

# **What do Aboriginal Storytellers bring to Crime Fiction?**

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# **Certificate of Authorship/Originality**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree, except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

English literacy was imposed upon Aboriginal people by the settlers in the exercise of their superior power, in an attempt to 'civilise' and assimilate Aboriginal people. But such was the foresight and resourcefulness of early Aboriginal writers, that they transformed the written word into a medium through which they spoke truth to power. In the ensuing centuries Aboriginal people transformed the written word by imbuing the page with their worldviews, experiential knowledge and politics. This doctor of creative arts thesis examines how contemporary Aboriginal writers are drawing upon their unique literary heritage in order to re-create crime fiction.

Aboriginal crime writers are transforming the genre through two tropes – reclaiming Country and characters who bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. In Aboriginal crime fiction, the land is a character that has agency in the story and wears the wounds of its people. In spite of colonisation, the bonds between the protagonist and the land remain strong. The latter trope resounds in characters that privilege Aboriginal histories, worldviews and celebrate the resilience of black communities.

Both tropes find reflection in the novel that forms part of this doctor of creative arts thesis, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*. The novel revolves around the journey of Aunty June Clarkson, a Murri Aunty who becomes a private detective. Aunty June draws upon her culture, experiential knowledge, wit and steely determination in order to solve crime. The Murri grapevine is one of her many tools, as is her invisibility as an Aboriginal woman. It is from behind the masks of demeaning stereotypes that Aunty June finds clues, pursues witnesses and delivers justice to villains.

## Preface

The origins of this doctor of creative arts thesis lie in my fond memories of the Murri aunties of my childhood. My aunties were wise beyond measure, natural comedians and on occasion, they could become vociferous critics. They were also gifted politicians who wielded exceptional power, not only in our family but also in the broader Aboriginal community of south-east Queensland. As I grew older I became aware that such women did not exist in Australian literature, and it dawned on me that each one of us was poorer for their absence. In 2012 I decided to celebrate those brilliant women by writing a crime novel about a Murri aunty who becomes a private detective. I was so passionate about the concept that I decided to make it the subject of my doctor of creative arts project.

Writing the novel, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*, proved to be challenging. Although I could visualise the protagonist, Aunty June Clarkson, and I could hear her voice when I closed my eyes, I could not get inside her head. Then I remembered that my aunties were very private women, and even though there was great love between us, I knew little about their intimate lives. In order to find my way into Aunty June's head, I had to discover her through characters who I already knew; her niece, Freya Clarkson, and Freya's best friend, Mark Tonkin. Hence, the novel, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*, is largely written in the voices of Freya and Mark, before the final third of the story is told by Aunty June Clarkson.

The exegesis was an opportunity for me to rediscover my passion for the Aboriginal literary tradition, and the extraordinary stories that have lined its trajectory. English literacy was imposed by the settlers in the exercise of their superior power, in an attempt to 'civilise' our people. But such was the foresight and resourcefulness of our old people, that they used the written word as a tool through which they spoke truth to power. Our ancestors also transformed the written word by imbuing the page with Aboriginal worldviews, experiential knowledge and politics. When Aboriginal writers turn to crime fiction, we draw upon this

unique literary tradition. The historical roots of Aboriginal crime fiction are discussed in chapter one of the exegesis.

Aboriginal crime writers are transforming the genre through the tropes of reclaiming Country and characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. The former is manifest in the themes of inter-relatedness, the return to country and challenging psychological terra nullius. Those themes will be examined in chapter two of the exegesis. The latter trope finds reflection in protagonists who privilege Aboriginal histories and values. They also understand that racism is not confined to the arbitrary behaviour of flawed individuals. Rather, it is systemic and consequently, racism remains the daily experience for many of our people. The trope of characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative will be explored in chapter three of the exegesis.

Both tropes find reflection in the novel, *Black Rose Private Detective Agency*. The protagonist, Aunty June Clarkson, is proud of being a Mununjali woman from Beaudesert in Queensland. In common with many of her contemporaries in the Aboriginal community, Aunty June has fond memories of our civil rights movement. Mirroring my own aunties, she is gregarious and doesn't suffer fools lightly. Aunty June is also conscious of systemic racism, just as she is aware of her invisibility as a black woman. But she is never a victim. Aunty June challenges demeaning stereotypes, and on occasion, she uses them in order to hide her detective work.

This project has been difficult and it has taken many hours away from my loved ones. But it has also revived my passion for Aboriginal storytelling. I hope that you, dear reader, are similarly inspired by the deadly Aunty June Clarkson.

Nicole Watson

Sydney

October 2016.

# **Black Rose Private Detective Agency**

A novel by Nicole Watson



## Chapter One

23 March 2014

My name is June, Aunty June. I'm a Mununjali woman from Beaudesert, in Queensland. Our Country is a vista of sprawling mountain ranges and lush valleys. I have fond memories of my grandmother, smiling as she cupped earth in her hands. When I close my eyes, I can still smell her camp fire and see the mighty ghost gums. Country pulsed in our veins, sang to us. Even now, as I live on the lands of the Gadigal people, Beaudesert is with me.

I am also the owner of Black Rose, the deadliest private detective agency in Sydney. My team consists of me, Dave, my sweetheart, and Marmalade, our dog. Dave is a tall, strong man with big hands. He was a detective for thirty years, and Dave's still got that stare he used to give to suspects to put the goolly up 'em. He's retired now, so Dave likes to go fly fishin', and he's real deadly at makin' banana bread. But he still helps me out with the odd case.

Marmalade was a rescue, so we don't know what breed she is. Her long hair stands on its ends so she looks like a porcupine. We got a lot in common, Marmalade and me, 'cause we're both short, sassy sistas in our mature years. The three of us live in Leichhardt, in the inner west. We're in the middle of the café strip in Norton Street, and our apartment is directly above my favourite cafe, Nino's. We wake up to the smell of coffee in the mornin', and inhale clouds of garlic, basil and tomato paste in the evening.

I guess you could say my path to becomin' a private detective was unconventional. Like many others in this game, I went to TAFE where I got my qualifications. But when I opened up for business, I had just turned sixty-one and my previous career experience consisted of managin' the Doonaville Caravan Park. Doonaville is a deadly fishin' village, an hour outside of Brisbane. It's famous for mud crabs and the ice cold beer served at the Doonaville Bowls Club. Spent many years there, livin' with my sister, Maudie and our niece, Freya. Never thought I'd leave Doonaville. But ya never do know what's around the corner.

I'm no Charlie's Angel. That show would always make me wild anyways, 'cause there never was any black angel. I'm no Magnum either, so don't go expectin' no Ferrari. I drive a green 1980

Holden Kingswood called Daisy. Hollywood detectives do jujitsu, climb up the walls of skyscrapers and jump outta planes. This little black duck does none a that shit. My most important tools are firstly, my binungs and secondly, my mouth. A good private detective can really listen to people, understand their situation, and be a good talker. I got those qualities by virtue of bein' born at a time when us Murriss were under the control of station owners and mission managers. One thing that comin' from the bottom teaches you is empathy, and that comes into real good use when you gotta repossess someone's car.

Another skill I mastered from an early age was the ability to mask my true self. My elders were renaissance men and women who pretended to be insipid. They swallowed all kinds of humiliation in order to avoid a beatin', or banishment to somewhere like Palm Island, known as Prison Island in them days. They also taught us kids how to make ourselves invisible. Whenever the latest welfare officer would turn up to take us, we'd be squirreled away to the bush where we'd make ourselves unseen.

Now I use my invisibility to solve my clients' problems. When I'm dressed in a white uniform, I can walk straight into a corporate boardroom. Security guards never bother to ask me for ID 'cause they automatically assume I'm the cleaner. Suits don't wanna acknowledge the elderly black lady in the room, so they continue their discussions unguarded. Conversations that begin about profit margins eventually meander into the territory of extra-marital affairs and dalliances with hookers; every single word of which is captured by the recording device concealed in the hem of my uniform. Likewise, no one gives me a second look when I use a walking frame. Not that I need one, 'cause I'm fitter and stronger than most people half me age. But this isn't just any walking frame, 'cause it's got hidden cameras. I carry a Glock pistol in my bum bag too, for the day when someone sees through one of my disguises. It hasn't happened yet, but like I said, you never do know what's around the corner.

I've exposed cheatin' spouses, blackmailers, thievin' employees and stalkers. I've rescued victims of cults, and one kidnapped French bulldog, called Winston. I have also sorted out some wayward rich kids. One a them was Henry Parker Junior, heir to a media and publishing empire. Henry is the reason I'm presently standin' outside the happy face entrance to Luna Park.

Chubby Cheeks is nine metres wide, with a smile almost as big. It's an impressive monument to the art deco style of the 1930s, and one of the most recognisable icons in a city that boasts the most beautiful harbour in the world. Right now, however, I'm concerned with the drunken woman perched on top of the enormous forehead. Her name is Lucinda Flack. Me and Lucinda go back a long way, and she was once married to Henry.

'Aunty June, I'm worried she'll fall,' he says.

Henry isn't his usual smug self. His eyes are scared, his voice shaky.

'It's alright Bub. Aunty June isn't gonna let that happen.'

Before her life went to shit, Lucinda was a soapie actress. It's fair to say her actin' was so wooden it could have come from the ground. Not that a lack of talent is ever an impediment to bein' a Lady Muck. Lucinda strutted the red carpet like she owned it, pouted from the covers of fashion magazines, and broke hearts. It was not how her parents, who were earnest tradies, had imagined her life would turn out. When Lucinda showed a flare for gymnastics at the age of six, they poured all their energy, and hard earned moola, into their little girl's career. Lucinda was going to be the first Flack to wear an Olympic medal around her neck. But that dream went down the dunny when Lucinda was discovered by a talent agent. She scored her big break as Detective Katrina Carlson, in the show, *Bondi Babes in Blue*. For five seasons, Detective Carlson disarmed her assailants with back flips, somersaults and roundhouse kicks.

Lucinda ditched her acting gig after she married Henry. When they weren't partyin' in Ibiza, or shoppin' in New York, Lucinda and Henry lived in one of the Parker family's mansions in Vacluse, where they spent their days guzzling fine wine and snortin' cocaine. Henry's parents knew that not all was well but they fumed silently, biding their time. When Henry was arrested while running through Centennial Park in the nude, they seized their opportunity. They rang me. I'd already done some work for Henry Parker Senior, doin' mostly background checks on his new employees, and we had a rapport. I knew of his concerns for young Henry, whom I had grown fond of. He was basically a good kid who was easily misled. So I drove Henry to an expensive retreat in Byron Bay to have his demons exorcised.

The following week, Lucinda opened her front door to a posse of lawyers. They smugly informed Lucinda that Henry was divorcing her. The prenuptial agreement she signed before their lavish wedding became a force field around the Parker fortune. Lucinda had loved Henry, and losing him just about broke her heart. But she couldn't drop out of the world for six months, to lick her wounds. Lucinda had gone from beer and chips to champagne and caviar, and be fucked if she was ever goin' back. At first she sold her story to a women's magazine for a considerable sum, but that was soon spent. Then Lucinda tried to resurrect her acting career, but her star had lost much of its sheen.

Every so often Lucinda appears in a cheesy reality show. About six months ago, she was a guest star on *My Outback Holiday from Hell*. The poor thing tried to survive in the Tanami Desert with only a pocket knife. She lasted for two hours before burstin' into tears over a broken finger nail. Seein' Lucinda lose her shit made me feel bad for the small role I played in breakin' those two up. That's probably why I'm here now, wonderin' how the fuck I'm gonna rescue Lady Muck from the top of old moon face. A small crowd has gathered and anxious security guards are cordoning off a perimeter around the entrance. She's caused a real commotion, but no good, she's swinging her legs in glee and seems to be lappin' up the attention. Lucinda focuses on me and starts pointin' the finger.

'Aunty June, those fuckers at the Logies didn't send me an invite this year. Don't they know who I am?' Lucinda cries.

'Everyone knows who you are. *Bondi Babes in Blue* used to be the best show on TV.'

'That's so true!', she says indignantly.

'Why don't ya come down? I wanna talk to ya about my favourite episode?'

'Which one was it?', Lucinda asks excitedly.

I try to draw upon my memories of *Bondi Babes in Blue*, but each episode was the same.

Beautiful men and women fell in love, had a doori and then beat up on some bad guys.

'Bub, all of them were deadly.'

'I know,' she says, 'but Aunty June, what are we gonna do about those fuckers at the Logies?'

'Lucinda, I'll find out why you weren't invited. Heads will roll over this. I promise,' Henry says.

Lucinda pauses and wipes somethin' from her cheeks.

'Henry, would you really do that for me?'

'I'd do anything for you,' he says breathlessly.

'Then why did you leave me?'

Before Henry can respond, Lucinda does a backflip, lands on the schnozzle, and then scurries down to the boardwalk like a possum. He wraps his arms around Lucinda and they kiss passionately. The crowd gasps in amazement. I just stand there quietly, shakin' me head. I begin to walk back to Daisy, who's parked around the corner from the North Sydney Pool. Henry taps my shoulder.

'Aunty June, I need a moment.'

'Everything okay Henry?'

'I just wanted to say thank you.'

'It's all part of the service, Bub. But can I say one thing?'

'Of course, Aunty June, you can say anything.'

Henry is relieved, and it's so bloody obvious that he never got over Lucinda.

'You two need to decide what you're gonna do, for real. True God, I can't keep rescuin' that one.'

'But my family ...'

'I know Bub, but you're a grown man. You need to grow a pair.'

In the corner of my eye, I see Lucinda stumbling back towards Luna Park.

'Bub, you don't wanna let her out of your sight for too long.'

## **Chapter Two**

The traffic in Norton Street has eased, and pedestrians are meandering in and out of the cafes and boutiques. I park Daisy in front of Berkelouw Books. When we first moved here, I'd spend hours in the café outside, readin' Cliff Hardy novels. Me and Hardy have got some things in common, like neither one of us suffers fools lightly. But true God, that fullah's gotta stop mixin' business with pleasure. He's always havin' a doori with some woman connected to one of his cases, and it never ends well. I walk inside and check out the new releases. I wanna scream

when I see *Love and Revenge: The Internet Dating Murders*, on the shelf. That gammon Alicia Summers wrote that book without even consultin' me.

I walk home fumin' and swearin' under me breath. The pink sky is gradually fading into night, and I imagine most people in Norton Street are heading home, to prepare for the week ahead. I pause outside our apartment complex. Nino's is bustling with customers and I can hear the splutter of the coffee machine. As I trudge up the stairs, I breathe in the familiar scents of banana and cinnamon.

'Why did you buy this?', Dave asks when I show him the book.

'Because I need to know what Summers wrote.'

'But it's bound to be a pack of lies,' Dave says.

He's wearin' a white apron over his Rabbitohs shirt. A speck of flour has landed on his nose, which is kinda cute.

'Babe, I've decided to write me own version.'

His face drops in disbelief.

'Babe, I've gotta tell the truth about that case, 'cause no one else has.'

'Since when did you decide to become a writer?'

'I've been a storyteller my entire life, and I come from a long line a storytellers.'

'June, you're an incredible storyteller. But that doesn't make you a writer.'

'Why not?'

'Well, look at it this way. I like to think that my banana bread is sensational. But that doesn't make me a chef. Speaking of which, it's time to take this loaf out of the oven. Can you make us some tea?'

Marmalade is havin' a snooze beneath me feet. Her legs twitch every so often, and I know she's havin' a dream about the dog park down the road. Dave and me are sitting back after enjoying a slice of perfect banana bread.

'June, when would you have the time to write a book?'

Dave's got a point. We're so busy servin' divorce papers, doin' surveillance jobs and debt recovery. Murri can't even remember our last holiday.

'Babe, I'm startin' to wonder if being a private detective is all that it's cut out to be.'

'What?', he says, lookin' stunned.

'I'm sick of savin' people from themselves.'

Only last month, I had to rescue Lucinda when she climbed on top of the Coca Cola sign in Kings Cross. Had to use up all me favours with the Fire Service just to get her down.

'This afternoon I told young Henry that those two have gotta sort their shit out. Murri's gettin' too old to be doin' it for 'em.'

'Do you think they will?'

'I doubt it.'

'You could always refer the Parkers to another agency,' he says thoughtfully.

'Babe, I don't think that's the change I need. I think it's time for us to move to Doonaville.'

My house in Doonaville is prime ribbon real estate. It's across the road from the mud flats, and just a little further away from the boat ramp. I spent many happy years in that house with Maudie and Freya, but I'm yet to live there with Dave and Marmalade.

'What about the tenants?', he asks.

'The lease is due to expire in two months.'

'It would be nice to be closer to Maud,' Dave says.

'Yeah, I do miss her a lot. I'm even beginning to miss her annoyin' husband.'

'But June, you've worked so hard to build the agency. Do you seriously want to give it up?'

'And give up dealin' with hopeless cases like Lucinda? Yeah, I'm serious.'

'Okay,' he says somberly.

'Babe, are you ready to leave the big smoke?'

'June, you know I'd follow you to the moon and back.'

I stare into those earnest eyes and my heart melts. I plant a soft kiss on his lips; it causes an immediate frisson. I lead him to our bed and we frantically undress. Our lovemaking is tender and afterwards, we cuddle beneath a sheet.

'June, I've been thinking.'

'How long for?'

'The last sixty seconds. The time immediately before that would not have allowed for lucid thought,' he says wryly.

'What ya been thinkin' about?'

'Your obsession with that case.'

'That case will always be important to me. I mean, it made me pursue my dream of becomin' a private detective. Then there's Freya and Mark to think of.'

'I thought we'd moved on since then,' he says sadly.

'We have, but that Summers woman has dredged everything back to the surface.'

'June, no one is going to remember her book in six months' time.'

'Babe, people have been stealin' my mob's stories ever since those bloody boats arrived in 1788. It's time we started takin' our stories back.'

I get out of bed and head for the shower. The cold water caresses my skin and I feel refreshed.

Before I head out the door, I go into the study and open the filing cabinet. I bundle the files under me arm. Dave is sittin' in front of the television, gettin' ready for Sunday night football.

'I'm goin' downstairs for a coffee.'

'June ...'

'It's okay. I know you're only lookin out for my best interest.'

Marmalade stands at my feet, tail's goin' for it.

'Old lady, you'd better behave this time. No growlin' at strangers,' I say sternly. She nudges into my ankles and licks me, as if to say, 'No problem'.

Nino makes me a cappuccino and gives Marmalade a bowl of water. I spread the statements across the table and find Freya's. It hurts to read her hand writing. I get this flashback of me and



Freya sittin' at the kitchen table, doin' her homework. She must have been six years old. I hold the paper to my nose, hoping to smell some trace of her.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Statement of Freya June Clarkson**

**20 December 2010.**

My name is Freya Clarkson and I am a Mununjali woman. Our Country is south of Brisbane, and has stunning mountain ranges and cool valleys. Although I have walked upon our beautiful homelands many times, I have never lived there. I was raised in the fishing hamlet of Doonaville, half way between Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast. When I reflect on those years, I remember glimpsing wallabies feeding at dawn, the smell of rain touching parched earth, and the psychedelic pink brush strokes that live in the night sky.

Aunty June has asked me to write down all I can remember of the events that are being described in the press as the 'internet dating killings'. In my mind, the beginning point was 20 September 2010; the day of my thirty-second birthday. Perhaps appropriately, that day began with a telephone call from the Mayor of Doonaville herself.

'Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Freyaaaa...'

'Aunty June,' I mumble in a haze of sleep.

'That's my name. Don't wear it out.'

'But...'

'Happy fuckin' birthday Bub!', she yells into the phone.

'But Aunty June ... it's seven o'clock in the morning!'

Aunty June is giving me one of her angry pauses. I imagine her standing in her kitchen, fuming, all five feet of her.

'What, don't you mob in Sydney ever get out of bed?'

'It's Saturday morning.'

'Hmm, I'll let you go back to sleep. Call me when you've decided to ditch the Sleeping Beauty gig.'

'Thanks Aunt.'

'Freya, you still there?'

'Yeah Aunt.'

'Fuckin' love ya.'

My mouth is parched and there's this gnawing ache in my head. I probably shouldn't have drunk that third glass of Chardonnay last night. I gulp down a berroca and peer into the bathroom mirror. I feel bad for ruining Aunty June's call. I have never met another adult who gets so excited about birthdays. In March Aunty June turned 60 and such a milestone required a special present. Fortunately, I had just received a tax refund. So I went back home to Doonville and surprised her with an iPad. Apparently, she's taken to it like a duck to water; planning her calendar for the next decade, mastering Facebook and using Google for all manner of things. Me, on the hand, I'm ambivalent about birthdays. Birthdays are an opportunity to count one's blessings. But they can also be a litmus test for all that is wrong in your life. So what is the status of my life's ledger in this, my thirty-second year?

My parents died in a car accident when I was five years old. My memories of them have faded over the years, so that now I have only images. I am told that my mother, Delia, was a beautiful, kind and outspoken Murri woman. In old photographs she smiles with her whole face. Whenever I look at that smile, I imagine Delia knew that her life would be defined by how she lived it, rather than the length of time that she was with us. Delia was an activist, and one of the organisers of the protest for black rights during the 1982 Commonwealth Games. Aunty June tells me that my strong commitment to social justice for our mob came from her. Like me, my Dad, Arthur, was an only child. He was born into a white, blue collar family. My paternal grandparents passed away before I was born, so I know little about Arthur's family. I have been told that Arthur was strong in a quiet kind of way. He loved Delia and me, and worked hard to provide for us. Arthur had eyes that were sky blue, like mine.

After the accident I went to live with Aunty June and her younger sister, Aunty Maud. Our house in Doonaville overlooks the mud flats, and it enjoys a sea breeze and gentle sunlight in the mornings. The most important part of the house is the back porch, where we sat most evenings, yarning. It was on that porch that the aunties told me the stories of not only our family, but Murri communities scattered throughout Queensland. All over the state people experienced violence and diaspora.

Aunty June had a tear in her eye when she told me the story of Nanna Ethel. She was taken from her parents when only a young child, to be farmed out as a domestic servant. The people she worked for were cruel, and on occasion, they would beat her. But Nanna Ethel never harboured bitterness. Aunty Maud would always underscore that story with a warning of the dangers of holding on to a grudge. She'd look somberly into my eyes and say, 'Bub, bitterness is a poison that'll corrode ya insides. Never hold onto it.'

I still remember bristling when Aunty June spoke of how the Bjelke-Petersen regime ruled so many of our people with an iron fist. She told me of seeing police officers bash the living daylight out of defenseless men and women who marched for our rights. Aunty Maud shared stories of people who were removed from their families on reserve communities, simply for joining a union, or questioning the judgment of the superintendent.

Even though our family was the only one in Doonaville that was immersed in black politics, we shared a lot in common with our white, blue collar neighbours. We would regularly hold barbeques in our back yard, where half the town would turn up, with each family bringing a plate. Like most families in Doonaville, we had a large tool shed, which was Aunty June's sanctuary. It was also the home of Mr Tibbs; the Thompson submachine gun she found in the *Trading Post*. For the past twenty years, Aunty June has been restoring Mr Tibbs to his former glory.

Growing up in Doonaville was an amazing experience, but I concede that it's not for everyone. According to Wikipedia, the population of Doonaville is a mere 456 people, and that's much more than I can remember as a child. Admittedly, the population fluctuated during the 'tourist

season' when the caravan park swelled with a couple of city slickers, the odd fugitive on the run from the law, and a few more who were on the run from life.

Ever since I can remember, Aunty June has been the manager of the Doonaville Caravan Park. She has the face of an echidna; little beady eyes that are mostly hidden by unruly hair. Aunty June is so tiny she barely reaches my shoulders, which really is saying something because I'm usually the shortest person in the room. But Aunty June has this incredible strength, and when she loses her temper, she's a powder keg that's been lit. Each summer there would be a new story about Aunty June pulling some group of cheeky fishermen into line, which would become embellished before joining our town's folk lore about all things June Clarkson.

When Aunty June wasn't sorting out strife at the Caravan Park, or casting a fishing line from her tinnie, she'd be at home, watching her favourite detective shows. She'd never admit it, but Aunty June was a fan of *Magnum* and her eyes would be glued to the television screen whenever Tom Selleck wore tiny shorts. She also watched *Simon and Simon*, *Murder, She Wrote* and *Moonlighting*. But she'd often point out that black actors were seldom cast in the leading roles. It was as though those Hollywood big shots were saying that black people couldn't become private detectives. That made her so angry that she would have to go to the Bowls Club for a beer.

Aunty Maud is a little quieter and demure. Unlike either Aunty June or me, she is tall and lanky. For the past thirty years Aunty Maud has worn her hair in a bee hive, and she has the most perfectly shaped eyebrows I have ever seen. Aunty Maud is a self-employed electrician, who probably would have made a fortune had she been prepared to leave Doonaville. But I guess Aunty Maud felt obliged to stay and help to look after me. Mind you, I headed down to Sydney when I was twenty-five years old, so if she really wanted to move on, she would have by now.

Our town boasted two convenience stores, a post office, and a bowls club, and still does. Most adults are members of the latter, because it's the only place where one can enjoy a drink and a counter meal. I know it sounds boring, but for the most part, my childhood in Doonaville was unadulterated bliss. My friends and I would ride our bikes around the quiet streets or spend hours dangling our legs over the jetty, trying to catch fish with a hand line. People who passed

you in the street would always say hello. That kind of hospitality between strangers is rare in big cities, but it's still the norm in Doonaville.

No place is immune to bigotry. But Aunty June's reputation was such that not even the most obtuse bigot would have dared to utter a racist slur in her presence. The cocoon that my aunts reared me in was torn apart when I attended school in the nearby town of Caboolture. I still remember the first time I came face to face with racism. I was seven years old. A boy in my class, Jamie Everett, called me a 'half-caste'. I didn't know what that meant, but from the laughter of the other children, I knew it was something bad.

Over the years, the racism I endured at school grew more venomous. The worst culprits belonged to a posse; one that would be familiar to most members of my generation. No matter how much we age, we will always shudder at the thought of those nasty girls, whose cruelty branded our souls. Each member of the posse was of the same prototype – an ethereal beauty who dated a handsome athlete, had seemingly endless amounts of cash to spend on clothes, and wore hemlines that only just managed to cover her elegant behind. I gave them a name, the 'deadly bitches'; deadly being ironic of course. They mercilessly accused my family of obtaining free cars and a free house from a mythical 'Abo Industry'. At their worst, the deadly bitches would stand with hands on hips, loudly inquiring about my personal hygiene. It took every bit of my strength for me not to cry on those occasions. I never told Aunty June and Aunty Maud about the deadly bitches. Intuitively, I knew that both of them would storm into the Principal's office and demand she take action. But that would have only made the bullying worse. So I gritted my teeth, and spent as much time as I could in the library. As a consequence, my marks were exceptional, and there was only one place that I wanted to go – law school.

While sitting on our back porch, Aunty June and Aunty Maud had told me stories about the early Aboriginal Legal Service in Brisbane. In the 1970s police had an unofficial quota on black arrests. In order to fill it they would swoop on the small number of black pubs in South Brisbane and make random arrests. It wasn't until our mob could get free legal representation from the fledgling Aboriginal Legal Service that the practice came to an end. Those stories inspired me to dream of becoming a lawyer, so I could walk in the footsteps of the brave men and women who

had fought in the trenches of our civil rights movement. Whenever I discussed my plan with Aunty June, she'd whistle in excitement, before saying, 'Bub, you come from a long line a bush lawyers, so I know you'll get there.'

On the day I received my offer from the T.C. Beirne School of Law of the University of Queensland, both of my aunts wept. Just before I left for the bright lights of Brisbane, we held a party in our back yard. The aunties bought a keg of beer and cooked a pig on a spit. Aunty June gave a moving speech, in which she spoke of my parents, and of how they would be proud of everything I had achieved. But the T.C. Beirne School of Law was not the nurturing place I had imagined. My classmates went to schools whose names included words such as 'Grammar' and 'College'. None had heard of my public school. The atmosphere was so conservative there wasn't room for the kind of discussions that had taken place on our back porch. At times, I wanted to quit and run back to the loving arms of my aunties. Somehow, I stuck at it. I think my perseverance had a lot to do with Aunty June's threats to turn up to my dormitory room with Mr Tibbs.

But my grades were so lack luster I couldn't get an interview with a big firm. Or a medium sized firm. Come to think of it, not even the ambulance chasers who work out of dying Ford Cortinas would have a bar of me. So I went back to Doonaville. But most of my childhood friends had moved away and there was little for me to do, other than go fishing and eat counter meals at the Bowls Club. One day the aunties sat me down. Aunty June sighed deeply, and I knew that what she was about to say would not be easy for her.

'Bub, you're gettin' fat and lazy. Ya need ta get outta here, and see the fuckin' world.'

So I did what so many other Murris before me had done, and crossed the border, in the hope of making a better life for myself. Within a few weeks, I had secured a job as a trainee in the New South Wales Government. Initially, I enjoyed my work and I was quickly promoted to the role of 'Senior Policy Officer'. In those early years, we engaged in a dialogue with Koori communities to determine what services they needed, and how those services should be delivered. We did our best to convince our political masters that policies that were informed by grass roots perspectives would ultimately be more successful than those imposed from above.

But Aboriginal affairs is not a sexy area. Most ministers consider the portfolio to be only an apprenticeship to be endured, so they maintain the status quo, and ignore any attempts to effect meaningful reform. After seven years of being in this quagmire, I'm ready for a change.

Job dissatisfaction aside, however, my life is pretty good. I'm a homeowner in one of the funkier parts of Sydney, the inner west. I live in Five Dock, which has some great Italian delis, and when in the mood for Asian cuisine, I am only ten minutes away from some fantastic Chinese restaurants in Burwood. Admittedly, my one-bedroom apartment is small, but hey, it's mine. My mobile phone beeps with a new message.

*Pack an overnight bag. We're blowing this ice-cream stand birthday girl! Mark*

Mark is Mark Tonkin, my best friend. He is thirty-eight, suave and handsome. I met Mark through his ex-girlfriend, Sarah, who I used to work with. After they broke up Mark and I struck a friendship. Our single friends are quickly morphing into couples and then parents, so it's really just us now. Mostly, we hang out at cafes, swapping war stories about our love life.

As I throw some spare clothes into a knapsack, I struggle to remember my last date. I think it was six months ago, with Cliff Holet, a friend of Mark's. Mark thought we would be compatible because we're both runners, so he organised a meeting at a swanky bar in Pitt Street. My black hair was perfectly straightened and flicked underneath. I wore a brand new Leona Edmiston frock; white with gold thread. It was the most expensive piece of clothing I have ever bought. I was wearing strappy heels and I felt fantastic. But Cliff left after one beer.

When I scamper outside of the apartment complex, I see Mark's black Audi R8 parked on the curb. Two hours later, we're in a bar overlooking Nobbys Beach in Newcastle. Sipping a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and staring through the wall-length windows. Red and yellow flags dance in the wind, with a backdrop of white foam and emerald. Surfers ride the waves with an adeptness I could never grasp. We're the only patrons here, and we're enjoying our private space. I love how they hang the wine glasses upside down like chandeliers. Each bottle on the dimly lit shelf reminds me of at least one mishap in my twenties. Makers Mark, Wild Turkey, Johnny Walker - I shudder at the thought of drinking spirits now.

'Thirty-two isn't so bad. Wait until you get to my age,' Mark says gloomily.

It's strange to hear him lament his age. After all, Mark is one of the most handsome men I have ever met. He has dark skin with fine, brown hair that's always worn in a conservative cut.

'Oh please, thirty-eight is hardly old. Besides, you're like a fine wine. You get better with age,' I say.

He laughs softly to himself.

'And you strike me as being happy with your life.'

'Freya, you know I'm not really happy.'

Even though it has been four years, Mark never got over Sarah. Within weeks of their break-up, Sarah had moved in with her new boyfriend.

'Have you spoken to Aunty June today?' he asks.

Mark and Aunty June are yet to meet. But I have regaled him with so many stories about her, he feels like they're old friends.

'She rang this morning.'

'What did the Mayor of Doonaville have to say for herself?'

'Can't remember. I was half asleep.'

'You should fly her down here for a holiday,' he says.

'Aunty June has never left Queensland. She's perfectly happy where she is.'

'How's the iPad going?'

'Apparently, she uses it all the time. It's gotten to the point where Aunty Maud is trying to ration her daily usage.'

Mark chuckles to himself.

'Freya, it was really kind of you to spend your tax refund on your aunty.'

'It pales in comparison to everything she's done for me.'

'Is she still addicted to the crime investigation channel on pay TV?'

'You bet. Aunty June watches shows about cold cases, murderous siblings and the war on drugs. But she flatly refuses to watch *Cops*. Aunty June reckons that *Cops* just stigmatises African Americans.'



Our monopoly over the bar is broken by a middle aged couple. Her hair is wiry blonde and her body slender. Twenty years ago, she would have been very beautiful and she still is a stunner. He watches her animatedly as she speaks. It's nice when you see a couple that appears to be deeply in love.

'So Freya, what's on the cards?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean,' Mark says with a cheeky grin.

'I don't expect my life to change just because I'm one year older.'

Mark playfully shakes his head and looks at me with those almond eyes.

'Freya, when was the last time you went on a date?'

'You know when!' I whine.

'Freya, I'm a man. I remember practical things like car keys, stocking the pantry with Tim-Tams for you, and the number of Peronis in my fridge.'

'You know who it was with, because you set it up,' I murmur.

'Cliff?'

I nod my head in agreement.

'Cliff is a loser who didn't deserve you,' he says flippantly.

Mark raises the empty bottle from the ice bucket and gestures to the waiter. The waiter has begun a conversation with the couple. At first he pretends not to see us, but eventually relents. After the waiter takes our order, Mark turns to me.

'Have you ever considered internet dating?'

'Oh please!', I scoff.

Internet dating is for four kinds of people – the desperate, the eccentric, the socially inept and the utterly naïve.

'Freya, internet dating is mainstream now.'

'But I don't want strangers looking at my photo. And what if someone from work sees my profile?'

'What if they do?'

'I'd be embarrassed.'

Mark laughs so loudly the couple glances in our direction.

‘Freya, dating has changed. In the old days, people were introduced to prospective partners by their families. Or they joined clubs. That doesn’t happen anymore.’

‘I was a member of a social club, briefly.’

He knits his eyebrows.

‘And that wasn’t exactly a success, was it?’

‘Mark, I think you’re being a little harsh. After all, I met some nice people.’

The people I met through the Inner West Sociable Singles were friendly and from all walks of life; pilots, teachers, librarians. Unfortunately, I also met Patrick.

‘Have you stopped taking Patrick’s calls?’

‘I try to, but then I feel guilty.’

‘Patrick isn’t your responsibility,’ he says firmly.

Mark pauses to fill our glasses. We toast our glasses and smile at the gentle chich-ching.

‘In any event, today is about you. Freya Clarkson, you deserve to have a nice man in your life. One who will shag you incessantly and whisper sweet nothings in your ear.’

## **Chapter Four**

When I wake on Monday morning I feel refreshed. I had forgotten how good it feels to have a reprieve from the manic pace of this bustling city. I run up Great North Road, past the federation style houses. The chain of brown gift boxes is occasionally interrupted by a garish monstrosity. It’s an eclectic mix – retirees who bought their patch of dirt forty years ago and their wealthier neighbours who moved here in the past decade.

I jog past the Italian bakeries and delicatessens and turn right at the Five Dock Hotel. The green of Five Dock Park is lush and manicured. Domremy College is deserted but soon the Catholic school girls will be lingering around the gate. From here the city skyscrapers are like wind chimes; dangling crystals that sit in the breeze. I jog past the multi-level mansions and boats that always seem deserted, until I make it to the Iron Cove Bridge. Then I turn around. The

endorphins are flowing and I feel chipper as I walk past my neighbour's front door. When the microwave clock in my kitchen tells me it's already 7:30, I skedaddle into the shower.

The driver mouths 'morning' as I hear the grind of my ticket in the machine. The bus is three quarters full and I take a seat midway. The bus moves at a snail's pace through Parramatta Road, only gaining speed on the occasional stretch of bus lane. Pubs on both sides boast to be home to Sydney's 'original and best ten-dollar steak'. They sit between car yards and underneath signs promising cures for penile dysfunction. As we head towards Leichhardt Parramatta Road boasts a hotchpotch of specialty stores – dog groomers, mirror specialists and drum shops.

I alight from the bus just as it approaches Glebe Point Road. I'm not due at work until later this morning because I'm catching up with my mentor and dear friend, Marion Groose. Her house is at the end of Glebe Point Road, only a few doors down from Jubilee Park. This part of Glebe is so beautiful, with huge leafy trees and historic mansions. Each is unique, whether it's the addition of a dome shaped tower reminiscent of the middle ages, or a roof like a church steeple.

In another life Marion managed her husband's medical practice. After he died, she spent many years working as a nurse in remote communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory, before joining our department. When I first moved to Sydney, Marion was my guardian angel. She taught me the ins and outs of our workplace, and how to stay sane in an environment where change occurs at a glacial pace. She has also been like an Aunty; someone who I confide in about all manner of things. The last time I saw Marion was at her farewell party a few months ago. Soon after she retired Marion went on a vacation throughout south-east Asia and returned only last week. We meet at the bakery café across the road from Marion's house. She's wearing a long black dress and a bright orange scarf is tied loosely around her neck. Marion has a slim, elegant face that's complemented by her chin-length bob.

'Happy birthday,' Marion says, as she gives me this warm embrace.

'I can't believe you remembered.'

Marion hands me a parcel wrapped in white tissue paper.

'It's just a little something I picked up in Hanoi.'

Inside the tissue paper is a small black box. On top of the lid is a turtle made out of mother of pearl.

'It's beautiful,' I tell her.

We spend some time discussing Marion's holiday, and I relish hearing about the spicy food in Thailand and the museums in Vietnam. After the waitress brings us our coffees and cakes, Marion asks me about my birthday.

'Oh, I celebrated by going to Newcastle with my dear friend, Mark Tonkin,' I say.

She cocks her left eyebrow.

'I'm sure I've mentioned Mark to you in the past.'

'Do you think that was a good idea?', she says sternly.

'Marion, what on earth do you mean?'

'Freya, you have a pattern of being attracted to unhealthy people.'

I'm taken aback by her remark. Marion is often candid, so I am not shocked by her directness. But Mark is such a lovely person, I don't know how anyone could possibly think that he's some kind of bad influence on me.

'Freya, I remember you had some pretty wild nights when you first came down here. You were spending a lot of time with people who didn't care about you.'

As much as I hate to admit it, Marion does have a point. Years ago I belonged to a group of sassy sistas, which was led by Sarah. Every Friday night we'd hit the clubs and party until the wee hours of Sunday morning. As each sista found a boyfriend, those friendships proved to be fleeting and soon enough, I was left on my own.

'I've changed a lot since those days,' I say indignantly.

There's this sudden lull in our conversation. I feel hurt and angry. I'm not a child and I certainly don't need to be lectured. But Marion really does care about me. So I break the silence by asking Marion about her new business. She's become a consultant for companies that work in Aboriginal communities.

'I'm making a trip to Central Queensland next week,' she says cheerfully.

'What for?'

'One of my clients is opening up a coal mine near Allanvale and I'm going to write their Indigenous employment strategy.'

Marion's face becomes animated as she tells me about Allanvale. It's a small community of only a few hundred people. They have their fair share of problems, but they also have some strong leaders. She pauses and smiles.

'Enough about work,' Marion says, 'have you met any nice men lately?'

'No, but a wise friend did suggest I try internet dating.'

'And who might that wise friend be? Mark?'

Once again, I'm surprised that Marion is suspicious of Mark. After all, they've never even met.

'Yes, it was Mark. But his logic was sound.'

'Which is?'

'In the past you met your future partner through family, mutual friends or shared hobbies.

These days, it's so much harder to connect with people,' I say.

'Freya, I don't think that internet dating is a good idea.'

'Why not?'

'It could be harmful for someone like you to be in a forum with people who will be judging you by your looks.'

'What do you mean?'

'Freya, one thing I have learnt about you is that you have low self-esteem.'

'No one is perfect, not even you!'

Marion seems oblivious to my irritation. She's smiling into her carrot cake, her voice musical.

'Chemistry is so complicated, Freya, it really is in the hands of the gods. Everyone has their likes and dislikes. Take me, for example, I really like men with dark features. I don't know why, it just is. Some experts believe that these tastes are grounded in childhood. Who knows? The thing is Freya, if someone doesn't feel attracted to you, it's not personal.'

'Of course I know that,' I say tersely.

'Do you? I mean, really, you get so upset when these men don't call you after you've been out on a date.'

Until now, I wasn't serious about experimenting with internet dating. But the idea of proving Marion wrong is suddenly tantalising.

## Chapter Five

'So Girlie, whatcha got ta say for yourself?'

Aunty June is the only person in the world who calls me 'Girlie'. Sometimes, I think it's strange to use the title 'Girlie' for a woman in her early thirties. But given that Aunty June calls Aunty Maud, 'Big Hole', I consider myself lucky.

'Aunty June, how you goin?'

'Oh, gettin' there, Bub. Me and Big 'Ole had a barbeque on the weekend.'

'How did that go?'

'Fuckin' Barney burnt the steaks,' Aunty June moans.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, Barney is Aunty June's favoured subject of derision. His capacity for burning steak has become legendary in Doonaville. But I suspect that even if he became a Michelin chef, Aunty June would still pour scorn on his culinary skills, and just about everything else the poor man does.

'Did Aunty Maud make her deadly potato salad?'

'Oh, don't go there girlfriend,' Aunty June says.

'Why, what happened?'

'Big 'Ole disgraced herself,' she whispers, 'with Barney.'

Barney is stout, bald and has a disturbing tendency to wear knee high socks underneath his thongs. We first met Barney when he camped in the Doonaville Caravan Park. He had just sold a successful cleaning business in Darwin. Barney was a widower and was travelling around the

country, with no apparent purpose other than to fish. He seemed pleasant enough, and in hindsight, I'm pretty sure that Aunty Maud began to flutter her eyes at him from very early on. Unfortunately for Barney, he made the mistake of leaving some empty beer cans outside his tent after a heavy night with some other fishermen. When Aunty June saw the mess the next morning, she tore him to pieces. But Barney wasn't deterred. Not only did he decide to stay in Doonaville, but he bought a house, two doors down from the Aunts.

'Barney and Maud were canoodling,' Aunty June says.

I really don't want to encourage her, so I change the topic.

'How's the iPad going?'

'Great Bub, Facebook is the new Murri grapevine.'

'Really?'

'Freya, you gotta get with the times.'

'What do you mean?'

'Bub, you joshin' me or what?'

'No, I seriously don't know what you mean,' I say angrily. I instantly feel bad for getting so worked up with Aunty June. Perhaps, I'm feeling bruised from my earlier conversation with Marion?

'Freya, you still listenin' to that gammon eighties music?'

'It's not gammon.'

'Bub, I was havin' a joke with ya,' Aunty June says.

'Yeah, well, I just got home from work. I'm tired.'

'Oh yeah.'

Auntie June pauses and I know exactly what, or should we say, whom, she is thinking about.

'Now wait a minute, you just made me remember somethin', yeah, that deadly brother down there. What's his name?'

'Jason. Jason Rogers,' I say flatly.

Jason is my boss; a Wiradjuri man who was a star football player twenty years ago. Jason was a handsome man during his heyday, and in spite of a few extra kilos, he still attracts a great deal

of female attention. He's also happily married to Shelley, a stunning Noongar woman who left Western Australia for him.

'Yeah, how's my nephew?', Aunty June asks.

We have no family connection to Jason, but Aunty June claims him nonetheless. Jason has an occasional gig as a sports commentator on the National Indigenous Television Station.

Whenever he makes an appearance, Aunty June stops whatever she's doing to watch.

'Jason is good Aunty. Actually, he was asking about you.'

'Really?'

'Yeah Aunty June, he said to say hi.'

'Naah, you're gammon,' she replies with a quiver in her voice.

I am indeed lying, but what the hell?

'So what else is new, Aunty? What's the gossip at the Bowls Club?'

It's hard to imagine our town without the Bowls Club. When I was a little girl, I would ride my bike past the manicured green and wave to the men and women in their spotless whites. As I grew older, I'd go to the club's new year's eve parties. Back then I thought that being classy meant dancing to Lionel Ritchie, while holding a glass of passion pop.

'That place is fucked,' Aunty June says.

'What's happened now, Aunt?'

'Stupppiiiiidddd! That's what they are.'

'Who's stupid?'

'That fuckin' committee.'

The committee can be pedantic at times, especially in relation to the dress code, but the truth is that they really aren't that bad. I suspect that Aunty June's real gripe is with their President - Barney.

'I had a big debate with the Secretary last night about the appropriateness of wearin' sandals into the bar. I spent a fuckin' fortune on my latest pair. And that fuckin' Barney, I could wring



his neck. I swear, next AGM, I'm runnin' for President. Nahh, fuck it! I'll just declare a revolution. Might even hire meself some mercenaries.'

I imagine Aunty June sitting in her kitchen, seething and plotting.

'Bub, where do ya think I'd find some mercenaries?'

'I don't know Aunt.'

'Google!', she says excitedly.

'Seen any good crime shows lately?' I ask, trying to deflect her attention from the looming insurgency.

'Yeah, *Cold Cases* is real deadly. I reckon I woulda' made a good detective, ya know, if I'd had the right opportunities.'

The roar from my stomach demands food.

'Aunty June, I'm still standing outside my apartment building.'

'Why's that Bub?'

'Because I'm talking to you.'

'Oh.'

'Aunty, I'm really hungry. I have to make dinner.'

'Alright Bub, you go then.'

'Night Aunt.'

'Fuckin' love ya.'

Dinner is pre-made beef ravioli and pasta sauce. I stir in some baby spinach leaves and parmesan cheese and it tastes delicious. I surf the television channels – a documentary on the Second World War, a reality television program about a family as wealthy as it's dysfunctional, and a football show hosted by boof-heads who laugh at their own homophobic jokes. Hmm, I pour myself a glass of chardonnay, swallow a chocolate truffle (for luck), turn the computer on and head for Google.

It appears that there is an online dating service for everyone – cougars, adulterers, swingers, vegetarians, Christians and a myriad of other faiths. There are also websites that offer

complimentary products for internet dating, such as makeovers, tips on how to get from email to the phone, and Hollywood dentistry that will make your profile irresistible. I decide to click on meetamillionaire.net.au because I find it hard to believe that any millionaire would have a need for internet dating. In hot pink text, I'm told that I have entered a place in which the wealthy and attractive meet. The homepage displays the profiles of members who are currently online. Their faces are either blurred or hidden behind sunglasses, but you can see the contours of toned bodies underneath tight clothing. In the case of one member, the photograph is of her ample cleavage and nothing else. Her username is 'kittylikestoplay'. This site is obviously not for me.

I turn to ABCtoLove.com and click on 'success stories'. Deborah and Keith are both my age, and even behind dark sunglasses, each radiates that lover's glow. Deborah had been a member of the site for two years, but Keith had only just joined when they met. After one dinner, each realised they had met 'the one'. That was a year ago and the blissful couple had recently become engaged. Most of the other 'success stories' had posted photographs of themselves too, some were even dressed in wedding finery. All of them looked, well, normal. A few appeared to have had easy lives, but others were survivors. Some had endured messy divorces but hadn't become cynical. Not all had a happy ending. One woman found the man of her dreams, only to lose him to brain cancer a few years later.

I open my purse and stare at the credit card sitting in its plastic sheet. Perhaps I'm imagining it, but I think my hands are shaking. Perhaps, none of it is real. What if Deborah and Keith are actors in a slick marketing campaign? I notice some statistics in the right hand margin of the home page – 'One million people are finding love on our site'. One million! I don't want one million people seeing my profile. I'm about to call it a night when I notice Single&sophisticated.com. I like the couple on the home page. She's wearing a little black dress that's elegant. He's looking dapper in a tuxedo. The street is made of cobble stones and I imagine they're in a medieval town in Europe. Single&sophisticated.com doesn't boast about

the size of its membership and it doesn't promise happiness at the touch of a button. But it does use words like 'confidential' and 'professional'.

## Chapter Six

'I've just had the most fantastic week of my entire career,' Mark gushes.

'And do you know why?', he asks.

I shrug my shoulders.

'Frank is away for two weeks.'

Frank is Mark's crazy boss. He works from seven o'clock in the morning until midnight most days.

'Frank had accrued so much annual leave that the HR manager practically forced him to take a holiday.'

'That's extraordinary,' I say, suddenly craving a break myself.

'The guy doesn't have a life outside of work. Apparently, even his wife has to make appointments with him,' Mark says with disgust.

'You're joking.'

'Freya, it's not unheard of in the corporate world.'

I can feel Mark's gaze. He always knows when there's something bugging me.

'Freya, what's wrong?'

'Oh I'd just like to take a vacation myself. Aunty June often expresses frustration that I don't spend enough time back home. I think she's right. I feel so different after I've been in Doonaville. It's as though my batteries are re-charged.'

My last holiday was in March. I took three weeks off and spent all of it in Doonaville. We celebrated Aunty June's birthday and went fishing practically every day. We also had numerous counter meals at the Bowls Club, where I became reacquainted with my old friend – the Doonaville Burger. Consisting of two beef patties, cheese, bacon, gherkins, tomato relish, and a bun the size of a small loaf of bread, it is not for the faint hearted.

'Why don't you take a holiday?'

'I don't have much leave in the bank.'

'So you'll just have to bide your time at work. Is it getting any better?', he asks.

'No, it's always the same. I love my work mates, but we don't seem to be achieving anything.

Any proposals that we put forward either get knocked back, or die from inertia.'

Mark examines the numbers on the screen above the tiny Japanese takeaway that's squashed into the wall of the food court.

'That's our order. I'll get it.'

'Here you go Miss,' Mark says, handing me my tray of teriyaki steak and rice.

'Thank you. It smells delicious.'

We're interrupted by a shrill scream behind us. The blonde haired toddler looks like he'd prefer to be anywhere but this food court. His face is a collage of tears and snot. He's waving a plastic fork in the air and his fatigued parents are losing the battle to calm him.

'I think I just lost my hearing,' Mark says, cringing.

I feel this tug at my heart when I look at the little volcano. Although I'm loathe to admit it, I've always wanted to have a life partner and a child. It's still possible, I guess.

'Freya, are you alright?'

I smile into wise, almond eyes and Mark rests his hand on mine. I wonder what our lives would have been like, if we'd become a couple. Early on, there were times when I wanted to take things further. I suspect that Mark has considered it himself on occasion.

'We'd better go. Our movie is starting in five minutes,' he says.

The cinema smells of popcorn and melted butter. Teenagers are lined up in front of a counter that holds tanks of psychedelic slurpies. The attendant takes our tickets and directs us to cinema four. There are only ten others inside and we're not surprised. The movie is, after all, an art house with subtitles. We sit down in the back row, next to the left hand aisle.

'Have you given any thought to internet dating?'

'I've done more than that. I've joined a site.'

'Freya, that's great news,' he says, 'which one?'

'Single&sophisticated.com,' I say proudly.

'That's the one I've joined. What's your site name?'

'Freya32.'

'Really original,' he teases.

'Okay smarty pants, what's your name?'

'My secret.'

'That's not fair.'

'Ssshhh, Freya, the movie's starting.'

The film turns out to be violent – it has pedophilia, rape and torture. Explosions occur every ten minutes, but we're not sure why. When the movie ends a couple in the front row claps. Mark turns to me and frowns.

'What the hell was that about?', he asks.

'Don't ask me. I'm not smart enough to work it out.'

By the time that Mark drives me home, the traffic in Parramatta Road has lulled. Twenty minutes later, I'm standing in the bathroom, brushing my teeth. My mobile phone beeps; alerting me to a new text message.

*Freya, we agreed to have lunch tomorrow. Please telephone to confirm. Patrick*

I met Patrick when we were both members of the Inner West Sociable Singles. Every second Saturday night our club would gather in a function room above an Italian restaurant in Norton Street. I was happily nibbling on bruschetta and sipping Chianti when I was introduced to Patrick. He never wore t-shirts; only pastel cotton shirts and always with a singlet underneath. Patrick smiled shyly as he took a piece of bruschetta from the nearby platter. Before long he began to come out of his shell and share his dry humour. Soon afterwards he asked me to coffee. We met at an old but fashionable café in Glebe Point Road. The crowd was an eclectic group of students, artists and the upwardly mobile. Chai and coffee wafted above bobbing heads.

Patrick was terribly unhappy. His former employer had recently gone bust, so in one foul swoop Patrick went from being an architect to a taxi driver. The money was okay, but the passengers were a nightmare, especially the drunks he picked up during the late shifts. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I too loathed my job. So we talked about our interests. I told him about how much I enjoyed jogging around Canada Bay, and he spoke of his fondness for Latin dancing. After two hours, I announced that it was time for me to leave. Patrick looked so disappointed and turned on those puppy dog eyes.

As the weeks passed, Patrick's calls became more frequent. He wanted me to do the Bronte to Bondi walk with him, there were new exhibitions in the City he was anxious to see, and he was always trying to talk me into going to his salsa class. Eventually, I capitulated and went to one class. Everyone there was so serious, and each man I danced with offered his own advice on how I could improve my technique. Half way through the class I announced that it was time for me to have dinner in the restaurant next door. I had assumed that my indifference to Latin dancing would deter Patrick, but apparently not.

Each time we met I felt a little less enthusiasm for our friendship. It wasn't as though Patrick was a bad person; he was just someone I didn't bond with. When you belong to a large group like a social club individual differences become camouflaged. But those differences are brought into stark relief when it's just the two of you. Whereas I admired people who were unconventional, Patrick shunned them. And he couldn't understand runners, who, in his opinion, were asking to be injured.

## **Chapter Seven**

*Hi Freya32, nice to meet you. I guess that I should tell you something about myself. I'm a property developer by trade. I enjoy sailing on the Harbour in my spare time, when I'm not renovating my terrace in Balmain. I've done a great deal of soul-searching these past few years and I believe I'm ready for a meaningful relationship. But before we take things any further, I need to ask you one thing – are you, Freya32, a self-actualised person? Jeremyjitters*

What does this guy mean by 'take anything further'? This is the first message I've received from him, for crying out loud. Jeremyjitters looks harmless, and with his messy brown hair and gingerbread man eyes he reminds me of Bill Oddie from *The Goodies*. But I didn't feel moved by him. Am I being unrealistic if I expect to be moved by a photograph? As if the universe is answering my question, my next match is a boxer whose biceps appear to have been chiseled by the gods. His photograph has been taken in a ring, and I can see some blurred faces in the audience. Damien41 is still wearing his gloves and his cocky smile suggests victory. He lives in Parramatta and is separated from his wife. When did they break up? Two years ago? Last week? Dang, here's a message that's a week old. How did I miss that?

*Hi Freya32, I was impressed by your profile, so I thought that I'd tell you something about myself. Until recently, I was a partner in an accountancy firm. Life has thrown me some curve balls in the past few years. But I'm getting back on my feet. I hope to meet you soon, so I can hear more about your quirky fixation with eighties music. In the meantime, here are some photographs of myself.*

*Warmest Regards,*

*Rogerramjett*

*PS. I also like Pina Coladas and getting caught in the rain.*

I am chuffed that he made a reference to the *Pina Colada Song*; the first official hit of the most outstanding decade in human history. Rogerramjett is an attractive man, who obviously works out in the gym. But in all of his photographs, he's wearing a skimpy pair of red speedos. I like to have some mystery.

*'Hi Freaya#8, I've read your [rofile and you sem lovely. Would you like to chat?'* Craig42

Poor spelling is a turn-off for me. But I skim over Craig42's profile anyway. He's attractive, with dark features and a solid physique. In his photograph, Craig42 is dressed in lycra and sitting on one of those super expensive bikes that weighs not much more than a feather. He's an engineer

and his hobbies are baking and going to the movies. The person who inspires him the most is his older sister, Samantha.

*Hi Craig42, thanks for your email. Sure, I'd love to chat. Freya32*

To my surprise, I get a response immediately.

*Hi Freya#7. Woud you like to chat 6now?*

Five minutes later, I'm anxiously dialing numbers on my phone. This is the first time since joining the site that I've made it this far. I suddenly recall that there was an article in the advice section of Single&sophisticated.com on what not to say during that first telephone conversation. Why didn't I read it?

'Hello,' mumbles this voice that's not exactly unfriendly, but hardly enthusiastic.

'Is that Craig42?'

'Yes it is.' The voice sounds annoyed, as if he's really saying, 'Who else do you think this could be?'

'It's Freya32 from Single&sophisticated.com. Actually, it's just Freya.'

'Yeah, that goes for me too,' he says.

'Sorry?'

'I mean it's just Craig, no need to add the forty-two on the end.'

'Okay Craig,' I say brightly, 'how are you?'

'Good.'

'Great.'

The silence lasts for only a minute, but it feels like hours.

"I'm glad it's Friday. When I was younger, I used to party on my Friday nights. But now, I like nothing more than coming home and relaxing on the couch.'

'Freya,' he says, 'I'm in the same boat. I've just finished watching the news, over a glass of wine.'

*Thank God he's started to help me out!*



'What channel did you watch the news on?'

'ABC,' he replies.

'Me too. Hey, did you see the report on the murder in Balmain?'

The lead story on the news this evening was about the discovery of a man's body at the Balmain Ferry Terminal. The report was more or less an appeal for members of the public who have information to contact the police.

'Yeah, I saw that.'

'It felt like it was too close to home,' I say.

'Did you see the report on that sick pedo?', he asks.

A notorious pedophile was released today after serving a twenty-year jail sentence. Victims' groups were up in arms.

'Men who hurt kids are disgusting. To hell with giving them a fair trial. They can drown or be burnt to death, for all that I care,' Craig says viciously.

He pauses and clears his throat.

'Freya, I was a bit too direct, wasn't I?'

I am hardly an expert at this internet dating thing, but isn't it weird to discuss a topic as grotesque as pedophilia during your first phone conversation? Something isn't right about this Craig. It strikes me that he's suddenly gone quiet too.

'The weather is fantastic isn't it? The last few days have been so sunny,' I say, while cringing.

'Hmm.'

'I read that you like to bake.'

Craig seems pleased that I remembered something from his profile and goes on to tell me that he bakes shortbread and chocolate cake. It turns out he's a fan of Nigella Lawson and has a stack of her cookbooks.

'So, Craig, tell me more about yourself,' I say, relieved that he has some normal traits.

'Well, I'm a civil engineer,' he says. I try to think of a question to ask about engineering, but I'm stumped.

'Oh right. I don't do anything that exciting,' I say, 'I work in policy.'

'Policy could mean any number of things.'

'That's true. I'm a policy officer in the New South Wales Government. My area is Aboriginal affairs.'

I breathe deeply, waiting for the usual racist comment that's invariably passed off as a benign joke. I'm always amazed by the privilege that enables one to make a racist comment, and then deny being a racist only seconds later.

'Wow, Aboriginal affairs - it sounds like you have a job that allows you to make a difference in the world.'

I can feel my heart beating faster.

'Actually, I work in Aboriginal affairs because I am Aboriginal. I'm a Murri.'

'Oh really! I mentor a Murri kid. His name is Michael, and he goes to this boarding school in the North Shore,' Craig says.

'Being a mentor must be rewarding. How did you get into that?'

'My work has a reconciliation action plan, and each one of us has to make a contribution under it. Some afternoons I help Michael with his homework. Other times we just kick a football around,' he says.

'Wow, I'd love be a mentor.'

'It's nice I can talk to you about it.'

'Oh I'd love to hear more,' I gush, then feel myself blushing.

'So, Freya, would you like to catch up for coffee tomorrow afternoon?'

'Sure.'

'I have some odd jobs to do in the morning. So I'll call you at three o'clock, and we'll make plans from there.'

## **Chapter Eight**

'Bub, what's wrong with ya?'

'What do you mean, Aunty June?'

'Every time I ring ya on a Saturday morning, ya always complain about me wakin' ya up. But today, ya sound chirpy. Bub, you got a man in that apartment?'

'No.'

'Why do ya sound different?'

'It's a beautiful day.'

Although I'm still in bed, I can see sunlight streaming through the partially closed blinds.

'Oh right, well, gettin' back to the reason I rang ya.'

I grin to myself. Aunty June never has a reason to ring, she just does.

'Freya, I got some news. It's about Facebook.'

'Okay,' I say cautiously.

'Freya, guess how many friends I got?'

'Ahh, twenty.'

'No way hosay! Try five hundred.'

Five hundred! I'm not sure if I even know five hundred people.

'Aunty June, how did you manage that?'

'Like I was tellin' ya, it's the new Murri grapevine, but I've extended it. I'm goin' global.'

'Really?'

'Yeah Bub, I got friends from all over the place, even managed to pick up a few from the big smoke.'

Aunty June has taken to calling Sydney the 'big smoke'.

'I got a new friend who's a reporter on NITV news. She's Chris Taylor, one a them Taylors from Bundaberg. You know her?'

'No, but I'm familiar with her work. She did a great report on Wannika a few weeks ago.'

The mining company, Wannika attracted some publicity recently because of its refusal to pay financial compensation to native title holders in Western Australia, whose lives are going to be substantially disrupted by mining. Through his flushed jowls, the CEO, Oliver McGrady blustered about the devastating impacts of 'sit-down' money on black communities.

'Yeah, I remember that. Anyway, Bub, Facebook has opened up a whole new world to me. Like, I met this lovely fullah who's from the Cobras. We were talkin' about fishin' and pig shootin'. Blaine, that was his name.'

Blaine sounds like a strange name for a member of a violent gang, but I keep that to myself.

'Turns out Blaine was up this way only six months ago. I think that was about the same time when there were those carloads of coppers near the turn off to Doonaville Road.'

'You know Aunty June, I'm yet to join it, but my friends who are on Facebook, say it's incredible for keeping in touch with their loved ones.'

'Oh, that's true Bub.'

'But Aunty June, my friends are pretty cautious about the strangers they meet on Facebook. You never really know who these people are,' I say gently.

'Freya, I was puttin' out fights between men twice my size when you were still in nappies,' she says crossly.

'I know you were Aunt. That caravan park would turn into bedlam without you. I just said that because I care about you. You're my aunty and my mum, remember.'

She falls silent, and I know that she's wiping tears from her eyes.

'Bub, a mate a mine just pulled up outside. We're goin' out to check the crab pots.'

'Alright Aunty, I'd better let you go.'

'Fuckin' love ya.'

Ordinarily, I would go back to sleep after one of Aunty June's early morning calls, but not today. I squeeze into my running kit and head out the door. I jog along Canada Bay; it's so beautiful in early October. The deciduous trees have coated the pavements with amber leaves and the water is still. Even at seven-thirty the path is overflowing with runners, cyclists, families, and dogs who appear to be so grateful to be included in the action. As soon as I get home, I shower and make plans for the rest of the day. I promised to meet Jason and Shelley in town at ten o'clock, for a rally against the Northern Territory Intervention. Being in Sydney, we're not personally affected by the Intervention's drastic measures, like the Commonwealth's seizure of Aboriginal lands, or the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act. But Aboriginal people

everywhere have an obligation to express solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Northern Territory.

The bus ride through Parramatta Road is relatively free of traffic this morning, and I have the back seat all to myself. When I arrive at Town Hall, the front entrance is lined with a small group of people holding placards with messages such as 'Stop the Racist Intervention'. Jason and Shelley are standing at the bottom of the steps. Shelley is statuesque, and her blunt, pixie cut accentuates her beautiful face. With his salt and pepper hair and chiseled jaw, Jason is making middle age look glamorous. Each gives me a warm embrace. The speakers are passionate and compelling, but I am really moved by a young woman from Alice Springs. When she tells us that her elders are comparing compulsory income management to the days when their lives were controlled by the old Native Affairs Department, I silently wonder what direction Australia is headed in.

After the rally I have coffee with Jason and Shelley, before making excuses to scamper to my bus stop. As I board the 461 bus, I'm busily making plans for my date with Craig; deciding what I'll wear, how I'll style my hair. By a quarter to two, I'm dressed in blue jeans and a long, white blouse. My hair is tousled and my face is luminous as a result of a mask. Craig said he'd ring at three, so I try to keep myself pre-occupied by tuning into the National Indigenous Television Station. John Pilger's documentary, *Utopia*, is on. Although I've seen it before, I am stunned by the images of families living in death traps riddled with asbestos. After the film ends, I check the time – it's half-past three. My hand shakes as I dial his number. But Craig doesn't answer. His phone is switched off.

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There are times when my workplace reminds me of a post apocalypse movie. Most desks are empty of life, and a stale eeriness hangs in the air. But the inhabitants are not yet dead. Some are downstairs enjoying a cigarette break. Others sit in cloistered conference rooms. Physically, this place is pretty much the same as it was when I arrived here. The work stations were

replaced a couple of years ago and there are a few new pot plants around the place. But nothing ever really changes. For the most part, we're still trying to open the door to a fortress whose gatekeeper is oblivious to our knocks. I know that if I stay here for much longer, I'll get lost in the abyss. I've seen it happen to long-timers. They've had all of the optimism and fight sucked out of them.

Politicians talk of millions of dollars going to help impoverished black communities, but most of it ends up in bureaucracies like this one, or in the pockets of private companies. Take the latest conference pamphlet in my in-tray; four pages of gloss and motifs from the Central Desert, advertising a two-day conference on how to address Indigenous homelessness. The organiser wasn't some not for profit association, but a company called 'Networkers', whose web page is adorned with men and women who look like they've just stepped out of a day spa in the eastern suburbs. And the price of a ticket to their shindig – four thousand dollars! Presently, I hear a boyish giggle behind the partition in front of my computer.

'Baby, you're being naughty. But I like it when you're naughty,' Jimbo purrs into his phone, before descending into more laughter. Jimbo is a lanky man child who is working in the department while he completes his university studies. He seems to spend a great deal of time standing outside the ground floor, with a cigarette protruding from his rakish lips. Jimbo's work station is the messiest I have ever seen; it's laden with office memorandums, newspapers, betting guides and old coffee cups.

'Sherene, you know I can't make it tonight,' he says anxiously.

I shouldn't be eavesdropping on Jimbo's conversation with the mysterious Sherene. In an open plan office, however, I don't have any choice but to hear him.

'Baby, don't say that,' he pleads.

'Sweetie, I really did want to have dinner with you and your Nanna. But I've got a lecture on Friday night.'

'Brenda told you that?'

'What, you're going to believe Brenda over me?'

'Alright, I did buy those tickets to the Rabbitoh's Game, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna use them.'

'Fuck! She hung up on me,' Jimbo exclaims.

I consider offering some kind words. Then again, if Jimbo chose a football match over me, I'd probably hang up on him too.

'Freya,' he says, looking so defeated I'm tempted to sweep him into my arms and protect him from this cruel world.

'I'm going downstairs for a smoke. Want me to get you anything at the coffee shop?', he asks.

'No I'm fine, but thanks for asking.'

'Freya, there's a man outside who wants to see you,' Christine says behind me.

Christine is a trainee who works at the reception desk. She's a stunning girl; olive skin with legs like ice block sticks. Christine reminds me of a bumble bee that's always buzzing from one person's desk to the next. But I feel sick when she tells me that my visitor's name is Patrick.

'Did he have an appointment to see you?' she asks.

'No, he didn't.'

'Then he has no right to see you.'

There's a ferocity in her voice. At times like this, it's hard to believe that she's only eighteen.

'I'll tell him you're in a meeting,' Christine says and disappears through the hallway.

When Christine returns a few minutes later, the colour has drained from her face.

'Sis he won't leave. I think I should call security.'

'No, don't do that. I'll talk to him first.'

Patrick is standing outside the lift. He's dressed in a navy suit and his hair is slicked back. His brown eyes are full of indignation.

'Patrick, what are you doing here?'

'You've been ignoring my calls and my text messages. What was I supposed to do?', he says angrily.

'Patrick, you can't just barge into my workplace.'

'Freya, I wanted to share my good news with you. I've found a new job. This is the first job I've ever had that I really enjoy.'

'Congratulations.'

I really am happy for Patrick. Being a taxi driver made him miserable. Hopefully, this will be a fresh start for him.

'You could have congratulated me sooner if you hadn't cancelled our lunch,' he whines.

Ordinarily, this tactic would make me feel guilty. Not anymore.

'Patrick, friends spend time with each other because they want to.'

'What are you saying?'

'Patrick, you and I are very different people. I don't want a friendship with you. I'm sorry.'

'Freya...'

'Enough! Please, just go.'

As I walk back to my work station, I can feel the heat on my face. I stop when I hear Jason's voice.

'Freya, are you alright?'

'I'm okay,' I mumble.

'Freya, can you come inside for a chat?'

Jason occupies the only conventional office on our floor. It's cluttered; there are two generous shelves filled with books written by anthropologists and historians, chronicling the inauspicious history of Australian Indigenous policy. On the mahogany desk are photographs of Shelley and their three boys. The spare patches of wall contain mementoes of Jason's football career; his old Rabbitohs jersey and team portraits.

'Who was that man?', he asks.

'His name is Patrick. He and I used to be members of a social club. When I left the club he wanted to pursue a friendship, but it didn't work out.'

'Did he threaten you?'

'No, of course not.'



'If he turns up here again, will you tell me?'

'Sure.'

Jason looks solemnly into my eyes, as though he's trying to gauge my honesty.

'What are you doing for lunch?', he asks.

'I'm meeting a friend at the Queen Victoria Building.'

'What time?'

I check my watch.

'Eek, I have to be there in five minutes,' I say.

'Okay, but we need to talk and somewhere away from here.'

He smiles and then whispers.

I know you're getting itchy feet, but we'd hate to lose you.'

'I'll check my diary and get back to you,' I say, feeling chuffed.

I saunter through George Street, conscious that I'm running late. I'm relieved when I see Mark standing beside the statue of Queen Victoria. He's wearing a black suit and a white business shirt. My clothes crease as soon as I walk out the door each morning, but Mark's always look freshly pressed. The lunch crowd is building in the street level of the Queen Victoria Building, so we opt for a cafe upstairs. I tell Mark about my confrontation with Patrick. He's alarmed at first, but he's also impressed by my assertiveness.

'So what have you been up to?', I ask.

'Oh, I had a date last night.'

'You didn't tell me about that,' I say excitedly, 'what's her name?'

'Alison. Twenty-eight, an accountant too. She looked pretty in her photographs,' he says glumly.

'What happened?'

'We met in this bar in Pitt Street. I tried to stick to small talk – where we worked, siblings, pet budgies, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, we got to the topic of where we live. I told Alison about my

apartment and how cool it is to live in Neutral Bay, expecting her to reciprocate. But she said nothing. So I said to Alison, are you going to tell me where you live? Alison just said straight out that she thought it was dangerous to tell me anything more about herself,' he says.

'Mark, that's horrible.'

'I'll tell you something Freya. I knew within five minutes of meeting her that Alison and I were never going to see each other again.'

'How did ...'

'Oh, guys just know, believe me,' he says.

'So what did you do?'

'I bade her farewell and drove home. You know what I did as soon as I walked through the door?'

'What?'

'I logged into Single&sophisticated.com and closed the match. That's what you have to do in this game – be ruthless. Besides, whatever problems Alison has with trusting men, they are none of my doing.'

'At least you're still out there,' I say, 'after all, Mark, it's not like you've given up on meeting someone special.'

He pauses to study my face.

'No, I haven't given up. But Freya, if you tell me that you have, you are going to be in so much trouble.'

'I just don't think that internet dating is for me. It feels, I don't know, fake.'

'So tell me of a better way to meet people?'

I struggle to think of a suggestion and I end up shrugging my shoulders.

'Freya, let me tell you something. Cruising bars in a drunken stupor is just sad, so don't even go there. And forget about chance meetings. Chance meetings exist only in Hollywood.'

'Hmm.'

'You can't give up on internet dating,' he bristles, 'Freya, how many weeks did you last on Single&sophisticated.com?'

'Three,' I mumble into my latte.

'You seemed so excited when you joined. What on earth happened?'

I look into his sympathetic eyes. Yes, he may tell me things that I don't want to hear and often. But I know that Mark will always have my best interest at heart.

'I met someone. We spoke on the phone and he sounded keen. So we agreed to meet for coffee the following day. He said he had some errands to do in the morning, but he'd call me at three. I waited until 3.30 but I didn't hear from him. When I tried to call him, his phone was switched off.'

'Baby, you're going to come across some guys who are cowards. I know, because I've been a coward myself, many times.'

I suddenly remember the time when Mark stood a woman up because he loathed how she used to complain about her old boyfriends. But instead of being honest, Mark told her that he had to stay home to complete his tax return – the most pathetic excuse in history!

'Freya, there is a man out there who will be perfect for you. But you're not going to find him unless you make an effort.'

## **Chapter Nine**

The chardonnay is crisp. I am wearing my most comfortable pajamas and Survivor is belting out *Eye of the Tiger*. Corn chips and French onion dip are within my reach.

*Hi Freya32,*

*I was looking at your profile and I was impressed. You could be my type.*

*Mr-Charisma*

Who on earth calls himself Mr-Charisma?

*Hi Freya32,*

*I just had another look at your profile. You seem familiar. Have we met before?*

*Mr-Charisma a.k.a. Simon.*

Mr-Charisma, also known as Simon, has brown skin and his face is gaunt. He looks harmless, I guess, but I don't recognise him.

*Now I know who you are – Freya Clarkson. We met at your last work Christmas party. But I don't expect you to remember me. Let's just say you were a little under the weather.*

*Simon Palmerston*

I look closely at his photograph. Oh dear! Simon belongs to the self-described 'A Team'; a group of male Koori lawyers who think that they can reverse two centuries of colonisation by soaring the heights of corporate law. They dress in expensive suits and seem to spend a lot of time with the white male doyens of the profession. Over the years, I've met so many lawyers who loathed the cut throat culture of their firms, and complained bitterly of working long hours until their bodies broke down, together with their marriages. Why on earth should blackfellas embrace something so unhealthy?

Not that I articulated those concerns particularly well at the Christmas party. I have flashbacks of me drunkenly nattering on about the conflict between morality and money. At one stage, Jimbo joined in and accused the A-Team of being a mob of coconuts. Coconut is such an inflammatory term, it's no small wonder that some of Simon's friends started to take their shirts off. Why do blackfellas always seem to take their shirts off for a fight? Anyway, Jason intervened and forced Jimbo and I into a cab. Presently, I feel my cheeks burning and my heart racing. There's only one thing to do in this situation – turn off the computer, take the unopened packet of Tim Tams out of the fridge, and soak up some late night television.

When I wake in the morning, the sugar high from the Tim Tams has well and truly worn off. So I do the only thing that I know – run. When I glimpse Canada Bay I immediately feel grateful for being alive. The tide is in and the water calm. I drink in the beautiful mist hovering above the

surrounding parklands. Later, when I walk into the lift, I have a spring in my step. As the doors are closing, Jimbo scurries inside, carrying a large polystyrene cup. He reeks cigarette smoke, and his eyes are bloodshot. He embraces me with this warm smile.

'Freya, mate, how are you?'

'I'm good thanks Jimbo. How are you?'

'Couldn't be better.'

'How's the study going?'

'Well, I reckon I've got a better than fifty per cent chance of passing this semester. I mean, I've actually been going to classes this time around,' he says in earnest.

When the lift stops on our floor, I head for my work station. I log into my computer and cringe at the first new message.

*Dear Freya,*

*You sound like an interesting person and someone who I could learn a great deal from. I would very much like to get to know you. Are you free this afternoon? Can we meet for coffee?*

*I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Warm regards,*

*Simon Palmerston.*

I click on the website link at the bottom of his message. The home page for Hill and Young Solicitors features photographs of men and women in suits, surrounded by austere grey and light blue tones. Simon Palmerston is employed as a solicitor in the firm's resources section. I guess the partners decided that a black lawyer sitting in on native title negotiations would be a good look. Too bad Simon acts for corporate interests who don't give a toss about our culture. My thoughts are interrupted by a call from my landline.

'Freya.'

His voice is just as I remembered it; creaky like a mouse.

'Simon.'

'Why haven't you been responding to my messages? Did I do something to piss you off?', he squeaks.

'Sorry Simon, I've been busy,' I say feeling guilty.

'Are you free for coffee this afternoon?'

As I wait inside the dusty café in George Street, I try to perk myself up. After all, this is going to be my first date from Single&sophisticated.com. The romantic part of my nature had imagined a swanky restaurant, a white table cloth and witty conversation. Instead of the fantasy, I'm sweating into an uncomfortable wooden chair. There's no music in this cafe, but it hums with sounds of the city – car horns, sirens, buses pulling in and out of the curb. I check my watch. Simon is ten minutes late. When he finally swaggers through the door, five minutes later, I'm angry.

'Freya, I'm so glad you could make it,' he says.

'It was five-thirty that we agreed to meet, wasn't it?' I ask, looking at my watch.

'Jesus Freya, I spend my days billing clients for as many minutes as possible. Outside of work I try not to obsess about the time.'

Ordinarily, I'm the shortest person in the room, but Simon is a good few inches beneath me. He removes his long, black coat and rests it on his chair.

'Have you ordered?'

'No.'

'I hope you're not thinking of getting anything alcoholic,' he says.

'Excuse me!'

'Excuse you, Freya. The last time we met you made a drunken mess of yourself.'

Simon breaks into this laughter that reminds me of a cricket; an annoying one I'd like to squish with my shoe.

'I'm going to order my coffee,' he says, gesturing to the counter. 'What would you like?'

'Skinny latte, please.'

When Simon returns, he removes a white notebook and a black fountain pen from his coat pocket. He almost seems to forget about me as he writes some notes.

'Nice notebook.'

'Thanks, I prefer this to a computer,' he says.

'What are you writing?'

'I'm working on a poem,' he says without looking up.

'Actually, being a lawyer is only my day job. I'm really a poet.'

'What's the poem about?'

'A meeting with some native title holders.'

Simon keeps writing as I silently fume. I made time for this schmuck and he can't even give me his full attention.

'It must have been an important meeting, for you to be writing a poem about it,' I say.

Minutes pass and he's still scrawling in that damn notebook.

'So what happened at the meeting?'

'That's information that's commercial in confidence. You do know what that is, don't you?', he says condescendingly.

'If you're too busy to speak with me, then I'll go home.'

He pauses to face me.

'Perhaps, I should write a poem about you,' he says.

'You don't even know me.'

'I'm very perceptive, Freya. I can tell a lot about you, just by looking.'

'Like what?'

He puts his notebook back into his coat pocket and studies me.

'Well, from that boring, shapeless dress you've got on, I'd say that contemporary fashion isn't something that interests you.'

'Excuse me!'

He laughs and tells me he's taking the 'mickey' out of me.

'Freya, I've also noticed that you don't spend a lot of money on skin care. I know that because I've invested big time in moisturisers. This brother is determined to still be looking hot when he's eighty.'

'I really don't want to know whatever else you've noticed about me,' I say through gritted teeth.

'Freya, lighten up. It's not as though you're a little girl.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothin' Sis.'

Simon goes on to tell me his life story. He grew up in the northern beaches. His Dad was in the army and his mum was a teacher. Simon is the oldest of three boys.

'So Freya, the reason I got in touch is that I have a business proposition for you.'

'So this isn't a date?'

'My firm is sponsoring a gala dinner for Power Through Responsibility,' he says, ignoring my question.

'You've heard of them, haven't you?'

I reflect on what I've read about Power Through Responsibility. The organisation is supposedly helping young people in remote communities to find jobs in the cities. They also offer scholarships to boarding schools. It was set up by the wealthy miner, Oliver McGrady, who also went to university with Mark. Mark reckons that McGrady was a spoilt rich kid who had no interest in anything other than football and drinking.

'Oliver McGrady has said some strange things about our mob in the past, hasn't he?'

'Like what?', Simon asks.

'Well, he did say that 'sit-down money' was the worst thing to happen to our people.'

Simon cups his hands together and sighs. I get the impression that all of the members of the A-Team do this whenever they meet blackfellas who don't breathe the same rarified air of their wealthy firms.



'I saw that NITV news report on Wannika's mine in Western Australia. I'm sure that's what McGrady said.'

'Freya, you don't understand. Oliver grew up in Katherine on his family's station. He saw first-hand how terrible it was when Aboriginal people lost their jobs in the pastoral industry as a result of the Equal Wages decision.'

'So it was preferable for our people to be paid low wages, sometimes even rations? He sighs impatiently.

'Freya, I'm trying to ask you to be my date to the gala dinner.'

'Oh.'

'Usually, I go out with women in their twenties. But I'd like to take someone my own age for a change,' he says.

'Lucky me.'

Simon refuses to respond to the sarcasm in my voice. Or perhaps, he's so full of himself that he's oblivious to the bait.

'It will be a great night. You can buy a nice dress and do something with your hair. Damn girl, your hair needs some work.'

'What's wrong with my hair?' I ask, suddenly conscious that I have had the same hairstyle, a bob-cut, for the last ten years.

'Nothin' Sis. But, if you want to look really good, then you should go for a shorter cut.'

'Simon, thanks for the coffee. I really have to go.'

I gather my handbag from the floor and prepare to leave. But I cringe when I look outside. It's raining buckets and I don't have an umbrella. Simon removes his coat from the chair and offers it to me. I'm touched by the gesture, and surprised by his sudden chivalry.

'Sis, put this on. You can give it back to me at the gala dinner.'

## **Chapter Ten**

Today is probably the only day that I have ever spent alone in this office. Everyone else is at a team building retreat, which I couldn't attend because of a meeting with a colleague in the

Director-General's office. That meeting, however, was cancelled at the last minute. It's not only lonely here, but creepy. I'm aware of every sound, from the pipes in the kitchen to the occasional groan from the lift. Mind you, it has been a productive day. I did manage to complete a memorandum on some proposed amendments to cultural heritage legislation that I had been struggling to finish. That was over an hour ago, and I've been searching different employment websites ever since. Years ago, it seemed that there were always opportunities for experienced policy officers in the NGO sector. Those roles have disappeared. So far I have found only one job I could apply for, and that would be based in Canberra. The idea of abandoning the warmth of Sydney for frosty Canberra is hardly tempting.

When I leave the office at four o'clock I almost expect tumbleweed to enter the lift with me. A few hours later I prepare some snacks – French onion dip, water crackers, vintage cheddar. I'm relieved when Mark walks through the door. After a day of isolation, it's so good to have some company. I'm also excited that I finally have my own tale of dating woe to share. But instead of laughing about that incorrigible jerk, Simon, Mark is quiet.

'How long did your date last for? Ten minutes?'

'Maybe.'

'So you didn't give Simon a chance.'

'Actually, it wasn't a date. It was a business proposition. Simon wanted me to go to some gala for Power Through Responsibility, that NGO that's being funded by your old mate, Oliver McGrady.'

'A gala would be nice,' Mark says.

'Seriously?'

'Freya, this isn't about Power Through Responsibility. It's about you. You didn't even try to get to know Simon before you wrote him off.'

All I can do is pout, as I pretend to be engrossed in the newsbreak.

'Freya, baby, are you going to talk to me? Or should I go home?'

'No, please don't go.'

'Perhaps, I did treat Simon a little harshly.'

Mark laughs and shakes his head.

‘Just a little?’

‘Okay, I still have a lot to learn about dating,’ I say bashfully.

‘Baby, you should try to think of dating as playtime. These men are not marriage prospects. You don’t even know them.’

The rest of our evening proceeds as normal. Mark watches every detail of the Friday night football game in silence. During the ads he tells me funny anecdotes about his boss, Frank. As he leaves we promise to catch up for breakfast on Sunday. When I wake in the morning, I go for my usual run around Canada Bay, before stopping for coffee in Great North Road. Given that it’s October the temperature is still cool, but it’s warm in the sun.

The remainder of Saturday is blissful. I have coffee with Marion at her house in Glebe. We sit underneath the mango tree in her backyard, sipping a Vietnamese brew with condensed milk and eating blueberry muffins. She has a new logo for her consultancy business, Goose Consulting. It’s a silhouette of a turtle surrounded by red dots. In between talking about her plans for her business and her latest trip to Allanvale, Marion manages to ask me about my love life. I tell her about my date with Simon and she listens without making any gratuitous comments about my low self-esteem. Marion has worked with Simon before, and she thinks that he is an arrogant twit.

On Sunday morning, I go for a run to Abbotsford. When I first moved to the inner west, I used to imagine that Abbotsford was the place at the end of the rainbow. Mansions sit within manicured lawns and face the sea. With only one road into Abbotsford, it feels like an island that’s hidden from the other villages that make up the inner west. Afterwards, I meet Mark at our usual café in the main street. We stay true to our ritual of ordering coffee, breakfast and then reading the Sunday papers. Mark chooses his newspaper and I’m left with *The Daily*. I gasp at the headline on the front page.

‘What is it?’ Mark asks.

‘It’s Simon ... he’s dead.’

## Chapter Eleven

Hushed whispers and gasps ripple through the workstations. Jimbo pauses beside my desk, large coffee cup in tow.

'Sis, did you hear the news?'

'Yes, it's a tragedy.'

'Only thirty-four years old,' Jimbo says while shaking his head in disbelief.

'Gonna be a big funeral.'

Neither one of us can mention the other tragic aspect of Simon's untimely passing. In light of the revelation that the police are treating Simon's death as suspicious, it would appear that he didn't go peacefully in his sleep. Christine saunters past us, clutching some tissues. Then I remember that she has a family connection to the Palmerstons. As she passes Jason's office he calls her inside. Moments later, they head for Christine's desk in the reception area. She doesn't return for the rest of the day. Everyone appears to be trying to barricade themselves within their workstations. Even Jimbo is refraining from his usual gaffes that provide comic relief for the rest of us. I become engrossed in a briefing paper I am writing about proposed changes to land rights legislation. In the back of my mind, however, I am still in shock. Simon and I would never have hit it off, but that's beside the point. Jimbo was right – thirty-four is far too young to die.

When I go home I desist from my usual practice of turning on the television. Instead, I cook a zucchini quiche, and make a garden salad. Then I pour a glass of chardonnay and offer a silent toast to Simon. He did make some insensitive comments about my age, my fashion sense and my hairstyle. But Simon also gave me his coat to protect me from the rain; an act of gallantry that suggested there was more to his character. After dinner I open my wardrobe and stare at the coat. It smells of expensive cologne and menthol cigarettes. I see a bulge in the left pocket and open it to reveal the moleskin notebook. If I read his poetry, I'll be intruding on Simon's personal thoughts. When I put the notebook back I feel the fountain pen in the bottom of the

pocket. It's black and has a gold nib. The name, Agnes, has been engraved on it. I hear my phone ringing from the kitchen bench.

'Freya?'

'This is Freya.'

'It's Craig.'

'You remember me, don't you?', he asks anxiously.

'Yes, I remember you.'

'Great.'

We both pause. The silence is damned annoying, but I can't be bothered trying to be nice to a man who stood me up.

'Freya, I just wanted to apologise.'

Craig sounds nervous and I suddenly feel a stab of sympathy.

'Freya, are you still there?'

'Yes, sorry, I've had a big day.'

'Freya, I need to explain to you what happened when we were supposed to meet. My sister, Samantha, she came down with the flu that morning. She was so ill, and could barely get out of bed. I was worried so I took her to see a doctor.'

Craig's devotion to his sister is admirable, but he should have rung to cancel our date. I would be within my right to hang up on him right now. But then I remember what Mark said about how I didn't give Simon a chance. Perhaps, I should learn from that experience?

'I hope that your sister is feeling better.'

'She is,' Craig says brightly.

'Freya, would you like to have dinner with me?'

I'm feeling so flat. I'm not up to going out on a date.

'That would be nice, but I'm really busy at the moment.'

'Why don't we wait until Friday night?'

'Okay.'

On Friday morning I struggle to find something to wear, and eventually settle on a black pants suit and ballet shoes. As I walk through Hyde Park, men and women in suits are walking past the beautiful old fountain. A large crowd is assembled outside St Marys Cathedral. The gothic architecture is breathtaking, and when I step inside, I instantly feel the solemnity of this place and the weight of the reason we are here. I know Simon's parents as soon as I see them in the front pew. She's holding a handkerchief to her face. Through the veneer of his dark suit, I glimpse the man's strong shoulders.

I sit with Jason and Jimbo in a pew mid-way. The organ begins to fill the enormous church and we rise to sing a hymn. Christine walks briskly towards the front. I'm surprised to see Marion with her. They're accompanied by a very attractive young woman, with long, blonde hair. She's wearing dark sunglasses and is walking very close to Marion, as though she needs her support. For the next hour we gain insights into who Simon was. His youngest sibling, Aaron, speaks of a protective big brother, who walked him to school, and taught him how to play cricket. Jimbo and I exchange sheepish looks as the members of the A-Team describe a loyal friend. When Simon's mother rises to speak, she looks so frail I almost expect her to collapse. Her tiny body is hidden in a long black dress and a matching shawl. She tells us of a loving son who often dropped by for supper after working a 12-hour day. When she speaks of Simon's devotion to Aboriginal communities that were struggling to achieve recognition of their native title, I am taken aback. His former employers, Hill and Young Solicitors, occupy two floors of a building in the heart of the CBD. The rent alone would cost millions each year. You don't make that kind of wealth by doing good deeds for those on the margins.

When I walk through my front door I want to creep into bed. I have no energy left for my date with Craig and I'm tempted to cancel. He's already stood me up once, so it's not like I owe the guy anything. But then I imagine Aunty June, holding Mr Tibbs. She's saying, 'What's wrong with ya? Go on, get ready.' So that's what I do. I choose some skinny jeans and a silk blouse. I put tear drop ear rings on, and wear some high heels. When I look into the bathroom mirror I like what I see. But I feel anxious.

Before I joined Single&sophisticated.com I had never given much thought to dating. Aunty June and Aunty Maud had always taught me that our lives were planned, long before our births. So if I was meant to meet someone, then I would, and only when the time was right. I'd never had a reason to question their logic before I joined Single&sophisticated.com. Now I worry about not meeting anyone. So many people are finding their partners on the internet, or at least, that's what we're led to believe. But what about those of us who don't find anyone, in spite of our best efforts? Is there something wrong with us?

I grab my purse and slam the front door behind me. Parramatta Road is bumper to bumper, but there are no cabs. After twenty minutes of waiting, I finally see one flashing its light. The driver ignores the choir of horns behind him as he pulls up on the curb. When I arrive at the trendy pub in Newtown where we agreed to meet I search everywhere for Craig, but to no avail. A new text message – he's at a bar three blocks away. We agree to walk in the same direction so that we can meet in between.

King Street bustles on a Saturday night. It's a massive puddle of cafes, restaurants, book shops, furniture stores and boutiques. Each one of us is a ripple in the puddle; almost nudging shoulders and overhearing pieces of each other's conversations. I smell a concoction of cigarette ash, bitumen and fresh rain. Dang! I spent thirty minutes blow drying my hair straight. That's when I see Craig. He's not a carbon copy of his photograph and he's shorter than what I'd expected. But I recognise that smile. It's warm and disarming.

'Freya, it's so nice to meet you.'

Craig kisses me gently on the cheek.

'Same here.'

'Let's get a drink,' he says.

Like most of the bars in the inner west, the Marly Bar has been transformed in recent years. The gaming machines in the front bar hark back to Newtown's grunge past, but around the corner is Cellar, a trendy bar replete with wall length mirrors and leather couches. Craig goes to order our drinks while I sit down in a booth. When he returns we engage in small talk about

work and what we enjoy about living in Sydney. I feel awkward every time I move and hear the groan of the leather couch. Craig drinks his wine in gulps.

'Should we get something to eat?', he asks.

As he's the foodie, I allow Craig to decide. He opts for Thai Pothong. There would easily be a hundred people inside and we can barely hear ourselves over the din of the chatter. Coriander and coconut milk waft above cackling stir fries. The metallic legs of our chairs screech into the wooden floor boards. When our meals arrive, I concentrate on the lemon grass chicken stir fry and special fried rice. I'm conscious of my table manners and every couple of minutes I wipe my mouth with my serviette. It's not until we finish our first glass of wine that we begin to soften. By the end of the second glass, we've moved beyond superficialities. I tell Craig about losing my parents, and being raised by Aunty June and Aunty Maud. When Craig says that he would like to take a holiday in Doonaville, I feel myself blushing. As soon as we've paid our bill, he suggests that we get a night cap. I smile to myself as it strikes me that Craig wants to prolong this date too. We settle on the top floor of a bar that's loud and young. Our conversation flows easily as we swap war stories from the trenches of youth. Many years ago, Craig was a bar tender, who made a killing for his boss with his very own cocktail. It was something ridiculously sweet and garnished with chocolate tiny teddies.

When I finally step into my apartment I'm surprised by how late it is. It's been years since I stayed out until after midnight. I hear the beep of my mobile phone and quickly seize it from my purse, hoping it's a text from Craig.

*Freya, you have hurt me very badly. You are a poor excuse for a human being. Patrick*

I turn my phone off and resolve never to engage with Patrick again. I relish the feel of clean sheets, and dream of Thai food, cocktails with tiny teddies, and the man with the warm smile.

## **Chapter Twelve**

'Freya, do you have a moment?', Jason asks.



'Sure.'

Jason lowers himself onto some space on my desk.

'How are the reconciliation principles coming along?'

Recently, Jason gave me the task of developing 'reconciliation principles' for government contractors. In theory it's a great project. If I wasn't so jaded, I would imagine that we could oblige these businesses to do real things, like broker partnerships with community organisations and invest in the social capital of struggling neighbourhoods. Bollocks! Even if the reconciliation principles get the approval of our political masters, they won't have any teeth.

'Is that your phone?', Jason asks, gesturing towards the ring tone coming from my purse.

'Sorry, can we talk later?'

'Go ahead, answer it' Jason says.

'Hello.'

'Freya, it's Craig.'

'Uh hi.'

In the corner of my eye, I see Jason walking into Jimbo's cubicle.

'You sound distracted. Is this a bad time for me to call?'

'No, of course not.'

Secretly, I'm thrilled that he's called. It's been six days since our date and I hadn't heard a peep.

'I know it's late notice, but I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner?'

'Sure, I'd love to. Where would you like to go? Newtown? Glebe?'

'How about my place?'

I'm conscious of the butterflies in my chest as the taxi pulls into the leafy, quiet street in Rozelle. Rows of single level terraces line each side. I notice some jacaranda trees outside Craig's house. They're in full bloom. The taxi driver is English and middle aged. Dark circles under his eyes reveal that he's endured a long day.

'That'll be sixteen-twenty please.'

I proffer a twenty dollar note and tell him to keep the change. A sudden gust of wind bites through my blue silk dress, into my skin. I inhale the scent of the nearby rose bush as I knock on the door.

Soft music spills out when Craig opens the door. He's wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt. I kiss him on the cheek and hand him the bottle of Merlot I've just bought. From outside the terrace looked small, but inside is kind of like the Tardis. The narrow hallway flows into two bedrooms, ending in the living room whose French doors open into a generous kitchen. I follow Craig until he stops at the kitchen bench.

'Would you like a glass of wine?', he asks.

'That would be great.'

'Can you get two glasses out of the cabinet?'

Jazz is playing from a stereo on top of the cabinet. Next to the stereo is a photograph of a very cute toddler. He has Craig's chocolate eyes and oval shaped face. I open the cabinet door to several rows of elegant wine glasses with long stems. I take two to the bench, where Craig is carrying out an operation on filo pastry and marinara mix. He pours the wine and then drags out a stool. I plant myself on the stool and we engage in mundane chatter about our week. He mentions that he spent yesterday afternoon with the student he's mentoring, Michael.

'He's an amazing kid, and he's come so far. When he first got to Sydney, he was shy and behind in his grades. But Michael is so determined and now, he's evening topping a couple of his classes,' Craig says.

'Where does he come from?', I ask.

'Allanvale, in Central Queensland.'

'Oh, I have a friend who's doing some work there for the new coal mine,' I say, referring to Marion.

'Would you like another drink?', he asks.

I allow Craig to refill my glass. This is a surprisingly blissful experience – spending a rainy Friday night in the home of a nice man who is cooking me a wholesome meal. He pauses and smiles, as though we’re sharing the same thought. I notice the Nigella Lawson cookbooks on the kitchen shelves cushioned between some appliances.

‘Ahh, Nigella. Are you cooking one of her recipes tonight?’

‘No, it’s an improvisation. You will be the first person I’ve ever cooked this dish for.’

Hot air races out of the oven and Craig places a tray inside. He peers into the oven for just a little too long, before looking up.

‘I’m so glad you could make it,’ he says shyly. His bashfulness is endearing and I can’t help but smile.

The pastry makes a racket whenever I plunge my fork into it. It’s a little bland and I eat only half of the food on my plate, but insist it’s the best meal I’ve had in a long time. When we’re finished, Craig goes to the fridge and returns with a small white box. Inside are some chocolate truffles. It’s obvious that he’s trying to make tonight a success, and I’m touched. Craig drinks his wine in gulps, whereas I’m sipping mine conservatively. The last thing I want to do is make a drunken fool of myself. When we finish the bottle of Merlot Craig opens another and pours me a glass. Then he disappears into the kitchen, and returns with a bottle of scotch and a glass filled with ice. Craig closes his eyes and loses himself in the lyrics of a song. It’s a sad ode to a broken relationship. I’m surprised at first, but then I notice that his voice is strong and polished.

When Craig finally opens his eyes he winces, as though he’s revealed too much of himself.

‘Sorry,’ he says.

‘Please, don’t apologise. I think it’s great you’re so passionate about music.’

‘Hmm, passion is all I have.’

Craig stares sadly into his scotch glass. There’s a story, perhaps a few, churning beneath the surface. I’m not going to press him into sharing. I try to change the subject, by turning to the painting on the wall behind him.

'Oh, that's one of my brother's paintings. Dale lives in the Blue Mountains, with his wife and daughter.'

Craig shakes his head before taking a gulp of scotch.

'I'm the black sheep of the family. Samantha, on the other hand, is the golden child.'

'In what way?'

'Well, she's a neurosurgeon, and she's beautiful. I'm just a regular Joe.'

'Engineering is hardly unimportant,' I say brightly.

'But I haven't just bought a three million-dollar house in Balmain. Freya, you should see Samantha's new pad. It's literally a stone's throw away from the water.'

'Money isn't everything. Besides, you have a nice home.'

He smiles into my eyes.

'You're right Freya. And you know there are some things about my job that I really enjoy. But I'm not changing the world. Not like you.'

'To be honest, I've spent most of my so-called career writing memorandums and a whole swag of other documents that never lead to anything real.'

As I hear the cynicism in my voice, I know I'm losing something. The mystery I felt as I walked inside has vanished and a light has been cast on my own disappointments. Craig pours another glass of scotch. Our conversation turns to politics and Craig reveals that he is a conservative voter.

'Do you have any idea what the Howard Government did to my mob?'

Craig looks surprised, and perhaps a little embarrassed.

'Freya, I'd love it if you could tell me.'

I suddenly remember Mark's advice about dating being playtime. Dang! I need to lighten up.

'Well, in hindsight, the small 'l' Liberals of the 1980s had a mixed track record. They could have done more for my Mob, who were suffering the brunt of the Bjelke-Petersen regime. But they did support the policy of self-determination, at least. The Howard Government was a different beast. Those guys thought that assimilation was the answer. So they got rid of our national

representative body, slashed millions from the Indigenous affairs budget, and then, as a parting gesture, gave us the Northern Territory Intervention.'

Craig seems to be thinking intently, mulling over what to say next.

'If it's any consolation I don't like Labor either. If it was up to me, I'd vote for Duran Duran.'

'Duran Duran! Freya, you really are obsessed with eighties music,' he chuckles.

'I guess you could say it's one of my quirks.'

'Wait a minute,' he says.

Craig reaches into his pocket and reveals his iPhone. Before I can tell what he's doing, he's already taken my photograph.

'Ekk!'

Why did Craig do that? What on earth is he planning to do with my photo?

'Freya, you're so beautiful.'

Wow, I can't remember the last time anyone called me beautiful.

'You're not too bad yourself,' I say giddily.

He takes another gulp of scotch.

'Freya, you can ask me whatever you want tonight. I mean it. If you have any questions, just ask.'

'About anything?'

'Anything at all.'

I suspect that Craig is trying to be sincere, well, in an increasingly inebriated kind of way.

'Okay, what do you usually do on a Saturday morning?'

'That's easy Freya. I take a bike ride in Centennial Park. But...'

'But what?'

'I was thinking you could come with me tomorrow. You could go for a run while I ride a few loops.'

'That sounds awesome,' I say excitedly.

'It's a date,' he says.

'Craig, are there any questions you'd like to ask me?'

He laughs and pours another scotch. His grin is boyish and self-deprecating.

'So Freya.'

He stares into his scotch and giggles.

'Craig, are you drunk?'

'Of course not.'

Craig shakes his head several times and straightens his shoulders.

'But Freya, I do have a question for you.'

'Alright, what is it?'

'How do I get your pants off?', he says in this smooth voice that makes me giggle.

'Oh my God!'

'What?'

'Freya Clarkson, you're blushing.'

I feel the heat on my cheeks but I don't care. If I'm in free fall then I want to enjoy every moment of it. I'll suffer the consequences when I land. Not that landing is on my mind. I'm too busy being dragged from my seat. Craig swirls me around the room in an impromptu waltz. I rest my head on his shoulder and imagine us, in the years to come, sitting at this table. We'll be surrounded by close friends. Craig will throw me a surreptitious wink, as I tell the story of the night he cooked for me, and then taught me how to dance.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

Jimbo stretches his scrawny arm along the partition between our work stations.

'Freya, you look different.'

I shrug my shoulders at him.

'I don't know what it is, but keep it up. You're lookin' fine Sis.'

'Thanks.'

I hear the mobile phone in my purse.

'Hey stranger.'

It's good to hear Mark's voice, but I feel bad. We've quickly gone from speaking daily to only the occasional call.

'Mark, I'm so glad you rang.'

'How's what's his name?'

'You know his name.'

'Remind me Freya.'

'His name is Craig, and he's wonderful,' I gush.

'Are you free tonight? Let's go see a movie?'

'I can't tonight. I'm meeting his sister,' I say excitedly.

'Wow, that's quick.'

It's been three weeks, but I feel like Craig and I have been together for six months. Each morning we wake up next to each other. By the time I'm sitting behind my computer and sipping my first coffee, there's a new message from Craig in my inbox. Usually, it's an attachment of some cute video he's found on You Tube, like a kitten dancing.

'I guess that's what happens when you meet the one,' I say.

I really do think that Craig could be my soul-mate. I've even closed my Single&sophisticated.com account, because, well, what's the point?

'Freya, it sounds serious.'

I know that Mark is happy for me but I can hear the concern in his voice.

'Don't worry about me. Everything is going to be fine. Craig is the most wonderful man.'

'Okay, just take care, and call me when you have time to talk,' Mark says.

'That's a promise,' I say, before turning off my computer for the day.

As soon as I open my front door, I rush to find something to wear. The first dress is too loose and makes me look six months pregnant. For a moment, I wonder what kind of father Craig would be. I imagine he'd be happy if I got pregnant. Why wouldn't he be? My phone alerts me to a new text.

*Hey Babe,*

*I'm ten minutes away from your place.*

*Craig xoxo*

I put the dress aside and settle on a blouse and jeans. But I struggle to get ready in time. When I open the door of Craig's car, my hair is still damp. He gives me a nod of recognition, but no kiss, which is strange. Every first Wednesday in the month, Craig, his sister, Samantha and her girlfriend, Deb, go to dinner at this pizza restaurant in Burwood. Tonight is the first time I have been invited, and I know it's important to Craig. I guess that's why he's really quiet. He weaves in and out of the lanes at a hurtling pace that makes me nauseous.

'How was work today?'

'An absolute fucking disaster,' he moans.

'What happened?'

I already know the answer and her name is Lisa; Craig's boss. Craig and Lisa seem to have at least one argument a day, sometimes several. It will be sparked by a meeting she didn't tell him about, an idea she stole from him, an acerbic comment.

'Lisa!', he groans.

Craig proceeds to inform me about everything that is wrong with Lisa; from the annoying tone of her voice to her general incompetence. His cheeks redden and the speed of the car increases.

'And that stupid cow living in my house – she's got to go.'

The stupid cow is Craig's flat mate, Kirsty. He rents the entire house and sub-leases a room to Kirsty; a point of distinction which apparently means that everything outside of her door is Craig's exclusive domain. She's hardly ever home, which in my opinion, makes Kirsty the perfect flat mate.

'What's Kirsty done now darling?'

'When I left for work this morning, her storage boxes were in the spare room,' he fumes.

'Oh.'



'It starts in the spare room, but you know, I've noticed other things. Like, she's always using my saucepans and the other night, she even used my colander.'

'Hmm.'

'Freya, I can't believe I forgot to tell you about what happened before you came over last night.'

'What happened?'

'Okay, Freya, get ready for this. When I walked through the hallway, I noticed that Kirsty had put the fan on top of the coffee table.'

Craig and I spent last Friday night in front of the DVD player, with our feet resting on top of said coffee table. Surely a fan is no worse than feet? I stop thinking about the Kirsty conundrum when we pull into the car park. Most of the cluttered tables in the restaurant are full and we stand behind a large group of people who are speaking to a frazzled waitress.

'Craig, we're here,' yells this woman who's standing at the back of the restaurant.

I recognise Samantha from the studio photograph that Craig showed me. Thick, black hair sits elegantly on her petite shoulders and she is wearing a flattering red dress. Craig rushes to greet her, then turns around to me.

'This is Freya.'

Samantha responds with an impassive nod and my heart sinks. She slaps Craig on the back.

'You took your time getting here.'

Craig's eyes become downcast and his cheeks turn red. I wonder how this lot would fare at one of Aunty June and Aunty Maud's dinners. They operate on 'Murri time', which can be anywhere from a day to a month late. Once, Barney turned up for dinner a week early, but no one said a word.

Craig sits on my left and Samantha on my right. Deb is on the other side of the table. She appears to be in her early fifties and her fine brown hair is cropped. Deb offers a warm smile, which makes me feel more at ease.

'Freya, have you decided what to order?', Craig asks.

'I'll have the vegetarian. What are you going to have?'

'Mexicana – it's superb,' he says.

Twenty minutes later our pizzas arrive. The hot trays are placed on top of metal platforms, each oozing fumes of garlic. I'm still struggling to engage with Samantha, but then I remember Craig telling me about her new boat.

'I hear you've been spending a lot of time on your new boat,' I say to Samantha. She ignores me and turns to Craig.

'I'm thinking of taking the boat out on Sunday. Feel like joining us?'

'Darling, the catering company will be dropping by on Sunday to pick up the chairs and tables,' Deb says.

'Are you having a party?', Craig asks.

Samantha turns to Craig and pats him on the shoulder.

'Sweetie, we're having a fundraiser for Power Through Responsibility on Saturday night.'

'Oh, did I mention that I'm mentoring a student who has one of their scholarships?', he says excitedly.

'You've already told me about that Michael kid a hundred times. Look, I'm just doing this as a favour for Oliver. I have no interest in his charity,' Samantha says dismissively.

'Oliver is not the person you think he is,' Craig says.

'What do you mean?'

'Michael has told me some pretty bad things about what his company is doing back home,' Craig says.

'You shouldn't believe rumours,' Samantha says sternly.

Craig turns to the bottle of merlot in front of us. He pours a large glass for himself and a much smaller one for me.

Samantha turns to me.

'So, I hear you work in policy.'

'Yes, I've been working for the New South Wales Government for seven years now,' I say, relieved that she's finally engaging with me.

'The public service sounds so boring.'

I cringe into my plate, uncertain of how I should respond. Samantha leans closer and whispers.

'Most public servants wouldn't be able to survive in the real world.'

I so badly want to say something. But I'm speechless.

'Deb, darling, can you remind me that I have a massage booked for tomorrow morning?', she says.

Deb smiles obediently.

'And darling, the three of us can go out in the boat on Saturday morning.'

Craig is quiet when we leave the restaurant, and he seems pre-occupied. I don't know what's bugging Craig, but I try to cheer him up by suggesting that I cook dinner for him. From what little I know about his family they seem to enjoy cooking. Craig is indifferent at first, but then he suggests I make dinner for him at his place on Saturday. He says that his kitchen is better than mine, and I have to agree. Mine is so pokey and the fire alarm is set off easily. I'm excited at the prospect of cooking for him and lashing out on an expensive bottle of wine. But my heart sinks when Craig suggests that I stay at my place tonight. As I watch his black Corolla disappear into Parramatta Road, it strikes me that this is the first time in three weeks that we've spent the night apart.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

'These dumplings are sensational,' Jason says.

Every day at noon this yum cha restaurant bustles with trolleys pushed by stern faced waitresses. Each one of whom take no nonsense from the hundreds of patrons who drift in and out of the tiny lifts.

'So, what do you think about my proposal?', Jason asks.

'I'm really touched that you would go out on a limb for me.'

Jason pulled a few strings in the Attorney-General's office, so that I can leave our unit for six months, to work on a recently announced inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal women in the criminal justice system. As the principal research officer, I will be working closely with the Chairwoman, Mary McIvor QC. It's what I have been longing for – an opportunity to make a real difference.

'Just say that you'll take the secondment,' Jason says.

'Okay, yes, of course I will.'

I should be deliriously happy, but I'm miserable.

'I know you're worried about your lack of expertise in criminal law, but you are an excellent researcher,' Jason says.

'Thank you.'

'Freya, you're blushing.'

I'm suddenly conscious that my cheeks are heating up.

'Freya, you're not good at taking compliments,' Jason gently chides.

'Sorry.'

'There's no need to apologise. But there is one thing that you can do.'

'What's that?'

'Have some faith in your ability,' he says.

'Really?'

'Oh come on, whenever I've given you anything to work on, you've immediately set about reading every paper that's been published in the field. And your writing is so clear and succinct.'

'I am going to grasp this opportunity with both hands. You won't regret this Jason, I promise.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Now, they want you to start in a fortnight,' he says.

'Okay, I'll need to finalise my work on the reconciliation principles before I go.'

'Jimbo will be taking over that project. Can you make a time with him for a hand-over?'

When we return to the office, I call Marion to share my news. She's ecstatic and insists that I stop in Glebe on my way home. I do a hand-over with Jimbo, who seems to be more excited

about going to the pub this afternoon. I clear my filing cabinet of anything I no longer need, and make a 'To do list'. I'm just about to log out of my computer when I receive an invitation to attend a meeting with Mary McIvor QC. I feel myself smiling as I click on 'Accept'. When I alight from the bus in Glebe Point Road, Marion is there to greet me. We sit on her back porch, sipping champagne and eating double brie. After giving me a precis of Mary McIvor's illustrious career as a criminal lawyer, Marion pauses.

'Freya, you look terrible.'

'I didn't sleep well last night.'

'What's happened?'

I pause while weighing up the pros and cons of telling Marion about Craig. She will almost certainly give me a reprimand about the risks of internet dating, and make some gratuitous comment about my low self-esteem. But she cares about me and her advice will probably turn out to be valuable.

'I met someone. His name is Craig.'

'How did you and Craig meet?'

'On an internet dating site.'

My voice has turned shaky and I suddenly feel unworldly.

'It's called Single&sophisticated.com – it's actually a very professional service. It's confidential and most of the people who join the site are sincere,' I babble on.

'Tell me more about Craig.'

'Craig is in his early forties, he's an engineer, enjoys cycling,' I say.

Marion sits back in her chair, silently prompting me to go on.

'He's handsome and funny. He lives in a detached terrace house in Rozelle.'

'How are things going with Craig?'

'The relationship began wonderfully. He's such an incredible man. Craig even likes to cook for me. He's a big fan of Nigella Lawson and her cookbooks are his pride and joy.'

'A man who loves to cook! Wow!'

'But I'm going to surprise him tomorrow night,' I say.

'Really?'

'Yep, I'm going to cook him duck and I'm even going to try this recipe I found for mango salsa.

Marion, I really enjoy doing nice things for Craig. Like, we were in a book store and we saw Nigella Lawson's new Italian cookbook. Craig said he was too broke to buy it. So you know what I did?'

Marion shrugs her shoulders.

'I went back to the book store the following day and I bought it for him. I was going to save it as one of his Christmas presents, but I can't wait that long. So I'm giving it to him after dinner tomorrow tonight.'

Marion gives me a sympathetic smile.

'There's something troubling you about Craig.'

'I'm worried that things are beginning to unravel.'

'That sounds dramatic,' she gently chides.

'I know what it sounds like. But Marion, he's been ignoring me ever since we had dinner with his sister on Wednesday night. Her name is Samantha. I tried to overcome my shyness and engage, but Samantha just took one look at me and decided not to like me.'

'Freya, are you sure that she didn't like you?'

'She said that my job sounded boring, and the public service was only for people who couldn't make it in the real world.'

'Ouch! And you said that Craig's been ignoring you?'

'Initially, we spent every night together and even when we were at work, we were swapping texts and emails. But ever since we had dinner with his sister, he's been incommunicado.'

'Oh dear. Freya, don't take this the wrong way, but you are a very sweet girl. The problem is that people take advantage of your kindness.'

There's no condescension in her voice, just concern. And affection. I feel lucky to have someone like Marion in my corner. She goes on to tell me that the first six to twelve months of a

relationship are fueled by powerful chemicals. So even though I think I know Craig, I really don't. When I step out into Glebe Point Road and head for my bus stop I rummage through my purse for my mobile phone. There are no missed calls or texts from Craig. I send him a text message.

*Hey you, are we still on for tomorrow night? I can't wait to spoil you. Freya.*

Three hours later, Craig finally replies.

*Sure Freya. I'm going sailing with Samantha and Deb tomorrow, and Kirsty is in Brisbane this weekend. So please remember to use the spare key. It's underneath the pot plant on the front porch.*

## **Chapter Fifteen**

'Who's that?', Aunty June asks.

It's a strange question given that she has called me.

'Your slack niece, who doesn't deserve to have such a deadly aunty.'

'Oh, I have a niece, do I?'

'Of course you do.'

'How come this niece hasn't called me in ages?'

'Sorry Aunty, I've been really busy.'

'Do you have a man friend? Is he what's been keepin' ya busy?', she chuckles.

'As a matter of fact Aunty June, I do.'

Her voice fades and I hear, 'Big 'Ole! Big 'Ole! Freya's got a boyfriend.'

They laugh and coo in delight. Then I hear Aunty June scolding, 'No Maud, it's not your fuckin' turn to talk.'

I look at my watch and shriek.

'Aunty June are you there?'

'No need to shout me fuckin' ear off.'

'Sorry Aunty June. It's just that I really have to go.'

'What!'

'You see, I'm cooking dinner for him tonight and I have to finish shopping.'

'When will I hear from you?'

'I'll call you soon – promise.'

'Alright,' she says, 'fuckin' love ya.'

I rarely enjoy grocery shopping. I loathe having to wait in queues for an inordinate period of time, before lumbering my groceries home. But today, I'm excited to be here. I search for ripened mangoes, squeeze half a dozen avocados before finding a soft one, and then select some free range duck. When I go into the Bottle Shop I look for a decent white and settle on a Brokenwood Chardonnay. The final purchase I make is tiramisu from a flash patisserie. As soon as I haul the shopping bags through my front door, I skedaddle into the bathroom. I slap on a face mask and select my dark blue silk dress, the same one I wore the night we got together. Just before leaving I place the cookbook into my hand bag. I paid a few extra dollars for the sales assistant to wrap it in gold paper and red trim.

As I sit in the back of the cab, I imagine the look on Craig's face when he sees the incredible meal that I've cooked for us. Craig will be touched that I have made such an effort, and we'll put the last few days behind us. The spare key is where he said it would be. This is the first time I've been alone in his house. There's an emptiness here that I hadn't sensed before. He's always going on about how a room should be free of clutter. But there's so little of Craig on display. The expensive bicycle in the hallway is the only opening to who he really is, and that's more functional than cerebral. I study the photograph of the young boy on top of the cabinet. I can see the obvious resemblance to Craig. They have the same brown eyes and oval shaped face. When I first saw it, I assumed the boy was Craig's nephew. But Samantha doesn't have any children and his brother has only a daughter.

The door to the spare bedroom is open. Piles of perfectly folded laundry sit on the single bed. Behind the door is another cabinet, which holds more photographs of the boy in different poses. Another photograph is of a name scrawled in sand – David. I hear the familiar beep from my phone, on the dining room table. There's a new text message.



*Freya, you are going to wish you had never met me. Patrick*

'Hey Missy.'

Craig's voice makes me jump. Craig is wearing a pair of black board shorts and a plain white t-shirt. He's tanned from his day on the boat with Samantha and Deb. Instead of kissing me he goes straight to the white plastic bags.

'This looks interesting,' Craig says.

I stand behind him and rest my head on his shoulder, but it feels awkward. He whistles as he inspects the wine and tiramisu.

'How much did you spend?'

'That's my secret. Besides, you're worth it,' I say.

I feel cold when I see Samantha standing in the hallway. Her arms are folded beneath her chest and her face is impassive.

'Samantha, why don't you join us for dinner?', he says.

'I can't, I have the fundraiser, remember?'

Samantha turns around and leaves without acknowledging me. Craig practically runs down the hallway after her. I hear the din of their voices outside the front door, but I have no idea what they're saying. I'm putting the tiramisu in the fridge when Craig returns. He's kitted up in lycra.

'I'm going to the gym for a quick work out,' he says.

'I was hoping you'd stay so we could talk.'

'I'll only be gone for an hour. That'll give you time and space to do whatever it is that you have to do,' he replies.

Things don't improve when Craig returns three hours later. We barely speak to each other and when Craig suggests that we eat dinner in front of a DVD, instead of sitting at the dining room table, I half-heartedly acquiesce. We watch a movie about grown men who drink themselves into oblivion over a wild weekend. Craig shovels duck and mango into his mouth in between laughing at the punch-lines.

'Aunty June and Aunty Maud rang me today.'

'Hmm.'

'I told them about us. The aunties were really excited.'

Craig says nothing and gulps down some wine.

'Are you listening to me?'

He turns and grimaces.

'Freya, I'm trying to relax. I had a very stressful week at work. Alright!'

After the movie Craig takes our plates to the kitchen. I follow him and sit down at the table.

'Can I ask you something?'

'What is it Freya?'

'Who is the little boy in the photo?'

He stops washing the dishes and dries his hands with a nearby tea towel.

'My son.'

Craig opens the liquor cabinet. He takes a bottle of scotch and a glass to the table. I pour myself another glass of wine.

'I haven't seen him in four years. I have a fucked up relationship with his mother,' Craig says matter-of-factly.

'Craig, I'm so sorry. Where are they?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?'

He plunges his fist on the table.

'I've got to pay child support for the next ten years. That's why I rent this place, Freya. Christ, everyone else I know has already bought a home and an investment property. But I'll be old and grey when I finally get into the property market.'

He leaves the table and fiddles with the stereo. Craig sings each song in between gulps of scotch. When he finally stops singing Craig stares at me through glassy eyes.

'Freya, I've been withdrawing from you.'

'I've noticed,' I say sadly.

'Too much is happening right now. Work is tough, and then there's this house. I hate being in a share house! Freya, I just feel emotionally drained.'

Now I know why Samantha was in a hurry to leave, and why Craig was avoiding me all afternoon.

'If you're not into me, then I want to know!', I stammer angrily.

'Freya, I like you, but...'

'But you're not in love with me, are you?'

'No Freya, I am not in love with you.'

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Ordinarily, I would never walk on my own at night. Perhaps, I'd expected Craig to run after me, profess to having made a huge mistake, and then beg for my forgiveness? I am such a naïve fool! The voice of reason is trying to tell me that I just dodged a bullet. The man I thought I knew, the one who was sensitive and caring, doesn't exist. If I had a child, I would want to know that he was happy, healthy, loved. Craig doesn't even know where his son is.

It strikes me that Craig didn't look at me when he told me that he didn't love me. How gutless was that? Perhaps, I'm imagining it, but I don't recall any hint of remorse in his voice either. A nice man would have surely offered to call a cab for me? Come to think of it, Craig didn't even thank me for dinner. My only consolation is that I didn't give him the cookbook. But my bag is feeling too light to be holding a hard covered book. Damn, I must have left it on the dining room table, when I took my phone out. I can't feel my phone either. I stand under the street light, fumbling through my hand bag. Tears well in my eyes, but there's no time to cry, because I need to hail the approaching taxi.

'Hello,' Mark says through the intercom.

'It's me, Freya.'

Mark's apartment is spacious and airy. Photographs of Mark and his family adorn the bureau next to the front door. He's watching a movie on pay TV – *Cape Fear*. I've walked in at the worst possible time – the last five minutes when Nick Nolte and Robert de Niro are locked in one final, epic battle. The waters are raging, boat's being smashed into smithereens against the rocks, Jessica Lange and Juliette Lewis are both screaming.

'Wow, this is the best part,' I say.

'What happened?', he says gently.

Mark gives me a hug and I break into tears. I tell him the whole sorry story, in between wiping my eyes with soggy Kleenex. He listens attentively, throwing in the occasional, 'Baby, you deserve better.' When I have no more to say Mark disappears into the kitchen. I surf the pay television channels and pause at an eighties music video marathon. He comes back with cups of tea and a plate of Tim Tams.

'Freya, you will get over Craig, in time.'

'I know,' I whimper.

'Baby, you don't have to go through this on your own. I'm always here for you.'

'I'm very lucky to have you in my life.'

'And I'm lucky to have you. My life would be so boring without Freya Clarkson in it.'

He takes a Tim Tam and eats half of it in one bite.

'Freya, break-ups happen because people aren't meant to be together.'

I swing my legs onto the couch and rest my head on the pillow. My eyes are sore from crying and it feels good to close them.

'What, Freya, you're not going to watch Toni Basil sing *Mickey*? Come on, I know how much you love those cheerleader outfits!'

Mark giggles and I relish its sound. There's no anger, no thinly veiled contempt. My best friend's laughter is the last thing I hear before I fall asleep.

When I wake my eyes are so damned painful I imagine that invisible pins have been sewn into them. The bathroom vanity reveals that my skin is grey, my eyes bloodshot. I grab the small

tube of moisturiser I carry in my purse and try to bring some vitality to my face. The silk dress is crushed and no amount of brushing is going to get rid of the bird's nest on my head. Mark's bedroom door is closed. I rummage through my purse for a piece of paper and settle on an old shopping docket. I find Simon's fountain pen in the bottom underneath some loose change.

*Hey you,*

*Thanks so much for being a dear friend. You're right – that jerk didn't deserve me. In fact, I'm not sure if Craig even deserves to live.*

*Love Freya.*

The taxi driver offers a look of disgust. Yes, I know how this must seem – I'm going home after a booty call. But I have bigger things on my mind than a stranger's disdain. I have to get my phone. Craig's black Corolla is parked in the front. I knock on the door.

'Craig.'

'Craig, I left my phone here last night,' I say firmly.

I walk to the gate on the side of the house and peer into the back yard. It's deserted. Damn him!

'START ACTING LIKE A MAN AND FACE ME!'

Once again I'm met with cowardly silence. I search under the pot plant for his spare key, before remembering that I still have it, in my purse.

'Craig, I'm sorry to walk in like this. I'll just take my phone and we never have to speak to each other again.'

My heels stick to something on the floorboards. I notice an empty, white tube on the floor. The label says something about wrinkle-depleting serum. I can't recall Craig being concerned about wrinkles, but what would I know? My phone is lying a foot away from the tube. What the hell was he doing with my phone? It's warm in here and all the windows are closed. Craig usually leaves them open. At the end of the hallway is a pile of torn papers. Sitting on top of the pile is a photograph of a woman holding a fork above a bowl of pasta. Damn, that was the cover of

the book I bought for him! The trail of shredded paper ends at the French doors. Ordinarily, the doors are never closed, but this morning they are. As I get closer to the French doors, I hear the sounds of the stereo.

‘Craig, are you there?’

I feel the urge to turn around. But I need to look into his eyes and say that I am grateful for the time we shared together. I also want Craig to admit that we did indeed have some special moments. That it wasn’t all for nothing. I push the doors open. Craig’s feet are lifeless and he’s surrounded by pools of congealed blood. His eyes are serene, in spite of the knife wedged in his chest. I don’t know how long I have been running for, or where I am going to. Suddenly, I feel arms around my shoulders. Huge iron bands that lift my feet from the ground. The more I struggle, the tighter their grasp around my chest. Vomit streams out of my mouth and suddenly, I’m on the ground. I dig my hands into freshly cut grass and breathe.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **Personal Statement of Mark Joseph Tonkin**

**20 December 2010**

My name is Mark Tonkin. Until recently, I was like most professionals in Sydney. I defined myself through my work. For the better part of the last fifteen years I did little else other than build my career in the corporate sector. The hours were long, the pressure relentless, and my boss was a pain in the arse. But I have always found time for my best friend, Freya Clarkson. I’ve only just met the force of nature that is Aunty June Clarkson. She has asked me to write down everything that I know about the internet dating murders. Aunty June reckons that she is an ace at this crime solving gig, and who am I to question the Mayor of Doonaville? From my perspective, Freya’s life began to spiral out of control on the day that she contacted me from the Police Station.

I don't recall any words that were spoken when I received the call, but I remember that frightened voice. She reminded me of a field mouse that trembles in a corner, as it stares helplessly into the eyes of a cat. When I stepped into the Police Station twenty minutes later, I had the feeling that I was on board an abandoned ship that was haunted by tormented souls. The air was stale, the air conditioning overpowering, and each face was heavy with acceptance.

Men and women in blue uniforms were huddled in one corner, and there was a motley crew of civilians in the reception area. Freya was sitting on a plastic chair in a corner, and her back was slouched. She was still wearing her dress from the night before, and I could tell from her bloodshot eyes that she'd been crying. A tall and burly man was crouched next to Freya. He spoke in a somber tone as she appeared to listen intently. He handed her a card and then disappeared through a corridor. Back at her flat, we spent hours gouging on comfort food and listening to really bad 80s music. The coffee table in the living room was covered in empty Tim Tam packets, Kit-Kat wrappers and the odd corn chip. I cannot say what thoughts were going through Freya's mind. I remember only the emptiness in her eyes and how that scared me.

'Freya, I think you should, well, you know ...'

'What are you trying to say Mark?'

'Freya, it's time for you to put the French onion dip away.'

She peers into the tub and studies the bottom. Without her eyes leaving the tub, she grabs the empty packet of Jatz on her lap and shakes it.

'Mark, do you think I could be in shock?'

'I think there's every chance.'

I know what it feels like to grieve the death of a loved one. I can speak first hand of how that loss makes you question everything you had believed before. Five years ago, Mum passed away in the bed she had shared with Dad for thirty years. Then we said goodbye to Dad in a hospice, three years later. In the movies, people die quickly and with their dignity in-tact. But for both of my parents, death was a lingering process that delivered many cruel blows before reaching its conclusion.

'I should get in touch with his family to, you know, express my condolences,' Freya says.

'Do you think that's a good idea?'

'Why wouldn't it be?', she asks.

'I thought you and his sister didn't exactly hit it off.'

I remember last night, in between Tim Tams, Freya told me about her frosty encounter with Samantha Lee.

'If one of your ex-girlfriends passed away, wouldn't you contact her family? Isn't that the right thing to do?'

'Freya, I think you should try to get some rest tonight.'

Her mobile phone rings from the kitchen bench. Freya slowly rises to answer it.

'Hello,' she says timidly.

Freya sighs and raises her spare hand to her forehead.

'How did you get my number?'

'No, I do not wish to comment!' she cries, before collapsing onto the kitchen floor. I pick her up and lead her back to the couch.

'Freya, who was that?'

'Some journalist.'

'What did they want?'

She stares at her phone as though she didn't hear me.

'Freya.'

'Mark, I just remembered something,' she says, 'Patrick sent me this nasty text message.'

'When?'

'Yesterday afternoon.'

She frantically scrolls through her text messages.

'Someone's deleted Patrick's message,' she says tearfully.

'How is that possible?'



'I don't know. I found my phone in the hallway at Craig's house. I just assumed that Craig had thrown it onto the floor out of carelessness. I can't imagine why he'd delete any of my text messages.'

'Do you remember what Patrick's message said?'

'He promised that I'd regret that I ever met him.'

'Why would Craig want to delete that message?'

'I have no idea. I never even told Craig about Patrick.'

'Oh my God!' she cries.

'What?'

'All of Patrick's messages are gone.'

Freya looks at me with those field mouse eyes.

'What if it wasn't Craig who tampered with my phone?'

'Are you suggesting that Patrick had something to do with what happened to Craig?'

'Mark, I don't really know anything about Patrick. I never went to his house. Come to think of it, I don't even know his surname.'

We both sit there, helpless. The silence isn't doing either one of us any good.

'Freya, maybe you should call him?'

'And say what?'

'You could start by asking Patrick what he meant in his text.'

'Alright,' she says nervously.

'Baby, I'm here with you.'

'Fuck!' she says, 'his number – it's gone.'

## **Chapter Eighteen**

The heat has softened with dusk, but the temperature outside is still in the mid-twenties. Some young men with skate boards pass me as I get into my car. Their caps are worn back to front, and their shorts are too big for their stick insect legs. But they carry themselves with a lightness that I crave. I should be with Freya, listening to Wham CDs and sharing the packet of corn chips

she just opened. Instead, I'm on my way to the birthday party of my oldest friend, Mike Brewster.

Mike's friendship is precious for many reasons. He's an amazing guy, generous and funny. Mike also belonged to the world that Nell and I shared with our parents. Mike can remember when Mum taught me how to drive, and he was standing beside me when Dad bought my first car; a red V-Dub. Mike spent many nights at our family's dinner table, devouring Mum's roast lamb. He still talks about her special mint sauce. Nell and I have no aunts or uncles, no cousins, with whom we can reminisce about our parents. Apart from a small number of long-term employees of the family business, whom we rarely see, there is really only Mike who remembers them.

I pull into the curb outside the federation style house that Mike shares with his wife, Abby and their daughter, Claudia. It's in one of Drummoyne's tree-lined streets, and they have a breathtaking view of the water from the second floor, which they added when Claudia came into the world. She has skied in Aspen, speaks animatedly about her last visit to the Louvre, and is the ripe old age of eight. Abby greets me at the front door. She's wearing skinny jeans and a frilly, yellow top with a plunging neck line. Her eyes are glassy and her smile warm.

'Mark!'

'Abby, you look wonderful.'

'What, no date?', she replies with a pitiful frown.

'I'm afraid not.'

'Mark, mate, so good to see you,' Mike says.

The entrance is a former sitting room that's been converted into a study. A personal computer with an extra-large screen sits on the mahogany desk, surrounded by photographs of Abby and Claudia. The study leads to an open kitchen. I spot the mothers instantly – all reed thin and dressed in expensive tracksuits, hair perfectly straightened. They take their wine in minute sips and seem engrossed in conversation. In the entertainment area are the fathers. Dressed in jeans and polo shirts, they're clutching Heinekens and watching the Grand Prix on the plasma. In between the mothers and fathers is my clan – the singles.

'Hi Mark.'

'Valerie, how are you?' I say, as I kiss Abby's younger sister on the cheek.

'Couldn't be better. My business is soaring. I've even had to employ two new people,' she says. Valerie is a blonde beauty like Abby. She has her own personal training business and glows with vitality. Valerie excuses herself to make a call and I try my best to mingle. The other guests are friendly but my eyes are drawn to the Goddess. To be precise, it's that patch of skin between the hem line of her cheeky black dress and boots that stop just above her knees. Waves of gold cascade on her tiny shoulders and her elegant face could have been created by one of the great renaissance painters.

'Commitment-phobe,' says this voice that's precocious and cute.

'Who said that?'

'Uncle Mark,' Claudia says as she wraps her arms around my waist. Claudia's brown hair is divided into pigtails and she's smiling through braces that weren't there when I last saw her.

'What did you call me, munchkin?'

'Commitment-phobe.'

'Claudia, are you being mean to Uncle Mark?', her mother says sheepishly.

'Uncle Mark, can I show you my room? I've got a new mural.'

She's a bright spark; doing her best to change the conversation.

'What kind of mural, munchkin?'

A young boy emerges from the hallway. Claudia forgets about the mural and runs past me, yelling out, 'Rupert, you can't catch me.' Abby and I stare in wonder at the infinite energy of those little people.

'Mark, I have no idea where she got that name from,' Abby says with flushed cheeks.

'Mate, you're looking well,' Mike says.

He hands me an open Heineken and we toast our beers. Abby says something about replenishing the canapés and disappears.

'Happy birthday by the way.'

'I'm really feeling my age,' he says sadly.

Mike was always a bit hefty, but in the past year he's piled on a few extra kilos. As I suck my stomach in, it strikes me that weight gain is happening to all of us.

'How's things?'

'Same old, same old,' he says, 'the market's gone down the gurgler.'

Mike is the managing director of a construction company. Lately, I've heard similar sentiments from other friends who are in senior management roles. Business, it seems, is struggling everywhere.

'I don't know what we'll do if they punt me,' Mike says.

'Hey buddy, you look tired. Everything okay?'

'Mate, I'm living the dream,' he says flatly.

As I glance at Abby, now in the centre of the mothers' group, I can't help but wonder, whose dream? I'm pretty sure that they would have paid the mortgage off years ago, but this place looks like a showroom. Then there's the Jaguars in the garage, and the boat moored in a marina at Birkenhead Point.

'Ridiculous,' he says sadly.

'What is?'

'The kitchen. We just splashed out a hundred and fifty grand on the renovations last month. Sure, it looks nice, but we didn't need it.'

I feel a stab of sympathy for Mike. It must be hard to have two people entirely dependent on you to fund a lifestyle that's probably not sustainable in the long term.

'I remember some incredible dinners at your folks' place,' he says.

I think back to the formal dining room in our old house in the Upper North Shore. By the time that Mike and I met in high school, Mum and Dad had thrown out the funky 1970s furniture, in favour of a huge glass table, cane chairs and a marble floor. I have an image of Mike and me sitting at that table, trying to convince Mum to allow us to try a Black Russian.

'How's Nell?', he asks.

Nell and her husband, Jeremy, have recently decided to separate. After ten years of marriage and two beautiful children, they have apparently drifted apart. It doesn't feel like the right time to tell Mike though.

'Nell is great. The kids are keeping her busy.'

'What are you two chatting about?', Abby says behind me, in an inebriated voice.

'Boys' stuff,' Mike says.

'Darling, can you start the barbeque?', she asks Mike.

Mike and I promise to catch up for drinks before Christmas. Then he heads for the fancy barbeque implements suspended above the kitchen bench.

'Have you been introduced to everyone?', Abby asks me.

'No I haven't. Shall we start here?' I say, while making a bee-line for the Goddess.

In the corner of my eye I see the fathers watching me with envy. The Goddess's eyes are radiant. When she says my name her voice is soft and effervescent.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

In the past hour, I have seen her body contorted in positions I had imagined could only be pulled off by gymnasts and trapeze artists. Up the garden trellis, across a satellite dish, on top of a banister, below the hall table that holds the urn in which she keeps her poodle's ashes. Memories I want to hold onto for an eternity, together with every episode of *The Goodies*. Presently, the Goddess is standing before me, naked apart from those boots.

'Mark, it's time for me to take these off.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'But I'm enjoying this,' I whine.

I'm convinced that she is the embodiment of Botticelli's Venus. Although, it's difficult to imagine how a giant shell would fit into this bedroom. There's so much junk in here; magazines, CD covers, dirty clothes and I could be mistaken, but I'm sure I can see a half-eaten packet of corn flakes lurking beneath a basketball. I would have preferred to go back to my apartment, but the Goddess insisted on coming here, to her home in Mosman. Actually, it's probably more accurate to describe the place as an estate. The three levels of sandstone and glass are sprawled across a massive block that boasts a tennis court and a swimming pool. We tip-toed into what appears to be the guest house, in between the sauna and a gardening shed. I seem to remember the Goddess saying something about an assignment being due tomorrow. It's so long since I was at university I can't even remember writing any of my old papers.

'If you keep staring at me, the wind will change direction and your face will stay in that weird look,' Adrianna teases.

Adrianna? Hmm, maybe. She's a knock-out – silky thighs, slim waist, perky breasts.

'I'm mesmerised,' I sigh.

'Mark, are you listening to me?'

'I've committed every single word that's come out of your beautiful mouth to memory.'

I love that Brazilian. Maybe I should get some personal grooming? I've heard that this day spa in the eastern suburbs is offering 'back, crack and sack' waxes.

'Why don't you tell me a poem?', she says excitedly.

'Poetry? Really?'

'My last boyfriend used to write poems for me.'

It's weird for her to talk about an old boyfriend, given the circumstances. But she's in her early twenties, and therefore, a generation removed from mine.

'Goddess, poetry isn't my thing.'

She pouts before throwing a pillow into my face. I love a girl with spirit.

'Mark, I need to take these boots off. My feet are starting to hurt.'

'You know you'll only have to put them on again before I go home.'

'Oh okay,' she says.

The Goddess giggles as she dives into the bed, unleashing a series of ripples. It's kind of strange for such a young woman to have a king sized waterbed. I mean, water beds were hot thirty years ago. We make love again. It's not my best performance. But hey, I'm a workaholic who hasn't been in a gym since the invention of the legwarmer.

'Mark, you're so funny.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Oh, you just are,' she replies in this saccharine voice.

I drink in the smell of her hair; it reminds me of a pine forest. I've never been in a pine forest, but I've seen enough deodorant ads to get the point.

'You're such a Goddess.'

Fuck! I wish I could remember her name!

'No one's ever called me a goddess before,' she purrs.

'Well, baby, they should.'

The Goddess turns over onto her stomach and rests her head across my shoulder. Her long neck is elegant and reminds me of a swan.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm running my hand down your neck.'

'Mark, I know what you're doing. But I don't know why you're doing it.'

'Because, Goddess, you have a gorgeous neck.'

Karen plants a gentle kiss on my forehead. Karen? Nah, what about Amy?

'I'm so glad we met,' she says dreamily.

'Right back at ya, baby.'

The Goddess yawns gently and entwines her legs through mine.

'You know Mark, I wasn't even supposed to go to that stupid party tonight. The invitation was meant for my father.'

'I had second thoughts about going myself. But Mike's a great guy. We went to uni together.'

'That's hilarious,' she says.

'What is?'

'That you went to Uni with Mark. My father did too.'

'Oh really, what's your father's name?'

She ignores my question and brings her lips to mine. Amber's kiss is soft, but then it becomes more intense. Amber? Celeste?

'Mark, did you have dessert tonight?'

'No, I'm trying to watch my waistline.'

'I wasn't talking about that kind of dessert,' Tracey says, with this wicked grin. Tracey? This is impossible!

She plants soft kisses, first on my chest, then my navel, and lower.

'Agnes!', thunders this bullish voice from behind the front door.

'Who was that?'

'Shh,' she says as she covers my mouth with her palm.

'Agnes, who's in there with you?'

That voice is familiar.

'Answer me young lady!'

Oh fuck!

'You didn't tell me that your father was Oliver McGrady.'

Oliver McGrady can smell vulnerability with devastating precision and he attacks without remorse. He's a great white shark that just happens to be in a man's body. Twenty years ago, McGrady would poke fun at my answers in tutorials, step on my feet in the cafeteria queue, and on one occasion, he even gave me a wedgie in the library toilets. A gigantic fist rips my chest apart and seizes my heart. I'm struggling to breathe and my arms are trembling. But Agnes is surprisingly calm.

'No one's here Daddy. I had a fitful dream, that's all,' she cries sweetly.

'Let me in, now!'



'But Daddy, I'm not even dressed,' Agnes says meekly.

'Agnes, what are you doing in there?'

'Daddy, I'm studying. You know how badly I want to excel in the HSC.'

*She's still in school!*

'Who the hell do these belong to?', McGrady thunders.

'Um, I think my Dad just found your pants.'

I jump out of the bed so quickly I knock Agnes over the edge and she makes a thud as she falls to the floor. Agnes bounces up and tackles me back onto the bed. Obviously, rugby prowess runs in the family. I hear a burst and suddenly, we're sinking.

'You stupid fuck!'

Agnes is trying to wrench her boots from the mattress, but she's stuck. Agnes quickly unzips the boots and frees herself from the sagging mattress. She plunges something black and silky into my right hand, before shoving me out of the window. I feel this sharp pain in the side of my head.

'Wallet, car keys, phone – now fuck off!', she whispers before slamming the window shut.

I take cover from behind the garden shed. When I hear Agnes and McGrady arguing, I make my way to what I hope is the front gate. All the while, praying that there are no Rottweilers lurking in the shadows. I breathe a sigh of relief as I close my front door behind me. My first instinct is to sit underneath a hot shower. But I pause when I catch a reflection of myself in the bathroom mirror. It's a tragic sight – a pudgy black man on the cusp of middle age, squeezed into a size six nightie. I look like a turkey that's been feathered and roasted.

## **Chapter Twenty**

I wake to this ache behind my knees that's replicated in my shoulders. When I stare into the bathroom mirror the turkey has gone, only to be replaced by a cantankerous old man. Oh dang! Does he really have a double chin? As I'm shaving my phone beeps.

*Hi, can I come over tonight? I need a hug. Freya.*

*Of course you can. I'll be home by seven. Mark xx*

Just as I'm about to leave for work, the intercom in the living room shouts its monotonous greeting.

'Hello.'

'Mr Tonkin it's Detective Sergeant Dave Chappell. Can we have a word?'

'I'm on my way to work. What's this about?'

'I'm investigating the death of Craig Lee.'

I feel numb as I wait in the doorway. When he appears, I recognise Chappell as the man who was talking to Freya in the Police Station.

'Nice apartment,' he says.

'Thank you.'

Chappell studies the portraits of my parents, Nell and her family. He pauses at the dining room table.

'Are you Maori?', he asks.

'Yes.'

'Go back to New Zealand often?'

'No, I have a very demanding job,' I say, offering a subtle hint for him to move beyond social niceties. It's already 7.15 and I need to be in the office by eight.

'Mr Tonkin, can you tell me what you remember about Saturday night?'

Chappell is as solid as he is tall. His face is pocked with acne scars and his skin is sallow. But he carries this quiet dignity, and I get the sense that he's a straight shooter.

'I was here, watching a movie.'

'Which one?'

'*Cape Fear*.'

'Was it the original or the remake with de Niro?'

'The remake,' I say, surprised that Chappell would be interested in such a trivial detail.

'What else do you remember about Saturday night, Mr Tonkin?'

'My friend, Freya Clarkson came over just as the movie was ending.'

'What time was that, approximately?'

'Half-past nine, I guess.'

'What did the two of you do?'

'Talked. Freya was distraught; Craig had just broken up with her.'

'Craig Lee?'

'That's right.'

'Did she mention anything about an argument?', Chappell asks.

'No, it wasn't like that. Freya said that she cooked him some flash duck dinner. Craig had too many scotches and then told her he didn't love her. She walked out and ended up here.'

'When did she leave?'

'She didn't. Freya fell asleep on the couch, and I went upstairs to bed not long after.'

'What time was that?'

'I don't know.'

Chappell's face is expressionless but his eyes bore into mine, like he's going to draw an answer out of me one way or another. I pause to look away and I see Freya's note on the table.

Chappell leans over the table to read it.

'Mind if I take this?'

'I guess not.'

'Is this your pen?' he asks, referring to the black fountain pen next to the note.

'No, I've never seen it before.'

'Then you won't mind if I take that as well.'

Perhaps, I should object to what he's doing. But hey, I'm no lawyer.

'Did you ever meet Craig Lee?', Chappell asks.

'No, I didn't.'

'What did Freya say about him?'

'Before the break-up, she thought he was wonderful.'

'You and Freya know each other well, do you?'

'Yes, we've been friends for years.'

Chappell studies my face, as though he's wondering whether or not Freya and I have ever been more than friends. Admittedly, there have been occasions when I have wondered what it would be like for us to be in a relationship. In theory, it would make perfect sense. I mean, she's the only person with whom I share all of my news.

'Break-ups can make people do crazy things,' Chappell says.

'Freya wouldn't do it.'

'Mr Tonkin I've been in the Job for many years, so I'll give you the drum. Most people who are murdered are not the random victims of strangers. They lose their lives at the hands of people they know.'

Chappell thanks me for my time and we walk out the door together. I run to the bus stop and just manage to make the 7.40 bus. By the time I turn on my computer, I feel like I'm at the tail-end of a sixty-hour week. My eyes are heavy and my head is in a fog. I make a strong coffee. The first has no effect, so I drink another. That just makes me queasy. When I leave at six o'clock, about half of the team are still pre-occupied, and the other half have already called it a day. As I walk past the strip of cafes and restaurants in Milsons Point I am reminded of why I love this time of year. Sydney-siders are making the most of their extra hour of sunlight. People are catching up with friends for a drink, music spills from the terrace houses out into the street, and runners are pounding the pavement.

## **Chapter Twenty-one**

'I still can't believe he's dead,' Freya says.

'Me neither.'

'When I was little and I had a nightmare, Aunty June would wake me up. You know, this feels like that. But it's real life.'

She's wearing a blue and green striped shirt over jeans and ballerina shoes. Freya's black bob is frizzy today and her face is free of make-up. The dark circles under her eyes suggest that she had little sleep last night, and who could blame her?

'Did you go to work today?'

'I wasn't feeling right this morning, so I called in sick,' she says.

We're sitting on the balcony, watching the pink and orange sky that's quickly fading into night. The silhouette of the Opera House sits in front of a dark backdrop that's occasionally interspersed with seams of blinking lights.

'Mark, I did something stupid.'

She opens her handbag and takes out a folded piece of paper.

'I sent an email to Samantha Lee, to say how sorry I was that Craig passed away.'

'But I told you I didn't think that was a good idea.'

'You were right,' Freya says gloomily, as she hands me the paper.

*Freya,*

*Before you killed him, Craig told me that he could no longer stand the sight of you. He thought you were insipid, needy and boring. What you did to my little brother was unforgiveable. You will spend the rest of your life rotting in jail, and when you die, you will go straight to hell.*

*Samantha*

I whistle as I take it all in.

'Baby, you are neither insipid nor boring.'

'But needy?', she says, wringing her nose.

I offer Freya a plate of Tim Tams and she gratefully seizes two.

'We're all a little needy at times.'

'I had no idea that Craig felt that way. I was certain there were times when he was happy. Like, the night we got together, it felt so perfect.'

'I'm sure you're right.'

'How does a man change his mind so quickly?'

'It sounds like Craig was a bit messed up. I mean, he hadn't seen his son for years, right? What kind of a person does that?'

'I shouldn't have contacted her,' Freya mumbles.

'Why did you?'

'I thought it was the right thing to do. Besides, if I was the one who had been killed, surely Craig would have expressed his condolences to Aunty June and Aunty Maud?'

From what Freya has told me about the guy, I doubt it.

'I know what you're thinking Mark,' she says sadly, 'Craig wouldn't have done anything of the sort.'

'How did you manage to get in contact with Samantha?'

'I found an advertisement for her surgery on Google. So I sent her an email.'

'Google, huh, where would we be without it?'

She pretends to be engrossed in the lights of the ferry that's pulling out of the Neutral Bay Terminal. On the lit footpath below, men and women in suits are walking home. They pass families who are taking their pooches for a stroll. It seems that every second dog in Neutral Bay is a Labradoodle.

'I wonder when the funeral will be. I imagine that the details will be published in the Death Notices in the paper. You know, it was only a month ago that I went to Simon's memorial service,' Freya says.

'Freya, I don't think you should go to Craig's funeral.'

'No?'

'Baby, there's only one Tim Tam left. You have it.'

Freya surprises me by declining.

'Did you see this morning's papers?', Freya asks nervously.

'No.'

'All of the news reports said that a thirty-two-year old woman was assisting police with their inquiries. That's code for suspect, isn't it?'

I ponder whether or not I should tell Freya about my meeting with Chappell. I decide against it. The poor girl has enough to deal with.

'Yesterday they took my finger prints and questioned me for hours. Of course I'm a suspect,' she says dimly.

'Freya, look at me.'

Those tired, sad eyes are the windows to a gentle soul.

'Freya, you are a good person. I know you didn't hurt Craig, and in time, the police will realise that too.'

She begins to cry, so I get a box of tissues from the bathroom.

'Mark, I didn't tell you the name of the journalist who rang yesterday. It was Alicia Summers. Are you familiar with her work?'

'Oh yeah, she did the hatchet job on that politician, Mark Aaronsley.'

Aaronsley had been a member of the New South Wales Parliament for ten years. Over that time, he'd been a champion for multiculturalism and public education. He was popular in his electorate too. But that counted for little when Summers exposed his visit to a male brothel, on the front page of *The Daily*.

'Why don't you take some leave from work? You could go to Doonaville.'

'I would love nothing more than to go back home. But I can't,' Freya says.

'Why not?'

'I'm supposed to be starting my new job next week.'

Freya was so excited when she told me about her secondment to the inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal women in the criminal justice system. It would be a shame for her to give that opportunity up.

'Perhaps, that is exactly what you need at the moment.'

I rub her knee and she looks into my eyes. I can see the beginnings of a smile.

'You're right, I need to focus on my new job. Besides, if I went home I would have to tell the aunties about what happened to Craig.'

'Don't you think you should tell them anyway?'

'But I don't want them to worry.'

She pauses to stare at me.

'Mark, you look tired'

'Freya Clarkson I am not as transparent as you.'

'I know,' she says with this cheeky grin, 'but from the sudden appearance of crimson on your cheeks, I suspect that there is a story waiting to be told.'

I spend the next hour regaling Freya with an embellished account of my exploits with Agnes. According to this version, McGrady had a .22 shotgun and there were three Dobermans that chased me through a fish pond and then a golf course, all while I was wearing a red negligee. Such improvisations make Freya burst into fits of laughter. But the poor girl is exhausted. It's time for me to drive her home.

'I'm having lunch with Marion tomorrow,' Freya says as she rests her head against the passenger seat of the Audi R8.

'You and Marion seem to spend a lot of time together.'

'She gives me valuable career advice, but Marion has a lot of wisdom when it comes to personal matters too.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, like, she could tell that Craig was going to break up with me. I was so taken with him that I ignored the warning signs.'

'Baby, relationships are complicated and it's not as though they come with a user manual.'

'I miss him,' she says softly, almost whispering.

'I know you do.'

'It's silly isn't it?'



'What is?'

'That I'm missing someone who I didn't even know.'

'Freya, there are people who were in long term relationships, who say that they never really knew their exes. Take my sister and her soon to be ex-husband, Jeremy. They've been together for twelve years, married for ten. After all that time they've suddenly decided that they are too different to be together.'

'Poor Nell. Did you really know Sarah?'

Freya's question is like a slap to the face. I hardly ever talk about Sarah, to anyone.

'I'm sorry Mark,' she says.

'Freya, don't apologise.'

'Do you still hear from her?'

'No, and it's better that way.'

## **Chapter Twenty-two**

'Mark, how could you?', Nell says angrily.

'Katie needs to have some of her family in the audience. After all, she's got the lead role in this play. As her uncle, you have a responsibility to be there.'

I don't doubt that Katie's school play is important, but Nell knows it's hard for me to get to these things during the week.

'Nell, I'm sorry.'

Mark, I have to insist.'

'Nell, you know the kind of hours I work.'

'Her Dad isn't going to be there.'

'What!'

I must have raised my voice because the woman in the work station next to mine has suddenly stopped typing. I clench my phone and walk towards the lift.

'Jeremy moved out last night. I knew it was coming, but it's hit us hard,' Nell says.

She's begun to whisper. Then I hear Tom in the background. Nell mentions something to him about putting his shoes on. It strikes me that Nell is probably trying to deal with the break-up and maintain some semblance of normalcy without the support of anyone. Like our parents, Nell has always been an introvert. I'm not sure if she has any close friends whom she can lean on.

'Sis, you can count on me.'

'I'll meet you outside Katie's school at five o'clock,' she says.

'I can't wait.'

I really am looking forward to seeing Katie's performance. But I have no idea how I'm going to manage to leave the office at such an early hour without Frank noticing. His loathing for me seems to be growing by the day. Admittedly, I have had a few late mornings and a couple of early evenings recently. But Freya needs me right now. And as for Katie, well, what kind of a bastard would abandon her? Christ, what's gotten into Jeremy's head? Ever since Nell brought him home, all those years ago, I've liked the guy. Jeremy was quiet, self-deprecating, and he always had a glow when he looked at Nell. Mum and Dad adored him too. They would be devastated if they knew that Nell and Jeremy were divorcing.

'Mark.'

That voice always makes me clench my jaw.

'Frank, how can I help you?'

Frank is about my height and pudgy around the middle. His grey hair is thinning, so all that is left is a landing strip on his crown.

'Are you going to be at the sales meeting tomorrow morning?', he asks.

'Of course.'

I've attended that damn meeting every fortnight, ever since I started working here.

'I need your report and the sooner the better.'

It's strange that Frank considers that he has to remind me how to do my job. In the six years I have worked here, there hasn't been a single deadline I haven't met.

'Sure Frank.'

I check my watch; it's half-past ten.

'I'll personally deliver it to you by midday.'

'Eleven-thirty would be better,' he says.

'Will that be a problem?'

'No.'

At exactly twenty-nine minutes past eleven I stand up, walk past the three rows of work stations, and deliver my report to Frank. He greets me with a smile that must be killing him. As I return to my space, I glance at my colleagues. Presently, each worker on this floor can be neatly divided into two groups – those who are glued to their computer and those who are connected to a phone. And if anyone was to die, or be punted, it would make not an ounce of difference. Corporate cogs stop for no mere mortal.

During my lunch break I rush home and drive my car back to work. The City is filled with humanity sprawled in all directions. The heat is intense and I can feel my shirt sticking to my back. At four-thirty I push my chair out and pretend to search for something underneath my desk. Frank is busily reading some poor bastard's spreadsheets. When he picks up his phone I make a runner for the lift. As I pull into the curb I notice that most of the parking space in the street is surrounded by families. There's pint sized dinosaurs, the odd pirate and some little princesses. Nell is standing outside the school gate.

'Mark, I'm so glad you made it.'

Nell is looking gaunt and her eyes are bloodshot. She's wearing a plain and loose, green dress and flat heeled sandals. Nell's shoulder length hair is usually blow dried straight, but today, it's messily tied into a pig tail.

'Are you alright?'

'It's tough. I never thought we'd be in this situation,' Nell says.

'Where's the actress?'

'Backstage – getting her make-up done.'

'What role is Katie playing again?'

'Snow White,' Nell replies.

I'm not sure whether dinosaurs and pirates featured in the original Snow White. But I let it slide.

'Where's Tom-Tom?'

'He's with Jeremy's parents this afternoon.'

Nell gives me this look which suggests that there is a long story behind Tom's absence.

'Today will be a new experience for you,' she says.

'In what way?'

'You haven't really lived until you've had kids,' Nell says piously.

I know that she's going through a rough patch. But I feel hurt that Nell would assume my life is meaningless.

'Sorry, I don't know where that came from,' Nell says sheepishly.

In the last few minutes the crowd has begun to drift through the gate.

'Mark, we should grab a seat before it gets packed.'

The performing arts complex is so much more elaborate than the makeshift stage in my old school's basketball court. The sets are replete with floating curtains and expensive lighting. But the grandiosity fades into the background when I see Snow White. Katie is dressed in this billowing white gown. Her wavy, brown hair is held back by a gold ribbon. She remembers all of her lines and carries herself with a poise that some adults fail to ever grasp. When we go backstage Katie looks at us uneasily. I suspect that she was hoping to see her Dad. I feel fiercely protective as I scoop Katie into my arms.

'Snow White, we're going to Gigantic Gelato!'

Gigantic Gelato is irresistible to most mortals who are yet to experience middle age metabolism. Not only does it boast the best gelato in the lower North Shore, but it also has a playground in the centre of the restaurant.

'Mark, it's a school night,' Nell says cautiously.

'Please Mum!'

'Okay, it is your special night, my girl.'

We leave my Audi parked outside the school and head for Gigantic Gelato in Nell's Lexus. All three of us opt for the Super-Sized Chocolate Sunday; a monstrosity of chocolate and praline gelato decorated with nuts, lollies and marshmallows. By the time we drive back to the school, Snow White is fast asleep.

'You're good with kids. It's about time you had some of your own,' Nell whispers as we say goodbye.

I know Nell was trying to be kind, and perhaps, make up for her unfortunate comment earlier. But her words weigh heavily on me. When I get into my own car I cringe. Until now, I've felt only pride in the Audi R8. It's sleek and a dream to drive, not to mention a chick magnet! I can't tell you the number of times that women have flirted with me because of this car. But tonight it's just a car. When I arrive home the self-loathing becomes palpable. This apartment cost me \$1.9 million to buy. Then I spent another few hundred thousand on renovations, and I hired an interior designer to choose the furnishings. When the job was finished, she won some flash award. So why am I miserable?

Our parents were loving, but shy, and Dad especially found it hard to show us affection. Both of them instilled a strong work ethic in Nell and me. Each weekend and school vacation, we would serve behind the counter at one of our family's pharmacies. By the time I turned twenty-one, I had saved enough money to put down a deposit on my first property; a one-bedroom apartment in Concord. I now have five investment properties; two in Concord, one in McMahon's Point, and two in Brisbane. I was drawn to the latter because I have always had a

liking for Queensland's warm climate. Perhaps, I was also seduced by Freya's stories about her community.

What I admire the most about Freya is her pride in being Murri. Together with her beloved aunts, Freya's identity is her anchor. I know that Freya feels like she's hamstrung in her job, and from what I've heard about the public service, her frustration is widely shared. But eventually, Freya will move on and make a difference. Perhaps, her secondment to the McIvor Inquiry will be a launching pad to a new career? I have nothing comparable in my life. I enjoy the intellectual challenges of my job. Ever since I can remember, I have been fascinated by numbers. But I am not exactly changing the world by working for a multinational that makes everything from cleaning products to weapons.

I head for the shower and I only turn off the tap when my skin is bright red. The cantankerous old fool in the bathroom mirror hasn't left. Maybe he's been there for a while and I'm only just noticing his presence. I'm sure that nasty prick didn't live here when I was with Sarah. Beautiful, head strong Sarah, who lived like each day was her last. She had a body that consisted mostly of her elegant legs. When she giggled, which was often, Sarah would lift her head ever so gently, so that her blonde hair bounced on her shoulders.

We met at a bar in the Rocks one Friday night. She had recently moved to Sydney from Perth, and was temping in a public service job. Sarah was painting the town red with some girlfriends who were also new to Sydney, including Freya. Now that I think of it, Freya and Sarah were so unlike. Whereas Sarah basked in the attention of the men at the bar Freya looked uncomfortable. She was wearing a sloppy black jumper over baggy jeans. Freya's voice was tiny and she seemed afraid to look into my eyes. It wasn't long before Sarah moved in with the few boxes she had brought to Sydney. God, I couldn't get enough of her. We'd set our alarm half an hour early most mornings, so we could bonk each other's brains out before leaving for the City. Then I'd count down the hours before I'd see her at home.

When Sarah left me, for a man who was even wealthier, I thought I'd die. Life became this mill stone I carried everywhere. Sometimes, I tried to spend my way to happiness. I bought a jet ski that's yet to touch water, and a Harley Davidson that rarely leaves my garage. When that had

no effect, I'd drink myself stupid in stale bars, where I nattered to old barflies whose faces were as worn and scarred as the carpet. I had sex with women whose names I never cared to discover. On the nights I slept alone, I'd cry for Sarah. Then I'd wake each morning, ranting, having this hysterical argument with her, in my mind.

The fog didn't begin to clear until the afternoon that I ran into Freya. We were both on our way home, but in no hurry to get there. She had a look on her face that spoke of just as much bewilderment as hurt. Like she'd endured a tornado and had only just become conscious of the devastation left in its wake. We found ourselves in a bar, where I unloaded about Sarah smashing my heart into tiny pieces. Freya reminisced about a friendship that lasted only until Sarah no longer had a use for her.

### **Chapter Twenty-three**

'This restaurant is amazing,' Janet gushes.

Janet is a beautiful, athletic woman. Her straight, red hair sits on her muscular shoulders. Her skin is translucent and her eyes are hazel. She's also a successful professional, I think.

'Mark, this menu is the best I've seen in months,' Janet says, inflecting the 'b' in 'best'.

'And Mark, I really know my restaurants. I'm so busy running my business I don't have time to cook.'

'What was it that you do again?'

Ouch! I just came across as an ignorant jerk.

'I mean, I read it on your profile, but I'm having one of those annoying brain freezes,' I say.

'I have my own recruitment firm. I love my job. How about you Mark? Do you enjoy being an accountant?'

'It's a living.'

'So how are you finding the site?', Janet asks.

I have no idea how to answer that question. On the one hand, I'm excited by the possibility of meeting the right person. And I'm learning new skills, like how to make conversation with a

stranger. But this internet dating thing is a bit like a talent contest. You're placed under the spotlight, for a brief period of time, during which your charm and humour will either save you or sink you.

'Joining Single&sophisticated.com was one of the best things I've ever done,' I say, 'after all Janet, I've met you.'

Ouch, that was so fake, and sheesh, it made her cringe.

'How are you finding the site, Janet?'

'Okay I guess.'

She pretends to be intrigued by the view outside the wall length windows. The constant stream of traffic on the ANZAC Bridge shimmers above the dark waters, whose blanket is pierced every so often by the lights of a boat. To be honest, I knew this date wasn't going to work out five minutes ago. Most men do. It's not because we're superficial, although, I concede that a great number of us are. It's because of that elusive 'C' word – chemistry. Trying to establish a relationship without chemistry is like attempting to build a house without a foundation. If a man decides that there's no chemistry, he's not casting a personal judgment. In fact, a lot of the time, it has nothing to do with the woman. It just is what it is.

A woman will become bitter, even hysterical, when a guy doesn't call her after they've been out on a date. I've lost count of the number of times that Freya has come to my apartment a blubbering mess, all because of some guy who didn't call. My advice is always the same – delete his number and forget about him. The guy has already moved on, in fact, he did so the moment he stepped outside the restaurant. Okay, okay, if he said that he would ring and then didn't, that sucks. It's wrong. Men should have the integrity to be honest about their feelings. But you know, while a lot of us like to think that we're brave, we're not.

'Are you ready to order your wine?', the young waitress asks.

'Please!', we say simultaneously.



After sharing a bottle of Chardonnay from the Mornington Peninsular, the two of us are finally at ease. Janet reveals that she was in a relationship for eight years, until they parted a year ago. They sold the apartment and split the proceeds, made an inventory of their possessions and civilly agreed on who was getting what. But they reached a stalemate over their Jack Russell, Cooper. So in the end, they hired a mediator. After much discussion, negotiation and contemplation, it was decided that Cooper would live with Janet. She proudly shows me a photograph of the Jack Russell on her phone.

After we finish with an espresso, Janet and I split the bill. Then I wait with Janet for her cab. As the taxi pulls into the curb she kisses me softly on the cheek.

'Thanks for the lovely night Mark.'

'Thank you Janet. I hope you find what you're looking for.'

'You too. You really are a nice man, Mark.'

As I watch her cab disappear into the darkness, I know that I will never see Janet again. But that doesn't mean that our date was a failure. After all, we shared a wonderful meal, enjoyed great conversation, laughed, and then wished each other the best. I'm walking to my car when the phone rings. Freya's number appears on my caller ID.

'Mark,' says this anxious voice.

'Freya, are you alright?'

'No, the police came to my apartment this evening. That detective from the other day, Chappell, he brought a warrant and went through my things. He took my computer.'

'Freya, I'm so sorry.'

'I feel violated,' she says.

'Did they make a mess?'

'Yes,' she says glumly.

'Oh Freya. Do you want me to come over to help clean up?'

'No, but thanks for offering.'

'Was Chappell nice to you?'

'At first he was apologetic. But then he looked angry when he found a coat that belonged to Simon.'

'Where?'

'In my cupboard.'

'Baby, what were you doing with Simon's coat?'

'He lent it to me to wear home from our coffee date. It was raining and I didn't have an umbrella,' she says.

'Did you tell Chappell that?'

'I tried to, but it sounded like I was making it up. Besides, I couldn't really explain why I kept it, especially when Simon's notebook was still in the pocket.'

'Why did you hold onto that?'

'I saw his Mum at the memorial service and she looked so frail. I didn't want to bother her with a notebook that she'd probably never even seen before,' she says.

'That sounds reasonable to me.'

'Can we catch up tomorrow?'

'Of course, let's have breakfast in Abbotsford. See you at ten.'

'Fuckin' love ya.'

'Woah! Isn't that an Aunty June expression?'

'It is indeed an Aunty June expression,' she says aghast.

'Freya, you've had a huge day. Get some shut eye and I'll see you in the morning.'

I turn the corner into the street where I parked earlier this evening. A tall and hulking figure is leaning against the passenger side of the Audi R8. There's just enough light for me to see the sneer on McGrady's ruddy face and the iron bar in his left hand.

'Tonkin, we have some business to resolve.'

If I move forward I'll be within his grasp, and I will have nothing to stop McGrady from beating me to a pulp. If I stay where I am, I could still out run him, but then, I'll have to watch McGrady destroy my car.

'What's wrong Tonkin?'

'Come get me,' I say, while trying to puff my chest.

McGrady laughs and then smashes the bar through the windscreen. I wince at the sounds of shards of glass hitting the bitumen. A red Porsche accelerates from around the corner and then screeches to a halt. McGrady throws the bar in my direction. It misses the left side of my head. Before he disappears into the Porsche, McGrady flips the bird.

## **Chapter Twenty-four**

'Your date sounded nice,' Freya says.

'Janet is a very nice lady. But we had no spark.'

'Hmm, chemistry, it's in the hands of the gods, according to Marion,' she says chirpily.

Breakfast in Abbotsford on a Sunday morning shares some commonalities with the Audi R8 that is now in a mechanic's workshop. Like the Audi R8, you don't need it, and would almost certainly be happy without it, but it's one of the nice things in life. When I first bought it, that car was a statement of my success. Now I'm reflecting on the jaunts that Freya and I have taken in that car, to places like the Hunter Valley and Byron Bay.

'You look brighter this morning.'

Freya's blue eyes are radiant and she's even wearing a touch of lip stick.

'I had a good chat with Marion after we spoke last night. She reminded me of the need to count my blessings.'

'Oh really?'

'She also promised to introduce me to a very good criminal lawyer.'

'Hopefully, you won't need one,' I say.

'I think that it's time for me to take some steps to protect myself. But I am scared about the cost. I could very well end up losing my home, just to pay the lawyer.'

'Things will work out, you'll see.'

'I guess that I will just have to take it one day at a time,' Freya says.

'What are you ordering?' I ask.

'I'm going to have the omelet.'

'You can't get the omelet.'

'Why not?', she asks indignantly.

'Because I am and we can't get the same thing.'

'Fair enough,' Freya says, 'I'll opt for the toasted muesli.'

We order our breakfasts and then sit back, inhaling clouds of coffee.

'So, tell me again why you chose to catch the ferry here?', she asks.

I omitted to tell Freya about my unfortunate meeting with McGrady last night. She has more than enough to worry about at the moment.

'Freya, it's a beautiful morning. Oh, and I can't remember the last time I was on a ferry.'

'But wouldn't you have to catch the ferry from Neutral Bay to Circular Quay, and then another to Abbotsford?'

'Yes.'

'But that would surely take over an hour,' she says.

I reach for the white plastic bag underneath the table.

'Which paper would you like?'

'I'll have *The Daily* if you don't mind.'

I hand *The Daily* to Freya, and she begins to skim through it.

'Oh my God!' she says, while placing her hand on her chest.

'What is it?'

She lays the paper down on the table.

*Aboriginal Bureaucrat linked to Palmerston and Lee Murders*

*Sources within the New South Wales Police have named Freya Clarkson, 32, as a person of interest in the investigations into the murders of Simon Palmerston and Craig Lee. Sources*

*linked to the investigations have also confirmed that Miss Clarkson met both men on the internet dating site, Single&sophisticated.com.*

Freya seizes the newspaper and holds it in front of her face.

'That fucking Alicia Summers!'

'What?'

'She spoke to Samantha.'

'Oh my God!' Freya winces, 'Samantha claims that Craig told her that I threatened to kill him.'

Freya slams *The Daily* on the table and wipes fresh tears from her eyes.

'Why would she make up lies about me?'

The waiter delivers our meals. He pretends not to notice that the woman whose face is splashed across the newspaper is sitting at the table.

'At least they chose a nice photograph,' I say, when we're alone again.

The photograph of Freya really is quite flattering. Her hair is styled straight and she's wearing make-up. Freya studies it for a moment.

'That was taken the night we got together. Craig used his phone. It was weird because he took my photo without even asking me.'

Freya sighs deeply and plays with her food.

'I think I've lost my appetite,' she says.

A part of me feels that I should refrain from eating as a gesture of moral support. But the smells of melted cheese and ham are making my stomach grumble.

'I do have at least one consolation,' she says thoughtfully.

'What's that?'

'Aunty June and Aunty Maud never buy the Sydney papers.'

'Do you think you really can hide this from them?'

'I will tell them, but when the time is right.'

'Why don't you go to Doonaville for Christmas? Then you can tell them in person.'

'Christmas!', she says with a grimace, 'I'm not in the mood.'

'It's only two weeks away,' I remind her.

'Christmas isn't a priority for me. I'm more concerned about the new job that I'm supposed to be starting on Monday.'

'Freya, perhaps it's time that you had a frank discussion with your boss?'

It takes me a moment to realise that Freya's no longer listening. She's staring at someone or something behind me. When I turn around I notice this man through the window, glaring at Freya.

'Patrick,' she whispers.

After hearing so much about him, I'm taken aback to finally see Patrick in the flesh. Patrick has the body and stature of a garden gnome. He's wearing baggy jeans and a black t-shirt, and his hair is slicked back with gel. It's a look that doesn't fit. It's too young, too chic.

'Mark, he frightens me.'

'He won't have that effect on me,' I say angrily.

I head towards the exit. My eyes meet Patrick's and he sneers.

'Sir, is everything alright?', the manager asks.

'Of course, I just need to speak to my friend outside.'

'Shall you require another chair?'

'No.'

'Mark, I'll pay our bill,' Freya says behind me.

'Was there something wrong with the food?', asks the manager.

It strikes me that we are being disrespectful, leaving meals on the table that we've barely touched.

'Freya, why don't you stay here and finish your muesli?'

'But Mark ...'

'I won't be long.'

By the time I step outside, Patrick is gone. I check inside each shop in the block of six, but to no avail.

'I can't believe I lost him,' I say, in between mouthfuls of omelet.

'Freya, if you see him again, I want you to call me. Okay?'

'Hmm.'

The manager brushes past our table, smiling in approval at my near empty plate.

'Another coffee sir?'

'I'd love one. How about you Freya?'

She nods meekly.

'Mark, do you think that Patrick could be following me?'

'What makes you say that?'

'I never got the impression that he lived around here. I always assumed that Patrick lived in the eastern suburbs, because he used to try to talk me into doing the Bronte to Bondi walk.'

'Freya, thousands of people do that walk every weekend.'

'So you think it's purely coincidental that Patrick was here this morning?'

'I don't know what to think.'

I hear my mobile phone in my pocket.

'Just give me a second,' I say to Freya as I take the call.

'Hello.'

'Mark.'

The voice is female and husky.

'This is Mark.'

'It's Rachel.'

'Rachel?'

'Rachel from Single&sophisticated.com,' she says.

Images of different profiles run through my mind. But I've seen hundreds of those things by now.

'We were sending emails and we swapped numbers,' she says impatiently.

I try to concentrate, but I still can't recall a Rachel.

'Mark, I hadn't heard from you for a while. I just wanted to check to make sure that you were alright?'

That's nice and a little strange. Usually, when a woman from Single&sophisticated.com stops sending me messages, I assume that she's moved on. So I close the match.

'Sorry, I've been really busy with work. But thanks for calling ... Rachel.'

'Mark, I was wondering if you'd like to catch up?'

'Sure.'

'I know that it's late notice but what about tonight?'

We spend a few minutes discussing the details of our date.

'See you at eight,' I say before the phone dies.

'You don't sound excited,' Freya says.

'I think I'm over internet dating.'

'Really?'

'Freya, I'm exhausted!'

'Rachel seems nice. After all, she did ring to find out if you were alright,' Freya reasons.

'Okay, I'll make an effort to enjoy tonight. Then I will take a hiatus from dating.'

'You and me both,' Freya says.

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The grumpy old man who moved into my bathroom mirror on the night of my fling with Agnes is still there. Damn, I hate those grey whiskers. My skin's looking sallow too. I could do with a facial.

'Smarten up you jerk,' I say.

As I walk out the front door, it strikes me that I didn't even log onto Single&sophisticated.com to read Rachel's profile. I really am fatigued by all of this dating. I just want to keep my deal with Freya and make an effort to enjoy tonight. How complicated could that be? It feels strange to hail a taxi. After all, I usually drive everywhere, other than when I catch the bus to work. I'll



be so happy to get the Audi R8 back from the mechanic. A taxi with a flashing light pulls into the curb. The driver spends most of our journey on his phone, which allows me time to psyche myself up.

When I reflect on my recent dates, I have to concede that not one was pointless. We tried new restaurants, shared war stories and made each other laugh. In the process, I've learnt how to move from small talk to substance, without making a dick of myself. I'm even improving my listening skills, and women really appreciate a man who genuinely listens. So the odds are that my date with Rachel will be yet another opportunity for me to grow. By the time the waitress shows me to our table, I'm feeling a little excited. The décor is African and the room is filled with the scents of various spices. There's a tiny bar in the heart of the restaurant and a drum beat lifts the atmosphere without being overwhelming.

I know Rachel as soon as she walks through the door. She's got the look I've come to recognise - it's a combination of fear, adrenalin and cautious optimism. Rachel is wearing a loose, white blouse and her legs look great in those dark blue jeans. I like it when a woman wears jeans to a first date. A woman who chooses to wear a thousand-dollar dress, and who looks like she's just stepped out of a salon, is putting a lot of pressure on both of us.

'Mark, it's good to finally meet you,' Rachel says.

'Likewise,' I say, as I kiss her softly on the cheek.

Rachel is wearing only a touch of make-up. I really like that. She's comfortable in her own skin.

'Have you been here before?', she asks.

'No, but I'm impressed.'

'Shall we have a glass of wine?'

'Certainly. Red or white?'

'I seem to remember that they have a great Chardonnay.'

Over guacamole and pita bread, Rachel tells me her story. She lost her parents in a tragic accident when she was still a teenager. Rachel was fortunate to have the support of a large

extended family, but she was stuck in an abyss of grief and confusion for the better part of a decade. When Rachel speaks of her parents her voice becomes shaky. But there's a glint in her hazel eyes, which suggests resilience. Rachel tells me that she became a journalist because she's interested in people's stories. She could have made a career in television, but instead, she chose to work for the *Inner West Weekly*. It's a local newspaper that allows her to meet ordinary people who have extraordinary tales to tell. When she's finished, Rachel asks about my story.

I speak of the pain of losing my parents, and of building an existence that's full of 'stuff'. I talk about the thrill of going to Katie's school play, and how I need to be supportive of Nell during her divorce. Rachel appears to be fascinated by my story and I have to admit, I'm flattered. I even confide in Rachel about what's been going on in Freya's life. We don't notice the other patrons disappearing. The waiters look exhausted as they begin to pack up the tables and mop the floors. It's our cue to leave. There's only one person ahead of us in the taxi queue, so there is little time to say goodbye. Ordinarily, I'd be working lines on Rachel right now, in an attempt to talk my way into her bed. But I don't want that with her. I take Rachel's hand and brush my lips against her fingers. When I look up into her eyes, she's cringing.

'Mark, you're going to hate me,' she says.

'Why on earth would you say that?'

'I lied to you.'

A taxi has just pulled into the curb. The driver blows his horn.

'Mark, I should take this cab.'

'Rachel, what did you lie about?'

She opens the car door but I stand in her way.

'Rachel, please.'

'My name.'

'I don't understand.'

'My real name is Alicia, Alicia Summers.'

I'm so shocked, I don't even notice her scurrying into the back seat.

'I'll be fair to Freya,' she says, before slamming the door shut.

## **Chapter Twenty-five**

This is the fifth time in as many hours that I've cursed my phone. Then I shriek, plunge my fingers into my scalp, and embrace the lie that every insomniac desperately wants to believe - that when I close my eyes I will instantly fall into a deep, coma like sleep. Dang! I try to imagine cute, fluffy sheep jumping over a fence. It's futile. At seven o'clock I crawl out of bed. I feel nauseous, my eyes ache, and a jack hammer is wreaking havoc in my skull. Reflecting back on that day, I can't remember what I did at work. Perhaps, I attended meetings, made some calls, I might have even argued with Frank.

I do know that I was overwrought with guilt. I divulged secrets to that assassin, Alicia Summers, secrets that Freya had entrusted to me. In hindsight, I can see how Summers ensnared me. She told me this story, probably a concoction, about losing her parents in a plane crash. She seemed to understand what happens when the ground under your feet suddenly disappears, and so many truths are up for grabs. A connection had been established that felt palpable. Summers hung onto my every word, occasionally nodding her head in agreement, or laughing whenever I said something self-deprecating. I never doubted her sincerity when she asked me if I had any close friends. She smiled in encouragement as I spoke about Freya's quirks, and the usual paradoxes and foibles that make each one of us endearing. I confessed that I had been the one who talked Freya into internet dating. Then I became a human sieve, releasing droplets of conversations with Freya about Simon and Craig.

For the next few days, Freya did not call, which was unusual. Each morning I logged onto *The Daily's* website, holding my breath, expecting to feel the assassin's bullets. But there was nothing. By Thursday afternoon I began to worry. Why hadn't I heard from Freya? Was it because she'd been arrested? Had Patrick done something to her? Was Freya tied up in a

dungeon hidden deep in the Blue Mountains? When I eventually called Freya, her voice was croaky and tired.

'Freya, you sound terrible.'

'I feel terrible.'

'What happened?'

'I'm not going to be working on the Inquiry,' Freya says sadly.

'I'm so sorry.'

'Yeah, I was really excited about it. But, in light of you know what, the Commissioner thought that it wasn't appropriate for me to take the job.'

She coughs and splutters.

'Freya, you sound sick.'

'I've been struck down by the flu.'

'Do you need me to do anything? I could take you to the doctor. Oh, do you need me to do some grocery shopping?'

'Mark that's very kind of you. But Aunty June is looking after me.'

'Get outta town!'

'It's something I thought I would never see, Aunty June stepping foot outside of Queensland.'

'When did she arrive?'

'Tuesday night,' Freya says, 'she rang from out of the blue to tell me that she was at Central Station. Aunty June took the train the whole way down here.'

'Why didn't she fly?'

'Aunt June watches *Air Crash Investigation* on pay TV. She swears that she will never fly,' Freya says.

'So why is the Mayor of Doonaville in Sydney?'

'Aunty June is going in an adventure race. You know, those events that require competitors to jump over fire, swim through tunnels and climb over walls.'

'Oh my God!'

'I know,' Freya says incredulously.

'When is the race?'

'Sunday,' Freya says, 'but she came early to familiarise herself with the course. Aunty June has been taking good care of me. Last night she made the best chicken soup I've ever tasted. But I feel bad for not being able to show her around Sydney.'

'I can take Aunty June out tonight,' I say.

Standing in the doorway of Freya's apartment is a woman who reminds me of Yoda.

Admittedly, Aunty June has neither long ears nor green skin. And as much as I would like it to happen, I don't think that she's going to produce a light saber anytime soon. But like Yoda, Aunty June is tiny and she has these piercing green eyes. Presently, she's giving me this death stare, which kind of makes me want to reach out for a light saber.

'What the fuck do you want?'

'I'm Mark, Freya's friend.'

'Heard a lot about you,' she sniffs.

'Likewise.'

'Ya think you're pretty fuckin' deadly, don't ya?'

I could be at home right now, spending some quality time with the home entertainment system I spent a fortune on. Instead, I am being interrogated by a Murri matriarch, who scares the bejeezers out of me.

'From what I've heard, there is no one who's deadlier than you, Aunty June.'

Aunty June grips my right cheek and shakes it.

'Augggh give me a fuckin' hug.'

Aunty June's idea of a hug is a lot like a rugby tackle. I'm too soft and pudgy for such harsh treatment.

'Is that you Mark?', Freya's voice travels through the bathroom door.

'Sure is.'

I walk past Aunty June and sit on Freya's couch. I'm surprised to see a black violin case nestled between the end of the couch and the wall.

'Young fullah, I'd like ya to meet Mr Tibbs,' Aunty June says, pointing to the violin case.

'Bub, Mr Tibbs is a genuine Thompson submachine gun,' she says proudly.

'You're joking?'

'Why would I do that?'

'Weren't you nervous that someone on the train would find out?'

'Find out about what?', she says.

'That it's a gun.'

'Nah, I kept ta meself,' she says.

'Does Freya know?'

'That one doesn't know shit about guns.'

'So what did you tell her was in the case?'

'A violin of course. True God, you city slickers are slow!'

Aunty June sits down on the couch. She stares at me intently, like this is all part of some elaborate plan to break my composure.

'How was the train ride to Sydney?'

She shrugs.

'The food was shit, but it beat Big 'Ole's watery roast.'

Even though it's late December, she's wearing the navy, grey, yellow and white jersey of the North Queensland Cowboys.

'So the Cowboys are your favourite team?'

'Who'd you hear that from?'

'Um, Freya told me.'

Aunty June roars with laughter.

'Is everything alright?', Freya yells out.

'Never you mind, Girlie,' Aunty June hollers.

Aunty June lowers her voice and points to the bathroom door.

'That one doesn't know shit about football,' she says.

When Freya finally steps into the living room she's wearing pink pajamas and black socks. Her hair is tied back, revealing a pale face.

'Bub, you sure you don't want me to stay?'

'I'm fine Aunty June.'

Freya turns to me.

'Will the two of you be alright?'

From the anxious look that Freya gives me, I assume that the question was intended for my benefit. I laugh as I nod my head in agreement.

'Bub, don't stay up waitin' for me to get home. Fuckin' love ya.'

As soon as the door closes behind us, Aunty June gives me this mischievous grin.

'It's time for us to bust a move,' she says.

'Aunty June, I thought we'd start with the Opera House.'

'Yeah alright Bub, that'll do.'

Aunty June runs her index finger across the bonnet of the Audi R8 and whistles. I must admit that I too am feeling affection for the car. After being without it for the better part of a week, I discovered that I really am attached to the Audi R8.

'Nephew, ya gotta let me drive.'

'With all due respect Aunty June, there is no way that's ever going to happen.'

'Bub, the night is young.'

She climbs into the passenger seat, and takes a moment to adjust the leg space, which is unnecessary given that she is so tiny.

'Bub, what CDs have you got?'

'Look in the console.'

Aunty June settles on Bruce Springsteen. When *Dancing in the Dark* comes on, Aunty June sings along and boogies in her seat. She's bewildered by the traffic in Parramatta Road and I can't

blame her. It's so congested it's more of a car park than a road. But when we finally reach Circular Quay, Aunty June is impressed. At this time of the day the Opera House looks like a cluster of enormous, scaled shells. I've lived in this City ever since I can remember, but seldom have I seen it through eyes as vivid as Aunty June's. She drinks in the dark and restless waters, and the historic buildings hemmed in around the foreshore.

'I can't believe people walk up that bridge,' she says in awe.

'We could do a bridge walk, after the adventure race.'

Aunty June gives me this warm smile.

'I'm happy with the view from here Bub.'

A massive cruise ship is berthed at the harbour, and weary tourists are hauling suitcases behind them. Men and women in suits seem to be glowing, and I imagine that each one of them is heading for their Thursday night watering hole.

'Would ya get a load a that!', Aunty June says, pointing at a plaque that belongs to the Writers Walk. The plaque commemorates the writer, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and has re-produced an extract from her poem, 'Son of Mine'.

'She was a good sort,' Aunty June murmurs.

'You knew her?'

'Yeah, she was the first one of our mob to publish a book a poems. When that book came out in 1964, our mob in Queensland could still be controlled by the old mission managers. Bet you didn't know that.'

'Aunty June, I suspect that there are a lot of stories that you could tell me.'

'Yeah, our mob have got a shitload.'

We continue to study the different plaques that belong to the Writers Walk. We pause at one devoted to Faith Bandler. Aunty June tells me that she met Faith Bandler, when they both worked on the 'Yes' Vote campaign for the 1967 referendum.



'They were different times. The push for the '67 referendum was a movement that was built from the ground up. This gammon campaign for constitutional recognition that's bein' led by that Recognise lot is just smoke and mirrors,' she laments.

'Can you feel that Bub?', Aunty June says, as we're hit by a gentle shower.

It's extraordinary how everything changes in an instant. The light has gone grey and the air bursts with the smell of rain hitting the concrete.

'Aunty June, would you like a glass of champagne?'

'Yeah, I was just thinkin' how nice it would be to sip some champagne while admiring the view.'

We head for one of my favourite bars in the Rocks. Aunty June smiles when she sees a young busker outside the ferry terminal. White stripes have been painted across his face and he's busily packing away a didgeridoo. The young man yells out, 'Hello Aunty' and she gives him the familiar nod.

'Where's your mob from?', Aunty June asks me.

'New Zealand, originally.'

'Don't you mean Aotearoa?'

'Of course. Thanks for reminding me.'

'Do you go back there often?'

'No.'

'But that's your land, your people,' she says in disbelief.

'My parents were Australian. They adopted my sister and me when we were very young, and moved us here.'

Mum and Dad were always honest with us about where we came from, but scant on the detail. In hindsight, there was never much time to dwell on the past, not when our lives were consumed by school, work and odd jobs around the house. As I grew older, there were a few occasions when I expressed curiosity about our birth parents. Dad would always walk away, and Mum usually fell silent.

'Come on Bub, no time for sadness tonight,' Aunty June says.

We walk inside a bar across from the Museum of Contemporary Art and stake a claim on some bar stools.

'Fuck me!', she says, looking up from the menu.

'This is twice the price of the Doonaville Bowls Club!'

'Aunty June, you pay a premium for being in the Rocks,' I say gently.

She shakes her head and reads the menu again.

'It's my shout,' I say, 'it's an honour for me to finally meet you.'

After a little more banter Aunty June allows me to buy her a drink.

'So what's your story Bub?'

'Well, I've got a sister, and a gorgeous niece and nephew.'

'You the oldest?'

'The youngest.'

'That figures.'

'What do you mean?', I say, a little shocked. Is she implying that I'm selfish?

'What about you and Freya?', she says, ignoring my question.

'Are you asking if we've ever been, you know, together?'

'That's exactly what I'm askin'.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I guess we decided that we'd be better off staying friends.'

'That sounds pretty fuckin' stupid to me.'

'What makes you say that?'

Aunty June ignores me and pauses to survey the bar. It's mostly youngsters in suits, nattering away.

'So you got a woman or what?'

'No.'

'Good,' she says.

This conversation makes me reflect on my last date, with Alicia Summers. I don't want to ruin tonight by worrying about what that assassin may or may not write about Freya.

'Are you excited about the adventure race?'

'Yeah, gives me somethin' to focus on,' she says nonchalantly.

Aunty June moves closer.

'Bub, you wanna go somewhere quieter?'

The soft music that was playing when we arrived has been drowned out by a flock of murmurs and the occasional squeal. The Thursday night crowd is beginning to swell and it's going to get a hell of a lot bigger, with Christmas just over a week away.

'Aunty June you read my mind.'

'Yeah, I got a talent for that.'

We leave the City and head for home.

'Bub, seeing that we're goin' to your neck of the woods, why don't we get a feed at The Oaks Hotel?'

'Aunty June, I was under the impression that this was your first trip to Sydney.'

'Bub, that's true, but I'm a modern woman. So I don't go anywhere unless I Google it first. The Oaks Hotel is an institution, accordin' to TripFinder.'

'Aunty June, are you warming up for a big night?'

'You can betcha ya budoo I am,' she says, sending the two of us into fits of laughter.

'Aunty June, you shouldn't talk like that.'

'Why? You got a budoo, haven't ya?'

Hearing Aunty June talk about my penis makes me giggle. I still remember the first time I heard Freya use that word. We'd had a few drinks and she was complaining about a former partner's lack of sexual prowess. As she bemoaned the absence of 'budoo magic', Freya's cheeks turned bright red.

'You didn't tell me you had a fuckin' Harley,' Aunty June says after we pull into the garage.

'When can I take it out for a ride?'

'Don't you have important things to do before the race?'

'What about the jet ski?' she says, 'when can we take that out for a burl?'

'Come inside and I'll make you a gin and tonic.'

As I mix our drinks Aunty June turns her gaze to my family photographs. She thinks that Katie and Tom are gorgeous. But I get the sense she's disappointed that I have neither fishing rods nor crab pots.

'Aunty June, I think it's my turn to ask you some questions.'

'Fire away Mark.'

I'm taken aback by her response. I had expected her to face up to me, and well, tell me off.

'Alright ... do you have a man?'

Aunty June smiles to herself.

'Okay Aunty June, you have to spill. What's his name?'

'What's it to ya?'

'Okay, you don't have to tell me his name. What do you like about this man?'

'He's earnest, has a good heart, and he knows how to use his binungs. We spend hours on the phone yarnin' about all kinds a things. And he likes his fishing, which is a bonus, 'cause I'm a fish whisperer.'

'Where did the two of you meet?'

'Same place where I found out about The Oaks Hotel.'

'The internet!'

'Why so surprised Bub?'

'Well, no reason, Aunty June.'

'What, ya think that internet datin' is just for fuckin' losers?'

'No, no, no.'

'I like to call it virtual man huntin' meself,' she says.

'Hmm, that's got a ring to it.'

'You know what my site name is?'

I'm tempted to say something silly, but I lose my nerve.

'Black Rose,' she says proudly.

'And what site does Black Rose belong to?'

'The place where all sassy sistas go to – Single&sophisticated.com.'

I try my hardest to suppress the urge to laugh, but it gets the better of me. Aunty June looks angry and perhaps a little hurt.

'Aunty June I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at myself, and Freya. As it turns out, we're all on Single&sophisticated.com. But I suspect that you've had better luck than the two of us.'

'No kidding,' she says, 'is that really where she met Craig Lee?'

'How did you know about him?'

'Freya said she had a boyfriend, a while back, but she never mentioned him again. Then I heard the gossip through the Murri Grapevine,' she says.

It appears that Aunty June is wiser and worldlier than either one of us had given her credit for.

'The Murri Grapevine is a powerful thing,' Aunty June says.

'I didn't know that the Murri grapevine ran through New South Wales. I thought that this was Koori country.'

'It is Koori country. But I have friends down here who are on Facebook. And one of my tiddas sent me a link to *The Daily's* website.'

'Oh.'

'Freya met that Koori fullah, Simon Palmerston on the site too?'

'Yeah, but Simon and Freya didn't exactly hit it off,' I say.

'Aunty June, Freya didn't want you to worry about her. That's why she didn't tell you.'

'Bit late for that now,' she says angrily.

'Maud and me had a talk after we read that article. We decided that I had to come to Sydney to sort things out for Freya.'

'So you're not really here for the adventure race?'

'Course I am. On Sunday mornin' this little black duck is gonna be runnin' up walls and haulin' arse over fire. Murri better be careful though, cause if I fall, I'll end up with a burnin' ring,' she says, sending us both into hysterics.

After the laughter dies down, Aunty June looks at me, her eyes searching mine for reassurance.

'How bad is it Bub?'

'Aunty June, I really don't know. But Freya's been interviewed by the police and a detective from the Homicide Squad has been here too.'

'What did he want?'

'I think he wanted to make sure that her alibi for the night when Craig Lee was murdered checked out. Unfortunately, he also found a note that Freya wrote. It said that she wasn't sure if Craig deserved to live.'

Aunty June winces and mutters something under her breath.

'Oh, and the police searched Freya's apartment. Apparently, they found a coat that belonged to Simon.'

She sits back and seems to become lost in her thoughts.

'Aunty June, I promise you, I'm going to be there for Freya.'

She rises from her chair and gives me a hug.

'Me and Freya are gonna have a long yarn tomorrow.'

'I think she'll be relieved to finally tell you.'

'Aunty June will sort everything out,' she says confidently.

'Really?'

'Yeah course. Look, I been watchin' crime shows and readin' detective novels ever since I can remember. Virgil Tibbs was the first black detective I fell in love with, but that John Shaft was real smooth. Black American detectives were so much better than that gammon Bony. Arthur Upfield made our mob out to be noble fuckin' savages ...'

'Aunty June, I hate to stop you, but this is real life.'

'I know Bub. As I keep sayin', Aunty's gonna sort it all out.'

'How?'

'If I told you, I'd have to kill ya.'

I'm not sure how to respond. Aunty June almost doubles over in laughter.

'Fuck me! You city slickers aren't too bright, are ya?'

Aunty June finishes the last of her gin and tonic.

'Bub, it's time for us to paint the town black.'

'Ahh, Aunty June, don't you mean red?'

Aunty June grabs my left cheek and pulls it towards her.

'I know what I fuckin' mean.'

We walk up the hill to Military Road. When we make it to The Oaks Hotel, ten minutes later,

Aunty June insists on shouting me a beer.

'Here you go,' Aunty June says, while placing my Peroni on the cardboard coaster.

'Thank you.'

'Charged me like a wounded bull.'

'Aunty June, that's Sydney prices,' I gently remind her.

'Yeah, well it's fuckin' ridiculous if ya' ask me. But it's a nice place. Thanks for bringin' me here Bub.'

We're sitting in the beer garden. The iconic oak tree is luminous under hundreds of fairy lights.

The breeze is mild and the atmosphere celebratory. I imagine that everyone is relieved that the year is drawing to an end. That's what we do at places like The Oaks Hotel; anaesthetise ourselves to the demands of an existence that's fast and cut-throat.

'Ya reckon them fullahs know how to cook a steak?' Aunty June says, as she gestures towards the DIY barbeque.

'I guess so, but I don't really understand their logic. I mean, part of the joy of coming to places like this is that a chef does my cooking for me.'

'Fuckin' Barney does all our barbeques these days. He burns everythin'. Fuckin' walkin' bush fire, he is.'

The aromas from the barbeque are pleasing but they also arouse my hunger.

'Aunty June what would you like to eat?'

She pauses to study the menu.

'Bub, given I'm at The Oaks, I gotta have a steak. Now, the Tomahawk Steak sounds impressive, but there is no way that this little black duck is gonna eat a piece a meat that's 1.6 kilograms in weight. So I'm gonna opt for the eye fillet, well done, with classic gravy.'

'Superb choice Aunty June. I'm going to have the same.'

I step inside to order our meals. When I return Aunty June is at the barbeque, seemingly giving instructions to a young man. Her hands are animated, and I distinctly hear the word, 'Bub'.

When she sees me Aunty June gives him a slap on the back.

'So Aunty June, are you ready for your big race?'

'Bub, I got a solid trainin' regimen that I been stickin' to since I turned fifty. Every mornin' I get up at four, and I do a workout in the gym in the tool shed. Then I go for a half-hour run, followed by a hundred sit-ups.'

'A hundred sit-ups – that's impressive.'

'What kinda exercise do you do?'

'I don't.'

'That's shockin,' she says, looking very concerned.

'My life is about my work, and my investments.'

'Bub, what's the point of having money if you die young?'

The contraption that the bar maid gave me rattles and glows.

'Aunty June, our steaks are ready.'

I collect our plates from the counter inside. As always, the steak is tender and the mashed potato is light and creamy.

'How's your meal Aunty June?'

'Yeah, it's alright,' she says in between mouthfuls of mashed potato, 'but it's not as good as the tucker at the Doonaville Bowls Club.'

'I've never been to Doonaville.'



'It's a great place to chill out, and you look like you could do with some a that. But I think you'd get bored pretty fuckin' quickly.'

'You don't strike me as someone who enjoys being idle.'

'No, but Doonaville is my home. I've built a lot a friendships too. Then there's the memories. I spent the best years of my life raisin' Freya there.'

'Aunty June, I think I'd like to spend some time in Doonaville next year.'

'Sure Bub. You can stay with me and Maudie. Or I'll get ya set up in the caravan park.'

She pauses to lean in closer.

'But Bub, shouldn't you go home first? I mean, don't ya wanna re-connect with your own mob?'

'Perhaps you're right Aunty June.'

It does seem like the right time to go. With Mum and Dad gone, I no longer have to worry about them fearing they will lose us.

'Bub, I'll go with ya. I been wantin' to check out the bungy jumping in Taupo for a while now.

After we sort out this homicide investigation shit, we'll ...'

'Mark Tonkin!'

When I was nineteen years old that voice would make the hairs on the back of my neck stand, and tremble in fear.

'Oliver.'

I have a flash back of a lecture theatre, filled with hundreds of students. I'm trying my best to hear our professor, who has a bad habit of muttering. All of a sudden my left ear is stinging. I turn around to McGrady. The ruler he used to strike me is still in his hand. He gives me the same obnoxious grin that he's wearing now.

'How's the car?'

'Fine, thank you.'

'You didn't look so smug the other night.'

'It's not every day that someone destroys my windscreen.'

McGrady's beady eyes are scornful. He's not quite the monster he was all those years ago, but he could still do me irreparable harm.

'I understand you met my daughter, Agnes.'

'Uhh, Oliver, I don't know what you mean,' I say, trying my best to look puzzled.

'She's seventeen years old, you bastard.'

In the corner of my eye I see Aunty June rising from her chair. Hands on her hips, she stares up into the giant's face.

'I don't know what the fuck is goin' on here. But I'm tellin' you – turn around and walk away,' she says.

'Who the hell are you?'

'My name is June. Aunty June.'

He studies her diminutive frame and laughs.

'Aunty June, whoever the hell you are, you should know that I don't take kindly to receiving orders.'

Aunty June glares at him and pounds her left fist into the palm of her right hand.

'I'm givin' you my final warning.'

'Fuck off.'

'Oliver, Aunty June is going to teach you some manners.'

'Manners? What the hell could a boong teach me about that?', he hollers.

Aunty June shakes her head from side to side.

'Oliver that was very fuckin' inappropriate.'

McGrady's smile suddenly disappears and his face becomes contorted. I look down to see Aunty June's right hand planted firmly across his crotch.

'Oliver, I forgot to tell you I'm an expert at handlin' mud crabs. Yep, been doin' it for thirty years.'

She seems to tighten her grasp and McGrady whimpers in pain.

'Do you know what a mud crab can do to the family jewels?'

'Please,' he gasps.

'It appears that me nephew did somethin' he shouldn't have. I'll talk to him, Oliver.'

'Just stop!'

'You gonna leave me nephew alone?'

McGrady silently nods in agreement. Aunty June surrenders her grip. McGrady hangs his head low and skulks into the bar.

'Aunty June that was incredible!'

'What the fuck went on between you and his daughter?'

I confess the sordid tale without any embellishment. Aunty June listens, occasionally shaking her head in disgust.

'Bub, you can't do that, it's wrong,' she says after I've finished.

I'm scared that Aunty June thinks less of me now.

'I know.'

'Mark, you got a big heart and you've taken good care of Freya. So I know that you're capable of better things.'

'Thanks Aunty June. You have no idea how much that means to me.'

'Mark, I got a question for ya.'

'What's that Aunty June?'

'Are we still gonna paint the town black?'

'Aunty June, you and I are going to have the ran-tan to end all ran-tans.'

My few surviving memories of that night are vague and cringe-worthy. Scattered among the lost hours, are images of Aunty June being quite the pool shark in one watering hole. We got kicked out of another. Oh, and I doubt that I will ever forget the sight of Aunty June pinching the bottom of a bouncer in some Irish pub in the Rocks.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Her tongue feels like gravel and her breath smells of decay. She moans and then yelps in excitement. She places her tongue into my ear and gently nibbles the lobe. I drift into memories of a lazy Saturday afternoon in Anderson Park. Young men try to play a serious game of cricket, a family nearby is packing up their picnic hamper, and dogs are playing. Dogs! I open my eyes to a beast. It could be an echidna. It's certainly the size of one. But in the place of quills is long, matted hair. It shrinks back and studies me through bushy eyebrows.

'Oi you, come 'ere,' Aunty June says firmly.

The beast skulks into the kitchen and pauses next to Aunty June. She's wearing one of my polo shirts and a pair of my long shorts. Her hair is tousled and wet. Aunty June's smile suggests that she's recovering from last night's excesses better than I am.

'Aunty June, is that what I think it is?'

'Don't you remember?'

'Evidently not.'

'We were waitin' for a taxi when I saw this little dog on its own. It looked real scared and was tryin' to hide behind a bin. I called her to me, and that's when I noticed she didn't have a collar on. I reckon someone's dumped her. Can't get over the bloody cruelty of some people,' she says.

'So why didn't you ring the RSPCA?'

'Cause I doubt that they woulda been open at three in the morning.'

'So why was the dog our problem?'

'I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear that.'

I am still wearing yesterday's clothes and I smell of stale sweat. My mouth has that lingering saccharine aftertaste from spirits and soft drink. Both of my arms are covered in stamps.

'Would you like a piece of toast?'

'No thanks Aunty June.'

'I was talkin' to the dog.'

She opens the pantry cupboard and takes out a jar of marmalade. The dog sits at her feet, its tail is wagging furiously. Aunty June spreads some marmalade on a piece of toast and hands it to the dog, who licks it excitedly.

'Hmm, I'm gonna call you Marmalade.'

'Shouldn't you report it to the pound?'

'I can tell that she's got nowhere to go. Besides, there's a reason why we found this little dog. It was meant to come home with me.'

I lift myself from the lounge and I instantly feel nauseous.

'You're lookin' sad and sorry for yourself. What ya need is a good feed.'

'Thanks Aunty June, but I had better get ready for work.'

I look down at my watch and scream.

'Bub, what's wrong?'

'It's 8.30. I should have been at work half an hour ago.'

I race for the bathroom, but pause at the bottom of the staircase.

'Thanks for the deadly night,' Aunty June says.

'It was a pleasure.'

'Bub, you get ready for work. I can see meself out.'

'Are you sure Aunty June?'

'Bub, this black tracker is more than capable of making it from Neutral Bay to Five Dock.'

'Okay, sorry I don't have time to drive you home.'

'Fuckin' love ya,' she says with a grin.

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I don't remember ever feeling this bad after a student party. My few memories of those seedy affairs are of naked people in togas passed out in the university grounds, and cocktails that had been mixed in garbage cans. To this day, I have no idea what the latter consisted of, but I will never forget its devastating impacts. Mum would always wake me the next day, with a cup of

coffee and the smell of bacon and eggs cooking on the stove. She called it her hangover cure, and I remember it being very effective. Perhaps, my system was more robust twenty years ago? Presently, my ears are buzzing, my headache is excruciating, and I desperately need sleep. No wonder I can't seem to do a damn thing at work. Ordinarily, I'm the office wizard of spread sheets. But none of it is making sense today. It's just hundreds of numbers, jumbled and empty of meaning.

I sneak out of the office and head for the ground floor. I know this is crazy – leaving without telling anyone where I am going. But I suspect everyone is so busy with their own work that no one will notice if I'm gone for an hour or so. I walk around the City for a while, and then head for the little cafe two blocks away from our office. At lunch time it's impossible to find a table here. But because it's mid-morning I can sit down and enjoy my coffee. When I step back into the office I feel anxious. I expect someone to ask me where I've been, but no one appears to notice me. Perhaps, I'll be able to get some work done now.

'Mark, do you have five minutes?'

Whenever Frank poses a question, it's invariably an instruction.

'Sure Frank.'

We walk past the maze of work stations. Offices with walls and doors are becoming increasingly rare in the corporate world. Some people try to personalise their space with photographs of their partners, kids and pets. Frank's work station, like mine, is empty. Whenever Frank wants to have a serious conversation with one of us, it takes place in the conference room behind the work stations. Although it has a view of King Street Wharf the conference room feels sterile too. Frank is one of the few men I know who wears suspenders and a bow tie. Today the former is blue and white striped and the latter pale yellow. His glasses have broad lenses that seem to magnify his grey eyes. Those eyes are studying me with a combination of irritability and concern.

'What's wrong?', he asks.

'What do you mean Frank?'

'You're off with the fairies.'

I laugh, trying to brush it off.

'Mark, you used to be the most dedicated member of our team. Sometimes, I used to think that you worked too hard. Not anymore.'

He sighs and plays with his left suspender.

'But I rarely leave before eight,' I moan.

'You used to stay until eleven!'

I breathe deeply, sit straight in my chair.

'Frank, whatever it is, I can fix it. I'll burn the midnight oil if I have to.'

He shakes his head and that's when I notice that he's stopped looking at me. Instead, he's facing the door.

'Christine in HR is waiting for you,' he says.

How I respond will have an impact on the rest of my career. Sydney might have a population of four and a half million, but the corporate world is small. I need to stay calm.

'We have to shed staff and your recent performance hasn't been satisfactory,' he says.

This is the first time since he became my boss that Frank has ever complained about my performance. I could list ten other people in this office who are clueless; individuals who I have, on occasion, had to carry. But that's not the way it works.

'It's been great working with you, Frank.'

I extend my hand and he gratefully takes it.

'If you need a referee ...'

'I'll let you know.'

As I open the door, I catch a glimpse of Frank. His back is turned to the door and his shoulders are slouched. It strikes me that it wasn't easy for Frank to sack me after all. Perhaps, I never really knew him?

The rest of the day is a haze – a conversation with someone in HR and brief goodbyes to the few colleagues I had a rapport with. We promise to catch up for drinks when we're free, but we all know that won't happen. I take the small box that contains my belongings and head for the bus stop. My phone rings. It's Nell.

'Hey Sis.'

'Mark, you sound despondent.'

'I got fired.'

'You poor thing!'

'Nell, things could be worse.'

I'm in a good position financially. I don't have to worry about coughing up money for private school fees, or paying off a mammoth sized mortgage. But I sure will miss having a job to go to each day.

'I was ringing you to talk about Christmas Day. The kids are going to Jeremy's new place in the afternoon. So I thought that you and I could take them in the morning.'

'That would be swell,' I say, trying to sound enthusiastic.

'This isn't a good time for you to talk, is it?'

'Sorry Nell, I'm just flat.'

'Okay, I'll call you tomorrow.'

'Fuckin' love ya.'

'What did you say?'

'I meant to say – I love you. Nell, you are the best sister a guy could wish for, and we're going to be seeing a lot more of each other. I promise.'

'Okay,' she says, 'I don't know what's gotten into you, but I like what I hear.'

'Bye Sis.'

As I wait for my bus I ponder whether my ran-tan with Aunty June was the real cause for my sacking. Did Frank smell liquor on my breath, or was he disturbed by my bloodshot eyes? Perhaps, he saw the remains of one of the stamps on my arms that no amount of scrubbing



would remove? Ahh fuck it! I choose to believe that Frank was always going to dispose of me, it was just a matter of time. Besides, I will never regret painting the town black with the inimitable Aunty June. Who in their right mind would?

## **Chapter Twenty-seven**

Light streams through the bedroom blinds. I imagine the people outside who are running, surfing, roller blading, kayaking and bush walking. I can't even remember the last time I exercised. What would happen if I tried? Would I have a heart attack, or pull a muscle in my back? Perhaps, my body would collapse from the shock of physical exertion. The phone rings from the dresser. It's Mike Brewster.

'Hey Buddy, long time no see.'

'Mark, how are you?'

'Good mate,' I say, pretending to be cheerful.

'I have this vague memory of us agreeing to catch up before Christmas,' he says.

'That's just around the corner,' I say.

'So we should catch up today. I can meet you at the Kirribilli Hotel this afternoon. How about one?'

'Great. See you then.'

As I get out of bed, I mull over yesterday. I know I'll be fuming for weeks, perhaps months, over the unfairness of it all. I am also painfully aware that I'm the only person who is still giving any thought to my sacking. When they return to the office on Monday, few of my former colleagues will notice I'm gone. Not one will call. Ever. Perhaps, Frank did me a favour? When I shower I refuse to make eye contact with the cranky old bastard in the bathroom mirror. Instead of going to the café down the street for my coffee, I make it at home using a plunger. I cook poached eggs for breakfast and watch the morning news. Then I park the car in the street and clean up the garage. It strikes me that I will never use either the Harley or the jet ski. Perhaps, I should sell both?

After I finish my chores I head for the Kirribilli Markets. The morning sun is still gentle and the harbour is a field of diamonds. Beneath Milsons Point Train Station the markets are in full swing. All kinds of people flock to inspect the artisans' wares, and many are here with their pooches. I wonder what Aunty June and Marmalade are doing now? I was mad when I realised that she had brought a stray dog into my apartment. But now, I'm struck by how kind it was of Aunty June to rescue the poor little thing. She's a better person than I am.

I buy some sourdough and a bottle of olive oil. On my way home I pause in Anderson Park. Massive fig trees line the boundary between the park and Kurraba Road. I can't begin to imagine how old they are, or what changes have occurred within the view of those magnificent boughs. A cricket game is being played and groups of spectators watch intently from the sidelines. I sit alone without anything to read, or even a phone from which I can write pointless text messages. It feels strange at first but after a few minutes, I find myself enjoying the stillness. Perhaps, unemployment won't be so bad after all?

I suspect that the Kirribilli Hotel was once a watering hole for workers. These walls are caked with decades of stories of hardship and resilience. But like so many other inner city establishments, the Kirribilli Hotel has been refurbished for the wealthy. There's signs advertising craft beers and people are dressed in expensive casual attire. Mike is wearing a white polo shirt and faded blue jeans. He's lost some weight in the face and his eyes radiate excitement.

'Mate, you've got some news, haven't you?'

Mike and I have counselled each other through pubescent crushes and doomed experiments with Passion Pop. I was his best man. He was a pall bearer at Dad's funeral. Sometimes, I wonder if I know him better than I know myself.

'We're moving to Brisbane,' he says.

'Get outta town.'

'The house is going on the market next week.'

Abby and Mike spent every Saturday for six months attending inspections and auctions, before they finally found their home. If one was to put a figure on the amount of money they've since spent on renovations, there would be only loose change from a million. But the smile on Mike's face tells me that the decision to sell was easily made.

'What about your job?'

'I resigned.'

'Oh my God!'

'Mark, you look like you've had a big week,' he says.

'Mate, I'll tell you about that later. Let me get the first round.'

I buy our drinks while Mike finds some empty bar stools.

'So, what does Abby think about all of this?'

'It was her idea,' he says.

'What?'

'Mate, I was as shocked as you are.'

When Mike and Abby first got together he was an affable rugby player. Mike could be fierce and competitive, but he was never going to become a Wallaby. Abby, on the other hand, was ambitious. She was determined to become the wife of an elite athlete, and when that didn't happen, Abby resolved that Mike was going to reinvent himself as a master of industry.

'So tell me, how did this happen?'

'I got home late last Thursday. Claudia had gone to bed hours earlier. Abby was sitting alone at the dining room table, and she'd polished off half a bottle of wine. She wanted to talk. I thought she was going to tell me that she wanted a divorce. I'd always thought that Abby was too good for me. Everyone thinks that.'

'Mate, stop putting yourself down,' I say.

'Anyway, I asked her what was wrong. Abby demanded that I quit my job.'

'Really?'

'It's true. Abby had gotten sick of me spending all of my time at the office. I wasn't happy either. I've put so much weight on this past year,' he says glumly.

'Mate, we've all become heavier.'

'But life wasn't meant to be like this,' he says.

I have to agree that modern day life is not all that it's cracked up to be. Most of us work crazy hours in jobs that we don't particularly enjoy. But the pay-offs are not to be scoffed at. For one thing, I happen to enjoy living in Sydney. Each day I wake up to one of the most beautiful harbours in the world.

'So, buddy, why Brisbane?'

'It's cheaper to buy up there. We'll get a nice house and we'll still end up with a few hundred grand in the bank.'

'Career wise?'

He shrugs his shoulders.

'I might go back to Uni. I always wanted to become a physical education teacher. God knows I've had enough of the corporate world.'

'You and me both,' I whisper.

'What was that?'

'I said I'm dry and it's your shout.'

I feel terribly sad. I know that Mike and I will stay in touch, but it's inevitable that our friendship will change as our lives go in different directions. Mike slaps me on the back when he returns with our schooners.

'So, I hear that you and Agnes McGrady hit it off,' he says.

'Mike, if I had known that she was still in school, I never ...'

'Yeah, you thought she was older. They all think that,' he says sadly.

'Agnes has got some problems. Her parents were always more concerned with their own lives than their kids. I know Oliver regrets that now.'

Hearing him say that makes me cringe, but I do deserve my shame.

'How is Agnes?'

'Okay, I think. She's doing well in school and she's got a part-time job in the family's charity, organising corporate events.'

'If I had known that she was Oliver's daughter, I would have stayed the hell away.'

'So you and Oliver have had some recent discussions?'

'If smashing my windscreen falls within the scope of a discussion, then I guess you could say that.'

Mike shakes his head wistfully.

'How did McGrady find out about me and Agnes?'

'Certainly not from me.'

'Abby?'

'Maybe. Abby and his wife, Katrina, chat on the phone occasionally. We have them over for dinner every so often, when they feel like slumming it in Drummoyne,' he says wryly.

I could never understand why Mike and Oliver were friends at university. Whereas Oliver was a merciless bully, Mike was kind and gentle. Presently, Mike is staring at me with this big grin. His eyes are mischievous and his dimples make him look younger than thirty-eight.

'I know what you're thinking,' he says.

'Oh yeah?'

'You have no idea why I stay in touch with someone like Oliver McGrady. The truth of the matter is that I've always felt sorry for him.'

'Why on earth would anyone feel pity for Oliver McGrady?'

Oliver McGrady is the most privileged individual I have ever had the misfortune of knowing, and given that I have always lived in the North Shore, that's really saying something. Even though he boarded on campus, McGrady would drive his BMW convertible to class and park it in some prominent space. He often boasted of family dinner parties attended by the leaders of political parties and corporate high flyers. Whenever he behaved poorly, which was often, McGrady

looked supremely confident. Even back then, McGrady knew that serious wealth insulated him from ever having to play by the rules that bound the rest of us.

‘Oliver is the loneliest person I know,’ Mike says.

‘But I always remember him being surrounded by people.’

‘Most of them were hangers-on,’ Mike says with disgust.

‘You know, I went to his family’s station in Katherine, during the Christmas vacation one year. I had been expecting this close family, which included the Aboriginal workers. Whenever Oliver talked about their station, he’d described it as some tightknit community in which everyone worked hard, but the benefits were distributed equally.’

‘It wasn’t utopia?’

Mike shakes his head sadly.

‘It was like I’d stepped back in time.’

‘What do you mean?’

Mike peers into his empty glass.

‘I think we should have one more beer. After that, I’ll go home. There’s still so much to get done before our first inspection.’

Mike heads for the bar and I sit back in my seat. The alcohol and the stress of my sacking are taking effect. When Mike returns we reminisce about old times, beginning with my first crush. Aileen Worsely was beautiful, but oh so cruel. She flirted with me and giggled at my awkwardness, only to go to the formal with another boy. Then we move on to the first time that Mike laid eyes on Abby. She was a stunner, and like everyone else, I assumed that he didn’t have a chance. Shame on me.

‘Mark, I’ve learnt something about marriage.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The first few years are all about sex.’

‘Yeah, I figured that.’

‘But the intense physical attraction eventually wears off, and if you don’t already have a strong friendship, your marriage won’t last. Abby really is my best friend.’

When we step outside we’re struck by an intense heat. Mike hails a taxi and I start walking home. Christmas decorations are suspended from the street lights, reminding me that I need to buy presents for Nell and the kids. My mind turns to Freya and Aunty June. Perhaps, I should invite them to spend Christmas with Nell and me? I might even buy some treats for the dog. I’m at the top of my street when I hear the gun shots. I can’t see anyone with a gun, but the shots are getting closer. I crawl behind some apartment mail boxes. It probably isn’t terribly effective in shielding me from whoever is causing havoc, but it offers a scintilla of protection. I hear myself breathing heavily and I’m trembling. Suddenly, a weight is pressed against the back of my head. Intuitively, I know that it’s a gun.

‘Don’t do anything stupid.’

The voice is female and refined.

‘What do you want?’

I hear a harsh sound followed by a surge of intense pain in the back of my head. I can feel blood flowing through the roots of my hair. I bury my face in the cold cement.

## **Chapter Twenty-eight**

### **Transcript of June Ethel Clarkson**

**1 March 2012**

Testing, 1,2,3, testing. This statement is bein’ recorded in the office of the Black Rose Private Detective Agency, of 114 King Street, Newtown. This here King Street is a far cry from Doonaville, and there isn’t anywhere nearby to go fishin’. But me and Newtown, we share a lot in common. Like, we’re both cosmopolitan, brash, earthy. Downright sexy. When I look outside me window I see hipsters, Kooris and suits walkin’ side by side. At lunch time I wander downstairs, where there’s this Vietnamese restaurant that makes a deadly beef noodle soup. On Friday afternoons I take it easy in the Bank Hotel, and have a yarn with the other regulars.

This place used to belong to a florist, and just now I caught a whiff a roses. When I moved in here, just over a month ago, I bought a desk and chairs at a Salvation Army op-shop, and I found a bar fridge on Gumtree. I hung some pictures of Freya on the walls, and on my desk are photos of Maudie and me in the old tinny. Then I bought this here voice recorder. It's a deluxe concealable device, which I plan to use for honey traps.

Last week I met my first and only client, Lucinda Flack. You probably heard of her, she's this actress who used to be on that show, *Bondi Babes in Blue*. I was on a date with me sweetheart, walkin' through Martin Place, when I seen Lucinda lying among the marigolds. The biggest mob was gawking at her, and some were even taking pictures on their phones. Well, that got me real wild. So I pulled Lucinda up on her feet and took her home, to some flash place in Vaucluse. I left my card with her butler, not that I expected to hear from her. But then Lucinda called me the next morning. She was real grateful and put me on a retainer. I reckon I'm gonna be earning my fee though. Just got a feelin' in me bones.

Marmalade is resting her head on my feet and snoring gently. The vet reckons that Marmalade was three years old when I found her. Marmalade's been a great comfort this past year, really helped me to dig myself out of the dark hole I was in. Outside it's pouring buckets and I got no desire to get wet. So I made a cuppa and I'm gonna stay put until the rain clears. Besides, the inquest is starting next week. The City's journalists are speculating about what new revelations will emerge about the internet dating murders. So I figure it's time for me to put my side of the story down on paper.

My name is June, Auntie June. I'm a Mununjali woman from Beaudesert. Proud of that fact. I seen and done a lot in my time. I worked on the campaign for the 'Yes Vote' in the '67 referendum, marched for land rights with the Australian Black Panthers, and got arrested in '82 when a big mob of us protested during the Brisbane Commonwealth Games. The history of the black struggle is made up of David and Goliath battles. We're always throwin' pebbles at this



leviathan that's so arrogant it pretends to not even know we're there most of the time. But we got something that the giant doesn't have. We got stories.

Without stories we have nothing, are nothing. Stories are cocoons that protect the histories that bind us to our Country, and the rules for how to live with each other. They also give us comfort during times of grief. If you ever been to a Murri funeral, you'll know there's a lot a sadness. But there will also be humour to take the edge off the pain. Some of the funniest stories I ever heard were told at funerals. Growin' up we went through a lot of hard times, so we clung firmly onto our stories. Stories that made us appreciate how strong we are, and reminded us that the most important thing each one of us can do in this life is to become a responsible ancestor. The key to me becoming a responsible ancestor was tellin' our stories to Freya. Soon as she was old enough, me and Maudie would sit her down at night, and teach her about the old people and what they went through for us.

We'd always been proud of Freya. She was the first one in our family to go to university. Then she left everything that was familiar to her, and made a life for herself here, in the big smoke. But in late November, 2010, Maudie and I started worryin' about Freya. First she told us she got a man and then we never heard anythin' more about him. So I was wonderin', did this fullah leave our girl high and dry? Would I have to get a hitman from the Murri Mafia to sort him out? We don't have our own mafia, mind you, but I like the idea. We could call it the Murfia.

Anyways, one of my tiddas on Facebook sent me a link to the story about Freya that was published on *The Daily's* website. Well, I packed some clothes, notebooks and the iPad. Big 'Ole and me spent some time in the tool shed, sortin' out which gun I should take. I settled on a Glock semi-automatic pistol. Then I decided to bring Mr Tibbs along too, 'cause he's my pride and joy. I would have liked to drive my Kingswood, Daisy, to the big smoke. But it had been years since I done a long road trip, and I wasn't feelin' that confident. So Daisy stayed at home. I gave Big 'Ole strict instructions that her useless boyfriend, Barney was not to be given the keys.

The train ride was arduous and I found it difficult to sleep. When I wasn't on the iPad, or worryin' about Freya, my mind turned to Dave55. I must have spent hours lookin' at his profile. His eyes are jaded, like he's done and seen a lot a things that have made him question the goodness of people. But I always liked his smile. It's earnest. The first time we spoke on the phone I was that nervous. But there was this gentleness in his voice and he seemed interested when I talked about the Caravan Park. He even laughed when I told him about the ridiculous dress code at the Bowls Club. I'd like to think that I'll take him there one day for a counter meal. We'll style up.

Dave and me even got around to organising a face to face meeting in Coffs Harbour. It's half-way between our respective homes, and Coffs Harbour has this massive tackle shop. Given that we're both mad about fishin', it felt like it was meant to be. But when I found out about the shit that Freya was in, I had to put that plan on hold. Dave was nice when I told him. He even said that family should always come first. But I could hear the disappointment in his voice. When I arrived in the big smoke a few days later, I told Freya I was here for an adventure race, which was only partly true. The real reason for my being here, the crime solving gig, was interrupted when I went out on a ran-tan with Mark. But had we not painted the town black that night, I wouldn't have met Marmalade. The poor little thing was cowering behind a bin. I knew I couldn't leave her there. But like I used to tell Freya, everything happens for a reason.

Freya fell in love with Marmalade right away. We gave Marmalade a bath and brushed some knots out of her fur. Afterwards, the three of us curled up on the couch, and Freya and I had a heart-to-heart. Freya told me all about her misadventures with virtual man huntin'. She's got a good heart that one, but she's always been too anxious to give it away. Now she was in a world of pain. But Aunty was gonna sort it out. Not that I had a lot of time for snoopin' before the race, mind you. That Sunday I got up at four o'clock in the mornin'. I dressed into long black tights, laced up the runnin' shoes and then pinned on me bib, carrying the number 9804.

'Aunty June, here's your breakfast,' Freya says, handing me a toasted bagel and a cup a coffee.

'Thanks Bub.'

Freya is lookin' brighter this mornin'.

'Bub, I think that you beat that flu.'

'It must have been your deadly chicken soup, Aunty June.'

She takes a long look at the bib and smiles.

'Aunty June, you look deadly!'

'Bub, I'm feelin' nervous.'

'But you've trained for the race, right?'

'Time for us to catch that bus,' I say, while grabbing my knapsack from the kitchen bench. We take turns to hug Marmalade. She waddles back to the bed that we made for her out of an old cushion.

As we get closer to the City I see more people in bibs. I'm taken aback by the crowd in Hyde Park. There must be thousands of people here. Music's blarin' and banners advertising energy drinks and running shoes are all over the place. Some reality TV starlet is perched inside a studio, together with a retired Olympian. They're givin' tips on how to get through the course, and tellin' us where the porta loos are. It's time for me to join the masses behind the start line.

'Good luck,' Freya says.

'Fuckin' love ya.'

When the gun blasts I take off like a jaguar in pursuit of its prey. The hundred metre sprint leaves me feeling spent but it's nothin' compared to climbing up the wall. A few minutes later, I'm crawlin' through mud underneath barbed wire. When I hear my fellow competitors yellin' out words of encouragement to each other, I feel inspired. Which is handy, considering that I gotta run up what appears to be a hundred steps. My legs are burnin' and my brain is tellin' me to stop. In the last fifty metres I get swept up in the atmosphere and from some unknown place, I find the energy to propel my body into a sprint.

'Aunty June, that was amazing!', Freya says.

All around me people are hugging supporters, clutching their medals, and even those who are limping seem elated.

‘Bub, that was a beautiful experience.’

‘Aunty June, I’ve been in Sydney for seven years now, and yet, this is the first time that I’ve ever been to one of these events. Can you believe that?’

‘Bub, next year, you and I will do the City to Surf together.’

‘It sounds like you’ve developed a liking for Sydney.’

I have to admit that the big smoke does have a lot goin’ for it. The harbour is stunning this mornin’, and doing the race showed me that this lot get behind their community events. A few years ago, I held a 5-kilometre race in Doonaville. It began from the turn-off to Doonaville Road, followed by two loops around our town, and ended outside the Doonaville Bowls Club. Well, I only managed to attract two competitors – Maud and me. I won but the atmosphere was pretty fuckin’ flat.

Presently, we’re sittin’ in a café in the Rocks, a few metres away from the markets. There’s hand-made chocolates, crystals and scarves for sale. One stall sells only dog collars. It makes me reflect on Marmalade. I hope that she’s behavin’ herself. We both splurge on the ‘Big Breakfast’ of bacon, sausages, eggs, beans, mushrooms and tomatoes. Afterwards, I struggle to walk to the bus stop, ‘cause my legs feel like they’re filled with lead. During the ride home I keep lookin’ at my finisher’s medal. I’m gonna find a jeweler and get my name engraved on the back, together with my finishing time of 56 minutes and 21 seconds.

Marmalade is excited to see us and she keeps jumpin’ up on me knees. I head straight for the shower, and it feels so good to wash the mud and leaves off of me. I’m dryin’ me hair when I hear a knock at the front door. It sounds strange ‘cause Maud and I so rarely close our front door. But given that Barney often walks in as though he’s some kind of fuckin’ royalty, I probably should bolt the bloody thing shut. When I open the front door, I recognise that handsome face right away. He’s tall like I had imagined and he’s lookin’ dapper in his black suit. ‘Dave, how did you know where to find me?’

Oh don't, my voice is quivering. Shame!

'June,' he says, lookin' real happy.

'Yeah, how did you know I was here?'

His smile disappears and his eyes fall to the ground.

'I'm here for Freya.'

## **Chapter Twenty-nine**

'Madam, your bruschetta,' the young man says.

He's about twenty years old, and he's wearin' that popular hair style with the shaved sides and long mop on top.

'Would you like any cracked pepper?'

'Thanks Bub.'

The walls of this cafe are plastered with advertisements for concerts, political demonstrations and meditation retreats. I never seen any notices on the walls of the Doonaville Bowls Club, only the plaque with the names of all of the executive members since the Club opened in 1982. I can still remember when they were mixing the concrete for the foundations. It was the most exciting thing to happen in Doonaville, since, well, forever.

These cherry tomatoes are even sweeter than the ones I grow in our back yard. Thinkin' about home makes me sad. Right now, Big 'Ole and I should be puttin' up the Christmas lights and floggin' a tree from the pine forest along Doonaville Road. Every Christmas Eve there's a party at the Bowls Club. Barney gets dressed up as Santa and has a sack a presents for the local kids. All of them know that it's Barney behind the beard, but they go along with the ruse. Maudie and I make a shit load of rum balls, and Christmas cakes that we give away as presents. Our neighbor, Joselyn, is in her nineties and she doesn't do a lot of cooking anymore. So for the last few years, she has come to our place for Christmas dinner. I know that Maudie and her useless boyfriend will look after Joselyn this year, in my absence.

Thankfully, I remembered to bring my iPad with me, 'cause there's not a lot to do here apart from drink deadly cappuccinos and eat bruschetta. So far, I've read the news and caught up with the community gossip on Facebook. There were a couple a bitter posts from Cousin Ernie that were supposedly about the world in general, but in reality, were about his Missus. In the last one he was whingin' about 'people' who are too lazy to do the washing up after dinner. From here I got a good view of the big house across the road. It's an old style building in between two terrace houses. Police cars are parked outside, and people keep streaming in and out of the front entrance.

Freya was so composed when Dave took her away. I was real proud of her. I trust that Dave will be fair to Freya. He'll respect her right to silence and that kinda shit. I've learnt so much about him since we met on Single&sophisticated.com. I know that Dave is the oldest in a family of three boys. His Mum and Dad passed away ten years ago. Both of his brothers live near him in Balmain, and they catch up every so often. Dave is happiest when he's fly fishing in Lake St Clair, near the Hunter Valley. I been dreaming about us goin' there and canoodling under the stars. But this mornin' he looked unhappy. Although, I guess that we're not starting off under the best of circumstances. But if we're meant to be, then things will work out.

I remember how my dear old Mum used to tell me that most of our lives have already been mapped out before we are born. There are little things that you can change of course. But all the major turnin' points have already been woven into our lives, and for a reason. I've had a good life, so far, but one with a lot a responsibilities. Even when we were jarjums, I had to look after Maudie. I made sure she got out of bed each mornin', fed her brekkie and dressed her for school. It wasn't that Mum and Dad didn't love us, 'cause they fuckin' well did. It's just that they were always slavin' their guts out to keep the roof over our heads and tucker in our bellies.

Dad travelled around to get work wherever he could. He built fences, broke horses in, ya name it, he did it. Dad could make anythin' out of nothing. He built our first home himself. Lookin' back on things, I don't know how we managed to fit into that place. It was pretty basic, just

Mum and Dad's room, the little sleep-out me and Maud shared, and the kitchen. But we was happy. Mum was a real salt of the earth type. We didn't have a lot to do with her side of the family, 'cause she was taken away from them and put into a home. Mum wasn't in the home for long before she was hired out as a domestic. Once, when I was about ten, Mum was lookin' at me and she had this tear in her eye. So I asked her, 'Mum what's wrong?' She told me about the people she used to work for. They was real cruel them people. Used to make her milk their cows at four in the mornin', even though she was still a jarjum. In winter it used to get so cold she'd stand in the cow pats to keep her feet from freezing. But Mum was never one to dwell. Most of the time, she was real happy, at least, in front of us she was. Pretty too. I still got photos of Mum and Dad when they started goin' out together, when they was just teenagers. She had beautiful long hair and eyes that were light green.

Back in them days the old Office of the Director of Native Affairs kept tabs on everything us Murris did. Dad had an exemption pass, so we didn't have to live on one a them missions where your life was kept under the microscope of the superintendent. But those exemption papers could always be taken away. So he and Mum created all these masks they'd hide behind. It used to get us wild to see Mum always bein' the last person to be served in the shop, or Dad bein' called a 'boy' by the white men he worked with. They never stuck up for themselves. But now I know, they were masking their humiliation so they could keep our family together. Cheeky blacks attracted the attention of the Director of Native Affairs, who would split families apart and send people all over the state. If you were real unlucky you got sent to Palm Island, where Murris were subjected to all kinds a cruelty.

Every holiday Aunty Anita, Uncle Harry and their daughter Delia, would visit our place in Beaudesert. Maud did all the girly stuff, you know, dolls and tea parties and shit. But me and Delia were tomboys. We'd build cubby houses in the bush and go fishin' for yabbies. As we got older, I got more interested in stories about detectives. Dad collected the Bony novels and one was always in the outside dunny. When I first heard about this Murri detective I was real excited. But when I started readin' the books I was disappointed. Bony was always more at

home with the white squatters than he ever was with our mob. Them African American detectives, though, they were deadly. When I first seen *In the Heat of the Night*, I fell in love with Virgil Tibbs. True God, when Sidney Poitier looked Rod Steiger in the eyes, and said, 'They call me Mr Tibbs,' this little black duck was captivated.

When I was eighteen I moved to Brisbane and boy, was it a wild place! Drank me first glass of wine and even tried that yarndi. I'd laugh meself stupid and then I'd eat meself broke. Went to me first land rights demo and saw them black panthers in tight jeans and Afro hair. True God they were deadly! Stuck up for our mob against the coppers and the politicians, they did. But ya know it wasn't all politics. I met some other sistas and we'd look out for each other. Every Saturday night we'd style up and go to this deadly Murri disco. The brothers looked so fine, but no good, I was related to half of 'em. So no nookie for this little black duck! I loved goin' to the pictures in Brisbane too. When I seen the movie, *Shaft* I was in awe of Richard Roundtree. He beat up the bad guys, charmed the women and solved the crime, and all while makin' blackness irresistible. But like all big cities, Brisbane chews you up and eventually spits you out. I got sick of the traffic and I knew that if I stayed there, I'd never be able to buy me own block a dirt. So I took a job in a kitchen at a service station on the way to Gympie. Some of my customers would talk about this place, Doonaville, where you could throw in some crab pots and always end up with a sack full a muddies. Then outta the blue, I get this call from Delia. She and her hubbie, Arthur, had just moved there with their little girl, Freya.

Well, I fell in love with Doonaville. Within a few weeks, I had found a job as the manager of the Doonaville Caravan Park. Every so often I had to pull some of the fullahs into line, and still do. But the money was alright and I enjoyed gettin' to know the people. I may never have become a proper detective, but I'd still do a bit a snooping. Like, if anyone's crab pots went missin', they knew to come to Junie. Nothin' gets past me, mate. It wasn't long before Maud followed me. Eventually, we saved up a deposit for a house on the water. Fuckin' blue ribbon real estate if ya ask me. And the best bit - it was just around the corner from Delia and her little family.



Me and Freya, mate, we clicked from day one. After 'Mum' and 'Dad', I was one of her first words, followed by 'fuck', but I had nothin' to do with that. We did everything together, me and Freya. I'd take her fishin' with me, and she'd come along into town when we did our shoppin'. Once, her Mum panicked when she couldn't find Freya. Delia rang me, cryin' and shit. No good, I look out me front door and there's Freya, wearin' just a nappy. Had this big grin on her face, she did.

Whenever the phone rings in the early hours of the mornin' it has to be bad news. 'Cause that's the only news that can never wait. Soon as I got the call, I drove like a maniac to the hospital, with Maud swearin' beside me. Arthur had been working as a security guard in a factory out of town. Delia was picking him up after his shift when the other car ran through a red light. Freya had been sleepin' in the back seat. Her parents were dead but she didn't have a scratch. We took Freya home with us, thinkin' we'd look after her until her grandparents came to get her. But they were pretty crook themselves, and not really capable of running after an energetic jarjum. So Freya ended up livin' with us for good.

She's a good girl, our Freya. She got a bit lost after she finished Uni and wasn't real sure what to do with herself. But now, she's a big-time public servant. I reckon she'll be runnin' the New South Wales Government one day. Last time we saw each other was for me birthday in March. Maudie and Barney put on a deadly party with a keg a beer and a barbeque. Barney even managed to avoid burnin' the steaks. First time in fuckin' history! But the best bit was seein' Freya. I had no idea our girl had been plannin' on coming home. And then she surprised me with an iPad.

At first I used the internet to check the tides, and I'd catch up with the community goss' on the Indigenous portal on the ABC's website. Then I got onto Facebook and I met mob from all around Australia. Eventually, I stepped into the murky world of virtual man huntin'. It began while Maud and Barney were havin' dinner at some swanky restaurant in Noosa. I was doin' what I do most nights. Watchin' TV, havin' a cuppa, doin' a crossword, then another cuppa. But without Maud home is real quiet. That's when I had a terrible thought – what would I do if Maud moved out? The possibility was so overwhelming I needed air.

I sat on the jetty lookin' out into the darkness. It was one a them perfect Doonaville nights, with a gentle sea breeze carrying that tangy smell of the mud flats. Then it occurred to me that perhaps it was time for me to meet someone special too? I had no idea what it would be like to date at my age. Would the men be divorced? Would they have kids? But it struck me that dating in your mature years could be deadly. 'Cause by now, we've sorted out our shit and we've built a nest egg. But I needed to find a way of meetin' men. After all, Barney was probably the last eligible bachelor in Doonaville, and he was never that eligible to begin with.

When I first typed the words 'internet dating' into Google, I got 206,000,000 results. No fuckin' joke. There are all kinds of sites, books, blogs and news stories about true love found in cyberspace. The first site I joined was called, 'Murri Matchmaker', for Murriss and other people who want to date us. And who wouldn't want to date us? I mean, we're so fuckin' deadly! In my profile I described myself as a senior manager, and I said my hobbies were fishin', watchin' crime shows and following the NRL. Within a few weeks, my matches grew to a hundred, 'cause they all wanted my footy tips. The problem was I started gettin' messages from men whom I knew were my relations. When they sent one a those gammon little love hearts to the Black Rose, they had no idea they were chattin' me up. So I decided it was time to go mainstream. A lot of the sites were full of teeny boppers and twenty somethings. I'm no cougar so I stayed away from those. That's when I stumbled upon Single&sophisticated.com. I was drawn to the name 'cause if there's one word that's apt to describe who I am, it's sophisticated.

Virtual man huntin' has been an intriguing and unpredictable adventure. I've met some nice men, the odd Casanova and one con artist. The latter was called Stan, and he claimed to be a member of some royal family that had been overthrown by a rebel army. Stan reckoned he was languishing in a prison in Africa. If only I could place one thousand dollars into his bank account, I would secure his freedom. Oh, and as a gesture of gratitude, he would give me ten thousand dollars. But this little black duck didn't come down in the last shower. So I told Stan that if and when he got outta jail, a job at the Doonaville Caravan Park would be waiting for him. He could even rent a caravan for free until he got back on his feet. But I never did get a reply from Stan. Presently, my mobile phone rings. Big 'Ole's name flashes across the caller ID.

'Maud.'

'Junie, it's so good to hear your voice.'

'What ya up to Big 'Ole?'

'Oh just sitting on the patio with Barney.'

'How's the grandson?'

Barney just got back from Darwin, where he spent some time getting to know the newest member of his family.

'The baby's a real sweetie. You should see the photos of him. He's a handsome little fella.'

'Just like his granddad,' I hear Barney chime.

'How's Freya?', she says anxiously.

'Freya's been better since I arrived.'

'You sortin' things out?'

'We're gettin' there Sis.'

'How did the adventure race go?'

'Deadly Sis. I can't wait to show you my medal.'

'Go on, tell her,' I hear Barney say.

'Tell me what?'

'Well, don't go gettin' upset on us Junie,' Maud says.

'Why would I get upset?'

'Cause we been doin' a bit of our own detective work ... on my iPad,' she says nervously.

'You got an iPad!'

'Barney bought it for me when he was in Darwin.'

'I was missing her Junie,' Barney says.

'Big 'Ole tell your man to shut up. I can't speak to the both of you's at the same time.'

'Barney darlin', can you bring the washing in please? Looks like a storm's coming.'

'He'll have a fuckin' storm from me if he doesn't shut up,' I say.

'What's that Junie?'

'Nothin'. So what have ya found?'

'Some photos of Samantha Lee's fundraiser for Power Through Responsibility,' she says.

'What do they tell us?'

'They were taken the night that Craig Lee was murdered.'

'So?'

'I'm just tryin' to be helpful,' Maud says, sounding hurt.

'Sorry Sis. Why don't ya send the link to me Hotmail account? I'll show them to Freya. She might recognise somethin' important.'

In the corner of my eye I see Freya walkin' outta the big house. She's holding a tissue to her eyes and taking each step slowly, as though she's in a daze.

'Maud, I gotta go.'

'Take care of our girl,' she says.

'Fuckin' love ya.'

### **Chapter Thirty**

The shop fronts along Parramatta Road are tired. The specialty stores that sell only one thing, like beads, always seem to be closed. When the bus goes past Ashfield Park I notice a big sign advertising Carols by Candlelight on Christmas Eve. Freya and me haven't even talked about what we're gonna do for Christmas dinner, even though it's only five days away. It'll probably be a merry fuckin' McDonalds for us. But I guess that I should go easy on the girl. Freya's been real glum since she left the big house. Keeps starin' out the window, like a stunned flathead. I get a new text and my heart sings.

'Who are you sending a text to?', Freya asks as I'm typing away.

Never you mind, Girlie.'

Marmalade greets us at the front door as though she's been with us forever. Freya has a long shower and I use the time to check on Mr Tibbs. I don't pick him up, 'cause doin' that always gives me the urge to use him. When Freya finally emerges from the bathroom I'm sittin' on the

couch, with a cuppa for each of us. Marmalade makes some space in the middle and rests her head on my lap.

'Out with it you.'

She sighs deeply and shakes her head.

'They asked me a lot of questions about Simon. Like, they wanted to know how I ended up with his coat,' she says.

'Well?'

'Aunty June, it was perfectly innocent. We met for coffee one afternoon. When I got up to leave, it was pouring rain. I didn't have an umbrella so Simon lent me his coat.'

'But the police don't believe you?'

'Well, in light of Craig ...'

'I got the general idea about what happened to Craig, bless him. But what ties you to Craig's murder?'

'Well, the knife that was, you know ... I used it to chop up the onions for that flash duck dinner I made for him,' Freya says sheepishly.

'And then, when I was at Mark's place the next morning, I wrote a note in which I said that Craig didn't deserve to live. I used Simon's fountain pen.'

'Fuck me Freya!'

'The weird thing is that it had this woman's name engraved in it.'

'What woman?'

'I don't know. I think her name started with 'A'. Anna maybe.'

She pauses to stare into Marmalade's eyes. I reckon that Marmalade knows exactly what we're talkin' about, because she's giving this real sympathetic look to Freya.

'Aunty June, it gets worse.'

'Is that possible?'

'Detective Sergeant Chappell showed me this photo of Harold James, the guy who was murdered at the Balmain Ferry Terminal.'

'I remember seein' a news report about him.'

'Apparently, he sent me a message through Single&sophisticated.com.'

'Fuck me!'

We hear the intercom buzz from the hallway. I open the front door to a black man who's as pale as a sheet.

'Aunty June, in the space of three days, I lost my job, had bullets sprayed onto my balcony, and then I got hit with a gun,' Mark says.

There's a large white dressing on the back of his head. The poor bugger looks real sorry for himself.

'Bub, that's a lotta punches that life's throwin' at ya.'

Marmalade huddles beside Mark and licks his ankles.

'Hey Marmalade, it looks like you've made yourself at home,' he says.

Mark sits down next to Freya. She rubs his shoulder.

'I was at the top of my street when I heard the gun shots. I dropped to the ground and then some woman stood behind me. She was holding a gun to the back of my head and she hit me with the butt,' he says, soundin' all surprised and shit.

'You poor thing,' Freya says.

'I've just been to the Emergency Ward where they put some stitches in the wound. I had to give a statement to the police too.'

Mark touches the dressing, as though he wants proof that it's real.

'Sit on the couch, Mark. I got some work for ya's to do.'

I find my suitcase in Freya's bedroom and get the notepads out. I change into the blue linen dress I brought from home. Smear a bit a lippie on and dab some perfume on me wrists. I can hear Freya and Mark in the living room, talking about his old job. From the sounds of it, he didn't have a lot of affection for his former boss.

'Right, it seems to me that all this shit is connected.'

'To what?', Freya asks.

'Virtual man huntin'.'

'How do you know that?', Mark asks.

'I can feel it in me bones.'

I give each of them a notepad and a biro.

'I need both of you to write down everything that's happened since ya joined Single&sophisticated.com. Don't worry if ya think it's trivial. Write it down anyways.'

'What are you going to do, Aunty June?'

'Reconnaissance.'

The burn in my legs becomes more intense as I walk up the hill. On both sides of Great North Road there are federation style houses with generous yards. Occasionally, a white, fluffy dog will growl through a fence. I cross at the traffic lights and continue down the hill. On the other side of the road, people are streaming into the Five Dock RSL. I imagine that families are getting together for Sunday lunch and a few loners will be glued to the pokie machines. I stop outside the Wild Hearts Cafe. There's a small number of tables on the footpath, all of which are taken. Dave is inside, sippin' a glass a water and reading a newspaper. When he sees me his face breaks into a warm smile. Dave rises from his chair and plants a soft kiss on my cheek. He smells of cologne and peppermint.

'Have you had lunch?', Dave asks.

'Yeah, when Freya was in the big house with you.'

'Oh,' he says awkwardly.

Our conversation goes all quiet and shit. We pretend to be engrossed in the Christmas decorations on the walls.

'So, how are you finding Sydney?'

'I did an adventure race this mornin'.'

I tell Dave about the adventure race and he looks intrigued.

'Wow, I had no idea that you were so fit.'

'Thanks ... you do any of that kinda thing?'

'Oh no,' he says, 'but I like walking.'

'Me too. I'm thinking of walking around the Bay Run, after I've recovered from the race.'

'I've always wanted to give that a try,' he says, with his chin cupped in his hand. It makes him look real intelligent. But then the arse falls out of our conversation. Murri can't believe it! I been dreaming about this moment, and now, I can't think of anythin' to say. Neither can Dave. Fuck me! What if he's changed his mind?

'Dave, I'll do us both a favour and get to the point.'

'Okay,' he says warily.

'Do you still want to date me? 'Cause if you've changed your mind, I'll respect that.'

'Of course I still do, very much so,' he says, lookin' confused.

'But given that my niece is a person of interest in two homicides ...'

'Actually, Freya is a person of interest in three homicides.'

'Oh yeah, that Harold James fullah. Forgot about him. What evidence have you got to pin his murder on Freya?'

'June, I'm not really at liberty to be discussing this with you.'

'Babe, we're on the same side.'

Dave's face breaks into this bashful smile. I imagine us sittin' in front of a fireplace, cuddlin' underneath a blanket.

'Black Rose - how did you come up with that name?', he asks.

'The black rose is special because it grows only in Halfeti, Turkey.'

'Does that mean that you can thrive only in one place?'

'Babe, I'm just sayin' I'm unique ... and I wanna go to Turkey, one day.'

'That sounds nice,' he says dreamily.

'But I gotta go to Aotearoa first. I've always wanted to try out the bungee jumpin' in Taupo.'

'Bungee jumping?'

'Mark, Freya and me are goin' there, after I sort out this homicide investigation shit.'



'How are you going to do that?'

'By doin' what I was born to do, which is solvin' crime.'

He smiles and I know what he's thinkin', 'cause I'm thinkin' the same thing.

'Babe, we gotta keep things between us professional.'

This solemn expression appears on his face and his grey eyes study mine. It gives me butterflies and shit.

'June, do you know who killed those men?'

'Not yet, but I'm workin' on it.'

'June ...'

'I'll tell you everything I know, in four days' time.'

'That's Christmas Eve,' he says.

'It's also when there's gonna be the Carols by Candlelight at Ashfield Park. I'm thinking you, me and my dog, Marmalade, can take a picnic hamper.'

'Dog?'

'Yeah, she's the newest member of the family. I found her the other night when I was out on a ran-tan in the Rocks.'

'Christmas Eve ... I don't have any plans,' he says.

Sadness resonates in his voice. I get the feeling that Dave has spent a lot of time alone. I can't imagine how difficult it must be to constantly see people at their worst. It makes me think about those true crime shows on pay TV. Some of those detectives stay on these cold cases for years. They form bonds with grieving loved ones, and do everything they can to achieve justice.

'But what if I want to see you before Christmas Eve?', he says.

I feel them butterflies again and me voice goes all shaky and shit.

'Alright, the Bay Run, just as soon as my legs have recovered.'

As we say goodbye, Dave takes my hand and gently kisses it. Makes me wanna do things I can't put down on paper. On the way home I stop at a news agency and buy some chart paper,

scissors, highlighters, glue and blue tack. I'm grateful the walk is downhill, 'cause my body has gone to cactus. The afternoon sun is harsh, and I'm cursin' meself for not taking a hat. When I walk through the door, Freya and Mark are sittin' on the carpet, writing furiously on the notepads. Marmalade is spread out on the couch, snoring her sweet little head off.

## Chapter Thirty-one

'That looks impressive,' Mark says, lookin' up at the chart I stuck on the wall between the book shelf and the TV.

'Thanks, Bub.'

He's sitting on the couch, resting his head against an ice pack. Freya is making some fresh coffee in a plunger and the fumes have begun to waft into the living room.

'Aunty June, that chart looks like something that a real detective would make,' she says proudly.

After Freya and Mark finished writing their statements we looked for names that kept popping up in both. Then we wrote them down on the chart paper, together with crucial dates and a shit load of arrows. There were a few surprises. Like, neither myself nor Freya knew about Mark's date with Alicia Summers. The brother kept that secret real close to his chest. The biggest shock, however, was Freya's poor taste in men. That Craig was a dirty dog for breakin' her heart, and the way that he broke up with her was real insensitive.

Anyways, gettin' back to the chart, I cut out the picture of Freya that was published in *The Daily*, and glued it to the centre. Then I found some photos of Craig, Simon and Harold James from the ABC News website and stuck them on the chart too. It looks like the kinda thing that Detective Chief Inspector John Luther would put together. Luther's gotta be me favourite TV cop at the moment. He's tough, compassionate and until he solves the crime, the brother can't think of anythin' else. That's how I gotta be - completely absorbed in this crime solving gig.

'What now?', Freya says.

'Patrick.'

'Patrick,' she says, wringing her nose, 'why him?'

'I wanna ask him what he meant when he wrote in that text message that you'd regret ever meetin' him.'

'Aunty June, I no longer have Patrick's phone number. I don't even know his surname.'

'How long did ya know this fullah for?'

'About six months.'

'What did you talk about?'

Freya shrugs her shoulders.

'Mostly him, and how unhappy he was in his job. I felt sorry for him I guess. But then, Patrick began pestering me. Like, he really wanted me to do his salsa class.'

'Bub, you got the worst shake a leg I ever seen.'

When she was a little girl, we'd take Freya to Musgrave Park in Brisbane for the big NAIDOC Day celebrations. There were usually some lithe dancers who'd hang out with the kids, teaching them how to dance. Freya was always out of time, and she'd do a two-step while the other kids were shakin' their long legs.

'I told him I couldn't dance, but Patrick kept hassling me. So I agreed to go once, but then I spent most of the class sipping a latte and eating risotto.'

'Where was it?'

'In Leichhardt near the Palace Cinema.'

When Bub?'

'Sundays.'

'That's tonight! Mark, can I drive the Audi R8?'

'Not on your life,' he says.

'Just checkin' to see that you're still in the land of the living.'

'Yeah, fuckin' love ya,' he says.

Norton Street celebrates the Italian people and their culture in so many ways. One store has advertisements for Italian language classes, a travel agent has posters of Rome in the window, and then, there are the deadly Italian restaurants and wine bars. My legs scream in pain as I walk up each step. I remind myself that John Luther would never be put off by a little bit a muscle soreness. During the day this place is a restaurant and at night it's a dance school. The wooden floor has been cleared of tables and chairs. Some couples are lingering on the edges of the room. Freya waits at the top of the stairwell. I know Patrick right away, because his body stiffens at the sight of her. When he turns around I try to take off after him, but my legs buckle. Patrick sprints down a side street but quickly runs out of puff. Freya and I close in on him. I'm grateful for the darkness. I don't want anyone to see me threatening Patrick with the Glock.

'What do you want?'

'To talk.'

'I'm not going anywhere with her,' he sneers at Freya.

'Take it easy Patrick.'

Mark pulls up on the curb. I tell Patrick to get inside. He hesitates.

'Bub, you give us what we want and I promise that no harm will come to you,' I say, as I push him into the front passenger seat. Freya and I climb into the back and Mark accelerates towards Haberfield.

'Nice to see you again Patrick,' Mark says.

'I wish I could say the same.'

'Patrick, we only want to talk to you,' Freya says.

'I'm not saying anything until you let me go,' he says indignantly.

I plunge the Glock into his right shoulder.

'Patrick, I do this kinda thing all the time.'

'Really?', Freya says, sounding perplexed.

'Bub, please.'

'You lot are like Keystone Cops.'

'Patrick, you do know what's pointed in the back of your shoulder, don't you?'

'You wouldn't dare use that thing,' he says anxiously.

'Just try my patience.'

'You're bluffing.'

'Patrick, if you don't start talkin' by the time I count to ten, I'm gonna blow one of your ear lobes off.'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ...'

'Oh alright, I was there, on the night it happened.'

'When what happened?'

'When that engineer got killed.'

'Craig?'

'Yes, but I had nothing to do with it.'

'Why on earth were you at Craig's house?', Freya says.

'Oh, I should be the one asking you questions,' he says angrily.

'Like what?'

'Like, how could you lead me on and then cruelly dispose of me?'

'I did nothing of the sort,' she scoffs.

'I thought you spent time with me because you liked me. When you told me that you didn't want to be friends anymore, it really hurt,' Patrick whines.

'So you decided to become a stalker?', Mark says.

'I guess you could say that I became a stalker, but only for a little while,' he says ruefully.

Mark turns right into Great North Road and heads for Abbotsford, before turning into a quiet street. The houses here are enormous and a few boats are parked beside generous garages. We pull over outside a federation style house. Patrick has begun to tremble. The poor bugger probably thinks I'm gonna top him.

'Bub, I know you had nothing to do with Craig's death.'

I sit back but I keep the Glock aimed at Patrick. He turns around to face me. Patrick smiles shyly. It strikes me that Patrick was probably one of those kids who always struggled to belong. Even now, if he counted all of his friends, he wouldn't complete a full hand.

'I have no idea who you are. But I like you,' he says.

'Patrick, you don't need to know who I am. In fact, you should probably try to forget me, once we let you go.'

'Which will be when?'

'Right after you tell me what you were doing in Craig's house.'

He looks anxiously at Freya.

'She's telling the truth, Patrick,' Freya says.

He sighs deeply and nods his head in assent.

'I've been in love, many times. The first time was with Mrs Tracey, my grade two teacher. I used to put my hand up in class and ask her for help with whatever lesson we were being taught.

When Mrs Tracey lent down to read my work, I could see right into her bra,' he says dreamily.

'Patrick!', Mark snaps.

'I'm getting there. After Mrs Tracey there were many others. Too many to name.'

'Thank god for small mercies,' Freya whispers.

'But my love was never reciprocated. Eventually, I learnt to accept that I would be on my own forever. It wasn't so bad. I was still working as an architect. I saved some money and put down a deposit on an apartment in Kensington. And then I began to dance. Dancing became my outlet, my passion,' he says.

'But it wasn't enough?'

'No, I still yearned for companionship. One day, a friend from my dance class suggested that I join the Inner West Sociable Singles. He said that there would be lots of lonely women there, who'd be desperate for attention.'

'That's horrible,' Freya says aghast.

'What was really horrible about the Inner West Sociable Singles was meeting you. Freya, I fell head over heels in love with you.'

Freya's cheeks turn pink and she stares out the window.

'I know that you never felt any love for me,' Patrick says sadly, 'but back then I was in denial. When you stopped returning my calls I was shattered. So I decided to confront you, in your office.'

'You had no right,' Freya stammers.

'I know, he says wistfully, 'the thing is that I didn't feel any better afterwards. I only became more obsessed.'

'So you began to follow me?'

'Yes,' he whispers, 'it was only a few weeks later that you began to see the engineer,' he says.

'Watching the two of you together was so painful. The worst part was seeing you go to his house, every night.'

Tears have begun to stream down his cheeks. I reach into my pocket and offer Patrick a tissue.

'On the day that it happened, I resolved to give you a piece of my mind. Freya, I wanted you to know just how much pain I was in,' Patrick says.

'So I sent that text to you. Then I went to a bar.'

'How much did you drink?'

'Enough to give me some Dutch courage. Well, a lot more than that,' Patrick says sheepishly.

'Then I caught a bus to Rozelle. But as I approached the house, I saw this woman leaving, through the front door.'

'What did she look like?'

'She was well dressed, like she'd just come from the theatre. She looked anxious and was checking her phone. Then a red Porsche pulled up outside the house and she got inside. I thought it was strange that she'd left the front door wide open. So I went inside. It was dark and there was shredded paper everywhere. The lights were on in the kitchen. I knew he was gone the moment I saw him.'

Patrick buries his face in his hands. I don't wanna be insensitive, but it's important that we maintain the momentum.

'Bub, what happened next?'

'I can answer that,' Freya says, 'you found my phone.'

Patrick glares at her and his cheeks turn bright red.

'I saw your phone on the kitchen table. I noticed it because you've got the phone case with the Aboriginal flag on it. I panicked. I deleted my messages and my number, then I dropped it on my way out.'

'Patrick, why didn't you ring the police?'

'What if they thought that I killed him? I mean, they could have argued that I was resentful of his relationship with you, and in a fit of jealous rage ....'

'Yeah, but they'd already broken up by then,' Mark says.

'Oh really?', Patrick says brightly.

Freya shakes her head and begins to talk, but I quickly tell her to shush. Workin' with amateurs is doing my head in.

'Patrick, I'm glad my niece parted company with you.'

'Me too,' Mark says.

'Bub, take this fullah back to his fuckin' salsa class.'

## **Chapter Thirty-two**

Freya's flat has got a nice feel to it. On top of the book shelf in the living room are photographs of Delia and Arthur on their wedding day. They were battlers, so they didn't have a lotta money to spend on the dress, or the reception. But Delia was a beautiful bride and Arthur was so proud to be her husband. There's photos of me and Maud too, mostly out in the tinnie. Freya's taken good care of her little home. The blue carpet she had laid when she moved in still looks fresh, as do the lavender walls. There's never so much as a dirty dish in the sink, or clothes left on the floor. Real house proud she is. Presently, the four of us are sittin' on Freya's little balcony. There's a cool breeze and the only noise is comin' from the traffic in Parramatta Road.



Mark looks exhausted and angry. He's so used to being in control of his life, but in the past few days, it's all gone to shit.

'Bub, maybe you should stay here tonight,' I say to him.

'But there's no room for me.'

'Rubbish,' Freya says, 'Aunty June can sleep with me, and you can have the sofa.'

Freya goes to her bedroom and returns with a blanket and a pillow.

'Now, what would you like for dinner?', she asks us.

'What have you got?'

'I can make an omelet.'

'Sounds good to me,' Mark says.

Marmalade follows Freya into the kitchen and pauses beside her new bowl on the floor. I bought it from the supermarket in Great North Road. It's pink, which suits the little princess.

'I think I've got some barbeque chicken in the fridge. What do you think Marmalade?'

Freya chops up a chicken breast as Marmalade furiously wags her tail.

'What are you going to do if she already has an owner?', Mark whispers to me.

'Mark, trust me, she doesn't have anyone else. Besides, Marmalade knows that she belongs with us.'

'Hey you two, I've got a bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge,' Freya hollers from the kitchen.

'Bub, I'll have a glass.'

'Me too,' Mark says.

Dinner is surprisingly tasty. The omelet has ham, tomato, cheese, shallots and mushrooms.

Freya also made this deadly salad of lettuce, white onion and beetroot. We're sitting back with full stomachs, and savouring the wine, when I say what's been on my mind since we got home.

'Bub, what do we know about this Harold James?'

'A little,' Mark says, 'I heard rumours at work. We accountants like to gossip as much as anyone else.'

'What did you hear?'

'Harold James was a partner in an accountancy firm. He stole money from his clients and only a fraction of it was recovered. James spent time in prison and was released just a few months ago.'

'Freya, do you remember meetin' this fullah on Single&sophisticated.com?'

'I think so. He sent me a message soon after I joined. He called himself Roger Ramjett.'

'After the cartoon?', Mark asks.

'I assumed so. Anyway, he told me that life had thrown him some curve balls, but he was getting back on his feet.'

'Obviously, he was referring to getting out of prison.'

She wrings her nose.

'What is it Freya?'

'I just remembered that he sent me some photographs of himself in red speedos. He had a good body, but he was a bit too forward for me.'

'Bub, I like my men to have mystery too.'

After dinner Mark clears the dishes and does the washing up. Freya makes some hot chocolate and we get comfortable in front of the television. Freya has all five seasons of *The Wire* on DVD. We choose to watch the first episode of Season One. Jimmy McNulty always gets me wild, 'cause he's self-destructive and he can never keep it in his pants. But he's a deadly cop who is always one step ahead of everyone else.

'Who's your favourite character?', Freya asks me.

'Stringer Bell.'

'I like Bunk,' she says.

It's nice bein' with these two. Makes me sad thinkin' that it took this homicide investigation shit to bring us together.

'Freya, I've been thinking ... did you delete the message from Harold James?', Mark asks her.

'I don't think so.'

'Can you log into your account?'

'I closed it,' she says, 'as soon as Craig and I got together.'

'You still might be able to log on,' Mark says.

'But the police took my computer,' she replies, pointing in the direction of the empty desk in the corner of the living room.

'But I got me iPad.'

The three of us huddle on the couch, with Freya in the middle. Marmalade is snoozing on the floor beside me feet, probably dreamin' about barbeque chook.

'Oh my God,' Freya says, 'my account is still active.'

'How is that possible?', Mark asks.

'I don't know.'

Surely enough, Roger Ramjett's email is there. She opens up the attachments.

'I see what you mean about bein' too forward,' I say, while feelin' meself cringe at the middle aged man in budgie smugglers.

'There's some more messages from him,' Freya says.

She opens up the chain of emails.

'Apparently, we agreed to meet at The London last month.'

'I know that pub, it's a five-minute drive from the Balmain Ferry Terminal,' Mark says.

'That's where his body was found,' Freya says aghast.

She puts the iPad down on the coffee table and covers her mouth with her hands. Tears stream down her cheeks.

'Bub, someone is tryin' to set you up.'

'But who would want to do that to Freya?', Mark says.

He's got a point. With the exception of Patrick, Freya has never really had a blue with anyone.

She's so meek she finds it hard to stick up for herself.

'Bub, who did you tell about joinin' the site? Hang on a minute. Let's check your statement.'

I grab Freya's statement and shuffle through the pages.

'Aunty June, I can tell you that ...'

'Just wait. Here we go. According to this you told Mark ...

'And my good friend, Marion. She actually tried to counsel me against experimenting with internet dating. It turned out to be sage advice,' Freya says.

I put Freya's statement down on the coffee table.

'Bub, there's something goin' on that we're not seeing.'

I stand beside the flow chart and examine each name. Nothing springs out at me. I turn to the photo of Delia and try to imagine how she would approach this shit. That tidda remains the smartest person I ever met, and I'm not talkin' about the kind of intelligence reflected in a university degree. Delia could always read between the lines and she knew whenever someone was bein' a dirty dog. Freya stands beside me.

'Power Through Responsibility,' she says.

'Go on.'

'Both Simon and Craig had connections to Power Through Responsibility. Simon wanted me to go to some fundraising gala for them, and Craig was mentoring this Murri kid from Allanvale, who has one of their scholarships.'

'But what about Harold James?', Mark asks.

'Let's put that fullah to one side for the moment, while we focus on Power Through Responsibility. I heard bad things about the founder, Oliver McGrady and his mining company, Wannika. Remember that story on NITV news about how they were short changing native title holders in Western Australia?'

'Yeah, the reporter was Chris Taylor,' Freya says.

'Chris Taylor is one of my friends on Facebook. I'm gonna send her a message before I go to bed tonight.'

'Good idea Aunty June.'

'But in the meantime, we need to do some snoopin' of our own. Who do we know at Power Through Responsibility?'

In the corner of my eye, I see Mark unfolding his blanket. I know what he's thinkin'.

'Bub, you can't avoid it.'

'Aunty June, there is no way that I'm contacting Oliver McGrady. The guy wants to kill me. For all that I know, he was responsible for this,' Mark says, pointing to the dressing on his head.

'Bub, I wasn't thinkin' about Oliver.'

### **Chapter Thirty-three**

Glebe Point Road reminds me of West End in Brisbane. Both have cafes, music shops, restaurants and a few deadly book shops. Like West End, Glebe was once a safe place for those from the margins, somewhere they could claim as their own. But now they've been usurped by wealthy professionals who can pay a fortune for houses that used to be sold for a song. The office of Power Through Responsibility is half way along Glebe Point Road, in between a medical practice and a hairdresser. It's a renovated terrace with a small garden in front. A sign with the letters, PTR, sits on top of the gate.

'Can I help you?', a young woman says through a security screen.

I can tell that she's a true Lady Muck. Her make-up is heavy and her lashes are fake. She's wearin' a short, black skirt that barely covers her bum and a tight singlet top. I never would have allowed Freya to dress like that, but this one is accustomed to getting her own way.

'Agnes McGrady.'

She studies my eyes and I see some uncertainty in her own.

'Who are you?'

Until now I had planned to lie. Freya, Mark and me made up this story in which I was lookin' for a job for my wayward son, and I'd heard on the grapevine that there were jobs goin' at Wannika. But now that we're facin' each other, I know that the ruse isn't gonna work. I get the sense that young Agnes has been told a lot a bull shit over the years. It's in her eyes, they're too jaded. So I'll tell her the truth, kinda.

'My name is June, Aunty June. I'm a private detective.'

'A private detective?', Agnes says incredulously.

'You got a problem with that?'

'Have you got some identification?', she says, soundin' hoit-toity and shit.

I show her my driver's license.

'What about a private detective's license?'

'I come from Queensland.'

'So?'

'So my Queensland ID is no good down here. True God, I didn't think I'd have to spell that out for you.'

A red tinge appears on her cheeks.

'I didn't think of that,' Agnes says.

'Is your boss in?'

'I can deal with your query,' Agnes says firmly.

I throw my hands up in the air.

'You had better do that then. Time is money. At least, it is in my line of work.'

'I have an appointment in half an hour,' Agnes says tersely as she opens the security door.

Inside the furniture is worn and the walls are littered with remnants of sticky tape. An oil infuser sits above the banister, releasing the scent of lavender. We walk upstairs and into what I assume was once a master bedroom. Three desks have been arranged into a triangle. Each is laden with files and trays. In the corner is a plastic Christmas tree that's seen better days. Its branches are bent and out of shape.

'Tea or coffee?', Agnes asks.

'Tea please. White, with no sugar, thanks Bub.'

She disappears downstairs and returns with a tray of tea cups and a plate of Scotch finger biscuits.

'Everyone else has gone on holidays,' Agnes says dimly.

'But not you?'

'I have to stick around for one more day, when we close the office for the Christmas break. It sucks being the boss's daughter.'

I imagine that there are also many benefits to being the heiress of a billion-dollar fortune.

'So, it must be exciting being a private detective.'

'It's not all that glamorous.'

'What kind of cases do you work on?'

I reflect on what Dave's told me about the private detectives he's bumped into over the years. He reckons that process serving and surveillance for insurance companies are their bread and butter.

'Actually, it's pretty mundane stuff. I serve divorce applications, subpoenas, that kinda shit. Sometimes, I have to do surveillance of people who are suspected of makin' dodgy insurance claims.'

'Really?'

'Oh yeah, this one guy reckoned that he'd injured his back at work and was gonna be bedridden for life. Well, I secretly filmed him laying tiles for his pergola.'

'Wow,' Agnes says.

'Anyways Bub, getting back to the reason I'm here. I'm workin' on my first homicide investigation, and you Agnes, could be a key witness.'

She smiles to herself.

'Really?'

'My client was a friend of Simon Palmerston. She needs to know what really happened to him.'

Agnes looks rattled. She sits back and crosses her arms.

'You knew Simon?'

'Oh I most certainly did,' she whispers.

'The two of you were close?'

Agnes begins to sniffle. I grab a box of tissues from one of the desks. Agnes pauses until she regains her composure.

'I met Simon at one of our corporate events. His firm had an entire table. I was selling raffle tickets and Simon bought a book of twenty. I think it was just an excuse for him to talk to me.'

I know where this is goin’.

‘Simon was quite a lot older than you.’

‘Yes, he was. But we had something special,’ Agnes says.

Oh Lord! At seventeen I had no idea about love, and I suspect that Agnes is similarly clueless.

‘We’d meet secretly, at his apartment and sometimes here, after everyone else had gone home for the day.’

She’s still a child. True God, these men wanna wake up to themselves!

‘What kind of a person was Simon?’

I’ve already formed an opinion about the kind of person he was. But I keep that to meself.

‘Simon was always trying to be someone who he wasn’t.’

‘In what way?’

‘When he was a baby, Simon got very sick and even though he recovered, it stunted his growth. It made him insecure about his body, so he went to ridiculous lengths to make himself look good. Like, he’d wear these boots that gave him extra height, and he spent a fortune on moisturisers.’

Agnes pauses and stares at the Christmas tree. The angel perched on the top is drooping, as though it’s eavesdropping on our conversation.

‘In spite of his flaws, he did have some good qualities,’ she says pensively.

‘So he could be generous?’

Agnes laughs and shakes her head.

‘Simon was the biggest tight arse I’d ever met. The one time that we went out was for coffee at this dingy café in George Street. Even the staff looked like they didn’t want to be there. But he was a beautiful poet.’

‘A lawyer who wrote poetry? Interesting.’

‘It surprised me at first. But in time, I grew to appreciate Simon’s poems. They were usually about falling in love, watching sunsets and running his hands through my hair.’

It sounds like schmaltz used for a booty call.



'His last poem was bizarre. It was about a turtle that was eating a town. First it ate the school and then the children had to go away. When all of the children were gone, it turned on Simon.'

'Bub, was Simon on anything?'

'No way, he wouldn't even touch alcohol.'

'You said that was his last poem?'

'Shortly afterwards we went our separate ways. I think that Simon was worried that my Dad would find out about us,' she says.

Agnes is trying to sound blasé. But the pain is obvious in her eyes.

'Bub, you deserve better than a man who just wants to use you for booty calls. You deserve a man whom you can take home and introduce to your family.'

'My family is so dysfunctional,' she says, 'I wouldn't wish that experience on anyone.'

Young Agnes has a lot to learn, especially about the importance of family, but at the end of the day, it's none of my business.

'Well, I'd better not make you late for your next appointment,' I say.

'Oh that, it can wait.'

We both know that there is no appointment, but I say nothing. Agnes then gives me a tour around the office. Next door is some kind of board room. A long table is in the centre and on the walls are montages of photographs. I recognise Oliver McGrady. He towers over everyone else.

'Our corporate fundraisers,' Agnes says proudly.

We pause at the final montage, which has a small number of photographs.

'This was our last cocktail party. It was in the home of a famous neurosurgeon.'

'Oh really, famous huh?'

'Yes, her name is Samantha Lee and she's a good friend of Dad's'

In one photograph a svelte woman with long black hair is standing next to McGrady. Their arms are wrapped around each other.

'That's Samantha,' Agnes gushes.

In another photograph McGrady is standing in the centre of a crowd. Samantha Lee is on his right. The women are in expensive looking gowns, and all of the men are decked out in suits, with the exception of one. He's stocky and wearing jeans and a chambre shirt. He's got this drunken expression on his face.

'Oh that guy was Samantha's brother. He ended up getting pissed as,' Agnes says.

'Oh what a shame. I hope he didn't ruin the party,' I say.

'Oh no, but it could have ended badly. He was hassling Dad and swearing his head off.'

'Do you remember what he said?'

She studies the photograph for a moment.

'No, sorry I can't remember.'

'I'm glad that the event wasn't ruined. It sounds like you put a great deal of work into making sure that everything ran smoothly.'

My compliment makes Agnes smile.

'It's nice of you to say that. No one appreciates what I do around here.'

'I bet that Samantha Lee appreciated what you did.'

Agnes is glowing now. I'm glad that Simon is no longer foremost in her mind.

'I worked really hard with Samantha to make that night a success. It took so long to find the right menu, and then I spent hours on the phone trying to organise publicity.'

'Publicity, now I'm sure that would be challenging.'

'Oh not really. Dad has a good friend who's a journalist and she works at *The Daily*.'

'*The Daily*, wow!'

'Her name is Alicia Summers. Do you know her?'

'Alicia Summers, I think I might have met her once. Yeah, I helped her out with a scoop.'

'Alicia is coming to work for us. She's sick of the grind of working on a newspaper. She's going to be the head of communications at Wannika.'

'Wow, that's a big coup.'

'I know.'

Agnes looks at her watch.

'She's having a going away party this afternoon. I'm hoping to pop in on my way home.'

'You don't say.'

'I'll tell Alicia that you said to say Hi.'

'Actually, Bub, I wouldn't mind doin' that in person.'

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The beer garden of the Oaks Hotel is a world away from Glebe. Most of the women look like they've just stepped outside of a hair salon, and their clothes are real expensive. No St Vinnie's Dior here. Me, on the other hand, I'm comfortable with my windswept hair. I'm feelin' deadly in my Doonaville Bowls Club t-shirt, with the logo of the dancing crab. Luckily, I googled Alicia Summers after she did that hatchet job on Freya. I spot her at a table next to the legendary oak tree. It's the confident smile that I recognise. It speaks of a moral compass that went awry a long time ago. I buy a beer and sit in a corner.

It appears that Alicia's shindig has been in full swing for a few hours, and things are just startin' to get messy. Empty jugs are scattered on the table, together with some half eaten pizzas. She's sitting in between two younger men. Alicia is drooping her head into the table and when she talks, her hands are animated. The two young men laugh and one pats her on the head. Real condescending he is. Not that she's aware of it. A few minutes later, the youngsters rise from their seats, leaving Alicia on her own.

'Alicia, Bub, how you goin'?'

'Who are you?'

'My name is June, Aunty June.'

She looks confused. Or more likely, Alicia's just pissed.

'What do you want?'

'To talk ... about Freya Clarkson.'

Alicia sits up straight and tries to look all professional and shit.

'What about her?'

'She's my niece.'

'So?'

'You appear to have a vendetta against Freya. I want to know why.'

She laughs. There's no lightness in it, just cynicism. Alicia may be a successful journalist, but I get the feelin' that there's not a great deal of joy in her life. I reckon that she might even be conflicted about what she does for a livin'.

'I don't reveal my sources. Not to you. Not to anyone.'

'How did you know that this source was reliable?'

'Why would I tell you anything?'

'Because you want to get me out of your hair.'

I move the plates and the jugs to the far end of the table. Then I sit down opposite Alicia.

'I didn't invite you to join me.'

'So I hear that you're off to work for Wannika.'

'You didn't come here to congratulate me,' she sneers.

'From what I heard, you're a gun reporter. So why are you are heading into the corporate world?'

'Why not?'

'Aren't you going to miss having your finger on the pulse?'

She sighs and wrings her forehead. This one is either bored shitless or really charged up.

'We have someone else in common - Mark Tonkin.'

Alicia's cheeks turn red.

'Look, that was a set up,' she says.

'What do you mean?'

'My source led me to believe that Mark was someone that he wasn't.'

'I happen to think that my nephew is a decent human being.'

'I agree.'

'Just tell me what I wanna know.'

'Look, I'm not about to reveal the identity of my source.'

'Alicia, if you felt guilty about deceiving Mark, then why don't you feel remorse for leaving Freya out to dry?'

'The public has a right to know,' she says all hoity toity.

'The public has the right to know the truth. From what I seen, you write lies.'

'How dare you!'

'Alicia, is this person annoying you?'

I turn around to Oliver McGrady. True God! This fullah reminds me of a cooked mud crab. He's got the same beedy eyes and ruddy complexion. But I reckon that most muddies would have better morals than Oliver.

'Oliver, she was just leaving,' Alicia says.

'I can ask Simon to remove her,' he says, referring to the burly man in the suit next to him. I never met a real body guard before, but I assume that's what this Simon is. He's about six feet tall and built like a brick shit house.

'I was just leavin'.'

As I walk past Oliver he steps in my way. My head connects with one of his tree trunk arms. Makes me that wild, I lose my temper.

'You listen to me, Oliver McGrady. I know you're behind the murders. Everything I learnt so far about this case all points in your direction. I'm gonna prove it too.'

McGrady looks confused.

'I have no idea what you're talking about. But if you don't leave immediately, Simon will physically remove you from these premises.'

Oliver, you remember this, mate. When you pick on one of the Clarkson women, you make an enemy out of all of us.'

## Chapter Thirty-four

The ocean is a chameleon that never stops changin' its colour. Right now it's dark blue. Unfathomable but calm. I wonder how many generations of Koori families camped on the foreshore, before the construction of this here Iron Cove Bridge. I reckon that they would have appreciated this place more than some of the rich people around here do. True God! Some of these mansions have spectacular views, but you never see people on their balconies, or out in the yard. Their houses are closed up, like they wanna hide from the rest of the world. There's some deadly boats bein' moored in Birkenhead Point. Some a them must have cost over a million bucks. If I had my way, I'd take one a them beauties out, together with a kilo of prawns and some ice cold beer. Then I'd set up the fishin' rods and lures, and wait for the flathead to bite.

'June, what are you dreaming about?'

Dave's wearin' some long Khaki shorts and a black t-shirt. This is the first time I seen him in casual clothing and I'm not disappointed. He's sex on two legs.

'I'm dreaming about what I would do if I owned one a them boats.'

He pauses to stare at the cruiser directly below. It's more like a plush hotel that floats.

'What would you do, June?'

'I wouldn't let it just sit there, bein' wasted, not on a beautiful day like this.'

'I suspect that the owners have to work incredibly long hours just to pay for fuel.'

'That seems to be the way in Sydney. People slog their guts out in their jobs so that they can live in the lap of luxury.'

'And they don't in Doonaville?'

'Babe, I work hard at the Caravan Park, especially durin' the tourist season. But I knock off at four o'clock. On Fridays I finish at three, so I can shoot up to the Bowls Club and get everything ready for our trivia nights.'

Dave gives me this big grin. Makes me go giddy.

'June, you are a renaissance woman.'

'Babe, that's the nicest thing that anyone has ever said about me.'

'June, you picked the right morning to walk the Bay Run,' Dave says.

All around us people are riding bikes, running and pushing prams. Marmalade is enjoying her latest adventure but she growls at every big dog that walks past us. Yesterday afternoon, we took her to the vet and she got a clean bill of health. As I predicted, Marmalade had no microchip. There's a bit a rigmarole we have to go through to make sure that she's ours for good. As we get closer to the end of Iron Cove Bridge, I can see the swimmers in the Olympic size pool below.

'You ever been into swimming?'

'Not really,' Dave says.

'Me neither. Doonaville has more mud than sand. Last time I went for a dip, I walked out smellin' like I'd been sleepin' in a crab pot for a week.'

We keep goin' until we find an empty bench. Some kayakers glide past us, as a golden retriever jumps into the water in pursuit of a stick. Dave and me talk about all kinds a shit, especially fishin'. Eventually, however, our conversation gets dragged back to the homicide investigation.

'Dave,' I say, tryin' to hide my anxiety.

'What is it June?'

'The other day, when Freya came back from the big house.'

'What about it?'

'Freya and me had a good talk and I asked her about Harold James. She never even replied to his first message.'

He furrows his brow.

'Dave, someone hacked into Freya's account.'

'Who might that be?'

'I don't know yet. But I'm workin' on it. This Harold James, he didn't pay all the money back that he stole?'

'No, he didn't,' Dave says thoughtfully.

'If he'd stolen money from me, I'd be pretty wild.'

'June, I shouldn't be discussing this with you.'

'No, but rules were meant to be broken.'

Dave sits back and seems to mull over what he's about to say.

'June, there are some things about Freya that might disturb you.'

'Such as?'

He frowns and looks real frustrated.

'Babe.'

'Alright, Freya wrote a note to Mark Tonkin, just before Craig Lee was killed. In the note, she expressed doubt about whether Lee deserved to live.'

'Dave, I know about the note. I admit that Freya can be impulsive, but that doesn't mean she's a killer.'

'Hmm.'

There's somethin' else I gotta tell ya. I spoke with Agnes McGrady.'

He looks puzzled.

'She's the daughter of Oliver McGrady and she organises corporate events for Power Through Responsibility.'

'Go on,' he says.

'Agnes was havin' an affair with Simon Palmerston.'

'How do you know this?'

'She told me.'

'June, this is police business,' he says firmly.

'Babe, this is my niece's life we're talkin' about. I can't help but get involved.'

Some pelicans swim past us. When you get up close and look into their eyes, they seem to study you with such seriousness, but rarely fear. I get the feelin' that they're titillated by us. Dave's face, on the other hand, is a combination of exasperation and lust. I can tell he's fallen for me. Like a tonne a bricks. I know he's annoyed by my private detective work, but hey, I'm a



modern woman. I stand on me own two feet, and I'm not about to be deterred from lookin' out for my Freya.

'What else did Agnes tell you?'

'Simon broke up with her 'cause he was worried that her old man would find out. He's a violent fullah, that Oliver McGrady.'

'So I've heard,' Dave says.

'What if her Dad did find out? That's a motive for murder, isn't it?'

'What else did Agnes have to say?'

'Simon used to write love poems for her. But his last poem was strange. It was about a turtle that ate up a town.'

'A turtle that ate up a town?'

'Babe, it'll be in that moleskin notebook of his. If ya just let me have a look ...'

'June, that's official police evidence.'

'But I can help ya.'

'June, Freya is the only suspect in all three homicides. I'm under pressure to make an arrest.'

'Dave, I'll make you a deal. You hold off from arrestin' Freya, just until Christmas Eve. By then, I'll know who the real killer is, and I'll be able to prove it too.'

He looks deeply into my eyes and I can feel meself blushing.

'Let's get a coffee,' he says, while pointing in the direction of a café across the road. Dave chooses a table next to the entrance. I get a bowl of water for Marmalade and tie her to a post. She's not concerned about bein' left behind, because she can still see us.

'I'm feeling parched. Would you like a glass of water?'

'Yes please, Babe.'

Dave goes to a table with a large decanter of water and glasses. I hear my phone ringing.

'Junie,' Big 'Ole says.

'I'm kinda busy right now.'

'Did ya show Freya the photos?'

'Not yet. Hey can you do me a favour?'

'Anythin', she says.

'Who do we know in Allanvale?'

'That's up in the Bowen Basin isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

'I need to give it some thought Junie. What's Allanvale got to do with Freya?'

'Craig Lee was mentoring a kid called Michael, who comes from Allanvale. Apparently, he has a scholarship so he can go to some posh boarding school down here.'

'Alright Junie. I'll make some calls. The Murri Grapevine won't let us down.'

'Fuckin' love ya.'

I put the phone back into my pocket as Dave sits down.

'Everything alright June?'

'Yeah Dave, I'm good.'

He studies me.

'You're up to something. I know it.'

'Babe, I only got three days to solve three murders. Of course I'm up to somethin'.'

Dave laughs heartily. His laugh is so manly and fuckin' sexy. I know I should be focused on this homicide investigation shit, but I throw caution to the wind. I loosen the sandal off my left foot and gently rub it against Dave's ankle, but for only a few seconds.

'Babe, when this is over, we're gonna spend some time together. We owe it to ourselves to find out if we're meant to be.'

'But until this is over?'

'We keep our minds on the job,' I say firmly.

'Thanks for reminding me,' Dave says with this flirtatious grin that makes me wanna lean across the table and pash him.

'So, if we are to become partners in this, err, crime solving gig, how is that going to work?'

'We share information. I've just told you what I know about Agnes McGrady and Simon Palmerston. So now, it's your turn to spill.'

His grey eyes have become playful.

'There were similarities between the killings,' Dave says.

'Like what?'

'I'm still working it out myself,' he says.

'Well, two heads are better than one.'

'Okay, I know that this is going to sound strange, but each of the victims had been smeared with anti-aging fluid.'

'Dave, are you sayin' that anti-aging fluid is part of the killer's modus operandi?'

'June, if I was going to describe the killer's modus operandi, which, of course, I wouldn't be, because that would be against the rules...'

'Babe.'

'I think that the killer set out to humiliate each of them in some way. James was forced to eat his Rolex. Craig Lee had to watch his cook books being shredded as he died.'

'How did Simon Palmerston die?'

'He choked on the heels of his boots.'

He sits back into his chair and draws his fingers to his chin.

'There's more, I know it.'

The phone tucked away in his trouser pocket buzzes loudly.

'Sorry June, I have to take this.'

Dave listens intently to the phone. He gives some instructions and then promptly hangs up.

'I have to go,' he says.

Dave plants a gentle kiss on my cheek.

'See you at Carols by Candlelight, Black Rose.'

## Chapter Thirty-five

Before I came down to the big smoke, I hadn't been on a bus for years. Me and Maudie tend to walk everywhere in Doonaville. Once a fortnight, we drive Daisy to one of the bigger towns, like Caboolture, to buy our groceries. I miss that sweet, old Kingswood. Barney had better keep his fuckin' hands off her. Presently, me and Freya are sittin' on the 438 bus, which I prefer to the 461, 'cause we get to go through Haberfield. The housing blocks are bigger in this part of the inner west, and the lawns are impeccably maintained. I love the old federation style houses that are long and sturdy.

'I think it's nice that Marion invited you to afternoon tea,' Freya says.

'It was nice of Marion to include me, but Bub, we got work to do.'

When I got home from my walk with Dave, Freya was stylin' up. She explained that Marion had invited her over for coffee soon after *The Daily* published its horrible article, but then she got crook. Freya still wanted to catch up with Marion before Christmas, so it was now or never.

'Aunty June, I was able to find lots of stories about Harold James' court case on Google. I found some that reported directly on the sentence hearing. Most of his victims were wealthy retirees,' she says.

'That's useful Bub. I reckon that all we need is that one special part of the puzzle that's gonna connect all the dots.'

When I see the sprawling campus of the University of Sydney on our right, Freya pushes the stop button. We make our way up Glebe Point Road. I'm beginning to learn that every suburb in Sydney is a village, each with its own unique look and feel. Glebe is an eclectic mix of activists, upwardly mobile professionals and public housing tenants. Notices of rallies for all kinds of causes sit beside plush looking restaurants and boutiques. We walk past the office of Power Through Responsibility. The curtains are drawn and the front door is closed.

'So Bub, what do you know about Oliver McGrady?'

'Not a lot, Aunty June. I haven't met him in person. Although, from what Mark has told me, that's a good thing. After he set up Power Through Responsibility there were a few conversations about McGrady at work. Most of us were skeptical about his motivations.'

'Yeah, I think those sentiments were widely shared,' I say, reflecting on some of the posts I read on Facebook.

'If McGrady was really interested in working with Aboriginal communities then he would have started in his own backyard. Sydney has a sizeable Aboriginal population, but McGrady has never had the slightest inclination to work with any of the community organisations here,' Freya says.

'I don't trust miners. They're only motivated by one thing, which is makin' a dollar. If McGrady was really interested in our mob, then he'd be throwin' his support behind a treaty.'

Freya stops walking.

'Aunty June, I need to tell you something. Marion is a consultant.'

'Really, who does she give advice to?'

'Mining companies,' Freya says nervously.

'That's good to know.'

Marion lives in a glorious federation style house with a small pond in the front yard. From the fresh paint job, I can tell that the house was only recently renovated. Marion greets us at the front door. She's thin and immaculately dressed. Reminds me of one of them posh women who's spent most of her life gettin' maintenance done, while the kids were bein' raised by nannies. Marion hugs Freya tightly and I feel a stab of jealousy. Then I tell meself that I'm bein' stupid.

'Aunty June, it's so nice to finally meet you,' she says.

'Likewise, Marion. Thanks so much for keepin' an eye on our girl.'

She places her hand on her chest and frowns.

'I was beside myself when I read that article. So I told Freya to come over immediately. But she preferred to keep her own company.'

'I was really sick for a few days, remember? Luckily, I had Aunty June to look after me,' Freya says brightly.

Marion takes us through the spacious living room, which is furnished with antiques and dot paintings that could have come from the Central Desert. We pass a bathroom with a magnificent claw tub. As we're walking through the kitchen, I notice a pile of business cards on the table. Marion offers me one.

'Thanks. You never know when I'll be in need of your services,' I tell her, as I put the card in me bum bag.

'I write mostly reconciliation action plans, but I'm starting to put business plans together too.'

'That would be perfect,' I say, thinkin' of the detective agency I wanna run one day.

'I didn't know that you were planning to start your own business,' Freya says.

'Girlie, I don't have to tell you everything. I got a life of me own too.'

I don't know why I'm reluctant to discuss my plans for the agency. Usually, I'm not shy with me words. But ever since I started talkin' about solvin' the murders, everyone has doubted me. Through the back door is a large patio that enjoys a cool breeze. At the end of the property is an old mango tree and a bird bath sits underneath one of its massive boughs. It must be so relaxing to sit out here in the late afternoon, readin' a good book.

'Marion, you have a beautiful home,' I say.

'Thank you June. I do love it here, but it's terribly expensive to maintain,' she says.

'It's just as well that your business is flourishing,' Freya says excitedly.

'I wouldn't describe it as flourishing,' Marion says.

'But what about your work in Allanvale?'

'I take it that you haven't read the business section of today's edition of *The Daily*,' Marion says.

'No.'

'One of the native title groups up there joined forces with some environmentalists to oppose the mine. The coal would have been shipped through the Great Barrier Reef. They've claimed

that the Minister failed to take account of possible damage to the Reef when she gave approval for the mine.'

'So they're applying for an injunction?', Freya asks.

'The Court granted one, yesterday.'

I want to be sympathetic. After all, Marion has been a surrogate Aunty for Freya. But I'm thrilled that the Murriss and the Greenies were able to protect the Reef. I mean, you can't compare that magical place to short-term profits. As we're making our coffee, Marion asks Freya about the police investigation. I notice that Freya is a little guarded in her answers. Marion says she's spoken to her good friend who is a criminal lawyer, and she promises to make an appointment for Freya to see her. Marion then asks Freya about her work. When Freya says she is on leave and will not be working on the Inquiry, Marion seems angry. I feel gratitude for Marion being here for our girl. Freya has had a rough time of late, and it pains me to know that Maudie and I haven't been able to give her comfort. As we're leaving, Freya invites Marion over for drinks on Christmas Eve. Only later do I remember that Dave and I will be going to Carols by Candlelight at the same time.

### **Chapter Thirty-six**

'So Bub, what did ya find out for us?'

We're sitting in Mark's living room. The doors of the balcony have been repaired, and the bullets were taken by the police. But it's still unnerving to be here.

'I rang my friend, Mike Brewster. Mike went to the McGradys' station in Katherine, when he and Oliver were students. The McGrady family had a strange relationship with their Aboriginal employees.'

'How so?'

'Mike talked about this shop on the station. When Oliver's parents had to go away for a business trip, Oliver and Mike opened the shop for the employees. Mike was surprised that there were two queues - one for the white employees and one for the black employees. The former got all of the best produce, while the latter were forced to buy food that was rotten.'

'That's horrible, but what's it got to do with Power Through Responsibility?', Freya asks.

'Nothing, but it casts a question mark over McGrady's motivations. I mean, if the guy has no empathy for the Aboriginal people who worked for his family, then why would he fund a charity that provides jobs and scholarships to Aboriginal youth?', Mark says.

'Thanks Bub, you found out a lot.'

'Really?', Mark says, lookin' pleased with himself.

'Who's next?', Freya asks.

'Samantha Lee.'

North Sydney is bustling. Traffic is comin' from every direction, and people in suits are power walkin'. Mouths are glued to their phones. The phones aren't put away for a second, not even when they're crossin' the street. Be fucked if I can think of a conversation that's so important, it's worth riskin' your life for. Dr Samantha Lee's rooms are on the eighth floor of a building opposite Green Plaza. The music in the lift is easy listening. Give this Murri country and western any day 'cause each song has a story. Admittedly, most of those stories are sad, like they talk about marriage break-ups and untimely death. But they're still better than this schmaltzy and repetitive shit.

The reception counter is pristine white and it's decked out in promotional material for a charity that supports research into brain cancer.

'Can I help you?', the young man says.

He's in his early twenties and dressed in a black shirt that's tucked into jeans. The frames of his glasses look expensive, as do his perfectly straight teeth.

'I'm here to speak to Dr Lee.'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'No.'

'I'm afraid you won't be able to see Dr Lee without an appointment. She's very busy.'



The door behind the reception opens and a young woman exits. She's painfully thin and a green scarf has been wrapped around her head. She pauses at the counter and makes her next appointment. A statuesque woman in a light blue pants suit emerges from behind the same door. Samantha Lee's hair is sitting perfectly on her shoulders and she's wearing bright red lipstick. She waits for the receptionist to finish his discussion with the young woman, who limps out the doorway. Her life hasn't even begun, but now she's livin' on borrowed time. I feel so sad I don't realise that Samantha Lee is staring at me.

'Who are you?', she says.

Samantha's beautiful face is harsh. I gather that this one doesn't smile all that often.

'My name is June. Aunty June.'

'What do you want?'

'To talk to you.'

She folds her arms and gives a look of disgust. Makes me feel like a piece a dog goona that's been dragged in here.

'Andy, does this person have an appointment to see me?'

I know a bully when I see one. I feel sorry for the young fullah.

'No, I don't have an appointment. But I need to speak with you. It's about your brother, and my niece, Freya.'

Samantha shakes her head and scowls.

'If you don't get out of here I will call the police.'

'Samantha, you and I want the same thing.'

'What might that be?'

'To find out who killed Craig.'

'I know who did that – your niece.'

'Freya couldn't hurt a flea. Whoever did that to your brother was a cold hearted killer.'

She may not like me, but Samantha knows I'm makin' sense.

'You have two minutes and then you have to disappear.'

Samantha Lee's office is empty of colour. There's no paintings on the walls, or photographs of loved ones on her desk. She sits directly opposite me, with her back to the window.

'I know that Craig turned up to your shindig for Power Through Responsibility.'

'You came here to tell me that?', she says sarcastically.

This one isn't gonna intimidate me. Samantha Lee might be some bigshot neurosurgeon, but she wipes her bum just like the rest of us.

'I've read your police statement, Samantha. You didn't mention anything about Craig turning up to your cocktail party.'

I'm bluffin' of course. In spite of my many charms, Dave wouldn't show me Samantha's statement. But she's lookin' less confident.

'Craig was a mess. It was all because he'd just broken up with that insipid woman.'

'Hey, that's my niece you're talkin' about.'

'Freya was hopeless. She smothered him and hung onto his every word. Craig needed to be with a woman who had her own power.'

Samantha stifles a tear and reaches for some tissues on her desk.

'I knew that they were all wrong for each other the night that we were introduced. Craig knew that too. He was intending to break up with her in his usual manner.'

'Which was?'

'Ceasing all communication. Eventually, Freya would take the hint.'

'That's pretty fuckin' cowardly ... no disrespect intended.'

'None taken. I took the same point of view. So did my partner, Deb. So we took Craig on our sailing boat and the three of us hatched a plan for him to break up with Freya. He was going to call on Freya at her apartment and tell her in person.'

'But?'

'Freya foiled that plan when she cooked him some ridiculous dinner.'

Food preparation has never been Freya's forte. If it was possible to burn water, then that one woulda done it. When she was a teenager, she'd cook up these big batches of pikelets. Them

pikelets were so rubbery, I'd take them to the Bowls Club, where they were used as drink coasters.

'When he arrived at the party, Craig began to drink heavily. He started abusing Oliver. Craig wasn't making sense.'

'What was he saying?'

'I have no idea. Look, I just wanted to get Craig out of there. He was embarrassing me.'

'How did Craig get home?'

'One of Oliver's staff drove him.'

'Who?'

'I don't know.'

Samantha looks frail now and her eyes are a window into a whole lotta pain.

'Wannika is a generous contributor to our charity, The Brain Cancer Institute. If Oliver got dragged into this mess, he would withdraw his support. Besides, I don't think that Oliver would kill anyone.'

'I'm a very talented private detective Dr Lee, and my years of experience have taught me that even good people are capable of heinous acts, given the right circumstances.'

Tears stream down her cheeks and her mascara has begun to run. Samantha rises from her chair and stares into the harbour. The water has gone turquoise and the afternoon sun doesn't look so harsh from here.

'It doesn't matter now. My brother is dead and nothing can bring him back.'

'You know as well as I do that it still matters.'

'No, it really doesn't matter anymore. I have bigger things to worry about, like finding his son, David.'

I reflect on Freya's statement. Craig had a son, whom he hadn't seen in four years.

'How could he lose touch with his own child?'

Samantha shakes her head.

'I loved my brother, very much. But he had lots of flaws.'

'Samantha, I could help you to find your nephew.'

'Why would you help me?

'Because locating missing persons is one of the things that we private detectives do.'

'I'll give it some thought.'

'I need to ask you one more thing. Why did you lie about Freya?'

Samantha looks baffled.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Alicia Summers wrote an article about Freya for *The Daily*. She quoted you as saying that Freya had threatened to kill Craig.'

'I never said anything of the sort.'

### **Chapter Thirty-seven**

'It feels like we're gearing up for a ran-tan,' Mark says.

He's got this cheeky grin and some lightness has returned to his eyes. He's no longer wearin' that big dressing on his head.

'What makes you think that we're gonna paint the town black?'

'Each one of us is styled up.'

We are indeed styled up for Freya's work Christmas drinks. Freya is wearing skinny jeans and high heels. She's even put on some lippie. Mark is his usual debonair self in his slacks and black suit coat. Me, I'm wearin' the North Queensland Cowboys jersey, my favourite cargo pants and my bum bag.

'Mark, we're not getting drunk tonight. I have to work with these people, eventually,' Freya says.

'When do you go back to work?'

She places her lipstick in her purse and gestures us through the front door.

'I go back in the second week of January. That's when my leave runs out,' she says.

'At least you have a job to go back to,' Mark says gloomily.

'Bub, you'll find another job in the new year. I can feel it in me bones.'

The traffic in Parramatta Road is flowing, but there's a shit load of it. I'm sweating and there's no tree to provide us with shade. Inside the bus shelter is just as hot as it is outside.

'So what are the two of you doing on Christmas Day?', Mark asks.

Freya looks at me uncomfortably.

'I'm sure that it will be deadly, whatever we decide to do. Which reminds me - Freya, that oven in your kitchen looks like it hasn't been touched for years.'

'I've used it once or twice,' Freya says defensively.

'Tomorrow mornin' I'm gonna buy a turkey and some veges. We should get a tree too.'

I'm gonna make up a nice little Christmas spread for me and Freya. Might even find some rumballs.

'This will be my last Christmas as a free woman,' she says glumly.

'Freya, you shouldn't say that!'

'Aunty June, she has a point,' Mark says.

'No she doesn't. Not while I'm on the case.'

True God, I'm gettin' wild with this mob. No one believes that I can solve this case. Not Mark, not Freya, not even Dave. This little black duck is gonna prove all a them wrong. In my heart, I know that Oliver McGrady is responsible for the murders of Simon Palmerston and Craig Lee. And I reckon that the same person who killed those two was also responsible for the death of Harold James. Just need to get me some evidence.

The bus into the City is packed like a tin a sardines. The three of us are standing in the middle. I reckon we look like pins in a bowling alley. We get off the bus in George Street, catch the train to Redfern Station and then cross the street. The Redfern RSL is a lot like the Doonville Bowls Club. The carpet and the furniture are a bit worn, as are the bar flies. But it's homely. As soon as I step inside, I'm greeted by the black Adonis of Australian sports journalism.

'Aunty June, I am so glad to finally meet you,' Jason Rogers says.

'You know who I am,' I say, feelin' all giddy and shit.

'Your niece talks about you all the time,' he says.

I can feel my cheeks heating up. Talk about a shame job!

'But Aunty June, I have to warn you.'

'About what?'

'This is Rabbitohs Country here,' he says, lookin' at me jersey.

'Bub, every black fella in Australia loves Jonathon Thurston.'

A tall and gaunt young man approaches Freya.

'Sis, it's been too long,' he says.

They embrace and Freya introduces him to me as Jimbo. I remember Freya tellin' me about this Jimbo fullah, who's infamous for bein' a party animal. He lives up to his reputation when he buys a round of shooters for us. In the corner of my eye, I can see Chris Taylor. She's havin' a yarn with a group of women, but she gives me a nod of recognition. After I contacted her on Facebook, we agreed to meet here tonight. Apparently, Chris is a legend at Koori-oke.

'Aunty June Clarkson, right?'

'And you're one a them Taylors from Bundaberg. Your Aunty Jean and I used to be flat mates in Brisbane, forty years ago.'

Chris pauses and chuckles to herself.

'Oh my, the stories Aunty Jean has told us about back then. I seem to remember her mentioning something about a Murri disco.'

'Black Doors, it was called. The deadliest brothers would go there on a Saturday night. But no good, we were all related.'

'Aunty June I have to leave early tonight. So we should probably grab some private space and have a yarn.'

We find an empty table in a corner. Chris goes to the bar and returns with two glasses of bubbles.

'It's almost Christmas,' she explains as she hands me a glass.

'Thanks Bub.'

'So what do you want to know about Wannika?'

'As much as you can tell me.'

'Okay, I only looked at their operations in Western Australia. But from what I could tell, they were dodgy.'

'In what way?'

'Wannika had no respect for important cultural heritage sites. If any anthropologist delivered a report that was adverse to Wannika's interests, they were let go. Oh, and another thing, McGrady was dead set against the payment of financial compensation for the extinguishment of native title.'

'Why was that?'

'Oh, he has this stock story about growing up with proud Aboriginal workers on his family's station, who were happy to be paid in rations. But when the Equal Wages Decision was handed down, the black workers were ruined by grog and welfare.'

'It never ceases to amaze me that they can justify somethin' like slavery when they're talkin' about our mob.'

I reflect on Mum and what she went through when she was a little girl. Mum worked so hard and rarely got a day off. Her employers had always claimed that they were puttin' Mum's pay into this government trust fund. But when Mum finally got her freedom, her account was empty.

'I made some inquiries and it turns out that the McGradys were terrible employers. Always have been. During the 1946 strike in the Pilbara, the workers on the McGrady Station left as well. They were taken back there in chains,' Chris says somberly.

'So if this McGrady has no compassion for black fellas, then why would he set up a charity for our young people?'

'Power Through Responsibility administers the scholarships and job programs that are given to native title holders as their compensation for mining.'

I catch a glimpse of Freya and Jimbo getting up on the stage. Freya's talkin' to the DJ and Jimbo is giggling.

'Aunty June, there's something else I should tell you.'

'What is it Bub?'

Chris looks nervous.

'Bub, whatever you tell me now, it's just between you and me.'

'It's a requirement of all of the scholarships and job programs that the recipients re-locate. But in practice, they're encouraged to move away from their communities permanently. My theory is that it's a long term solution to any recalcitrant native title holders. If all of the young people go away, then those communities will gradually disappear.'

'That is explosive ... and this crazy scheme came from McGrady himself?'

'Apparently. I wanted to do some more digging, believe me. But the story was too hot. We would have been bogged down in defamation proceedings for years.'

All of a sudden I hear this horrific sound. It makes me think of finger nails dragging down a blackboard, and salt bein' poured into bloody wounds.

'Baaaabbbyyyy, baaaabbbyyyy, I'd get down on my knees for yooouuuu. If you would only love meeee like you used to dooooo.'

Freya is in the centre of the stage, holdin' the microphone and giggling in between the lyrics. Jimbo is standing beside her, almost doubling over in laughter. Jason is trying to be the grown up, and is encouraging Freya to leave the stage. Mark, on the other hand, is lookin' stunned.

'You've lost that lovinnnn feeling. Ohhh that lovin' feeeeellling.'

'Aunty June, that's awful,' Chris says.

'Fuck me! How many shooters did she drink?'

'Not enough,' Chris says, 'not enough.'



## Chapter Thirty-eight

24 December 2010

I wake up feelin' anxious. I turn over, close me eyes and try to get some more sleep. But my mind won't settle. Marmalade is stirring, so I grab her leash and we go outside. Most of the dogs I've ever had anythin' to do with, needed a bit a training to get used to walkin' on a leash. But not Marmalade. She strides. The early sun is gentle and the sky is clear. If I was in Doonaville, I'd be takin' the tinnie out right now. I'm struggling to walk this morning. Me body feels likes lead and me mind is all over the shop. If I don't work some magic in the next few hours, Freya is gonna end up spendin' the rest of her life in the big house.

On our way back I remind meself that everything happens for a reason. Destiny has brought me here to save Freya, and to establish meself as a private detective. As if the old Murris are here beside me, I get a call. It's Maud.

'Junie, you got a pen and paper?'

'What ya got Big 'Ole?'

'The name of the student you're lookin' for is Michael Hogan. I've spoken with his Mum. He's back in Allanvale for Christmas. She's okay with you givin' him a call.'

'Look out! That Murri grapevine is deadly!'

Ten minutes later, I'm sittin' on Freya's balcony, talkin' to young Michael. Tryin' to get this young man to say anything is a bit like pullin' out hen's teeth.

'So Bub, you lookin' forward to comin' back to the big smoke next year?'

'What's the big smoke?'

'Sydney.'

'Yeah, I guess so.'

Minutes pass. I can hear his Mum growlin' other kids in the background.

'Michael, I understand that you probably wanna get back to your mates.'

'Okay, bye ...'

'Hang on, just a minute! As I already told ya, I'm a private detective and I'm workin' on a big case. You might have some important information that could help me to solve it.'

'Like what?'

'I know you told Craig Lee something about Allanvale.'

'I hardly knew him.'

'From what I heard, he had a lot of time for you.'

'Craig only spent time with me because he had to,' he says petulantly.

'I understand you told him something that made him angry. Something about Oliver McGrady.'

'I can't remember.'

'Try.'

Michael huffs impatiently.

'Please?'

'I think I might have told him about the Turtle Festival at our school.'

'What's the Turtle Festival?'

'It's this gammon parade that we put on for the people from Wannika. They come and choose the students for the boarding school scholarships.'

'Why is that a bad thing?'

'We don't wanna leave here. But we have to.'

'Why?'

'Because that's the only way that our parents can get jobs. Wannika also builds the things we need. Like, we got a new community hall last year, but only after me and some other boys agreed to go to boarding schools.'

'I'm sorry to hear that Bub.'

'We done now?'

'Just one more question. How did the Turtle Festival get its name?'

'I dunno,' he says, soundin' all irritated and shit. Anyone would think I'm askin' him to donate a kidney.

'I wanna know why you think it's called that.'

'At the last festival that I went to, someone from Wannika gave a talk about how baby sea turtles take off into the ocean as soon as they're born, and then they roam the world. I guess they reckon that black fellas should be like baby sea turtles.'

'Do you remember who this person was?'

'No.'

'Okay Bub, you can go ...'

The little shit hangs up before I can finish me sentence.

I'm makin' some fresh coffee, and seething over that dirty, rotten dog, Oliver McGrady, when a two legged sea creature emerges from behind the bedroom door. Real green behind the gills, she is.

'Aunty June, I feel terrible,' Freya says.

Her face is pale and her hair is dank.

'I need some greasy food.'

'I'll get you some Bub. But first, I need to go to Mosman.'

I look at Mark, who's stretched out on the couch. He hasn't moved for a long time. Looks like one a them lizards that freezes in order to protect themselves from predators.

'Mark, I need the keys to the Audi R8. This time, Aunty's not takin' 'no' for an answer.'

Mosman breathes old money. Hard work alone won't get you here. Each one of these stately homes would be worth several million, and most of them are havin' some renovations done. Half of the cars parked in this street appear to belong to tradies, and scaffolding has been erected inside many of the yards. The footpaths, like the streets, are wide and lined with beautiful, old trees. Oliver McGrady's place is just as Mark described it. Fuckin' Buckingham Palace, if you ask me.

'Can I help you?'

The young man is wearing a t-shirt with an advertisement for 'Harry's Dog Walking'. He's tall and gangly, but sweet lookin'. The dog next to him is a big, old labrador.

'I'm lookin' for Oliver McGrady.'

'This is his house,' he replies.

'You walkin' his dog.'

'He's called Jethro,' he says. At the mention of his name, Jethro wags his tail.

'But the McGradys have already left.'

'Where to?'

'Switzerland. They're spending Christmas in their chateau.'

'You wouldn't know when they return by any chance?'

He looks anxious. I feel bad for puttin' him on the spot.

'It's okay Bub. It doesn't matter anymore.'

I drive around for a while, before I pull into a little beach called Sirius Cove. Some fit lookin' youngsters are paddle boarding. The water is a beautiful light blue, and I can see one a them massive cruise ships in the distance. I wanna make sense of all of this tragedy, but I can't. I can only feel sorry for everyone who's grieving for Simon, Craig and Harold. I never met any of them, but no one deserves to have their life cut short at the hands of another. Pretty soon, me and Maudie are gonna be grieving for our Freya. She doesn't belong in prison. She's too soft.

At the very least, I'm gonna give her a proper Christmas dinner. Seein' I'm in Mosman I do some shoppin'. I taste some samples in a cheese shop and settle on a cheddar and a brie. Then I step into a flash delicatessen and buy some Kalamata olives and a spicy salami. I find a turkey for tomorrow and a Christmas cake. I even manage to track down some rumballs. Finally, I pick up a bread stick from a French patisserie. By the time I'm finished, I'm carrying three shopping bags in each hand. The drive home is pleasant enough and it's deadly to pass the Opera House. I remind meself that people from all over the world know Australia by reference to those majestic, white sails. I should be countin' my blessings. After all, I'm havin' a real date with Dave this evening. We might even get to have our first pash.

## Chapter Thirty-nine

I'm feelin' chirpy when I step inside Freya's apartment. Freya and Mark, on the other hand, look like driftwood. Real still they are and windswept. Freya's hair is standing up straight and Mark just keeps starin' into the wall.

'Aunty June, you look like you bought half of Sydney,' Freya says wearily.

'Yeah, well the three of us are gonna have a deadly feed tomorrow.'

'Is it okay if I bring my sister?', Mark asks.

'Of course it is, Bub.'

Freya jumps up from the couch. She looks all agitated and shit.

'What's wrong?'

'I just remembered that Marion is coming over for drinks tonight. I had better do some housework.'

Freya pats her pants pockets and then looks through her purse.

That's strange,' she says, 'I can't find my phone.'

'You must have left it at the Redfern RSL,' Mark says.

'I can't deal with this right now,' she says in between yawns.

'Oi Freya, have you got some nibbles for when Marion comes over?'

'I've got some French onion dip and corn chips.'

'Bub, I think you should do better. Look, I'll leave you some of the cheese I bought in Mosman.'

Freya looks at me real serious and folds her arms across her chest.

'Where are you off to?'

'A date.'

Who with?'

'Dave Chappell.'

'Detective Dave Chappell?', she says, lookin' like a toad fish caught on a hook.

'We met long before I came to the big smoke ... on the internet.'

Freya seizes a pillow and buries her face into it.

'Bub, I told you, everything happens for a reason.'

'This is too crazy,' she says, 'I need some sleep before I can even begin to make sense of everything.'

I spend the rest of the day gettin' ready for my big date. I put on a face mask. It's some kinda mud from an island in the Pacific, or at least, that's what the back of the packet said. I put a treatment on my hair that smells of coconut. Then I mix meself a gin and tonic, take the iPad and claim some space on the balcony. The news is pretty lackluster. But there's a story about Wannika. McGrady was blusterin' about the Murriss and Greenies who've managed to foil his planned coal mine for the Bowen Basin. He even gives a serve to their lawyers, Hill and Young, for actin' for the Murriss on a pro bono basis. True God! This McGrady thinks he owns the world. Well, this little black duck is gonna bring him down, one day.

By the time that five o'clock arrives, I'm styled up. Big time! I'm wearin' a white peasant blouse, and black capri pants. My hair has been blow dried back. I spent ages gettin' me make-up right. When I open the bathroom door, Freya and Mark break out into whistles and claps. I'm so grateful that Freya isn't mad with me for bein' sweet on Detective Dave.

'Aunty June, you look hot!', Mark says.

'Hey, that's my aunty you're talking about.'

'I'm just telling the truth,' he says to Freya, who's lookin' a lot better.

A few years ago, Maudie and I gave Freya a picnic hamper for Christmas. She and Mark have only used it a couple of times, so it still looks new. I load some cheese, olives and the bread stick into the hamper, together with some wine glasses and the iPad. Freya puts the leash on Marmalade.

'Aunty June, are you sure that you don't want to leave Marmalade here?'

'I'm sure.'

She hands me the leash and gives me a big hug.

'Enjoy tonight. You deserve to be happy, Aunty June.'

As I walk along Parramatta Road I'm experiencing mixed emotions. I'm stoked that me and Dave are gonna have a romantic picnic, and it'll be fun singin' carols. Fortunately, I got a much better singing voice than Freya. But the real purpose for me bein' here hasn't been resolved. Pretty soon I'm gonna have to tell Maudie that Freya is goin' to the big house, where she will likely remain for the rest of her days. I meet Dave near the statue of Mary Poppins. Her creator, Pamela Travers, once lived in Ashfield. Dave and I talk about how deadly the monument is, and I take a selfie with it in the background.

Then the three of us find a spot to lay down the picnic blanket. We decide on a space that's quite far from the stage. Even though I'm lookin' forward to hearing the carols, I'm more interested in talkin' to Dave. Each time that we meet, I discover something new and endearing about him. Of course, it helps that Dave is lookin' hot as. He's got dark blue denim jeans on, and a polo shirt that he bought from his local sailing club. He's wearing different cologne tonight. It's got a musk scent that's drivin' me wild.

'A glass of wine, June?'

'That would be nice, thank you.'

After he pours our wine, Dave rummages in a white plastic bag.

'Marmalade, I bought you some lamb treats.'

'Babe, you shouldn't have,' I say, feelin' touched by the gesture.

We talk about our day, the weather and occasionally comment on the singing. I know that I'm glowing. Dave is too.

'So, can I ask how the crime solving gig is coming along?', he says.

'Not as fruitful as I had hoped.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I did me best.'

'How's Freya?'

'At home. She's got a couple of mates over for Christmas drinks. I haven't said anything about goin' back to the big house. But I think she knows.'

Dave has stretched out on the blanket and his head is resting on his left palm. Marmalade is lying against him and he's scratching her belly. Dave goes all quiet. I don't know what to say either.

'I've reached a decision,' he says.

'Which is?'

'I think it's time for me to retire.'

'Really?'

'Life is short and precious. I'd prefer to spend what time I have left fishing.'

'We got some good fishin' posies at Doonaville.'

'You wouldn't know of a good tour guide?'

'Babe, you only have to say the word.'

He turns to face me and I get lost in those grey eyes. Our kiss is warm and soft. When we finish I can feel myself smiling.

'I'm so happy,' I whisper to meself.

He looks up into the night sky, grinnin' like a Cheshire cat.

'I just wish that I could have made things right for Freya.'

'June, I've been investigating homicides for more years than I care to admit. Its hard work, emotionally grueling, and I don't always yield a good result.'

'I know Babe. It's just that I promised Delia, Freya's Mum that I'd always take care of Freya.'

'But you have,' he says.

'Not this time.'

He cups my chin with his hand. I like the feel of his hand. It's the hand of a strong man who's used to workin' hard.

'I do remember you saying that two minds are better than one.'

'Babe, I know that it was McGrady. I just can't prove it.'

He pauses and rummages through the white plastic bag. Dave reveals some photocopied pages. The turtle poem,' he says.



I can't believe it! Dave actually made copies of Simon's notebook for me. That means he's takin' me seriously. Someone on this planet, other than me, thinks that I can solve this case.

'Shall we read it together?', he says.

*Beautiful Country, sings to me.*

*River smells like the hair of my beloved. Fresh and alive, so alive.*

*Children play in the dirt that carries their ancient inheritance.*

*The turtle comes with promises of new buildings, roads, the great Australian dream.*

*The turtle has a voracious appetite.*

*She eats the children first, takes them away from everything they know.*

*Soon enough, she will eat up Allavale.*

*Then come for me.*

*It's just like Wham said – Everything she wants is everything she sees.*

'Wham? Are you fuckin' kidding me?'

'As a poet, I'm sure that he made a great lawyer,' Dave says wryly.

'It's terrible poetry. I'm gonna have to ring Maudie and tell her the news. You know, even Maudie and her annoyin' boyfriend tried to help out with solving this case. They even sent me some photographs of a shindig for McGrady's charity.'

I haven't even looked at those photographs yet. I probably should, if only so that I can assure Maudie that they were indeed helpful. I take the iPad out of the picnic hamper and log into me Hotmail account.

'Fuck me!'

'June, what's wrong?'

'I show Dave the photo of Oliver McGrady, Samantha Lee, Craig Lee ... and Marion.'

'That's fuckin' Marion.'

'Who's Marion?'

'She's Freya's mentor and confidante.'

This photo is the jigsaw piece that connects everythin'. I know it!

'I gotta ring Freya. Fuck me!'

'What is it?'

'Freya lost her phone last night.'

'June, what's going on?' Dave asks, looking all concerned, and a bit confused.

'Marion is at Freya's apartment for Christmas drinks.'

I remember that Marion gave me one of her business cards the other day. I search through my bum bag and find it. Surely enough, the logo is a turtle.

'Marion is the turtle! It wasn't McGrady after all. Fuck me!'

I dial the number on the card.

'Aunty June, I've been waiting for your call. Come now. Alone.'

\*\*\*\*

'June, you can't be serious,' Dave says.

I've just spent the last ten minutes explainin' the jigsaw to Dave, but he's still unconvinced.

'Marion killed Simon Palmerston. It was Simon's old firm that acted for the Murriss and the greenies to slap an injunction on Wannika's new mine in Allanvale. Marion needed that mine to go ahead.'

I look at the photos that Maud sent me again.

'I remember Samantha Lee sayin' that one of Oliver's employees took Craig home the night he was killed. I reckon it was Marion. That Patrick fullah who was stalkin' Freya said something about seein' a woman leave Craig's house. I reckon he was talkin' about Marion. She decided to kill Craig because Craig confronted Oliver about some dodgy stuff goin' on in Allanvale.'

Dave's lookin' mystified and once again, frustrated.

'June, you have to come to the Station with me, now.'

'Babe, I will, but not now.'

'Why not?'

I look at my bum bag and feel the contours of the Glock handgun.

'We have to rescue Freya and Mark.'

'June, I can't let you do this,' Dave says.

'Why?'

'For starters, it's illegal.'

I guess that he's got a point. It will indeed be illegal for me to storm into Freya's apartment with the Glock.

'But if I don't go Marion will kill them.'

'Please don't do this on your own,' he pleads.

'Babe, we Murri women are the back bone of our community. Have been since the year dot. I can handle this.'

We're sittin' in Dave's Landcruiser, which is parked outside Freya's apartment complex. I turn to Marmalade, who's sleepin' in the back.

'Princess, you behave yourself. I'll be back soon.'

As I open the car door Dave swears under his breath.

'Babe, I love you. Whatever happens, please don't forget that,' I tell him.

As soon as I know that Dave can't see me anymore, I drop the confident façade. The painful truth is that this little black duck has no plan. I'm just gonna have to try to out-wit Marion. As I walk up the stairs I'm passed by two young men, one of whom is carrying a carton of Coronas on his shoulder.

'Merry Christmas,' he says.

'You too, Bub.'

'Would you like to join us for some drinks on the roof?'

'Maybe later.'

When she opens the front door, Marion has this glazed look in her eyes.

'You on drugs or something?'

'Get inside,' she sneers.

Freya and Mark are sitting on the couch. Their hands are bound in rope. I notice some knives on the kitchen bench, together with what must be a dozen packets of Tim Tams, and tubes of Nivea hand cream. Marion has a Smith & Wesson handgun.

“What the fuck are you plannin’ on doin’ with them?”

‘Oh, I’ll let you live just for long enough to see. I’m an artist,’ Marion says. She turns to Freya and Mark.

‘These two specimens here are going to be the stars of my next masterpiece.’

‘Marion, this shit has nothin’ to do with art. It’s all about money.’

‘Oh really?’ she says, ‘do tell.’

‘I know that you killed Simon Palmerston and Craig Lee. I know why too. Both of them were a threat to your business model in Allanvale. What I don’t understand is why you needed the money. That house in Glebe must be worth millions.’

‘Oh, so you think that you’re some kind of Miss Marple, do you?’

‘Actually, I prefer to think of meself as the female version of John Shaft.’

Marion laughs. It’s condescending.

‘I had to take a huge mortgage over the house, after that prick, Harold James, stole my life savings. A small amount of money was recovered, but not enough for me to live on. So I had to start my consultancy business,’ Marion says bitterly.

‘So that’s why you killed James?’

‘I was determined to start over. But when I found out that Harold had been released from prison early, I was furious. It was about this time that Freya had told me that she was going to experiment with internet dating. She’s so predictable, I knew that she would fall for the respectable façade of Single&sophisticated.com. Christ, it’s a meat market like every other internet dating site.’

She turns to Freya.

I also guessed your password – Tim Tam.

‘Fuck me! Freya, we need to talk.’

‘I hear you Aunty June.’

'So you killed Harold James and framed Freya.'

'Oh they breed them smart in Doonaville,' Marion sneers.

'Why'd you kill Simon Palmerston?'

'He got too close to the traditional owners in Allanvale. He was the one who advised them to seek an injunction.'

'And Craig Lee knew about the real goal behind the Turtle Festival.'

Marion glares at me.

'Wannika provided those people with infrastructure and services. Before you judge me, you remember this, it's the miners who look after communities that governments only ever neglect. There's no votes in blacks. You of all people should know that.'

'But why did you have to kill Craig?', Freya sobs.

'I saw him talking to Alicia Summers at that stupid fundraiser. I couldn't risk Alicia Summers finding out about Allanvale.'

'You were the one who leaked to Alicia Summers, weren't you?'

Marion laughs. It's cruel and taunting.

'You also sprayed the bullets onto my balcony?', Mark says.

'It was a brilliant decoy,' Marion gloats.

She gestures to me to sit on the couch. Marion points the handgun at Freya.

'Any strange moves and I'll blow her fucking head off,' she says calmly.

I sit next to Freya on the couch. Freya is lookin' pretty stoic, all things considered. Mark is too.

'Thanks for rescuing us, Aunty June,' he says.

'Some rescue,' Marion retorts.

'At least, when I die, I will go knowing that I have loved and been loved,' he says.

My heart melts when I see tears streaming down Freya's cheeks. I turn the other way. In the corner of me eye, I see a flicker of movement outside, on the balcony. True God, I hope it's Dave.

'What are you looking at?', Marion says.

'The night sky. I want that to be the last thing I see before I die.'

'Oh don't get all traditional on me,' Marion says.

'When did you stop believing in things, Marion?', Freya says.

'Who said I believed in anything to begin with?'

'Here I was, thinking that you cared about me.'

'Freya, life is harsh. If you don't take care of yourself, no one will.'

'Police. Don't move!', Dave hollers. He's standing in the light now. He looks all strong and shit. Freya lunges at Marion. The two of them wrestle on the carpet. A shot is fired. And my Freya is dead. I'm starin' at her stony eyes as the chaos unfolds around me. To this day, I can't remember hearin' that second shot that killed Marion. I can only remember that the life had gone from Freya's beautiful face.

Just the other day, Dave reminded me that it's been over two years since we lost her. But to me, it feels like yesterday. The pain is so raw some days I can barely get out of bed. After all this time, I still cannot understand why Freya threw herself at Marion. Sometimes, I think that Freya felt responsible for bringing that deranged killer into our lives. That was why she took it upon herself to disarm Marion. If only she knew of the incredible pain that her death would bring to each one of us.

Mark left for Aotearoa as soon as he was able to settle his affairs. He said that there were too many memories of Freya in Sydney. He's called me, but only a couple of times. Mark found his birth family. Biggest mob. Maud and Barney ended up gettin' married, but there was no big wedding. Sis struggled just as much as I did. I'm glad that she's got Barney, 'cause he's taken good care of her. Makes her laugh when no one else can. As for me, I've questioned a lotta things. I still wanna believe that everything happens for a reason. But where was the logic in losin' Freya? I used to tell Dave that Freya was so special that the old Murriss had to take her, because they needed her more than we did. But I can't say that anymore, 'cause I don't believe it. I only know that I gotta keep movin, and realising my dreams, 'cause that's what Freya would

have wanted me to do. When I became a private detective for real, I knew that my baby girl would have been proud of me.

That case always will be in the back of my mind. Even though the papers called it the ‘internet dating murders’, it was never about romance. It was always about greed. Sometimes, I think about what Patrick told us about the night when he saw Marion leaving Craig’s house. He always maintained that Marion disappeared into a red Porsche. But I never did find out who drove that Porsche. If Marion had an accomplice, he or she was never found. Perhaps, it was young Agnes? Or Patrick himself? You never really do know who these people are beneath the surface. As for Oliver McGrady, I hear that he’s suffered as a result of the end of the mining boom. But rich men like him never really suffer. Do they?

## **Chapter Forty**

**1 November 2016**

‘Congratulations on your award, Miss Clarkson.’

It’s funny hearing anyone call me Miss Clarkson. But when you’re the Prime Minister, I guess that you have to be officious.

‘Thank you ... Prime Minister.’

He’s a silver fox who’s aging like a bottle of wine in a rich man’s cellar. His skin is soft and his hazel eyes are youthful. That suit must have been made by a tailor, because it fits him perfectly.

‘I enjoyed reading your book,’ he says.

‘I’m surprised that you would have time to read for pleasure, given that you to have to run the country.’

‘Even prime ministers deserve to relax in front of a gripping yarn.’

We’re interrupted by the Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff. She’s tall and thin, with cropped hair. Haven’t seen her smile yet. Real pushy, she is.

‘Excuse me Prime Minister,’ she says.

'What is it Megan?'

She whispers into his ear. They exchange worried glances and the Prime Minister quickly excuses himself.

'Everything okay, Bub,' I ask Megan.

'What does it look like?', she says haughtily.

Megan plunges her program into my hands and takes off in pursuit of her boss. Agghh fuck her!

If I lived here, at Kirribilli House, I'd do all of my entertaining outside, 'cause the view of the harbour is magnificent. The Opera House is so close I reckon I could swim there. When I look at those beautiful sails, I reflect on the afternoon that Mark took me to Circular Quay. I'm so glad we spent that time together. Ya never do know what's around the corner. So you gotta enjoy life while you still have it. I catch the eye of the waiter who's carrying a tray of my favourite canapes. Most of us here are writers. So we're more accustomed to beer and potato chips. Gotta splurge whenever we get the chance.

I glance over the program again. It still doesn't feel real when I see my name as the winner of the non-fiction prize. I get a bit teary when I think about all the times that me old Mum talked about her childhood, and how she had been robbed of any chance of gettin' a decent education. Who would have thought that our family would get here, to the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, in one generation? Deadly Aye!

Writin' me book was hard yakka. When I was a private detective I worked odd hours, especially when I was doin' surveillance jobs. Often I got home late at night and I found it hard to concentrate in front of the computer. Then I had Dave and Marmalade to think of. After bein' at work all day, I couldn't ignore those two. So I sold my business to an up and coming private detective, called Vera Swales. Vera took on all me old clients, with the exception of Henry Parker Senior and his on-again-off-again daughter in-law, Lucinda Flack. A few times per year, I get summonsed to the big smoke so I can do a job for me old mates. Besides payin'



handsomely, Henry always puts me up in a posh hotel where I can enjoy unlimited room service.

Maud and her useless husband were real happy when we moved to Doonaville. To his credit, Barney made a big effort to make Dave feel welcome. The two of them now play lawn bowls a few times per week. Marmalade is in her twilight years, so she spends most of her time lyin' on a cushion on the porch. It didn't take me long to develop a routine. I'd get up at a sparrow's fart and go for a run. At eight o'clock I barricaded myself into the tool shed and wrote. My bum stayed glued to my seat until one o'clock. Then I'd go into the house and have lunch with Dave. I did that every day until the manuscript was finished.

In hindsight, I have to say that the hardest part of writing the book was having to draw upon my memories of Freya. I wanted the reader to know who she really was. I wanted to tell the world that Freya was quiet and shy, but she also had this steely determination. She was kind but if you ever did anything to hurt her, or those she loved, Freya would be wild. She'd hold onto her anger for a long time too. Freya also had her quirks, like her fixation with eighties music and Tim Tams. There would be days when I could feel her beside me. At times the pain would surge to the surface and I'd find meself on the floor, cryin' me eyes out. But I had to go on, if only to set the record straight. I couldn't let that hack, Alicia Summers, get away with paintin' our Freya as a coldhearted killer. I never did find out what happened to Summers. Apparently, she hit the bottle pretty hard after my book became a runaway bestseller.

'Are you enjoying yourself?', Dave asks.

'Yeah, this shindig is real nice.'

He's wearing a navy coloured suit with a white business shirt and a red tie. I gotta pinch meself sometimes. True God, I can't believe how lucky I am to be with him.

'Kirribilli is a far cry from the Doonaville Bowls Club,' Dave says wistfully.

He's been tryin' his best to enjoy living in Doonaville. But I know that Dave misses his family, 'cause he's on the phone to his brothers all the time. Dave's never really taken to either the

coffee at the Bowls Club, or the characters in the Caravan Park. Doonaville folk aren't exactly gregarious like Sydneysiders.

'You wanna move back here, don't ya?'

Dave's eyes are clouded with sadness. But he doesn't wanna disappoint me. Bless him.

'It's alright Babe, I understand.'

In the corner of me eye I spot the waitress with the mini quiches. I quickly grab one before they disappear.

'Doonaville is terribly quiet,' Dave says.

I gotta admit that I miss the big smoke too. I'd gotten used to drinking good coffee in Leichhardt and goin' to the Palace Cinema. The closest cinema to Doonaville is about an hour away and it's got nothin' on The Palace. I also miss bein' a private detective. I found meself in some sticky situations, but those were the occasions when I'd get an adrenalin rush. Like, this one time I had to do some surveillance of a bikie gang. Well, I wore a dowdy dress and I donned the walkin' frame with the concealed cameras. I was taking photos for the longest time before I aroused the suspicions of their leader. He stared at me, and then he went inside the clubhouse. Well, just when I thought he'd shoot me head off, he comes back with a cuppa and piece a fruit cake. True God, thinkin' about that still makes me laugh.

Mind you, I also had to do things I didn't enjoy, like rescue the likes of Lucinda. True God, I lost count of how many times I had to save Lucinda from herself. But it's good seein' her at this shindig. Speakin' of the devil, here she comes.

'Aunty June, I just finished reading 'The Life and Times of Freya Clarkson.' It was beautiful,' Lucinda gushes. She's radiating good health, as you'd expect of someone who's about to give birth to her first child. Henry is lookin' happier these days. He's ditched the suits and he's even lookin' buff.

'Congratulations, Aunty June,' Henry says.

'Bub, this book never would have been published unless you had pulled some strings.'

When I eventually finished the manuscript, I sent it to that many publishers and agents. I even entered it into a few competitions. But I never got anywhere. Then I ran into young Henry one day, after a meetin' with his old man. When Henry asked me how I was, I told him I was feelin' disillusioned after all the rejections. Well, before I knew it, Henry had made an appointment for me with the head honcho of Parker Publishing. The rest, as they say, is history.

'I hear that filming is starting soon,' Henry says.

'Yeah Bub, I've had some really good meetings with Quentin Tarantino. We're feelin' confident about our screenplay.'

'Aunty June, we might even see you at the Oscars next year.'

'Bub, you never do know what's around the corner.'

In the corner of my eye, I can see Nell and the kids. We've become close since Mark left for the land of the long, white cloud. I'm kinda like a Nanna for the kids, who are growing so quickly. Every time I see them, they're taller and just a little more mature than before.

'Aunty June, it's so good to see you,' Nell says.

'Bub, thank you so much for bringing the jarjums,' I say, before givin' big hugs to Tom and Katie.

'We wouldn't have missed this for the world,' Nell says.

We're tellin' Nell about our road trip down here, when that rude woman, Megan, starts pesterin' me.

'Look you, I'm catchin' up with my family,' I tell her.

'But June, the Prime Minister needs to speak to you now,' she says.

'Darling, you really should go to see what he wants,' Dave says,' 'I'll come with you.'

People nod their heads in acknowledgement and try to shake my hand as we're whisked through the old mansion. The Prime Minister and his wife are waiting for us in what I assume is some kind of sitting room. She rises from the sofa and shakes my hand.

'Please call me Dianne,' she says.

'Nice to meet you, Dianne.'

She seems to hesitate before speaking.

'I wish that we were meeting under better circumstances.'

'What's goin' on?'

Dianne looks solemnly to the floor. The Prime Minister sighs.

'Miss Clarkson, we have a rather delicate situation that requires some discretion. One of our family heirlooms has been stolen. It's a rare diamond that belonged to my grandmother.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. But surely the police can investigate the theft?'

'We know who the thief is,' Dianne says, 'our youngest daughter, Annabelle.'

The Prime Minister nods his head sadly.

'We don't care about the diamond. We just want our daughter back.'

'Where is Annabelle?'

'She's fallen in with a bad crowd.'

The Prime Minister looks somberly through the window, into the harbour.

'I spent so many years building my political career. It was a terrible life for Dianne and the kids.' From what I seen of Kirribilli House, it doesn't look too terrible to me.

'I concede that Annabelle grew up in privilege. She went to the best schools, travelled and we paid for her university studies. But she struggled with being under the public gaze,' he says.

I feel sorry for the Prime Minister. Away from the cameras and the bluster, he's a father who feels powerless to save his troubled daughter. I seen a lot of families in this very situation.

'Where is young Annabelle?'

Dianne shrugs her shoulders.

'We last heard from Annabelle three weeks ago. She was in Byron Bay ... with Jimmy Z.'

'Jimmy Z the rock star?'

'I'm afraid so.'

Jimmy Z is a megalomaniac who has somehow escaped three murder convictions. Over the years he has been linked to notorious drug cartels, and some weird cult whose members believe that the world has been taken over by aliens.

'I understand that you've retired. But we were hoping ...'

'To tell the truth, I miss being a private detective. Don't get me wrong, I'm enjoying my writing gig, but it's terribly solitary.'

'So you will find Annabelle?'

'Of course. I'll start workin' on your case right away.'

'Does this mean that the Black Rose Private Detective Agency is re-opening?', Dave says, grinnin' like a Cheshire cat.

'The Black Rose is back, and I'm gonna be even deadlier than before.'

THE END

# **From Bony to Jay Swan: Aboriginality and Crime Fiction**

An exegesis written by Nicole Watson

## Chapter One: Oral storytelling to Aboriginal crime fiction

### Introduction

When Aboriginal writers turn to crime fiction, we re-create the genre through characters who did not exist before. While our protagonists share some commonalities with their non-Indigenous counterparts, their perspectives and experiences are also framed by their Aboriginality. In my novel, *The Boundary* (Watson 2011), the Murri detective, Jason Matthews is street smart, a loner and single-minded in his determination to apprehend the killer. But Matthews' past distinguished him from most of his colleagues in the Queensland Police Service. Matthews was adopted into a white family at birth, and grew up in isolation of other Aboriginal people. Matthews is ambivalent about his heritage, and feels vulnerable when a homicide investigation casts its microscope over the Aboriginal community of West End. As he solves the crime, Matthews is forced to come to terms with his identity.

Our crime writers imbue places with repressed Aboriginal histories, and reclaim ties to Country. My characters in *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) were lenses through which the reader witnessed an otherwise invisible past of West End, and in particular, Boundary Street. This cosmopolitan café strip was once the periphery of an evening curfew imposed only on Aboriginal people. Today, there is no public memorial to the former boundary. But it continues to exist in the stories of the fictitious traditional owners, the Corrowa, who maintain their connections with their land, in spite of colonisation.

Aboriginal crime writers draw upon a literary tradition that was at least forty thousand years in the making. Countless generations shrouded their ways of knowing, being and doing in stories. This chapter will examine the evolution from oral storytelling traditions to Aboriginal crime fiction. Aboriginal people were introduced to English literacy as part of the colonising project. But they quickly claimed it as their own, and transformed it into a space from which they projected their truths of dispossession, incarceration and virulent racism. Like our forebears, Aboriginal crime writers are naming unsettling truths, but in more nuanced ways than ever before.

This chapter will be divided into four parts. Part one will discuss Aboriginal storytelling traditions and the introduction of English literacy. Early figures such as Bennelong mimicked the writing practices of the settlers, but they also brought the rules of their own society to the page. Part two will examine the nexus between English literacy and incarceration in the nineteenth century, and the emergence of a tradition of subversive truth telling. Part three will discuss Aboriginal literature in the twentieth century. Aboriginal writers in the earlier part of the twentieth century used the written word in order to name unsettling truths on behalf of an emerging pan Aboriginal community. In the closing decades, Aboriginal writing flourished in poetry, life stories and song. Through those works, the Australian public learnt of the Stolen Generations, and the rising number of black men and women who were losing their lives in the nation's prisons and police watch-houses. Finally, part four examines Aboriginal literature in the twenty-first century, and the emergence of creative hybrid text; a subgenre of Aboriginal literature that includes Aboriginal crime fiction.

## **Part One: The historical foundations of contemporary Aboriginal literature**

### **Our storytelling traditions**

As a child I cherished school holidays, because they were the times when my cousins and I would gather around a fire to hear our elders tell stories. Some of those stories were humorous, others were sombre, and the odd ghost story would send chills down my spine. The storytellers of my childhood were so compelling that we absorbed their every word and gesture in silence. But at the time, we did not understand the magnitude of what was taking place. Our elders were not only entertaining us. They were also handing down the precious histories of the Murri community of south-east Queensland. It was through those stories that I learnt of giants like my great-grandfather, who saved his family from the grasp of a police protector.

Our storytelling traditions find resonance in Indigenous communities across the globe. Stories are the capsules in which we store our understandings of how the world began, experiential knowledge of the environment, and the rules that enable one to live a good life (Stasiuk & Kinnane 2010, pp. 87-88). They also keep us anchored in a world that is often dangerous and unpredictable. When my father would tell stories of the brutalities inflicted on our activists by



police officers in the 1970s, the violence would always be underscored by humour. Stories are also healing. Some of the most uplifting stories I have ever heard were told during times of grief, such as funerals.

Historically, our stories were never owned by individual authors. Rather, families belonged to stories. Okanagan writer, Jeanette Armstrong, has described her own storytelling traditions in the following terms:

Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns (Armstrong cited in King 2003, p. 2)

While Armstrong was writing about the people of the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, the same words could have been applied to Aboriginal storytellers in Australia.

Our stories breathe life into the memories of generations long past. Throughout Australia are stories of ancient geological events, such as volcanic eruptions and tsunamis (Hamacher & Norris 2009, p. 63). Which begs the question - how was it possible to maintain the integrity of oral histories over thousands of years? The answer lies in the appointment of custodians, who were responsible for ensuring that stories were passed on to successive generations (Stasiuk & Kinnane 2010, p. 88). Elaborate methods were also created to guarantee the inter-generational transfer of knowledge in the event of the premature death of a custodian. By way of example, the Nhunggabarra of north western New South Wales vested responsibility for a story in four custodians; each of whom was tasked with protecting a discrete part of the story. In the event of the passing of a custodian, a remote sibling named a 'tuckandee' would assume responsibility for transferring the knowledge to the next generation (Sveiby & Skuthorpe 2006, pp. 55-56).

The nuances of Aboriginal storytelling traditions were invisible to the settlers. Literacy was considered one of the markers of civilisation, and the lack of an obvious form of literacy proof of the inferiority of Aboriginal people (Kral 2009, p. 41). While some colonists believed that Aboriginal people were incapable of advancement, others considered that they could be

'civilised' through immersion in Christianity and English literacy. The first Aboriginal people to be taught how to read and write in English were children who had been taken into the homes of settlers (van Toorn 2006, p. 15). While some of those children were orphans, others were seized from their kin (Robinson 2013, p. 309).

Penny van Toorn has described the circumstances of the first recorded Aboriginal child removal. The teenager, Boorong, was taken into the home of Reverend Richard Johnson in 1789 (van Toorn 2006, p. 24). Boorong was taught how to read, and cite the Lord's Prayer. In spite of her progress, however, Boorong's request to return to her family was refused (van Toorn 2006, pp. 24-25). Boorong's experiences would mark the beginning of a long relationship between Aboriginal writing and incarceration. In this chapter, the term 'incarceration' will be used to describe various forms of subjugation, that include kidnapping, the removal of children into state care, confinement on reserves, and more recently, detention in police custody and correctional institutions.

### **Bennelong's letter**

The year following Boorong's removal from her family, the man who would become the earliest known Aboriginal writer, Bennelong, was kidnapped at the behest of Governor Phillip. Bennelong of the Wangal People was believed to be twenty-six years of age (Clendinnen 2003, p. 104) when he was taken in manacles to the Governor's house, where he would be detained for five months. In spite of such coercion, Bennelong formed a close bond with Phillip, calling him 'Beanga' or Father (van Toorn 2006, p. 59). When Phillip sailed to England in 1792, Bennelong accompanied him (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 9). Bennelong's time abroad was characterised by loneliness and frequent bouts of illness (Clendinnen 2003, p. 264), and he returned home in 1795. Tragically for Bennelong, he found himself estranged from his own people, and the privileged status he had enjoyed during Phillips' administration was no more.

In August 1796 Bennelong dictated a letter to Mr Philips, who had been responsible for his living arrangements in England (Wheeler 2013, p. 3). In the letter, Bennelong informs Philips about developments in his life, such as the loss of his wife to another man, and his own spearing (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 9). Bennelong also expresses his gratitude to Mrs Philips

who cared for him when he was ill (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 9). He then seeks stockings, handkerchiefs and shoes (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 9).

In composing the letter, Bennelong was almost certainly mimicking the writing practices of the settlers whom he had closely observed. Before the invasion, mimicry was the predominant method of learning in Aboriginal societies (van Toorn 2006, p. 57), and it was common for the settlers to express admiration for the talented Aboriginal mimics they encountered (Clendinnen 2003, p. 113). Encouraging the 'natives' to engage in mimicry was also a common practice of the settlers, as demonstrated by Bennelong's experiences. During his time with Governor Phillip, Bennelong was introduced to English clothing, food, wine, and personal habits such as shaving (Clendinnen 2003, p. 133). Bennelong was also known to sit with Phillip while the latter drafted correspondence, which included requisition orders for supplies from England (van Toorn 2006, p. 57).

Homi Bhabha describes mimicry as one of the 'most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge' (Bhabha 1984, p. 126). It is elusive because the desire to 'normalise' the colonial subject can never be fulfilled. Total replication would be counter to colonial authority, which 'requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power' (Bhabha 1985, p. 153). Consequently, mimicry can only ever result in a partial representation of the colonisers' cultural products (Bhabha 1984, p. 129). Mimicry, however, is destabilising because it leads the 'observer to become the observed' (Bhabha 1984, p. 129) and casts light on the ambivalence of colonial discourse.

At first glance, Bennelong's letter appears to affirm Bhabha's theory. His blunt requests for items of clothing accord with the stereotype of the 'cheeky native' (van Toorn 2006, p. 68). Bennelong's apparent lack of tact could also suggest that the attempts of his former patrons to 'civilise' him were futile. Sadly, this was how some chose to remember Bennelong after his death, as revealed in an obituary published in the Sydney Gazette:

The principal officers of the government had for many years endeavoured, by the kindest of usage, to wean him from his original habits and draw him into a relish for civilised life; but every effort was in vain

exerted and for the last few years he has been but little noticed ... In fact, he was a thorough savage, not to be warped from the form and character that nature gave him by all the efforts that mankind could use (Clendinnen 2003, p. 271).

Far from being a 'thorough savage', Bennelong was a person of considerable intelligence, who possessed an insatiable curiosity about the settlers (Clendinnen 2003). For a short time, Bennelong walked a tightrope between two worlds that were diametrically opposed; a feat that ultimately led to his demise. Like its author, the letter is steeped in complexity. Penny van Toorn argues that Bennelong's letter should be viewed as a 'product of intercultural engagement' (van Toorn 2006, p. 54). When Bennelong dictated the letter, it is likely that he melded his observations of the settlers' writing practices with the rules of his own society. The latter included kinship relationships that required the exchange of gifts (van Toorn 2006, p. 62). Therefore, it is possible that the letter was an attempt by Bennelong to co-opt Mr and Mrs Philips into his familial network. It is also likely that Bennelong aspired to trade any items that he received, in order to restore his former position as a powerful intermediary (van Toorn 2006, p. 66).

We will never know if Bennelong's letter reached its intended recipients. But in composing the letter, Bennelong was unwittingly setting a precedent that has been followed by Aboriginal writers ever since. English literacy was introduced by the settlers in the exercise of their superior power. But once Aboriginal people became proficient in reading and writing, they used their new skills in ways that had not been anticipated by the settlers, and most importantly, could not be controlled. These writers fused their own values and truths with the written word, and in the process, re-created it as a space of empowerment.

## **Part Two: The continuing nexus between English literacy and incarceration in the nineteenth century**

Mirroring the experiences of Boorong and Bennelong, subsequent generations of Aboriginal people would be exposed to English literacy through their incarceration. In 1815 the first school for Aboriginal children, the Native Institution, was established in Parramatta under the imprimatur of Governor Macquarie (van Toorn 2006, p. 27). Students were to receive

instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic (Brook & Kohen 1991, p. 61) and training to perform menial tasks (Robinson 2013, p. 305). They were also expected to abandon their families with whom they were permitted to have only fleeting contact at the Governor's annual native feasts. Unsurprisingly, Macquarie's experiment was a woeful failure, and the Institution closed its doors after nine years in operation (Robinson 2013, p. 305).

Macquarie also used objects and pieces of paper embossed with English script to administer Aboriginal people. One of the earliest methods of co-opting Aboriginal people was the 'king' or 'breast plate' (van Toorn 2006, p. 29). These metal plates, often engraved with concocted royal titles, were first gifted by Macquarie to individuals whom he ordained as chiefs (Healy 2001, p. 31). Macquarie also issued certificates that would become known as 'passports', which would afford Aboriginal people some protection from settler violence when they were moving through villages and farms (Healy 2001, p. 31). Only those who 'conducted themselves in a peaceful and inoffensive manner' (Brook & Kohen 1991, p. 32) were eligible to receive a passport.

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Aboriginal people throughout Australia became vulnerable to protectionism. This patchwork of State and Commonwealth legislation transformed thousands into wards of the state. Many were condemned to live on reserves indefinitely, where they were indoctrinated with Christianity, coerced into gruelling physical labour and prohibited from practising their culture. Protectionism first emerged in Victoria, where a system of reserves under the control of a Central Board was established in 1860 (Broome 2005, p. 125). Nine years later the Victorian Parliament passed an *Act for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria*, which increased the power of the Central Board to micro-manage the lives of Aboriginal wards. For example, regulations would determine where Aboriginal people could live, their eligibility for a work certificate, and who would hold the custody of their children (Broome 2005, p. 131).

In echoes of Macquarie's passports, numerous pieces of paper were used to administer Aboriginal wards. For example, when Darwin was declared a prohibited area under the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1911* (Cth), Aboriginal people were compelled to obtain special permits

to enter the city for sanctioned purposes, such as employment (Stephen 2009, p. 63). The permits belonged to a matrix of surveillance that included finger printing, compulsory medical examinations, and identification tags that would come to be known as 'dog tags' (Paisley 2001, p. 44). Liberation from the protectionist regime was similarly represented by another piece of paper; the certificate of exemption. Those granted a certificate of exemption would acquire the freedom of personal movement, but it could also be revoked upon a suspected failure to assimilate (Wickes 2008, p. 75).

Given that their exposure to the written word was so frequently associated with dispossession and incarceration, it would not have been unreasonable for Aboriginal people to reject the former entirely. However, many quickly grasped the power of the written word and were determined to use it to their own ends. By way of example, Aboriginal women who suffered the brunt of Victorian protectionist legislation, wrote hundreds of letters to government officials, concerning issues such as the custody of their children, housing and their right to equality (van Toorn 2006, pp. 175-176). Some also wrote letters as a means of maintaining family bonds, in defiance of bureaucratic attempts to destroy them (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 14).

### **The Coranderrk petitions**

Petitions were another tool used by Aboriginal people to resist their oppression, as demonstrated by the community of Coranderrk in Victoria. Gazetted as a reserve in 1863 (Broome 2005, p. 124) Coranderrk was a haven for those who had become homeless as a result of settler expansion. Under the management of the progressive, young preacher, John Green, Coranderrk became a prosperous farming community whose members enjoyed a degree of autonomy. In spite of Coranderrk's success, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines pressured Green into resigning. For many years, the people of Coranderrk petitioned for Green's reinstatement and security of tenure (van Toorn 2006, p. 133).

In drafting their petitions, the people of Coranderrk were invariably mimicking the writing practices of the settlers. But like Bennelong, these writers also brought their own values and traditions to the page. It is possible that they were drawn to the petition because its capacity for multiple signatories accommodated the tradition of group ownership of a story. In an 1881

petition to a board of inquiry, for example, the petitioners spoke in one voice of land that had gone fallow, and official incompetence (Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 46). They also expressed their conviction that if Mr Green returned, the Station would soon 'self-support itself' (Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 46).

Richard Broome has argued that some of the correspondence from Coranderrk represented attempts to elicit 'right behaviour' from the settlers (Broome 2006, p.1). The Kulin's moral code dictated that those who profited from the land had an obligation to care for the original owners who had been dispossessed. A letter by one resident, Tommy Michie, provides examples of transgressions of this moral code by Green's successor, Reverend Strickland, which include a failure to grow vegetables for the 'good of our health' (Broome 2006, p. 11). The order of signatories on the Coranderrk petitions also reflected the Kulin's social structures. For example, the principal signatory of many of the Coranderrk petitions was William Barak, their ngurungaeta, or speaker (van Toorn 2006, p. 130). Below Barak were the names of senior men, followed by the younger men, then the senior women, the younger women, and then finally, the children (van Toorn 2006, p. 132). The Kulin were also creating a new tradition, which can be described as 'subversive truth telling'. Their written testimonies of unjust treatment posed a challenge to the moral foundations of settler society. This role of speaking truth to power, on behalf of those who did not have a voice, would become pivotal to the struggles of the twentieth century.

### **Part Three: Aboriginal writing in the twentieth century**

#### **The early decades**

The opening decades of the new century saw the emergence of Aboriginal advocacy bodies, such as the Aborigines Progressive Association ('APA'). Established in New South Wales in 1937, the APA fought for the abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board, campaigned against the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, and sought to publicise the abject poverty of reserve communities (Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 60). In common with the Coranderrk petitioners, the APA used writing as a tool of resistance.

Members of the APA drafted letters to officials, wrote petitions and briefly published their own monthly newspaper, *Australian Abo Call* (Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 60). One of the latter's important contributions was the publication of the proceedings of the Day of Mourning, on 26 January 1938 (Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 86). In response to the official celebration of 150 years of white settlement, 100 Aboriginal people participated in a silent demonstration from Sydney's Town Hall to Elizabeth Street (Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 86). On arrival, the President of the APA, Jack Ferguson, named some unsettling truths:

The Aborigines Progressive Association has been formed to put before the white people the fact that Aborigines throughout Australia are literally being starved to death. We refuse to be pushed into the background. We have decided to make ourselves heard. White men pretend that the Australian Aboriginal is a low type, who cannot be bettered. Our reply to that is, "Give us the chance!" We do not wish to be left behind in Australia's march to progress. We ask for full citizen rights, including old-age pensions, maternity bonus, relief work when unemployed, and the right to a full Australian education for our children (Patten 1938, cited in Attwood & Markus 1999, p. 87).

During the same era, the Ngarrindjerri writer, David Unaipon, used writing as a means of educating the broader Australian public about the truths of Aboriginal cultures; cultures that had long been misrepresented as savage and child-like. Born on the Point McLeay Mission in South Australia in 1885 (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 18), Unaipon moved to Adelaide at the age of thirteen, to work as a servant for a family that had ties to the Aborigines' Friends' Association (Unaipon 2006, p. xv). During his time in Adelaide, Unaipon was exposed to philosophy, music and science (eds Heiss & Minter 2008, p. 18).

In the 1920s Unaipon travelled throughout Australia, interpreting the stories of Aboriginal communities. Unaipon had a unique ability to explain Aboriginal histories and beliefs through the framework of his classical education. For example, in the short story, 'Belief of the Aborigine in a Great Spirit' (2006, p. 11) Unaipon begins by acknowledging the universality of the belief in a higher being, and the common need for places of worship. He then goes on to describe a great Aboriginal spirit that has some resemblance to the Christian God:



We build no place of worship, neither do we erect altars for the offering of sacrifice, but, notwithstanding this lack of religious ceremonies, we believe in a Great Spirit and the Son of the Great Spirit (Unaipon 2006, p. 12).

### **Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Kevin Gilbert**

The next generation of Aboriginal writers to follow David Unaipon would, like their forebears, tell truths on behalf of those who lacked a platform. But these writers became household names during their lifetimes. They also played leadership roles in the burgeoning pan Aboriginal movement, which would build on the foundations laid by earlier bodies such as the APA. At the vanguard of this movement were two writers - Kath Walker, later known as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and Kevin Gilbert. Although other Aboriginal writers emerged during this era, such as Jack Davis, I have chosen to focus on Noonuccal and Gilbert because of their contributions to national debates.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born on Stradbroke Island in Queensland in 1920 (Beston 1977, p. 466); two decades after the passage of Queensland's protectionist legislation, the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld). Noonuccal responded to the indignities of protectionism by becoming a vociferous activist. She held leadership roles in prominent advocacy bodies, such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and became one of the public faces of the campaign for the 'Yes' vote in the 1967 referendum (Collins 1994, p. 10). Noonuccal was politically active for most of her life. She was involved in the protests for black rights during the 1982 Commonwealth Games, and unsuccessfully ran as a Democrats candidate in the 1983 federal election (Collins 1994, p. 16).

Noonuccal was equally renowned for her contributions to writing. Her first book, a collection of poems, *We are Going*, was published by Jacaranda Press in 1964. Its lead poem, *Aboriginal Charter of Rights* demanded freedom from a 'bureaucratic Protection', and pleaded for Aboriginal people to become 'mates, not poor relations' (Walker 1964). The success of *We Are Going* was extraordinary - seven editions were published (Beston 1977, p. 446) and Noonuccal was out-sold by only one other Australian poet of the time, C.J. Dennis (Brewster 1995, p. 5). Some early critics were dismissive of Noonuccal's work, and argued that it was too political to

be considered poetry (Brewster 1994, p. 96). Noonuccal, however, was undeterred, saying, 'I agreed with them because it *was* propaganda. I deliberately did it' (Noonuccal 1988, cited in Brewster 1994, p. 96).

Noonuccal's contemporary, Kevin Gilbert, was born in Narrandera in New South Wales, into impoverished circumstances (Beston 1977, p. 447). He learnt how to read and write while serving a lengthy prison sentence for the homicide of his first wife (Beston 1977, p. 447). Gilbert was released from prison in 1971 (Foley 2001), and published his volume of poetry, *End of Dreamtime* in the same year. Two years later Gilbert became the first Aboriginal person to publish a political text. In *Because a White Man'll Never do it* (Gilbert 2013, p. 198) he laid out a blueprint for Aboriginal people's recovery, which comprised the creation of a land base, the payment of compensation and self-determination. Like Noonuccal, Gilbert considered himself to be a mouthpiece for a pan Aboriginal community (Shoemaker 1989, p. 186). This commitment to the role of spokesperson was exemplified in his book, *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert* (1978).

*Living Black* was based on a series of interviews with Aboriginal people throughout Australia, undertaken by Gilbert in an attempt to describe the actual situation of Aboriginal people in their own words. Through frank testimonies the reader was able to glimpse the pervasive racism endured by Aboriginal people, and gain insight into the various ways that it had scarred their psyches. Gilbert described this litany of psychological injuries as a 'rape of the soul so profound':

The real horror story of Aboriginal Australia today is locked in police files and child welfare reports. It is a story of private misery and degradation, caused by a complex chain of historical circumstance, that continues into the present ...

It is my thesis that Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today. It is this psychological blight, more than anything else, that causes the conditions that we see on reserves and missions. And it is repeated down the generations (Gilbert 1978, pp. 2-3).

## **The 1980s and 1990s – The era of personal testimony**

In the closing decades of the twentieth century Aboriginal writing flourished in poetry, life stories and song. This renaissance was given impetus by a new desire on the part of many settler Australians to hear Aboriginal voices. Belinda Wheeler argues that this desire can be explained, in part, by the extravagant bicentennial celebrations in 1988, which prompted many to consider Aboriginal perspectives of our shared history (Wheeler 2013, p. 1). It can also be explained by the commercial success of works such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), discussed below. Aboriginal storytelling in the 1980s and 1990s occurred in two very different forums; law and literature. Hundreds of Aboriginal people told their stories to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and later, the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. Simultaneously with those processes, Aboriginal writers were channelling personal narratives of incarceration, diaspora and resilience.

### **Black deaths in custody**

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established in 1987, in response to advocacy by Aboriginal Legal Services and activists who were outraged by the spiralling number of deaths in prisons and police custody (Cunneen 2001, p. 53). Providing impetus to their campaign were the suspicious circumstances in which some prisoners had lost their lives. Among them was 16-year old John Pat, who perished in the Roebourne police lock-up on 28 December 1983 (Grabosky 1988, p. 88). Pat had been repeatedly kicked in the head by drunken, off-duty police officers, before being thrown into a police van, and then beaten again upon arrival at the Roebourne Police Station (Grabosky 1988, p. 88). Five police officers were charged with his manslaughter, but all were acquitted (Grabosky 1988, p. 92).

John Pat's death was one of 99 that were investigated by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Williams 2001, p. 1). The criminologist, Chris Cunneen, has described the evidence received by the Commission as 'incontrovertible stories of institutional racism, of human tragedy and *monumental inhumanity*. Some cases showed profound callousness, others simple indifference' (Cunneen 2001, p. 61). In spite of those narratives, however, no police or

prison officers were held responsible for any of the deaths. For many grieving families, the lack of criminal prosecutions meant that there was no 'conclusion to the story' (Marchetti 2005, p. 122). Frustration over the lack of closure from the Commission's work resonated in much Aboriginal writing of this era. For example, in the poem *John Pat*, Jack Davis gave voice to the hurt felt by many over the violent death of a young man, and the failure to hold those responsible to account:

Right of life  
The pious said  
Forget the past  
The past is dead.  
But all I see  
In front of me  
Is a concrete floor  
A cell door  
and John Pat.

(Davis 1988, cited in Langford Ginibi 1999, p. 80)

The desire to name systemic racism in the criminal justice system also resounded in prose. In *Haunted by the Past* (Langford Ginibi 1999), Ruby Langford Ginibi told the story of her son Nobby's entry into the criminal justice system, which quickly became a vortex that consumed many years of his life. Langford Ginibi's desire to speak truths on behalf of not only Nobby, but every Aboriginal family that had experienced systemic racism in the criminal justice system, echoes throughout the text. Interspersed with Nobby's story were the stories of David Gundy (Langford Ginibi 1999, pp. 75-77) and Daniel Yock (Langford Ginibi 1999, p. 88). Both men lost their lives at the hands of police officers, who were later exonerated. Langford Ginibi also cast light on the roots of such tragedies; histories in which the police had been used as conduits for the state's genocidal policies:

They removed fair-skinned Aboriginal children from their families, controlled Aboriginal people by withholding rations, and shifted whole communities off their lands. Maybe the police who killed David Gundy and who harassed my son are still haunted by memories of their colonial past (Langford Ginibi 1999, p. 77).

The theme that racism was so ingrained in the criminal justice system that it was incapable of delivering justice to Aboriginal people also permeated fiction. In my father, Sam Watson's novel, *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990), he drew elements of past and present together, so that two centuries of colonisation were compressed into the space of a few days. His protagonist, Tommy Gubba, is employed as a court interpreter, but he is also a Kadaitcha. By using his supernatural powers, Tommy is able to exact revenge on those who have reduced his people to a subjugated existence on the fringes of colonial society. In contrast, Justice Jones, who represents the legal system, is portrayed as a debauched rapist of young, black women (Watson 1990, pp. 221-222).

### **The Stolen Generations**

In the same year that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established, Sally Morgan published her ground-breaking memoir, *My Place*. This was not only Morgan's story of discovering her Aboriginal heritage, but it was also the story of two generations of her family that had experienced the trauma of child removal. Morgan's great uncle, Arthur, had been a ward of the Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission (Morgan 1987, p. 232) and her mother, Gladys, was also removed into state care while still an infant (Morgan 1987, p. 304). Morgan's cherished grandmother, Daisy, was initially reticent to divulge any information about her past (Morgan 1987, p. 206). Later, it emerges that Daisy was taken from her own mother at the age of fourteen to work as a domestic servant, and became pregnant with Gladys two years later (Morgan 1987, p. 216).

The commercial success of *My Place* was extraordinary; over five hundred thousand copies were sold in Australia alone (Morgan 1987, Preface). It was followed by the life stories of other Aboriginal women, such as Ruby Langford Ginibi (1988) and Rita and Jackie Huggins (1991). Not

every protagonist belonged to a family that had experienced child removal, but all told truths of harmful state interventions (Grossman 1998, p. 174).

In common with Bennelong's letter, Aboriginal life stories of this era were products of intercultural engagement. Authors wrote biographies and autobiographies that were infused with their own traditions, such as group ownership of a story. For example, in *Auntie Rita* (Huggins 1994) Jackie Huggins melded a biography of her mother with her own reflections of growing up as Rita's daughter. Martina Horakova describes *Auntie Rita* as a 'double-voiced' narrative (Horakova 2013, p. 55), because it is imbued with the subjectivities of two very different women. As a child, Auntie Rita was taken to the Cherbourg Reserve, and later overcame poverty to become a revered leader in the Brisbane Aboriginal community. Her perspectives and voice were sometimes at variance with those of her daughter, a university-educated historian (Horakova 2013, pp. 60-61).

Aboriginal songwriters of this era also told their truths of being torn from kin and identity. Bob Randall's powerful song, *Brown Skin Baby* (Randall 1990, cited in eds Heiss & Minter 2008, pp. 130-131) became an 'anthem' (Heiss 2006, p. 187) for the survivors of family separations. Archie Roach similarly reached into the national conscience with *Charcoal Lane* (Roach 1990); a personal reflection on the stolen children of Charcoal Lane in Fitzroy, Melbourne, who self-medicated with alcohol.

The impacts of such works were profound and wide reaching. Only two decades earlier the subject of Aboriginal child removals had been 'closed, or to put it more accurately, it had hardly been opened' (Read 1998, p. 8). Now, the term 'Stolen Generation' was entering the national lexicon. In 1991, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody delivered its National Report. One of its most alarming revelations was the nexus between child removal and adult incarceration (Cunneen 2001, p. 55). This finding gave succour to the call of Aboriginal organisations for an inquiry into former policies that had seen the systematic removal of Aboriginal children into state care (Devitt 2009, p. 50).

The Keating Government responded with the establishment of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. Between

December 1995 and April 1997, 535 former child wards told their stories to the Inquiry, which also considered hundreds of written submissions (Devitt 2009, p. 51). The outcome was the watershed report, *Bringing Them Home* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). One of the most powerful aspects of *Bringing Them Home* was its privileging of the stories of the stolen children. Testimonies of severed family connections, abuse in state care, and ongoing trauma traversed cultural differences and reached into hearts and minds. Eight thousand copies of *Bringing Them Home* were purchased; making it the highest selling government report of all time (Whitlock 2001, cited in Bretherton & Mellor 2006, p. 91).

#### **Part Four: Aboriginal writing in the twenty-first century**

##### **Creative hybrid text**

Aboriginal writers of the twenty-first century are the custodians of a unique and powerful literary tradition. We are following in the footsteps of our ancestors by bringing our collective values and experience to the page. From this space we tell the hard truths of an ongoing colonisation, and celebrate the resilience of our people. But for the first time in our shared history, Aboriginal writers are carving a 'decisive impression across the Australian literary landscape' (Wheeler 2013, p. 1). Our literature is now a respected field of academic inquiry, and markets for our works exist in Europe and North America (Wheeler 2013, p. 2). We are also witnessing some profound changes within the genre itself. One of the most exciting innovations in Aboriginal writing in recent years has been a shift towards what Dee Horne calls 'creative hybrid text' (Horne 1995, p. 255).

According to Horne, colonisation gave rise to two forms of hybridity – colonial mimicry and creative hybridity. The former, discussed above, can be psychologically damaging for colonised peoples, because in emulating the Coloniser they are encouraged to deny their difference, and as a result, may experience self-hatred. The latter, however, is empowering, because it is a space from which colonised peoples can deconstruct settler discourse, assert their difference, and offer pathways to a meaningful co-existence (Horne 1995, p. 255).

Writers of creative hybrid text shatter stereotypes of Aboriginal inferiority through characters that have strength, intelligence and emotional depth. Initially, the reader develops empathy only for those characters. But as the story unfolds the reader is exposed to Aboriginal worldviews, perspectives of history, and the complexities of being an Aboriginal person in a nation that is yet to confront its past. Such engagement leads to collaboration between the writer and the reader, in which both work to deprive settler discourse of its legitimacy and 'map new terrains' (Horne 1995, p. 255) of a cohesive nation. This chapter will discuss three kinds of creative hybrid text that are currently being produced by Aboriginal writers – humour, Koori chick-lit and Aboriginal crime fiction.

### **Humour**

Paula Anca Farca has highlighted the growing trend among Aboriginal women writers to use humour as a means of bringing contentious issues out into the open, and challenging racism through characters that 'talk back' (Farca 2013, p. 126). Among these writers are Gayle Kennedy and Marie Munkara. The former's *Me, Antman and Fleabag* (Kennedy 2007) is a collection of short stories that revolve around an unnamed narrator, her partner, Antman, and their dog, Fleabag. The trio live in Sydney, but when they tire of city life, they 'go out bush' (Kennedy 2007, p. 3) to visit their respective families.

Kennedy's characters have a universal appeal because they are warm, witty and often laugh at themselves. For example, in 'Ma and Dad's big trip' (Kennedy 2007, p. 35) the narrator travels with her parents on the Ghan to Alice Springs. Ma quickly tires of the 'four-star tucker' and requests 'chops, tomato and some lettuce' (Kennedy 2007, p. 36). When she is subsequently served a rack of lamb garnished with cherry tomatoes and rocket, Ma is outraged:

'Ya think they could serve up some decent size tomatoes. And another thing,' she says, turnin the racks of lamb this way and that, 'would it have killed em to cut up the chops?' (Kennedy 2007, p. 37).

When Kennedy critiques racism, it is often through comedy that brings the foolishness of the bigot into stark relief. For example, in *Mothballs* (Kennedy 2007, p. 77) Aunty Sugar attends the wedding of her nephew, who is 'marryin' a white girl' (Kennedy 2007, p. 80). At the reception



Aunty Sugar is accosted by a member of the bride's family. During their conversation the woman makes some derogatory remarks, to which Aunty Sugar responds with wry humour:

Then the lady started complimentin Aunt on her good looks and her nice skin and Aunt's lappin it up.

Then she asks Aunt how old she is and Aunt tells hers she's sixty-five.

The old lady looks surprised. 'Sixty-five?' she says. 'How unusual. I didn't think you Aboriginal people lived that long. I mean with all the violence and the alcohol and the drugs and the whatnot.'

'Well,' says Aunt, takin a big slug of her beer and fixin her large black eyes on the lady, 'Well, my dear,' she says in a really flash voice, 'I only sniff unleaded petrol' (Kennedy 2007, p. 81).

In her collection of short stories, *Every Secret Thing* (2009) Marie Munkara critiques the mission era through satire. The nuns and priests of an unnamed mission in far northern Australia are exposed as hypocrites who go to extraordinary lengths to hide their foibles. Together with the 'bush mob', the reader can laugh at the missionaries' ridiculous behaviour. Sister Annunciata, for example, is perplexed by the 'high levels of deafness' among the children in her classroom; a dilemma that disappears as soon as school is over for the day (Munkara 2009, p. 6). Instead of acknowledging that the children have no desire to receive her religious instruction, Sister Annunciata convinces herself that the 'tympanic membranes' in the children's ears must be 'tuned to another frequency' (Munkara 2009, p. 6). 'Why else,' she ponders, 'would they have trouble learning the teachings of God and how to stop acting like a black person?' (Munkara 2009, p. 6).

Although they suffer many indignities at the hands of the missionaries, the 'bush mob' is portrayed as resilient, and they offer resistance through humorous means. For example, when the anthropologist, Dr Colvin Curry, also known as Wurruwataka, arrives to conduct research on the bush mob, the wise Pwomiga is given the task of being his assistant (Munkara 1009, p. 66). When Pwomiga tires of Wurruwataka's probing, he exacts revenge with humorous consequences:

'And so what do you call that?' asked Wurruwataka a short time later, pointing at a spear propped against a nearby tree.

'Oh, I call him my timurarra (penis),' replied the mischievous Pwomiga ...

'And that?', asked Wurruwataka as a gust of wind blew the pages of his notebook.

'Oh we call that one dhooroo (fart)' (Munkara 2009, pp. 66-68).

### **The Koori chick-lit of Anita Heiss**

Koori chick-lit is the invention of the Wiradjuri writer, Anita Heiss. Born and raised in Gadigal Country, Heiss uses her writing as a means of asserting pride in her identity as an urban Koori. In common with Gayle Kennedy and Marie Munkara, Heiss talks back to archaic stereotypes through humour:

I don't wear ochre, I wear Revlon or Avon, or Clinique or whatever is on special when I enter the department store. I don't go walkabout for work or social/cultural reasons, because I drive a sports car; it's faster. Why would you think that Blackfellas would want to get somewhere any slower than a whitefella? (Heiss 2012, p. 120)

Like her forebears, Heiss names truths on behalf of those who do not have a platform. In *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence* (2007) Heiss told the story of a young Aboriginal girl who was removed and placed into the care of a white family in the North Shore. Although Mary was fictional, her experiences mirrored those of the many children who became members of the Stolen Generations (Heiss 2012, p. 195). Heiss explained her motivation for writing the historical novel in her memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (2012):

*Who Am I?* is a book I wrote to give a voice to those who are without one: those who don't have access to publishing or have the ability to tell their stories, whose lives previously hadn't been taught in the classroom (Heiss 2012, p. 194).

What distinguishes Heiss from other Aboriginal writers, however, has been her re-creation of the romance novel. The decision to write commercial women's literature was motivated by a desire to reach audiences that were not engaged with 'Aboriginal Australia in any format' (Heiss 2012, p. 214). It is also through this genre that Heiss has been able to create characters that did not exist elsewhere in Australia literature, that is, strong Aboriginal women who are educated and concerned with their careers (Heiss 2012, p. 215). Like their mainstream counterparts these

women value friendships, and encounter both triumph and disappointment in navigating their intimate relationships.

Heiss' work is deeply political because it is through the voices of her characters that she challenges racism, ignorance and contentious government policies such as the Northern Territory Intervention. In *Paris Dreaming* (2011) her protagonist is Libby Cutmore; a beautiful thirty-two-year-old woman who has committed herself to a 'man-fast' (Heiss 2011, p. 3) in order to salve the wounds of some painful break-ups. Libby is also a proud Gamilaroi woman who thrives in her job as an educator at the National Aboriginal Gallery. Heiss questions the underlying racism of the Northern Territory Intervention when Libby goes to Paris, to work at the Musée du Quai Branly. Soon after her arrival, Libby glimpses the Louvre. There is a large media presence due to Paris Fashion Week. Libby reflects that she missed some earlier press coverage about the event, because she had been watching a report concerning the French Government's decision to ban the burqa from public places. Libby's thoughts then turn to the Northern Territory Intervention:

As I stood gazing at the French glass icon of art and architecture, I wondered if they had anti-discrimination laws in France like we had back home. Not that it mattered because our own government had suspended the Anti-Discrimination Act back in 2007 in order to pass the racist Northern Territory 'intervention' legislation which claimed control over land and monies in targeted Aboriginal communities.

Clearly the government of any country can just play with legislation to suit their own needs at any time. Just as I thought about it, a skinhead with a swastika on his t-shirt walked past. I wondered, why didn't the French ban racist slogans on clothes as well? (Heiss 2011, p. 117)

### **Aboriginal crime fiction**

Like Anita Heiss, writers of Aboriginal crime fiction operate within the broad parameters of their genre. A reader of Aboriginal crime fiction will come into contact with brutal murders, grieving loved ones, corrupt politicians and flawed detectives. Clues are also woven into the fabric of the novel, so that the reader can silently work alongside the protagonist to solve the crime. Simultaneously, however, the reader is exposed to issues such as black deaths in custody, the Stolen Generations and native title.

The inventor of Aboriginal Australian crime fiction is the Kamilaroi writer, Philip McLaren. His debut novel, *Sweet Water, Stolen Land* (1993) revolved around a fictitious Lutheran mission in the Warrumbungle Range, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Pastor Karl Maresch is anxious to convert the local Kamilaroi people to Christianity, and attempts to manufacture a situation in which they will be forced to find sanctuary at the mission. However, his plan backfires, and many of the Kamilaroi lose their lives in one of the most shameful chapters of Australia's history; the Myall Creek Massacre (McLaren 1993, pp. 118-124).

McLaren's subsequent novel, *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001) is set in Redfern in the aftermath of the police shooting of David Gundy in 1989. Under pressure from the Aboriginal Legal Service and Amnesty International, the New South Wales Government forms an Aboriginal Homicide Unit (McLaren 2001, p. 5). The Unit's two detectives, Lisa Fuller and Gary Leslie, are given their first case when the bodies of an Aboriginal woman and man are found beside the Redfern Train Station. Fuller and Leslie have attributes that would be familiar to readers of the genre. Both are committed, independently minded and have uneasy relationships with their superior officers. But Fuller and Leslie are also portals through which the reader gains access to the black political debates of the 1990s. Readers are forced to consider the trauma of the Stolen Generations when Fuller reflects on being seized from her mother (McLaren 1995, p. 11). Likewise, the reader is confronted with systemic racism in the criminal justice system when Leslie reflects on his motivation for joining the police force:

He was furious that deaths of Aboriginal people were not investigated properly; also well-documented mistreatment and abuses by authorities were allowed to pass. The loss of black lives went largely unexplained. Gary told Lisa he could pinpoint the moment he decided to do something about it: 10.30 a.m. the day after he first heard the name, David Gundy and his death from a police shooting (McLaren 2001, p. 14).

At this point in time, I am the only other Aboriginal Australian writer apart from Philip McLaren to publish crime fiction. My novel, *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) is a murder mystery set in West End in the present day. The story begins with the Federal Court's rejection of a native title claim brought on behalf of the fictitious traditional owners of South Brisbane, the Corrowa. Prominent lawyers and politicians associated with the case are killed in quick succession. The

only clue left at the crime scenes is a trail of red feathers. As the police investigation is drawn to the Aboriginal community, the Corrowa begin to suspect that the murders are the work of a clever man, Red Feathers.

In common with McLaren's protagonists, my detective possessed attributes that readers of the genre could identify with. Detective Jason Matthews was strong-willed, determined to apprehend the killer, and had personal foibles that impacted on his intimate relationships. I also dropped subtle clues throughout the story, so that the reader would be able to solve the crime. The alert reader, for example, would have noticed a brief reference to a shoebox of red feathers in the filing cabinet of the Corrowa's lawyer, Miranda Eversely (Watson 2011, p. 15).

But throughout the story, the reader was constantly exposed to Aboriginal political debates. The reader learnt about the injustices of the native title system when the Federal Court rejected the evidence of the Corrowa's elder, Ethel Cobb, because she was removed from her family at birth, and therefore, she was deemed to have lost her connection to her homelands (Watson 2011, pp. 7-8). The reader was also forced to consider debates over punitive welfare reforms through the character, Dick Payne; a corrupt Aboriginal lawyer who built a lucrative career on delivering sermons about the evils of 'sit-down money' (Watson 2011, p. 19). Payne's views are at odds with those of Charlie Eversely, the leader of the Corrowa and an activist who cut his political teeth in the 1970s. Through Charlie's memories of his youth, the reader learnt about the violent repression of Aboriginal activists during the Bjelke-Petersen era (Watson 2011, p. 125).

Aboriginal film makers have also begun to turn to crime fiction. In *Mystery Road* (2013) Ivan Sen created the Aboriginal detective, Jay Swan, who investigates the murders of Aboriginal girls in an unnamed country town. Aboriginal crime fiction has also made it to the small screen. The television series, *The Circuit* (2007) revolved around the journey of Drew Ellis, a young Aboriginal lawyer from Perth, who relocates to Broome to work for the Aboriginal Legal Service. In the first season, Drew learns about his culture and re-connects with his family. But he also attempts to protect a young girl who is being molested by her grandfather; a prominent

community leader. These works and others will be examined further in the remaining chapters of this exegesis.

Like other authors who come from the margins, Aboriginal crime writers have developed our own tropes - reclaiming Country, and characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. Chapter two of this exegesis will unpack the trope of reclaiming Country, which consists of the themes of inter-relatedness, the return to Country and resistance against psychological terra nullius. Chapter three will examine the trope of characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. It will be argued that through their characters, Aboriginal crime writers are privileging Aboriginal values and histories, and celebrating our resilience.

## **Conclusion**

For thousands of years, storytelling traditions have been the archives of Aboriginal knowledge. Within our stories are our understandings of how the world began, and the rules for how to live a good life. Colonisation and its various forms of incarceration warped the fabric of those traditions. But we are nothing if not a resourceful people, and when our ancestors realised the power of the written word, they made it their own. Rather than being a tool of colonisation, writing became a space from which Aboriginal people asserted their humanity and spoke truth to power.

Like the former custodians of oral histories, Aboriginal writers of the twenty-first century are the guardians of a rare and precious tradition. But we are naming our truths in more nuanced ways than ever before. Readers of Koori chick-lit will invariably lose themselves in the romantic adventures of protagonists such as Libby Cutmore. But they will also learn that Kooris do not lose their identity simply because they live in bustling cities. Readers of Gayle Kennedy's short stories will laugh out loud over the antics of characters like Aunty Sugar, but they will also be forced to reflect on the obtuseness of bigotry. It is within this relatively new tradition of creative hybrid text that Aboriginal crime fiction sits. Within the pages of our novels we are naming systemic racism in the legal system, unpacking what colonisation has meant for Aboriginal people, and celebrating our indomitable ties to Country.

## Chapter Two: Reclaiming Country

### Introduction

Aboriginal crime fiction belongs to a literary tradition that is like no other in Australia. At the heart of such distinctiveness is a system of knowledge that was thousands of years in the making. Every being, whether a person, rock or even a blade of grass, is a creation of ancestral beings that came from the Dreaming. Each not only has a right to exist, but a role to play in the perpetuation of all life. By imbuing their ways of knowing, being, and doing into the written word, Aboriginal people have re-created it. This transformation is powerfully reflected in the trope of reclaiming Country. This chapter will examine three strands of the trope of reclaiming Country: inter-relatedness, the return to Country and resistance against psychological terra nullius.

In the Aboriginal world, people, plants, animals, the land and spirits are inter-related. Explanations for these mosaics of relationships, and the obligations that they impose upon human beings, are contained in our creation stories. The Warraimay historian, Victoria Grieves, has described the creation stories as a 'blueprint for all life' (Grieves 2008, p. 365). When inter-relatedness is not maintained, chaos and even death may result. In Aboriginal literature, inter-relatedness often finds expression in the portrayal of the land as a dynamic character that has agency in the story. The land also carries the wounds of its people, and suffers its own physical ailments in the event that inter-relatedness is not sustained.

In constructing places, Aboriginal writers also push against the edifice that is colonisation and its handmaiden, terra nullius. Protagonists who have been displaced, or are yet to connect with their homelands, make the journey to Country and discover that the bonds remain strong. We also challenge the myth that Australia's bustling cities have been emptied of Aboriginal cultures, by filling those spaces with stories of an enduring Aboriginal presence.

This chapter will be divided into four parts. Part one will explore the relationships between Aboriginal people, the Dreaming and Country. Part two will discuss the ideas that shaped colonisation in Australia. It will explain colonisation as a powerful and mutating structure that

has scarred Aboriginal people and settler Australians alike. Part three will unpack the trope of reclaiming Country. Finally, part four will discuss how such themes find reflection in Aboriginal crime fiction. Because of commonalities with the North American experience, this chapter will also draw upon the works of Indigenous writers in the United States of America and Canada.

### **Part One: Country, the Dreaming and people**

In the Aboriginal world, 'Country' is more than the physical features of the land. Country is a self-contained universe:

For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human - all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self (Kwaymullina 2005, p. 246.)

The term 'landscape' is insufficient to describe Aboriginal Country. The former signifies a separation between place and people. Landscapes are also subject to the whims of human beings, whether they be economic, cultural, spiritual or aesthetic. But in the Aboriginal world people are only one component of the ecosystem; having no greater right to exist than any other beings. Furthermore, Country has its own consciousness. Country hears and sees all, and can be either happy or sad (Bird Rose 1996, p. 7).

Country is also home to spiritual beings, who continue to exist even in places that have endured significant disruption. As a child growing up in Brisbane my father would regale us with stories of the jonjurries; mischievous spirits who took the form of hairy men. Jonjurries often visited my father on occasions when he was away from us. Although we never understood them, we did not fear them. It was tacitly accepted that the jonjurries were one of an unknowable number of beings who have a role to play in the life cycle.

### **The Ancestors**

Country was created by ancestral beings that emerged from the Dreaming. The Dreaming is a multiplicity of states of being. It exists in the land and the sky. It is where one lives before



conception, and where one returns to in death. The Dreaming is also the source of the laws that govern relationships between all living things. For the Warlpiri of the Central Desert, the Dreaming is:

... the mythological realm of totemic Ancestors; it is the embodiment of metaphysical potency in the land; it is the 'Law' to which humans must conform; and it is the spiritual identity of the individual. Knowledge of the Dreaming is an essential element in the attachment of Warlpiri to the landscape. But ultimately, the Dreaming is a *process*, a dynamic unfolding of the universe which provides the dominant reference points for human identity, intellect, and action in relation to the land (Faulstich 1998, p. 198).

Each Aboriginal nation has its own ancestors, who prescribed the rules for how to live. David Unaipon of the Ngarrindjerri of South Australia wrote of his people's great teacher, Narroondarie (Unaipon 2006, p.5). It was Narroondarie who led them across the waters to their homelands, and delineated the boundaries of the hunting grounds which were allocated to each family (Unaipon 2006, p. 4). For many Aboriginal nations, however, life began in what is now known as Australia. My father, Sam Watson opened his novel, *The Kadaitcha Sung* (Watson 1990), with the gods breathing life into people, plants and animals. The most powerful among them was Biamee, who created a veil of mists to protect his sacred garden (Watson 1990, p. 1).

Although each nation has its own ancestors, the Rainbow Serpent emerges in oral histories throughout Australia (Grieves 2009, p. 8). This powerful spirit is often associated with rivers, creeks and springs. The Rainbow Serpent can also be heard during cyclones and floods (Bird Rose 1996). In *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright wrote of a magnificent serpent descending from the heavens billions of years ago, and creating the river systems of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The serpent now rests underground, but such is its power that the great ancestor permeates all who dwell on the riverbanks (Wright 2006, p. 2).

The ancestors taught the people how to live not only with each other, but with all other beings (Grieves 2009, p. 8). The role of humanity was and remains to maintain all other life by performing the correct ceremonies, telling the stories, and living in accordance with the moral

code gifted by the ancestors. The crucial importance of storytelling finds reflection in the philosophies of the Nhunggabarra of north western New South Wales:

Telling stories kept alive the links between the earth and the animals, the people and the ancestral land in the Warrambul - the Milky Way. Without stories, the knowledge would die and when the knowledge was gone, everything else would die too (Sveiby & Skuthorpe 2006, p. 11).

Because all land was created by the ancestors, there is no such thing as wilderness (Gammage 2011, p. 130). Faulstich observed of the Warlpiri that they have 'no geography without meaning' (Faulstich 1998, p. 204). Their stories and laws are carved into the land, which becomes the Dreaming. The connections between the Dreaming, law and land were eloquently described by Dorothy Tunbridge:

To Adnyamathanha elders the Dreaming signifies two things above all, the land and the law ... For the people, the stories are the land. In the language Yura Ngawarla, 'telling (someone) a story', *yarta wandatha*, means simply 'telling (someone) the land (*yarta*) or 'linking (that someone) to the land'. (Tunbridge cited in Bird Rose 1996, p. 31).

The inter-relatedness that underpins Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing finds reflection in Indigenous societies around the world. For example, the Mi'kmaq people of Canada live according to a body of values and behaviours called Netukulimk (Prosper et. al. 2011, p. 1). Netukulimk governs relationships between the Mi'kmaq and prescribes rules for their treatment of all animals, and in particular, the moose. As distinct from a farm animal whose life is governed by the commercial imperatives of its owner, the moose has an existence independent of human beings. When a moose is taken, the hunters express their gratitude through ceremonies devoted to the deceased animal, whose bones are treated with reverence so as not to disrupt its spiritual journey (Prosper et. al. 2011, p. 5).

One value shared by Indigenous peoples around the world is the refusal to treat land as an inanimate object that can be traded. As stated by the Tanganekald and Meintangk Boandik scholar, Irene Watson:

The commodification of land sold and purchased is a concept alien to Aboriginal law and peoples' relationships to land. The old people had a deep understanding that while land is our home, it is our home

because it is who we are; it is home to our songs and laws that lie in the land; it is our relative; it is our grandmother and grandfather. Our ancestors are alive in the land, and this is in accord with the saying that to sell the land is akin to selling one's own mother (Watson 2009, p. 40).

In the Pacific, people, land and animals are similarly inter-related. The islands of the Native Hawaiians are the offspring of the Earth Mother, Papahānaumoku, and the sky father, Wākea (Kana'iaupuni & Malone 2006, p. 284). The land is an elder sibling of the Indigenous people, as are the natural elements and the animals. Irene Watson's abhorrence towards the commoditisation of land finds resonance in the Kanaka Maoli belief that to sell land is to part with a precious ancestor (Kana'iaupuni & Malone 2006, p. 286).

## **Part Two: The ideas that shaped colonisation in Australia**

Many of the early Europeans who travelled to the east coast of what is now Australia were surprised by the preponderance of bare hilltops and woods that contained pockets of lawn (Gammage 2011, p. 6). Joseph Banks' draughtsman on the Endeavour, Sydney Parkinson, described the land as, 'very pleasant and fertile; and the trees, quite free from underwood, appeared like plantations in a gentleman's park' (Gammage 2011, p. 5). But rather than comprehend those 'parks' as the products of time-honoured systems of Aboriginal land management, the Europeans perceived them only as wilderness. Deborah Bird Rose argues that concepts of wilderness all involve, 'the peculiar notion that if one cannot see traces or signs of one's own culture in the land, then the land must be 'natural' or empty of culture' (Bird Rose 1996, p. 17).

The idea that the land was untouched by human influences was but one of several that would provide justification for colonisation. The ascribed inferiority of Aboriginal people was another. The early European gaze of Aboriginal bodies constructed Aboriginal people as brutish and immoral (Finzsch 2005, p. 105). According to Henry Reynolds, the medieval concept of the 'Great Chain of Being' grew in popularity contemporaneously with the intensification of frontier conflict (Reynolds 1974, p. 47). Originally a hierarchy of all living beings with humans at its apex, the Great Chain was adapted in the seventeenth century, in order to take account of imputed

racial attributes. When applied to the colonies, the Great Chain was once again distorted so that Aboriginal people were relegated to the bottom step of humanity (Reynolds 1974, p. 47).

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, scientific theories revolving around the study of craniums, such as phrenology, would be harnessed in order to provide legitimacy to representations of Aboriginal inferiority. According to Reynolds, phrenologists frequently argued that small brain sizes precluded Aboriginal people from ever becoming civilised (Reynolds 1974, p. 50). By the early twentieth century, Australia had come to be viewed as an 'evolutionary museum' in which the best of the British race could be studied alongside the most primitive of man (Cawte 1986, p. 36).

Such ideas underpinned the legal mythology that Australia was 'settled' by the British under the doctrine of discovery (Ardill 2009, p. 93) This mythology would be maintained by Australian courts for two centuries, until it was finally corrected by the High Court in *Mabo v Queensland* (1992) 175 CLR 1. The legal position of Aboriginal people prior to the *Mabo* decision has been succinctly described as 'physically present but legally irrelevant' (Simpson 1993 cited in Ritter 1996, p. 12).

The invisibility of Aboriginal rights to land not only underpinned the Australian legal system. It was also crucial to the development of an Australian identity. Aileen Moreton-Robinson has argued that the same values that are celebrated as inherent to the quintessential Australian character, such as mateship, perseverance and overcoming the extremities of the landscape and climate, also required the dispossession of Aboriginal people (2005, p. 26). Such notions remain etched in the Australian psyche, and are brought into stark relief during public debates over recognition of Aboriginal rights to land, and the inclusion of Aboriginal viewpoints of our shared history. In the years following the passage of the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), opponents of native title often appealed to base stereotypes of Aboriginal people. By way of example, the former federal leader of the National Party, Tim Fischer, chastised Aboriginal people for failing to invent the wheel, and blustered that dispossession was 'always going to happen' (Davis 2008, p. 57). At the same time, conservative commentators railed against attempts by

progressive historians to engage with Aboriginal perspectives of colonisation, with historian, Geoffrey Blainey, deriding such efforts as 'black armband' history (Clark 2002, p. 1).

### **Settler colonialism is ongoing**

Patrick Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is not an event, but a structure, with the primary goal of acquiring territory through the elimination of Indigenous populations (Wolfe 2006, p. 388). He divides Australian settler-colonialism into three modes - confrontation, carceration and assimilation. The initial phase of confrontation was characterised by high numbers of Indigenous deaths brought about by homicide, sexual abuse, starvation and introduced disease (Wolfe 1994, p. 99). Carceration subsequently involved the removal of the diminished Aboriginal populations to fixed locations (Wolfe 1994, p. 100), such as reserves and missions.

The beginning of the final mode, assimilation, was marked by the eviction of 'mixed-race' people from Victorian reserves in 1886 (Wolfe 1994, p. 101). As such individuals were no longer categorised as Aboriginal, it was believed that they would be absorbed into the settler society. By the time of the Conference on Aboriginal Welfare in 1937, the assimilation project had found expression in the widespread removal of fair-skinned children from their families (Wolfe 1994, p. 107). Today, the assimilation mode continues via strategies of 'repressive authenticity' (Wolfe 1994, p. 113), which seek to confine Aboriginal identities to remote locations, so that Aboriginal people in towns and cities are rendered invisible. One such strategy is the requirement that native title claimants demonstrate a 'traditional connection' to their lands; effectively shifting 'the burden of history from the fact of expropriation to the character of the expropriated' (Wolfe 1994, p. 122).

Wolfe argues that one of the traits of Australian settler colonialism has been the appropriation of aspects of Aboriginal culture by the settler society, in order to distinguish itself from the Mother country (Wolfe 2006, p. 389). In recent decades, the settler society has borrowed Aboriginal motifs for use in the arts, film and to promote the national airline. While I agree with Wolfe that such measures are often superficial and seldom pose a threat to the colonial structure, I do not believe that they are motivated solely by a desire to create a distinct Australian identity. Such developments are also a reflection of the angst carried by many settler

Australians. The position of settler Australians has been described by Deborah Bird Rose as inhabiting a series of 'damaged places'; swaying between the burden of a violent invasion and occupation, and attempting to find hope in practices that are still rooted in colonisation (2004, pp. 21-22).

This practice of trying to solve the evils of colonisation through reinforcing the colonial relationship has never ended. The High Court's belated recognition of a fragile and inferior native title in *Mabo v State of Queensland* (1992) 175 CLR 1 occurred simultaneously with the advent of the Reconciliation Movement, which sought to achieve a united Australia (Short 2005, p. 274). Such attempts to incorporate Aboriginal people into the settler state are problematic, given that Aboriginal people comprise hundreds of nations, none of whom has ever ceded their sovereignty. Many settler Australians find the idea of Aboriginal sovereignty confronting because it brings into question the nation's moral legitimacy; hence the attempts to construct Aboriginal people as perpetually in a state of deficit, and in need of white interventions (Maddison 2011, p. 88). As a consequence, Australia is yet to engage in genuine decolonisation, which would require a redistribution of power and resources, and the termination of the 'colonial relationship itself' (Short 2005, p. 275).

### **Psychological terra nullius**

Although terra nullius has been expunged from Australian law, we are now left with what Larissa Behrendt describes as a 'psychological terra nullius' (Behrendt 2002, p. 9). As a result, the meagre rights that Aboriginal people have clawed back under the native title process remain subordinate to the interests of miners and pastoralists. This psychological terra nullius also festers in urban spaces, which are widely considered to be empty of Aboriginal communities (Behrendt 2009, p. 78).

I was reminded of psychological terra nullius while reading Matthew Condon's *Brisbane* (2010). *Brisbane* is an attempt to connect the cosmopolitan city of today with its historical roots. Condon makes several references to the man who founded Brisbane, John Oxley (Condon 2010, pp. 8-26, 38). The eccentric, and invariably white, characters of Queensland's history, such as Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, emerge throughout the story, as do events such as the 1971 State of

Emergency declared in the wake of protests against the Springboks tour (Condon 2010, p. 257-262). But Aboriginal people are rarely mentioned and when they are, they emerge only as the victims of colonisation. By way of example, Condon acknowledges Merridio and Neugavil; two Aboriginal men who were hung from the City's windmill in 1841 (Condon 2010, pp. 129-132). Wrongly accused of murder, the two men suffered violent deaths in the presence of their countrymen who had assembled nearby. But Condon neglects any mention of the Murri community's contemporary history. There are no references to those who protested in the City's streets for black rights during the 1982 Commonwealth Games, or those who have consistently asserted their sovereignty over the important meeting place of Musgrave Park. Rather than representing Murri people as vibrant agents in their own destiny, Condon implies that they exist only on the margins of white history.

Brooke Collins-Gearing and Dianne Osland (2010 p. 1) have observed that Australian children's literature is still grappling with psychological terra nullius. The scholars use *The Rabbits* (Marsden & Tan 1998) as the focus of their thesis. In *The Rabbits* a country of numbats is invaded by rabbits who are European in appearance. The rabbits exploit the land, steal the numbats' children and marginalise the survivors. Although a clever allegory for colonisation, *The Rabbits* presents the numbats as a helpless people who have given up the fight for self-determination. Their land is similarly suffering an agonising and inevitable death (Collins-Gearing & Osland 2010, p. 4).

The violence that underscored the invasion remains a source of angst for many settler Australians. In *The Secret River* (2005) Kate Grenville drew upon her own family history to tell the story of William and Sal Thornhill. After enduring transportation to Australia as convicts, the Thornhills establish a farm on the banks of the Hawkesbury River, at great expense to the traditional owners of the land. Towards the end of the novel, William Thornhill participates in a horrific massacre of Aboriginal people (Grenville 2005, pp. 303-309). With the land cleared of its custodians, the Thornhills go on to become members of the colonial aristocracy. They live in an estate that is built like a fortress, and invest in an English garden which fails to thrive (Grenville 2005, pp. 318-319). Although the Thornhills never discuss the massacre, it forms a

cloud over their relationship. The Thornhills' anxiety over the origins of their wealth is a metaphor for the Australian psyche. Much of the nation's affluence has been built upon pastoralism, agriculture and the extraction of mineral resources; all of which hinged upon the theft of Aboriginal land. For most Australians, this history has been a 'nightmare to be thrust out of mind' (Smith, cited in Manne & Feik 2014, p. 171).

I find novels such as *The Secret River* (Grenville 2005) problematic because the land is viewed only through such lenses. It is reduced to being the spoils of bloody conquest; an inheritance that many settler Australians remain ambivalent about. Conversely, when Aboriginal writers depict places in our stories, those places remain shaped by our ways of knowing, being and doing. Country comes to life on the page. In the event of diaspora, Country is not simply lost, but re-imagined. It is through such constructions of place that we assert our rhetorical sovereignty.

### **Part Three: Place in Aboriginal writing**

#### **The assertion of sovereignty**

The meaning of the term, 'sovereignty', has evolved over hundreds of years. From its origins in sixteenth century France, sovereignty began as a terminology that invested legal and political authority in the hands of a few as a 'bulwark' against anarchy (Brennan et. al. 2004, p. 311). Today, sovereignty has become aligned with the modern democratic state. The Australian Law Dictionary (Mann 2013, p. 672) refers to the operation of 'popular sovereignty' in Australia, otherwise known as 'rule by the people', whether directly by plebiscite or indirectly through parliamentary government.

Just as Aboriginal people have used the written word to their own ends, they have also adapted the concept of sovereignty. There is a diversity of opinion in relation to what rights are encompassed within the phrase, 'Aboriginal sovereignty'. Larissa Behrendt has described Aboriginal sovereignty as a 'catch-phrase' for the aspirations of Aboriginal people (Maddison 2009, p. 48). Conversely, the Aboriginal Provisional Government has called for the creation of a Black state, with essential control exercised by Aboriginal people (Mansell 2002, p. 83).



Aboriginal people have expressed their sovereignty in ingenious ways, the most renowned of which is the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Established on the lawns of Parliament House in 1972, the Embassy began as little more than placards and a beach umbrella. The humble, makeshift structures of the Embassy reflected the feelings of many within that they were 'aliens in [their] own lands' (The Expert Panel on the Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians 2012, p. 207). Today, sovereignty continues to be expressed in myriad ways, including the Acknowledgement of Country (Maddison 2009, p. 51).

This chapter is concerned with expressions of sovereignty in Indigenous literature. The Ojibwe scholar, Scott Richard Lyons, argues that Native Americans have turned to the written word in order to achieve 'rhetorical sovereignty' (2000, p. 447). Lyons describes rhetorical sovereignty as the inherent right of a people to determine their own communicative needs and desires (Lyons 2000, p. 462). In practice, rhetorical sovereignty demands a Native American speaking voice and the ability to determine, at least partly, the terms of any debate (Lyons 2000, p. 462). Rhetorical sovereignty draws its power from a consistent refusal by Native Americans to extricate their identity and culture from the land (Lyons 2000, p. 457).

I would argue that Lyons' concept of rhetorical sovereignty captures the essence of what many Aboriginal Australian writers seek to achieve in our work. We consistently privilege the voices and experiences that dwell in our communities, and as a consequence, we exercise mastery over how we are represented on the page. When Aboriginal writers turn our minds to place, we commonly exercise our rhetorical sovereignty in one of three ways. Firstly, we assert the inter-relatedness between Country and people. Secondly, we depict our bonds with Country as strong and resilient, through the medium of the protagonist's return to his or her homelands. Finally, we challenge psychological terra nullius by privileging Aboriginal perspectives of invasion, and casting light on the enduring Aboriginal presence in urban spaces.

### **Inter-relatedness**

Because the land has its own consciousness, it is often portrayed as a character that has agency in the protagonist's journey. For example, Lee Maracle's novel, *Daughters are Forever* (2002)

tells the story of Marilyn, a Canadian Aboriginal woman. Marilyn is a recovering alcoholic who is traumatised by memories of her abuse of her young daughters. Marilyn no longer lives on the lands of her ancestors. But, in order to heal, she mentally re-creates the places of her childhood, and re-visits the violent death of her father (Maracle 2002 p. 34, cited in Farca 2011, p. 63). In reconciling with her past, Marilyn is assisted by 'Westwind'. Westwind follows her, imparts the wisdom of the ancestors, and implores Marilyn to listen (Maracle 2002 p. 38, cited in Farca 2011, pp. 63-64).

When the people suffer, the land is also in pain, and the recovery of both is intertwined. Even when atrocities, such as murders and sexual abuse in state institutions, are absent from the public record, they cannot be erased from the land. In Alexis Wright's novel *Plains of Promise* (Wright 1997), the head missionary of St Dominic's secretly murders the young Aboriginal women whom he impregnates. The women are buried underneath a banana plantation. When the trees bloom above each fresh grave the fruit is poisonous, causing a 'head-to-toe rash' in whoever consumes it (Wright 1997, p. 32).

### **Returning to Country**

In Aboriginal life stories, it is common for the protagonist to return to Country after a long separation, or travel to Country for the first time. This journey is often a crucial step in the protagonist becoming a self-actualised person. In *My Place* (1987) Sally Morgan vividly described her working class childhood in Perth. Raised by their mother and grandmother, Sally and her siblings were denied knowledge of their Aboriginal identity until adulthood. Towards the end of the story, Sally and her mother travel to their ancestral home of Corunna near Port Headland (Morgan 1987, pp. 276-296). They are quickly embraced by their newly found relatives, which has transformative effects for all. Morgan eloquently reflects that they 'had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it' (1987, p. 296).

Reconciling with Country is often related to the journey to reclaim identity made by the protagonists of young adult fiction. Such works often begin with the protagonist experiencing a sense of disconnection and ambivalence about his or her identity, before embarking upon a

transformative journey. By the end of the story, the protagonist has a renewed confidence in his or her identity (Leane 2013, p. 108). Melissa Lucashenko's debut novel, *Steam Pigs* (1997) revolves around a young, urban protagonist. Sue Wilson is uncertain about her culture, until she begins a relationship with Roger, a young Murri man (Leane 2013, p. 114). Their relationship is characterised by addiction and violence. By the end of the novel, Sue has found the strength to leave Roger and begin a new life as a university student. Growing confidence in her Aboriginal identity enables Sue to see her home of Brisbane through fresh eyes:

... Sue began to grasp something of the city dweller's spirit, and when Rachel told her the story of the Tower Mill, and how the various Boundary streets were named for the original city limits excluding blacks, making the streets safe for civilised folk; she remembered anew that it was Murri land, whatever they'd done to it or put on it. It was Yuggera country - shining towers of wealth or no - and that meant she had a connection to work from. No matter what monied artefacts they put on the surface, her belonging roots reached deep into the soil, anchoring her like an old river gum (Lucashenko 1997, p. 240).

But just as family reunions cannot always restore the harm endured by years of separation, Indigenous protagonists do not always find peace on their ancestral lands in the short term. In *Plains of Promise* (Wright 1997), Mary Nelson is taken from her Aboriginal mother at birth and adopted by a white couple who conceal her Aboriginality (Wright 1997, p. 209). After the deaths of her adoptive parents, Mary resorts to various means to discover who she is. She gains employment with an Aboriginal organisation, the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments, and quickly falls into a disastrous sexual relationship with her boss, Buddy (Wright 1997, p.209). It is through Buddy that Mary learns that she is from the former mission, St Dominic's, in the Gulf Country (Wright 1997, p. 227). By the time that Mary gives birth to their daughter, Jessie, Buddy has abandoned them (Wright 1997, p. 213).

Although initially reluctant to go to St Dominic's, Mary and Jessie are eventually persuaded to relocate there in order to establish an office of the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments. Instead of feeling a sense of belonging, Mary and Jessie struggle as outsiders in the tight-knit community. However, there are moments when the land attempts to reclaim Mary and Jessie, and bring them together with Mary's birth mother, Ivy. During an overnight stay at an outstation, Mary and Jessie briefly come into contact with Ivy when a violent storm forces them

to seek refuge in the same dwelling (Wright 1997, p. 295). Upon their departure from St Dominic's, Mary and Jessie see thousands of waterbirds return to the 'Disappearing Lake', which has been dry for thirty years (Wright 1997, p. 302). Mary promises Jessie that they will return one day, suggesting that in spite of everything that both have endured, their relationship with their land has been at least partially restored (Wright 1997, p. 302).

### **Challenging psychological terra nullius**

Anita Heiss argues that place exists psychologically as a 'fringe' (Heiss 2006, p. 74). It is from this fringe that Aboriginal writers tell repressed black histories that challenge the pervasive psychological terra nullius. For example, in *Life in Gadigal Country* (ed. Heiss 2002), Aboriginal writers chronicled Sydney's contemporary black history. Ruby Langford Ginibi (2002, p. 66) wrote of Redfern in the 1960s; a time when police imposed a ten o'clock curfew on all Aboriginal people. Brenda Palmer described the fight to preserve the site of the Day of Mourning protest; an event that is celebrated in the Aboriginal community as one of the foundations of the black political movement (Palmer 2002, pp. 78-84). While Brenda Croft wrote of the gentrification of Redfern in the 1990s; which would see Aboriginal people and their organisations dispossessed by wealthy developers (Croft 2002, pp. 20-27).

In the event of displacement, Aboriginal writers do not necessarily lose their bonds to Country. In a study of how Aboriginal women authors engage with place, Paula Anca Farca concluded that place exists beyond its physical properties (Farca 2011). Place is remembered, re-created, imagined and internalised:

Physical places shape the identities of individuals, just as those individuals create the cultural aspects of places. Places allow characters to find connections to the past, to make sense of their present, and to open up possibilities for the future. They regenerate people and their cultures and make possible the dialogues among generations of Indigenous people who have inscribed their lives onto those places. Places invite Indigenous characters' imaginative reconstructions that create opportunities for healing and ethnic and cultural rejuvenation (Farca 2011, pp. 17-18).

If place exists beyond its physical properties, then Aboriginal people can rebuild their cultures even when removed from their Country. This has most certainly occurred across Aboriginal

Australia, and in particular, in the urban spaces of Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. Home is now both one's ancestral domain, and the 'created spaces' of missions and 'big city dreaming stories' (Heiss 2006, pp. 68-69). This fluid understanding of home finds resonance in both my writing, and the poetry of my brother, Samuel Wagan Watson.

Our paternal grandfather belonged to the Birri Gubba of Nebo in Central Queensland, and our paternal grandmother hailed from the Mununjali of Beaudesert. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, my grandfather's father secured an exemption pass. As a result, he and his family were able to eventually move to Brisbane. I am also aware that my grandmother was in possession of an exemption pass, which presumably enabled her to leave Beaudesert, and marry my grandfather. By the time that my brother and I came into the world decades later, the Watson family was firmly ensconced in the Brisbane Aboriginal community.

While we take great pride in being Mununjali and Birri Gubba, we often set our writing in Brisbane. But we inscribe our worldviews, family histories and spirituality onto the City. Farca's theory that Aboriginal writers re-create place, and use it as a vehicle for cultural rejuvenation, finds reflection in our work. Each of us has imagined the spirits who continue to live beneath the skyscrapers and bitumen of the central business district. In *for the wake and skeleton dance* (Watson 2004, p. 50) Samuel described apparitions of black dingos who stalk the City's pubs, preying on the souls of the assimilated. In *The Boundary*, I wrote of the ghosts of Aboriginal people who had been murdered for breaching the City's former curfew. Every night the ghosts re-enact their gruesome deaths at the hands of the Native Police (Watson 2011, p. 47).

In summary, Aboriginal people have adapted the concept of sovereignty to their own ends. When Aboriginal writers exercise our rhetorical sovereignty in relation to place, we depict Country as a vibrant being with its own consciousness. While the bonds between land and people may have been interrupted by colonisation, they are portrayed as resilient. In urban spaces that have been allegedly cleared of Aboriginal cultures, our writers revive stories that have withered on the margins of history. Finally, in the event of diaspora, Country is re-imagined and inscribed onto place.

#### **Part Four: Place in Aboriginal Australian and Native American crime fiction**

The constructions of place discussed above are crucial to the decolonisation of genres such as crime fiction. Indigenous writers in North America and Australia are re-creating the genre through the trope of reclaiming Country. Once again, this trope is manifest in the themes of inter-relatedness, returning to Country and challenging psychological terra nullius.

#### **Inter-relatedness**

Inter-relatedness between the people and their land constantly finds expression in both Aboriginal Australian and Native American crime fiction. Place is a character with its own consciousness, whose fate is indelibly tied to the circumstances of its people. When the people suffer the land undergoes physical ailments, such as drought. The land is also imbued with spirits who assist in apprehending the killer, but on occasion, commit murder.

In Indigenous crime fiction the land is often a character that provides clues that assist the protagonist to restore order. While the land can offer clues, it cannot force the people to respond appropriately. Rachel Perkins' film, *One Night the Moon* (2001) is based on real-life events that took place in the Australian 'outback' in 1932. A young girl, Emily Ryan, is entranced by the moon one evening. Emily climbs out of her bedroom window and disappears. A search is called the following day. The Aboriginal tracker, Albert Yang, arrives at the home of Emily's parents, Jim and Rose Ryan. Jim refuses to have any Aboriginal people on his property and Albert is forced to leave. Albert, however, is the only character who can read the Country and find Emily. In his absence, the search proceeds in the wrong direction, and a subsequent attempt by Jim to find his daughter is a disaster. Jim does not take enough water with him, he becomes lost, and eventually, he must return home without any resolution. Rose eventually approaches Albert for help. Albert is able to read his Country and find Emily's tracks, but tragically, he is too late.

Because the land has its own consciousness, it may exact revenge on those who desecrate it. The writer, Jean Rae Baxter, whose ancestry is French, German, English and Pottawatami, imagined the tragic consequences that flowed from the violation of sacred ground in the short

story, *Osprey Lake* (Baxter 2010). An unnamed white family decides to construct a holiday home on land that belongs to the Ojibwa. While constructing the privy, the grandfather discovers a skull, bones and personal effects such as arrow heads (Baxter 2010, p. 40). His Ojibwa neighbours advise him that the land is a burial ground, and counsel him against building there. But their advice is unheeded and the land becomes cursed. The family's youngest child soon drowns in a nearby lake (Baxter 2010, p. 46). The child's elder brother is wracked by guilt and becomes an aimless and violent addict. The grandfather dies and his sons fight over ownership of the cottage, which becomes a derelict ruin.

### **Land wears the pain of its people**

Because of the mosaic of relationships that bind people to land, the land often reflects the physical ailments, trauma and ill fortune suffered by the protagonists. This theme emerged in the work of the Choctaw Cherokee writer, Louis Owens. In *Nightland* (Owens 1996, cited in Macdonald & Macdonald 2002, p. 52) the story begins with a man falling from a plane. The man is impaled on a cedar tree, clutching a suitcase filled with drug money. The land, which is also dying, belongs to two Cherokee men, Keene and Striker. In the midst of a sustained drought, both men are leading 'lives as arid and desperate as the geography around them' (Macdonald & Macdonald 2002, p. 53). The crime is solved not by a detective, but by a wise grandfather, Siquani. It is Siquani who understands that the drought has been caused by the spirits of murdered Native Americans. Siquani speaks to the spirit of the man who fell from the plane, and the two consider ways of making amends for the murders (Macdonald & Macdonald 2002, p. 55).

In *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) most of my characters suffered from some kind of addiction that was rooted in the violent dispossession of the Corrowa. The Corrowa's lawyer, Miranda Eversely, is a high functioning alcoholic who suffers black-outs. Her court room opponent, Dick Payne, is addicted to sex and his accomplice, Lesley Tagem, is addicted to gambling. In common with the human characters, Brisbane also suffers from an addiction, but the City's fetish is for construction. Brisbane is eating itself to death with cranes and skyscrapers (Watson 2011, p. 19).

In Ivan Sen's film, *Mystery Road* (2013), the land similarly reflects the pain of its people. Set in an unnamed country town, the story begins with a truckie stopping on a highway beside a sign, which carries the words 'Massacre Creek'. The creek bed has since dried up. Underneath the highway, however, is the body of an Aboriginal girl. The name 'Massacre Creek' suggests that there is another crime, albeit unacknowledged, that haunts this drought-stricken place. The sparseness of trees, prevalence of dust and general malaise that hovers in the background, suggests that the land is cursed. A history of racial segregation is also inscribed onto the town's living spaces. The white characters live on sprawling properties that house cattle and horses, while their Aboriginal neighbours live in dilapidated housing on small blocks.

### **Land is imbued with spirits**

In both Aboriginal Australian and Native American crime fiction, the land is alive with spirits. In *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) I acknowledged the spirits of those whose lives had been scarred by the former curfew. The cries of one domestic servant who was shot in the back for breaching the curfew are still heard at nightfall (Watson 2011, p. 47). The spirit of the man who shot her, Horace Downer, remains perched on the hill above the boundary. Downer is forced to watch his killings being replayed each night, and is unable to stop himself from drinking laudanum (Watson 2011, p. 47).

Not all spirits are powerless like Horace Downer. Some are the killers of human beings, as evidenced in the work of the Huron and Cherokee writer, A.A. Hedgecoke. In the short story, *On Drowning Pond* (2010) Hedgecoke created the tragic Jolene, a beautiful alcoholic who mysteriously drowns one night. Drinkers claim to see a woman smiling at them through the waters (Hedgecoke 2010, p. 106). Men who resemble Jolene's former lover, Jimmy, mysteriously perish by drowning, and it is implicit that Jolene's spirit is responsible for their deaths (Hedgecoke 2010, p. 107).

In summary, inter-relatedness emerges in Indigenous crime fiction in one of three ways. Land is a character that assists the protagonist to restore order. As its wellbeing is inextricably tied to the wellbeing of its people, the land reflects the wounds of the human characters. Finally, the spirits who are part of the life cycle are acknowledged and incorporated into the story.



## Returning to Country

The lives of the protagonists in Indigenous crime fiction are commonly shaped by histories of dislocation, family separation and diaspora. The protagonist's return to their ancestral home often coincides with the resolution of the crime. This theme emerges in some of the short stories that were published in the anthology, *Indian Country Noir* (2010) that was edited by Native American writers, Sarah Cortez and Liz Martinez. One strong example from the anthology is *Another Role*, by Reed Farrel Coleman, who is not Indigenous. In *Another Role* (Coleman 2010, pp. 214-238) the protagonist, Harry Garson, is an actor who was once the toast of Hollywood due to his prowess for playing stereotypical Native American roles. Adopted at birth, Harry knows nothing of his cultural heritage. He is now destitute and living alone in a decrepit hotel in downtown Los Angeles. Harry's career appears to be revived when he is approached by some shadowy figures, to play the role of Ben Hart (Coleman 2010, p. 223). Harry is told that Hart is the estranged son of an elder of the Tohono O'odham.

In his role as Ben Hart, Harry travels to Tucson, where he lives in a bungalow and intermittently signs mysterious documents (Coleman 2010, p. 230). Inexplicably Harry feels at home in Tucson and he spends his days discovering the countryside. Towards the end of the story, Harry is contacted by a young woman, Rebecca, and her grandmother. Harry learns that he is in fact Ben Hart, and the women are his relatives. He is then shown a photograph of his father, Isaac Hart (Coleman 2010, p. 233). Harry soon realises that his employers are corrupt miners who have defrauded him of his ancestral lands (Coleman 2010, p. 236). Before his murder at the hands of one of their goons, Harry puts an end to the theft, and bequests the land to his newly discovered relatives (Coleman 2010, p. 238). Although Harry has little time to savour his reclaimed identity, he is able to die in peace:

Harry Garson was an old man, too old to be fully transformed into Ben Hart at this late date. Belonging, being Ben Hart, son of Isaac Hart, even for only a few hours, had answered all the important questions that he'd kept locked up inside all these years. What he really hoped for was that the end wouldn't hurt too much when it came (Coleman 2010, p. 237).

In Ivan Sen's recent film, *Goldstone* (2016) the Aboriginal Detective, Jay Swan finds himself in a frontier town, Goldstone. He is in Goldstone to investigate the disappearance of a young woman. Swan is grieving the recent death of his daughter. He is self-medicating with alcohol and appears to be rootless. The town of Goldstone is dependent upon the nearby mine. A powerful mining company has brokered an agreement with Tommy, the corrupt leader of the Aboriginal Land Council. During the film Swan uncovers official corruption, human trafficking and finally, he recovers the body of the young woman.

As Swan works on his missing person case, there is another mystery unfolding, which is Swan's connection with his Country. During the investigation, Swan meets Jimmy, a local custodian, who is played by David Gulpilil. Jimmy recognises Swan's physical resemblance to his father, who was removed from his family as a child. Jimmy takes Swan to a sacred water hole. In one of the most moving scenes of the film, Gulpilil explains through song the stories of the ancient paintings on boulders that are immersed in the water. After he has restored order to Goldstone, Swan returns to this hallowed place. Although he is still deeply affected by his daughter's death, it is implicit that connecting to this sacred area has provided a beginning point for Swan's recovery.

### **Challenging psychological terra nullius**

Aboriginal crime writers challenge psychological terra nullius by casting light on Indigenous spaces in bustling cities, and privileging Indigenous perspectives of invasion. In *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) I wanted to tell the Aboriginal story of Boundary Street in West End. What is now one of Brisbane's most cosmopolitan streets was once the boundary of an evening curfew imposed upon Aboriginal people. (Watson 2011, pp. 8-9). The curfew represented the beginning of the dispossession of the fictitious traditional owners, the Corrowa. Although this past is largely unknown to the white residents of West End, it continues to live in the oral histories of the Corrowa (Watson 2011, pp.46-48).

In spite of the gentrification of West End, the Corrowa have refused to concede their homelands. They continue to gather in their meeting place, Meston Park, which has been sold to a wealthy developer, Coconut Holdings. When the Federal Court rejects their native title

claim, the Corrowa establish a tent embassy in Meston Park (Watson 2011, p. 190). Although their embassy is removed by the police, the Corrowa return and re-establish their protest site (Watson 2011, p. 270). It is implicitly understood that the links between the Corrowa and their land are incapable of being severed.

Philip McLaren cast light on Aboriginal spaces in Sydney in *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001). As discussed in Chapter One (Watson 2016, p. 21), *Scream Black Murder* is a murder mystery set in Redfern in the 1990s. In the opening to his introduction, McLaren describes Redfern as the home of the 'densest Aboriginal population in Australia' (McLaren 2001, p. vii); and identifies his birthplace in George Street. The story then begins with the discovery of two bodies in a drain near the Redfern Railway Station. When the members of the Aboriginal Homicide Unit arrive at the scene, they are met by the entire Aboriginal community from Eveleigh Street (McLaren 2001, p. 1). The Aboriginal presence is also acknowledged through references to the matches of the Redfern All Blacks football team (McLaren 2001, p. 54), and the sight of an Aboriginal busker with a didgeridoo in Circular Quay (McLaren 2001, p. 86). McLaren also creates Aboriginal landmarks. For example, the fictitious 'Black Dance Studio' leads contemporary Indigenous dance from its headquarters near Central Railway Station (McLaren 2001, p. 22).

Aboriginal and Native American crime writers challenge myths of benign discovery by weaving real-life massacres into their stories. Philip McLaren drew upon the Myall Creek massacre as the inspiration for his debut novel, *Sweet Water, Stolen Land* (McLaren 1993). The setting was the fictitious Neuberg Mission near the Warrumbungle Range, administered by an ambitious, young pastor, Karl Maresch. When the mission fails to inspire the Kamilaroi people to convert to Christianity, Maresch murders white families in the area. He leaves Aboriginal weapons and ceremonial objects at the crime scenes, in order to inflame reprisals against the traditional owners (McLaren 1993, pp. 77-78). Maresch's scheme tragically backfires when scores of the Kamilaroi become the victims of the notorious massacre at Myall Creek Station on 9 June 1838 (McLaren 1993, pp. 118-124).

Indigenous crime writers also challenge the premise that dispossession was an event that occurred in the distant past. In such works, the imperative to seize Indigenous land is a continuous process. In her book, *Mean Spirit* (Hogan 1992, cited in Macdonald & Macdonald 2002, pp. 73-74) the Chickasaw writer, Linda Hogan, highlighted the impacts of the discovery of oil on Osage land in Oklahoma in the 1920s. While oil provides the families with instant wealth, they became the victims of a murderous campaign. Although the killings attract an official investigation, the conspiracy to dispossess the Osage does not stop (Macdonald & Macdonald 2002, pp. 73-74).

Protagonists who are unable to physically return home can still maintain psychological ties to Country. Farca's theory that place exists beyond its physical properties, and can be re-created by Indigenous people who experience diaspora, finds reflection in Aboriginal Australian crime fiction. In Australia, this is best demonstrated in *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001).

Detectives Gary Leslie and Lisa Fuller are outsiders in the Redfern community. Their initial attempt to secure co-operation from those who live in Eveleigh Street is rebuffed, until some elders intervene (McLaren 2001, pp. 41-42). In spite of feeling disconnected, the protagonists re-create places of belonging. For example, while sitting at Circular Quay, Leslie imagines his ancestors living on the harbour before 1788 (McLaren 2001, p. 84). As Leslie walks past the ferry wharves, he glimpses the Eora's water supply becoming too polluted to drink (McLaren 2001, p. 85). As a member of the Stolen Generations, Fuller is uncertain of where she belongs. However, she is able to re-create Aboriginal spaces. For example, when Fuller smells the broken earth in her father-in-law's garden, her thoughts turn to the spirits in the land (McLaren 2001, p. 112).

In summary, the trope of reclaiming Country in Indigenous crime fiction comprises three themes. The first, inter-relatedness, finds reflection in the portrayal of the land as a character that has agency in the story, wears the pain of its people, and is alive with spirits. A second thread of this trope is the return to Country. In Indigenous crime fiction, the bonds between the people and Country remain strong, and the protagonist's return to her ancestral home often coincides with the resolution of the crime. The final element of this trope is challenging

psychological terra nullius. Our writers breathe life into repressed black histories of urban spaces, and assert a continuing Aboriginal presence among the bitumen and steel. Our writers also challenge the myth of benign 'discovery' by weaving real-life massacres into their stories. In the event of diaspora, Country is not lost, but rather, it is re-imagined.

## **Conclusion**

The trope of reclaiming Country has been inspired by both pre-invasion laws and resistance against an ongoing colonisation. In the Aboriginal world, every being, whether a person, animal or geographical feature is inter-related through our creation stories. Inter-relatedness finds expression in constructions of place in Indigenous crime fiction. The land is often a character that provides clues to help the protagonist to restore order. By way of example, in *One Night the Moon* (2001), Albert was able to read the Country in order to find Emily. The land may also exact revenge on those who desecrate hallowed ground, such as the burial mound in *Osprey Lake* (Baxter 2010). The land also experiences physical ailments in parallel with the suffering of its people. In *Mystery Road* (2013) the prolonged drought suggested that the land was cursed by the unacknowledged crime that lay behind the name, 'Massacre Creek'.

This chapter has drawn from Patrick Wolfe's conception of colonisation as a structure, as distinct from an event (Wolfe 2006, p. 388). Because colonisation is continuous, our writers are compelled to tell stories that assert the indomitable and vibrant ties between the people and their land. In Indigenous crime fiction, such assertions are manifest in the return to Country. In *Goldstone* (2016) the resolution of a missing person case occurs in parallel with Jay Swan's discovery of his Country. At the beginning of the film, Swan is drifting and grieving the loss of his daughter. His newly discovered connection with his ancestral home appears to provide him with an anchor, and therefore, a place from which he can begin his recovery.

Finally, Indigenous crime writers challenge 'psychological terra nullius'. We tell repressed stories such as the horrific Myall Creek massacre, and we remind our readers of the former curfew which prevented Aboriginal people from entering the precincts of Brisbane City at night. In the event of diaspora, our writers re-imagine Country and inscribe it onto their new

surroundings. Aboriginal spaces are re-created through glimpsing the footsteps of one's ancestors, or imagining the spirits of the land.

### **Chapter Three: Aboriginal Voice**

#### **Introduction**

Although there are vast differences between the cultures and historical trajectories of African Americans and Aboriginal Australians, there are also important commonalities. Fundamentally, both have been represented as inferior on the basis of ascribed racial attributes. The African American writer, Frankie Y. Bailey (1991, p. x), argues that myths revolving around black savagery and uncontrollable sexuality were necessary in order to justify slavery, and later, Jim Crow laws and barbaric acts such as lynching. In Australia, stereotypes of Aboriginal people were used to protect the foundation myth that Australia was created by courageous white men, rather than being the result of an invasion (Mishra & Hodge 1990, p. 26).

Representations of racial inferiority were often internalised by those within marginalised communities. Such injuries created what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903, p. 2) described as a 'double consciousness', which forced African Americans to see themselves firstly as inferior beings, and then as American citizens. In Australia, Kevin Gilbert would similarly argue that Aboriginal people 'underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today' (Gilbert 1978, p. 3). More recently, critical race theorists have argued that because racism has played a central role in American history and culture, it is an unavoidable inheritance, albeit one that few Americans are conscious of (Lawrence 2013, p. 314).

Indigenous scholars such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (1998, p. 11), similarly claim that whiteness remains so overwhelmingly dominant in Australia that the values of white culture alone define normalcy. Most white Australians, however, are oblivious to their privilege.

Far from being passive victims, crime writers on the margins have transformed their oppression into a creative space. African American crime writers have used double consciousness to their own ends, namely through protagonists who make themselves and their detective work invisible behind racial stereotypes. This chapter will argue that Aboriginal crime writers are

similarly challenging stereotypes through the trope of characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative.

This chapter will be divided into three parts. Part one will consider Du Bois' concept of double consciousness. It will discuss how representations of African American inferiority filtered into crime fiction, and then finally, it will examine double consciousness detection. Part two will discuss the portrayal of Aboriginal characters by non-Indigenous crime writers. This part will draw upon the work of Vijay Mishra (1987) on Aboriginalism, which was realised in characters such as Arthur Upfield's protagonist, 'Bony'. Bony was the consummate noble savage, who had a hereditary connection to nature, and a compulsion to do the 'walkabout'. Bony has long since disappeared from Australian crime fiction, but whiteness is still privileged through Aboriginal characters who assume the cultural values of the white protagonist.

Finally, part three will unpack the trope of characters that bring Aboriginal voice and experience to the centre of the narrative. This trope is manifest in the use of Aboriginal English and the privileging of Aboriginal histories. This trope is also evident in characters who comprehend racism as systemic, rather than the arbitrary behaviour of flawed individuals. Finally, it is through the journeys of such characters that the resilience of our people is celebrated.

### **Part One: African American crime fiction**

#### **W.E.B. Du Bois and double consciousness**

W.E.B. Du Bois was an African American activist, writer and scholar. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, Du Bois would eventually take up citizenship in Ghana, where he died in 1963 (Du Bois 1994, p. iii). One of Du Bois' most influential works was *The Souls of Black Folk*, which was originally published in 1903 (Du Bois 1994, p. iii). *The Souls of Black Folk* was a critique of the failure of the Reconstruction era in the United States to deliver genuine emancipation to African Americans. Although slavery had officially come to an end, the social and economic structures that had secured the oppression of generations of African Americans remained largely intact.

Du Bois encapsulated the African American experience in the phrase, the 'Veil of Race' (Du Bois 1994, p. 48). The Veil simultaneously constricted how whites viewed African Americans within the purview of stereotypes, and paralysed the self-esteem of black communities. *The Souls of Black Folk* was primarily a social critique but it was also autobiographical, with Du Bois often ruminating over his own experiences of life behind the Veil. In one poignant example, Du Bois accepted a dinner invitation from his new employer, only to find that he was forced to eat alone, after the white guests had finished their meal (Du Bois 1994, p. 39).

Because the Veil was so inhibiting and pervasive, many of its victims were prevented from ever developing their own self-consciousness. Instead, they lived with a double consciousness, which Du Bois described as, 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois 1994, p. 2). Double consciousness forced African Americans to see themselves firstly as inferior beings, and secondly as American citizens (Soitos 1996, p. 33).

Double consciousness undoubtedly prevented many African Americans from becoming self-actualised individuals, but mastery of it was often crucial to survival. This was a time when a breach of the rules that cemented white privilege could result in brutal death at the hands of vigilantes. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has determined that between 1889 and 1918, 3,224 Americans were hanged; the majority of whom were black (Perloff 2000, p. 315). Newspaper coverage of lynching during this era commonly ascribed blame to the victim, especially black men, who were often unjustly accused of harassing white women (Perloff 2000, p. 320).

### **Critical race theory**

Today, the work of Du Bois is being continued by activist scholars who subscribe to critical race theory. Critical race theory began in the 1970s, when lawyers such as Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman observed that the gains of the African American civil rights movement had stalled (Delgado & Stefancic 2013, p. 2). At the same time a stock story emerged, in which racial equality had become the norm. This narrative overlooked the reality that the vast majority of



African Americans remained steeped in the very poverty that had been the overwhelming experience of their ancestors (Bell 1995, p. 903).

Critical race theorists argue that civil rights victories in the earlier part of the twentieth century delivered only the illusion of meaningful change, because racism was so deeply ingrained in American society. Contemporary racism is no longer as overt as Klan violence. Rather, it has become institutionalised by ostensibly neutral laws and practices that treat histories of racial oppression as irrelevant (Bell 1973, p 300). Critical race theorists not only strive to illuminate systemic racism, but they also interrogate the privilege that emerges as a result of such forces. Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis (2013, p. 795) argue that, together with sex and sexual orientation, race should be understood as a 'power system that creates privileges in some and disadvantages in others'. The characteristics shared by members of privileged groups are treated as societal norms, but those within these groups are often oblivious to their advantages. The activist scholar, Peggy McIntosh, identified 46 indicia of her 'white privilege', which included:

'...being told that people of her color made American heritage or civilization what it is, not needing to educate her children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily protection, and never being asked to speak for all people of her racial group' (McIntosh 1992, cited in Wildman & Davis 2013, p. 797).

### **Stereotypes of Blacks in crime fiction**

Stereotypes of African Americans permeated American popular culture, including crime fiction. In *Out of the Woodpile* (1991) Frankie Y. Bailey argues that American detective novels have consistently depicted two archetypes of blacks - the plantation slave and the urban slum dweller (Bailey 1991, p. xii). One such stereotype belonging to the former category is the wise and outspoken black Mammy, whose loyalty to her owner is unwavering, and as a consequence, she is treated as a member of the family. An example of this stereotype is Melville Davisson Post's character, Mammy Liza. In *The Devil's Tools* (Post 1927) Mammy Liza has a conference with her employer, Squire Randolph, about the theft of his daughter's jewels. Mammy Liza not only speaks to Squire Randolph as an equal, but she also has the temerity to remind him of the need to be firm with his slaves (cited in Bailey 1991, p. 31). Bailey concedes

that there has been some progress since the earlier part of the twentieth century when Davisson Post was publishing his works, but she argues that such stereotypes are still the norm (Bailey 1991, p. 119).

Not only do black characters remain fixed in stereotypes, but white hegemony is rarely brought into question. Maureen Reddy (2003) argues that whiteness is taken for granted in most crime fiction authored by whites, and that implicitness is one of the ways in which whiteness is reproduced and maintains its power. Consequently, white protagonists rarely consider questions of race, especially in relation to themselves (Reddy 2003, p. 15). I was reminded of Reddy's thesis while watching the HBO crime series, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010).

Set during the prohibition era, *Boardwalk Empire* chronicles the rise and fall of Enoch 'Nucky' Thompson, the fictitious treasurer of Atlantic City. Thompson is Irish American and is played by the actor, Steve Buscemi. Issues of race are often in the background, as evidenced by the occasional glimpse of men dressed in Ku Klux Klan garb on the boardwalk. Jim Crow laws become visible in Season Four (2013) when Nucky bankrolls a nightclub based on the legendary Cotton Club. The Onyx Club is a glamorous establishment that showcases black entertainers for an exclusively white clientele. In spite of inhabiting racially segregated spaces, few of the white characters ever reflect on their privilege.

Likewise, they seldom espouse negative opinions about African Americans. When such views are aired, they are never voiced by the protagonist, Nucky. Rather, such comments are made by characters that have already been established as villains, such as Commodore, who is a manipulative paedophile. As a consequence, white privilege is normalised and racism is represented as the arbitrary behaviour of flawed individuals. Although crime series such as *Boardwalk Empire* are testament to the continuing influence of systemic racial privilege, it is important to remember that African Americans have never been passive victims of mainstream cultural products. In particular, Black crime writers have reclaimed double consciousness, resulting in the trope of double consciousness detection.

### **The trope of double-consciousness detection**

Stephen F. Soitos (1996, p. 33) associates the trope of double consciousness detection with the trickster quality of using various masks in order to outwit one's adversaries. For example, the *modus operandi* of Barbara Neely's character, Blanche White, who is a middle aged black woman, is to pander to stereotypes so as to create a façade for her detective work. In *Blanche on the Lam* (Neely 1992) Blanche is on the run from the law, after having been unfairly sentenced to jail for passing a bad cheque. In order to buy time, Blanche makes herself invisible as a worker assigned by a domestic agency to a wealthy white family. During the course of her new employment, Blanche stumbles across a murderous plot by her employers. Once again, Blanche uses her invisibility as a middle aged black woman to investigate and then expose the family's crimes.

Soitos argues that double consciousness detection is also characterised by 'hidden meanings' (1996, p. 37) that inscribe an African American viewpoint into the text. This tradition of weaving social critique into the text can be traced to the early novels of writers such as Pauline E. Hopkins, who used her work to highlight the immorality of a racial caste system. In *Talma Gordon* (Hopkins 1900, republished in Penzler ed. 2009, pp. 197-217) Doctor William Thornton is hosting the monthly meeting of the Canterbury Club of Boston. He tells his guests the story of the beautiful heiress, Talma Gordon, who was wrongfully accused of the murders of her wealthy father, Captain Gordon, stepmother and baby brother. Talma is acquitted, but then flees to Rome, where she is to be married to Edward Turner. It then emerges that Talma's grandmother was an 'octoroon'; a revelation that her fiancé cannot accept. At the same time, the son of a man killed by Captain Gordon confesses to the murders. After Doctor Thornton finishes telling the story of Talma Gordon, his guests inquire about her fate. The doctor responds by inviting them into his drawing room, where they are to be introduced to his new wife, Talma Gordon (Hopkins 1900, cited in Penzler 2009, p. 217).

In summary, the 'Veil of race' determined how African Americans were seen by both the world at large, and themselves. For those in front of the Veil, African Americans were visible only through the frames of demeaning stereotypes. While those behind the Veil were prevented

from ever realising their full humanity. In spite of the civil rights gains of the twentieth century, the Veil remains a potent force today. But African American writers have never been passive victims, and they have transformed the Veil into a creative space. This has led to the emergence of protagonists who use stereotypes to mask their detective work, and text that is inflected with African American perspectives.

## **Part Two: The portrayal of Aboriginal characters by Non-Indigenous crime writers**

### **Aboriginalism**

The term 'Aboriginalism' was first used by Vijay Mishra (1987) to describe the system of ideas that generated the various 'truths' through which settler Australians came to know Aboriginal people. Mishra and Hodge argue that the primary role of Aboriginalism has been to neutralise the 'raw and buried' question of Australia's legitimacy (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 24). The reality that Australia was founded upon an invasion has always been a powerful threat to a national identity that is based on the myth of brave and resourceful white settlers. Hence discursive regimes arose that constructed Aboriginal people as primitive and barbaric, in order to protect the foundation myth (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 26).

Mishra and Hodge argue that suppression has been the major discursive strategy of Aboriginalism (Mishra & Hodge 1990, p. 26). Aboriginal history was, until recently, invisible in school curricula and Aboriginal writing was largely excluded from Australian literature. But Aboriginal people were not erased entirely. At least some voices, represented as belonging to Aboriginal people, were required in order to lend legitimacy to the foundation myth (Mishra & Hodge 1990, p. 27). Bain Attwood argues that Aboriginalism has alternated between two constructions of Aboriginal people; the noble savage and the ignoble savage (Attwood 1992, p. iv). The former found reflection in the diaries of Cook and those on the First Fleet, who described Aboriginal people as exotic, childlike and untainted by civilisation (Scates 1997, p. 37). But as colonisation proceeded and Aboriginal people resisted dispossession, they were increasingly represented as the barbarous Other (Attwood 1992, p. v).

## Aboriginalism and early crime fiction

Just as stereotypes of African Americans filtered into American detective novels, Aboriginalism similarly permeated Australian crime fiction. Christopher Przewloka argues that in early detective novels, Aboriginal characters were either 'brutal savages' or 'skilled bush-dwellers' (Przewloka n.d., p. 3). As stereotypes they were voiceless and rarely central to the plot.

According to Stephen Knight, such stories were, 'full of respect for the special skills of these quaint folk, noble savages indeed, who appear and disappear faithfully at the need of the plot, and indeed the ideology' (1997, p. 121). Knight (1997, p. 43) provides the example of A.H. Lambton's novel, *From Prison to Power* (1893) in which a wealthy Englishman, Ernest Malcolm, is wrongfully accused of murder. Malcolm's brother-in-law, Jack Derwent, uncovers the real killer, with the assistance of a black tracker who has been given the demeaning name, Snowball. Early in the novel, Lambton describes Snowball as '... a black boy, much prized by Mr Ethrington [his employer] for his good qualities and general capabilities (Lambton 1893, p. 23).

Snowball's countrymen, however, are regarded as cunning vermin who should be eradicated from the Colony of Queensland. In a discussion between the owner of a station, Mr Smartboy and an officer of the mounted police, Mr Bang, Mr Smartboy describes a recent massacre of Aboriginal people without any sense of remorse:

"Are the blacks troublesome?" inquired Mr Bang, the leader of the detachment.

"Not a bit of 'em, not since I dressed 'em down last," was the reply.

The "dressing down" alluded to by Smartboy occurred in this way: The blacks had killed a bullock on that individual's run, and he, possessing the instinct and general capabilities of tracking, surpassed only by the natives themselves, caught them in the act, and, with the able assistance of his stockman (who boasted of being able to ride "the wildest buckjumper in the colony, drop a nigger at five hundred yards, in fact, track a mosquito, anything from pitch and toss to manslaughter, providing a five p'n note came out of it"), and both being well armed, and taking the blacks by surprise, they, having no shelter near, plunged in a waterhole of small dimensions, and fell an easy prey to the two kindred spirits who glorified in the "sport" (Lambton 1893, pp. 18-19).

As Mishra and Hodge argue, some Aboriginal voices have always been necessary to provide legitimacy to the foundation myth. One such voice was Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, 'Bony', who not only epitomised the noble savage, but also freely inhabited the world of the virtuous white pioneers. Bony's creator, Arthur Upfield, migrated to Australia from England in 1910, and developed a passion for the Australian Outback which is often reflected in the Bony novels, many of which are set on remote stations (Hetherington 2009, p. 1). The first novel in the series, *The Barrakee Mystery* was published in 1929.

At the time that the *Barrakee Mystery* was published, eugenics had attained a degree of respectability in Australia and was especially popular in the Academy (Jones 2011). In 1936 the Eugenics Society of Victoria was established by prominent citizens, including Richard Berry, Professor of Anatomy at Melbourne University (Jones 2011). The Society called for the compulsory sterilisation of homosexuals, prostitutes and Aboriginal people, among others (Jones 2011). The Society's influence reached into Australia's political leadership, culminating in a national survey of mental deficiency in 1928 (Jones 2011). The Society's work was also taken seriously by the Victorian Parliament, which passed the *Mental Deficiency Bill* in 1939. The legislation made provision for the institutionalisation and sterilisation of marginalised groups, including Aboriginal people (Jones 2011).

The influence of eugenics occasionally emerges in Upfield's work, and is evidenced by Bony's denunciations of the union of his Aboriginal mother and white father. In *The Barrakee Mystery*, Bony says, '[m]y mother was black, my father white. They were below the animals. A fox does not mate with a dingo, or a cat with a rabbit' (Upfield 1929, p. 104, cited in Donaldson 1991, p. 345). Eugenics also found reflection in certain traits that were attributed to Bony's genetics, such as a bond with nature that he apparently inherited from his Aboriginal mother (Coe 1999, p. 31). His skills in ratiocination, however, were a gift from his white father (Coe 1999, p. 31).

Fear of the imagined dangers of miscegenation was central to the plot in *The Barrakee Mystery*. The story is set on a sheep station owned by the Thorntons who live with their adopted son, Ralph, who is also engaged to the couple's niece, Kate. Bony is called to the property when an Aboriginal man, 'King Henry' is murdered. At the same time, Ralph is experiencing a disturbing

transformation. His skin has begun to darken and he feels an irresistible pull towards an Aboriginal woman, Nellie Wanting (Donaldson 1991, p. 346). Bony recognises the signs of Ralph's Aboriginal ancestry, and surmises that Ralph is powerless to overcome his primal urges (Donaldson 1991, p. 346).

Bony was not only an unlikely advocate against inter-racial unions, but he was also a wholly unrealistic representation of Aboriginal people in the 1930s. Bony had a university degree forty years before the first Aboriginal person graduated from a university (Donaldson 1991, p. 345). Bony was also free of the constraints of protectionism. At the time that *The Barrakee Mystery* (Upfield 1929) was published, Aboriginal people in Bony's home state of Queensland were reeling from a regime that was first established under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld). This legislation effectively transformed those caught by the Act's tentacles into wards of the state. As such, they were vulnerable to incarceration on reserves, and at the mercy of superintendents who were empowered to impose corporal punishment on those who attempted to flee (Chesterman & Galligan 1997, p. 53). Bony, however, is subject to no such constraints. Other than reporting to his superiors in the police force, he is answerable to no one.

Likewise, Bony was unencumbered by the racism that was the daily experience of Aboriginal people in the earlier part of the twentieth century. This was a time when Aboriginal people were prevented from accessing public hospitals, and Aboriginal children could be removed from schools at the whim of white parents (Chesterman & Galligan 1997, p. 53). Yet when Bony adopts his common disguise of an itinerant labourer, he seldom encounters racism. In *Death of a Lake* (Upfield 1954) Bony investigates the disappearance and suspected murder of Ray Gillen from Porchester Station in western New South Wales. Bony sleeps in the men's quarters without objection from his white co-workers, who not only treat Bony as an equal but admire his intelligence. The overseer, Martyr, describes Bony only as a Queenslander who, 'talks like a Uni professor' (Upfield 1954, p. 6). The white characters are not only reluctant to name Bony's Aboriginality, but they are also sensitive to his imagined hereditary compulsions. For example, when Martyr offers Bony the use of the Station's utility to travel to a remote location, Bony

declines so that he can do 'the walkabout' (Upfield 1954, p. 97). Martyr nods silently in 'understanding of the urge which cannot be resisted by aborigines' (Upfield 1954, p. 97).

Other Aboriginal people, however, do not fare so well, and they are often referred to in demeaning terms. For example, during a conversation with the stockman, Witlow, Bony discloses his suspicion that the other men are hiding something. Witlow responds that they must be unsettled by the presence of the women employees (Upfield 1954, p. 56). Witlow then shares an anecdote about a former 'abo' labourer who had brought 'his gin' to the station (Upfield 1954, p. 56). In spite of being 'ugly as hell', this Aboriginal woman drove the men crazy, necessitating her removal (Upfield 1954, p. 56). Bony is untroubled by Witlow's caricature of Aboriginal women, and even laughs.

In summary, Aboriginalism has alternated between the stereotypes of the noble and ignoble savage. Both constructions filtered into early Australian crime fiction. The noble savage was epitomised by Bony, who had a hereditary connection to nature, advocated against inter-racial unions, and seldom experienced racial discrimination. Conversely, other Aboriginal people were cast as brutish, and a thorn in the side of pastoralists. Hence, a massacre of Aboriginal people in A.H. Lambton's novel, *From Prison to Power* (1893), was of little consequence to the story.

### **Aboriginal characters in contemporary crime fiction**

#### **The privileging of whiteness**

In common with American critical race theorists, some Aboriginal scholars contend that whiteness remains overwhelmingly dominant in Australia, but is largely invisible (Moreton-Robinson 1998, p. 11). With few exceptions, whiteness continues to have an impact on the construction of Aboriginal characters in detective novels. While their Aboriginal identity is acknowledged by the white protagonist, it is usually empty of meaning. Such characters are neither present in their communities, nor do they consider issues that are of concern to most Aboriginal people, such as the ongoing legacies of the Stolen Generations and spiralling rates of incarceration. In this sense, they are indistinguishable from the white protagonist, whose cultural values are seemingly neutral.



By way of example, in Peter Temple's novel, *An Iron Rose* (1998), the story begins with the apparent suicide of the protagonist's surrogate father, Ned Lowey. After enduring an unhappy life with his restless father, the young Mac Faraday found security in his father's old friend, Ned. Years later, Mac returns to the country town of his childhood, and once again finds sanctuary with Ned and his grandson, Lew. In the aftermath of Ned's death, Mac reflects on their first meeting and recalls his surprise at two revelations:

One was that Ned was Aboriginal. My father had never mentioned it. The other was that Ned Lowey was not a giant. I remember that he took me by the shoulders, picked me up and held me to his chest (Temple 1998, p. 60).

This is the only time that Ned's Aboriginal heritage is mentioned in the story. Perhaps, through omitting any discussion of Ned's Aboriginality, Temple was making a gesture of racial equality. But he affirmed the dominance of whiteness in the text through the implication that Ned's values and way of life were unaffected by his Aboriginal heritage.

Whiteness is also privileged through the subservient roles that Aboriginal characters play vis-à-vis white protagonists. In common with colonial crime fiction, contemporary Aboriginal characters are rarely central to the plot. For example, in *Silent Kill* (Corris 2014) the legendary private inquiry agent, Cliff Hardy, is compelled to travel to Darwin while on a case. On arrival he is met by Dave Burns, a Tiwi Islander and apparently the first Indigenous person to hold a private inquiry agent's license (Corris 2014, p. 84). Burns is a former AFL player, straight talking and works out of an office that reeks tobacco smoke (Corris 2014, p. 86). Burns and his partner, Tania, use their knowledge of Darwin's tourism industry to assist Hardy to locate two fugitives. After one of the fugitives is located, Hardy returns to his home of Sydney, and Burns falls out of the story.

### **New stereotypes – The firebrand black lawyer**

Although the noble savage has vanished from contemporary crime fiction, he appears to have been replaced by another stereotype - the handsome male lawyer who is brilliant and righteous. Such characters sacrifice the financial rewards of private practice, in order to pursue justice for the downtrodden. While undoubtedly an improvement on Bony, the firebrand lawyer is still a stereotype, and as such, he lacks complexity. Little is revealed of the personal lives of such characters, and they are rarely situated in their communities.

An example of this stereotype is Vince Cellini, of the television series, *Wildside* (1997). The series revolved around a crisis centre in Sydney's Kings Cross. Played by Aaron Pederson, Cellini is an abrasive young lawyer who works at the crisis centre. In spite of being a university medallist, Vince forgoes a lucrative career in corporate law in order to pursue legal aid cases. Little is revealed of Vince's life outside of the crisis centre, with the exception of the occasional quarrel with his Italian father over his chosen career, and his brief relationship with his colleague, Gerry. Vince's Aboriginal mother is seldom mentioned. Only when Vince departs from the series is it revealed that she abandoned him at birth.

A more recent version of this stereotype emerged in Peter Temple's novel, *The Broken Shore* (2005). Temple's protagonist, Detective Joe Cashin, has returned to his dilapidated family property in the coastal town of Port Monro, while recovering from injuries he sustained in the line of fire. When a local philanthropist, Charles Bourgoyne, is murdered in his home, suspicions are cast over three Aboriginal boys from the nearby township of Daunt. Two of the boys are killed in a botched police pursuit, and the remaining suspect commits suicide. With all of the suspects dead, Cashin is warned by his superiors to move on. But as the story unfolds, he discovers that Bourgoyne's death was linked to paedophilia and official corruption.

Cashin has Aboriginal relatives in Daunt, the Doogues, with whom he lived for some of his childhood. However, with the exception of his cousin Bern, Cashin has little to do with them. A minor character in *The Broken Shore* is the Aboriginal lawyer, Bobby Walshe. Walshe is described as, 'handsome, sallow, hawk-nosed, just a hint of curl in his dark hair' (Temple 2005, p. 33). Like Vince Cellini, Walshe is passionate about social justice, young and brilliant. He has just been selected to lead a new, progressive political party, United Australia (Temple 2005, p.

33). Walshe has ties to Daunt, but the reader discovers little about them, and he is rarely situated in his own community. Like Vince Cellini, Walshe lacks complexity and has little relevance, if any, to the story.

### **New characters that have complexity**

In *Out of the woodpile: Black characters in crime and detective fiction* (1991) Frankie Y. Bailey argues that the writers who respond effectively to questions of race are those who are prepared to deal with complexity (Bailey 1991, p. 118). Their characters are not necessarily 'card carrying liberals' (Bailey 1991, p. 118). What is crucial is that such characters understand that there are no simple answers to the myriad legacies of slavery and ongoing systemic racism. Aboriginal historian, Jackie Huggins, has similarly argued that non-Indigenous authors who write about Aboriginal people should at least attempt to gain a grasp of the nuances of Aboriginal cultures, histories and contemporary social issues (Huggins 1998, p. 83). I believe that two recent non-Indigenous crime writers, P.M. Newton and Adrian Hyland, have achieved this goal.

In her debut novel, *The Old School* (2010) P.M. Newton created Aboriginal characters that are strongly connected to their communities and immersed in black politics. The story, set in Sydney in 1992, revolves around the discovery of the remains of two women underneath the concrete foundations of a block of flats. One of the deceased is Dawn Jarrett, a prominent Koori activist who disappeared in the 1970s (Newton 2010, p. 83). Detective Nhu 'Ned' Kelly is on the case. She has to contend with Jarrett's son, Markus, who is wary of the police, due to the inadequate investigation into his mother's disappearance.

Although Markus Jarrett appears to loathe the police, he is anxious to discover who was responsible for the murder of his mother. Consequently, he introduces Ned to members of his extended family, whom he co-opts into assisting the investigation. Although family bonds are tight, the Aboriginal community is not portrayed as an idyllic space that is free of conflict. It emerges that at the time of her disappearance, Dawn Jarrett was in a dispute with Phil Walker, the head of the Redfern Housing Authority, and a recently pre-selected Labor candidate (Newton 2010, p. 120).

Throughout the story, Newton introduces the reader to the fraught relationships between police and the Redfern Aboriginal community. References are made to *Cop it Sweet* (Brockie 1991), a controversial documentary that exposed blatant police racism in Redfern. Ned reflects that most of her peers were stunned not by the film's revelations, but by the 'stupidity of saying it on camera' (Newton 2010, p. 97). However, the police are not portrayed as a pack of evil racists and Ned has compassion, if not understanding, for the Aboriginal people whom she must work with.

Mirroring reality, the black characters frequently consider issues that were of concern to Aboriginal communities in the 1990s. For example, Ned goes to see Markus during Paul Keating's famous 'Redfern Park Speech' (Newton 2010, p. 269). Although most in the crowd appreciate Keating's sentiments, some are sceptical (Newton 2010, p. 272). Contemporary developments are not viewed by the Aboriginal characters as isolated events, but are part of an ongoing colonisation. The fluidity between past and present is made stark through the character, Paul Arthur Murray. Murray is a homeless alcoholic to whom the police have given the moniker, 'Mabo', because of his refusal to leave a park near the building where Dawn Jarrett's body was found. Later, it emerges that the park is the burial ground of Aboriginal people who were murdered by settlers under the direction of Governor King in 1801 (Newton 2010, p. 244). Soon after he tells Ned about the existence of the graves, Murray is murdered. Mirroring the events of 1801, his killers are never brought to justice.

Jackie Huggins argues that the best books written about Aboriginal people by non-Indigenous people are by authors who have meaningful relationships with Aboriginal communities (Huggins 1998, p. 83). This is possibly true of Adrian Hyland, who created the first Aboriginal woman protagonist of Australian crime fiction, Emily Tempest. Hyland was inspired to write his Emily Tempest novels, *Diamond Dove* (Hyland 2006) and *Gunshot Road* (Hyland 2010), after many years of working with Aboriginal communities in Central Australia (Porter 2010).

Emily is the daughter of Jack Tempest, 'a wandering whitefeller' (Hyland 2006, p. 9) who now operates a small gold mine in a remote part of the Northern Territory. Her mother, Alice Limmen was a Wantiya woman who passed away while Tempest was a child (Hyland 2006, p.

9). After her mother's death, Emily and Jack moved to the fictitious outstation of Moonlight Downs. In *Diamond Dove* (Hyland 2006) Emily is returning to Moonlight Downs after several years of boarding school, followed by a string of failed attempts to complete a university degree. Soon after her return, Emily's friend, Lincoln Flinders, is murdered. Suspicion is cast over Blakie, a mysterious sorcerer, who was seen arguing with Lincoln shortly before his death (Hyland 2006, p. 15). Although wary of Blakie, Emily is unconvinced that he is responsible and is determined to uncover the identity of the real killer.

Mirroring the experience of many Aboriginal people who do not live on their homelands, Emily's understandings of home and community are fluid. Emily has a fierce loyalty to her extended family at Moonlight Downs. However, she is also conscious that Moonlight Downs is not her Country (Hyland 2006, p. 25). Although Emily is still finding her place in the world, she uses her heterogeneity to her own ends. Emily is able to draw upon her university studies when she pretends to be a land council lawyer, so that she can investigate the suspicious station owner, Earl Nance (Hyland 2006, p. 174) Similarly, Emily's knowledge of geology, gained from an unfinished degree in geology, is vital to uncovering the real plot behind the murder - an attempt by some miners to rob the Moonlight Downs mob of their mineral wealth (Hyland 2006, p. 302).

In summary, Aboriginal characters in contemporary Australian crime fiction are, for the most part, peripheral to the story. Such characters tend to lack depth, and assume the values of the white protagonist. In recent years, P.M. Newton and Adrian Hyland have created characters that engage with Aboriginal worldviews, and are situated in their own communities. But they remain exceptions to the rule. In contrast, Aboriginal crime writers have created characters that are central to the plot, and it is through such characters that readers engage with Aboriginal cultures, histories and politics.

### **Part Three: The portrayal of Aboriginal characters by Aboriginal crime writers**

Implicit in Aboriginalism was the notion that Aboriginal people did not and could not know themselves. Consequently, they had to be represented by members of the dominant culture, whose work invariably fostered notions of racial superiority (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 27). While Aboriginalism operated to silence Aboriginal people, it is important to recognise that Aboriginal people have never been 'mere passive victims of white cultural practices' (Hodge & Mishra 1990, p. 72). Aboriginal resistance has been manifest in political activism, the performing arts and literature, including crime fiction.

Like African American crime writers, Aboriginal crime writers are using their characters as beacons to reflect their own moral message. Their protagonists are not simply black versions of their white counterparts. These characters proudly speak Aboriginal English, and privilege Aboriginal perspectives and experience. They also understand that racism is omnipresent, and is manifest in covert and overt forms. Finally, it is through the journeys of such characters that the resilience of Aboriginal communities is celebrated.

### **Aboriginal English**

Prior to the invasion, some 200 distinct languages were spoken in Australia (Butcher 2008, p. 625). It has been estimated that over eighty per cent of those languages have since been lost (Harkins 2000, p. 60). Aboriginal people, however, have used the introduced language to their own ends, resulting in Aboriginal English (Harkins 2000, p. 61). One of the characteristics of Aboriginal English has been the fusion of Aboriginal kinship systems with English words that connote familial relationships (Butcher 2008, p. 637); reflected in the use of words such as 'Auntie' and 'Uncle' as gestures of respect for older people. Aboriginal communities have also created their own meanings for English words. The word 'deadly', for example, is now used across Aboriginal Australia as an adjective to describe someone or something that is exceptional (Harkins 2000, p 73).

In Aboriginal crime fiction, the characters often speak Aboriginal English. In my novel, *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) I was conscious of the need for the Aboriginal characters to speak the light Aboriginal English that I remembered from growing up in Brisbane (Watson 2011, pp. 42-43). Likewise, the detectives in *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001, p. 42) speak light

Aboriginal English when they are seeking information from the residents of Eveleigh Street in Redfern.

### **The privileging of Aboriginal perspectives and experience**

As distinct from Peter Temple's black characters, those created by Aboriginal writers usually have an opinion on issues of concern to their communities. In *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001), Aboriginal disadvantage is never far from the minds of the protagonists. For example, while making lunch after attending an autopsy, Detective Lisa Fuller dwells on the inequalities in the federal health budget, which sees the majority of funds earmarked for black communities spent on infrastructure that other Australians take for granted (McLaren 2001, pp. 10-11).

It is also through such characters that Aboriginal perspectives of justice are brought to the centre of the narrative. In the television series, *The Circuit* (2007) the protagonist, Drew Ellis, is an ambitious Aboriginal lawyer from Perth, who aspires to a career in federal politics. Before going to Canberra, however, he decides to work as a locum for the Aboriginal Legal Service ('ALS') in the Kimberley. Although he believes that he has come to the ALS in order to 'give something back', it is Drew whose life is changed, as he gains knowledge about Aboriginal law and culture.

Drew's ignorance becomes apparent soon after he appears in Court for his new client, Gavin. Gavin was attacked by some relatives of his former partner, because the two were in a 'wrong-skin' relationship. When Gavin recovered from his injuries, he assaulted one of his assailants. On the day of his hearing, Gavin receives only a suspended sentence for the assault. Drew believes that he performed his job effectively in securing a lenient sentence for his client. However, from the perspective of Drew's ALS colleague, Sam Wallan, the suspended sentence is a threat to the community's fragile peace. As Gavin would not spend any time in prison, the victim's family was unlikely to be satisfied that justice had been delivered by the Court, and would be motivated to seek retribution.

As distinct from Bony, the protagonists of Aboriginal crime fiction have often been adversely affected by colonisation, and many still suffer psychological scars as a result of earlier

assimilation policies. In *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001) Detective Lisa Fuller is the medium through which Philip McLaren illuminates the psychological injuries carried by Stolen Generations survivors. Fuller often reflects on her removal from her mother at the age of five (McLaren 2001, p. 11). She also remains traumatised by her experiences as a ward of the Bombala Home for Girls. Fuller was bullied by the Matron of the Home, Mrs Williams, who ignored her academic prowess and groomed her for a life of domestic servitude (McLaren 2001, pp. 104-105). Although Fuller is fictitious, her experiences mirror those of thousands of former child wards. Many who told their stories to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1997, p. 137), spoke of being deprived of affection, and receiving only a rudimentary education.

Fuller was also a victim of what is now known as 'stolen wages' practices. Such practices arose out of government controls exercised over the personal incomes of Aboriginal wards during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 2006, [1.13]). At the age of fifteen Fuller was sent to work as a domestic servant for a white family, the Deans (McLaren 2001, p. 103). Although the Deans diligently paid her wages into a government trust fund, Fuller never received her income. Like Fuller, many real-life wards gained their freedom only to find that their trust funds had been misappropriated by unscrupulous public servants and employers (Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 2006, pp. 50-56).

### **Racism is omnipresent**

In common with critical race theorists, Aboriginal writers have long understood that racism is not confined to the arbitrary behaviour of flawed individuals. Such writers often seek to expose the myriad ways that whiteness is favoured and concealed under the guise of neutrality. The primary means of achieving this goal has been to privilege the experiential knowledge of Aboriginal people. In *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert* (1978) Kevin Gilbert attempted to describe the everyday lives of Aboriginal people throughout Australia. Racism was experienced by the interviewees in numerous ways. Young Aboriginal women endured sexual harassment by their employers without recourse to legal remedies (Gilbert 1978, p. 19), while Aboriginal men



faced unofficial segregation in hotels (Gilbert 1978, p. 29) and constant police intimidation (Gilbert 1978, p. 99). Students also experienced alienation in predominantly white schools that provided little accommodation for their worldviews and culture (Gilbert 1978, pp. 46-47). Gilbert's response was to argue for a barrage of positive propaganda about Aboriginal culture and history, in order to neutralise the racism that was 'constantly raining in' from the dominant society (Gilbert 1978, p. 3).

Aboriginal crime writers similarly portray racism as pervasive, and manifest in overt and subtle forms. In the film *Mystery Road* (2013) Aboriginal detective, Jay Swan, has recently returned to his home; an unnamed country town. One evening he is called upon to investigate the violent murder of an Aboriginal teenager, Julie Mason. The young woman's throat was slit and her body abandoned underneath a highway. When he arrives at the crime scene, Jay is struck by the absence of tape or barriers to stop members of the public from contaminating the evidence. He is also stunned that his colleagues have allowed a journalist to interview their only witness; a truckie who discovered the body. In a following scene, the police assemble at a going away party for one of their colleagues. Jay appears to be the only Aboriginal person in the restaurant. He sits silently and impassively as the Sergeant reflects on the drug fuelled crime that has gripped their town, but makes no reference to the murder.

The indifference of the police to Julie's murder is shared by many of the town's white citizens. When Jay questions the pastoralist whose land borders the highway, Sam Bailey, he is met with the derogatory comment - 'Are you a real copper or one of those black trackers who turns on his own type?' Bailey's contempt for Jay is shared by his son, Peter, who casually advises Jay that they, 'usually shoot fellas who turn up without an invite, especially those of the dark breed'.

Racism is also a common experience for the Aboriginal characters in *The Circuit* (2007); which Drew learns on his first day in Broome. While trying to remove the keys from his car, that he has accidentally locked, Drew is arrested by a police officer. Even though he is able to produce his license and registration details, Drew has to endure the humiliation of being taken to the police station.

In summary, Aboriginal crime writers bring the voices and historical experience of our communities to the centre of the narrative. Characters created by Philip McLaren and myself speak in the light Aboriginal English that is spoken within our own families. Our writers also cast light on Aboriginal values. Characters such as Drew Ellis are forced to confront the differences between mainstream conceptions of justice, and what is actually necessary for the restoration of equilibrium after an act of violence. Protagonists such as Detective Jay Swan also comprehend racism as a daily experience, rather than the isolated acts of flawed individuals. Finally, it is through our characters that Aboriginal crime writers honour the resilience of our communities.

### **Celebrating resilience**

Aboriginal Australian and Native American communities often have to contend with historical trauma, which has been defined as the 'cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experience' (Yellow Horse Brave Heart 2003, cited in Ramirez & Hammack 2014, p. 114). The consequences of historical trauma, which include substance abuse, anxiety and guilt behaviour, are often experienced by multiple generations (Denham 2008, p. 397). In spite of the devastation wrought by historical trauma, many communities have developed resistance strategies. Denham has described how ancestral narratives that highlight survival in the face of brutality are now being used by Native American communities to inspire resilience (Denham 2008, p. 406). Reclamation of identity through participation in cultural activities has also been linked to resilience (Ramirez & Hammack 2014, p. 126).

In Aboriginal crime fiction the protagonists often exhibit symptoms of historical trauma, such as alcoholism and guilt over being spared the atrocities inflicted on earlier generations. But by the end of the story, they invariably find strategies to achieve resilience. In *The Boundary* (Watson 2011) the Corrowa's lawyer, Miranda Eversely, is a high functioning alcoholic who is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt over her community's failed native title claim. Miranda's father, Charlie, is a former alcoholic who overcame his addiction through drawing strength from his Corrowa heritage, and finding purpose in community activities (Watson 2011, p. 127).

Miranda and Charlie have a strained relationship and she finds it impossible to discuss her problems with him. It is only at the end of the story that Miranda realises that, like her father, the keys to her resilience are community engagement and pride in her identity (Watson 2011, pp. 270-271).

Even when protagonists have been stripped of their identity by personal or familial histories of child removal, such attempts at assimilation are never entirely successful. While family bonds may never be restored completely, the protagonist usually gains confidence in his or her identity as the story evolves. In *The Circuit* (2007) Drew Ellis knows little of his Aboriginal family because his father was a member of the Stolen Generations. When Sam Wallan locates some of Drew's relatives, Drew is initially reluctant to meet with them. It is only after the intervention of an elderly uncle who silently waits outside his home that Drew relents, and begins to connect with his relatives. By the second season (2009), Drew's experiences with his relatives have been fraught with difficulties. But Drew has developed confidence in his Aboriginal identity.

For protagonists who are yet to find or be found by their families, they often resort to other means in order to reclaim their identity. In *Scream Black Murder* (McLaren 2001), Detective Lisa Fuller has had no contact with her kin since she was seized by police officers while still a young child (McLaren 2001, p. 11). But she has resorted to other means in order to reclaim her identity, albeit not always safe ones. Lisa enters a disastrous marriage with Alby, a young Koori man, out of a desperate need to belong (McLaren 2001, p. 147). Alby is selfish and Lisa leaves him after discovering that he has been unfaithful (McLaren 2001, p. 148). However, Lisa finds other, healthier ways of reclaiming her heritage. For example, while following a lead in the Aboriginal community of Weipa, Lisa and her partner, Detective Gary Leslie, are embraced by the traditional owners, the Jirjirond. The women take her to their secret waterhole and Lisa relishes the experience (McLaren 2001, p. 132). Throughout the story Lisa has a recurring dream in which she is in a tubular corridor. A black woman in the corridor tells Lisa to be careful; a woman Lisa suspects is her mother (McLaren 2001, pp. 67-68). Towards the end of the novel, the two are re-united, and thus begins the long journey of healing the 'government's deeply inflicted wounds' (McLaren 2001, p. 170).

## **Conclusion**

In the United States of America, stereotypes of black inferiority permeated detective novels. The archetype of the wise black Mammy, whose loyalty to her white owners was unwavering, emerged in the works of novelists such as Melville Davisson Post, in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Today, white hegemony is taken for granted, and consequently, few white protagonists consider issues of race, let alone question their privilege. However, African American crime writers have transformed their oppression into a space of resistance, and double consciousness detection is now an established trope of African American crime fiction. Characters such as Barbara Neely's Blanche White make themselves invisible behind stereotypes, and it is from this space that they solve crime.

Aboriginalism similarly filtered into Australian crime fiction, and found expression in Arthur Upfield's protagonist, Bony. As the quintessential noble savage, Bony had an innate connection with the bush. But he was unlike any other Aboriginal person of his era. Bony was unscathed by racism, advocated against inter-racial unions, including that of his own parents, and never endured the indignities of protectionism. Although the noble savage has long since disappeared from Australian crime fiction, Aboriginal characters still tend to lack complexity, and are rarely situated in their own communities.

Just as African American crime writers are using double consciousness to their own ends, Aboriginal crime writers are employing our characters as mouthpieces, from which we project black histories and honour our continuing survival as a people. It is through the eyes, voice and emotions of a protagonist like Jay Swan that a light is cast on the myriad forms of racism in rural Australia. It is through the experiences of Detective Lisa Fuller that the multiple harms endured by the Stolen Generations are brought into stark relief. Finally, it is through Miranda Eversely's personal journey to redemption that the resilience of Aboriginal people is celebrated.

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