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About the Author

Graham Akhurst is a Kokomini writer who grew up in Meanjin. He is a Lecturer of Indigenous Studies and Creative Writing at UTS. Graham began his writing journey in a hospital bed in 2011. He read and started journaling while passing the time between treatments for Endemic Burkett Lymphoma. As a Fulbright Scholar, Graham took his love for writing to New York City, where he studied for an MFA in Fiction at Hunter College. He is a board member for the First Nations Artists and Writers Network and Varuna. He lives with his wife on Gadigal Country in Sydney and enjoys walking Centennial Park with a good audiobook.

www.grahamakhurst.com

BORDERLAND



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GRAHAM AKHURST

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For Mum

I acknowledge and pay my respects to Elders past and present on the Turrbal, Yuggera, Lenape, and Gadigal lands in which this novel was written; the Turrbal, Yuggera and Gunggari lands where this novel is set; and all Indigenous lands where this novel is read.

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1

It was graduation day. I sat uncomfortably in the first row of the auditorium at St Lucia Private, waiting to receive my high school certificate. The school band stopped playing and silence filled the Great Hall. I knew we'd have to walk onto the stage soon, shake hands, receive papers, and smile for the camera. The other grade twelve students around me seemed elated, but my stomach was tight.

I felt an attack coming on. I focused on deep, slow breathing like Mum had taught me. I'd been looking forward to graduation all year. To be finally finished with school was massive, but a few weeks ago, out of nowhere, I started to get these panic attacks. It felt like I'd taken a big breath in but then couldn't exhale and all consequent breaths sat on top. Soon after, the dread would come.

Jenny must have noticed my breathing and put her hand in mine. Jenny was my best friend. Our mums loved cooking together and we had grown up close in Brisbane. Today she'd straightened her long black hair. It was usually a crazy wiry mess like a bird's nest.

She smiled. 'It'll be over soon, Jono,' she said. 'Just chill. We only have to play dancing possum for a little bit longer.'

Dancing possum. It was her term for what was expected of us at these events. We were paraded around so the school could show off how 'socially conscious' they were and all the wonderful things they were doing to 'close the gap' by helping the poor blackfellas. Don't get me wrong, it was great to be on a scholarship, but it came with conditions; like having to be the very first person on stage after the principal made a speech about you and the only other Indigenous student. It was a bit much.

Principal Davis moved toward the podium. She wore a long green dress, her nails were painted bright pink, and her blonde hair was styled and stiff. She'd moved from Tasmania two years ago, and was known for complaining about the humidity and constantly slurping on a water bottle.

My hands were wet with sweat. The terror was knotting up my insides.

Principal Davis tapped the microphone and waited for silence.

'Good afternoon, class of 2017. Just before we begin...' She grabbed a piece of paper and read. 'I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we are gathered on today, the Y... Yug... Yugaara... Yuggera.' Panic crossed her face and she looked directly down at Jenny and me. Jenny nodded, confirming the pronunciation.

'Yes. Good. Very good,' Principal Davis continued. 'I'm happy to acknowledge them and the Elders past, present, and future.' She placed the piece of paper on the lectern and cleared her throat. 'This brings me to the wonderful,

just wonderful, scholarship program that the school has invested in over the last couple of years. We have taken it upon ourselves to become an institution that helps establish equality and education for all.' She raised her finger high in the air. 'We strive to provide a top-notch private school education for the less fortunate in our society. This year will be the first time we have graduated students from the Great Change scholarship. We have helped two lovely Indigenous students achieve their dream of completing a high school education. I would like to welcome Jonathan Lane and Jenny Pohatu to the stage. Please give a big round of applause as our Great Change scholars receive their high school certificates.'

People clapped. Jenny looked at me. I must have looked pretty sick by the way I felt. She laughed and tugged at my sleeve.

'Jono, get up. It's dancing possum time.' She pulled me up and I walked onto the stage and shook Principal Davis's hand.

'Well done, young man. It wasn't the easiest couple of years but you got there in the end.' She wiped my sweat off her hand and onto her skirt as I nodded back at her.

'Thanks, miss.'

I looked out at the crowd. All those people staring at me. What were they thinking? That I was an imposter? That I was only there out of the school's charity? Each round of clapping rang out like thunder in my head. My breathing quickened. My chest felt tighter. I quickly exited the stage and sat back down. I tried to calm my breathing and with it the sense of dread.

I turned around to find Mum. She was in the crowd somewhere, proud as punch, no doubt. When I couldn't spot her, I looked out the large windows towards the football oval before the Brisbane city skyline and exhaled a long slow breath. Storm clouds formed on the horizon.

On the window ledge, a magpie was fighting a crow for a chip. When the crow grabbed it, the magpie flapped its wings, lifted itself, then bore down. Its long beak striking one of the crow's eyes clean out like an oyster scraped from its shell. The crow screeched and flew off. I couldn't believe what I'd seen. That magpie was vicious.

I watched as the magpie gobbled the chip and then began pecking hard at the window pane. Lightning forked across the sky in the far distance. Loud tapping echoed around the hall. The procession of students receiving their certificates slowed as attention was drawn to the bird.

'Looks like a magpie wants to celebrate with us,' Principal Davis said into the mic, then laughed awkwardly. A prefect went to the window and flailed his arms about attempting to shoo the bird away, but it had no effect. The magpie's beak hammered relentlessly. The glass cracked loudly and then the window suddenly gave way with a large crash. People gasped. Nearby students jumped from their seats as shards of shattered glass fell to the floor. Everyone was paying attention now.

The magpie took flight and circled close above us. This wasn't helping my panic. I wasn't a big fan of magpies. I'd been attacked heaps as a kid.

Jenny grabbed my arm. 'It's a message,' she whispered, excited.

Jenny and her spiritual talk. She was always searching for meaning in everything, especially when it came to animals and nature. She got her information from these cards she bought at a new-age store in Toombul. It was run by an old woman with dreadlocks, had rows upon rows of crystals and the whole place smelled of incense. We might come across a butterfly which could apparently mean Jenny was 'entering a time of great change or transformation'. If we saw an owl she claimed 'something hidden will soon come to light', and that a robin meant 'your fortunes are brightening'. Jenny sometimes made out like it was a joke and I could tell she was a little embarrassed to share her beliefs. They were too easily dismissed by people who didn't agree with them.

Just as I was about to reply *What kind of message?*, the prefect rushed past, knocking into me while waving his arms overhead attempting to direct the bird to the now-open doors. Heat and humidity flooded into the Great Hall. The crowd was completely distracted and Principal Davis looked beside herself. Through the doors I could see mean-looking storm clouds. They were grey and black with streaks of green and seemed to be moving quickly towards us. A lightning strike lit up the hall and thunder followed soon after.

As I watched the magpie circle, I was surprised to realise that my breathing was back to normal. The panic attack was over. The bird made a flight around the hall then soared high above me and dived. It looked like it was going straight for me. It zeroed in on me. As it bore down I got ready to duck, but the bird steadied, straightened, and shot out through the open doors. The crowd settled, the doors

were closed, and Principal Davis continued her speech with a shaky voice.

Jenny looked at me and laughed loudly. People looked over at us. Through snorts and laughter, she gestured towards my shoulder and said, 'That maggie shat on you. Looks like the message was for you after all.'

Others students sitting nearby caught wind and laughed as well. I felt my face go red and started wiping the bird crap off my shoulder with the only thing I had on me. My high school certificate.

Principal Davis had been right. It had been tough at school for me. I hated the attention I got for looking different and being poor in a school full of rich white kids. I'd been in more than a few fights since starting. The other guys hated me, that's for sure. It's like they got some sick enjoyment out of taunting me. I might have been expelled for one more fight, or I might have dropped out if it wasn't for mum, Jenny, and her mum Naomi hassling me to stay on. I found some of the classes difficult and had to work hard to get through. I also struggled to care sometimes. I mean, who they hell uses algebra...ever? It's a miracle I was graduating.

Jenny didn't cop as much crap as I did. She took more of her father's Maori features. I guess she was a different, less confronting type of brown to the upper-class white Aussie kids at school. People even thought she was Greek, which really made her fume. She owned her Ngarabal heritage proudly, and tried to get me to go to all the rallies at Musgrave Park and every other Black event in town. She knew so much more about mob and culture than I ever would.

I didn't even know who my mob were or where my Country was.

Jenny passed me some gum. 'So, you're definitely coming tonight?' she asked.

'Huh?' I was still scraping the last of the bird crap off my shirt.

'Presley's party, remember?' she said, sounding irritated.

I focused in on what she was saying, and her irritation flowed over to me. 'For the hundredth time, yes,' I hissed. 'I'll go with you to this stupid party. I'll stand awkwardly while people judge me, and possibly get into a fight with a racist.'

'Hey, I'm not *forcing* you to come, Jono,' she said, and rolled her eyes dramatically.

I realised I was overreacting and laughed. 'My ring you're not forcing me! You haven't shut up about it. How many times have you begged me? "Please Jono, you never get out, and it will be the best party ever..." If I hadn't said yes I would never hear the end of it.'

'Yeah, OK, that's fair, I did hassle. I'm just making sure you're not chickening out. You have a bad habit of not following through.' She poked me in the arm.

Thinking about the party made me nervous. I just felt too different to the other students. All I'd known was me and Mum struggling. If I'm honest, it made me angry and jealous to see the wealth of the other kids. They didn't seem to worry about anything except social media posts and where to go on holidays. But for some reason this party meant the absolute world to Jenny.

Just as the last of the certificates were being handed out, the rain started. It lashed the roof of the hall and came in through the magpie's broken window. Thunder rumbled right above us, making people jump.

I had to yell to be heard. 'OK, OK, I'll definitely come with. Alright?'

2

Walking up the long steep driveway to Steve Presley's party that night, I was feeling a little unsteady on my feet. Jenny and I had been pre-drinking at hers. I could tell that Jenny was excited and nervous because she kept messing around with her hair and dress. She looked pretty good though. I don't know what she'd done with her make up, but her light brown eyes looked really big and sparkly. Although, she looked uncomfortable in the high heels she had on, especially walking up the slope. Loud music echoed down the hill. The storm had passed and night was upon us. We were guided by the lights of the house at the top.

Steve Presley lived in a mansion in The Gap, a suburb around twenty minutes' drive from school. There was a tennis court, a massive swimming pool, a granny flat, and at least five bedrooms. The house was surrounded by bush. His family owned land, which went down past the back of the house until it hit a creek a hundred or so metres away. It was easy enough to get lost if you wandered off.

The party was the biggest I'd ever been to, although that wasn't saying much. There were people everywhere. They

partied on the driveway, they sprawled out along the hill in groups, and they wandered out of the bush on either side of the house with drinks in hand, back from clandestine missions.

Coming up to the house, I saw people dancing on the second-floor verandah. Techno music boomed through huge speakers. There was even a DJ. He was fist pumping the air, turning dials, and holding his expensive headphones to his ear with one hand. He had a Chicago Bulls cap on and was chewing his face off. There were a couple of grade eleven girls dancing in front of his set up. The same girls looked down at me from their vantage point and laughed dismissively. This is why I didn't go to parties. I felt inferior, like a second-class citizen to some of the rich kids. I was either invisible or I stood out so much that I wanted to hide.

Jenny's back straightened and she walked more confidently in her heels once we'd cleared the slope. She was stopped briefly and hugged by a couple of her girlfriends on their way to the bush.

I spotted one of my only other friends from school, Sam. He was a champion cross-country runner. He had an impressive ability to train and ace his classes while maintaining an active party schedule on the weekends. In this moment he was drunk and overly happy to see me. He ran over, leaving Courtney, a girl from our year, looking irritated at the doorway. We completely stuffed up our greeting. He went for the fist bump, I went for the standard handshake. After a couple of failed attempts, we laughed it off.

Sam offered me a swig of his wine cask and I obliged. 'Jono, bro. This is legit the first party I've seen you at.'

'Yeah,' I said, and drank deeply. 'I don't head out much.'

'True.' He looked at the packet of rollies in my hand. 'Roll us up?'

'No worries.' I handed back the cask, grabbed the papers out, and pinched some tobacco. 'What are you doing next year?'

Sam took a massive scull before replying. 'I'm doing science at uni, before hitting up the med program.'

'Jeez. That sounds intense. What made you wanna do that?'

'Parents are frothing over it. Plus, it's mad coin, and the girls love it. Who doesn't want a doctor?'

Courtney came over from the doorway and put her arm through Sam's. 'Going off about being a doctor again,' she said, before shaking her head. 'I don't think it's as sexy as you think it is.' She smiled.

'I know you like it,' Sam replied, looking into her dark eyes. They started making out.

I finished rolling and when I looked around, I noticed that Jenny had disappeared and a wave of anxiety washed over me. Sam came up for air, and I handed him the ciggie. 'Cheers, bro.' He lit up and drew deeply. The plume of smoke seemed to go on forever as he exhaled. 'What about you, any plans?'

'I'm not going to uni, that's for sure. I've had enough of studying meaningless crap. Thinking about a performing arts school for Murriss that Jenny told me about.'

Courtney laughed hard. 'Sounds sad' she said, before being called over by a friend and dancing all the way into the house.

'You want to be an actor?' Sam asked, and tried to hide his own laugh.

I couldn't help laughing a bit too. 'Not sure. But it's free, and I'll get Centrelink to live off. Give me time to figure things out.'

'True. Your life, bro. Jenny going with?'

'Yeah, Jenny's doing dance. I'll act.'

'Nice. You guys together, or what?'

Sam wasn't the first person to ask that. Jenny and I were the only two blackfella students and we hung out heaps so of course everyone thought we were an item. Jenny was my best friend, but we weren't together in that way.

'Na, bro. Why?'

'I heard that Presley was going to have a crack tonight.'

'Really?' Presley was the captain of the First XV and usually had some hot blonde on his arm. Jenny didn't fit the type.

'Yeah, he wants to try out a brown chick, he reckons.'

'Bull. Who told you?'

'He did, yesterday.'

I felt adrenaline surge through me in concern for Jenny. I was fuming. Bloody Presley, the dog. Jenny had a crush on him. Hell, every girl at school had a crush on him. I needed to find her and warn her. She deserved better than this crap.

I walked into the house. The place was a mess. Streams of toilet paper hung off a chandelier. A black piano was being used as a dance podium and there were plastic cups and empty beer bottles on every other small table, ledge, and shelf in the room. A couple were making out on a leather couch. The room was full of people who danced, drank, kissed, and bumped into one another. The carpet was stained with all sorts of liquid and the whole place smelled of sweat, booze, and ciggies. I tried to fit in, nodding my

head to the music as I shuffled through the dancefloor. Mum would go ballistic if I messed up our joint like this. Then again, I'd never be able to draw a crowd like this. I jumped up on the piano and searched for Jenny. No luck.

I kept searching out the back. It was nice to get some air, but it was humid and hot even after the earlier storm. There were people swimming in the pool and half the Firsts were playing beer pong on a table tennis table. I knew some of them from the odd class together, but I got some strange looks as I moved around the pool.

A prop from the Firsts sculled a beer from a red plastic cup after losing a round of the drinking game. He looked about, alarmed, then vomited into the garden. I laughed with everyone else. He noticed me then muttered something under his breath. A couple of the other Firsts snickered.

I was still feeling buzzed, and the booze gave me courage. I hated being made a fool of. 'What's that?' I said loudly.

The laughing stopped.

'Nothin' mate, nothin',' he said, slurring.

'Nah, what did you say?' I asked again, this time with a bit more venom.

The prop turned to his friends, shrugged, and stepped right up to me. 'What kinda cheese you like, bloke?'

'What?' I said, and had a feeling I knew where this was heading.

'I said...what kind of cheese...you like...bloke?' He poked me in the chest. The stench of vomit was strong on him.

I clenched my fists and felt my back straighten.

He put his finger to his mouth and made a shushing sound before saying, 'I already know.' His mates laughed.

He poked me again, harder this time, right in the sternum. He cleared his throat once, twice, and then looked around. Everyone in the pool area had their eyes and interest on us. He spoke loudly then, over the music echoing down from the house. 'Coon,' he said, slowly, letting the word settle. His lip curled. 'You love that coon cheese.'

Hearing that word made my blood boil. I stepped right up to him. 'Say that again.'

His teammates were all around me now, twitchy and alert in my periphery. This was going to end badly. I was heavily outnumbered. I squared up, my body tense and ready for a fight. We were inches from each other. I could see his mates moving closer towards me. I pushed my forehead into his. In his drunk state he stumbled backwards from the force. He slipped on a wet tile. His arms flailed comically, and his back slapped loudly against the water as he landed in the pool. Everyone erupted in laughter. The pressure eased. The girls in the pool helped him out. The fight was soon forgotten. I became invisible. The game of beer pong started up again.

I was wound up. My heart was thumping and that familiar feeling of dread crept in as my chest tightened. I needed to be by myself. I decided to head towards the creek at the bottom of the property to calm down.

Everything was damp and rich-smelling after the rain. I thought about Jenny. I was annoyed at her. She had pleaded and begged me to come to the party and then abandoned me right away, and I had already almost had a blue with the entire Firsts rugby union team. But I was also worried about her. Pretty much since our first day of school she'd had a crush on Presley. She always acted weird around him

and went out of her way to sit near him in class. She would twirl her hair when they talked and laugh at everything he said, and believe me, he wasn't that funny. I couldn't imagine a player like him wanting a relationship with her. It wasn't how the world worked.

I hit lantana. The barbs scraped and stung my legs. I didn't care. I was in a foul mood and welcomed the pain. I was trying to calm down, but all I could think of was that word 'coon' and the smell of vomit.

Once I got into the scrub it went dark. There was little light with so much foliage overhead. I could hear the music from the house behind me. My breathing was shallow and my chest was still tight. Once my eyes adjusted to the dark it didn't take me long to get to the creek.

The moon shimmered off the water. I found a nice flat rock, took my shoes and socks off, and dangled my feet in. The water was cool. There was no current. I was still shaking from adrenalin and my ankles and shins stung from the lantana cuts. I wiped sweat from my brow. The stillness was smothering. I took a million tiny breaths. I tried to calm myself but my worry for Jenny prevented that.

Something lightly tugged at my feet and legs. I looked down at the water and saw the moon reflected full and bright on the surface. Another small tug. I pulled my feet out. There was a thin trail of blood running down my leg from the lantana scratches. Must have been fish trying to eat me. A wind picked up, carrying the faint sound of a growling dog.

I noticed the reflection of the moon changing. It was spreading out across the water. It was beginning to take the shape of something else. The water was so still it couldn't

be an illusion made by ripples. The moonlight lengthened further and revealed the outline of a man, but something was odd about the figure. He seemed to possess a weirdly shaped head. I stood up and tried to focus on what I was seeing. The head looked like a muzzle pointing towards the sky. The growls got louder.

I must be super wasted. I looked at the other bank and glimpsed something white moving amongst the bushes in the darkness. My stomach dropped and my heartbeat quickened. The wind breathed life into the bush behind me. Panic suddenly hit me.

I turned and ran. The heaving scrub greeted me with darkness. I strained to hear the music from the house or see its lights. The wind and the black took over. I hit lantana again and the little barbs were like needles over my body. My feet were exposed. I'd forgotten my shoes. I saw the path through a gap in the trees.

I felt like I was being chased. I caught a glimpse of something monstrous in the periphery of my vision, the outline of something pale moving at tremendous speed. I looked harder, whipping my head around. Nothing there.

I ran hard to clear the bush. The wind died down, and I heard the thumping beats from the house.

I cleared the scrub and entered the edges of light from the party.

I had to find Jenny and get the hell out of here.

I walked into the house. I was bare-footed and muddy and received some weird looks. I asked around. Someone said she was last seen with Presley heading towards the granny flat near the tennis courts.

I made my way down quickly, with the moon full and the ground still damp. I saw light coming from inside as I approached but there was no movement. I banged my bare foot into a rock near the entrance. Muffling a yell, I tried to open the door but it was locked. I walked round the back and through a wooden gate into a small courtyard.

Candles softly lit up the lounge room inside and the faint sound of music came through an open crack in the glass doors. I stood outside, watching anxiously.

Presley was spread out on the couch with his shirt off. Jenny was underneath him and her dress was gone. Now she was only wearing black lacy underwear. My stomach dropped as Presley kissed her lips and then down her neck. I felt like the earth would open and I'd sink below. A slow song started and Jenny stood up. She took off Presley's jeans one leg at a time while dancing to the music. I had never seen Jenny like this before. She climbed on top of him. She grabbed his hand and placed it where her bra clipped together and he began fumbling with it, trying to undo it.

Just then, Jenny saw me. I froze. She didn't get up. She looked back at me and shook her head angrily. She mouthed something to me that I couldn't make it out.

My mind raced between the act of bursting into the room or running away. I leaned toward the crack in the door. She buried Presley's face into her chest and he kissed her there.

She kept mouthing at me aggressively, while Presley kissed her stomach and chest.

What was she saying? Then I caught it.

'Piss off...will you just piss off!'

3

Three months later

I arrived late again and slipped into class unnoticed. Everyone watched a dancer perform at the front of the studio. The music worked to a crescendo as the dancer jumped and landed hard, then stamped her feet before tumbling to the floor. She flung her legs and arms up while lying on her side. That was the end of it. I applauded along with everyone else and tried not to smile. That final pose, which she held absurdly long through the lengthy fade of the music, made her eyebrows raise and her face redden.

Once the clapping died down the teacher looked over her sheet of names.

‘Jonathan?’

I stopped smiling. Ah crap. We were supposed to perform a short piece, incorporating the techniques we learned over the first month in contemporary. I frantically rummaged through my bag, and found an unmarked CD. Whatever it was, I was going to have to wing a three-minute dance piece to it.

I stood in position, completely unprepared. The slow chiming of a bell through a storm echoed around the room. Relaxation music. I felt my palms begin to sweat. Damn. It was Mum's meditation CD.

This bloody curriculum was killing me. I didn't understand why I had to do ballet, tap, jazz, contemporary dance, and music classes. I guess it was worth it for the acting classes though. I enjoyed them and was told I was 'progressing well' by my teacher.

The music kept up and I kept still. The look in the eyes of my classmates turned from interest, to embarrassment, and then to pity as I stood, stunned. I willed my body to move but it wouldn't. So I closed my eyes to dance in the safety of darkness and I knelt to begin the impromptu routine.

I could hear a faint sound from the back of the room. My hands went to my ears and flapped. I heard the growling of dogs just behind the music. I sniffed the air and became the kangaroo. The barking became louder. Then I was on the floor slithering: a snake through a storm with a chiming bell. The growls rang out like thunder. My heart thumped in my chest. This can't be part of the meditation music.

I placed my arms at my sides, lengthened my neck, and paced the room as the emu. My eyes felt wired shut. I sensed something with me in the darkness. I was on the floor bending my arms and feet, turning, tumbling, and making sharp unconscious movements. My body was flexible and strong. My arms straightened and I glided around the room as a graceful soaring bird. I could just hear the music behind the sound of howling dogs.

The piece was drawing to an end. The howling dogs were closer now. I jumped higher than I ever had before, my

legs straightened horizontally to the ground in a split jump. I landed softly, rolled, and curled up into a ball on the floor. The music stopped and, with it, the barks.

I opened my eyes. In the wall of mirrors at the end of the room I saw an albino human figure with a dog's head looming behind me. Its skin was bloodless and pale. It had elongated arms with claws that rasped on the ground. A pinched mouth opened, baring canines, and empty pitch-black eyes stared through me.

I reeled, put my head down and crawled quickly toward the crowd. Once I was in the safety of the mob, I turned around to an empty dance floor. The dance was over and the dog-man was gone. It was a trick of my eyes, surely? I put the vision down to tiredness, the fact that the dance routine had taken me off guard, and that I had my eyes shut. Perhaps going from darkness to a white-walled dance studio had left me disorientated.

The audience seemed stunned by my performance. There was complete silence. Not one single clap.

The teacher walked to the centre of the room. 'Jonathan, please stand and take a bow.'

'Sorry miss?' I said, confused. The girl before hadn't done that.

'That was one of the most outstanding pieces of contemporary dance I have seen in some time, and from a first-year student, no less. A truly wonderful performance, and the choice of music fit the intensity so perfectly. Up you get, please. Come and take a bow young man, take a bow.'

I was totally surprised, but did as asked. The teacher started clapping. It didn't take long before everyone was cheering. It went on for what seemed like an eternity. I felt

a large grin on my face, but was still embarrassed as people clapped, whistled, and called my name.

There must be a mistake. The cheering and praise was something different. I had been convinced the Aboriginal Performing Arts Centre mob saw me as an impostor. In their eyes I was privileged because of St Lucia Private, even though I'd been on a scholarship and me and mum weren't well off.

I found that what bound everyone together at APAC was estrangement: from the world of privilege outside. Yet my heritage was strange to me, a broken story half strung together from the snippets of knowledge mum could give me. I felt like a fraud.

There was anger about this place, too. Colour type-casting was a hot topic discussed by the actors, the rappers rhymed heated political statements, and the dancers wished there were big companies other than Bangarra and that Bangarra wasn't so hard to get into. Every day I heard another story of racism, some as small as a strange look from a bus driver. Discussions were swallowed by the white plasterboard walls, stained with shoe scuffs, and dents, and shown in circular huddles that started every student meeting. We'd begin meetings with an acknowledgement of Yuggera Country, and show our respect for the ancestors who inhabited the ground we spoke upon. I saw it as a ritual of defiance, too. It took some getting used to.

Still, APAC was way better than high school. At least the students were blackfellas. Plus, APAC gave me time to think about what I *really* wanted to do with my life. Even though thinking about my future felt like walking through thick fog.

I went to the rec room feeling odd. What the hell had just happened? I was shaken from what I thought I had seen at the end of my routine. Plus, the crowd's reaction afterward was massive. I was no dancer. I guessed anyone could fluke it occasionally.

Jenny walked in after me. She was bare-footed and in active wear. I felt my hands begin to shake slightly.

'Jono,' she said. 'Sorry, I didn't think anyone was in here.'

'I can leave if you want?'

'Don't be silly,' she said, flatly.

I sat down and could feel tension in the air. Jenny put the kettle on and tapped the kitchen counter with her fingers. We didn't speak while it boiled. Things had been different between us since Presley's party, and we'd barely spoken in the first month at APAC. She sat down at the table. I saw her go to speak, but then nothing. She blew hot steam from her mug.

Jenny hadn't had any problems fitting in at APAC. She knew some of the other students from dance troops and she was so active in the community. I noticed how toned she was; being at APAC had made her fitter. The place definitely suited her, and I could tell she was happy with the classes from hearing her laughter in the halls. She had loads of friends.

I went to talk but then thought better of it. I got up and made myself a cuppa. Out the window, some students were practising hip hop in the carpark. One of the dancers had lost his balance, fallen over, and pulled a bin down over himself with a loud crash. Garbage had spilled all over him; there was bin juice on his t-shirt and pants. It must have reeked! Everyone was laughing and holding their noses.

The commotion outside broke the silence inside. Jenny looked at me and we started laughing. The void between us was crossed.

‘Remember formal?’ she asked.

I remembered Jenny’s yellow dress and the native flower corsage she wore. I remember Mum driving us there in her busted-up 2003 Corolla. I remembered Jenny’s hand steady on my arm as we walked into the hall. I remembered how we’d poured vodka into our soft drinks under the table and slyly grogged. ‘How could I forget?’ I said.

‘You fell in that bin after the speeches. There was cake and wet stuff all over your suit.’

We both laughed, then. It felt like a massive weight had been lifted.

‘The security guard came to help me up but when he saw the bin juice on my shirt he stepped away, quick-smart.’

‘Such a good night,’ said Jenny, and for a brief moment we locked eyes. Then Jenny sipped her tea and gazed out the window again.

I took a deep breath. ‘I know things have been weird between us, but...’

She looked up sharply. ‘And who’s fault is that? Hey, Jono?’

‘I know it was none of my business.’

‘You’re damn right it was none of your business. Far out, Jono, you pretty much watched me have sex. How do you think that makes me feel? What the hell were you doing?’

‘I just wanted to make sure you were alright...is all.’

‘I don’t need you to look after me. Why do you have to be so weird sometimes?’

‘Look, I know you liked Presley. I didn’t trust him. I didn’t want you to be messed up over him afterward.’

‘Messed up? Jono, did it ever occur to you that I just wanted to sleep with him and that be it? He’s pretty, but so boring. No way would I ever be with a guy like that. I thought you knew me better. How many times have I said I want a brown boy who knows stuff about culture and is respectful?’

I was shocked at what I was hearing. I felt like such a fool. ‘A respectful brown boy...?’ I said, a little surprised.

I must have looked funny because Jenny laughed. ‘Oh, Jono,’ she said, then sighed.

‘I’m sorry. I messed up. I’m sorry for being weird...’

‘Just shut up,’ she said, cutting me off. There was a long silence before she spoke again. ‘I’ve missed you, Jono.’

‘I’ve missed you too.’ Another silence. I wanted to go and hug her, but I wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to do. ‘I’m also sorry for seeing you in your real sexy lacy underwear,’ I said, and searched her face.

Jenny looked at me. I thought I had completely stuffed things up, but then she pulled a large grin.

‘Shut your hole,’ she said and laughed, then punched me in the arm.

It was such a relief to finally talk to Jenny. I didn’t know what I would do without her. Although, I wished I could stop thinking about her on top of Presley in her knickers.

Jenny poured the rest of her tea out into the sink.

‘Jono, the dance you just did,’ she said, while doing spirit fingers in jest.

I laughed. ‘You were there? I know, gammin, aye.’

‘Not gammin. It was amazing. Everyone was totally focused on your every move. This place has really had an effect on you. I reckon you should audition.’

‘Audition for what? Not some dance thing?’

‘Not dance. It’s a doco gig, about mining,’ she said. ‘I’ve been doing work experience with that production company down the road and they’re handling it. It’s paying five hundred bucks a day.’

‘Wow, that’s good coin. I’m a bit young to be working on a documentary though?’

‘It’s an internship type of thing that the government is paying for. I’m a little conflicted, though. I’m not sure about mining. Just the other week I was at a march protesting a coal mine in the Galilee Basin. But this is for mob to know their rights and have more information. It’s important, and I’m hoping to go and learn production and stuff. I want to learn about what happens behind the camera. Beats the boring paperwork I’m doing now. They’re looking for a host and I reckon you should audition.’

‘I dunno. I’m not sure I’m ready. I’ve only been studying acting a month.’

‘Up to you,’ she shrugged her shoulders. ‘I reckon you’d be great. Anyway, they’re filming out in the desert somewhere, which is awesome.’ Jenny got up and grabbed a Monte Carlo from a stash of cookies she had hidden behind a broken coffee machine. ‘I want a feather from out there.’

‘A feather? What for?’

‘I love feathers,’ she said, through a mouth full of biscuit. Watching crumbs go all over her top, I couldn’t help noticing her breasts but quickly looked away. ‘Mum collects feathers.’

She said whenever I find one, it's a sign that passed family are watching me from the Dreaming.'

Wow, how sentimental and silly, I thought. 'That's wonderful,' I said.

She frowned.

I considered the money. 'Five hundred bucks a day, you reckon?' I said, and scratched my chin. 'Jeez, for that kinda coin they can take whatever they want out of the ground. You can get that feather you want so bad. I dunno about finding your family in it, but,' I laughed.

Jenny punched me in the arm again, harder this time.

I had a sudden, sharp vision of that thing I saw in the mirror earlier. I rubbed my temples.

'You OK?' she asked. 'You still getting panic attacks?'

'Every now and then I get that tight feeling. But I haven't had a bad one since grad day.' Remembering those terrible canine teeth and the pale bloodless skin in the mirror, I looked over my shoulder.

'Jono, you sure you're alright?'

'I'm...have you ever...'

'Ever what?'

But I thought better about telling Jenny about what I thought I'd just seen. I didn't want her thinking I was losing it, especially after we had just started talking again. 'I'm fine, just feeling weird after dancing in front of the whole class is all.'

Jenny rubbed my shoulder. 'You were great,' she said. She checked the time. 'I have to get to practice.' At the door she turned her head. 'Your Mum asked us over for her birthday on Friday.'

Mum, didn't tell me about that. She loved their company, but I think she also wanted to give me and Jenny the chance to talk. I'd been sulking around a lot at home.

'No problem,' I said. 'And Jenny, I really am sorry for everything.'

'I know,' she said and smiled. 'See you Friday.'

4

Sitting on the train home from South Brisbane, I watched as the large concrete buildings of the city turned into parklands and suburban wooden houses with long verandahs. I felt elated. Those months when Jenny and I hadn't talked were lonely, and I didn't like myself when I was isolated and had too much time to think. Now I had my best friend back and, after the crowd's reaction to my dance routine, I reckoned that the other students might be warming up to me at APAC too. Things were definitely looking up.

The train screeched to a halt and I almost tumbled over as it jerked backwards sharply before stopping. Suffocating humidity greeted me as I exited the air-conditioned carriage at Nundah station. The sky was overcast, trapping the heat.

It was a fifteen-minute walk home and I moved under the stringybark trees lining the sidewalk with a kick in my step – sweating, but thinking happily about Jenny.

Then I remembered I was about to enter magpie territory. It didn't matter that it was the end of February and not magpie breeding season, they always attacked me anyway. There was a small park near the station where they nested,

and I pulled my backpack over my head and ran. On cue the swooping began. One magpie with a mangled leg particularly disliked me. It swooped, squawked, and pecked at my bag as I ran hard to clear the park. I read once that they lived for around twenty years and that it was a learned hatred that spurred their attacks. Some went for children, others cyclists, some only men. It depended on who had offended them when they were young. I remembered how crazy that magpie had been at graduation. That seemed like forever ago. My heart raced as I ran the gauntlet.

Once clear, I heard loud voices. Three blackfellas were milling around the edge of the park, charged up. I noticed a pile of empty VB cans in the bushes nearby. They were pointing at me laughing: they'd seen me duck and run and enjoyed the show.

'Back from school, aye?' one asked. I was wearing an APAC shirt. He wore a Tupac t-shirt and smoked a rollie. He had stainless steel rings on his fingers. The one on his right index finger was a skull with sharp red eyes.

They'd stopped me on the cement path between a public toilet and the train station. We were hidden.

I pulled my earbuds out. 'Just heading home.'

'You live round here?'

'Just up the road there,' I said, and waved vaguely off into the distance. I didn't want them to have any idea where I lived.

'Aboriginal Performing Arts Centre,' he said, reading my shirt. 'Looks like someone's getting an education. I bet you wanna be famous.' The other men laughed, nastily. 'Who's your mob?' he asked, then spat on the ground.

The other two circled behind me.

'I don't know,' I said.

The men looked at each other. One threw his beer can onto the pile, freeing up his arms. 'Johnny-come-lately, aye?'

I didn't reply. I put my head down and started walking past them toward home. The man in the Tupac shirt stepped in my way. 'Don't even know who you are. But I bet you're first to put your hand up.'

I moved around him and bolted. He clipped my ankle as I fled past him. I tumbled to the ground.

'Why you wanna run off like that? We're having a nice conversation.'

My phone had come out of my top pocket and lay on the concrete next to me. It felt like I'd busted my knees.

'That's a nice phone.'

I jumped to my feet, grabbed my phone off the concrete and made to run again, but I was tackled to the ground. A train screeched into the nearby station, covering the yell that bellowed from me.

'What do you want?' I asked.

'That phone would be a good start.'

'Get lost!' I tried to get up, but one of the men kicked me and I felt a sharp pain in my side.

'You best not yell, you coconut dog.'

'I'm not a coconut,' I said, gasping. I didn't even know what they meant.

They grabbed my phone off the ground, then rifled through my bag, taking my laptop. 'Grab his wallet.'

One of the men went for my pockets. I kned him in the face. He reeled back and the leader stood over me. He punched me and his skull ring cut my face deeply with a piercing hit. 'Stop struggling or I'll break that coconut head.'

He swung again, hitting my mouth. I felt one of my front teeth dislodge.

I tried to yell, but couldn't. The wind was still knocked out of me. I knew I was in trouble, but I didn't feel any pain as adrenaline coursed through my blood. Time seemed to slow as I watched them gather my things and run off. They took the twenty bucks out of my wallet, and my phone. I saw them dump my bag in the park and throw my wallet into some nearby bushes. All I could think of was that I had to go into magpie territory to grab what was left of my gear. I lay on the concrete path for a while.

I tried to cry out for help, but barely produced a whimper. I was still struggling for breath. I eventually got to my feet and started towards home. My bruised knees meant I hobbled and I clutched at my side, sore from the kick. I looked back at the train station. It was busy, but nobody had heard or seen a thing. I thought about walking over and pleading for help, but I just wanted to get home and see Mum.

I entered the park warily. I looked down to where the men had run off to, and then towards the tops of the trees. The magpie swooped down immediately as I entered the kill zone. It clipped my ear, adding to my wounds. I found my wallet. The money was gone but all my cards were there. I found my empty bag. The magpie swooped again. Another cut, this time the back of my head. I began to feel an immense amount of pain in my body from the beating. I couldn't run or defend myself. The magpie circled high, turned, dived, attacking again. A near miss. I hobbled across the road and started for home under the stringybarks.

That's when the panic set in. It began as a knot of worry and pain in the pit of my stomach. It moved up and along my torso, tightening my chest. The word 'coconut' echoed within me. The panic racked my arms into tense wires. It crawled up my neck to my throat and into my sinuses. The dread burrowed into my brain. I was going to die; the world was going to end. My mouth filled with the strange taste of blood. I swallowed the dread. I fought for the tiniest parcels of air taken in over and over again. With each step, a drop of dark crimson hit the pavement from my busted mouth. I ran my tongue over my teeth. Most of a front tooth was missing. Dogs barked through fences as I invaded their territory. The adrenaline was overtaken by fear for my very existence. My vision was blurred. One foot in front of the other. Time moved differently.

I dragged myself, step by step, past familiar houses. First was the high-set Queenslander with the pink door and fairy lights on the verandah; where a group of young hippies lived. They called themselves artists but all they produced was crap-sounding rap music. Then there was Mrs Valente's joint with its rose bushes that miraculously survived the concrete desert of her front yard. Then a bunch of low-set houses, which were quiet with everyone at work.

I finally found myself at the front gate of the old wooden house we rented and called home. Mum popped her head out from the upstairs verandah and gasped. She had been sick on and off for a while now, nothing huge. I guess I worried a little extra about her, but I knew she'd be alright. I felt bad for dragging her into this, but I was in bad shape.

Then she was downstairs with me, her wavy black hair bobbing up and down and her dark brown eyes taking me in. I trailed blood through the house as she rushed me inside. I couldn't get enough air. I couldn't breathe. She sat me down in the upstairs living room.

'Dear, oh dear,' she said, before grabbing a brown paper bag. 'Breathe, bub.'

I struggled to pull air through my tightened throat. I looked at the Albert Namatjira print on the wall. The colours of that distant central red landscape dotted with green scrub seemed to ripple in the frame.

'What happened?' she asked.

I couldn't talk. The bag rose and fell. Mum ran out of the room and grabbed a bowl with water and some Dettol to clean me up. She looked at me, as I struggled with the dread. Her eyes searched me. She must have seen the panic. She placed her thin strong hand in mine and spoke slowly and with a soft calmness. 'Why don't I tell you a Dreaming story my mother told me?'

I nodded. I was still struggling, my body wound up and taut like a double knot. I knew what she was doing. Whenever I was frightened or panicked, she would tell me a story about her past, our past, and snippets of things she was told as a child.

This was different though. She'd never told me a Dreaming story before. I listened intently.

'Now, bub, your grandmother didn't know much, and she said that this was only part of the story.' Mum stopped for a moment and looked up at the ceiling, maybe thinking about Nan. 'She told me the story of Wudun, the protector of the land. If you're ever out bush and afraid, call for

Wudun. He is of the land, he is protector, and he will come to help.'

I nodded again. I flinched at the pain as Mum wiped the dried blood off the wounds. The Dettol stung. She kept working, unmoved.

'In the Dreaming, a long time ago, and a long time to come, ancestor spirits took the form of animals and began to shape the land. They made the rivers, lakes, gorges, hills, mountains, deserts, and ranges. At that time, the time of creation, Wudun lived with his mother. He was an anxious child, and was afraid of the giant ancestor spirits forming the land. Wudun's mother wanted him to understand his Country, to show him there was nothing to be afraid of, so they walked the land and saw the busy ancestor spirits creating. The spirits spoke to Wudun as they worked, but he was afraid and hid behind his mother. No matter what his mother said, or how often the ancestor spirits tried to speak with Wudun, he remained afraid. Then his mother went away and Wudun was left alone.'

Mum got up, went to the kitchen and brought me a drink of water. 'Drink, bub.'

I was still breathing heavily into the bag but managed a couple of sips. A droplet of blood from my lip diluted like an expanding flame in the clear water.

Mum went back to cleaning up my face. 'Alone, Wudun was so scared of the ancestor spirits towering over him, that he hid under scrub and behind trees as they did their work. He hid and waited for his mother to return. He waited and waited but she didn't come back. After a long time by himself he started talking to the spirits and copying their ways. He lay on the ground and slithered, taking on the

form of the snake. He hopped along the flat desert floor, becoming the kangaroo. He waved his arms and took off as the great black and white magpie. It was then Wudun discovered he could take on the form of all animals. It was then he realised he was no longer scared. Wudun began to love all the animals and all the land and he became protector.'

When she finished speaking, I realised the bag was by my side and my breathing was back to normal. Of course, Mum had chosen to tell me this story after the dance earlier. It showed the power of our connection. I saw so much strength behind her worried eyes. Even though she had her bad days, she still worked hard and was always there for me.

Mum let go of my hand and busied herself with cleaning the last of the blood from my face. She was wearing her nursing uniform and I was relieved I'd caught her before she'd left for work. Finished with my face, she pulled my chin up and rubbed the dried blood off my neck.

'What happened?' she asked bluntly. There was no sign of judgement. Only concentration on the job at hand.

'Three blackfellas jumped me just past the park near the station.'

'Did you tell them you were a blackfella too?'

'They knew from my shirt.'

'Rotten bloody buggers. I heard some mob moved into housing commission up the road near Toombul. Already causing trouble.' Mum kept cleaning me up and then shook her head. 'Jonathan. My beautiful boy. There's a cut through your eyebrow. I'll have to clean it out and bandage it. I'm

worried about a concussion. Whatever you do don't doze off, OK?'

'OK...Mum...How are my teeth?' I opened my mouth so she could get a decent look. I figured they must look pretty bad, considering all the blood.

Mum peered in at my mouth and looked startled. 'Don't worry about your teeth. We will sort that out later.' It was obvious by Mum's reaction that they were in terrible shape and she knew I could tell.

For some reason I found her reaction hilarious. I burst into laughter. I have no idea why I laughed, and it seemed so inappropriate given the circumstances.

Mum looked at me, concerned. 'Are you OK, bub? What you laughing at?'

I laughed harder the more concerned Mum looked.

She shook her head. 'What's wrong with you?' she asked, but she was smiling. She grabbed me by the shoulders, looked into my eyes, then started chuckling as well. Just being there with Mum, laughing, made the whole situation seem bearable.

We finally settled down.

'Mum, what's a coconut?' I asked.

'Bub, didn't they teach you anything at that fancy private school?'

'No...I know what a coconut is.' I said shaking my head at her. 'But what does coconut mean, like if someone said it about me?'

Mum sighed. 'Is that what those fellas were saying to you? You don't have to worry about rubbish like that.'

'Why, Mum? What the hell does it mean?'

'I brought you up just fine. So you wouldn't have to go through all the things I did.' A tear came to her eye.

'Mum? You OK?'

Mum sighed again and wiped her eyes. 'Coconut means being black on the outside but white on the inside. Don't you worry about that. You don't need to be anything but yourself, bub. Especially to a bunch of no-good blackfellas like that. Imagine beating up a boy. The world's gone potty.'

'I'm not a boy,' I said, a little more harshly than I intended.

'I know, I know. You'll always be my boy though, bub.'

There was a long silence while Mum finished cleaning out the wounds.

'I'm going to bandage you up and then we're going to head to the doctor, just in case,' she said, then paused and held my hand. 'I think we should book you in to see someone about these panic attacks, too. How does that sound?'

5

At the hospital, I got a CT scan of my head. It was excruciating to lie so still with the pain and I felt claustrophobic going through the machine. They didn't find anything wrong, but I had to get stitches for the cut through my eyebrow. Mum had called in sick for work. Good thing too, because we waited around forever and didn't get home till late. I had dinner through a straw. The pain in my face and mouth was intense. I was prescribed some heavy-duty painkillers at the hospital, which took the edge off. We couldn't afford to fix my missing front tooth, though. I'd just have to get used to it.

The next afternoon, I sat with Dr Clark, a psychiatrist. She had short curly dark hair and the palest skin I had ever seen. Freckles dotted her arms and cheeks, and she scrunched her nose after I said anything. Her office was in an old steel mill near the river in New Farm, that had been turned into a medical centre.

The air-con in her office was too cold and I shivered as I told her about the growling and barking dogs the

image in the water at Presley's, and the monster after the dance routine.

I mentioned the weird feeling I was having, like someone was near me, shadowing me. I told her about the panic attacks and the dread. I'd felt stupid saying it all out loud.

She looked really serious and took heaps of notes, and was really worried about how busted up I looked. I had to tell her the whole story about being beaten up at the station. She asked about Mum as well. I mentioned how she was sick, but that I wasn't worried. Mum was getting the treatment she needed and she would be fine.

In the end Dr Clark reckoned I was having both auditory and visual hallucinations. She prescribed me drugs for the anxiety and wanted to closely monitor my progress with a view of putting me on something stronger if the 'episodes' continued. I didn't really want to take pills, but I was keen to try anything to stop all the weird stuff.

That evening, I stared at the grainy wooden ceiling of my room and thought of the fight, Jenny, and what I'd seen at the creek and after the dance routine. What I thought I'd seen. Surely, I hadn't seen it. Thinking back, I wasn't so sure it had been a trick of the eyes. I lay in bed for hours trying to doze off. I felt pinned down by the stale muggy air in my room. There was no air-con in our home or any other place I had ever lived. The hum of the fan had become so familiar that I even slept with one on over winter, just for the noise. Even with the fan blowing full pelt, I sweated bullets. I tossed, turned, and kicked my feet restlessly until they poked out from under the single thin sheet. It wasn't until the painkillers numbed me did I sleep and dream.



In the darkness, brown eyes, wavy black hair, and a wise face full of warmth greeted me. It was the face of my mother. She spoke. I couldn't make out the words. It was like she was speaking a foreign language.

A magpie fluttered up behind her and perched on her right shoulder. My mother had a worried look on her face. I pleaded with her to speak normally. By her reaction, maybe I was the one who was speaking another language. She shook her head, turned, and walked away into the black.

She was abandoning me. I ran after her. I yelled for her to come back. I caught glimpses of white from the bird on her shoulder. The harder I ran, the further away she got.

Then someone else appeared. A black face with shrewd eyes on a thin body, stood a few metres in front of me. He held the magpie and smiled, his white teeth bright in the darkness. Then we were on a desert plain. The pale moon high. The Aboriginal man plucked a feather and put it into his mouth. After placing the bird gently on the ground, he stood tall and spoke.

'Look at me, boy.' His voice boomed like a thunderclap across the land. Then he leapt from a standstill, jumping the distance between us. He landed in front of me, a violent expression on his face. Parts of his body glowed earthen red from within. He grabbed my face and forced my mouth open. I struggled hard, but there was too much strength in his bony hands and wiry arms. He looked at my broken tooth. He nodded. He fed me the magpie feather. I could feel it cut my insides as it moved. I coughed and coughed. The feather was stuck in my chest. I knelt on the desert floor.

It was cold to touch. I coughed up blood and thick pieces of hair. The magpie came and drank the blood and ate the hair off the cold desert floor. Something wriggled under my skin. The pain was complete.

I witnessed black and white feathers strike through the skin of my hands, arms, chest, and legs and I stood up in agony. The magpie sang a sweet and terrible song as it flew off into the black. I fell forward. I was at the feet of the shrewd man.

He held a short blunt piece of wood. He kicked me over onto my back. I stared up at him. Red glowed from his torso and head.

He brought the club up.

I went to scream but nothing came out.

He brought the club down.

6

I woke to Jenny sitting next to my bed and staring intently at my face. I was groggy from the pills and took a moment to realise where I was and what was happening.

Jenny smiled as I began to stir. 'Get up. It's 11 o'clock.' She grabbed a ruler off my desk and started poking me.

I rolled over and shielded myself with blankets. 'Go away.'

'Watch closely as the creature wakes from slumber. It's a slow-moving mammal, the Jonoflopicus. Native to the mean streets of Nundah, a sub-section of the Brisbane concrete jungle,' she said, then started giggling. She pulled the sheets down off my face and lifted my chin with the ruler. 'You look like crap!'

'Apparently I'm crazy, too,' I said, shaking off the disorientation. 'Damn, I was going to make Mum breakfast for her birthday.'

'Don't worry about it. The old girls are out for lunch. Looks like it's just you and me for a while, buddy.' She got up, spun towards the door, opened it, and turned on the tele outside. A story about the ecological risks of mining

was on the news. Jenny turned down the volume and walked back in. 'It stinks in here, Jono,' she said, opening the curtains and the window.

I snarled at the light and slowly got up, while Jenny went to the kitchen to make us coffee. I looked at myself in the mirror, taking stock. I was still sore from the fight. My eyebrow was puffy, red and raised with black dissolvable stitches crossing over. It would leave a mark – my skin scarred easily. I looked menacing with the missing tooth. My eyes were bloodshot and I felt a little hazy from the painkillers. I remembered my medications and took them. One pill for the pain and another for the crazy. A great mix.

I lay back in bed. Jenny hustled down the stairs and placed the coffee in my hands like a gift or treasured jewel.

'Why are you so chirpy?' I asked.

'Life's good Jono, life...is...good. For one, you're not dead. But besides that, I just got news that there's enough in the budget for me to join the crew for the doco.'

I spilt hot coffee on my hands and cursed. I placed the mug down on the bedside table. 'Awesome news. What's next?'

'Need to fill out paper work and do some boring training modules before they sign it off. The acting auditions are on Monday, too,' she said, then sat down at the end of my bed and settled in, taking a sip of her coffee. 'So, anyway, enough about me. Tell me everything.'

I told her what had happened since we spoke in the kitchen at APAC. She already knew bits and pieces from Naomi via Mum. It was hilarious watching her react. She squinted and gasped and asked weird questions like the colour of

Dr Clark's eyes (green), and how long I was in the CT scanner (minutes), was I worried about radiation poisoning (only slightly and only because she'd just mentioned radiation poisoning), and did I know which mob the blackfellas who beat me up were from (I didn't). The questions went on. The only thing I didn't tell her was what I told Dr Clark about the 'hallucination' after the dance routine and the other weird stuff. I didn't want Jenny thinking I was proper losing it. I did tell her the story of Wudun that Mum had told me, and the dream I had the night before. Both made her inner clairvoyant tingle.

I took a long shower, the warm water felt soothing over my aching and bruised body, then I dressed and joined Jenny on the front verandah. We sat and waited for our mothers to come back from lunch with mud cake, Mum's favourite. There was a nice breeze.

Jenny had a contemplative look on her face as I sat down. 'You've left me with a lot to think about. A lot to think about,' she said, shuffling through animal oracle cards. She had gifted them to Mum for her birthday the year before, but no one except Jenny used them. 'You were beat up by mob, then your mum told you a Dreaming story,' she said, and tapped the table with the deck of cards. 'And there's the magpie and the blackfella in your dream. I wonder what it all means. Very cryptic indeed.' She stared out into space for a while before continuing. 'You know, you've never told me who your mob is.'

'Told you what?' I said, although I'd heard her quite clearly.

'Your mob. Who's your mob?'

'You know this. I don't know my mob.'

‘I know, I know, but there’s ways to find out,’ she said, and placed the cards down in a neat pile on the table. ‘Your Mum knows bits and pieces, and there are services to help you find out. I bet they could work with what you know.’

I laughed. ‘Well, for starters, I know basically nothing. And does it really matter? You met me when we were eight years old. Who my mob are ain’t gonna to change who I am,’ I said, and took a deep breath in. I could smell cut grass and a barbeque someone was having in a neighbouring yard.

‘You’d be surprised, Jono. It will ground you, you know, help you understand your place. Knowing my mob, where I’m from...well, everything comes from that.’ She was beaming.

I didn’t want to have some deep and meaningful conversation about identity, when I already had enough to worry about.

‘I really think it would be good for you, at least start searching,’ she continued.

I shook my head. ‘I don’t want to talk about it. Leave it, alright!’ My voice was angry and sharp.

Jenny looked shocked. She stood up, went to the verandah’s edge, and stared out towards the garden and the street beyond. I could see her shoulders rise and fall.

I shouldn’t have been so blunt. ‘Are you ok? I didn’t mean...’

She turned around. Her eyes were full and wet. She gathered herself before approaching me slowly and hugging me tightly.

‘I know you’ve been through a lot lately,’ she said.

I hugged her back, and in that moment, I wished desperately for the peace and tenderness you would

expect from a long embrace, but instead I felt anger and helplessness surge through me. I moved away, sat back down, and was tormented by the vision of three blackfellas, a skull ring, punches, kicks, blinding vision, the taste of blood, and a monster. I had clenched my fists without realising it.

Jenny sat down, noticed my hands, and rubbed my back.

‘It’s just...I don’t know, Jenny. I feel so damn lost sometimes.’ I could feel the tears welling in my eyes. The fight and the hallucinations were in the forefront of my mind. I felt that knot of dread rearing its ugly head, feeding on my emotions like a parasite. ‘I’m losing it. They have me on meds now. It’s official. It feels like something is with me in the shadows. Sometimes I feel hot breath on the back of my neck. There are white specks on the periphery of my vision. How the hell did it get to this?’

‘You are not your thoughts, Jono. You are just under a lot of stress, is all.’

I would not let the dread take me. I stopped my tears, sat up straight, and breathed deep and slow. Jenny stroked the back of my head.

‘If I’m not my thoughts, then what am I?’ I asked, more evenly.

I stood up, put my fingers through the lattice work on the verandah and stared at the flame tree in the front yard. It was nearing its autumn bloom.

Jenny came up behind me. She turned my head and her light brown eyes searched mine. ‘It’s going to be ok, Jono.’

We held a stare. Jenny moved in a little closer. Birdsong drifted on the breeze. I felt my face flush. I moved toward her. I could smell the conditioner in her long hair. I put

a hand to her cheek and gently caressed her skin. It was warm and smooth. Jenny's lip trembled and our mouths inched closer. The skin of my arm prickled.

Then the front gate rattled abruptly and our little fox terrier, Jiffy, ran outside and started barking.

'Hello, shopping, hello, shopping. You mob, anyone home? We need help with the shopping,' Mum yelled through the house.

The car revved loudly through the gate, and Naomi yelled out to Jiffy, who was so excited she peed on the floor.

Jenny backed away.

'Be down in sec,' I yelled.

I hugged Mum and helped with the shopping. We set the table in the dining room and sang happy birthday. Mum blew out the candles. The standard family photo followed, Mum holding Jiffy as always, Jenny pulling a silly face, Naomi standing next to Jenny with a beaming smile, and me doing the peace sign behind Jenny's head. Then we ate the rich chocolate mud cake.

Jiffy found a spot under the table and panted from the heat. We were all sweating.

Naomi commented on something she saw on the news about the rise in the Indigenous population due to more and more late identifying blackfellas. 'Just the other day at the unit,' – she said, and rubbed her hands together like a praying mantis – 'a white woman walks in with her daughter like she owns the place, asking for forms. She reckoned not two days before her family found out they have Indigenous ancestry. And she had the nerve to ask what Indigenous scholarships her daughter could get. No

community ties or certificate, no idea where their mob might be from. I couldn't deal I was that angry.'

Mum laughed. 'Oh Naomi, everyone starts the journey at different points. Jonathan and I don't know our Country. Does that make us less black?'

'Yes, well, I suppose it's complicated, isn't it...'

 Naomi mumbled.

Jenny looked at her mum with a little shake of the head before interjecting. 'Did Jono tell you about the documentary? I'm heading out bush! And the acting auditions are on Monday.' She winked at me.

'Congratulations, bub,' replied Mum. 'You go knock 'em dead. That's something you should do too, bub,' she said, nodding at me. 'Give you something to look forward to. Even if you don't get the job, the experience of doing an audition will do you good.'

'I'll think about it,' I said, and finished off a large slice of cake.

Mum noticed. 'Now you have a belly full, you can go clean up Jiffy's mess like I asked. You know that dog's getting old, can't keep it in when she's excited like that.'

Jenny and Naomi laughed.

I found Jenny in my room after I cleaned Jiffy's accident. She was laying on my bed with the curtains and window open. The afternoon sun cast one half of her small frame in shadow. I thought about earlier, on the verandah, and wondered if we really had been about to kiss, or if I had misread the situation. I couldn't have, surely? I wondered if things would be weird now.

‘About time,’ she said, and laughed. ‘How long does it take to clean up a little puddle?’

I smiled. Didn’t seem like we were going to discuss our feelings. I was relieved but also disappointed.

‘I’ve been thinking about what your Mum said earlier, and I agree with her. Change is natural, and APAC is good for you. You should audition for the doco.’ She sat up, and stared me down. ‘No, you *need* to audition. Do something daring. The promise of adventure. I expect to see you there on Monday.’

‘I haven’t put in an application. I’ve only just started acting,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘They’ll take walk-ins, Jono. It’s an open call. Plus, it’s not like they’re casting the lead in a Spielberg movie. Stop being such a wuss.’

I was a little shocked at how forcefully Jenny said that last word. Maybe I just needed to grow a backbone and have a crack. ‘Sounds like I don’t have much of a choice in all this.’

‘There’s always a choice. But only the daring succeed!’ she said, and raised a fist in the air.

Naomi called out for Jenny from the top of the staircase.

‘I’ve been summoned. Oh, and take this.’ Jenny passed me an animal oracle card. She looked back at me from the doorway.

‘And Jono, for the record, I don’t think you’re crazy, but what the hell is it with you and magpies? I pulled that card for you earlier. It’s getting a little weird.’

I began asking what she had meant, but she shut the door behind her. I looked at the card. It had a tacky drawing of a magpie in full flight with colorful waves coming off it

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on one side. There was writing on the other side, which read:

The magpie spirit animal is a messenger foretelling death and the birth of new life.

7

The audition was at Innovative Synergy Studios near the river in West End, about a forty-five minute walk from school. I'd rung that morning to see if I could audition at such late notice and they said the director was able to fit me in towards the end of the day. The program was for Indigenous youth who were 'serious' about a career in the arts. The studio had a connection with APAC, and that's why heaps of students were auditioning or had applied for the production assistant internship that Jenny got. There was certainly going to be stiff competition for the one acting spot.

I walked along the river and under a line of Moreton Bay figs. A pair of kookaburras cackled at me. Mum told me once that a kookaburra's laugh was a sign of good luck. I was definitely due for some. I ran my tongue over my teeth and worried about my missing tooth – I wasn't exactly camera friendly. If I got the gig, I would fix the tooth and give the rest of the money to Mum. She worked way too much.

I watched the sun reflect off the murky water of the river and thought about Jenny on the verandah. Her full

lips, her brown eyes, and the way she smelled of sunscreen and conditioner. No. I needed to calm down, put it out of my mind, and focus on the audition.

Innovative Synergy Studios was in a modern concrete building decorated with rusted sheet metal. Over-the-top decorated. I guess they thought it looked artistic. I thought it was wanky. I walked into a crowd of raucous APAC students in the foyer. Everyone was either waiting for their audition or milling around after. Some students had even walked over just to hang out with everyone. It felt like the whole school was there. The people working in the building popped their heads over railings and out of doors to see what was happening. There was a lot of laughter and nervous energy about. I got some weird looks from students because of my busted face.

I saw Jenny sitting down with her back propped against a thick glass wall. She was talking to Rick, another acting major. 'Jono, you made it. The call to adventure is strong, isn't it?' she said.

'Yeah,' I laughed. 'Thought I'd give it a go. Can't hurt.'

Rick looked at my face and smiled. 'Certainly can't hurt as much as what happened to your face. You can't seriously be thinking of auditioning like that?'

I didn't like Rick, and in my mind, I always added a P to the start of his name. *PRick* thought he was so cool because he had a minor part in a stage play called *Which Way* about blackfellas in colonial times. The entire school was given a free showing and since then he thought he was the big man on campus. The girls fawned over him, too.

‘Yes, actually P..Rick, I am auditioning. And I suppose you’ve been through and think you have the part? Maybe the director hasn’t seen *Which Way*. Not too many people did.’

Jenny snorted and chuckled under her breath.

Rick didn’t seem to notice. ‘Everyone that matters saw the show,’ he said, and winked at Jenny.

I felt an uncomfortable pang of jealousy.

‘And yes, I have auditioned,’ he continued. ‘Chin up, though, Jonathan. You never know what they’re looking for,’ he said, with a smirk.

I ignored him and looked at Jenny. ‘Any advice? You’ve already got a gig with this mob.’

‘Stay calm, and don’t be shy about mentioning our old school. They loved the fact I went to St Lucia Private.’ She made inverted commas with her fingers as she emphasised our old school name.

‘Jonathan? Jonathan Lane?’ A man with a meticulously groomed moustache sitting behind the reception desk read out my name.

I left Jenny and Rick, and the moustached man directed me to the control room of a recording studio on the second floor. A long-haired audio technician greeted me as I entered. He sat in front of an impressive array of lights and gadgets and strummed lazily on a ukulele while we waited for the director. The music brought visions of pristine beaches and bronzed beauties, and reminded me of camping in Maroochydhore during my childhood. I could smell the ocean, and feel the sun on my face and the sand between my toes.

It wasn’t long before the door opened. The music stopped and with it, the calm I was feeling.

The smell of perfume greeted me first. The director/production manager, Tabitha, was tall. Probably just under six foot, near my height. She had big blue eyes, a sharp jawline, and beach-tanned skin. Her blonde hair was pinned back, and she wore black suit pants and a white button up shirt that had the studio's name printed on it. She looked kind of young, no older than her early thirties. I don't know why, but I'd expected someone older.

She gave my hand a stiff shake before speaking. 'OK, Jonathan, let's get you into the studio. I need you to read out what comes across the prompter. Kneel on the ground near the rock I've set up, and we can begin.' Her face flashed a broad smile for a split second before dropping.

I did as directed. Kneeling on the ground, I tried hard to imagine that I was in the desert. I looked into the camera, took a deep breath, and read aloud.

'Aboriginal people have a special connection to Country. Stories and spiritual places are all part of Country. Country also provides us with food, shelter, and medicine. Since Country is so important the government wants to help us protect it. They have introduced the Commonwealth Native Title Act and Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act to make sure that Country is safeguarded.'

'However, Country also has rich natural resources and mining helps create employment. There are also social and economic benefits as communities grow...'

The words moved across the teleprompter relentlessly. I forgot them as quickly as I spoke them. The kneeling caused a sharp pain in my side where I'd been kicked. I focused, through the pain, and soon the audition was over. I used the rock as leverage to stand and waited awkwardly for Tabitha to speak.

Her body language gave nothing away. 'OK, Jonathan.' She looked up from a bunch of papers in her hands. 'I notice you have a missing tooth. Was that done in initiation?'

I was a little taken back by the question. 'No, it wasn't through initiation,' I laughed. 'It did get punched out by blackfellas, though.'

She didn't appear to take the joke. 'I see,' she mumbled, and looked deep in thought for a moment. 'Well, this is going out to community...' She twirled her pen around her finger, looked down at the rock, and at the papers in her hands. 'It says here that you went to St Lucia Private?'

'Yes, I graduated at the end of last year.'

'Congratulations. I've already put my little one on the waitlist. Wonderful school, isn't it?'

I almost told her what I really thought about the school but stopped myself. 'Yes, it provided me with an excellent education.'

Tabitha stared at me briefly. 'OK, Jonathan. Thanks for coming in. If you don't hear from us within a week, assume that you have not been successful.'

'And if I have been successful?'

'Then we'll give you a ring and email you the script and travel details.'

I thought of money. 'And it's five hundred bucks a day?'

'Yes, I believe that's the figure.'

'Thanks, I really hope to hear from you.'

'That's great. Thanks, Jonathan.'

8

A couple of days later, I sat in my room with the window open and Jiffy on my lap. The cackle of kookaburras drifted in on a breeze that shifted stale air. I was reading Leah Purcell's play *The Drover's Wife*. It was my favourite. I reckon it showed how confusing it was for Australia to have a black history. Just as I got to the part where it's revealed the drover's wife is really a blackfella, the phone rang loudly.

'Mum, phone,' I yelled. Nobody ever called me on the landline. People either rang for Mum or cold-called about changing energy provider or some other nuisance. The phone rang again. Jiffy didn't like the noise and jumped off my lap and scurried out the door. The phone rang again.

I cursed under my breath, rushed out of my room, leapt up the stairs, and grabbed the receiver just before it went to message bank. 'Hello,' I said, puffing.

'Jonathan?' It was a woman's voice.

'Oh, hello, yes, yes, it's Jonathan,' I said awkwardly.

'Hi, Jonathan. Tabitha here from yesterday' – I remembered the strong smell of her perfume – 'I just want to let you know that your audition was successful and we will

be offering you a contract for the project. How does that sound?’

I did a mini jump and pumped my fist. ‘That’s great news, Tabitha. I’m really excited to be on board.’ I looked at myself in the mirror above the mantelpiece. There was a huge grin on my busted face. My immediate thought was, *f you Rick*.

‘Excellent. OK, just a couple of details and some logistical concerns...’

As Tabitha began detailing the project, a strange, sharp pain struck. It started in my temples and crossed over my forehead. My ears began ringing. The agony was sudden and blinding. Tabitha’s voice faded. I dropped the phone and placed my hands over my ears.

Something flashed past the mirror in front of me. I slapped at my head. Anything to stop the searing pain. It didn’t help. Another flash of white. In the reflection I saw the pale dog-man directly behind me. I froze. The beast was a horrific vision. Its chest heaved as black eyes stared through me. The air was putrid. A long, red tongue dripped saliva onto my shoulder. I could feel it through my shirt. It bared long sharp teeth and snarled. It raised a clawed finger and pointed directly at me.

Terrified, I turned away, yet I found nothing next to me. I looked back to the mirror. The vision was gone and with it the pain and ringing in my ears.

I shook as I picked the phone off the floor.

‘Jonathan? Is everything alright? I heard a bang?’

‘Sorry, everything’s fine. I dropped the phone. I’m just really excited.’

‘Yes, it is exciting. Well, that’s about it. Everything will be outlined in the email as well. I’ll see you in a couple of

weeks. If you have any queries please ring or email the studio. Goodbye for now.'

'Goodbye...' I said, meekly.

I wondered what the hell had just happened. I took my shirt off and checked to see if it was wet. It wasn't. I turned around and ran through the top of the house. Nothing there. I was scared. Another hallucination. When would they stop?

Maybe the pills needed more time to work. The doctor had said there was a period of a couple of weeks where things might get worse before they got better. I hoped things got better fast.

I had no warning of the visions. They seemed so real. I felt the wetness and smelled the rotting breath earlier. How was it possible to see something and think it so real...for it to be just be an illusion? Why would I lie and deceive myself like this, even subconsciously? As I considered the fragile state of my sanity, I felt the dread under my ribcage and behind the tightening of my chest.

I looked for Mum but she was nowhere to be found. She must have gone out. While turning my room upside down in search of my pills, I focused on my breathing. Sensing my anxiety, Jiffy came into my room and kept me company. I found my meds and exhaled a long slow breath. I was angry at myself for not taking them sooner. I had totally forgotten.

I took one and picked Jiffy up. 'Do you think I'm losing it, girl?'

Jiffy looked at me doe-eyed and gave my nose a lick in answer.

Medicated, and feeling more settled, I sat down at the computer and found an email from Tabitha waiting for me.

Reading through, it finally dawned on me that I had landed a gig that paid five hundred bucks a day. I perked up and thought about having my tooth back and helping Mum.

We were leaving for Gambari in far western Queensland on 21 March. I was contracted for three days of work, but that could change, lengthen even, if there were 'extenuating circumstances.' I hoped I'd be out there forever on that kinda money. I was told to bring my own wardrobe.

Outside, the gate rattled, Mum yelled about shopping, and Jiffy went ballistic. I helped Mum up to the kitchen with the bags. I flicked the kettle on and she started putting the groceries away.

I had to blurt it out. 'I got the gig, Mum!'

'Hey, hey,' she said. She looked so proud and gave me a big hug. 'Well, we better order some Chinese for dinner to celebrate.'

The kettle boiled. The sound pierced through the top of the old Queenslander. Every year on my birthday since we moved to Brisbane, we ordered Chinese. We had it when I graduated too.

'Sounds good. Sweet and sour pork with fried rice for me, please.'

Mum grinned from ear to ear. 'I know, bub.'

■ ■ ■

I walked down the road to Norths Rugby League Club. There was nobody around so late during the off season. I sat at the back of an old shed that creaked and cracked, exhaling the heat of the day. It was used by the groundskeepers and smelled of freshly cut grass and petrol. The night air was

humid and thick, and the loud droning of cicadas travelled over the pitch-black oval in front of me.

I lit up a smoke rolled from the dregs of a pouch left over from Presley's party. A newly-trapped moth flapped violently in the dim yellow light above me, casting frantic shadows upon the wall. Mum had bought me a crappy replacement phone that afternoon.

It was a cheap old brick and texting Jenny was a slow process: *Hey, this is Jono. New number. I got the gig!*

The phone rang almost immediately.

'Since when do you have a new phone?'

It was hard to hear Jenny over the cicadas. I blew out smoke.

'Are you smoking?'

I coughed and laughed. 'Just having a celebratory dart, geez Mum. And I bought the phone the other day.' A gust of wind blew across the oval and the cicadas stopped.

'So, we're going together then,' Jenny said. Her voice boomed through the phone in the sudden quiet.

'Yeah, bring on Gambari,' I said, before taking another drag.

'Gambari,' she said slowly, letting it roll off her tongue. 'It sounds so far away. I can't believe we'll be taking our first proper trip together.'

I could sense her grin, which made me happy. It would be a chance for us to be ourselves away from APAC and our mums. Growing up, we'd often talked about a road trip but we never had the means – and by means, one of us needed a car and a driver's licence for starters. Plus, dreaming of an escape was usually a knee-jerk reaction after one of us, usually me, had gotten into strife at school or home.

A trip to the desert will be an adventure, and even though there'd be others with us, it was still damn exciting.

'Sounds good to me. What are you up to tonight?' I asked.

'Me and Mum just ordered pizza. Girls' night in. Going to paint our nails, dye our hair, and watch movies.' I could hear Naomi chatting away in the background. 'And congratulations, by the way. I had a feeling you would get the role.' There was pride in Jenny's voice. 'Make sure you always remember who pushed you to take that first audition when you're famous,' she said, then laughed.

'I could never forget you, Jenny.' The words had come out quickly and a little too seriously. There was a moment's silence. Embarrassed, I cleared my dry throat and went to speak again, but Jenny beat me to it.

'Aww bless,' she said sarcastically. 'You can be so sensitive sometimes Jono, it's adorable.' *She called me adorable.* 'But seriously, I've seen you practicing monologues when you think nobody is watching. You're not bad at this acting business. I bet your Mum got you Chinese for dinner too, right?'

I couldn't remember a birthday without her and Naomi at the table teasing me about how much Chinese I ate and how quickly. 'Yep. Mum knows what's up when it comes to tucker. I just ate my weight in sweet and sour pork and fried rice. So delicious. I feel kinda sick from it.'

'That's what happens when you got a big hole.'

We both laughed. 'Hey, you're the one with the big hole...' I let the rest of the sentence trail off. The phone had died. Being brand-new it didn't have much charge and I hadn't powered it before heading out. I sighed and felt the night close in around me.

Bats squealed in the distance cutting the silence. They were drunk off the overripe fruit from a sprawling mango tree across the oval. I remembered the contours of Jenny's firm body when she arched her back in that lacy underwear. I thought about how we had almost kissed on the verandah. It had been so close. I had relived that moment in the minutest of detail a million times. I could almost taste her soft lips.

I sparked up my second smoke. I felt confused by my feelings for Jenny. Mum had always said if I ever felt stuck to make a list, so I made one in my head.

Pros of telling Jenny the truth.

1. She is like a sister.
2. She knows everything about me.
3. She is really hot.
4. She is really experienced, like sexually.
5. She is a proper blackfella.
6. She is the funniest person I know.

Cons of telling Jenny the truth.

1. She prefers pizza over Chinese, which is just wrong.
2. She is like a sister.
3. She knows everything about me.
4. She won't want a virgin like me.
5. Sometimes she makes me feel like a fraud, like I'm not black enough.

I recited the list a bunch of times and laughed. *God, what was I doing? Lists about Jenny?* It seemed so shallow. She was one of my favourite people, and surely you couldn't define

someone by some list? She was special to me in a way that I only wished I could communicate to her.

I had to admit it to myself: I liked Jenny. I hoped it all worked out. Finishing off the last draws of the cigarette, I let myself daydream.

I thought of a possible life and potential happiness with Jenny. I would act, she would dance, we would be cultured and cultural. She could teach me how to be a blackfella and I could...I could – *what exactly was I bringing to the table except my awkward virginity?* Anyway, people would know us and respect us in the community, and we would have just enough money, but not too much to change us. I wondered again and again if we would kiss.

Walking home, the bright headlights from a passing car blinded me and in the flash I recalled the pale skin of the beast and those sharp menacing teeth. I stopped, stamped my foot against the footpath, and told myself in calm, even, logical terms that I was now medicated, and it was best to bury the memory of those terrible fantasies.

9

Things were difficult at APAC in the lead up to our departure for Gambari. The teachers didn't know, and there was no way I was going to tell them in case things got even worse.

After I'd gotten the gig instead of him, Rick turned the acting students against me. His brittle ego couldn't handle the fact that a novice, one with a missing tooth no less, had beaten him.

The incidents started off as childish, like being the last person to get a partner in improv class, or finding stink beetles in my lunch box. I was able to shrug it off at first, but things got progressively worse.

I started finding coconuts with my name scribbled on them in dark permanent marker. They'd appear in the bathroom, the rec room, the dance studios, even in my bag. Students would snigger when they knew I had seen one. Some students would even hide behind corners in the adjacent bathroom stalls waiting for me to see the coconuts. They wanted to witness the moment of recognition, followed by my anger, and as time went on, my resignation.

It escalated to the point of someone smashing a coconut all over my locker, gym gear, and books. I picked dried pulp off my stuff for days. I was close to knocking Rick on his arse.

Each coconut reminded me that I had no community, language, or tradition.

The upside was that Jenny pranked Rick in retaliation for how much of a tool he was being towards me. One afternoon she made him a coffee mixed with a big dose of laxatives she had nicked from her Mum's medicine cabinet. It was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. Rick spent the entire afternoon stuck to the toilet. He ended up missing an acting assessment, which I got a high distinction for. *F you PRick*.

I really enjoyed the acting classes and sometimes daydreamed about being on stage. Maybe that was another reason why Rick annoyed me so much. He'd been there and wasn't shy talking about it.

Jenny was super excited about the trip to Gambari and we spent most of our time away from school talking about it and preparing. She'd packed and repacked her luggage heaps of times, attempting to pull together the perfect assortment of clothes and accessories. She also consulted her oracle cards *a lot*, questioning the future and musing about spiritual connections she would make in the desert.

I was pretty excited myself, especially because we were flying – which was a first for me – it gave the trip an edge.

■ ■ ■

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I went back to Dr Clark and told her about the incident on the phone. She was concerned about the hallucinations and upped my meds. I was diligent with my pills. I didn't tell her about being bullied at school, though. I knew that was real – everyone had seen the coconuts. The dread had stopped, and I hadn't had a proper anxiety attack since the fight near the train station. Most importantly, the beast had left me alone. I was happy to forget.

10

The morning of the flight was stiflingly hot, and together with the anxiety of last-minute packing, my left eye twitched and I couldn't settle. I had to meet the crew at the airport at eleven am sharp. I checked my bag. I'd packed a mottled yellow shirt that Mum picked up from the op shop – the closest thing she could find to safari type gear – as well as a second-hand pair of Blundstone boots and some brown jeans. I searched for toiletries, and then finally the script.

I made a cuppa and found Mum sitting on the front verandah. The humidity clung to us. We sat for a while, sipping the piping hot tea despite the heat. A soft breeze came in off the ocean, kilometres away, and I relaxed. Mum pointed to the flame tree in the front yard, where dots of bright red were budding on the branches. The colour was made bolder by the grass, overgrown from the relentless rain of the last few days.

'Ready for your big trip?' she asked.

'Ready as I'll ever be.'

'You'll be a new man when you come back, I reckon.'

‘What makes you say that?’

‘You’ll be deep in the Country. Songlines are strong out there. Might even find yourself a girl and have black babies,’ she said, and laughed.

I wondered if she knew about my feelings for Jenny? Probably. Mum had a way of seeing straight through me.

‘I doubt that,’ I said, and laughed with her. ‘It’ll be nice to see some desert though. I’ve never been.’

‘Well, look after yourself. You’ll be right though. Nan will be watching you.’

‘You reckon? Her Country was out west?’

‘Somewhere out there,’ she said, and waved her hand and went back to her tea, blowing steam off the top of her mug. ‘She was taken and moved to Mornington Island, but she went out west again at some point. She met your poppy out there.’

‘You don’t remember him, right?’

‘No, he died when I was a baby.’

‘You never told me what happened to him.’

‘Your nan didn’t know the full story, but she said when we ended up in Cherbourg he was working as a police officer. A strong lawman. Back then the government never paid us properly and the rations they gave us were never enough, so your poppy would head out and get food from the bush near the mission. He went out one day and came back charged up and angry that they didn’t give us a pass to leave for Brisbane to see his brother. They threw him in jail and he died in there.’

I looked at her, and felt an emptiness. I searched her face. Her dark eyes, which took in everything and gave so little away, her curly hair and brown skin that I inherited,

her small jawline that could easily burst into a smile. There was no sign of sadness, just resigned strength.

‘Did they find out what happened to him in jail?’ I asked.

‘No bub, there’s no record of it. That was a very different time,’ she said, and patted Jiffy. The heat was getting to Jiffy too and she was panting.

To be reminded of the past – a past that Mum had protected me from – made me nervous. Maybe her work as a nurse healed the hurt. She never spoke of her childhood, or about Pop and Nan, unless I asked at the right time. Usually times like this, on the verandah, with birdsong cutting through the noisy traffic on our busy street. These times were infrequent; with the long hours she worked and the very few days off she had. The past was something she was happy to forget about, or at least keep tight and forbidden. It was something for me to slowly unravel.

We sat in silence, finishing off our tea. ‘I better ring a cab, Mum.’

‘Oh, my boy. Make sure you take care of yourself.’

Mum bent over to pick Jiffy up, but stayed hunched over. I thought maybe she was checking the dog for ticks, but I noticed her eyes were shut.

‘You ok, Mum?’ I felt tense.

‘Yeah bub,’ she said, keeping her eyes closed. ‘Just feeling a bit light-headed.’ She rested for a moment before picking herself up slowly and placing Jiffy on her lap. ‘Time flies,’ she said, looking back at the flame tree. The colour returned to her face and I relaxed again. She’ll be right. ‘It feels like only yesterday you were a tiny bub. I’m so proud of you. You know that? How about we head up the coast for a couple of

nights when you get back? What do you reckon?' she asked, smiling.

'Sounds awesome Mum, can't wait. My shout, too'

'You're growing up so quick,' she said, and pinched my cheek.

11

On the way to the airport, I stared aimlessly out of the cab window as we passed townhouses, budget hotels and car lots. I was happy about leaving Brisbane for a few days. I needed to get away. Best of all, I was leaving college behind: its white walls and huddles, and the 'coconut' taunts.

I met the crew in a small transit lounge in a different part of the airport, away from the commercial flights.

I saw Jenny first. She wore a head scarf with an Indigenous design, keeping her wild hair in place. She'd dyed her hair from black to a sunnier brown and the lighter colour made her face seem even warmer. She wore trendy short overalls and she looked way too cool to be hanging with me. She was nervous though. I could tell from the incessant tapping of her finger against her leg. I went straight over to her and gave her arm a squeeze. We were finally leaving. We smiled at each other and sussed out the others.

There were four of us. Tabitha wore a cap – her blonde ponytail stuck through the hole in the back – loose-fitting clothes, and sandals on her feet. She was certainly

travelling light, with only the one scraped and dented suitcase with metal corners. Now we were away from the studio and the stress of the audition, I saw her in a different light. There was a hint of excitement in those big blue eyes as she looked out over the tarmac. She seemed in her element, which made her infinitely more attractive. The kind of attractive that draws you in but pushes you away at the same time. Jenny mouthed the word 'hot' when she caught me checking her out. I felt my face redden in embarrassment.

Mick, the cameraman, on the other hand, couldn't keep his eyes off Jenny. And it wasn't like he was just looking at her then shying away, he was really putting his stare out there. It was full on. Jenny either didn't seem to notice, or she didn't mind the attention. I wasn't sure which. Mick, who didn't look that much older than us, wore shorts and thongs and had pale freckled skin, frizzy red hair, brown eyes and had a nose that arched upwards, making him look unimpressed with everything. A large dragon tattoo covered his left arm, and the inside of each of his wrists were tattooed with one half of the Aboriginal flag. He seemed pretty happy about the whole deal. I could tell because he used the word 'stoked' a lot.

Once the introductions were over, Tabitha told us there would normally be a sound person and someone for lighting, but the budget was small and we had to make do.

We sat down on dirty plastic chairs in the lounge next to the tarmac and waited for the pilot. Outside, in the brilliant light, myna birds chased a magpie. The sight of the magpie brought on that familiar tightening of my chest, but the feeling went as quickly as it came. It was hot and humid

inside, although a couple of ceiling fans tried to counter the heat.

Tucked away in a corner, a table sported free percolated coffee. I made myself one and sat back down, my eyes drawn to Tabitha. She cussed under her breath as she typed into her phone, countering the relentless pinging coming from it. She stopped typing suddenly, raised her eyes to the ceiling, and talked to herself. The only word I caught was 'promotion' before she focused back on her phone. The pinging eventually stopped.

She shook off her agitation and stood up. 'Alright everyone, listen up. We're landing near Gambari at a gas mine. A guide will pick us up and drive us to a prepared campsite. I know we're all keen, but the plane is running late, and I don't think we'll have the light or energy to do any shooting today. Tomorrow we'll begin at first light. Sound good?'

We nodded, then silence crept over the room while we waited. About an hour later, a small propeller-driven plane blurted around the corner, stopping in front of us. The smell of petrol wafted into the lounge and we made our way outside.

The pilot waved as he disembarked and grinned while walking towards us with a coffee in hand. He wore a smart pilot's uniform, and had wavy brown hair and an epic sunglass tan. 'Good morning – or should I say afternoon. I'm Phil and this is your carriage.' He pointed to the plane. 'We'll have to do a quick stop on the way to refuel, but we should have you there by about 5 pm at the latest.'

I started to sweat as the sun bore down and the excitement of finally leaving swept over me.

The plane fit nine people. As we were only four, I had two seats at the back to myself. Jenny took the window seat in front of me, and Mick slid into the seat next to her, rather than taking the single on the other side of the plane. As he sat down, Jenny looked back at me, smirked, and wiggled her eyebrows. The engines started up and we taxied to a runway. Phil looked back at us, gave a thumbs up, and flashed a grin before we started moving. The grass and tarmac rushed past as we took off. My body was driven into the seat as we climbed.

Brisbane flattened out beneath us as we continued our ascent. I couldn't take my eyes off the view. It was a strange sensation to have lost contact with the earth. I watched as the suburbs became mountains and lush green fields, and eventually, desert and dust.

An hour or so into the flight, Tabitha took the foil off a platter of bite-sized sandwiches and placed it on a ledge behind the pilots' seats. I squeezed my way up the front and loaded a plate with too much food. After eating, I settled back into my chair, content. Jenny and Mick shared a plate and seemed to be getting on like a house on fire. I felt a pang of jealousy watching them, so I closed my eyes.

The plane dropped suddenly and with it my stomach. I felt a sharp pain accompanied by a vision of pale skin as my head hit the window. I saw Mick joking and waving his arms around, getting a laugh from Jenny. Tabitha, on the other hand, looked shaken. Her face was bright red and her eyes darted about, searching for something. Once the plane steadied, she seemed to settle. She smoothed her hair

and picked up her cap, which had fallen between a couple of seats.

Phil turned around and motioned for us to put on the headphones. 'Sorry about that,' he said, through a crackly line. 'It looks like we're heading into turbulence. Please sit down and put your belts on. I don't want you banging yourselves up back there.'

I was fumbling with the seatbelt as the plane dropped again.

A vision of the beast came. I could see it on a desert plain.

The aircraft began to shake violently and I took off the headphones and massaged my temples. My head was throbbing and the vision came again.

The beast was howling at a large full moon and the light cast a bright sheen on its pale body. It focused its black eyes on me, raised its muzzle and sent a piercing howl towards the stars. It began running towards me, shaking its head and growling as it gained speed. My body shook and I heard the roaring of the plane as it jolted. Still the beast rushed towards me. The growls became louder as it charged. It was almost on me, its black eyes piercing, its jaw wide and eager for blood. I tensed as the plane dipped and juddered. I raised my hands just as the beast was about to strike.

Then, calm.

The dog-man was startled, and a bright red light shone from behind my shoulder, gaining intensity. I could hear someone rushing up behind me, muttering. The beast reeled and bolted across the moonlit desert.

I breathed heavily, put the headphones back on and the plane steadied.

‘We’ll head to this airfield to refuel,’ Phil said through the crackling line.

Jenny gave me a look, frowning and concerned, but the others seemed oblivious to my distress.

The plane bumped through the descent. I felt sick. When we touched down and Phil opened the door, I was the first out. There was a playground in a park directly next to a shop, which I guessed doubled as the airport. I ran over to it and was sick next to the seesaw.

Jenny came over with Mick in tow. ‘Jono, you alright? That spew looked nasty,’ she said.

‘Yeah, feeling a bit better now. Must’ve eaten too much on the plane. And with the turbulence,’ I gestured vaguely. ‘Well, you were there.’

‘I have some ginger tablets in my bag. I’ll grab them for you.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, and Jenny moved off.

‘That was a rough ride,’ said Mick. ‘Stoked to be on land again. It was like a rollercoaster up there for a while.’

We watched Jenny walk back to the plane. ‘So, what’s the deal with you and your friend?’ he asked.

‘Jenny? We go to performing arts school together.’

‘Cool. Is she your girlfriend?’

I stared at him, and burped up a little vomit before replying. ‘No, just really good friends,’ I said, then turned and chucked up again.

‘Cool, cool. Well, you feel better.’ Mick went to find a bathroom.

I finished up, wiped my mouth on my sleeve, and went into the shop to get something fizzy to drink. I thought sugar might smooth out the ruffled feeling I had. With a bottle of lemonade in hand, I walked out and saw Tabitha being sick into a bin close by. I approached her and she stared up at me. The whites of her eyes were crisscrossed with red lines. She was sweating profusely. Her face told me to leave her alone, she turned away sharply and retched again.

I went back to the playground and sat on the swing. The sun was blazing. It was dry and dusty, not a scrap of grass on the ground. I was amazed by the few gum trees that had leaves on them, considering the climate. They gave the line of shade I was under. Sitting on the swing, I drank and watched the wind lift dust off the ground. The lemonade made me feel better, although my heart still pounded.

I thought about the visions. *Why weren't the stronger pills working? If the visions were coming to me for a reason, what was it? What the hell did this dog-man want from me? Did it want to kill me? What had I done to deserve this?* I breathed deep and let the air release slowly from my lungs. Gathering myself, I felt lighter and angry. My anger layered itself towards a resolution. I would not let this creature get the better of me. I would fight. Even if I was only fighting against insanity.

Jenny walked over from the plane with the little bottle of ginger tablets. She passed the puddle of vomit before sitting down on the other swing with a worried look on her face. 'You feeling better?' she asked.

'Yeah. Better out than in,' I said, burping.

'A lot came out.' She pointed to the puddle. 'I can smell the egg and lettuce sandwiches from here,' she said, and pinched her nose before laughing. She opened up the bottle of tablets and gave me one.

I swallowed it with a swig of lemonade. 'Not the best start to the trip. And to think I was so excited for the plane ride.'

A gust of wind formed a whirly whirly on the runway. We sat in silence for a moment and watched the mini tornado grow and then dissipate just as quickly as it formed. I looked over at Tabitha who had recovered and was slurping on a water bottle.

Jenny noticed me staring. 'That Tabitha is hot, hey?'

The question caught me off-guard. 'Yeah. Well, I mean...you know. In, like, the traditional sense, I suppose she might be considered...um, beautiful. It's kinda like how people think Marilyn Monroe is beautiful.'

'You think she looks like Marilyn Monroe?'

'No, no. I mean people who think Marilyn Monroe is hot might think that Tabitha is hot, you know?'

Jenny looked at me with a little smile and one eyebrow cocked. 'No, Jono. I don't have any idea what you're talking about.'

'What about Mick? He looks pretty cool,' I said.

Jenny looked over at Mick who was talking with Phil near the plane.

'He's cute,' she said. 'Has that whole Ron Weasley sexiness going for him. Plus, I think he's a blackfella. Did you see the awesome flag tattoos he has on his wrists?'

'Yeah, they look cool,' I mumbled.

Mick didn't look like Jenny's type. But then again, Jenny's type seemed to change a lot. All I knew was that I wanted to be the type she liked.

'Anyway,' Jenny said, wiping sweat from her forehead. 'Finish up. Phil's waving us over.'

The next flight was smooth. The novelty had worn off and I just wanted to arrive. I could count the number of buildings and houses I saw on one hand until we approached our destination.

The mine was massive. There were well towers that had big pools of water nearby, as well as trucks, people, and buildings. It was a fracking mine and the company wanted access to the entire basin. Tabitha had explained that the reason for the documentary was to let the community know the exploration process and explain that artefacts and heritage sites wouldn't be messed up. I was sure the mining company would do whatever they could to get access to that land, and in partnership with the government – who could also make a killing. The doco would be one of the first steps in starting talks with the native title mob.

I didn't care either way. I was just happy for the money.

The descent wasn't as rough as the one for the refuel and after disembarking and gathering our things, we said goodbye to Phil and his Cessna.

An Aboriginal bloke with sun-worn skin jumped out of a large four-wheel drive that was waiting for us. He welcomed us with a dip of his wide-brimmed hat and began putting our bags into the back of his vehicle. His eyes were dark brown and deep-set. He looked in his mid-forties and

wore a long-sleeved shirt, jeans, and boots. He seemed like he was used to the heat, wearing all those clothes. Turned out he worked for a community organisation that was contracted to the gas company. 'Gambari Community Organisation' was emblazoned on his work shirt. Once our bags were accounted for and loaded, he offered us beers out of a giant esky in the back of his ute and everyone took one.

I was apprehensive when he offered me one, I figured he must have thought I was old enough being the host of the doco and all, and nobody else seemed to care. Once I saw that Jenny was drinking her beer I took the lid off mine and took a swig. It had been a long day, after all. Once everyone had a drink in hand, the bloke addressed the group.

'I'm Sid, and you're late. The light will be gone directly,' he said, and pointed at the setting sun.

We raised our heads and, looking properly for the first time, gasped in wonder. The sky was filled with a myriad of colour made grand by the flat desert floor.

'We'll have to stay in town tonight,' Sid said. 'There's no way round it. It's no fun driving around the desert after dark especially off road where we're headed. We'll push on to the campsite in the morning. I hoped we could crash in the mining accommodation but there's no room. We'll have to stay at the pub in town. Just a word of caution to you city mob. There's a band on tonight and half the community will be out. Just stick close to me and you'll be right. There's nowhere else. I had to pull some strings to get a couple of rooms.'

With that, we were ushered into the vehicles and we left.

12

The town was a twenty-minute drive from the gas mine. We drove as the sun departed, the sky lined with shredded clouds catching the last rays. We were now on Gunggari Country.

From what I saw out the car window, the settlement of Gambari had five streets, a community hall, something called a 'Living History Centre,' a tiny medical clinic, a school that looked like it used to be a chapel, a cop shop, a petrol station, a Chinese restaurant, a fish and chip joint, a newsagency, a general store, a bottle-o and a caravan park. As we drove past the caravan park, a withered old white couple sat on fold-out chairs in a dusty and grassless area in front of their trailer. They drank beer and stared as we passed.

We drove on toward the centre of town and came across noise and people, a mix of miners and locals. I noticed Tabitha taking everything in with a look of awe on her face.

Sid spoke over the hum of the car. 'The population has tripled with the mining activity. The miners tend to live in the on-site accommodation, but they bring a lot of money

into town.' He dropped his window and yelled out 'hello Auntie' to an ancient-looking woman who'd just came out of the general store, before continuing. 'The mining operation is just outside Gunggari Country. Our land council here, which I'm a member of, is hesitant to open up access to the basin. It would bring in ten times the people and money, and I'm hoping this doco will set them at ease. Once they know how the exploration works, and I can explain the benefits, I reckon I can change their minds. Just imagine a cinema, a big supermarket, and all the rest. Totally transform the place.'

He pointed up the road to a two-story old colonial style building with faded and chipped paint that looked more a dusty red than the original white. The roof was corrugated iron with veins of rust and large gutters that looked like they hadn't seen rain in a long time. 'That's The Royal, where we're staying. It's a bit of a focal point around here. A place where miners and locals mingle. I'd be lying if I said they didn't clash every now and then,' he added, then laughed.

We parked near the entrance to the pub where a large crowd was gathered for the night's entertainment. Bits of Gunggari language could be heard on the slight breeze and people stared at us as newcomers. A cover band played AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* and the music rang out onto the street. Mick checked his bag, making sure he had everything for the shoot. Tabitha looked grim as a couple of drunk white miners leered at her and made suggestive movements. I could tell they didn't see many tall, blonde women out there at the mine. Jenny was offered drinks by the same men. Sid had words with them, and they left us alone.

We walked into the pub through a haze, the smell of tobacco clutching our clothes. It was my first time experiencing anything like this. I'd snuck into the odd pub in Brisbane, but this was something else. It was absolutely packed. I saw a few patrons around my age who looked completely at ease. I'd never been around so many blackfellas before and I was nervous and excited at the same time. We walked up to a long bar with TAB betting screens all along the walls. The dogs and horses were being replayed from Melbourne and Brisbane. Towards the back was an entrance to a larger area where the band was playing. People, black and white, were jammed in tight.

A huge bloke with a long beard, short-sleeved flannelette shirt, and murky green eyes stepped out from behind the busy bar and greeted Sid with a sturdy handshake. Sid winced at the strength of the grip. Over the chatter of the crowd and noise from the band, the stranger spoke. 'Hello folks, I'm Ned, and this is my pub.'

'This is the crew I was telling you about,' said Sid. 'They're here to shoot a doco for the government.'

'Ah, right,' said Ned. 'Well, here are the keys, mate. I saved the two bunk rooms directly above the stage for you.' He laughed, showing yellow teeth. 'It's all I could give you on such short notice.'

'It'll have to do,' Sid yelled.

Guitars screeched loudly. I looked into the other room and saw a crowd member, obviously not the sound tech, playing with the knobs on the sound desk while pumping his fist in the air with his other hand. People were still streaming in from the road.

‘Let’s get the gear out of the ute and up to the rooms,’ said Sid.

We traversed a sea of sweaty bodies out to the utes. Grabbing our gear, we made our way up a narrow staircase and into the rooms. The noise from the band and crowd underneath was almost unbearable. There would be little chance of sleep until the music stopped. Tabitha and Jenny shared a room, so there were four bunks and three blokes in ours.

Sid went back to his ute and grabbed a swag. He placed it in the centre of the room for himself. He said he preferred that to the bunk. I just hoped nobody snored.

We decided to head back down to the pub for a feed and drinks. I stopped at the girls’ room on the way.

‘We’re heading back down. Gonna kill some time while the music is still playing.’ Just as I finished talking, the drummer started smashing cymbals.

‘I’ll stay here,’ said Tabitha, not looking at me. She held her phone above her head, searching for reception.

Jenny decided to come. Sid and Mick moved ahead of us and were already down the stairs when Jenny stopped me in the narrow hallway. We were alone and out of earshot.

She spoke over the music. ‘She’s all business that one,’ she said, and rolled her eyes. ‘She wants me to do a report every evening about what I’ve learned, and she kept saying she wished she had an opportunity like this at my age. She was telling me about career paths in production. It’s like I’m staying with a guidance counsellor.’

I laughed at how animated Jenny was as she spoke, all arms and eyebrows.

‘Ah well,’ I said. ‘You wanted to work “behind the scenes”. I hoped we’d be here for a while for the cash, but looks like Tabitha is gonna work us hard. I don’t mind though. She can get away with anything looking like Marilyn Monroe...ay, sis? I waited for it.’

‘Shut your hole,’ Jenny said, before punching me in the arm. We both laughed.

‘Honestly, I’m just happy to be on the ground again,’ I said. ‘Even if this pub is crazy.’ As if to reiterate my point, a local barged past me in the hallway hitting me with his shoulder. I knew that it was almost certainly by accident, and I’m sure that when he looked back he was apologetic, but I still felt like I wasn’t welcome.

Jenny took no notice. ‘Just relax,’ she said. ‘Nobody is going to have a go at you. I love it out here. Something about the desert air makes me feel right at home. I might even meet someone.’ She smiled dreamily.

Leading up to the trip, I often overheard the questions she would ask her oracle cards. Sometimes they were romantic, and I swear I heard my name mentioned, but I was never one hundred percent sure. I remembered that she wanted a respectful blackfella who knew about culture.

‘Could be Mick,’ I said. ‘He seems pretty keen. Make sure you put plenty of sunscreen on him, but.’

Jenny laughed and hit me again. She gave nothing away. I wasn’t sure if she liked him or not. My arm went numb. She had such strong bony fists. There was silence for a few moments before the beginning of the Men at Work song *Down Under* bellowed up the staircase and we decided to make our way down and get something to eat.

We sat near a window in the TAB section. Ned had shut the large door to the hall where the band was playing and most people had migrated over. There wasn't much food on offer, so we ordered schnitzels, hot chips, and gravy for dinner. Mick started yarning about a shoot he'd done in Papua New Guinea. Jenny's ears perked up and she gave him her full attention. The rest of us began to relax now we were closed off from the rowdy crowd next door.

'PNG is a wild place,' Mick said. 'I was stoked to be over there. It's beautiful, and I got a couple of sick surfs in, but there's a hell of a lot of crime. There are massive shantytowns on the outskirts of Moresby, where we were shooting. Tabitha was with me on that trip. We were working on a doco about Raskol gangs and marijuana trafficking into Australia. People are dirt-poor there. Everyone is chewing on betel nut and smoking weed. It's pretty easy to tell who's on the nut – they have big wads of it tucked into their cheeks. I was a bit nervous heading out by myself, but I met a couple of old blokes on holiday. I hung around with them when we weren't working. They were retired patrol officers and were there while the whole independence thing was happening in the 70s. Once that settled down, they were all offered jobs with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. They told me some funny stories about working out in the communities here. Especially how they treated Aboriginal people like they had the Guineans, but the locals didn't understand the pidgin they picked up.'

Sid got up with a grunt and walked over to another table.

Mick continued. 'Anyway, I ended up staying a couple weeks after the shoot and surfed with them. One overcast arvo off the coast of Taurama Point, I was paddling in and

got snapped by a reef shark.' He raised his leg onto the table and showed us the scar. 'I managed to make it to shore and yell for help. A bunch of kids were first on the scene. Instead of helping, they stole my board before the lads got to me. I was lucky and only needed a few stiches. But here's the kicker. I was drinking down at the same beach a couple of days later with the lads, and those same kids tried to sell my own board back to me,' he said, and laughed hard at his own joke.

Jenny gave a small chuckle, but it didn't sound genuine to me. I sat silent and thought Mike was a bit of an idiot.

The band started playing *Beds are Burning* by Midnight Oil and the crowd next door erupted. I headed for the bar and grabbed a lemonade for me and Jenny and a beer for Mick.

Ned took his time serving me. He seemed preoccupied and was looking over my shoulder intently. As he passed me the drinks, I turned and saw Sid talking to a couple of whitefellas. By the looks of them, they were locals. I went back to our table and tried to catch their conversation.

'I'm bloody telling you it's a sacred site,' said Sid, his voice strained. 'Just because there aren't artefacts present doesn't mean it's not significant.'

A broad-shouldered man with a massive gut and eyes full of grog spoke back to him. 'Come on, Sid. Let them miners get what they want out there. Look at this town.' He waved his arms around. 'Place is jumping. The store has never been so busy. These miners are a thirsty bunch, especially for rum. Never sold so much rum in my life. Who gives a rat's if they pock around and drill under that rock?'

‘You don’t know squat, Timbo,’ said Sid. ‘I’m all for the mining, mate, but haven’t you learned a damn thing being out here all these years? That rock? You mean Marrgany. That’s its proper name. I’m telling you it’s significant. Did you ever think to look properly at the formation? They can’t drill there.’

‘There’s a Dreamtime story is there?’ scoffed Timbo. This got a laugh from his mate, a rail thin bald-headed bloke. ‘What story might that be?’

Sid looked wild. Ned moved from behind the bar. He must have sensed some trouble brewing.

‘That rock formation is an upside-down goanna. The basin next to Marrgany once carried water, and that goanna drank his fill and drowned himself in the process. It’s part of our stories and songlines.’ He pointed outside where community members were gathered.

‘If there’s gas under that lizard you should bloody well let them mine it. It’ll keep this town alive. Bugger the stories.’

Sid was absolutely fuming, but suddenly Tabitha came running down the stairs in a fuss. Sid turned. Timbo and his mate went back to their drinks.

Tabitha bolted towards the table, panting. She looked pale and was obviously shaken. ‘There’s a man! He came at me, and I threw my phone at him.’ She showed us the phone. It had a cracked screen. ‘There was a white flash through the room. I could feel him behind me,’ she said. ‘But I froze. I didn’t see who it was. I need to sit down.’ She sat, her hands trembled and she was out of breath.

Sid had made his way over to us and he spoke softly. ‘Take a deep breath. Nobody came down after you. I’ll run up and have a look.’

Sid went up to the room and I grabbed Tabitha a drink. She took a couple of sips of vodka. The food came. I hadn't eaten since the sandwiches on the plane, and they were scattered over a playground in what seemed like a distant memory. We ate in silence.

Sid returned. 'Nobody up there. And nobody will be getting in or out without us knowing. You're safe. Plus, Ned's down here, and nobody messes with Ned.'

Ned was clearing glasses off the table next to us and joined in. 'That's right,' he said, flexing a massive bicep that had a dodgy looking tattoo of the southern cross around it.

Tabitha looked at him, but didn't reply. The rest of us were still busy eating. Jenny had finished her meal but started pinching my chips. Tabitha stared at the crowd outside and let out a long sigh.

The band stopped and Ned began clearing out the pub to close up. The noise left with the crowd, and we decided to hit the sack. I walked back up to the room behind Tabitha and Mick.

'We've done a lot of gigs together,' Tabitha said to him.

'Yep, a dozen or so now I reckon.'

'I just wanted to say that I appreciate the hard work, Mick. There has been talk of another promotion for me.'

'Jeez, again? That came quick.'

'I know. It would be good to nail this one.'

As we reached the bottom of the narrow staircase leading up to the rooms, a sick looking punter rushed down between us and staggered towards the front doors.

Tabitha stopped and I was caught awkwardly behind them. 'But it's not just the promotion.' She paused for a

moment, looking Mick in the eyes. 'It's just... Well, being here and seeing the community...and knowing this is... Anyway. This one's important to me, Mick.'

Mick had a confused look on his face. 'Hey, no worries, Tab. Have I ever let you down?'

'No, you haven't,' she said. A yell echoed in from outside. A brawl between two miners had flared up. Tabitha flinched, then rubbed her temples. 'I'm exhausted, and I have to look over the runsheet before bed. We've lost a day before even getting started. Make sure you check over your gear tonight. I want us moving first thing.'

Mick nodded.

'One more thing. Have you noticed the dogs? There seems to be a lot of stray dogs around.'

'Dogs? There are a few around, I guess. You OK, Tab?'

'I'm...'. She finally noticed me stuck behind them, forced a smile and continued up the stairs without another word.

Back in the room I thought about what Tabitha had said. The number of stray dogs out there? It seemed like an odd comment to me. I'd only seen a couple of strays in town as we drove through, nothing to warrant her comment, and what about that flash of white in the room she mentioned, but she never saw anyone? I pondered for a second, but... No, it couldn't be...

She'd been pretty shaken up by everything, and she was under stress from work. Plus, I sure as hell wouldn't want someone coming at me from the shadows. I figured I'd had my fair share of frightening things happen to me over the last few months. I was almost pleased that someone else was getting the crap scared out of them.

BORDERLAND

I lay in bed, on the edge of sleep and thought about Jenny. I wanted to be brave and tell her how I felt during the trip. I ran my tongue over the gap in my front teeth and hoped my confession would be well-received.

I woke in the middle of the night. Mick was snoring. Sid was reading with a small headlamp. I heard the loud barking of dogs through the crisp desert air.

13

I woke to light poking through the grille on the window, filling the room with little spots of yellow. My sheets were wet with sweat. I checked my phone for the time. Nine am, I couldn't believe how hot it was so early in the day. I was alone in the room.

I got up, had a cold shower, then made my way downstairs to the bar. I felt slightly off, and remembered to take my pills when I brushed my teeth. I'd felt like a proper adult the night before, hanging out at the pub with the crew. I desperately wanted a coffee and hoped that Ned had a machine.

Tabitha and Mick sat at a table near the entrance.

'Sorry I slept in,' I mumbled. 'Weren't we leaving at sun-up?'

'We would have woken you if we were leaving, don't worry about that,' Tabitha replied. 'Problem is, we can't leave.'

'What? Why?'

'Sid left at the crack of dawn. Apparently, there has been an incident. He didn't seem to know much when he went,

just that he had to go and that he would ring on the way back.' Tabitha said, bringing her tea cup to her mouth, but not drinking. The cup rattled against the saucer as she placed it down.

'So we're just going to sit around here till he gets back?'

'Yep. I suggest you take a look at the script and work on your lines.'

'Sure thing. I'll grab a coffee and a bite to eat, then get into it.' Ned didn't have a coffee machine. I had instant instead, and a breakfast of scrambled eggs on toast.

I went back to the room and found the script.

You might be wondering how we can let explorers onto the land and trust that they won't interfere or damage significant places and cultural sites. Well, the Queensland Government has put together the Native Title Protection Conditions for exploration permits granted under the Expedited Procedure...

I read over it a couple of times while standing in front of a small mirror hung behind the door. Beads of sweat dripped onto the paper. While reading out loud I imagined myself in the desert, on camera. I felt ridiculous. The more I emphasised points with hand gestures the more of a twat I looked. And what the hell was I talking about? I had no idea what the 'Native Title Protection Conditions for exploration permits granted under the Expedited Procedure' was. I kept saying it over and over again to make it sound more natural. The more I recited it the more unnatural it seemed. I began to think that I wasn't cut out for this acting business. Then I thought of the money and Mum.

I'd just started practising again when Jenny burst into the room without knocking, startling me. 'Good to see "the talent" working for his money,' she said, then grinned.

I felt my face flush from embarrassment. 'I can't look natural while reciting this script,' I stammered. 'I don't even understand what I'm talking about. It's all boring government gibberish.'

'Well, this is your first-ever gig. Don't stress too much. You're allowed to make mistakes.'

She was right, of course. Plus, it would only be seen by rural and remote communities, and it's not like I'd be up for an Oscar nomination for my performance in an educational mining documentary. Maybe I was putting too much pressure on myself. 'I suppose you're right.'

'I'm always right, Jono,' she said. 'You should know this by now.' She moved further into the room and yawned loudly. 'I don't know what you're complaining about, at least you got to sleep in. Tabitha was up and down all last night working and wandering in and out of the room. I barely slept. You have a real role here. I'm running errands for "the director slash production manager".' She made inverted commas in the air. 'Plus, Mick just hurt his back this morning and has me lugging around camera gear.'

'I'd rather run after Tabitha,' I said, and winked. 'Beats being in front of the camera acting like a complete tool. You can keep the heavy lifting for Mick, though.'

Jenny frowned as Tabitha's voice travelled up the staircase calling out for her. 'I've been summoned. Catch ya later, and keep up the practise.' On her way out she stopped, spun and finished with jazz hands. 'And remember...you're a *superstar*.'

After a while of getting nowhere memorising the script, I tried calling home from my mobile. No reception. I lay back

on my bunk and opened Tetris on my phone. The room was hot and bright, and my fingers were sweaty and slippery, making it hard to play. After a few games the phone died. As I put it on charge, I noticed a book poking out from under the pillow in Sid's swag. It must have been his reading material from the night before. I looked over at the door and listened out for footsteps. Not hearing any movement, I pulled the book out. It was a notebook with poems and short snippets of writing. Each piece was autographed: Sid Stanley. There was one page in particular that was dog-eared. It had corrections all through it and notes in the margins.

Big mine comes to my small town. Taking land and buying Law. The drilling cracks and splits tradition. I don't hear our songs anymore. I fight for mob and fare shares. I. Yell. Fair. Go. But they duck, cower, and hide behind charts, lines, and numbers that mean nothing to mob. I demand social justice packages for community to survive. But money can sing mob away from time, from culture, from tradition, from life. I feel hollow in town and on site, but whole when I see Possum out bush. We find peace in song, family, earth, water, and fire.

Sid Stanley

Parts of it reminded me of a rapid-firing gun. I found it odd that Sid was working with the mining company if he would write something like this. Maybe things weren't so black and white. He seemed to really want the mining and was even helping with the documentary, but I guessed it came at a cost? At least our work here would make sure that they didn't stuff up any sacred places.

Mick opened the door unannounced, startling me. *Doesn't anyone knock around here?* He bustled into the room

and sat on the ledge of the open window. He didn't look like a guy with a busted back. He seemed in perfect health to me, chirpy even. I hastily hid the book behind me. I felt like a kid caught with his hand in a lolly jar.

'Hey dude, Sid's back. We're meeting downstairs.'

I felt flustered and replied awkwardly. 'Yep, no worries. I'll get ready and see you down there.'

Mick gave me a strange look and laughed. 'Been having some alone time? Got a bit of a sweat on there.' He shook his head and closed the door behind him before I could reply.

I heard him laughing all the way down the hallway and yelling out Jenny's name. God knows what he's going to tell her. He probably had another heavy camera for her to pick up, no doubt. I placed Sid's notebook back where I found it, packed up my gear, and walked down to the bar.

14

The ceiling fans in the pub were caked in dust and rotated agonisingly slowly. Everyone sat at the table sweating and looking uncomfortable while we got organised.

‘It’s a four-hour drive off road to the campsite we have set up,’ said Sid.

I checked one of the TAB screens for the time. One o’clock. We’d lost half the day. A half day that we may need to make up, I thought. A half day of extra pay for me and Mum if we went over schedule. A horse named Lucky Duck had just come in first at Doomben to the cheer of one happy punter with a big red nose. He was quickly silenced when his next horse didn’t place. Tabitha tightened her hairband before speaking.

‘We were meant to leave at sunrise,’ she said. ‘We could get some background footage for voiceover imagery on the way. Would give us something out of this late start.’

Everyone around the table nodded.

‘Sorry, but duty called,’ said Sid. ‘There was a bit of a problem earlier with one of the wells.’ He paused for a couple of seconds as if he wanted to explain further but

didn't. 'Anyway, all sorted now and we can get moving. I'll take you out to Marrgany. It's roughly on the way to camp, and I reckon it would be a great place to film with the big rock and the basin flat as a tack for hundreds of kilometres behind it. It's a story place too, and I know the land council mob are worried about the exploration. Be good if it was in the film so they know the mines won't touch it.'

'That sounds great,' said Tabitha. She got up from the table. Her chair scraped across the floor cutting through the low hum of the fans and TVs. 'Alright everyone, let's get going.'

With my bag already packed, I waited downstairs alone. I took a glass of cold lemonade onto a low-set verandah with a view of the town on one side and the basin on the other. The air was hot and dry. It hurt to breathe. The sun reflected off the parched ground. I felt marooned by the haze of heat surrounding me. Beyond was the desert – the true bringer of isolation. I looked out toward the nothingness. The sky was clear and blue. Something shimmered in the distance. It looked like some sort of structure. An unfinished house? I hadn't noticed it in the twilight of the evening before. It was about a kilometre outside of town.

I felt my shoulders tense into knotted weights. I thought of the pills I'd been taking religiously in the hope of a normal life, then of the episode on the plane. The beast had cast shadows in the darkest recesses of my mind, making me anxious. *Was it real?* The thought lingered as a magpie glided over the pub and perched itself on a frayed power line nearby.

There was a phone booth a hundred metres or so down the road. My mobile was useless out here, so I decided to

call Mum while I had the chance. I shuffled my feet as the phone rang through.

‘Hello?’ I felt immediately comforted hearing Mum’s familiar voice on the other end.

‘Hi, Mum.’

‘Hello, my boy. I’ve been waiting to hear from you. You got in alright?’

‘Yeah. Sorry I didn’t call sooner. No mobile reception out here. How’s everything back home? Jiffy miss me?’

‘Yes, Jiffy misses you. She’ll be so excited when you get back. I’ll have to put newspaper near the front door.’ We both laughed. ‘She’s been a little stressed though, with Naomi looking after her, but she’s settled again now.’

‘Why was Naomi looking after her?’

A gust of dry hot wind blew dust into my eyes. I blinked and rubbed out the dirt.

Mum cleared her throat. ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter, bub. I’ll tell you about it when you get home. How’s Jenny? She like the desert?’

Mum loved that dog like a daughter and Naomi had never needed to look after her before. *Was she getting worse?*

‘Mum, don’t change the subject. Why did Naomi have to look after Jiffy?’

Mum sighed. ‘I don’t want you to be worried, but I had a fall and had to go to hospital for the night.’

My heart skipped a beat. ‘What?’

‘Don’t worry, bub. It’s nothing. Better now. Your mum’s just getting used to the treatment, is all,’ she said, and laughed. ‘Now tell me, how’s Jenny?’

‘Sure you’re OK, Mum?’

‘Yes, bub, I’m fine. And Jiffy is fine. Here girl, say hello to your brother.’ I could hear Jiffy’s wet nose against the receiver.

I smiled and said hello to the dog before Mum was back on. ‘Jenny’s good,’ I said, then laughed at the thought of her carrying the gear around for Mick.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘They’re working her hard. She’s running errands and lifting heavy equipment for the camera guy.’

Mum laughed. ‘Jenny would hate that. It’s good you are out there together. I reckon things will be different between you two when you come back.’ I felt my face flush. ‘Anyway bub, good to hear you’re well. Naomi just popped over.’ I could hear Jiffy barking and Naomi saying hello in the background.

‘Look after yourself.’

Mum hung up and I walked back inside and took my boots off. The Blundstones were moulded to a different foot, and they were already starting to rub the sides of my feet raw.

One at a time, the crew made their way down the narrow staircase. Jenny walked down carrying the heavy camera gear with Mick following. Since earlier this morning he’d apparently developed a limp.

Ned was waiting behind the bar and once we were all gathered, he insisted we have a shot of scotch before leaving. ‘Nobody leaves until we’ve toasted. After the toast, we scull on three.’

Jenny and I stood back, but Ned dragged us over to the bar to join in.

Tabitha mumbled something about the early hour, but Ned had none of it at. He shoved the full shot glass into Tabitha's hand, spilling some onto the sticky vinyl floor.

We raised our glasses. Jenny and I grinned at each other. Ned's voice boomed through the pub. 'Never above you, never below you, always by your side. ONE, TWO, THREE.'

We drank. The scotch burned my throat and I felt dizzy from the mixture of alcohol and heat.

Ned proceeded to shake our hands in turn. 'Good luck young fella, and look after Sid for me, aye,' he said, trying to break my hand as a parting gift.

'I'll try my best,' I replied, through a wince, though I had the feeling that, if anything, Sid would be looking after us.

I took my gear out to the car and went back into the pub to see if anyone needed a hand. Sid was talking to Ned at the side of the bar. As I grabbed one of Mick's camera bags to help Jenny out, I overheard their conversation.

'Ned, have you fixed up that second water tank yet?'

'Nope,' Ned replied before laughing.

'Well, get onto it mate. And get a water truck out here to fill it.'

'Water truck? What's got into you, mate? I'm touched, but we've got taps with running water,' he laughed again. 'I'm sure there's water in the good tank, though I haven't checked in a while. What's brought this on?'

Sid opened a can of soft drink and took a long pull before speaking. 'I've just come from a well about half an hour out from the airstrip,' he said, and looked about.

I was shuffling around gear and strained to listen as Sid continued in a hushed tone. 'There was a problem. They're running tests. Probably nothing, but better safe than sorry.'

‘Struth,’ said Ned, before scratching his stubbled chin. ‘What were you doing out there, anyway?’

‘Mob were on staff and I was called in to yarn with them.’

‘Right. Well, thanks for the heads-up.’

Before we left, Sid drove around to a tank at the side of the pub and filled up a large water container on the back of the ute. He said that on top of the bottled water in the esky, it would see us through the trip.

We drove with the sun high. Jenny sat in between me and Mick. It was a tight squeeze. A couple of minutes out of town, I noticed the gleaming structure I’d seen when I was on the phone to Mum. Closer now, I could make out the framing of a couple of houses. They looked like abandoned projects. I leaned towards the front of the car. ‘Sid? They gonna finish those houses?’

‘Na, bud. That was a CDEP project. Won’t get finished now.’

‘CDEP?’

‘Community Development Employment Project. Instead of work for the dole, government paid people for work on community-based projects. That Living History Centre was one of the projects. These houses weren’t finished.’

Sid waved over at the twisted metallic frames and the broken and picked dry board. The steel skeletons were barely standing, they were that mangled and bent. He took a swig of water and spat it out the window. ‘The houses were being built under the same initiative until the government abolished the program. Work for the dole doesn’t have much meaning out here now. At least with the CDEP, work for the dole contributed to the community.’

That's why I'm trying to get the mining out here. It'll give more mob employment.'

I didn't reply. I thought of what I'd read in Sid's notebook.

We moved along a neat gravel road, and then onto the desert floor. Driving along with the windows down and the dry heat blowing, I felt agitated. Every bump of the car scraped the sides of my feet against my boots. It was going to be an awful drive.

I took a moment to breathe deeply and feel the desert air enter my lungs. I looked at the bright endless sky, and centred myself. After a while, with the motor humming away, everyone fell quiet. Jenny stared past me and out the window, taking everything in.

An hour into the drive Sid pointed up ahead. 'Would you look at that. Gets me every time.'

Marrgany loomed boldly in the distance – the only rock formation for as far as I could see. I passed Mick one of his cameras and he started messing around with it, before filming the land and our approach to the rock. The hard desert floor gradually turned to sand as we drove closer, and the ride became more turbulent.

I grabbed the hand grip above the window as the car bucked through the waves of loose sand and gravel like a ship through rough waters. How easy it would be to get bogged out here and have the desert take you.

We pulled up and I jumped out, stretched my arms to the sky, and heard my back crack. Sid opened the esky and handed out sandwiches and cold bottled water.

Mick put on his limp again when Jenny jumped out of the car. 'Jenny, could you grab that tripod and set it up in front of the ute? And bring over the camera bag?'

‘Sure thing, Mick,’ she said, rolling her eyes at me on her way to grab the gear.

I grinned and pinched her arm as she passed.

Mick and Tabitha leant on the front of the car and discussed the shoot. Their hands waved over the landscape, their fingers pointed at Marrgany and the basin, and their heads nodded and shook as decisions were made.

I made my way over to the rock with my food and drink. I remembered the night before, and Sid talking to the locals in the pub. Marrgany really did look like a goanna lying on its back. I sat alone in the shaded side. The cool smooth surface against my sweating back was a welcome relief. I looked out over the basin and could clearly see the outline of what used to be a large body of water.

Sid came over and sat next to me. ‘Nice in the shade, aye.’

‘Yeah, it’s real hot out here,’ I said, and accidentally spilled water. Even in the shade the desert greedily gobbled it up.

‘See out there,’ Sid pointed out across the basin. ‘There were trade routes all through there.’

‘Really?’

‘Yup, the whole basin is full of artefacts from mob camping and moving across long time ago. I reckon they’ll find a whole bunch of stuff when they start to survey for gas.’ There was a moment’s pause. ‘It’s beautiful ain’t it?’

‘Yes.’ I wasn’t lying. It really was beautiful. There was something so very striking, peaceful, and yet dangerous about all the flat land and sky in front of me. I felt incredibly small and so very large at the same time.

I thought of songlines and creation story pathways. I wondered what ancient knowledges, Laws, and songs lay

across that land. 'And this is where they will be mining?' I asked.

'There is a lot of gas under this basin,' he said, then rubbed his face with his shoulder, getting rid of a few flies. 'I can see mob out there. Working their land, being busy, having purpose, and making money to buy the things they want.'

Sid went silent then and, in that moment, as we stared out over the dust and flat red earth, I believe we shared a vision of a possible – no – probable future. One of fracking wells, hundreds of them, black towers covering the land in the clear glowing heat, each accompanied by a dark pool of water for drilling.

'Things change,' he said, and sighed, breaking the silence. 'This land is all we have. You understand me?'

I nodded. In witnessing this future that Sid brought forth, I thought of his poem and I could sense conflict within him.

'And if our land brings industry then we have to use it, you know?'

I nodded again.

He poured what water was left in his bottle onto his hands to wash the food off. 'Anyway bud, Mick's busy getting some footage of the rock and basin then we'll head off.'

'No worries. I'll finish up my feed and head back.'

'Take your time, no rush. Don't want to drag you from the shade too quickly.' Sid stood up and shook the sand off his pants and boots.

Mick yelled down at us from the top of the rock, 'Hello down there!'

Sid looked up alarmed. 'What the hell are you doing? Get down from there!'

‘What’s the problem? It’s a good vantage point to shoot from.’

‘You’re standing on something special. Get down! It’s right to film but I didn’t say you could climb it..just get down.’

‘Sorry. I had no idea.’ Mick shuffled his way toward a rock ledge. I watched him check that Jenny wasn’t looking – she was at the car talking to Tabitha – before he jumped the last part easily. He called Jenny over to help and they walked out over the basin. They were a fair way out before turning and filming us and the surrounds. When they returned, we jumped back into the car and headed off.

Over that long last leg, the sun slowly faded and colour crossed over us. The desert was seemingly endless. The air became cool and crisp and patches of scrub began to dot the landscape.

Jenny had swapped seats with me at Marrgany and slept soundly with her head nestled into her rolled-up headscarf as a pillow against the window. The moon was rising behind her and the sun on the other side caught her face at just the right angle, brightening the dust in the air around her like little specks of glitter. She looked beautiful and at peace.

After a few hours Sid broke the silence. ‘We’re close,’ he said, and rang ahead on his satellite phone to someone at the camp.

Jenny and Tabitha both stirred out of sleep. Ahead of us, I noticed a long line of green snaking its way through the red sand. A river out here? I thought. We veered towards

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the campsite and witnessed three wild horses milling around a waterhole before reaching our destination.

We had finally arrived.

15

The campsite was next to a slow-flowing river, where trees lined both banks. A large tent housed a camp kitchen, and close by long logs surrounded a smoking firepit. Sid had arranged a small one-man tent for me on the edge of the campsite and I stashed my gear. Jenny had a tent nearer the fire and the others. Sid's wife prepared a barbeque dinner and the smell of steak, sausages, chops and eggs cooking on the grill made my mouth water. She introduced herself as Possum, whether or not that was her real name I didn't know. I remembered Sid's poem and thought this must be the Possum of the text. Sid offered me a cold drink, which I eagerly took, then he walked off to gather firewood. Once everyone had unpacked, we settled on the logs and Sid stoked the fire, while the sun disappeared beneath the horizon.

After we ate, Jenny, Possum and I cleaned up together in the darkness of early night. A gas-powered lantern sat on top of a tattered fold-out camping table. I sat next to the glowing orb and washed dishes in a plastic tub while everyone chatted near the barbeque. Lantern light spread

over their backs and cast shadows against the tarpaulin that rolled in the light breeze.

‘Who’s your mob?’ Possum asked Jenny, without looking away from her task of scrubbing the grill.

‘I’m Ngarabal,’ Jenny said. While I couldn’t see Jenny’s face, I imagined there was the utmost pride spread across it as she spoke. That single word – Ngarabal – was the foundation block to her past, present and future being. Ngarabal was Jenny, and Jenny was Ngarabal.

‘And your name?’ Possum continued.

‘Jenny.’

‘No, bub, second name.’

‘Oh, sorry. Jenny Pohatu.’

‘Pohatew, Poohatuu, Pohatu, Pohatu,’ Possum said, lifting her head and rolling the name around her mouth several more times. It seemed that with each repetition of the word she pulled a memory closer and closer from long ago.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ Jenny said, nodding at Possum. I could tell she desperately wanted to connect with this older woman. ‘My father’s from New Zealand.’

‘We won’t hold that against him now will we.’

Jenny laughed.

‘I had a job out in Tenterfield as a social worker years ago,’ said Possum. ‘Strong community out there. Do you know the Johnsons?’

‘No,’ Jenny replied.

‘The Alberts?’

‘No.’

‘The Walkers?’

‘I’m sorry, no.’

‘Surely you must know the Nelsons?’

'I haven't been back there since I was very young. But I probably met many of the Johnsons, Alberts, Walkers, and Nelsons when I was a baby. I'm sure my mother knows them.'

'And who's your mother?'

'Naomi Pohatu.'

Possum nodded, her long black and grey hair moving up and down her wiry back and her eyes fixed on Jenny. 'I see.' She smiled briefly before getting back to her work of cleaning the barbeque and, as quickly as the conversation had started, it was over.

Jenny went to talk but didn't and, looking resigned, she handed me the last couple of dirty plates and went off to her tent.

'I didn't mean to scare off your friend,' Possum said, with her back to me. Her left arm tensing and untensing as she continued to scrub the grill.

'I'm sure she's fine.'

Possum put the brush down, came to the table, and stood over me. The tent filled with her immense shadow. 'Let me get a good look at you,' she said, and lifted my chin with her rough hand. 'What's your name? Do you know your mob?'

'Jonathan Lane. And unfortunately, no,' I said, and did my best to avoid Possum's eyes staring into me.

'You remind me of someone.'

'Really? Who?'

She jerked my head a few times left and right. 'I can't quite place it,' she said, her hand still clasping onto my chin and lifting my face. She looked me over one more time before letting go. 'I'll finish up. You go off and enjoy the fire.'

Sid put on a compilation CD 'The Best of Aussie Rock.' I sat near the fire and watched the different yellows, reds, blues, and greens lick and spit at the hardwood logs. Tabitha turned the music up in small increments as she drank more; it was blaring before long. *Khe Sanh* by Cold Chisel came on and Tabitha began to slow dance by herself. She had drunk far more than the rest.

'Check it out,' I said to Mick, pointing over at Tabitha who was off in her own little world.

He chuckled. 'Strange thing, she doesn't normally drink much.'

I was staring at her, totally intrigued by her ungracefulness.

Mick noticed. 'Dude, you know she's married, right?'

I felt embarrassed. 'Oh no, I was just...thinking how well she dances.'

Mick laughed. Tabitha had her hands raised and shook her arms while staring up at the stars. 'If you can call it that,' said Mick. 'She can't dance, but she's smart as hell. I'll be following her to the top.'

Tabitha's dancing stopped when the song ended. She clumsily turned the volume down a notch before stumbling towards her tent.

'She'll be sore tomorrow,' said Mick, and threw his empty bottle of beer into the fire and got up. 'I'm checking my gear. Bloody dust gets in everything. Might come back for another in a bit.'

Mick disappeared into his tent, and Possum and Sid waved goodnight from over at the camp kitchen. Jenny passed them as she walked in from the darkness and towards the fire. *Never Tear Us Apart* by INXS started to play on the stereo.

'Take a bit of log, *darlin'*,' I said, doing my best impression of country drawl. I patted the spot next to me.

Jenny laughed and sat down. She picked up a stick and started poking the fire. 'Possum is a bit weird,' she said. 'It's not my fault I didn't grow up on Country, but I wrote down those names she mentioned. I'll ask Mum when we get home, she must know them.'

'I'm sure she does,' I said.

There was silence and Jenny stared upward. 'Will you look at that.'

I looked up too. For a few moments we took in the clearest sky I had ever seen. Infinite bright stars above us.

'Jono, how does it feel?'

I wasn't sure what she was getting at and probably looked confused too.

'I mean being here out bush,' she said.

'It's hot in the sun, and cold in the dark. I'm making more money than I ever have...yeah, pretty sweet, I'd say'

'That's not what I meant,' she said, and rolled her eyes. 'Seeing Gambari and all the blackfellas. Marrgany and all that history, and now this beautiful river. Doesn't it make you want to find out where you're from?'

'Not this again, Jenny. You know I don't like talking about that stuff.'

For a brief moment all that could be heard was the fire and the soft violins from the track playing.

'When the time is right, you'll start looking. How could you not when we were raised by two proper strong black women.'

I nodded but didn't say anything. I hated it when Jenny got all sentimental like this. Trying to tease out deep and

meaningful talk about my identity. Why did she have to have so many opinions about it?

'I kind of feel bad for leaving Mum by herself. These old girls are all we have,' she said, staring into the fire.

I felt a jolt of anxiety at the thought of Mum at home with Jiffy.

'I called home when we got into Gambari,' Jenny said softly. 'Your mum's not doing so well, Jono.'

The hearth rumbled. A large log had cracked in two. I watched as shadows danced over Jenny. Her eyes full of fire.

'Jenny, please.'

'Sorry. There are good treatments now. Maybe you two can move in with us.'

I felt an anger well up from the pit of my stomach. She was poking at more than the fire.

'She'll be fine,' I said, more loudly than I intended. 'Of course, she'll be fine. We won't have to go anywhere or do anything. Understand?'

The esky rattled and the music was turned up. Mick walked over, cracked the top off his beer, and threw it into the fire. The Hunters and Collectors song *Throw Your Arms Around Me* came on. Mick placed his beer next to a log.

'Wanna dance?' He said, holding his hand out to Jenny.

'Sure,' she said, with a twinkle in her eye.

The song went for what felt like an eternity. Jenny giggled as Mick dipped and twirled her around, before pulling her in closer. Even though I was a bit peeved at Jenny for bringing up things she knew I didn't want to talk about, watching her locked at the hip with Mick and swaying to the music made me uncomfortable. I thought about turning in, but I just couldn't get myself to leave.

Just as the song was coming to an end, Mick stepped back, looked deep into Jenny's eyes, and spoke in a slightly drunken slur, 'Is this when two become one?' He then placed his arms together making both halves of the Aboriginal flag tattoo connect.

She stepped back and began laughing hysterically. 'Most ridiculous pick-up line I've ever heard,' she said, through snorted gasps.

The CD skipped onto the Jimmy Barnes song *Working Class Man* and Mick reacted by dancing silly and doing air guitar while smiling up big to Jenny who matched his enthusiasm. *What the hell is happening?* The guitars screeched and Mick did an arm wheel and stamped his foot down hard.

Jenny's eyebrows narrowed. 'What the hell!' she yelled. 'There's nothing wrong with your back!'

Mick stopped dancing and approached Jenny slowly. 'I faked the injury.'

Jenny picked up her stoking stick. 'You better have a good reason or I'll bust this over your gammin sore back.'

Mick raised his hands like he was surrendering. 'Sorry. I wanted to spend time with you. If I hadn't faked an injury you'd have been with Tabitha the whole trip.'

'Aww, that's adorable,' she said, and her face softened for a moment before pulling a cheeky grin and chasing after Mick with the stick.

I could hear their laughter trailing off into the darkness. My stomach felt like it had been branded by hot iron. I felt stupid for thinking I had a shot with Jenny. I wished I could stop my feelings for her. I picked up a stick and moved coals around the dying fire.

Before we'd left for the trip, I'd spent night after night staring at the ceiling of my room and fantasising about a future with Jenny. I was supposed to tell her how I felt, and she would feel exactly the same way and we would head back to Brisbane as a couple. I replayed that broken dream over and over. The trip was turning into a disaster.

Nature called and I walked down to the river and relieved myself next to a shrub. It was dark and eerie away from the fire and I looked over my shoulder a few times. The beast came to the front of my mind, those sharp teeth, and that pale skin. I didn't want it – or anything else – creeping up on me while I was doing my business. I became very aware of the wild noises around me. I could feel myself starting to freak out, so I turned off the music and, under the light of a high moon, walked through the now deathly quiet campsite to my tent.

Inside, and stinking of smoke, I got into the sleeping bag fully-clothed. The desert was brutally cold at night. I shivered and thought about Jenny with Mick. I was physically and emotionally exhausted, and it didn't take me long to drift off.

■ ■ ■

Rustling noises stirred me awake. I was dazed and in darkness. I tried stretching my arms to find my torch, but they were trapped inside the sleeping bag.

I could hear heavy, wet breathing outside. Laying still and stiff as a board I listened for movement. Something was right outside, sniffing at the fabric, smelling me out. My eyes adjusted, and a large silhouette formed in the

half-dark. The tent was coming in on me and a wet patch emerged where the breathing was concentrated.

It was the beast! In that half-asleep half-awake state, I worked off pure instinct. I flung my arms out of the sleeping bag and found my torch, then bolted for the entrance. The beast was startled, but came in on the tent biting at it. I struggled with the zip. I finally got out and tensed for the fight of my life. I shone the light but couldn't place the thing. I heard movement and the rustle of bushes, and, in that moment, as my adrenaline peaked, I remembered Mum's story and the name *Wudun*.

Wudun the protector. Wudun who would help in times of danger. I said the name soft at first, then louder as I turned my body around in circles, the torchlight dancing around me.

'Wudun, Wudun, Wudun.' I repeated the word like a mantra, but no protector emerged. My heart thumped and I was overcome by the thought of uncovering the pale skin, sharp teeth, and long red tongue of the beast.

I flashed the torch on the riverbank a couple of metres away, and what appeared, startled by the light, was a different type of monster: a huge black wild pig, with long tusks, a big wet nose, and beady eyes shamed by the light. I stamped my foot and said 'Ahh, get,' and it ran off scared, along the riverbank and away from camp.

I lay back down but couldn't sleep. The shock of seeing the pig made me restless and I felt silly for saying *Wudun*. It was a childish campfire story that had no bearing on the real world, and there I was, seventeen years old, asking for Wudun, a figure from the Dreaming, to protect me. Silly and childish indeed. I didn't want to get up and go out, but I

desperately needed to relieve myself again, so I grabbed my torch, which I admit I'd kept on to light the tent as I tried to sleep. My breath billowed in the cold night air. My bare feet were wet from the dewy grass lining the riverbank and caught bits of rock and twig as I walked. I was groggy and could feel a headache coming on. I pissed on a tree nearby, as I nervously looked about with my torch. Afterwards, I wanted water and began walking back to the centre of camp. That's when I heard the whimpering.

Tabitha was sitting on one of the logs surrounding the firepit, which still had softly glowing embers in it. She jumped up, startled, as I approached. She had tears in her eyes. She sat back down once she realised I wasn't a wild animal. She wore track pants, an old-looking plain T-shirt, and her feet were uncovered and blackened from dirt. She must be freezing. I wasn't sure what to do, so I grabbed a log and placed it on the coals. I sat next to her and looked into the rekindled flames.

'Are you OK?' I asked. She was obviously not OK.

She took a large breath and wiped her face. 'I'm fine,' she said, looking into the fire. 'It's just being out here, so far from home, when this is meant to be my...and my father...my father's very sick, you know?'

'Sorry to hear,' I said, pushing away the sudden thought of Mum.

We were quiet for a few moments, and I watched the flames lick the insides of an empty bottle in the hearth.

'I have a beautiful girl,' said Tabitha, breaking the silence and rubbing her hands together. 'She's everything, and looks just like her grandad.'

Tabitha's eyes were large and a deep shade of blue. Her face was pale and blonde hair messy from broken sleep and emotion. An open bottle of whisky leaned against her leg.

'Would you like to see a photo?' she asked.

'Sure,' I said.

She went to her tent to get her phone, then came back and sat down next to me. She showed me a picture on the cracked screen of a girl, maybe three years old, happily playing on a swing.

'What's her name?'

'Elizabeth,' she said, then touched the screen, and smiled.

'She's beautiful,' I said, before the screen went black. We looked at our reflections off the phone for a few silent moments. I made to get up. 'Goodnight.'

'Please stay a little longer.'

'Sure.' I started to feel tired again, but I knew I shouldn't leave her like this.

'You know I started my career doing the same thing as Jenny.'

'As a dancer?' I asked, confused.

'What? No. On a training program like this.'

'Don't you need to be Indigenous?'

'Yes.'

Far out! Tabitha, a blackfella? You could have fooled me.

'And now I'm up for a promotion,' she continued. 'And it had to be this place. This place, for this gig that has so much riding on it.'

'Aren't things going well? We had a late start, but we can pick it up.'

'I'm Gunggari,' she said.

I didn't know what to say.

‘This is my first time on Country. Dad’s Country. Something I’ve thought about for years. And I feel...I feel like I don’t belong here, like I should be home with him instead.’ She took a swig of the Scotch bottle. ‘No, no, Dad understands...I know he’s proud. I’ve worked my whole life to get high enough to make change, change for mob, even just being there at the top and being black, you know?’

I didn’t really understand anything in that moment, but I nodded.

‘And I thought by coming here, coming home, people would recognise, but...’

The wind changed direction and smoke engulfed me. I coughed, and moved out of its path and away from Tabitha. ‘You’re making a difference,’ I said. ‘The mining doco, and teaching Jenny. I know she acts like it’s a chore, but she loves the work... And I’ve learned a lot.’ I wasn’t sure if I’d learned anything really, but I said it because it seemed like the right thing to say to Tabitha in that moment.

Tabitha looked at the black screen of her phone. ‘We need mob in high places,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘But there are pressures, pressures that take a toll on you mentally. Pressures that make you think you’re losing it.’

‘Stress does strange things. I’m sure you just need a good sleep.’

‘No.’ She took another large gulp.

My stomach churned just watching. She leaned in close, the booze strong on her breath. ‘The pressure could make you see things. Don’t you think?’ she whispered.

My heart skipped a beat. ‘Oh really. What kind of things?’
‘It’s the stress, has to be the stress...’

‘What have you seen?’ I asked outright.

She looked straight into my eyes. ‘A pale dog-man.’

I jumped off the log and fumbled with my torch, trying to turn it on. I looked behind me. I scanned the bushes. My heart pounded in my chest. ‘I’ve seen it too,’ I said, still looking over the campsite.

‘Stop teasing me.’

‘Long teeth, pale skin. Long claws and black eyes.’

A sudden clarity came over Tabitha’s face. ‘And the growls,’ she said. ‘It can’t be a coincidence if we’ve both seen it, right? When did it start?’

‘At college, and before. It’s been a while..you?’

‘On the plane ride here. I had a vision of it when we hit turbulence. I was lying on the ground. It was standing over me, it was hurting me.’

‘Last night at The Royal, was it the beast?’ I asked.

‘I think so. I thought it was a man at first...but I saw a flash of teeth, and pale skin, and I heard a growl before I saw anything.’

‘I believe you. I thought it was all my imagination, but maybe not.’

I told her I was on medication and asked her if she was taking anything. She wasn’t. We tried to figure out a connection, something in our pasts that linked us. There was nothing besides our sick parents, but I didn’t mention Mum.

‘We should tell somebody,’ I said.

She grabbed me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes with intent. She shook me. ‘I’ve got too much riding on this without people thinking I’m unstable. We never talked. Right?’ She started to get up.

I saw a flash of white bound over the outline of the parked utes in the periphery of my vision.

'Wait!' I said. 'Sit down.' There was movement near the large tent in the centre of camp. I jumped up, grabbed my torch, and swung it around, searching frantically. The light danced over the water and trees surrounding us. The wind picked up and the fire burned brightly.

Tabitha turned her head to-and-fro, following the light from the torch. It must have dizzied her, because she fell off the log.

I knelt down beside her. 'You OK?'

Her blue eyes looked up at me, the corners catching flame from the now-roaring fire. The wind blew. She stiffened and stared directly behind me with fear written on her face. A shadow loomed across her. She was shaking.

'Behind you...' she whispered.

I turned quickly. The monster towered over me, its claws outstretched. Its lifeless black eyes stared through me towards Tabitha. I swung my torch but it went straight through the beast. It was not solid – a horrific outline only. Its pale arms and black claws bore down like a lightning strike.

Tabitha screamed.

I found courage and leapt using my torch as a weapon. My attack didn't connect and I fell, landing on my face near the fire.

The beast looked at me, its expression deadpan, as I lay on the ground. It then walked over me and through the fire before fleeing at tremendous speed into the bush.

I jumped up and threw light over the tents and trees around us. There was no sign of it. The growls faded and the wind died down.

I turned back to Tabitha and gasped. She had a large, ripe scratch down the side of her neck.

‘You’re hurt.’

Tabitha looked stunned, and closed her eyes. I ran back to my tent and grabbed bandages from the first aid kit Mum made me pack. I started treating Tabitha’s wound.

The commotion had woken Possum. She wore a white nightie and looked like a ghost walking in from the dark towards the light of the fire.

‘Possum, we need help,’ I called.

‘That’s a nasty-looking scratch,’ she said, and grabbed the bandages off me.

I tried frantically to tell her what had happened while she worked on Tabitha’s wound. She let me get my words out and, once I’d finished, she pulled a loose nail out of the log near Tabitha’s neck, moved the almost empty bottle of whisky away, and looked up at me sympathetically.

‘Leave her to me, Jonathan. Go get some sleep.’

‘We might still be in danger,’ I said urgently.

I could feel the wildness in me from the adrenaline and fear.

But she was having none of it. ‘Get some sleep, Jonathan,’ she said, a second time.

I stood there a few moments. Possum wasn’t really listening and the only other witness to the event lay hurt and passed out in the dirt. I gave up, and walked off to bed full of questions and worry.

16

Light and heat woke me. I was tired, parched and I stunk of smoke. I forced myself up, opened the zip to my tent, and plodded along the riverbank. I thought about the night before. It was like a dream. While the world felt different in the light of day, the fear that had gripped me at the fire the night before had only slightly loosened its talons.

I recalled the vision of the beast again and again, and the dark red blood on Tabitha's neck. *It was real?* I needed to talk to her. *Was it real?* I stopped and ran back to my tent and took my pills. Then, with the wind blowing off the water and the gum trees waving along the banks, I walked into the centre of camp.

Possum was cooking what looked like an epic breakfast. She smiled as I approached, but didn't respond to my hello – she was too busy frying up bacon and eggs and talking to Sid. I grabbed a coffee and sat on a log at the scene of the attack. There was nothing visibly amiss: no blood, no sign of a tussle, just the dirt, the fire and a couple of empties. The bottle of whisky wasn't there either. I hadn't imagined it, surely?

Tabitha was nowhere to be seen. I needed to see the bandage on her neck, I needed to be sure that I hadn't had another episode. I started to feel the dread again. I sipped my coffee and tried to calm myself. Tabitha would be out soon. I'd talk to her then.

A tent unzipped and I clasped my hands together. It wasn't Tabitha, but Jenny who bundled out, yawned, and stretched her lean body and wiry arms to the sky. She'd stepped out of her own tent, so I guessed she hadn't stayed with Mick the night before. Not that it was any of my business. Still, the sight of her made my stomach flip and, in that moment and with so much on my mind, I still wanted to be with her and felt overwhelmed by it.

She looked over to me and smiled, but I didn't respond, and her face dropped. Jenny was her own person, and she could be with whomever she wanted to, but knowing that didn't help the sick feeling I had.

Mick sat down next to me and grinned. I felt like knocking that smile off his smug face. I supposed it wasn't his fault, though. I was angry with myself for feeling too much. I'd told him that Jenny and I weren't an item. I needed to give Jenny some space, so my hurt feelings didn't ruin our friendship.

Another zip sounded and this time it was Tabitha who lumbered out and walked over. She didn't take any notice of me. She looked sick, but the bandage was there! Thank the stars. It hadn't been an episode. I felt stupid for being so happy at seeing that white dressing on her neck. She looked bleary-eyed and walked like she was still a little drunk. I watched her find her sunglasses, grab a bottle of water from the esky and walk over to the camp kitchen.

I went and sat down beside her. 'You OK?' I asked.

She sat low in the chair. Strands of messy blonde hair over her dark specs. She was wearing the same clothes as the night before.

'I feel like death. Like I've eaten the entire desert,' she said, and took a massive gulp of water.

'Your neck?'

'Her neck will be fine,' said Possum, who put a plate of food in front of Tabitha.

Tabitha straightened herself in the chair but kept her sunglasses on.

'Eat up,' Possum continued. 'You should have told Sid earlier you were one of the Smith mob. We could have asked some of your family to come out and meet you.'

Tabitha smiled. 'Thanks for the thought, but I'm not sure they know I exist.'

'They would be happy to meet you.'

'Your neck though. Do you remember how it was cut?' I asked.

'I don't remember a thing from last night.'

'That's what happens when stress eats you up. You explode,' said Possum. 'You told me a long story last night, my girl, as I put you to bed. You had a nasty fall and cut yourself on one of those nails on the logs. Make sure you get a tetanus shot when you get back to town if you're not up to date with them.'

'You don't remember anything?' I said, almost pleading. 'We talked and...'

'Not a thing,' said Tabitha, before tentatively nibbling on a rasher of bacon.

'It happens to the best of us. Keep up the water and change that bandage after you clean yourself up,' said Possum.

'Thanks, Possum.'

'And how about you, young man?' Possum asked, accusingly. 'How's your head? You were talking a lot of nonsense last night charged up.'

I was at a complete loss. Possum thought I was crazy and drunk the night before, when I hadn't had a drop of liquor. Tabitha couldn't remember anything, but there was the cut on her neck clear as the flies circling the bacon and eggs on the plate in front of me.

'Yeah, sorry...' I said.

'I should never have allowed that,' said Tabitha, looking a little worried.

'It's fine. I won't tell a soul,' I said, feeling adrift. I was alone in this again. Just when I thought that I could talk to someone, I was alone again. No, I knew what I saw. I knew it.

'I'm gonna clean myself up,' I said.

'You're not leaving till you've had something to eat,' ordered Possum. 'You've got a long day ahead.'

So, there I sat, forcing down bacon, eggs, and toast under the watchful eye of Possum, feeling unsure if the world was as it seemed and sure that nobody believed me.

The river was pale brown and it felt like I was bathing in milk. My feet were ankle-deep in mud under the cloudy water and it was disturbing to feel things brush past my legs as I washed and cleaned my teeth. I'd kept my jocks on because I was in the section of river across from camp.

A desert wind disrupted the surface of the milky river. I thought of being on the verandah back in Nundah and the cool salty breezes coming in from the ocean. I should never have left. I spat out the toothpaste and sniffed the air. Unlike the salty ocean scent of my home town, there was the strong smell of gas on the wind. I figured it was from the camp kitchen.

Magpies began to sing then, raising the hairs on my arms. I felt immediately anxious. I looked into the trees behind me and there, perched on the branch of an old gum, a pair of magpies cooed. I put my head under the water and when I breached the surface I saw a flash of black and white as a magpie flew past gunning for my ear. I instinctively yelled, pulled my legs out of the mud and ran through the water with my knees high and bent. The magpie turned and took another swoop.

Sid and Mick laughed heartily as I passed the camp kitchen pumping my legs along the bank towards my tent.

I got dressed and cursed the magpies and everything else. When I stepped out, I noticed Tabitha and Possum talking. They were knee-deep in a shallow upstream section of the river.

I zipped up the tent and was startled by Sid. 'What you doing, bud?' he asked, one hand tucked into his belt. His wide-brimmed hat tilted slightly downwards, throwing a shadow across his face.

'Just getting changed.'

'Had a bit of scare from those magpies, aye?'

I looked down at the ground.

'Possum told me you got charged and said you been seeing things? I've seen a lot of mob fall to grog.'

'I wasn't drinking.'

'No need to lie. I'm not gonna growl you.'

I looked straight into his concerned eyes. 'I wasn't drinking,' I said, harshly and with a little spittle.

'No need to arc up. Just want to make sure you're alright, then we can get the show running.'

I looked back at the ground.

'And what's this about you seeing things? Jenny said you're taking medication?'

Jenny said? I felt like everyone was against me. 'You know what Sid, this is all crap.'

'Crap? This is important stuff, bud.'

'You wanna know what I saw? You really want to know?'

'Easy now, I'm only trying to help.'

'I've seen a monster. A pale dog-man with teeth like knives. I saw him at college, and on the plane. I hear him in the growl of dogs, and when I close my eyes. It's been happening for a while. Tabitha is being chased by it too, even though she will probably flat out deny it. He attacked us last night, and at the pub. He tried to kill her. That's how she got the cut, not by some nail on a log. The thing is playing with us. It's trying to kill us,' I said, my tone rising in panic.

Sid looked at me blankly. 'You need to stop this nonsense. There's nothing chasing you or Tabitha.'

'I'm telling the truth,' I pleaded.

'I don't wanna hear it. There is no such thing as this dog-man. You need to pull yourself together and get this doco done.'

'You don't understand, I am telling the truth. I swear.'

'There are stories out here from long ago but they're just stories. What's real is the land we're standing on, what's real is the gas underneath, what's real is the multimillion-dollar package for my mob.'

I stared at him for a moment before replying.

'What about your poetry?'

'You been getting into my personal stuff, aye?'

I ignored him.

'And what about Marrgany? I saw you get wild at Mick when he jumped up on the rock. I thought you'd understand.'

'You're confused, Marrgany is a special place. We're doing this doco so they don't touch it. You seeing things is something else.' He spat on the ground and fixed his stare out over the river, before continuing in a lower tone. 'City mob coming out here thinking they know me and what goes on. Big-city blacks, got all the answers. They don't know nothing. Just a bunch of coconuts talking for us. Makes me sick.'

I didn't know what to say.

Sid grabbed my shoulders and I raised my arms, thinking he was about to strike me. His face softened, and he patted me on the back.

'I didn't mean to go off like that, bud. I'm sorry. Look, the job you're doing is important. You get this doco done and we're one step closer to getting the mining companies out here. Then we can negotiate a decent package. And as far as my writing goes, how could I not talk about the land that provides us with so much. And it will keep providing, as long as we do a good job of getting a fair deal from the mines. Don't you worry about anything, OK? Forget about

all these dog-men, or whatever. It's just in your head, right bud?'

I nodded.

'You just focus on the project and keep up your medications. You come straight to me if you're not feeling well. Why don't you grab a cold drink, relax, and look over that script, aye? That's the important thing.'

I felt hopeless. I had seen it. I was sure of it. *How could Tabitha be having the same visions as me? Even if she couldn't remember the night before, she must remember the attack at The Royal? What was the connection? Was it this place?* I had heard of mass hysteria, but this was ridiculous. Whether I liked it or not, Tabitha and I must be connected somehow.

I made my way to the fire. Sid and Tabitha sat on a log and planned the trip ahead.

'What do you have in mind for locations, Sid?' Tabitha asked. She had completely transformed from earlier. She had bathed and changed into loose-fitting clothes. She wore a cap, and sandals on her feet. She sat straight and her eyes had cleared. She was back to business.

'There is a big red sand dune that might do the trick for a bit of filming,' said Sid. 'There's nothing behind it but sky.'

'Sounds great. We can film Jonathan moving up the hill and then speaking at the top of the dune. The contrast between red and blue will be striking.'

Mick, who had come over with a second helping of breakfast, nodded in agreement.

'You mentioned sacred sites? We should try and get as many in as possible,' said Tabitha.

‘There is a rock face with paintings dating way back,’ said Sid.

‘Perfect.’

‘And there is a Bora Ring where they used to initiate young fellas,’ Sid nodded to me as he said this. ‘We can film that, but nobody’s allowed in the ring. Only thing is it’s a fair way out and we will have to stay at my mate’s property tonight. Be good though because there are plenty of other sites out that way.’

Tabitha nodded, ‘Great idea, if your friend is fine with us staying. I think this puts us back on track timewise.’

Sid phoned his friend who owned the cattle station to organise our overnight stay. Everyone else scattered and started preparing for the day’s shoot and another change of accommodation. Mick was checking over his camera gear. He pointed his camera at me, said ‘cheese’ and laughed.

I didn’t respond. I felt deflated. I went over the introductory passage of the script.

I’ve been part of much exploration of Country. It seems that every couple of days there’s an explorer humbugging us to come onto Country to see if there are any minerals or coal around, so I have a lot of experience with the process. I’m going to talk you through the Expedited Procedure process to grant exploration permits...

I scoffed at the words. I was a 17-year-old novice actor, and the script had me saying that I had vast experience in mineral exploration and expedited procedures. And who says ‘humbugging’ these days? But what the hell. Like Sid said, this was important.

Coconut.

GRAHAM AKHURST

They were paying me good money.

Big city black.

Plus, I was pretty sure that absolutely nobody I knew
would ever see this.

17

We said goodbye to Possum, who we left to mind the camp. The desert greeted us with a dry heat, and even this early in the day it reflected off the ground. Staring out across the heat haze of that flat expanse made me think that we didn't belong in that desolate place.

Under the monotonous hum of the car, I studied the script and we drove towards the large red sand dune.

Once we arrived, Tabitha and Mick played the pointing game as they discussed camera angles and my movements.

'OK, Jonathan,' said Tabitha, approaching me. 'I want you to walk from the back of this sand dune and once you reach the top, start speaking straight into the camera.'

The sand dune snaked its way up to a high precipice. I walked from the tail of the dune and felt strange knowing my every step was being documented, as if being there was the most natural thing in the world to me. But I couldn't be further from my urban life in Nundah with its old Queenslanders, ocean breezes, green footy fields and the flame tree out the front.

Sid and Jenny were idle and waited under a canopy coming off the car roof. I was jealous of the shade and the cold drinks they enjoyed.

The sun blazed down, burning my face. There were hundreds of flies. I wondered where they came from and what they ate. I realised I hadn't seen any animals that day. Red sand trickled into my boots and fed the blisters and cuts on my feet while I laboured up the dune.

Once at the top, I suddenly froze, missing my cue to speak. This was the first take of my first gig. Nobody except the crew was around for probably hundreds of kilometres, and yet, it felt as though the entire world was watching and judging me. I tried to get the words out, but my mouth just wouldn't respond. The seconds rolled on.

Mick looked at Tabitha and Tabitha looked at Mick before she spoke. 'OK, Jonathan. We can edit the scene so you don't need to walk the dune again. But when you're ready, start talking.'

The heat bared down, flies surrounded me, and my feet sank lower into the sand. I willed myself with everything I had to begin talking. 'G'day...my name's, ah, Jonathan. I've been...I've been...part of much exploration of Country..'

I made so many mistakes, but Tabitha waited for me to finish the entire passage.

'Cut,' she said, before walking up the side of the dune towards me. 'Jonathan, relax. Try to be natural. And you're moving your hands about a lot. It doesn't come off well on camera.'

'Sorry. The flies are all over me. I can't help it.'

'I know it's tough, but try your best not to swat them away.' She studied my face for a moment. 'You're looking a little burnt, too. I'll get you some more sunscreen.'

We took a short break. I went over the words in my head. Tabitha came back and I thought of the night before. I searched her face for some insight as she applied the sunscreen to my cheeks. Did she really not remember? I wanted a sign, something that I could connect to. I didn't want to carry the burden of the beast alone, but she was in work mode and totally focused.

We did heaps of takes, each one slightly better than the last, until Tabitha was finally satisfied. We packed up and headed towards the rock paintings for the next scene. I was happy to be moving, and felt I was getting better in front of the camera. Plus, the work kept my mind busy and away from thinking about the beast.

In the car I began to work on the next block of text.

The Expedited Procedure is a process that makes sure the exploration work is Not Likely To disturb land, damage cultural sites and places of significance, or interfere with community...

I closed my eyes, reciting it in my head. By the time I'd committed it to memory, we'd stopped for lunch. It was midday and the sun peaked high above us. I'd never encountered heat like this before; I could almost feel myself evaporating. The lack of wind made it worse. We'd stopped at the top of a hill and I could see the vastness of the desert around me. The flies were relentless. I reapplied sunscreen, and after eating a ham and cheese sandwich, a fly, and drinking a litre of water, I felt the angry sting of an ant bite on my leg.

Just then, Jenny rushed past me with a hard case. Her frizzy hair was tied up showing a sunburnt neck. She'd thrown herself into the work of general hand and ran around helping Mick and Tabitha.

We hadn't spoken a word since the night before. There was tension between us again. I never knew what was happening in Jenny's head and it made me equally smitten and distrustful of her. I was starting to see a pattern between us. We would get close, then I'd stuff it up, or she would hook up with someone else, then I'd retreat and eventually things went back to normal for a brief time before the cycle began again.

Sid grabbed everyone's attention. 'We're about half an hour away,' he said, and packed the esky.

Mick and Tabitha took time to set up for the shoot, so I went to look at the rock paintings with Sid. On a steeply inclined rock face were paintings of emu feet and snakes. The emu feet were making their way down from the top of the rock and I wondered how the artists managed to climb that high up. There were also ant nests protruding from the rock like large barnacles on a ship's bow.

A wind rose and gave some relief from the heat. I walked back from the rocks to take a different view of the art. What I saw stunned me. The white emu footprints and the outline of the snakes had meshed together into a portrait of the beast. Sid was standing next to me.

'You see that, Sid?' I asked. 'The creature, there, on the rocks?' A surge of adrenaline coursed through my body.

'What creature? The emu feet? The snakes? Haven't seen an emu around here for a long time.'

'No, not the emu feet! See the long body, and the claws where the snakes are at the bottom there, you see it?'

'I don't see anything like that. You OK, bud?'

A growl started to resonate around me. Two large ant nests made up the beast's eyes. Angry fire ants poured out of them as the wind blew harder. The growls changed. A word was forming. I felt confused. *Badarra, badarra, badarra*. I heard the word again and again. I knelt and covered my ears. The sound became louder and louder. Sand and ants spilled out of the rock face forming claws that reached out to me. The wind blew stronger, lifting dust and debris.

I was struck by an immovable fear that rooted my feet to the ground. Arms formed in the swirling sand and stretched out towards my face. I wanted desperately to run, but couldn't move. The grainy claws of sand and ants grabbed the sides of my face. My body was overwhelmed with pain. My cheeks felt as though they'd been scalded by steam.

Time seemed to stop as my mind faded to black.

In the darkness, I saw red light and heard muttered words guiding me out of the void I was trapped in. I followed. I felt the presence of someone with me. I heard the magpies call and continued to the light. The gum where my tooth was missing ached deeply.

I felt Sid's hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes. The wind died. I looked to the rock face. The beast's image was gone.

Sid stared at me, concern written all over his face. 'Bud. Seriously, you OK?'

'I'm... Please tell me you heard that?' My eyes darted from the rock face to Sid.

'Heard what?'

'That word. "Badarra". Over and over. You hear it?'

'No, I didn't hear it. Badarra? How do you know that word?'

‘I don’t know it. I just heard it.’

‘It means “sick.” You must have picked it up while I was talking with Possum.’

‘Yeah, probably,’ I said, knowing full well that Sid had only spoken English the entire time I’d been there.

‘You rest a minute. Must be the heat, aye. You wouldn’t be seeing things now, would you, bud? That’d be funny talk. You’re doing a good job. That last shot was great. Your face is real sunburnt though.’ He slapped me on the back. ‘I’ll be right back.’

Before long, everyone was hovering over me as I sat with my back against the rock face. They offered me water and food, and reapplied my sunscreen. Jenny looked worried, which Mick didn’t seem to like at all.

‘Looks like he’s had a bit of heatstroke, I reckon. Sun’s no good for you if you ain’t used to it,’ said Sid.

‘I’m OK, it’s just the heat and the bumpy road.’

After a few minutes I was positioned for the scene. I struggled to focus on the shot. I knelt with my back to the rock paintings. I searched around, wary, and listened intently. All I heard, and saw, was nature – which made me even more anxious. My hand trembled slightly as I recited the manuscript from memory. I’m sure my fear surfaced in the performance. Tabitha made me do a dozen takes before she wrapped it up. I was glad when it was finally over.

I found Tabitha alone by the ute. ‘You feeling better, Jonathan?’ Her calm voice made me feel wild.

I exploded. ‘What’s wrong with you? Don’t you remember anything about last night? The thing that attacked us? Ring any bells?’

Tabitha looked at me, wide-eyed. 'I don't know what you're talking about. I admit that last night was unprofessional. I shouldn't have drunk that much and I'm sorry if I was saying anything that has upset you. It wasn't my intention at all.' She scratched at the dressing on her neck. 'Sid said we'll get a proper bed each at his friends' cattle station. Something to look forward to. I think we all need a decent sleep.' She rubbed my arm.

'You said it came at you at the pub. Surely you remember that?'

She shook her head a couple of times. 'I don't know what I saw at the pub. Listen, I'm sorry. It's just, I have a lot riding on this shoot and so does the community here. You've heard Sid talk about what this means for mob. Let's just settle into the work. We're providing the information that mob need here to make decisions.' I saw honesty and care in Tabitha's concerned face.

Why was it so hard to believe my own thoughts and memory? I just wanted to share this terror. I could feel the dread rising. I knew what I saw, but was it real? Or just a hallucination? Maybe the scratch on her neck was from a rusty nail and I had imagined something different? But my face still stung from the claws just before. Was everyone else right?

The thought that I might actually be losing my mind drove through me so strongly that I almost buckled over.

'I'm sorry, Jonathan. I see you're upset. And believe me, I know what stress can do to a person. Maybe when you get back to Brisbane you might think about going to see someone about your mental health.'

‘I’m already seeing someone,’ I said, and let out a long sigh. ‘I guess the meds just aren’t doing the trick. I haven’t been feeling well lately.’

Tabitha rubbed my arm. ‘I’m truly glad you are getting help, Jonathan.’

She left me and jumped into the front seat of the car. I got into the back and sculled cold water.

We drove towards the cattle station and eventually the motion of the ride calmed me, and I slept.

18

The sun was setting, and the sky was filled with stunning hues of orange and pink. The station was an oasis in the red desert. A grand wooden homestead with long verandahs surrounding it, the windows were open to let the breeze in. An irrigated garden bordered the house. It was odd to see lush grass, trees, and flowers among the hard earth and red dunes.

The house struck a chord in me, and I felt a pang of homesickness again. I thought of lazy afternoons on the verandah back home in Brisbane, with the southerly breeze coming in off the nearby coast, and chats with Mum.

We were greeted by Keith, who ran the place. He was white, with leathery skin. I reckon he was around sixty and wore a wide-brimmed hat, denim jeans and boots. He had big, calloused hands and carried extra weight around his midriff. Sid smiled, shook Keith's hand and they chatted. The light was fading and wind blew, carrying the cold. I was still amazed at how quickly the temperature dropped out here.

The lights in the house came on suddenly and I saw the dark figure of a man in the window. It looked as though he was staring directly at me. He moved to the front door and the entrance to the verandah lit up. A blackfella around Keith's age walked slowly down the front stairs, his dark eyes, under a furrowed brow, locked on me. I felt incredibly uncomfortable but returned his gaze. He had thick wavy grey hair. His skin was dark and weathered; his body wiry. He wore similar clothes to Keith without the wide brimmed hat. He had a rifle strapped to his back. He looked familiar but I couldn't quite place where I'd seen this man before.

'This is Norman, my head ringer,' said Keith.

'Evening all,' Norman said, and nodded. His wavy white hair moved in the wind. 'I'm gonna head out and take a look at that fence real quick.'

'Yep, see you in the morning,' Keith said. 'Now everyone, grab your bags and let's head in.'

I could feel Norman's eyes on me. When I reached the car I turned, and he was standing right in front of me.

'I see you, boy,' he said. A vein pulsed along his temple as he clenched and unclenched his jaw.

I didn't know what to say. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Norman's steely eyes stared through me for a moment before he spoke again. 'And so does Wudun.'

It felt as though the ground underneath me had given way. My knees buckled and I leant against the car. Norman examined my face a moment longer before continuing on towards the dirt bike further down the driveway.

'Wait,' I said. 'What did you say? Wudun? What are you talking about?'

He picked up his pace, mounted the bike quickly and kicked the starter. The crackling engine drowned out my questions and a dry dusty wave flew behind him as he took off.

I turned about, convinced that the beast would appear out of nowhere. But all I saw was the homestead under the magnificent sky and everyone grabbing their stuff from the car.

‘Did you hear that?’ I asked Jenny as she pulled her bag out.

‘Oh, what? You’re talking to me now?’ she snapped, and looked away.

The crew were exhausted. I fretted, mulling over what Norman had said. *Wudun? Was there some truth to Mum’s story? But isn’t he protector? I desperately wanted answers. I see you. What did he mean?* The dread was rising in me as I cycled through each instance of seeing the beast. Each one more violent, each one closer to the last.

I was directed to a room that looked like it hadn’t been used in decades. There was a thin layer of dust on everything. But it had a queen-size bed and an ensuite. Water-colour paintings hung on the walls, one was of a tall white lighthouse being buffeted by a storm. I needed to calm down.

I found my pills and rattled a couple out of the bottle and into my hand. I knew I shouldn’t be taking more than prescribed, but I was desperate. I jumped in the shower and hoped the hot water would relieve the stress that was compounded by each weird event since leaving Brisbane.

The water ran brown from dirt and dust and my feet stung as soap entered the open wounds. I got out of the shower and wiped the steamy mirror with my towel. In the reflection, I saw the outlines of clawed hands on my cheeks – the remnants of the last attack, and a reminder that I was in danger and still had no idea of how to protect myself. My hands shook at the memory.

I wondered again if I was losing my mind, if the claws on my cheeks were just my imagination, and if what Norman had said was real. I knelt on the ground of the bathroom floor and breathed. *I will get through this*, I said to myself over and over in a mantra of survival. The clawed outline on my face slowly disappeared as my body cooled, the marks swallowed by my skin.

I got dressed and went to join the others. I ran into Keith outside in the hallway.

‘G’day, Jonathan. Head out to the verandah. Nothing special for dinner. I just knocked up some pasta and there’s bread. Sid didn’t give me much time to sort something better.’

‘I’m not fussy. I could eat a horse.’ I wasn’t lying. I was ravenous. Being out there put me at extremes. I wasn’t hungry at all, or I was starving. I was wide awake, or dead to the world. I was the dark and cold of night, against the burning light and heat of the day.

I took a seat at the head of the table. The smell of pasta hung in the air and Keith fired up a couple of gas heaters for the chill. Sensor lights lit up the garden. They would intermittently turn on, depending on the movements of two border collies. I couldn’t see much of the desert past

the lit garden in the dark, even with the moon large on the horizon.

And damn the was moon big, and the stars bright, without the light pollution of the city.

The others trickled out for dinner looking refreshed and took their places at the long wooden table.

'I've got a couple of places in mind to finish up the shoot,' Sid said to Tabitha. 'There's an ancient campground where mob would rest and make fire. Plenty of spear heads and other artefacts there, reckon it'd be good. That's on the way to the Bora Ring. The land on the drive is well worth shooting too, if you need more of the background stuff.'

'Thanks, Sid. That should give us enough footage. The rest we can sort out at the studio with voice over and graphics.' Tabitha's blue eyes caught the flame of the candle in front of her, reminding me of the attack at camp the night before.

'Hey Keith, is Norman coming to dinner?' I asked, hoping I could talk to him.

'No, mate.'

'Will we see him tomorrow?'

'Maybe, he's in and out. Why?'

I had no idea how to reply, and blurted out the first thing that came to mind. 'Just want to talk about dirt bikes.'

Keith nodded at this and ate a forkful of pasta. Jenny looked at me strangely, knowing full well I had no interest in bikes.

Mick noticed Jenny's expression. 'This one here couldn't handle the heat today, could you mate?' Mick said, and waved a fork vaguely in my direction. 'Never seen so much sunscreen. And those blowflies on you...'

I thought that was pretty rich coming from Mick, who applied more sunscreen and drank more water than anyone as we worked. Even in the soft light I could see that his freckles had darkened and grown from the sun of the day.

Everyone looked in my direction, waiting for a reply to Mick's comments. But I was in no mood to defend myself. It was such a juvenile attempt to impress Jenny – who was my best friend, no less, even if we weren't talking.

Jenny paid attention to Mick but, knowing her like I did, I could tell that she wasn't one hundred percent smitten with him. She answered his dull wit while she ate with forced smiles and didn't respond to his touch. Her hand sagged like a dead fish under the weight of his sweaty pale palm. I glanced between Tabitha and Jenny. Two women who couldn't be further apart in all aspects of life, history, and even appearance, yet both were breathtaking and strong in their own ways.

The pasta was simple but excellent and everyone hoed in. Not a scrap remained for the dogs circling the table. I gently pushed the muzzle of a hungry border collie off my knee. Its black eyes looked disappointed.

I saw Mick gently move a stray curl of hair that fell over Jenny's face. The way he stared at her was gross and I wondered if that's how I looked when she caught me looking at her.

I'd had enough of the flirting and touching. I stood up. 'Goodnight everyone.'

Later, I was about to nod off and heard a tapping at the door. Jenny's soft voice was on the other side. 'Jono, it's me. Can I come in?'

I opened the door and she walked straight past me and sat on the edge of the bed. The moonlight washed over her. She looked sad.

‘You OK?’ I asked, and found a T-shirt to put on.

‘You got any smokes?’ she asked, ignoring my question.

I’d packed the very last of the pouch from Presley’s party. I’d almost forgot I had it. ‘Sure,’ I said, and passed the pouch to her.

‘Roll for me?’ she asked.

I struggled to get a smoke out of what was left. The silence was deafening as she waited. After what felt like forever, I passed her the thinnest cigarette I had ever made.

She opened up the window and sparked up. ‘What’s wrong, Jono? You’ve barely said a word to me all day.’ Jenny was teasing out an emotional conversation here. With the beast seared into my brain, I didn’t know how to have this talk right now.

‘Nothing’s wrong. I’m just tired is all. It’s nerve-racking in front of the camera and I’m feeling a bit homesick.’

Jenny looked at me and took a deep draw of cigarette then started coughing her lungs up. She flung the smoke out the window theatrically and turned to me all bleary eyed. ‘Water,’ she demanded, with a pained look on her face and a gruffness in her voice.

I grabbed her a cup of water drawn from the bathroom sink and she wheezed and coughed for a while. She eventually settled down and sat on the bed, patting the spot next to her. I plonked myself down and heard her exhale a long breath before speaking.

‘Jono, listen...I know you like me as more than a friend,’ she said, staring into my eyes with a serious expression on

her face. 'You're not exactly great at hiding it. I've known for ages. And I like you too...but you're all I have in this world and I don't want to stuff that up. There have been so many times that I thought we might...but then...I just think it's best if we don't. You understand?'

There was silence. It felt like my world had been tipped upside down. I stood and paced the room gathering my thoughts. I thought we were going to end up together. I had dreamed of a relationship with her since that almost-kiss on the verandah. I had to turn this around somehow. Jenny kept her serious face. The face of someone who had just knifed me in the heart. She watched me move from one end of the room to the other.

I felt hot, my pulse sharp. I pulled myself together and sat back down. 'Jenny does your mind ever wander?'

She took a moment to reply. 'Sure, same as everyone else, I guess.'

'Well sometimes I think about the end, like dying and all that.'

Jenny looked into my eyes and nodded.

I continued, 'Well, you're the one who told me that we don't die, not really, and that some part of us lives on with our ancestors.' I shuffled around on the bed uncomfortably. I was nervous. 'When I think of forever, I think of you, and what it would be like to kiss you, and to feel your heart beating next to mine, and the warmth of your body in my arms. And I figure that even if the world ends, that's cool, as long as we're together.'

'Oh, Jono,' she said, smiling. Her smile filled me with hope. 'Always the hopeless romantic. Thank you for those beautiful words, but you're wrong.' She got up off the bed,

went to the window and looked up towards the sky. 'What we have right now is the best thing that has ever happened to us. We will always have each other as friends forever, now and in the Dreaming.'

'No Jenny, I don't believe that. Why won't you at least give us a try?' I knew my words had a tinge of desperation to them.

'Jono,' she said sternly, 'we're teenagers. Teenagers don't find the one they spend the rest of their lives with. Look at our mums, they were young when they had us and guess what? Their men left them. But they have each other in friendship, and they'll always have that. Please understand, Jono.'

'No, I don't understand. This is about Mick isn't it? You're in love with him?' Even as I said it, I knew that it was not true.

Jenny laughed. 'This has nothing to do with Mick,' she said, shaking her head.

'But you slept with him last night.'

'Is that what you think? Is that why you've been acting all weird today?'

'Well, yeah. It was pretty obvious at the fire that you two were about to...you know.'

'Jesus, Jono. You think I spread my legs for every fella that shows interest. I just met Mick a couple of days ago.'

My face dropped. I probably looked as dumfounded as I felt. 'So, nothing happened?'

'We just kissed a bit, that's all. Plus, he's not even a blackfella. He has those tattoos because he reckons "You can represent culture without being Indigenous". He said I was racist for thinking otherwise.'

I couldn't help but laugh. 'Mick has one half of the Aboriginal flag on each arm and uses them as a pick-up line when he's not even a blackfella?' I said, and laughed harder. 'Did you find this out before or after you kissed?'

'After, of course,' she said, with a grin forming on her face. 'You better shut your hole too. This stays out bush.'

We both laughed for a while. The tension released. As we quietened down, Jenny grabbed more water from the bathroom before sitting on the bed.

A cold breeze blew into the room, so I got up and shut the window. I saw the claw marks on my flushed face in the reflection and jumped back. My eyes scanned the room for danger.

'You OK?' Jenny asked. 'Please don't hate me. I want to be friends with you forever and this is the only way I can see that happening.'

'No, it's fine,' I said, distracted as I searched out the window checking for any signs of the beast. I was jumpy.

'Is something else wrong?' Jenny asked with a worried look on her face. 'You're all over the place.'

I quickly weighed up the pros and cons of telling her everything that happened with the beast and what Norman had said. I decided to spill my guts.

Jenny listened intently as I told her everything from the very first signs of the beast as far back as St Lucia Private.

When I was done talking, Jenny stood up with a massive grin on her face. 'Jono, this is amazing. Absolutely amazing. There is something to your mum's Dreaming story. And I'm telling you – there is something up with the magpies. I've never heard of someone getting swooped like that out of

season, and you've even dreamed about them...I wonder what Norman has to do with all this!

Saying everything out loud from the beginning had made it more real, and I felt the dread pushing down on me. 'Aren't you the least bit concerned?' I asked. 'I'm terrified. I don't know if it's even real.'

'Real? Come on, Jono, you need to believe in yourself. Why would you be seeing things all of a sudden?' she said, dismissing my worries. 'I'm not concerned,' she continued, her smile larger than ever. 'I've never been so excited!' Jenny looked into space for a few moments. 'I wonder why Tabitha is seeing this dog-man, but I can't? She's so lucky.'

'Lucky? It almost ripped her throat out last night!' I said, and shook my head. 'And don't mention this to Tabitha, she can't remember any of it.'

'Can't? Or won't?' Jenny looked off into the night and then rubbed my arm with a concerned look on her face. 'Don't stress. We will figure this out together, OK?'

I muttered something in agreement before Jenny became more animated again. 'But what is it?' she said, looking perplexed. 'Why you? What sets you apart? I understand with Mick, but the rest of us are Indigenous and connected to the Dreaming in ways. Although, I never would have guessed Tabitha for a blackfella. How come only you and Tabitha have had any sort of contact?'

I didn't mention that the only link I'd made was our sick parents. It would only lead to Jenny probing into Mum's health. We sat thinking silently together for a while before I let out a big, involuntary yawn. 'I'm bone-tired.'

She was deep in thought and wasn't really listening. 'Tired, yeah sure.' She mumbled staring off into space

before she clicked back in. 'OK. Get some sleep. I am going to consult my cards and books and I'll suss out Keith's library as well. You leave it to me, Jono. I'll figure this out!'

She left and I couldn't help thinking that her oracle cards wouldn't be much help.

■ ■ ■

I woke in the middle of the night to the sound of the door creaking loudly. Jenny must have some pressing breakthrough to tell me after consulting her cards. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I realised it wasn't Jenny.

Instead, a pale figure stood at the entrance. I jumped out of bed, my fists raised, ready to strike, then a voice whispered, 'It's me, Tabitha.'

Adrenaline coursed through my body.

'What's wrong with you! You scared me half to death. I thought you were...'

'The dog-man?'

'What?' I said, shocked. 'You remember?'

Tabitha shut the door. 'It's blurry and I wasn't lying, I was really drunk last night. But I just had a nightmare...I saw the thing that attacked us.'

The moon crept in and cast its light upon her, giving her the appearance of an apparition. Her bare feet lightly touched the wooden floorboards as she approached me. A robe draped over her body. She raised her hands slowly then hugged me close. My heart beat faster and I stood with my hands at my sides. It was the most awkward hug I had ever experienced. I pulled back pretty quickly.

'I remember,' she said, and opened the bandage showing me an angry thin wound. 'You were there. Possum helped me. I was groggy in the morning but had flashes of memory from the night before. I broke down to Possum about being here and my father. I've been holding in so much. Possum listened to me. She seemed worried, and asked questions about the dog-man. Maybe I was just drunk, and she was probably just being nice, but it seemed like she knew something,' she said, and lay down on the bed. There was a stiffness in her body.

I opened the window before sitting on the edge of the bed. 'What happened in the dream?' I asked.

She shuddered, then started the story. 'I was in the river. The moon was bright and the wind had a foul smell. Something grabbed my foot and I was pulled under. In the darkness I saw everything go red and yellow above me. I kicked and kicked and pulled away. When I came up for air I was engulfed in a blaze. The river was on fire, but I wasn't burning. Walking towards me through the water was the beast. I was stunned. I couldn't move.

It ran toward me through the fire and water but stopped in front of me like it had hit a wall. I had somehow created a barrier. It clawed and clawed and I saw a tear form in the glowing barricade. The beast pulled itself through the gap. It grabbed me and pulled me out of the water by my hair. There was a piercing howl. I ran and it came after me. My feet were muddy, cut and bloody. I stumbled. It caught up to me. It clawed my legs, then my arms. It circled around me. I lay on the ground bleeding and...it raised its claws. That's when I woke up.'

We sat for a moment in silence. I ran a hand through my hair. 'Are you OK?' I asked.

'No. I don't understand all this.'

'Neither do I. I saw it again, earlier today, when we were shooting at the rocks. It formed from the paintings. It scalded my face with sand, and I heard a word on the wind over and over: *Badarra*. It means *sick*, according to Sid.'

'This is getting scary,' said Tabitha.

A cold breeze blew into the room. Tabitha looked out the window and then to me. 'I'm going to stay here tonight, in case...if that's OK?' she said, and balled her hands into tight fists then released them.

I nodded. My mind suddenly raced. I was about to share a bed with Tabitha, a full-grown woman, and a beautiful one at that. I grinned.

She must have sensed my thoughts. 'Keep your head out of the gutter,' she said, with a gentle smile.

I felt my face flush in embarrassment.

19

Barking dogs woke me as they raced past the open window doing laps of the house. The smell of fresh dew blew in. It was still dark. Had I woken early? It would normally be hot as hell with the sun blazing. Still groggy from sleep, I noticed that Tabitha was gone. She must've crept back to her room in the night.

I yawned, rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, and realised the entire left side of the bed was soaked. It was only wet on the side where Tabitha had slept. I scratched my head. Her side was furthest from the window, if it had rained I'd be drenched. Maybe she had had an accident, or spilt water, but there was no glass on the bedside table. Plus, there was too much of it. Water dripped onto the wooden floorboards next to the bed, as if a whole bucket-load had been dumped. What had happened?

I changed quickly and left the room, hoping to find Tabitha safely outside on the verandah with the others at breakfast.

Fierce black and green clouds filled the horizon. They brought the cool and dark. A bolt of lightning flashed with

a crack of violent thunder. The storm was close. Bacon, eggs, toast and cereal were laid out on the table. Everyone was there except Tabitha. I grabbed a cup of coffee, sat down, and tried to act normal even though I began to worry. Where was she? Jenny barely looked up from the book of Dreaming stories she was intently reading.

Keith pointed out to the horizon. 'Storm coming. Good thing too – need water for cattle. Bad drought the last couple of years.'

The dogs ran past the verandah. The impending storm had them frantic.

'I guess we won't be doing any shooting, not until this passes,' said Mick. He set up his tripod and camera and began filming the storm's approach.

Another jagged flash brought a thunderclap that rattled the house. The dogs howled.

'Where's Tabitha?' I asked, to no one in particular. I wanted to mention that she'd been with me and that I hadn't seen her since the night before, but I thought better of it. I pondered the wet bed. Was it the beast?

No one answered.

'We need to find her,' I snapped, which earned a concerned look from Jenny. It gave me some peace that I'd talked with her. I had someone to share the burden with.

Another clap of thunder rocked the house. My eardrums rang.

'She might just be in the shower. Finish your breakfast and enjoy the show. No need for a search party just yet,' said Keith, smiling.

I ate some toast and switched my gaze between the storm and the front door, hoping to see Tabitha walk

through. Hail started to bang violently against the tin roof, followed by a downpour of rain. The noise was deafening.

Through the squall I saw a red umbrella. Finally, Tabitha. But what the hell was she doing out there?

Underneath the umbrella were black legs, khaki work shorts and worn boots taking two steps at a time up the staircase towards us. Norman walked onto the verandah. He shook rain off his umbrella and placed it in the corner.

He clutched Keith's hand. 'The tanks and holes are gonna fill up real quick.'

'You bloody ripper. A blessing alright.'

'I'll head out and check them after.' Norman turned to me, his smile gone and his dark eyes piercing. He nodded in greeting. I wanted to ask him then and there about what he had said the day before and about everything else, but I was worried about Tabitha and wanted to find her.

'I think we should look for Tabitha,' I said urgently.

Keith looked at me. 'I'm sure she's inside, but I'll take a look, mate.'

I got up to search as well. I went back to my room. Nothing. I walked into the kitchen and saw flies hanging around a large piece of pork on the table. I yelled out Tabitha's name through the house, but the hail and rain pummeling the roof drowned out my voice.

Around fifteen minutes later, we were back on the verandah. The storm still raged. Keith was dripping wet from checking the grounds around the house.

'Any luck?' yelled Keith.

I shook my head.

Keith looked out at the storm before addressing the group. 'Tabitha's not in the house or on the grounds.'

Jenny and the others suddenly looked worried. Only Norman seemed calm.

'I'll ring Possum to see how the camp's holding up,' said Sid. 'The storm mightn't have hit there. There's no way she could've walked back to camp, but I'll get Possum to drive out. Be good to have another car for the search...if we need to search that is.'

Sid tried to play down the situation – we were under his care, after all – but I could sense his stress.

I watched from the verandah as Sid paced around the kitchen. He was doing laps around the table where the pork rested, cussing and yelling as he tried to get reception with his satellite phone. I could hear him faintly through the storm.

'Possum, Possum, you hear me? Hey? Calm down, calm down. Tabitha's missing... What's that? The river? I can't hear you. Come out to Keith's...'

I felt helpless as the storm relentlessly battered the house. There was no going out. We had to wait till it was over. I watched Norman as he stared out at the rain, his jaw clenched and his eyes concentrated.

Jenny came to me and rubbed my arm in concern. 'You OK?' she asked.

I didn't reply, but I could tell from the look on her face that she saw the worry across mine.

'We'll find her,' she continued.

I nodded. I didn't feel like talking and went to my room to gather myself.

I quickly changed the wet sheets with a hole-ridden dry set I found in the wardrobe.

I thought about Tabitha and wondered why this thing was after us, and again, how we were connected. Surely there was more to it than having a sick parent. The thought of Mum's gaunt face crossed my mind but I forced my focus back on Tabitha. *Where the hell had she gone? Was the beast really behind this? Or had she cracked?*

I took a moment next to the window and stared out at the storm. I thought of Jenny standing in the same spot the night before and wished she saw things differently. I understood her logic, but to me it felt like we had broken up even though we weren't together. I mourned the *idea* of our love. I sighed and hoped she was right. That we would continue to be best friends now and into the Dreaming.

The rain started letting up and the hail stopped smashing the rooftop.

I made my way back to the verandah, where search preparations for Tabitha were underway. The horizon was still dark, but there were small beams of light poking through the angry clouds, and the rain had calmed down enough to head out.

'I'll take the young fella and Mick in my ute. Keith, take Norman in yours. I'll head the way we came, towards the river. You circle around and head up towards the ring. We can both cut in and meet near Stafford's station,' said Sid.

'Norman can take the bike. We'll cover more ground that way,' said Keith.

Norman didn't respond. He was looking out over the flat. 'There,' he said, and pointed out into the brightening desert.

I stood up and looked out, but saw no sign of Tabitha. 'You sure she's out there?' I pulled on my boots and grimaced at the pain from the blisters.

‘You’ve got bad eyes, boy. You’ll see soon enough.’

I strained for a couple of anxious minutes before noticing a pocket of light illuminating Tabitha walking towards us on the horizon. I wondered how Norman had seen her so far out. She was in her pyjamas and robe from the night before.

‘I’ll get her,’ said Sid, and he ran down the stairs to the car. Mud splattered as the tyres found grip.

The wait seemed longer than it was. We all rushed down to help once they got back. My boots squelched through the new mud. Parts of the driveway had pooled with water. Sid flung open the door.

‘Tabitha, Tabitha, you alright?’ I asked anxiously.

‘Give her space. Norman, grab her legs,’ said Sid. They carefully pulled her from the car and carried her up the stairs.

When we reached the front door, I noticed Jenny pick up a feather. She placed it in a pouch her mother had given her. In the silence left by the thundering storm, I heard the scraping of claws on the tin roof. Looking up, I saw a magpie above the doorway.

Tabitha looked wrecked and trembled under the wet robe. I noticed scratches and bruising on her arms and legs. She was obviously in shock and was unresponsive to questions. Sid and Norman took her to her room.

Jenny looked scared. The horror of the situation finally set in for her. There was nothing to be excited about.

Tabitha and I were in mortal danger.

Once Tabitha was cleaned up and resting, Sid left her side, and I took the opportunity to talk with her. Jenny came in with me. The room was stuffy and smelled of sickness.

Tabitha shivered under layers of blankets with her eyes closed.

I sat on the bed next to her, Jenny beside me. 'Tabitha. Are you awake?' I asked, softly.

She opened her eyes and looked around the room.

'You're safe,' I said.

She coughed. Her chest sounded wet and angry. She noticed Jenny. 'I'd rather talk to you alone if that's OK?' It came out as was a statement rather than a request.

Jenny accepted, yet lingered at the door looking back at us for a few moments before leaving.

'What happened?' I asked.

'I'm not sure. I remember being with you last night. Then I dreamed again of fire and water and being hit by hail and rain. I have no idea how I got out there. I woke to the storm and the desert all around me. I've tried so hard to remember, but it's just gone.' She coughed again and a pained look crossed over her face. 'I don't feel well.'

I put a hand on her forehead. 'You're burning up. Sid called Possum and she's on her way. You don't remember anything, anything at all?'

'Only the growl of dogs.'

I stood up and felt my heels scrape the inside of the boots. 'It has to be the beast,' I said. I moved to the window and looked out across the garden all wet and bright after the rain. I turned back to face her. I must have looked worried.

Tabitha's face softened and she smiled, but the trembling in her body remained.

'I'm tired, Jonathan. I'm going to rest now.' Tabitha's words trailed off as she closed her eyes.

I grabbed a couple of aspirin from Keith and sat them on the table next to Tabitha's bed. She was already asleep and I didn't want to wake her.

I crept out of the room and went back to the verandah. Norman was gone.

With Possum coming and Tabitha sick, we wouldn't be working on the film. I sat down next to Jenny and told her what Tabitha had said.

'I'm sorry for being so excited about all of this,' said Jenny.

'That's OK. I'm just glad you believe me.'

'Tabitha looks...horrible.'

I nodded.

'I've been reading,' she said, and held up the book of Dreaming stories. 'I haven't found anything.'

I shook my head. 'I'm happy you want to help but...I just don't think you'll find anything in those books or cards.'

She looked into my eyes and let out a sigh. 'I'll keep looking.'

I had a few hours before dinner and took the time to rest and re-engage with the script to keep my mind busy. Lying in bed with a soft dry breeze and the clean smell of the wet garden coming from the open window, I read a section that would be voice-over for background footage and graphics.

A registered Native Title Claim applicant or Native Title Body Corporate can lodge an objection by Section 237 of the Native Title Act with the National Native Title Tribunal (NNTT). It must be lodged within four months but may take up to six months after the time of lodgment before a response is given...

The script was the driest piece of writing I'd ever read. Good luck to anyone that needed to make a formal objection.

A car horn blew outside and I walked onto the verandah. Possum had arrived. You could see car tracks from her approach through the mud—which was already drying—all the way to the horizon. The storm may have poured rain, but the earth had drunk deeply and was parched again.

I went with Sid down to the car to see if Possum needed any help with her things.

'Glad you're here,' said Sid, giving Possum a hug.

'Where is she?'

20

That evening, with Possum attending to Tabitha, the rest of us gathered in a big dining and lounge area. There were two large windows facing the front garden and I watched the tip of the red sun disappear beneath the horizon. Rugs covered most of the floor and the furniture was varnished hardwood. There were heads of wild pigs mounted on the walls, in between framed black-and-white photographs of Keith's ancestors, and also pictures of Keith and Norman as young men.

Three stuffed kelpies posed together in a relaxed huddle near a leather reclining chair in the corner. The taxidermy was so professional that I thought the dogs were alive until I noticed an ashtray notched into the scalp of one. This would, most likely, be the fate of the border collies. I grabbed Jenny's attention and patted one of the stiff dogs. She laughed.

A fire roared in the hearth and above it a large mirror was angled slightly downward, making the room look twice as big. Norman wasn't here, and it seemed there was nobody

else living in the homestead except Keith. Norman had his own place away from the main residence, apparently.

We took our seats around a long table and Keith walked in from the kitchen with a steaming platter of roast pork and veggies for dinner.

‘Thanks for looking after us,’ said Sid, cracking a tinny of beer and making himself comfortable.

‘You’re always welcome. Haven’t had visitors in a while,’ replied Keith.

Sid nodded and turned to Jenny. ‘Mind checking if Possum wants any food and if Tabitha can stomach something?’

‘Sure,’ said Jenny.

The food was placed in the middle of the table and we took turns plating. It smelled delicious and was the most tender meat I’d ever had, although I couldn’t eat much. My body was already full of questions and worry. Keith offered up his stash of alcohol before entering into a low conversation with Sid. I grabbed myself a beer. I hoped it would ease my knotted shoulders and dull my troubled thoughts. After I knocked back a couple of cans very quickly, I found my voice and broke their conversation.

‘What’s Norman’s deal?’ I said loudly from across the table.

Everyone stopped talking and looked over at me with bemused faces. Keith piped up in a cheery manner. ‘Well, he’s Possum’s brother for a start,’ he said. ‘Means Sid can’t get away from him.’ He laughed. Sid joined in.

I wasn’t amused. ‘There was something he said yesterday that I want you to explain.’ My words were slurring slightly. ‘I see you and so does Wudun.’

Keith shifted in his chair. 'Norman says strange stuff sometimes. I wouldn't take any notice.' He turned back towards Sid.

I took another pull of beer. 'I want to know. And where is everyone? Isn't this meant to be a cattle station? I don't see anyone working.'

'You had your chance to ask Norman earlier. He was up here in the storm. He'll be around tomorrow, I'm sure. You can ask then,' said Keith.

'We were a little preoccupied with Tabitha today.'

The table fell silent for a few moments and I sensed that everyone's thoughts turned to Tabitha and how banged up she looked.

'This place,' I said, quietly, towards the end of the room and the fire. Then more loudly, 'what's with Norman and this place?'

'It's a long story,' said Keith.

'I'm not busy.'

Keith sighed.

Mick, who was sitting next to me, whispered into my ear. 'Dude, what's wrong with you? We're in Keith's house.'

Keith waved off Mick's intervention. 'It's alright.' He poured beer into a large mug and took a moment to sip before continuing. 'My father used to run the station before he got Alzheimer's. The business was bigger back then, more staff on, many of them Aboriginal. My father was many things, but progressive wasn't one of them. He fed and clothed the workers, never mistreated them, or not that I know of, but he never paid them. Nobody paid blackfellas back then. But Norman...I mean, I see him as my brother.' He pointed to one of the framed pictures on the wall. It

was of Norman and Keith out the front of the homestead holding the reins to a couple of horses and smiling. They wore traditional paint for ceremony.

‘Keith’s initiated...’ Sid interjected.

Keith raised his hand at this and gave Sid a glare, stopping him.

‘Sorry,’ said Sid. ‘Not my story to tell.’

‘No harm done,’ said Keith. He took a moment to relax back into his seat before continuing. ‘Norman’s parents worked here and died when he was young. Around your age I reckon,’ he pointed to me. ‘He disappeared for a bit after that, but came back and worked as a ringer. When Dad passed, things were going well for a long while. I even paid off loans. But then the drought hit us hard and the foreign exports stopped. The station suffered. It’s just me and Norman now.’

‘Why would he stay? He could get ripped off anywhere.’ I said.

‘I’m not my father. When he died...I paid. Norman stayed because this is his Country, and we grew up together.’

Before I could reply, Jenny returned looking irritated and everyone went back to their food. Possum followed shortly after and went to Sid. They spoke softly, but I could just hear them over cutlery scraping plates.

‘How is she?’ asked Sid.

‘Not great. I should take her back to camp and on to Gambari.’

‘We need to finish this video.’

Possum shook her head. ‘She needs help,’ she said, and leaned in closer. I had to really concentrate to hear. ‘I need to tell you about the river.’

‘Go on then.’

‘Not here.’ Possum grabbed a plate of food and went off back to Tabitha.

We finished eating in silence, then Sid spoke. ‘It’s getting late. I’ve had a chat with Mick, and we’ve decided to push on with the shoot. So, get some rest. Big day tomorrow.’ He got up and helped Keith clean the table.

Before long only me, Jenny, and Mick were left. Mick moved over and sat next to her. He smiled up big and gently took her hand and held it up. ‘Let me see your future.’

Jenny raised an eyebrow.

‘You’ve recently met someone,’ continued Mick, searching Jenny’s hand and running a finger across her palm. ‘He’s very handsome and wants to settle down with you.’ He looked up into Jenny’s eyes and her lips pursed together before she pulled her hand away.

‘Enough, Mick. I’ve had enough.’

Mick clasped his hands together. ‘Jeez, just a joke.’

‘I don’t want to hear it. Never touch me again.’

Mick was shocked. I felt myself grin. He looked at Jenny and then to me and without another word he stood up from the table and left in a huff.

‘You OK?’ I asked.

‘Let’s sit near the fire and finish our drinks.’

I placed another log on the hearth and we sat quietly for a while. Jenny seemed transfixed by the fire while my gaze fell on the stiff unmoving dogs and the pig heads along the walls. Their lifeless eyes and white tusks reminded me of the beast.

I pondered the pills I took, which seemed to do nothing except make me a little spaced out. I remembered the attack

at the rock paintings, the camp, and every other instance of those sharp teeth and that pale, almost translucent, skin. As my thoughts spiralled I felt an anger building from the pit of my stomach. A ball of rage that wanted to know why the hell this was happening to me and Tabitha.

Then I noticed Jenny. She was shaking, her head in her hands.

‘Jenny? What’s wrong? Mick’s just an idiot. You’ve told him off.’

‘Possum’s the idiot,’ she said, and looked at me. There were tears streaming down her face. I didn’t often see Jenny cry and the sight of it made my heart sink.

‘What? Why?’

‘I found her beside Tabitha. She was singing softly to her. I asked if I could help. She seemed really annoyed at me for disturbing them. Then we sat on the floor together. She said that I was an amazing girl and that my heart was in the right place,’ Jenny stopped and started crying harder. ‘But she said I wasn’t Ngarabal.’

‘Not Ngarabal?’ I said, and shook my head. Jenny looked at me like something was broken. ‘Well, we’ll find your mob then.’

‘No, it’s bigger than that. Possum said I should go back home and find my people.’ She finished and buried her head into the couch and curled into a ball.

I was dumbfounded. Jenny was the blackest blackfella I knew. She was so strong in her identity. It was everything to her. Possum must be mistaken.

‘No Jenny, it can’t be true. We have grown up together. Our mums and everything...’

‘What if she’s right? Then my whole life is a lie. Mum said she met Dad in New Zealand, and she is so vague about life before that. She might have been born over there for all I know – I feel sick...’ She got up, raced to the kitchen sink, and chucked up before disappearing off into the house.

She came back bleary-eyed and carrying her pouch of feathers. I wasn’t sure what to say. She went over to the hearth and stared into it for a while before opening the pouch and placing a crow feather into the flames.

‘I’m sorry, Jenny,’ I said gently. ‘But you don’t know for sure. Talk to your Mum when we finally get home.’

She placed a white cockatoo feather into the flames. ‘No, I’m sorry,’ she said, and sighed. ‘I know you have bigger problems to worry about.’ She looked over to me and the fire lit the left side of her body. ‘You were right. I didn’t find anything in my books or cards.’

She placed a pink galah feather into the flames. ‘My whole life...’ She finished by placing a magpie feather into the flames and I felt a weird sensation under my ribcage as it burned.

I grabbed a bottle of red wine and poured out two stonking full glasses, which almost finished the bottle. I took my shoes off and the white rug felt nice underfoot. We were both exhausted and quiet. We sat and felt the heat from the hearth wash over us.

I thought of the beast and Tabitha. I thought of home. I thought of my mother and the story of Wudun, the protector. I took a sip of the wine and with my ribcage still tingling I stared into the flames. Even though it felt childish, I asked for Wudun under my breath. Once at first, but again

and then again. Wudun protect me. Wudun protect me. Wudun protect me.

A log cracked in two and flames danced light over the pictures and stuffed dogs and pigs. I looked at my sorry self in the mirror above the fireplace. As I focused on the large bags under my eyes, I noticed a slight warping of my reflection. I must be drunk, I thought. The harder I concentrated on my image, the more it moved.

'Jenny,' I said. 'You see the mirror moving?'

'No. You charged or what?'

The fire spat and my reflection changed, slowly transforming, becoming something else. My body became naked and pale, my face elongated, my jawline and nose turned into a muzzle, my mouth pinched showing sharp teeth. The whites of my eyes slowly blackened, and the reflection smiled, baring its teeth back at me.

I stood up and yelled. 'Why! Why are you doing this?'

Jenny looked frightened. 'Jono? What's wrong?'

'It's here...'

'What's here? The beast? I can't see it,' she said and looked around frantically. 'What's it's doing?'

I didn't reply. The face shook, throwing off the last remnants of my reflection in the mirror. It said *badarra*, again and again. Anger burned in my gut. I clenched the open bottle of red in my hand and threw it at the mirror with all my might. It shattered, spraying shards all over the floor.

'Jono! What's happening? You're scaring me.'

'It was in the mirror,' I said, and slumped over.

The image was broken. I moved to sit back on the couch, cutting my feet in the process. I wanted another drink, but

there was nothing left. Blood flowed onto the white rug. I watched as a little red pool formed at my feet.

‘Jono, your feet. I’ll grab some bandages.’

Jenny ran off and the shards of mirror on the ground began to vibrate.

Wisps of smoke rose out of the broken pieces, wavering like flame.

A figure slowly formed from the bottom up. My hands shook as I witnessed feet and long claws unfold in front of me.

The smoke rose, conjuring pale muscular legs and a torso. The beast was made real.

I jumped up and ran for the doorway. Turning, I witnessed the last of the beast take shape.

Its chest heaved as it stared at me, dead-eyed, and began the hunt.

21

I ran out of the room, along the verandah, down the stairs, across the grass, and onto the desert. I could hear the growls and barks of the beast behind me. My feet throbbed as they landed on rocks and bindi barbs. Dirt filled the cuts from the broken mirror. Adrenaline coursed through my body. I didn't halt or stumble. I didn't look back. I ran as fast as I could. My heart thumped from the exertion.

Eventually, I fell to my knees, exhausted.

The moon was full, and the desert lay illuminated and flat in front of me. I turned, searching for the beast, but all I saw were the lights of the homestead some way in the distance. I had no idea how long or far I'd run. I tried to stand, but the pain in my feet sent me collapsing to the dirt. I tried again but the pain was fierce. Slumped on the ground, I brushed off the dirt and began to pick barbs and pieces of rock out of my soles.

That's when the howling began. I looked up and saw the beast in the distance, its muzzle upturned howling at the moon. Light gleamed off its pale body like a beacon

of death. An eternity passed as I watched, and heard its howls pierce the thin desert air.

The howling stopped and the beast focused on me. I could see the rise and fall of its chest even at that distance. It ran towards me.

This is it, I thought. This is the end.

Its head shook to and fro, and a large red tongue flapped by the side of its open mouth. Its sharp teeth showed as it gained speed. It was almost on top of me. I forced myself onto my feet, not wanting to die on the ground like a coward.

I raised my arms to take the brunt of the hit; I could see its black eyes, it was about to strike – then a bright red light burst from behind my shoulder, startling it.

A black figure with grey hair ran past me at incredible speed. I could hear mumbled words and saw a red light emanating from his forehead, brightening the desert for some distance. I dropped to the ground and watched as the beast ran hard to clear the light. It veered off into the darkness.

The light faded and the figure walked towards me. Norman stood over me; his figure cast against the pale moon. '*Ngura nagalina*, you look like you've seen your own shadow in the dark, boy.'

'Norman...how'd you do that? How'd you know I was in trouble?'

'Rest now.' He placed a hand on my forehead and I slept.

■ ■ ■

I drifted in and out of sleep. A bulb swayed above me throwing light and shadow around the room. Through an

open door was a tiny kitchen and a neat desk, and in the bedroom and living area were shelves of books mostly on history. A couple of rifles, some horse-riding apparel and other bits and pieces sat tidily in the corners. A wind vane rattled somewhere outside.

I began shaking. It was freezing; the walls were thin and the cold night wind came through gaps in the floorboards.

Norman was sitting at the end of the bed mixing something in a bowl and applying it to my feet, which went numb.

I slept.

■ ■ ■

I woke, groggy. Norman was standing at the door talking to Keith, who was furious. 'The hall is a mess! There's blood and glass everywhere. What the hell's going on?'

Norman whispered his response. I couldn't make out what he said.

Keith nodded. 'I trust you. If you need anything, give the house a ring. Possum told us Tabitha slept walked out of the house and into the desert. I'm going to have to make up some rubbish to tell the others about Jonathan – they're all worried. Especially the young one.'

I slept.

22

I woke. It was still dark outside. I ran my hand along the soles of my feet and was horrified by their smoothness and the lack of pain. Norman was moving about and I could hear the kettle boiling. He sat down on a chair by the bed. It felt like his shrewd eyes could see right into me.

‘What happened?’ I asked, through a dry mouth. ‘How’d you know I was in trouble? Is it over?’

‘Calm yourself, boy,’ he said, before getting up and making a drink. ‘Have this.’

‘What is it?’

‘You want answers? Drink first.’

I took a sip. It tasted nutty.

‘I saw you running across the desert and heard the howling.’

‘Earlier, you said *I see you and so does Wudun*. Did you know I was being chased?’

‘We’ll get to that.’ He scratched his chin. ‘Do you know where you’re from?’

I didn’t want to make chit chat. I wanted to know what the hell had been happening to me and Tabitha. I felt a sudden rise of anger. ‘I want answers, Norman. Now!’

Without a reply, he got up again and poured himself a cup of tea. When he sat back down, he was silent. It was agonising to watch him blow steam off the top of his mug while the wind whistled through the gaps in the floor and walls. 'Patience is a virtue so few possess,' he said, finally. 'Be patient now and you will learn everything you want to know.'

I calmed down and almost apologised but didn't. Instead, I let out a long sigh. 'Brisbane. I was born in Brisbane and that's where me and Mum live.'

'No,' he said, and shook his head. 'I mean your Country. Where's your Country?'

'I don't know. Mum doesn't know. With the lost documentation...my grandmother grew up on a mission. Mum said that Nan met Pop somewhere out here.'

'I knew your Nan.'

'What?'

'Beverly, right?'

'Yes,' I said, confused. 'But how?'

'Possum mentioned you. You're her spitting image, you know that?'

I felt my heartbeat thrumming in my ears. 'Mum said I look like her. I never met her though.'

'I was young, but I remember your grandparents. Your Poppy was born out here, and your Nan came home from a mission up north. They met here. They worked for Keith's old man. This is your place. This is your County. You're Gunggari.'

In that moment, the hairs on my arms stood on end and I felt a tremendous wave through my body. I kicked my feet out from under the sheets and scanned the spines of the

history books along the walls. I shook my head. I never imagined hearing where I'm from, being told my link to place and Country, would have such an effect on me. I took a few moments to breathe and steady myself. 'Mum...she never said anything about that.'

'They left to find work that paid. Never heard what happened to them.'

'My poppy died in jail.'

Norman looked at me solemnly and nodded. 'Your mother told you anything about our mob?'

I moved the pillows and sat up. I took another sip of the drink and remembered the story Mum had told me after I was beat up. 'There's a Dreaming story she told me once.'

'Tell me.'

I told Norman what I could remember. The story of Wudun becoming protector of the land. He listened patiently and filled in bits I'd forgotten.

When I finished, he smiled broadly. 'That's not the full story.'

'Mum said as much.'

'I'll tell you the rest and maybe you'll begin to understand. You see, Wudun became protector, alright. But as time went by, people came. Only a few at first. They lived in harmony with the land, never taking more than needed, never more than could be replenished. During this time of the first people, Wudun chose a woman and a man who also lost their parents at a young age. They became his link from the Dreaming. They helped him keep balance, you understand?'

I nodded.

'But more and more people came. They ate the kangaroo, possum, goanna, and fish, and they used too much of the

water. Water is life. The clever people Wudun had chosen couldn't stop them mob from harming the land. That's when Wudun started to get sick, because the land was sick.

'An angry spirit grew in his belly. A spirit brought here by man; a dingo spirit. That dingo spirit grew and grew and wanted to cross from the Dreaming. It grew from Wudun's sickness and desire to bring balance. Wudun sent that creature after the people who harmed the land.

'To cross the Dreaming, it had to go through the two clever people Wudun had chosen. They let the creature through and he made balance again.'

'How'd he make balance?'

'He is malevolent, and did what was necessary.'

Silence filled the room. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. An angry spirit from the Dreaming was trying to get through and harm people? A million questions ran through my mind. I ran a hand through my hair. 'How can this be? It's just a story, right? Sid said those stories aren't real.'

'Sid!' said Norman, and shook his head. 'He's part of why we're in this mess. Dreaming stories show us how the world was created and how to be proper custodians. This one is a warning. That's what you've seen. Wudun's sickness. That creature wants to come through from the Dreaming to cure the land.'

'What's Sid got to do with it?'

Norman raised a hand putting a stop to my questions. 'What have you and Tabitha seen?'

I told Norman about every instance of seeing the spirit and what Tabitha had mentioned. Norman was particularly interested in her dreams. When I finished, Norman got up

and grabbed two small planks of wood and placed them in a bag.

‘Sid wants the mining out here to help mob,’ he said. ‘But mining has poisoned the land and water. The creature has come.’

I thought of Sid’s vision for Gambari and Country – fracking wells across the basin shimmering in heat. I also thought of the conversation Sid had had with Ned at the pub and the gas I’d smelled on the wind when bathing at camp.

I thought of Tabitha being sick and hurt, and I shuddered at the thought of her dream; the flaming water and the creature trying to break through. ‘I still don’t understand what this has to do with me and Tabitha.’

‘Once in a generation two people are chosen. Clever people. You and Tabitha. You think it’s a coincidence you came here together on your Country? You’re here to learn from your Elders.’

I shook my head. ‘But why me and Tabitha?’

‘Wudun chooses. I don’t pretend to know his reasons. All I know is that me and Possum are getting old, and you are the future. We felt the creature trying to get through but stopped him, so he went after you two. You haven’t been initiated and trained. Soon both your parents will leave, like ours did, and you’ll eventually take our place.’

‘Mum’s not going anywhere,’ I said sharply.

Norman looked into my eyes and nodded slowly. ‘Everything goes back to the land in time.’

I forced my thoughts away from Mum. ‘I thought I was losing my mind, Norman.’

‘You’re not, and I’m sorry it had to be like this. I don’t have all the answers. The world has changed. We can stop the mining in other ways...that creature puts everyone in danger and, from what I saw last night and what you’ve told me, he’s come through.’

‘How do we stop him?’

‘I’m not sure we can...but the Bora Ring, where boys are initiated, is a strong link to the Dreaming and the creature will come to us there. Then, hopefully, we can force him back.’

‘Will Tabitha be OK?’

‘That creature puts everyone on the land in danger.’

‘And if we do force the spirit back. Will everything go back to normal?’

Norman shook his head a couple of times. ‘Questions, questions. Get some rest. We got a big day tomorrow.’

I didn’t feel tired at all but as my mind raced back and forth over everything Norman had said, my eyes became heavy and I drifted into a deep and dreamless sleep.

23

The sun broke and Norman and I walked to the homestead for breakfast. I snuck into my room to freshen up before seeing everyone. My pills were on the bedside table. I picked up the white plastic bottle and rattled it; it was half full. I didn't need any more convincing that the meds were useless and my 'hallucinations' were real. I threw the pills in the bin before showering and putting on fresh clothes.

Jenny barged into the room just after I dressed, startling me. Her hair was messy and her eyes wild. 'I just saw Norman outside. Where were you? Are you OK? What happened? Is it over?'

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' I lied, and prompted her to take a seat on the bed.

The sun was blazing and the room was getting hot. I opened the window and felt a warm breeze on my skin before telling Jenny everything that happened.

'I'm glad you have Norman,' she said, and sighed. 'I feel so useless right now.'

'Don't be hard on yourself.'

Jenny's eyes suddenly fixed on the picture of the lighthouse in the raging storm, hanging on the wall. 'What am I going to do, Jono?'

The realisation that her life up to that point may be a lie had taken its toll. I could tell she hadn't slept. Likely through worry for me, as well as the possibility she may have to redefine herself and start again.

'I don't know. Best to figure it out when we get back,' I said. It was hard to see Jenny go through this. I wished I could help more, but it was something that only Jenny and her mother could begin to untangle.

Jenny looked into my eyes and nodded.

I placed my hand on her shoulder. 'If I don't make it back...You'll be there for Mum, right?'

Jenny's expression softened. 'Of course. But don't talk like that,' she said, before hugging me for a long while. 'Let's get you outside. Everyone's been worried. I didn't know what to tell them.'

I put on a show of calm as I walked onto the verandah. Breakfast was laid out and everyone was getting stuck into the bacon, eggs, and watery coffee.

'Here he is,' said Keith, getting up and shaking my hand. 'Glad you're alright, mate.' He cleared his throat to grab everyone's attention. 'There's been a bunch of idiots breaking into homesteads across the basin. Unfortunately, young Jonathan here was around when they came in.'

Norman nodded. A smirk formed on Jenny's face. Whether or not the rest believed Keith's explanation didn't bother me. There were pats on the back and everyone saying they were glad I was OK.

Sid rang the mine and played down events. Then he addressed the group. 'As you know, Tabitha's in no condition to be leading the rest of the shoot. After talking with Mick, we've decided to push forward and finish up today with him in charge.'

Mick puffed out his chest and smiled.

Jenny looked irritated. 'Why are we continuing?' she asked. 'Shouldn't we get Tabitha to a doctor?'

'This is important stuff for the community,' said Sid, rubbing his hands together. 'We haven't come this far to stop now. Possum has assured me that Tabitha's on the mend. She'll take her back to the campsite and we'll meet up with them after work. We'll head back to Gambari together tomorrow morning.'

The fracking was destroying the land. I looked to Norman, expecting some kind of reaction, but he just stood with his hands on the rail, looking out over the hot, dry desert.

'Let's pack up and get this show on the road,' said Sid.

I quickly ate a piece of toast and drank a cold black coffee before heading to Tabitha's room to check on her before getting ready to leave.

Tabitha was alone. The air in the room was stagnant and streaks of light came through gaps in the drawn curtains. I sat down on a chair beside her and she stirred.

'Good to see you,' she said, rubbing sleep from her eyes. There was colour back in her face, but her chest still sounded wet.

'How are you feeling?' I asked.

'Oh, you know, like I've been through a washing machine.'

I smiled. It was nice she was able to joke.

‘Pass my phone?’ she asked, pointing to the dressing table across the room with her bits and pieces on top.

She hastily turned it on and scrolled through photos, finding one of her daughter. She touched the cracked screen and paused a moment, before asking, ‘Do you have any idea why this is happening?’

I told her about Wudun, the sick dingo spirit, Possum, and Norman. That I was Gunggari, and we were next in line to help protect the land. I told her that we were going to the Bora Ring to try and push Wudun back into the Dreaming. I told her everything I knew and she looked at me wide-eyed and nodded throughout.

‘Last night, after you went missing, Possum told me a little, but now I understand more.’

‘It’s a lot to take in.’

‘That’s the understatement of the century,’ she said, and rubbed her arms as though a cold gust had just passed over. She glanced at the window and asked me to open the curtains. Tabitha looked small with her face in the light and her body under the covers. ‘He raised me by himself, my father,’ she continued. ‘He’s a good kind man and I love him with all my heart...It’s been the worst experience of my life to watch him suffer. I hope he finds peace.’

‘Our parents aren’t going anywhere, Tabitha. And we don’t need to be what Possum, Norman and Wudun want us to be.’

Tabitha shook her head, ‘You don’t understand. My whole life I’ve known my place, even if I had never been on Country, and everything I’ve done was to push mob into positions to make change. To know now...to be connected

to my Country and Dreaming like this...is an honour I would never refuse.' She spoke with passion.

In that moment, the weight of what was being presented to us bore down on me. I knew my place in the world. And yet, it felt as though my identity was something others decided. I pushed the thought aside. 'Anything else you can tell me about what happened when you were attacked?' I asked.

Tabitha shuddered. 'I felt so much anger in that spirit,' she said, and looked up at the ceiling. 'I dreamed I was in the river again and tried to fight it off. But, in the flames, it pulled itself through the barrier. When I woke, I was in the desert alone and started walking.'

All that could be heard in the stillness that followed was the wind buffeting the window. Norman was right. The spirit had come through. Tabitha coughed harshly, breaking the silence.

'This is ridiculous. We should stop shooting and get you to town,' I said.

'No. I've seen the creature come. You must stop him...but you also need to finish the doco. Promise me.'

I was shocked.

'But why? The mining is destroying the land. Why would we want to do anything that promotes it?'

'I have to finish what I've started.'

She held my hand for a brief moment before continuing. 'I know you're upset, but Sid's right. We need to give mob all the information they can get.'

'I'll do my best with the filming,' I said, although I was still unsure if it was the right thing to do. I let out a sigh

and got up from the chair. 'I better get ready. Get well, and safe travels back to camp.'

'Good luck, Jonathan. I'll see you tonight.'

I saw uncertainty written on her face, which didn't fill me with confidence.

Outside Tabitha's room I heard Sid talking to Possum around the corner in the hallway. I stopped dead in my tracks and listened.

'Will be good to get back to work. From what Mick tells me they should have enough footage after today,' he said.

'You need to see the river,' said Possum.

'What's wrong with the river?'

'It's on fire, Sid. I was sitting on the bank with a rod in and saw smoke on the horizon from a spot fire. Then, out of nowhere, the flame crept up. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. From one bank to the other, the water was lit up. That flame snaked its way past me and it kept going. Before long the entire river was blue and yellow. Has to be the gas. The animals can't drink. Who knows how far the gas has spread through the ground water. You need to stop this nonsense and get back to Gambari and tell the council what's happening.'

'There was an accident,' Sid explained. 'Contamination of the aquifer near the mine. I know it might look bad, but them mining mob assured me they can fix the problem. No need to catastrophise. We need to get mining here soon...'

'Stop it. Just stop it... You'll change your tune when you see.'

There was silence for a while before Sid whispered. I had to strain to hear. 'Just let me finish this up and I'll see you at camp tonight.'

The rain of yesterday was swallowed up, and the sun blared down on the cracked hard ground. Sid and I helped Tabitha down to Possum's car. I squinted through the glare and felt sweat on my brow. I said one last goodbye to Tabitha and looked back at the homestead. Possum and Norman were talking on the verandah. Possum's hand was on Norman's shoulder and he shook his head as they spoke.

We packed and watched Possum's car creep away. Keith had made up an esky of sandwiches and water for the day. He seemed sad and looked frail saying goodbye.

'Nice to have company,' he said, before taking off his wide-brimmed hat and shooing away a couple of flies. 'You're welcome here anytime.'

We said our goodbyes and Norman asked to borrow Keith's work ute. I was travelling with Norman.

Just before we left, Keith placed a hand on my elbow. 'I dunno what he's up to,' he said, and glanced over at Norman waiting in the ute, 'but look after him, will you?'

'Of course,' I said.

Keith nodded, 'Good lad.'

With country music playing on the stereo, Norman pulled the car around and we left Keith alone with his border collies at play in the green garden, and entered the flat dry desert with all its uncertainty.

Around lunchtime we stopped by a pool of water with gum trees and boulders surrounding it. As the cars approached, I saw a goanna bolt off a flat rock where it was sunbaking. When we got out I felt a cool breeze on my skin and half-expected to smell gas off the water, but there was

nothing. I figured we were a fair way from the river and the contamination hadn't made it that far.

Mick and Sid decided it was the perfect place to shoot.

Mick started barking orders—he took his new role as director seriously. 'Grab the tripod, Jenny. I'm going to set up at the cave entrance. The light is good. Yep, just there. No, a little further to the left. No, a little further. No, now you've gone too far. Back a bit. OK, yep, good.' Then he looked to me and marked a spot in the dirt with his foot. 'Jonathan, you can kneel down here. I reckon that'll work well.' He looked into my eyes. 'This is it, Jonathan. The last scene. Make it count.'

While Mick readied the camera, the others milled around the water's edge, but I studied the cave.

The ceiling was blackened from countless fires and it felt as though spirits moved about me. I thought of my ancestors sleeping in that very spot. Thousands upon thousands of years of dreams were held by the solid cave walls. I placed a hand on the smooth cold stone. The hairs on my arms stood to attention. There were ancient paintings on the walls: hands, birds, kangaroos, possums, men hunting and the stars.

I moved toward the back of the cave, and my knees almost buckled from under me. On the far wall was a white outline of a human body with a dingo head. Its face and claws outlined in red ochre. A lone warrior was pictured on the ground at the creature's feet. His arm raised with a spear in hand.

'You ready, Jonathan?' said Mick, pulling me away from the picture.

I took a moment to clear my head and focus. I knelt on the ground next to artefacts and the bones of small animals. I held a spearhead and began to speak the words I'd memorised on the ride:

If an explorer comes across a cultural heritage site, they have two business days to send you a Cultural Heritage Notice. If you receive a cultural heritage find notice, you then have five business days to respond to said notice. Then another five days to lodge the agreement after consultation with the appropriate parties...

As I spoke, I heard the magpie's song. With each sentence the singing became louder and closer. I began to smell fire and heard the crackling and popping of burning wood. There was heat coming from behind me and yet I knew there was no fire. The smell of smoke and the sweet singing didn't bring anxiety as it would normally. Instead, I felt a calmness. On the branch of a tree above me the first magpie swooped up and perched. Not long after, another came. They lengthened their necks and sang together before taking flight and circling the cave. I noticed Norman staring at me intently. I finished the shot and stood up, my feet solid on the ground. I listened to the last of the magpie's song. I felt a pull within me, a disruption, and with a crackle of ghostly fire it felt as though a pulse of energy was sent afar.

'Cut,' said Mick. 'Take a quick break. We'll have to do that again, Jonathan. Too much bird noise.'

Norman came over and looked me up and down. 'You feel anything?' he said.

'I smelled smoke and felt energy coming from the cave. It's hard to explain.'

‘The energy came from you. You just connected with your totem.’

‘My totem? What is it?’

‘The same as your Nan’s. Galbular. The magpie.’

I thought of all the times they’d swooped me. ‘Why have they attacked me so often?’

‘Because you weren’t listening.’

It made so much sense now. The warning attacks, the dreams, the constant signs. My totem had been with me from the beginning. I was shocked.

‘The magpie is strong, quick, loyal,’ said Norman. ‘The magpie sees the world from above. He’s wise. You’ll need his strength and wisdom.’

It took me another half a dozen takes to nail the scene. With the filming finally completed, it seemed like a weight had been lifted off Mick and Sid, and they patted each other on the back. Norman, on the other hand, looked sombre and focused. The peace and excitement I’d felt in discovering my totem had faded and was replaced by a tightness in my chest accompanied by a vision of the creature on the wall with its ochre stained teeth and claws.

We loaded the cars and took a small breather before continuing.

‘How’d you think that went? Was it the same as working with Tabitha?’ asked Mick.

‘It was fine,’ I said, which prompted a broad smile from him.

‘Good work, Jonathan. I’ll be glad to put this one behind me and get back to Brisbane,’ he said, looking past my shoulder.

‘Yeah, it’s been a tough trip.’

I followed his gaze. He was staring at Jenny. She looked anxious, and from what I could gather from her mutterings and hand gestures, she was practising what she was going to say to her mum when we returned.

The Bora Ring was located at the base of a small stony hill. There was a clearing with one large circle of rocks. As we approached from a distance, it looked like an eye staring into the sky. With the sun slowly dropping behind it, the sight of the colours and clouds cast against the red sand and stone made my skin prickle. It felt as though I’d glimpsed eternity.

While everyone ate afternoon tea, I climbed the hill next to the Bora to get a view of the surrounding desert. This would be our field of battle. As I stood there, anxious about the fight to come, a flock of cockatoos flew overhead. They squawked, played, and weaved about in unison and the afternoon light shimmered off their feathers. I stretched my eyes and saw a spot of black in the whiteness. Two magpies came and circled above me. I knew, somehow, that they were the same birds from the waterhole.

I felt heat through my body, an unfolding of power as the magpies glided above me, an understanding of things I’d forgotten as I became linked to the past, present, and future of Dreaming through my totem.

I climbed back down the hill and Norman ushered me away from the rest of the group. ‘Wudun’s out there somewhere,’ he said, and waved over the flat.

‘What should we do?’ I asked.

‘We’ll wait till nightfall and hunt him. He’ll be waiting for us. He knows we want to stop him because he had to fight so hard to get through.’

‘I’m supposed to be heading back to the campsite with the others.’

‘I’ll tell Sid I’ll drive you back later. We’ll either head back after it’s done, or we’ll go back to the land.’

I could feel a weight of pressure bearing down on my shoulders. *I am Gunggari and my totem is galbular.*

Jenny approached me as the others were preparing to leave for camp. ‘I’m staying here with you, Jono. I can help.’

‘I know you want to be part of this, but you need to leave this to me and Norman.’

‘This is crap,’ she said, and anger flashed across her face. ‘I don’t believe any of it. Now you’re off your meds, Norman’s just filling your head with junk. And you know as well as I do that I’m a blackfella. Possum’s wrong,’ she said, desperately.

I stood silently before her. She was lashing out at me. I understood. Her world had been turned upside down. Possum’s words had rocked the very foundation of her identity.

‘I’m sorry this is happening, Jenny, I really am. If you’d seen what I’ve seen...’ I clasped my hands together and looked at the pinkish sky. ‘Maybe Possum is totally wrong. I hope she is. But only your mum knows the truth.’

Tears welled in her eyes. She breathed deeply, wiped them away, and put a hand on my shoulder. ‘I don’t know what I’d do without you. Be safe.’

She hugged me, then walked back over to the others. She didn't look back as the car pulled away. In that moment, no matter what happened that night, I knew things would never be the same again.

As I watched the dust trail of the car moving off, I thought of Mum and Jiffy back home and hoped I'd see them again. I thought of APAC and St Lucia Private and realised that everything had led up to this point.

I looked at the Bora Ring, where so many boys had been initiated into manhood. I thought of my totem and my link to the Dreaming – a time and space that was both endless and fleeting.

I heard a bang. Norman had pulled a couple of wooden clubs from the ute tray.

'What are those?' I asked.

'Nulla nullas,' he said. 'I reckon that creature can't be killed with rifles. They might slow him down, but these are ancient weapons made from the wood of our Country. We'll have to get in close to use them.'

Norman sat down cross-legged, put the nulla nullas in his lap, and closed his eyes.

I felt a surge of adrenaline. The clubs announced the violence that was about to come, and the thought of it made my temperature rise.

After a couple of minutes Norman got up, walked back over to the ute tray, and called me over. 'You ever used a rifle?' he asked.

'No.'

He nodded and pushed a gun into my hands and looked at me sternly. 'Breathe in, exhale, hold your breath to stop

the muzzle moving around and squeeze the trigger, don't pull it.'

I looked at him in disbelief. 'I can't do this. I've never shot a gun in my life.'

'I'm gonna need you to learn real quick then.'

'I can't.'

'This could mean life or death. I need you to do this.'

I felt the rifle in my hands. It was heavy with a shiny smooth barrel and a grainy butt.

'Let's do a practice shot. Aim at that rock over there. Yep, that one, and watch for kickback. The first time you're not used to it.'

I stood with the rifle raised and admit that I closed my eyes when I fired. The kickback felt like someone had punched me hard in the shoulder.

'That was terrible,' said Norman, with a half-smile on his face. 'Try again.'

I took another couple of shots before Norman decided enough was enough and we prepared.

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The sun sank and the moon glowed bright again after last night's full moon. Clouds wrought a patchwork of darkness on the desert floor. I put the rifle on my back and Norman handed me a nulla nulla. I gripped it tightly and I swung it a couple of times, getting used to the weight of it. It was heavier at the tip. I was nervous, and stepped to-and-fro on the balls of my feet.

Norman put a hand on my shoulder. 'This is it. I know you've been through a lot to get here. Not knowing what and why all this was happening. But know this: whatever happens out there tonight..you are Gunggari and this is your place.'

Norman's words were bittersweet. I knew my place in the world, but immediately had to fight for it. We ventured out on foot to pick up the creature's trail. My boots scraped at my heels. My skin prickled as the cold breeze blew in the dark. We walked a few hundred metres onto the flat desert floor.

Can I do this?

I watched as Norman pierced the landscape through squinted eyes. His back straightened when he caught a glimpse of something. He ran off full pelt, his shoes leaving puffs of dust as he darted away. I was having trouble keeping up with him. It was difficult to run with the heavy bolt-action rifle rattling against my back. I lost him.

I knelt on the ground and focused into the darkness. I listened, trying to place him. I saw bright red light a short distance away and heard a rifle shot. I raised my gun in that direction, but Norman had disappeared into the darkness.

The wind picked up and dark shadows moved quickly across the ground. The creature spread his terrifying growl over the plain and, with the wind in my ears, I couldn't tell which direction it came from. My heart thumped. My mouth was dry. I could feel my totem with me. It felt, strangely, like my strength had doubled. I was shocked when I caught a glimpse of feathers coming out of the backs of my hands as I clutched the nulla nulla tightly. My totem was showing itself and giving me power that I didn't yet know how to use. I saw Norman's light again and ran over to join him.

My feet felt almost weightless as I sped along the hard desert floor. I heard another growl on the wind, closer this time. I stopped dead in my tracks as I searched and listened.

I heard quick movement, and in the moonlight witnessed a clawed hand strike at my leg. Power surged through my body. I leapt into the air, higher than I ever thought I could jump.

I bore down on the creature, my hands now razor-sharp claws. I struck its arm and there was a yelp. I hadn't attacked intentionally. It'd been a self-defence reflex, guided by my totem and deadly in its lightning precision. Looking at my

hands, I was horrified by the sight of claws retracting into my fingers. My body had taken over and I was no longer in control.

The creature's cries sounded off into the darkness. My body felt strong, but my mind was full of doubt and confusion as something ancient coursed through my veins, channelled through my totem.

Norman was in a patch of light around twenty metres in front of me, stumbling around. I saw a blur near him.

He yelled.

I heard another growl, closer to me. The creature moved at tremendous speeds.

I turned about and swung the nulla nulla. I felt a sharp pain in my leg. The creature had been more careful in his attack this time; he'd dummied left and struck on the right. My counter-attack missed by some distance. I fell to the floor. My calf muscle was deeply cut. I could see the sinewy tendons poking through, and blood flowed from the gash onto the ground. I was shaken. My stomach hollowed out at the sight of the blood. I took off my shirt and tied it around my leg, shook my head and tried to focus.

The wound slowed me. I limped as I made my way over to Norman.

A cloud crossed the moon and Norman vanished into darkness once again.

When it passed, I saw the creature ripping into Norman's stomach with one of his clawed hands, the other pinning his head to the ground, steering the blinding red light coming from his forehead away from him.

I yelled in fright and felt utterly alone as Norman's light dimmed. If Norman could be struck down, what chance did

I have? I stared at Norman's unmoving body and an anger rose within me, sharpening my mind.

I pulled the rifle up. *Inhale, exhale, hold, squeeze don't pull*, I said over in my head. I held my eyes on the target and steadied myself for the kickback. The shot rang out and the bullet hit the creature in the midriff.

Wudun released a piercing cry that shook me. My leg stung, and I couldn't quite concentrate on him; the second shot sailed past.

The creature turned to me. He bent down next to Norman, placing a knee on the ground. He looked up at the sky. Streams of dust came up from the ground. The dust entered the wound. He was healing himself.

That old sense of dread came upon me as I fumbled with the ammunition. I desperately tried to get another shot off before he recovered from the last. My hands were sweaty and shaking. I finally reloaded and fired twice, both shots missed.

The creature stood, fully healed.

I dropped the rifle, stood up, and witnessed the immensity of what I was fighting.

His long torso and muzzle were lengthened towards the moon and stars. He raised a thick clawed hand, shook, and howled. The vision of that pale gleaming creature left me stunned. Fear gripped me completely.

He turned his muzzle in my direction. I went to move my feet. Nothing. I tried to raise my arms. Nothing. I looked at my hands, but there were no claws. All that could be seen was the earth of my ancestors underneath my stubby nails.

I saw Norman on the ground at the creature's feet, helpless. I thought of Jenny, Possum, Sid, and Tabitha.

I thought of what might happen to them if I didn't find the courage to act. I closed my eyes asked for help. Still, I couldn't move.

The creature beat its chest and produced the loudest howl I had ever heard. In that moment, when terror gripped every fibre of my being, I thought of Mum.

Something inside me shifted and my breath returned. The claws came and I ran at the creature with clear vision; the nulla nulla in one hand and my claws extended.

The creature knelt again. He waited for me to cut the distance before bolting off the ground like a sprinter starting a race. I could feel blood dripping from my wound onto the ground, but I felt no pain. I was moving at great speed. We were about to clash.

I was ready to strike the back of its head with my nulla nulla, when the creature stopped suddenly, ducked and struck me fiercely in the stomach with its hairy arm. I hit the ground and rolled several times. I was a couple of metres from Norman, who was motionless on the ground.

I gasped and gasped for air. The pain returned to my leg and so did my fear. The creature walked slowly towards me.

Norman's light was almost out. Still winded, I crawled along the dirt towards Norman and spoke his name over and over.

That's when I saw Norman pull a lump of ochre from his pocket.

He drew his arm back with a new-found strength and threw it at that creature.

That's when the malevolent spirit stopped in its tracks between us. Norman had somehow frozen him.

I pulled myself off the desert floor and hobbled towards the creature. The pain in my leg was excruciating.

It was odd to see Wudun so close and unmoving. My fear and worry had gone, and I took a moment to study him. His emotionless blackened eyes, the snarl written on his mouth, the big red tongue over to one side. And the claws, which had the blood of his own people on them. His claws began to twitch and his arms slowly began to move.

I breathed in and could feel my totem with me. The magpie was guiding me. I sat and took off my boots and socks. I moved around the creature – the sickness of Wudun, protector of the land – and made a circle in the dirt with my toe. Dust floated over the mark.

Words came.

‘Dandi mundu, guma, mundangarra, nunguna wadi. From the earth, blood, portent of death, take him away.’

The creature’s eyes began darting around and his limbs began to move.

I raised my nulla nulla high. It felt like an eternity as I watched Wudun become unhinged. He raised his claws and lurched for my throat.

I brought the ancient weapon down hard on his skull.

His body made a sickening thud as it hit the ground.

The earth shook and opened up slowly claiming him before closing over.

I felt release.

25

I hobbled over to Norman. He was alive, but cut up badly. I knelt down beside him.

‘He’s gone back to the land?’ he asked. He was coughing, and spittle dribbled from his mouth as he spoke. I could hear a wheezing in his chest.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

I helped Norman off the cold desert floor and back to the car. He was bleeding from his stomach and I carefully wrapped the wound with dressing from a first aid kit. His eyes darted around as if searching for something. He started to speak, his tone soft. ‘He’s really gone?’

I nodded.

‘You did good,’ he said, and patted me on the back. ‘Can you drive?’

‘I’ve had a couple of lessons with Mum.’

‘Let’s put them to good use,’ he said, and coughed.

I quickly and poorly bandaged my leg and we jumped in the car.

Even in his wounded state Norman couldn't help but give advice. 'I'll be dead by the time you get us moving,' he said, through a pained half smile and one hand on his bandages. 'Feel the clutch. That's it, now give it a bit of gas. Nope, you've stuffed it. Start again.'

I focused through the pain of my leg, balanced the clutch and accelerator, crunched the gears up to fourth, and felt the car settle.

With the moon high and bright above, we drove in silence except for the odd direction from Norman. Once we were on a straight course to camp, Norman closed his eyes and slept.

A couple of hours into the drive was when I saw it. 'Norman,' I said, and shook his arm.

'Hey? We there?'

'Look!' I pointed toward the horizon.

Norman winced and grabbed his stomach as he roused. Once focused, he exhaled loudly, awed by what lay in front of us. Cutting the darkness was a tear of blue, orange and yellow stretching across the land. It looked as if the very core of the earth was exposed.

The river, as far as we could see, was on fire.

I glanced at Norman, and noticed his normally sharp and stern eyes were welling with tears. Not a word was uttered between us as we watched the river of flame draw closer on that last stretch towards camp.

It was quiet when we arrived. A few glowing embers smouldered in the pit. The river behind it had a low burning flame over the surface.

I went to find Possum who must have heard the car pull up. She was already making her way through the camp towards us. Nobody else stirred. Norman had gotten himself out of the ute. He was lucid and leaned on the car. He pointed to the river with a weary expression. Possum smiled for a second, obviously happy to see him alive, before a look of horror crossed her face as Norman collapsed to the dirt. Possum ran to her tent and grabbed medical supplies. I knelt down beside him. He was unresponsive.

‘Give me space,’ said Possum, when she came back.

I watched on anxiously. The bandages were soaked in blood. Possum peeled them off and went to work stopping the bleeding.

‘Find Sid. He’s further up river,’ she ordered. ‘I’m gonna take Norman to town.’

Sid was standing on the riverbank at the edge of camp. He was fixated on the flames and didn’t notice my approach.

‘Norman’s hurt,’ I said, gasping for air from my run. ‘Possum’s taking him into town.’

Sid didn’t respond.

‘You hear me? Norman needs help.’

‘The river,’ he said.

I heard the ute pull away.

‘Possum’s gone,’ I said.

‘I’ve been such a fool,’ he continued, pulling his gaze from the river to me. Blue flame caught the edge of his eyes.

‘You couldn’t know it was this bad.’

‘I just wanted to help mob.’

‘I know,’ I said.

We stood in silence for a while, looking at the blue and yellow dancing over the water. Sid shook his head. 'What happened to Norman?'

I had to think of something quickly.

'We were walking up the cliff near the Bora and he fell. Cut him up bad.'

Sid looked back at the river. 'We'll leave early tomorrow morning,' he said, and then with conviction in his voice. 'I've got work to do.'

I nodded and left him with his thoughts.

I found Tabitha sitting up on a mattress in her tent. She looked tired, as if she was not long awake. 'Jonathan, you're back.'

'Yes,' I said, and felt myself smile. 'How are you feeling?'

'A lot better. I don't think I'll need a doctor.'

'That's good news.'

She coughed then and, while her chest sounded better, I could tell it would be a while till she was fully healed.

'We did it,' I said, with pride in my voice. 'We pushed the creature back.'

She placed a hand on her chest. 'I think I felt it.'

Tabitha took a drink of water and offered me some. I drank deeply and felt a heaviness in my body. My heightened senses from the battle, the drive and seeing Norman injured, had finally relaxed and I became incredibly tired. I sat down beside her on the mattress. The tent flap was open and the river burned outside.

'The river. It's worse than I ever imagined,' I said, and pointed.

'I know,' she said, and sighed. 'Sid's been in a daze. He'll need his strength. There will be a fight with the mines.' She looked down and noticed the bloodied bandage. 'Your leg. Let me take a look.'

'It's OK. Doesn't hurt that much.'

She hushed me, knelt down on the floor, and undid the bandage. It was still open and bleeding, but wasn't nearly as bad as before. I thought of the strength I'd felt through my totem.

'Let's clean this out and get some fresh bandages on it.' She grabbed supplies and a bucket, and started to wash my leg. It stung as she applied the Dettol.

'Tell me what happened.'

I told her everything about the battle and how the earth claimed the creature. She was in awe as I talked about my totem and how I felt a deep connection to Country.

'I feel that same sense of place and peace,' she said. 'I hope Norman will be OK.'

There was silence for a few moments and I thought of the battle. 'What are you going to do?' I finally asked.

'Be there for my father until he passes. Then I'll talk with my husband and we'll come back. This is my place. My daughter will know her Country. What about you?'

I thought of Mum and Jiffy. 'I don't know.'

Tabitha pulled the bandage and nodded.

'All done. Just go easy on it.'

I sat on a log around the pit and watched the river. I thought about Norman and what we had just endured. I hoped for his survival. A black-and-white feather was on the ground nearby. I picked it up just as Jenny emerged from her tent.

‘Jono!’ She ran over, launched herself and wrapped her arms tightly around me. Her weight made my leg uneasy, but I hugged her back. We stayed like that for a long while and I could feel her tears on my shoulder. ‘You’re alive. I thought you were d... But here you are.’ She stepped back and wiped her face. She looked into my eyes and I was unsure if what I saw was just friendly affection or something more. ‘I don’t know what I’d do...’

‘It’s good to see you,’ I said, and opened my palm. I offered the feather. ‘Take it.’

She paused a moment but eventually accepted it. ‘Tell me what happened,’ she said after a few moments.

‘Help me with something first?’

Jenny had been shadowing Mick for most of the shoot and knew exactly where his camera gear was packed away in the ute. After grabbing the gear, we walked some distance away from the campsite and Jenny set up the camera on a tripod.

It felt like old times, when we would muck around at school knowing we were doing something dangerous. Knowing that we could get in deep trouble if we got caught.

The camera was ready. Jenny happily took on the role of director and placed me on the bank with the slow-flowing burning river directly behind me.

‘Speak,’ she said.

I took a moment to let the picture tell its own story.

Then I recited an extract from the text I had memorised.

The Expedited Procedure is a process that makes sure the exploration work is Not Likely To disturb land, damage cultural sites and places of significance, or interfere with community...

BORDERLAND

Once we had sneaked the camera back to the ute and the excitement of the risk we had just taken had settled, we sat down on the logs near the fire, and I told her everything.

There were no questions or comments from Jenny, only the story of a hunt and Wudun's death. My words hung over the river and land. I felt a cold gust of wind brush the back of my neck.

I released the air from my lungs and watched the past, present, and future unfold in the flames. I thought of home and how much had changed.

I looked up at the stars. Bright and infinite. On a dead tree branch above me, two magpies slept.

26

I woke the next morning to kookaburras cackling in the tree line near my tent. My leg was aching but didn't look infected. I changed my clothes and made my way to the centre of camp along the river bank. The water was still flaming, but it didn't look as bold in the sunlight.

With Possum gone, there was no fry-up for breakfast. We had cereal with milk instead. Everyone looked tired as we ate our breakfast on the logs near the fire pit and stared at the river.

Sid was busy pulling down tarps and packing things into the car before he came and addressed us. 'There was an accident yesterday at the Bora,' he said. Only Mick looked surprised. 'Norman had a bad fall. Possum took him into town to get treated. She says he's doing OK.' Sid looked at my leg. 'How you going?'

'It's fine,' I said.

Sid nodded. 'Once you're all done eating, we'll pack up and get to the airfield.'

The car hummed along the flat desert floor. I looked out the window and onto my Country. The desert felt more alive, the colours bolder. I felt a sense of peace knowing there was somewhere I belonged. We didn't stop on the way and my legs fell asleep caught between the car door and luggage.

It felt like forever before we saw the small town on the horizon. We entered Gambari and slowed as we approached The Royal Hotel.

I remembered the first time I'd seen the pub, and the anxiety and isolation I'd felt. People were gathered out the front. Word had obviously spread about the river and the mood of the crowd was both sombre and electric. An Elder stood on a crate addressing the group, stressing that the mines needed to take responsibility for what had happened. We crept forward in the car through the crowd. The Aunty speaking stepped down from the crate and came over to the car.

Sid dropped his window. 'I'm taking them to the airfield then I'll be back,' he said.

The crowd surrounded us.

'You let this happen.' A young bloke yelled over the shoulder of the Aunty at the car window.

She turned and raised her hand, stopping any further taunts, before talking to Sid. 'Hurry back. We need an emergency council meeting.'

Sid nodded and dipped his wide-brimmed hat. He beeped the horn as we made our way slowly through the crowd.

Sid was quiet on that last stretch and when we arrived at the airfield, he jumped out of the car and pulled our bags out swiftly. I could tell he wanted to get back into town.

'It was nice having you out,' he said, the mining wells in view behind him. 'Hope you got everything you needed.'

Sid took each of our hands one by one, saving me for last. 'You did a good job, bud. I reckon you've got a bright future. Don't be a stranger,' he said.

'Is Norman going to be alright?' I asked.

Sid let go of my hand and forced a smile. 'He's a tough bloke, and Possum said he's getting good care.'

I looked behind Sid's shoulder to the mine.

'Don't worry,' he said, and patted me on the back before getting back into the car and driving off.

■ ■ ■

It was late afternoon when we landed in Brisbane. Petrol fumes stung my nostrils and the familiar humidity clung to us as we got off the plane at the airport.

I said goodbye to Mick and approached Tabitha. 'So, this is it.'

'Hardly,' she said, smiling. 'You've still got voice over work to do.'

I wondered what her reaction would be to the new scene Jenny and I had made on the riverbank the night before. It was now up to Tabitha to use or delete it.

She took a moment and looked around. Planes flew in and out behind me and in front of us was the packed carpark with the city skyline in the distance. 'Feels strange,' she said.

'It does.'

Her face turned sombre. 'Our parents...if you need to talk...'

‘Thanks,’ I said, pushing away the thought of Mum being sick. ‘Do you think Possum and Norman will come for us?’

‘I have no idea. But I know what happened is going to take a while to process.’

I nodded. ‘I miss it already...our Country,’ I said.

She placed a hand on my shoulder. ‘We’ll be back there soon enough, I’m sure.’ A friend yelled her name and waved her over to where she was parked. ‘Well,’ she clasped her hands together. ‘Look after that leg.’

Naomi found us not long after. I noticed Jenny tense up at seeing her mother approach us.

‘Hello you two,’ she said, and smiled. ‘Great to have you back. You’re both looking vibrant.’ Naomi had a black dress on and it was strange to see her in makeup. Her curly hair was straightened. She’d worn the same outfit when me and Jenny graduated from St Lucia Private.

Jenny put her head down and walked straight past her to their car.

Naomi looked towards the car and Jenny with a perplexed look on her face. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘Must be slack from the flight,’ I lied. ‘Where’s Mum? I thought she’d be here.’

‘Your mum’s at work,’ said Naomi. ‘They called her in for a shift last-minute. She’ll be home in a couple of hours. I’ll give you a lift.’

I glanced at Jenny, who was staring blankly out the car window.

‘Thanks, but I’ll grab a cab,’ I said. I didn’t want to get stuck in the middle if they had it out on the drive home. I was sure to hear all about it the next day at APAC.

I made my way home past the bustle of industrial buildings and more cars than I could count. I already missed the dry desert air.

When I got home, Jiffy leapt up and down and immediately wet herself at the front door. I cleaned up the mess and played with her before setting my bags down in my room. I booked a dentist appointment to fix my missing tooth and transferred half the money I'd just made to Mum's account before showering.

Mum came home shortly after and met me on the verandah. She looked worn, older and thinner than before. It hurt to see her look worse than when I left, but I put that feeling aside.

'Mum,' I said, smiling. 'It's good to be back.'

'My boy. You look so black.' She hugged me tightly, before noticing the wound on my leg. 'What happened? You hurt, bub?'

'I'm fine, Mum. Just a cut. It's dangerous out bush.'

'Oh, my boy. It's good to have you home. Jiffy must have been excited.' She picked up the dog.

'I've already cleaned up her mess,' I said, and laughed.

'Thanks for the money. I have a nice treat for us,' she said, with a glint in her eye. 'We're going away this weekend. I booked us a unit up at Maroochydore to celebrate your first acting gig.'

'Sounds great,' I said, and really meant it.

'And I suppose I should order us Chinese for dinner,' Mum said, and winked. 'Sweet and sour pork with fried rice, coming up.' We both looked at each other, smiled, and hugged a second time.

The sun was setting, and spectacular colours crossed the sky adding contrast to the lush grass. One fiery red flower had come through on the flame tree in the front garden.

27

I found Jenny by herself practising in the studio. R&B music was blaring and she was dancing hard out and sweating profusely. I yelled to get her attention, but her focus was intense, and she didn't hear me. I had to go over to the stereo and lower the volume.

She looked annoyed that I'd pulled her out of the moment. Only after taking a large gulp of water did she reply.

'Sorry. Just working out a little frustration.'

'Did you find out?' I asked.

She hushed me and took me outside into the parking lot.

We didn't notice Rick and his crew smoking in a line of shade against the wall until we were in the middle of the small carpark with the sun blazing down on us.

'Looks like the coconut has returned,' said Rick, loudly. 'Probably think you're a proper blackfella after being out bush, don't you?'

Jenny piped up. 'Get lost, Rick. You're just jealous.'

'Jealous?' He laughed. 'Of some mining doco? Things have changed while you two have been gone. I've just

been cast in the sequel to *Which Way*. We're going to tour regional Queensland,' he said with a smirk.

'Yeah, you'll be the belle of the ball out in Barcaldine, mate. They'll be all over you like flies on a turd,' I said.

Rick's posse cracked up. He turned and growled at them. They went quiet. One of his crew pulled a coconut out of his bag and handed it to him. I could feel my skin tingling and a tightening of my muscles.

'Laugh at this,' said Rick, before he wound up his arm and threw the coconut as hard as he could directly at me.

Time slowed, and it felt like an age before the coconut reached me from across the car park. I stretched my arm out in front of me and caught the coconut with one hand. Rick and his crew gasped.

Jenny laughed. 'Nice one, Jono. We can eat that later.'

I laughed and, for a second, I thought Rick would come over and have a crack. But he walked back into school in a huff with his posse following.

'All bark and no bite,' said Jenny. With Rick gone we moved into the shade.

'So, tell me. What happened with your mum?' I asked.

Jenny looked towards the door and across the car park, double checking that nobody was in earshot before she spoke. 'We had it out bad last night. She denied and denied,' she said, in a matter-of-fact way.

'Possum was wrong?'

'No, I knew Mum was hiding the truth. When she gets like that...like I'm the one in the wrong for even thinking such a thing. I know her too well.'

I put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

‘It’s fine. I’m not even sad. I’m just furious at Mum. Just tell me the truth, you know?’

‘Far out. What are you going to do?’

‘I can’t stay here,’ she said. ‘I’m going to leave APAC and get a job. I need to pull money together. I’m going to find my father.’

My heart dropped. I looked into her eyes. ‘Are you sure?’

Her eyes darted around for a while before fixing on mine. ‘I don’t want to,’ she said, and I felt a bolt of hope through my body. ‘But... this is too important. I have to.’

I let out a long sigh and my shoulders dropped. ‘I understand.’

‘It won’t be forever.’

I nodded and looked at the ground. I could sense Jenny’s eyes on me.

She lifted my chin with her hand and kissed my cheek. I felt my face flush and grinned broadly, which prompted her to do the same.

‘Oh, Jono. You’re adorable.’

And just when I thought things couldn’t get any better, she offered her hand, which I took. For the briefest of moments, as we walked back into school hand-in-hand, we were together.

28

A cool breeze came in off the Maroochydore River. From the apartment balcony we had a direct view of the river mouth and the crashing waves on the beaches either side. Colourful kitesurfers played in the crossing, jumping off the back of waves and flying metres into the air.

I made us breakfast.

‘What do want to do today?’ Mum asked.

‘I’d like to walk along the beach and have lunch in a park.’

Mum coughed and helped plate the eggs and beans before answering. She looked weak. ‘Sounds like a plan. I might have to sit if you go too far, bub. I can’t seem to get rid of this cough.’ She smiled, but I noticed a slight show of concern behind her grin.

Salty breeze brought relief from the humidity. Gubbi Gubbi Country stretched out in front of us and I watched the crashing waves as we walked. Mum seemed upset and anxious. Like she wanted to tell me something.

‘You OK, Mum?’ I asked.

‘Yes, bub,’ she said, her eyes focused on the footpath.

We rounded the point at Cotton Tree and sat down at a table in the park. Mum coughed again.

‘Mum?’ I said. ‘Tell me. Is everything alright?’

She took a few moments to stop coughing before she shook her head. ‘Oh, bub,’ she said. Then she looked off over the ocean. ‘You know how I haven’t been well lately?’

I noticed a magpie perch itself onto a branch above our table. ‘Yes,’ I replied. I didn’t like where this was going. I felt my body tense.

‘I’ve been spending a lot of time at the hospital and had some more treatments.’ The lone magpie started singing its beautiful song. ‘Well, bub, the treatment isn’t working.’

The wind picked up and another magpie glided over and perched beside its mate.

‘The cancer...’ That word. I wish she hadn’t said it. She paused for a moment and I noticed her hand shaking. ‘I don’t have much time.’

What my mother had just said had changed everything.

Other birds joined in with the magpie’s song creating a strange harmony of sound that made my skin prickle.

She looked incredibly sad. ‘Bub, I’m dying. We need to make plans.’

The past, present, and future fluttered before my eyes.

I’d known about the hospital visits. I’d known when I saw how weak she looked, when I’d witnessed the vomiting and the pain she was in. I’d told her to stop working. I’d told her to rest, but she continued to provide for us.

But I was weak too. I’d put those moments into a deep well. My mother had raised me. She was the person I loved and trusted most on this earth.

'I know, Mum.' I began to cry then. I felt the warm tears down my face.

Mum looked down into her lap and then started to cry as well. 'I'm sorry, bub...I wanted to tell you sooner. They've been trying different treatments, but nothing seems to be working.'

I reached my hand across the table and placed it in hers. Our eyes were puffy and red from the tears that still came. 'I know, Mum.'

'My boy. I'm so worried about your future. It's been just the two of us since you were such a small thing.'

'I know, Mum.'

She nodded and ran a hand across her eyes. 'It's alright, bub. You'll be alright.'

With a chorus of birdsong filling the air around us, I got up from my seat, walked around the table, and hugged my mother.

She nestled her head into my shoulder and we cried. Her tears quickly turned into rocking sobs. She passed on her love and generosity, her healing heart, her strength and her wisdom. We rocked to-and-fro like a boat deep at sea.

For all my new knowledge and powers, for everything I went through with Norman, for everything in the world, I would give it all to save her and yet I was at peace. I knew we would see each other again in the past folded into the future.

■ ■ ■

I walked alone along the coastline digging my feet into the soft sand. My body shook. It was the beginnings of a course

of grief that would consume me as my mother's fate drew nearer and would stay with me long after she was gone. But I knew that there was power and resilience in loss and in her memory.

The wind blew strong. The sound of animals and birds reminded me of the Dreaming and that things could come again. The magpie guided me. I would need its strength for what was to come.

I thought of Jenny and her lost identity. Her life would never be the same again. I thought of Tabitha and our connection as the next generation to protect the land. I thought of the impending loss of my mother and how I must return to my Country.

I looked east, out over the vast ocean. The sun was bright above me and I felt a strong connection to the Dreaming and things before and things unfolded in that moment.

29

The next Monday, I walked through the park towards the train station on my way to APAC. I watched as a couple of magpies flew overhead. It felt like they were trying to communicate with me as they dipped, whistled and played.

I felt my totem stirring under my ribcage.

I approached the toilet block and heard a familiar raucous sound. My heart leapt and a memory flashed through my mind of men, a skull ring and pain. Those men had cut me down and called me a coconut. I remembered those moments of gasping for air on the hard concrete floor. I'd felt worthless. I remembered the anxiety that followed and the thoughts of dread. I remembered the taste of blood in my mouth.

I stopped in my tracks and braced myself. This time, as magpies circled overhead, I felt ready. I breathed in; my feet solid on the ground. I balled my fists, prepared for whatever came.

I turned around and was shocked to see Norman standing there in the bright sun, dressed in his flanno and wide-brimmed hat.

‘You’re a long way from home,’ he said, and smiled.

‘How are you here...What’s going on?’

‘You didn’t think I’d let you off that easy? We’ve got work to do.’

