records. The manner in which the kangaroo stands unmoving and silent in the landscape symbolises the ‘Great Australian Silence’ as described by W.E.H. Stanner (18) and the ongoing damage caused by the lack of discourse: “In the United States they made heroes of Davy Crockett and Kit Carson, who fought and killed the Native Americans; in Australia they talked in whispers, covered their tracks, pretended it didn’t happen. The bush is tainted with this cowardice” (Watson 352).

Imagination in the Present Day with Advice from the Past

Slotkin claims that the myth of regeneration through violence became “the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). Similarly, this metaphor structures much of the Australian experience, with roads in particular being frequently imagined as sites of sudden and unexplained violence. In “Belly of the Beast”, the initial draft contained several violent scenes which, upon reflection, functioned as a recycling of this mythology. The violent scenes which remain are necessary in their illumination of the connections between poverty, inequality and violence. Darren dominates and belittles Nico at any opportunity, his threatening presence manifesting in the clicking of his pen: “She heard it even when she was alone: *Click-click-click*. The sound had become a warning that danger was coming” (20). Ray’s rape of a young woman in Alice Springs illuminates the notion of male entitlement to female bodies which is systemic to a society founded on frontier notions of patriarchy. Nico’s destruction of the band equipment could be interpreted as a

recycling of the regeneration through violence myth, yet it could also be argued that this action is a symbol of the breaking of her ties to servitude and her reclamation of independence. Dave forces Nico to give birth alone, in the dark and the dirt like an animal. Yet this does not weaken Nico or make her less 'human'. She emerges a new mother and reclaims her body while at the same time bringing another female into the world. While Nico births, Dave overdoses, his failure to contain and dominate Nico complete.

In Chapter One, I discussed *Hiam* as a road novel which reflects and interrogates the frontier legacy of oppression of racial minorities. Road novels such as *Swallow the Air* and *Snake Cradle* are also discussed as narratives in which Indigenous women suffer violence and sexual abuse at the hands of men, symbolising the continued mythogenesis of the frontier. It is important to acknowledge my own privilege as a white writer, as well as my protagonist's as a white character. Kris Lackey argues that "The great American road has become a magic screen for the fears and desires of travellers with means and light skin" (xi). The research process has increased my awareness of the risk of repeating paradigms of ignorance and privilege in a genre already rife with these tropes. After deleting scenes in which I noticed these paradigms occurring, one narrative solution I found was to create a central Indigenous character, while not attempting to speak for her in terms of her ethnicity and culture. Amy is a strong, respected farmer. She is not a victim but she does face numerous obstacles because of her race and gender. As an Indigenous farmer in a mainly-male pastoral town, Amy must work twice as hard as the men, and it is a testament to her strength and determination that she has secured this position. Nico may not always witness the discrimination, but that does not mean it does not exist. As Gibson states, "to be rid of these traumas, we need to imagine how to transcend the cruelty that seems to have defined colonialism. To do so we need imagination in the present day but also advice from the past" (84).

Single Mothers and the Frontiersmanship Legacy

Like Loretta in *Floundering*, Nico is painfully aware of the exclusion that a young, working-class single mother experiences in Australian society. A sense of internal exile is created, what Edward Said defines as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (173). When Nico returns to Champion Beach, her sense of exile is triggered by her memories of the struggles of her own single mother and their ostracism. Yet when Nico returns to the band it becomes clear that her experience of freedom is illusory: she is essentially a domestic servant, no more ‘free’ than she would be in a traditional domestic pairing like that of Massie and Darren. Exile in “Belly of the Beast” is a function of memory rather than physical place. When Nico’s memories are activated she relives the feelings of shame and estrangement from her community. Nico’s arrival at the cattle farm is a kind of exile because she is physically and socially isolated and can no longer access her sense of identity through her role in the band. However, her access to skills-building through physical labour soon negates these emotions, and thus self-empowerment breaks the cycle of helplessness and narrative poverty. While Loretta in *Floundering* continues on her quest in the tradition of the male traveller and chooses self-discovery over immobility and the domestication of child-raising, Nico chooses to stay put. However, it is important to note that she does not continue her pattern of domestic servitude in Dave’s house. Homemaking is something she does little of, instead insisting on her right to skills-building and hard labour.

Like contemporary road novels *The Lauras* and *Heroes of the Frontier*, “Belly of the Beast” provides a single mother narrative outside the traditional trajectory of being ‘saved’ by a male hero. An unlikely pastoral hero, Nico’s adventure is a form of frontiersmanship in her adventurousness and self-discovery. Yet the legacy of frontier

individualism also problematises Nico's empowerment. Romanticised notions of 'living off the land' are not only questionable due to the legacy of stolen Indigenous territory, but also in the environmental damage caused by large-scale farming. Another problem is the pastoral industry's position as a structure of power (Gelder and Jacobs 137). This ambiguity is implied throughout the novel, in Nico's observations of the struggle of the farm in drought and also by the fact that the farm's losses appear to be subsidised by drug manufacturing. The possibility is high that with Dave's departure the farm will continue to struggle. There is, however, hope in the relationships Nico has built, and in her new respect for farming and agriculture. There is a possibility that with an unconventional protagonist the direction of the farm, too, could also be unconventional, perhaps continuing in a direction of small-scale cooperation and sustainability as opposed to large-scale land degradation and loss. This is implied by the care with which they farm: "Not a leaf of weed can arise without them noticing. Not a centimetre of soil can move without replacement" (211).

The Contemporary Picara

When Nico realises that her freedom on the road with the band is illusory, she abandons the dream, pushing forward to a new and unknown location. Despite her lack of resources and the end of her relationship, she remains optimistic: "She was young and free of all the bullshit, forging a path that was hers alone. *Nicky the adventurer*, her dad used to say. *Nicky the brave pioneer*" (91). In his analysis of the new American picaresque, Sherrill argues that the ability to start over with persistent optimism is one of the defining characteristics of the picaro or picara: "Whatever the fundamentals of his hope, he is able to continue along the solitary course of his hard-scrabble life and to remain open to what it will bring" (25). The picara's resilience and openness to new experiences can be

connected to the American frontiersman, whose restless quest for adventure Ireland argues is distinctly American, for “there is nothing more American than the pioneer spirit” (475). Nico’s optimism could well be interpreted as naivety or stubbornness, but her ability to start anew also provides the opportunity for surprise. Open-mindedness on the road allows for not only self-reinvention, but also a non-judgmental state of mind, providing opportunity to break out of traditional modes of thinking. The *picara* or *picaro*’s adaptability functions as “a structure of moral balance on his twisted course through a tilted world” (Sherrill 24), and this equanimity invites the same thoughtfulness in the reader. An open-minded *picara* is less likely to judge, and is perhaps better equipped to understand complex social and cultural issues without resorting to either/or, good guy/bad guy dichotomies. Nico’s openness to new experiences and people can be linked to her status as a marginalised character, and her evolution through empathy and sensitivity to the struggles of others as well as her own. The picaresque genre stems from the protagonist’s pursuit of the basic means of survival, and Sherrill connects these origins of the genre with a contemporary hunger for meaning, in what he describes as an epic of hunger (67): “There are frequent instances in which the remarkable thematic ‘hunger’ of this character in exile and tumult is nothing other than starvation for a realm of meaning” (Sherrill 25). Nico is uniquely placed to respond to contemporary social, cultural and political contexts, not only because she is an outsider but because she is capable of starting over. The contemporary *picara* or *picaro* is defined by their optimism, as well as their commitment to change.

Conclusion

The protagonist in “Belly of the Beast” is white, cisgendered and heterosexual, and able-bodied and physically attractive by Western conventions. These privileges give her access

to social currency and opportunity, yet Nico also comes from a lower socio-economic class, and has created a perception of herself as dependant on her partner for survival. The frontier legacies of racial, sexual and class oppression are illuminated both in Nico's observations and in her personal experience. As Gibson states, "disturbance in the soul is perhaps more prosaically understood as persistence in the memory" (92). Nico's memories are activated when she revisits Champion Beach, triggering a desire to move forward and start again. 'Picara' Nico converts her feelings of internal exile into a determination to make a place for herself through farm work, thus signalling an end to the picara role. While she cannot escape the structures of oppression, Nico finds a kind of freedom within the system. The mythogenesis of the frontier must be acknowledged rather than erased, and people from the margins, especially women, are ideally placed to do this work.

Conclusion

In her book *Roads of Her Own, Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives 1970-2000*, Alexandra Ganser asks whether “the quest in America, with its master narrative of the white masculine journey west and its implications of colonisation and the subjugation of the land under an Anglo civilizational paradigm, can be rewritten by women's literature to circumvent colonial and gendered mastery” (33). I have argued in this exegesis that the four Australian road stories analysed here are evidence for the affirmative. In *Hiam*, Sallis utilises the road as both a symbol of the legacy of racial oppression from the Australian frontier, and also as a site which facilitates Hiam's reconnection with her Islamic spirituality. The road and its ambiguity as both a technology of oppression and an opportunity for freedom are utilised by Sallis as a discursive tool, and by acknowledging this ambiguity, Sallis disrupts the cyclical mythology of the Australian frontier and ceases the regeneration of racial oppression in Hiam's self-acceptance beyond cultural binaries and stereotypes.

In *All the Birds, Singing*, Evie Wyld uses the trope of physical and sexual violence against women to interrogate Australian cultural archetypes such as ‘the good bloke’ and the ‘Aussie battler’. Jake is othered because she is perceived as being too masculine, and her punishment functions as a powerful reminder of the problematic frontier legacy of hegemonic masculinity. The circular structure of the novel in which Jake progresses through time back into her past can be interpreted as a representation of the circularity of the mythogenesis of frontier violence. Yet the novel does end with the possibility of re-direction, and Jake's new friendship has the potential for nurturing and understanding. In Romy Ash's *Floundering*, the characterisation of the working-class single mother subverts the myths of frontier individualism and the masculine logic of travel. The single

mother in *Floundering* follows the traditional male quest trajectory, choosing freedom and self-discovery over domesticity and mothering. Thus the single mother becomes a new kind of picaresque, one who both disrupts the patriarchy and also exposes the frontier myth of suffering and prosperity and the intergenerational poverty which results from Australia's classist society. My creative work "Belly of the Beast" is a continuation of these themes, and my own response to the problem of narrative poverty for single mothers in Australian literature. "Belly of the Beast" uses the frontier tropes of the 'Aussie battler' and the hapless male explorer to illuminate the circular process of the mythogenesis of frontier violence while also disrupting this circularity in the fate of the protagonist. Nico is a contemporary picaresque, both experiencing internal exile as a result of her status as a working-class single mother, and also achieving self-determination beyond the limitations of her class and gender.

Drawing on Richard Slotkin's theory of the mythogenesis of the frontier (5), in this exegesis I have proposed that the circular process of analysis and regeneration of violent mythology in both Australian and American literature has been recycled throughout the road writing genre. Traditionally, the frontier was something to be feared in Australia, rather than raced toward. The mythogenesis of the American frontier was perpetually speeding forward and expanding, while the Australian frontier was often almost at a standstill. The individualistic American explorer and the collectivist Australian explorer have characterised the male protagonists who dominated the genre at its peak. Yet the contradiction of the road genre lies in its ability to both recycle and problematise such tropes at the same time. The metaphor of the road is always a straight line: a linear, singular route heading in one direction. Yet the true appeal of the road is its circularity and the way it enables readers to u-turn, turn around and double back. This circular route enables us to revisit things we may have forgotten.

In crossing great distances and approaching an expansive horizon, drivers experience a sensation of space. This space allows travellers to imagine and dream, to let their minds wander. Meaning becomes unfixed and unstable, and identities are interrogated. Using the methodology of mythogenesis and subversion, I have argued for road stories about women, and characters from positions of cultural, ethnic, class, religious and sexual difference, as one possibility for the disruption of the recycling of the mythology of the frontier. While it must be acknowledged that using the lens of mythogenesis to interpret road story texts and themes entails the risk of recycling cultural archetypes and tropes, I have argued that the foregrounding of voices outside the dominant patriarchal centre allows for a revision of this mythology. According to Ganser, “the function of women’s road novels is twofold – as renewal and critique” (32). The three texts analysed in this exegesis both critique the past and also signal a new way forward that questions, challenges and rejects the powerful structures of gender, class, and cultural and social difference.

Rather than being a fixed entity, the road story is constantly changing and evolving. The road story genre is also varied and made up of often hybrid forms. It is to my regret that in the scope of this exegesis I was unable to explore road stories by LGBTTQQAAP writers. The LGBT community has produced a wealth of road stories, including films such as *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001) and the more recent *Carol* (2015). LGBT writers are uniquely placed to write beyond the borders. As Omar Musa observed, “There is something about the prejudice that has occurred in this country and in the world that forces certain people to be outsiders that makes them perfect to bear witness to the world.” The second road story subgenre regrettably outside my scope was narratives by African American writers. According to Kris Lackey, African American road stories “bare the

privileges white travellers take for granted” (130). Road stories such as *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin and *South of Haunted Dreams* by Eddy L. Harris are examples of a rich and varied subgenre. Lackey articulates my own concern that much of the road writing genre is a form of self-gratifying sensibility whereby the writer indulges in personal exploration under the illusion of “disinterested liberty” (xi). This illusion is a privileged position for those with access to mobility and security, and the act of “just passing through” can enable a disconnection due to the act of observing social and cultural issues without being directly affected by them. Lackey’s claim that some road narratives do not so much “create freedom as express freedom that already exists by virtue of class and race” (12) is reflected in road novels such as *Travels with Charley*, in which John Steinbeck designs a luxury camper in order to observe social and cultural issues from a comfortable distance. While all road stories are inevitably capitalist in nature because of the use of automotive technology, the experience of travel in an air-conditioned, efficient vehicle is markedly different from that of travelling in one which overheats and breaks down. Unpredictability and discomfort, anxiety and fear: these are the hallmarks of the road trip for the traveller who knows that if their car breaks down they will be stranded, their destiny completely beyond their control. My solution to the concerns Lackey has expressed are the novels examined in this exegesis, particularly *Floundering* in its treatment of class and poverty. Through the evolution of the creative work as my research progressed, I became aware of the dangers of writing in a mythopoeic state, and of repeating tropes in the pursuit of narrative. Disruption is a key goal in the creative work: disruption of violence against women, racial minorities and LGBT-identifying people who exist outside the white patriarchal centre. The road story genre provides the ideal format for disruption in its ambiguous form. According to Ffion Murphy,

The Australian road problematises identity and identification in the sense that it ubiquitously occupies that liminal space between the real and the imaginary, 'home' and 'not home,' town and country, between suburbia and the bush, between culture and nature, between America and Australia. The road connects these dual polarities but without clearly defining where one stops and the other starts (83).

The frontier legacies of gendered landscape, class divide and the oppression of females and racial minorities are reflected and subverted in contemporary road narratives. Road stories provide opportunities for transformation and spirituality, yet at the same time, these limits can often be reinforced because a physical escape does not necessarily enable a psychological one. Trauma repeats, and the structures of power in Western capitalist society remain. While Nico outwardly rejects the notion that an underprivileged woman cannot survive without a man, she has inherited the powerlessness of poverty. Despite this, she finds a way to live with a freedom not ordinarily available to a woman of her status, and she achieves this through the solitary act of road travel, and finally through industry and physical labour. The texts I have discussed here have added new and interesting dimensions to the road story tradition, and my hope is that my own novel will contribute to the wealth of road writing by women, and writers of ethnic, cultural, sexual, class and religious minorities, which continues to disrupt the mythogenesis of the violence of the frontier.

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