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Amber Outskirts

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GOOD AND VIRTUOUS WOMEN?
GENDER AND ECOLOGY IN AMBER OUTSKIRTS
AND
AMBER OUTSKIRTS

by

Ann-Marie Blanchard

A Dissertation Submitted in
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ABSTRACT

GOOD AND VIRTUOUS WOMEN? GENDER AND ECOLOGY IN AMBER OUTSKIRTS AND AMBER OUTSKIRTS

by

Ann-Marie Blanchard

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018
Under the Supervision of Professor Liam Callanan

Amber Outskirts opens with 25-year-old Penelope Moore searching for the girl she once loved, Amber, who disappeared after they shared a drug-fuelled night. Penny finds Amber in a gritty town in rural New South Wales where she is every bit as wild, but now married to a brutal man, Pete. There's no room for Penny in Amber's new life, but Penny can't stay away.

Penny gets a job at the local orchard, where Amber works, and it's not long before she's invited to a party where there's a muddle of drink and desire. By the night's end, Pete slips away with a lover and in an act of revenge Amber sleeps with his brother, Angus. The following morning, Penny wakes hungover—and lost—in the bush. Trying to find her car, she stumbles on Amber in a remote clearing. Amber is acting strangely, and asks Penny if she'll drive the Kombi. Penny follows her instructions to reverse, and hits a body; it turns out Pete was sleeping behind the vehicle. On seeing Pete rolling in agony, Penny realises Amber intended for her to hit Pete's lover.

With Pete hospitalised, the women escape cross-country. Amber attempts to see her incarcerated mum for guidance, but her mum refuses her visit. Devastated by the rejection, Amber spins into a manic state, insisting they return to Penny's childhood home. Together, they break into the Bondi mansion, only for a neighbour to alert the cops. Faced with being arrested,

Penny is forced to contact her mum to prove she has a right to be on the premises. Her mum rushes home to find her weary daughter, who admits to running a man over and voluntarily goes to the police station to testify.

A year later, Penny is working as a barista in Sydney, having been fully acquitted, and coping with the emotional impact of the court case. Amber has been sentenced to twelve years in prison and has cut off communication with Penny. Penny's decides to return to Shearsend, where she is determined to resurrect her father's childhood orchard. At the orchard, Penny hikes up a mountain and from her lookout sees a van pause at the end of her driveway. Approaching her mailbox, she hopes for a letter from Amber.

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For Shaun

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Good and Virtuous Women? Gender and Ecology in Amber Outskirts

Australian literature has traditionally been overrepresented by Anglo-Saxon men, even though there is a rich tradition of national minority and women's writing. Devaleena Das and Sanjukta Dasgupta track this history in *Making Space for Australian Women's Writing*: "Australian national literature was born out of an exclusively patriarchal context—a pioneering pastoral history, the legendary sagas of the explorers, the struggle of the convicts, "mateship" and the white male hero in the bush, the suffering of Great Depression and Federation nationalist fervour" (6). Of course, not all men fit this strict category of hero, and so many are excluded from being recognised as true Australians. Women have also been categorised in a binary, that of damned whores and God's police, as feminist scholar Anne Summers argues in her book of the same title, leaving little fluidity outside of being labelled an unvirtuous mischief-maker or moral enforcer. In the national imagination the most celebrated identity is the bushman, who is considered the truest Australian (Carter). Throughout colonial times, the territory of the bush was symbolically depicted as the heart of the nation, where the most honest and noble characters lived, and yet this space was seen as unfitting for a woman. Furthermore, when women enter this space in literature they are frequently erased. Although the bush legend is problematic, the anti-authoritarian spirit offers disruptive possibilities for women to reclaim space. However, such an act would be fraught, for while women are dispossessed of land ownership, the greatest tragedy of the nation is all land is stolen land. In approaching reconciliation with the Aboriginal Australian community, non-Indigenous peoples cannot return the land to a pre-colonial ecology

in a desperate attempt to nullify guilt. The truth remains that the land is forever marked by the violence of colonisation and the answer, although imperfect, is to avoid the subordinations that occurred during settlement.

My novel, *Amber Outskirts*, is set in rural New South Wales, and presents a contemporary take on bush communities. One might ask why another Australian is writing a novel about the bush. My intention is to demythologise the bush legend, challenging this gendered narrative by placing women at the forefront of the action. These women enter traditionally masculine spaces—as publicans, orchardists, wanderers—and are not erased from the text, but remain focal and necessary. However, while *Amber Outskirts* attempts to deconstruct the bush myth, so too does it celebrate the anti-authoritarian sentiment of the legend. In reclaiming this spirit of resistance, I also wish to show the complications of this endeavour, as seen by the characters who commit accidental and thwarted crimes. My novel tells the story of Penelope Moore and her search for her former lover, Amber, who she finds in a gritty town in rural Australia where she is married to a brutal man, Pete. During a drunken rapprochement, Penny, Amber and Pete get entangled in a violent crime that has repercussions the two women cannot escape. The women have mixed motivations, both admirable and questionable. Amber, for example, seeks to be loved, but also seeks to kill her husband’s lover. These conflicting impulses confound the false binary of damned whores and God’s police. In contrast to traditional Australian literature, I choose not to erase these women, but am instead interested in their accountability.

My goal as an Australian author is to write women who are fully immersed in the bushland and disrupt the gendered norms of this space. In the national imagination, the bushland is a territory where gender and racial exclusions are pronounced. Women have largely been

erased from this space where Anglo-Saxon men were imagined to belong, having stolen the land from the Aboriginals. While the term *the bush* is commonplace, the actual region is fluid. David Carter, professor of Australian Literature, asks the seemingly basic question “What regions does *the bush* refer to: agricultural land, forest, country towns, the outback?” (43). He proposes there is no firm answer, and hence although the myth is pervasive, the logic of it can be contradicted. The region is mutable, and yet the representation of the people is not. It has long been held that in the bush both the true nation will be found, along with the truest citizens: hard working settlers, shearers and drovers, nomads and bushrangers. This narrative is one of possession, where the settlers prove that they alone belong to the land, by colonising and prospering.

Tracing the imaginative construction of the bush legend, it becomes apparent that while many colonial women made their home in the bush, they were not depicted as possessing this territory. Instead, the resounding cry was that this land was no place for a woman. Kay Schaffer explains, in her landmark feminist text *Women and the Bush*, “When women inhabit the bush in the histories and fictional accounts, it is seldom in their own right. They appear as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers in relationships with men” (63). These women may face their remote living situation with practicality, expertise, and courage, and yet they are rendered as fragile and in need of protection. Furthermore, these women are often erased from the bush in art and literature.

The history of women’s marginality in the bush is poignantly portrayed in one of Australia’s most famous colonial era paintings, Frederick McCubbin’s “The Pioneer,” which hangs in the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia (see following page). Going by the title, one might expect the triptych to represent a single person and not a family of pioneers. Instead, the paintings portray a free selector and a pioneer woman. “Free selectors” were men enabled by the

1860 Land Acts, which under certain conditions allowed white-settler men to claim land as their own, even if the territory was already owned by wealthy “squatters.” In the first painting, the wife sits in the foreground resting her chin on her palm, staring into the distance. While her expression is one of sadness—one imagines her situation is hopeless—it is also one of acceptance. In the background, her husband works to light a campfire while she muses, possibly after they had a disagreement about the struggles of their situation. The second image shows the woman as wife, holding her blond-haired infant, as she and her husband converse. The woman stands, while her husband sits on a tree he has felled. There is a sense of the woman speaking frankly with her husband, he listening quietly as her audience; however, her time as a spokesperson is short, for in the final image she has died, and the husband kneels at the cross which marks her grave. The cross will soon rot and the woman will be forgotten, lost to the bush which she tried to make home.



Australian literature tells a similar story of women who follow their men into the bush and end mad, lost, or dead. Women are not only represented as imprisoned by their domestic space, but also by the harsh landscape that threatens their fragility. In Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, set in 1900, a group of private schoolgirls go on excursion to the bushland. Some of these white-lace wearing students are never to return. Before their disappearance, the girls are depicted as follows:

Insulated from natural contacts with earth, air and sunlight, by corsets pressing on the solar plexus, by voluminous petticoats, cotton stockings and kid boots, the drowsy well-fed girls lounging in the shade were no more a part of their environment than figures in a photograph album, arbitrarily posed against a backcloth of cork rocks and cardboard trees (42).

The tone of this excerpt is humorous, in that the women appear so at odds with the landscape, their outfits ensuring no part of their bodies connect with the earth. They look super-imposed and the natural world appears fake, taking on the look of cork and cardboard. It is easy to laugh at the young women, to question why they left their privileged domestic sphere for the wilds of the bushland. An equally important question is what chance do these girls have of survival when their uniforms restrict their ability to negotiate the surrounding world? Under the summer sun, they are perpetually overheated and on the brink of fainting. These girls enter the setting of the narrative from a place of disadvantage, having rarely gotten outside of their mock-English school, nurtured into a fragility that makes them unable to save themselves from extinction.

One of the most respected colonial memoirs that challenges the erasure of women from the bush is Jill Ker Conway's 1989 *The Road to Coorain*, which provides a first-hand account of life on an outback station in the early twentieth century. Conway speaks of the role of women:

“If he [the settler] shared his life with a wife and children, they lived marginally on the edge of his world of male activity” (7). While Conway’s father was alive, her mother desperately tried to keep the house immaculately clean, as dust storms raged, and he took care of the livestock and land. However, Conway’s father tragically dies, and the women become the station managers, overseeing the running of the farm. Conway’s account shows that women are not innately fragile, but are competent at ensuring their survival in remote regions.

Bebe Ramzan is an Indigenous woman from the Anangu Pitjanjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, a remote community in South Australia. In the essay, “Experiencing and writing Indigeneity, rurality and gender: Australian reflections,” Barbara Pini and Lia Bryant interview Bebe¹, in which she echoes Jill Ker Conway’s sentiments of women’s competence:

Rural living, as in remote living requires jobs to be done. Whether you are a man or a woman, Indigenous or not, gender nor colour is a consideration. You’ve just got to do the thing because you know you’re out there. It’s like going out to dig in the ground. If you had to plant a crop, would you say, “I can’t do it because I’m a woman?” What if there is no man? Are you going to starve to death because your gender kept you from digging the ground? (441)

As Bebe states, the ecology of the bushland inspires a gendered equality, for all people need to work for their survival, which means all members are necessary and have equal worth. While the popular imagination suggests women are not welcome in the bush, Bebe shows that gender and race do not exclude anybody, because if somebody does not work, the community will suffer. Bebe asks the question, “What if there is no man?” (441). Literature in which women are alone in the bush, such as Jill Ker Conway’s memoir, shows that these instances are at times

¹ In using her first name, I am following Bebe’s stated preference in the source text.

advantageous, because women are able to freely work outside of the domestic space. When women are recognised as competent farmers in the community, the gendered narrative of the bush starts to be demythologised.

The identity of the bush hero is certainly problematic in terms of the gendered and racist aspects of the category, however the antiauthoritarian agenda should be distinguished as a powerfully subversive tool, which has offered freedom to convicts and minorities. Carter explains how the conditions of living in the bush inspired “democratic qualities of egalitarianism, antiauthoritarianism, and incipient socialism” (48). I am strongly influenced by representation of anti-authoritarian figures in Australian Literature, notably the characters of Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang*. This novel tells of the diaspora of the Irish, blurring the boundary of fiction and non-fiction, suggesting an alternative history to that of the colonisers. Ned Kelly, the narrator, shares about the collective history of persecution:

And here is the thing about them men they was Australian they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood and a man might be a bank clerk or an overseer he might never have been lagged for nothing but still he knew in his heart what it were to be forced to wear the white hood in prison he knew what it were to be lashed for looking a warder in the eye and even a posh fellow like the Moth had breathed that air so the knowledge of unfairness were deep in his bone and marrow (104).

Kelly’s narrative is written for his niece, with the intention of informing her of their family history, so that she does not gain her knowledge from the ruling class in the newspapers. Through the power of the authentic voice, Carey draws us into the story of one young man whose family faced severe mistreatment from authority figures. The narrative depicts the

hopelessness of the situation for minorities such as the Irish, through the intentional lack of punctuation—brutalising of Queen’s English—which creates a subversive lyricism that is poignantly beautiful and tantalising in its disruptive power.

My novel presents an anti-authoritarian community. On arriving in rural Shearsend, Penny Moore, born and raised in a wealthy Sydney suburb, is told repeatedly that domestics—a colloquial term for fights that occur between intimate parties in domestic spaces—are dealt with privately, and so she should never notify the police if she witnesses violence. She is also warned to not get involved in disputes, but tensions quickly build. At a party, Pete slips away with a teen lover. In an act of revenge, Amber deceives Penny into running over her husband. At the station, Penny is faced with a scene where the cops are watching an internet video of a woman who is stripped bare, her bikini torn off while jet-skiing. This moment speaks to the “unfairness” of power hierarchies (Carey 104). While Penny does not face violence from the authorities, as Ned Kelly does in Peter Carey’s novel, she senses an underlying threat, doubting the law enforcers’ respect for women. In response, Penny decides to take the community’s advice by dealing with the situation privately, which opens the narrative up for disruptive possibilities when she and Amber go on the run. Rather than handing the power over to the police, the women independently strategise ways to ensure their freedom, determined not to pay for harming Pete, a criminal in his own right.

Though the bush legend’s anti-authoritarian agenda has disruptive possibilities, the legend is largely a tragedy, for as Carter points out, “One of the most profound effects of such history and memory making is to efface the Indigenous presence, past and present, in the land” (Birns et. al. 45). From the moment settlers arrived in Australia, the continent was deemed Terra Nullius: nobody’s land. This categorisation served to rhetorically justify the conquest of

territories and the disregard for the Indigenous people who had lived on the continent for over 40,000 years. This body of land was initially imagined as a bride awaiting penetration. Explorer Charles Eyre penned his desire to enter “the vast recesses of the interior of Australia, to try to lift up the veil which has hitherto shrouded its mysteries from the researches of the traveller” (Schaffer 60). However, the ecology turned out to be particularly resistant, and hence was reimagined as a veiled woman denying the rescue mission of the settler. For those Aboriginals whose lives were not robbed by violence or disease during colonisation, they often worked to farm the land for white settlers, making Australia’s pastoral regions the prosperous areas that they are today. And yet regardless of the Aboriginal’s part in pastoral history, they have received little public merit for their agricultural input, and been granted limited ownership of their rightful lands (Pini and Bryant). History still paints the Aboriginal Australians as hunter/gatherers, with no input into the agricultural transformation of the nation.

In an attempt at reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians, some non-Indigenous people endeavour to create native gardens. Murray Bail’s novel *Eucalyptus* depicts Holland who is fixated with producing a native ecology, which inspires his decision to cultivate a monoculture. He selects the eucalyptus as the tree most representative of a native Australian ecology, and spends “many years...culling, reducing most species to a single healthy specimen” (42-42). In undertaking to cultivate a wholly native plot, he instead creates a non-native space, for nature would never produce an environment of eucalyptus alone. The reader must question which moment in Australian history is most representative of a purely native environment? Holland places the time marker in pre-settlement Australia, and yet this is problematic, for as researcher Allaine Cerwonka of Oxford University’s International Gender Studies Centre suggests, “Such revegetation projects...often slide into fantasy of complete restoration and reparation of land post

invasion, an abnegation of guilt and responsibility” (Martin 97). The bush cannot be returned to a supposedly pure pre-colonial existence, erasing the guilt of the non-Indigenous. Instead, the land is forever marked by colonisation. In looking to the future, we are left to ask how we avoid the subordinations that occurred during settlement.

In my novel, I attempt to address the topic of stolen land by depicting Penny’s complex relationship with the orchard she buys. Although she becomes a land owner, she buys a farm that holds the junk-remains of the previous owner, who abused the plot and did not care for the crops. Most people question Penny’s desire to buy the farm, unsure why she would sink her money into something that requires so much rehabilitation. Penny is also concerned about her future, for although she wants the orchard, she is nervous about her ability to understand farm life and care for the trees. The novel ends with her walking through the decay that she has purchased, concerned and yet seeing that the land remains fertile. I hope to suggest Penny can respect the land and the rightful owners by educating herself in horticulture, and ridding the junk from the property, encouraging regeneration.

As an Australian novelist, I am not only interested in disrupting the bush legend by peopling this territory with women who respect the rightful owners of the land, but I am also invested in the treatment of women classified ‘damned whores’. From the moment white-settlers claimed Australia in 1770, they set about importing colonial gender norms from the British Empire. Feminist scholar Anne Summers argues, in her foundational work *Damned Whores and God’s Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia*, that settler women were expected to live out the Christian faith so as to break with the stereotype of convict-whore. Caroline Chisholm was a nineteenth-century humanitarian who was active in political debates regarding the immigration of women to Australia. In 1847 she declared:

For all the clergy you can dispatch, all the school-masters you can appoint, all the churches you can build, and all the books you can export, will never do much good, without what a gentleman in that Colony very appropriately called ‘God’s police’—wives and little children—good and virtuous women (Summers 291).

While much can be critiqued in Chisholm’s claim, there is something to be admired. Chisholm fought for the recognition of women’s role in nation-making. She pushed the agenda that women are political and have the capacity to enforce their will and the law. The job of nation making cannot solely be achieved by men, for without women they will “never do much good” (Summers 291).

Caroline Chisholm’s claims regarding nation-making are also deeply problematic. One particular issue with this gendered narrative of colonial Australia is that the only women capable of enforcing rule were white-settler wives and their “little” children (Summers 291). The adjective “little” evokes images of sweet and obedient children, ones who inspire moral behaviour by their natural virtue which is untainted by the world. In categorising wives and children together, Caroline Chisholm suggests a likeness between the two parties, enforcing the idea that women have a naive goodness that is innate to their gender; many would also question children’s natural goodness. Of course, not all women fit the category of white-settler wives, and were therefore unfitting God’s police. Such minority women were brandished transgressive, Anne Summers argues, and classified as damned whores. All women were therefore bound by a binary code that allowed little fluidity.

Not only did the binary code allow little fluidity for women’s identities, but so too did it inspire many artists to prematurely kill strong women characters. In resistance to this trope, I am committed to keeping my unvirtuous women alive. Furthermore, I am determined to portray the

nuances of these character's motives, desires, and personal ethics, proving they are neither entirely damned whores or God's police. My literary inspiration comes from the callous treatment of Eva Sanderson of Tim Winton's *Breath*. Winton, Australia's most prolific contemporary author, has been criticised for the treatment of women in his novels. Eva of *Breath* provides a striking example of a woman who simply has no place in a "'manzone' country'" (Blunt and Rose 101). Many readers fixate on Eva's statutory rape of fifteen-year-old Bruce Pike, while overlooking the question of where Eva fits in *Breath*. The world of this novel is clearly no place for a woman. Eva is the only woman in the novel who speaks, other than Pikelet's girlfriend who makes a brief and not particularly impactful appearance. The first half of the novel focuses on the boy's surfing life-threatening waves, and this serves as a worthy interrogation of constructs of masculinity, but does not welcome any female voices. While the second half of the novel introduces Eva in all her power and complication, she is ultimately killed.

Literary critic Hannah Schurholz speaks of Tim Winton's gender politics: "Although not a self-confessed member of the men's movement, Winton has frequently expressed his sympathies with a 're-centralisation' and redefinition of Australian masculinity" (59-60). I personally admire Winton for portraying male characters who love beauty for beauty's sake, and going beyond the archetypal Aussie-battler. And yet, along with many critics, I am left wondering why Winton's efforts to create a space for a new-masculinity has resulted in the erasure of women (McGloin; Murrie; Schurholz). Indigenous Studies scholar Colleen McGloin claims the description of Eva as "square...cubes...block-like...wide...blunt" accomplishes the "textual stripping of Eva's femininity to allow Pikelet's feminised position" (McCredden and O'Reilly 41). Is this not cause for celebration in our world where gender constructs have left so many feeling trapped and

deeply misunderstood? However, gender roles are not simply inverted in the novel, but rather the women are completely erased. Australian Literature scholars Lynn McCredden and Nathaneal O'Reilly claim that the women of Winton's novels whose "masculine power and erotic agency make [them] threatening phallic figure[s]...must ultimately be excised from the narrative so that equilibrium and its (white-settler) male perspective may be restored" (McCredden and O'Reilly 243). Schurholz furthers this statement by suggesting the men of Winton's novels are the presence, while the females are the absence, frequently associated with "lack, destruction and transience" (McCredden and O'Reilly 60). It is no surprise, then, that Eva—a woman who took up a lot of space when she got on the page—ends up hanged in a hotel room, killed by her own risk fetish. It is also no surprise that Eva is sexually immoral and must therefore die.

Amber of my novel has murderous intent. Like Eva Sanderson, she seeks destruction and lives a life of transience. Am I thus furthering the trope of women's erasure? I argue no: in my novel, Amber is not eradicated, but rather lives and takes responsibility for her actions. "I want to begin with murder," writes critic Susan Hawthorne in her essay "From Inner Space to Outer Space: Lesbian Writing in Australia." Hawthorne is intrigued with murder in narratives as she believes it "clears the space, creates the possibility of starting again with a clean slate" (Das and Dasgupta 200). While I am not entirely convinced by Hawthorne's argument, I concede that a character's sudden death could offer new possibilities for the remaining characters. In my novel, I resist the ease of "starting again with a clean slate," because in doing so, I would not treat my characters with dignity (Hawthorne 200). In some sense, to start again is to erase history, and I am far more dedicated to women's voice and actions being recognised. Amber's attempt to kill is foiled. Going by Hawthorne's logic, perhaps if her attempt had been successful, she could have

started anew. Instead, she faces the consequences of her actions, and when she demands to make a statement, her account is recorded and has impact.

Rather than wiping slates clean or erasing unvirtuous women, I am interested in their accountability. Postcolonial scholar Anne McClintock offers a persuasive argument regarding women's accountability in her essay, "No Longer in a Future Heaven." McClintock examines a context outside of Australia, yet her theory can be applied to my debate, offering a solution to the erasure of women. McClintock describes the Anglo-Boer women's efforts during the Boer War that were equally as politically motivated and often as violent as the colonial men's actions. Problematically, as these accounts have been historicised, the focus has been placed on the women's imagined maternal impulses and virtues. One such example is a monument that was erected in 1913 to honour the women victims of the war. The statue represents weeping women with covered shoulders, and starving babes clutched in their arms. This serves to "enshrine Afrikaner womanhood as neither militant nor political, but as suffering, stoical, and self-sacrificial" (McClintock 109). McClintock argues that such women can never be held accountable for their war atrocities if their acts are never accurately detailed in history.

By the same token, my characters have the right to be treated as liable human persons, worthy of the repercussions of violence. However, like Professor Susan Hawthorne, I also wish to "problematise the subject of [attempted] murder" (Hawthorne 203). Amber's husband Pete is an abusive husband and has a relationship with an underage girl, Rhi. Pete is never taken to trial, while Amber faces jail time. I wish to address the fact that "unpunished crimes and unrecognised crimes will go unpursued in our current system of justice" (Hawthorne 203). In response to this, I account for Pete's unpunished abuse, ensuring such crimes are revealed and documented. Furthermore, while I do not condone Amber's violence, I detail her history of abandonment to

suggest her actions are motivated by a desperate attempt to be loved, sadly by a man who feeds into her aggression.

In closing, I wish to share a little from my own history, because in critically considering my novel, it is fitting to return to its genesis. I grew up in rural New South Wales, surrounded by bushland. This territory was as much mine as it was the boys of my neighbourhood, because every day, I went deep into a nearby gorge and interacted with the animals and plants. Much of the time, I felt certain of how to navigate this ecology, and while there were elements to fear, I knew how to safely negotiate most threats. I also learned I was weak in comparison to a lethal brown snake, hopeless in the face of a bush fire, and this taught me environmental respect. My parents educated me and my brothers about the Aboriginal Australians, and I knew we lived on stolen land, which was painful to learn, and taught me that gratitude is complicated, that ownership is fraught. To understand my world more fully, I read books, usually about women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. I hated the stories of all the dying women in the desert, waiting for a bushman to save them, and was fiercely inspired by the words of feminist writers such as Miles Franklin, Sally Morgan, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Alexis Wright, and Dorothy Porter. While Australian Literature has been largely represented by Anglo-Saxon men, many of whom I respect, there is also a fierce and growing canon of women writers, who have educated and informed my identity and inspired my first novel. “Australian women writers have crossed canonical, cultural and racial boundaries in search of identity and meaning” (Dasgupta and Das 4), and to these greats I am forever indebted.

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Amber Outskirts

by

Ann-Marie Blanchard

Tell me I'm dirty.

~ Nick Cave, *Stranger Than Kindness*

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

At the furthest reach of town was a pub that appeared shabbier than all the rest. The verandah sagged as if it held up a silo full of peaches. Something about the solitude of the place made Penny swing into the dirt carpark. And walk in empty handed.

Every door and window was open, yet the light inside was sleepy. Fans shifted heat and dog hair. Under a farm table, that could've seated twenty, was a bundle of staghounds, their raw bellies bared. One woke and barked without bothering to move. Other than the dogs, there was no life about the place, only traces of human history: carving over carving across beams and bar, a cigarette smoking in an ashtray, a boot in the fireplace, polaroids of teathy drinkers, jars full of tiny wood-skeletons, muddled couches darkened by talk and sweat. Although everything begged for a wash, there was something calming about a space so loved—so abused. It was clear somebody took care to welcome the lost and found.

Grunge tunes spilled out a door at the far end of the pub. It was only once Penny got close to the office that she saw a jungle of indoor plants, and somewhere amidst it all a table covered in tools and vitamins.

“You lost?”

Coming down a staircase was a woman holding a wrench. Her skin was nicked from one too many do-it-yourself projects gone wrong; Penny had no doubt that while she ended up scarred, the projects got completed. Her hair was bleached within an inch of its life, so straight it defied any strand that attempted to curl. She wore only black: jeans, cotton tee, beaten Docs that showed signs of having been re-soled. She wasn't frowning, but she wasn't smiling either.

“I'd like a room,” Penny said.

“You want a room?” the woman said.

“Yes,” she said. “Please.”

“If you keep driving another hour or so you’ll reach a pretty big town with some fancier hotels. Got pools. WiFi.”

“No. This is where I want to stay.”

“Where’re your bags?”

Penny firmed her jaw. “Don’t have any.”

“Well—” the woman said, and touched an overburdened set of keys on her belt. “You coming?”

The Rose was the final room upstairs, the only with an ensuite. The woman said her name was Jen as she struggled with the lock and used her shoulder to force an entrance. Penny stopped against the thrift-shop odour, then opened a window, leant her head out, and saw a trail of sugar-ants marching across the corrugated iron of the roof which breathed the day’s heat.

“Can’t say I have guests stay here much,” Jen said. Although her eyes were dull they were playful, she looked like she was right about to wink. She was too thin to be pretty—too thin to be gentle—but maybe she would care enough to help Penny in her search. “This pub is more a drinking-hole than a home.”

Besides the scent, the room was verging on endearing. The carpet was dark gold shag, thicker in some sections than others. A bulbous lampshade with a bundle of flamingoes hung just an inch too low over the bed, offsetting the burnt rose eiderdown. The writing desk was so small that it was likely bought for a teen in the fifties, one who didn’t get much homework done. The ensuite was all mint tiles. And although the bathtub had a light dusting of long-dead insects, Penny was already imagining filling it to tipping and getting her mind less rattled.

“I met my husband in this room.” Jen squashed a single ant that had found its way inside.

“We had sex on that bed every day for a month and then got married. He’s fucked off now. I like to imagine he’s dead. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Who’re you running from then?” she asked. “Your daddy?”

Penny pushed at her hair as if it was long enough to get in the way, but it hadn’t been since she was a kid. An angry teen, she’d lobbed off handfuls—gathered the agitated strands of copper—and later, her mum paid a stylist to mask the damage. Faced with Jen’s question, she just wanted to appear blank. “No.”

“You might look like a fish out of water—all posh in your city dress—but I can see you’re planning on staying for a while,” Jen said and flicked a dead spider off the curtain. “I could do with someone here to pour schooners—all my girls quit. Are you in need of a job? Or do you have a trust fund to get you through the hard times?”

Penny tore at a loose thread on her dress’s hem. “I’m going to work at the big orchard.”

“Mumblety-Peg?” Jen snorted. “What do you know about it?”

“There wasn’t much information online. Just a description of the Mumblety-Peg game; had more to do with knives than fruit.”

“You seen the Mumbo crew? They’ll be at the pub tonight. You won’t need me to point them out. They’re what my old man would call drongos. Although, can’t say he’s not one himself, getting on the piss from dawn till dusk, leaving me to bring up my four sisters. But anyway, I shouldn’t speak ill of the wanker.”

“At least he’s around,” Penny said. Sweat ran the length of her ribcage.

“To collect the dole?” Jen grabbed a towel from the cupboard and cast it on the bed; it still had a price-tag. “The Mumbo crew can be a real handful, and I can see it already, once they

get a look at that freckle smudge on your nose they'll think you've got what it takes to get messy.”

“Don't worry, I'm not here to make new friends.”

“That's what they all say, then they get sucked in and fucked-up.” Jen turned on the light but the bulb blew. “Are you planning on sleeping tonight?”

“I hope so—haven't in days.”

“You should've bought earplugs. Thursday nights at the pub can be a bit of a rager, and the rooms aren't all that soundproof.”

“I could sleep through anything.”

“You? Bullshit.”

The window started to creep down, so Penny jammed it open with a rubbish bin. “Do you know everyone in this town?”

Jen gave a smile, close-mouthed. “Who're you after?”

“Her name's Adeline.”

“Never heard of her. Why are you on the hunt?”

“I knew her in my early-teens.” A breeze moved through the trees and she begged it to hit, desperate to cool.

“Bit late to go looking for her now. How old are you? Eighteen?”

“Eighteen!” Penny smiled. “I'm twenty-five.”

Along the road a burnt orange Kombi approached—not the type tourists rent to feel they have purchased the true Australian experience on credit—but that'd been passed down from one madman to the next. Something about the van insisted she not look away. It swung into a loading zone and just as quickly swung out. Penny felt a heat in her crotch as she imagined riding in the

passenger's seat. Sleeping on the mattress in the back. Seconds before it reached the pub, it veered down a side-road disappearing behind an abattoir.

“Until you tell me otherwise,” Jen said, “I’ll have it in my head you’re running from your daddy.”

“He’s dead.” Penny shut the window. “He died when I was twelve.”

“Shit.” Jen shook her head like she meant it. “You could’ve told me that earlier. How’d it happen?”

“Motorbike accident.”

“Mate, that’s rough. Sorry about my daddy comments.”

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago,” she said, as if his death hadn’t inspired all those teen years of trouble; the type of trouble that had adult consequences; the type of trouble she needed to revisit to understand. “He was actually from here. Grew up on an orchard, not Mumblety-Peg, but a little one called No Man’s Land. He said the name was a joke that stuck. Do you know it?”

“There’s only one orchard here. And ten pubs.”

Penny stepped towards Jen. “You must know the windmill with the yellow tin-woman?”

Jen stepped back. “We’ve got heaps of windmills.”

“How about a lane that winds till you get car-sick?”

Jen shook her head, like the heat had gotten to Penny. “Things change—even in small towns.” When she closed the door quietly it sounded like sympathy.

But Penny wasn’t in the mood for sadness. And neither were her hands that jittered like she’d eaten fire. For all she knew, the blog had gone viral. Penny’s name in red lights. Cynthia Cunningham had used that picture of Penny from the Swiss Alps. Aged twelve, the Cunningham’s had offered to take Penny on their family holiday to “fix her,” since she didn’t

seem to be very “well” a year after her dad’s death. There were concerns about her meanness. Stories circulated at school about her biting, as if she was a naughty terrier. Mrs. Cunningham, a woman who loved to save, reasoned with Penny’s mum: “Who can make mischief in the Alps?”

In the photograph, Penny sat on a horse she’d found grazing in a paddock and faced backwards, her boots savage with mud, her t-shirt torn at the breast, showing the bump of a nipple. It was easy to see she was preparing for chaos. Cynthia’s brother had taken the picture without her knowing; he was creepy like that, always showing up when she wanted space. That boy wasn’t the only one to sneak around trying to get a look at Penny. On the edge of puberty, people watched her like she was their pretty little alien and they wanted to lock her in a laboratory to understand her intimate bits. Yeah, she knew she was weird looking. It was probably the green eyes her mum called infected waters. Or maybe it was her nose, neat, perked, and freckle-smudged. Or maybe it was her skin, beneath the smattering of freckles, so white it was an erasure. A kid, she thought her weird looks might serve to provide cover, since people tend to like pretty girls better, but it turned out people think weird is pretty too.

If she could go back to being the girl on the horse, would she do things differently in her teens, save herself from scandal? It seemed impossible: that girl on the horse would meet Adeline. And no life could remain unchanged after her brilliant bedlam.

CHAPTER TWO

Penny needed maps—old ones—that knew history. She always came up with her best plans in the bath. She towed her hair and didn't bother locking her door since the pub was her temporary home so must be safe. Downstairs, there was no Jen, but she couldn't wait for her return. The sun was already starting to set. Bikini Kill drummed a marching-beat over the speakers as Penny slipped into Jen's office and tripped on an overgrown vine. She must've been nervous, because she went through the papers on the desk, as if Jen would store maps amidst screwdrivers and renovation-plans. The first filing cabinet had half-open drawers packed tight. She dug and felt something sticky. The second filing cabinet was locked. Getting on her knees, she pieced through a tool-box that was full of keys, jammed them one-by-one into the keyhole.

"This is a song about sixteen-year-old girls giving carnies head," screamed from the speakers.

She wasn't stupid. She knew there wouldn't be maps in the cabinet, but she couldn't arrive in Shearsend and just sit around, waiting for the orchard and Adeline to come to her. Action was better than waiting, even if it proved pointless.

"Want a hand?" Jen asked and turned on the light.

Penny swore and wiped her sticky fingers on her dress. Rather than apologise, she went straight for her demands. "I need a map."

Jen took the keys from her belt and unlocked the cabinet. Penny smelled fertilizer before she even saw the mushrooms, heads neatly packed along the shelves. "Best place to grow these beauties. Want one?" Jen asked, and plucked the smallest. "It looks just like your nose."

"Are these..."

She laughed. "I'm in AA—all illicit substances are off the table."

Penny ate the bud. It tasted like darkness. “But you’re a publican.”

“Don’t have to drink what I serve.”

“That seems like a hard way to live.”

“My clients are a daily reminder of why I gave up grog.” She pointed to the wall where a map was tacked, the corners curling with age. She tore it down. “The pub doesn’t open till midday. I’ll pick you up at sunrise and we’ll find your tin-woman, if she exists.”

In her room, Penny worked with a pencil in hand, trying to find the windiest lane on the map. But at some point, beats started coming through the walls and shag carpet, along with the din of hundreds of drinkers. It was dark outside, the kind of dark she was unfamiliar with, where you could see the stars so intensely it reminded you Australia is made up of colours that don’t do shades in halves, a truth easily forgotten in Sydney. The louder it got, the less she could concentrate on circling possibilities. Adeline could be downstairs: she was such a wild teen, it made sense she’d be an adult who liked wild spaces.

Penny jogged downstairs and hit a wall of people. The room smelled carnal: oils, skin, leather. The crowd’s hair clearly hadn’t seen the insides of a salon for a decade. Those whose scalps weren’t shaved had dreads flecked with coloured wool and feathers. Their bare feet revealed past journeys, suggested places they would someday go. All the jeans had blown out knees. Some wore shirts. Some didn’t. Their touch wasn’t selective, instead they grabbed hold of hips, running fingertips along spines. Many had dogs at heel. Jen lent over the bar, yelling at the dogs by name, telling them to get out on the verandah where they belonged; her Staghounds were the only welcome animals. Moving through the crowd, Penny felt they all knew bodies, when to detach, when to fuse.

Jen slapped a gin and tonic down. “I don’t want that,” Penny said.

“What, so you want a Bundy and Coke?”

“No, I want to find a woman named Adeline.”

“You’re not a good listener. I already told you she doesn’t live here.”

Penny swallowed from her glass and realised it was exactly what she needed. “Can I order dinner?”

But Jen was gone, dolling out jugs of beer and telling a redhead she needed to get some water into her before she chundered. Penny shoved through men and all their beards, searching the push of bodies for the one body that wasn’t foreign, was instead the first she’d ever known. She swallowed equal amounts of fear and anticipation; the same dosage as the night the two teens escaped in the rowboat.

The courtyard was empty. She thought. There were vines, dark green. She ran her fingers over carved names on a table. Some markings were fresh, but others were almost indecipherable. She got on her knees and read from left to right, trying to find her dad’s name among the punters. He had to be there; he’d been part of that town, had once loved women more worthy than her mum.

A man came out the toilet marked W. He should’ve noticed Penny but he was distracted, digging in his jean pockets, pulling out loose-leaf. He lent against a wall and set to work crafting a cigarette with the type of care he obviously didn’t dedicate to his appearance. He was dirt-road brown, hair all feral dog matts. His body was so lean she would’ve guessed vegetarian, but suspected the man ate meat. Although he was bedraggled, there was something so dignified about him, so completely unspoiled. Penny imagined he’d swum in waterways all over the country, knew gorges, falls, oceans, hot springs. Overhead a bat passed, who hadn’t yet figured out flight, and dipped towards the man’s head. He smiled as if proud of the pup and blew his

smoke away from the tiny body, clearing lingering clouds with his palm.

“Hi,” Penny said, but he didn’t hear, instead fingered his smoke’s cherry onto the pavement and walked into the pub.

Penny woke to the corrugated iron telling secrets. The wind tackled the pub trying to lay it flat, clear the space down to the dirt. It hadn’t struck Penny till that moment just how isolated she was in her room, amidst five other guest-less rooms. If somebody broke into the pub, she’d be a perfect candidate for taking out into the surrounding fields.

“Adults aren’t scared of wind,” she repeated. Or whispers. Or being buried in a field where sheep bundle their shorn selves into unified heaps.

The map took up the dashboard. Penny’s surroundings appeared so immaculately flat she wanted a level to test her eyesight. Jen adjusted her seat, fidgeted with the radio, tested the precision of the air-conditioner, and asked how much the car cost. She was proving herself a useless navigator, would say, “Did you see the windmill?” well after it’d already passed. Penny would brake, drop her Volvo in reverse, right as a semi came tumbling up behind them. Veering onto the roadside, they’d brace against the suck of wind, the truck’s tyres overtaking like micro-aggressions. Everything was too big in the country.

“So this orchard we’re looking for was your dad’s?” Jen asked, after they inspected another windmill with no tin-woman.

It was hard to get started on the story of her dad and how he lost Shearsend. A kid she helped him build the retaining wall where their property dropped away dramatically to the harbour, and he spoke of his childhood and all the fruit trees. The creek. The wild horse that ran

onto the property and became his friend. An adult, his parents left the orchard to him and he sold the fruit at markets and church fetes. He had just enough money to keep himself going. Still young and hungry, he met her mum at a B & S Ball. They danced till sunrise, left in his ute, drove to the Northern Territory, and slept under a sky so star splendid they had to cover their eyes to create night. There they conceived their first child in Katherine Gorge. Her dad thought her mum was amusingly proper, but wild at heart. When they married, six months later, her belly the talk of Sydney society, he started to wonder if she'd just been having a holiday from proper. He asked her to move back to Shearsend with him, and she said, "Someday."

Her mum had a way with turning ugly interiors splendid; her company, Moore Beauty Moore Brilliance (MBMB), was the northern suburbs most award winning interior designers. She also had a way with doing-up husbands. She cut his hair herself and taught him not to say cunt casually. She bought him cigarettes in a gold pack and tossed out his loose-leaf. She selected tan rather than denim. And he went along with it, until it came to his only daughter.

Their first child, Dom, was talented, effeminate, and born with direction in his bloodstream. He was quickly scooped up by the most prestigious performing arts school in the city. But Penny was another story. She grew wiry, with a laugh that often sounded nasty. And wherever there was dirt, she buried herself. Her mum had it out for her, always demanding she stop. Stop pissing in the swimming pool. Stop pissing in the greenhouse. Stop pissing on the tennis court. Her alien eyes got greener, a muddle of blue and yellow estuaries always flowing out, never pooling.

Penny begged to visit her dad's orchard where she thought she might make a bit more sense. She saw herself lost in the bush. Felt the safety of disappearance. "You're wild enough as it is," her mum would say. "We don't need you turning into a bush-kid." But then one day her

dad was driving her to school and rather than pulling into the rose-garden fortress, he just kept going and didn't stop till it was late afternoon and they found a windmill and a winding lane. They spent the evening exploring the orchard and the mountainside. As night came on, her dad's old friends arrived and got a campfire going. They were nicotine stained and back-sore. As they cooked up snags they told stories of her dad's antics—the accidental bushfire and accidental avalanche—and once they were full of rum, they plucked on their guitars, and sung wet-eyed.

When she and her dad returned home, her mum was drinking wine on the verandah which overlooked the harbour. As Penny remembered it, the garden was hot with growth. And the scent of jasmine was overpowering. There was a fight. Her mum said a lot and her dad said little.

Her mum's anger had been so big Penny ran into the backyard and hid under a huddle of King Ferns. From the foliage she listened to her parents until she heard her dad's motorbike. In years to come, her mum swore Penny conflated days: "It was months later," she said. "And no one was fighting, darling." But Penny knew the truth. It was definitely the day that stunk like jasmine.

The accident happened on Putty Road, the same road that led towards Shearsend. Her dad's canvas rucksack was returned to the family with his pipe, journal, and a variety of tomato seeds. Sometimes, when Penny was too tired to block her thoughts, she wondered why he hadn't taken her, and she wished he had, putting an end to her restlessness.

"I hate city tunes," Jen said, slapping the stereo off. They were on a dirt road so surrounded by undergrowth twigs wrote angsty messages across the car. "What was your dad's name?"

"Dan Moore."

"Oh shit! I knew Moorsy. He was a good ten years older than me. A looker. Had that

dash of copper hair, just like you. Bit of a legend around our shire—always into mischief.”

“So you must know his orchard then?”

“Of course I do, but I never knew it by name. We just call it Moorsy’s, even though it’s been sold a few times and now it’s just sitting on the market.”

“The woman I’m looking for lives there.”

“You sure? It’s been vacant for years.” She spat a fingernail-shaving out the window. “I need to pee.”

Outside, the air was so hot it breathed like mouthfuls of pea and ham soup. Jen didn’t ask for privacy, but Penny gave her some. She wandered to a turn in the road where a dirt lane split off and snuck away. Glancing back, she saw Jen dump the contents of her pockets onto the car’s bonnet.

Penny called out, “Do you need tissues?”

“Fish oil tablets.”

Maybe it was an illusion, but up the lane were colours that jarred against the bush. Fire-engine red. The kind of yellows that sell to kids but make parents nervous. She wanted to get closer, figure out what all the colours were about. The undergrowth had been chipped away, but haphazardly, so there were poorly cleared sections still peppered with wattles and wild grasses. It looked like somebody had worked with a machete, taking down the saplings and leaving the rest to claw at a living. Thinking of the knife made her worry that somebody wasn’t going to appreciate the intrusion. But once she started something, it was hard to stop. Adeline—a perfect example. She kept walking semi-crouched, as if a shorter version of herself would be less intrusive. Freezing, she saw tents of every colour.

“Oi.” She swung around, thousands of defenses ready, but it was only Jen. Arms folded.

“You know people have guns around here.”

“Is that legal?”

As they drove away, Penny let the windows down to breathe in the soup air. “Who lives back there?”

“The Mumbo crew.”

A kilometer down the road the bushland abruptly ended and the road dog-legged. There was a gorge, cut so deep Penny couldn't see to the bottom. She whispered a curse at the boldness of the cliffs, the gums that clung to the sheer drops, arching out over the endless fall. There was a “no trespassing” sign and a gate blocking the road.

“Let's go swimming,” Jen said.

Penny knocked the gearstick in reverse. “I don't have time. Where's the orchard.”

“I need to cool off,” she said. “Anyway, when did you last see this woman?”

“Twelve years ago,” Penny muttered.

“I think our search can wait an hour.” Jen jumped out. “Come on. You could do with some vitamin D. Freckles suit you.”

Penny followed and kicked a hunk of bitumen off the cliff. They never heard it land.

“You sure this'll only take an hour?”

Jen climbed over the gate, said, “This was once the main road into Shearsend. Soon enough it'll all be lost to landslides.”

A knee-high barrier served as false protection along the road-side. Penny leant her legs against the burn of the metal and looked to the river. It was so deep it was black. Although she was covered in sweat, she couldn't help feeling nervous about getting in the water.

“Did I mention there was a message on the pub's answering machine this morning,” Jen

said. Penny unsettled some pebbles that skirled off the cliff. “It was a woman named Florence asking if a Penelope Moore was staying at the pub.” Leaning further out wasn’t safe, but Penny did it anyway. “She said she understood that we can’t give out personal details, but that it was urgent because you’ve gone missing.” A magpie dive-bombed a sparrow. “Seems like you’re not all that good at hiding.” Another rock came loose and fell to the river. It was fucking dangerous that there was no sign warning of avalanches. Even if they were trespassing, trespassers deserved warnings too. “Who is she, your girlfriend?”

“She thinks she is.”

The track leading to the gorge should’ve only been attempted by goats. At the base was a weir walling the river; a trickle passed over the top and slid down the face to a pool where bread-crates jutted like ship-wrecks. Penny figured there was only one way to get down. She got on her arse and slid to the first ledge.

“Why didn’t you just tell her you were leaving?” Jen called out. “It’s shit to do the runner.”

“I hardly even know her. We met at a club and hooked up for a few weeks. Anyway, her breath smells like persimmon. She’s obsessed with anti-oxidants.”

“Nothing wrong with taking care of yourself,” Jen kept preaching from on high. “Anyway, no matter what her breath smells like, it’s always better to end it than leave her wondering when you’re coming back. I didn’t know my ex-husband had left for Darwin for weeks.”

“I didn’t want to have to explain about Adeline.”

“Doesn’t seem all that hard to me: Oi, Florence, I need to go find my old mate.”

“And then when she asks about our history?”

“Tell the truth.”

Penny scrambled down slab and grabbed at a crack right before she toppled off the next ledge.

CHAPTER THREE

Everyone was talking about it, there was a new girl coming to live with Cynthia Cunningham. A foster kid, is what the adults called her. Mrs. Cunningham was the one who dragged Penny off to the Swiss Alps after her dad died, and she was also the woman who ran charity events and awarded trips to Bali in return for the bountiful donations people gave for the homeless youths of Sydney. It was no surprise she wanted a homeless girl of her own.

Penny didn't care that Cynthia was getting a make-believe sister. She hated the stupid calendar her school friends made to countdown to the arrival, heavy with sparkles and faux-fur. But she felt kind of mean not caring, so she wrote "sooo excited" on a Bonds catalogue, right over a picture of two girls cuddling in palm-tree underpants. She thought it'd represent sisterhood, but Cynthia said it was creepy.

The girl was supposed to arrive at school on Penny's dad's birthday. He'd been dead for over a year, but welcoming some new girl on his day still seemed wrong. Penny spent dawn at Shelley Beach burning off a campfire of driftwood. She needed to mark her dad's day even if he was gone, and the only thing that felt right was incinerating things that would soon be forgotten. She ran home and showered so her mum couldn't trace ash on her skin. Her uniform looked sick it was so crumpled, but her mum didn't mention it as they drove to school. She also didn't mention her dad's birthday, although she gripped a leaf pendant he'd given her one Christmas. For a woman with so many opinions, it scared Penny the most that she lost them the year after losing her husband.

Penny's friends were clustered under a bougainvillea so purple it looked sour. They told her Cynthia was minutes away. After not caring about the new girl, it was strange that she ran to meet the Rolls. Cynthia got out first and did a weird shrug, as if to say they'd misplaced the

addition to the family, but then a locket-sized teen appeared who was anything but jewelry pretty.

Cynthia had said they were getting an older girl, maybe sixteen or something, but she couldn't have been sixteen because she was so little. It wasn't that she looked malnourished or anything, she was just really compact, as if she smuggled muscles rather than drugs. Her eyes were so dark Penny was certain she only had pupils; she could probably see everything with eyes like that. In her right hand she held a dark-brown hunk of something: bark or beef-jerky. In her other hand she held a school-bag that was practically empty.

The girl didn't register Penny or wait for Cynthia to be her guide, she just strode into the heart of the walled school and disappeared amidst the bonnets, blazers, and rose gardens. Penny was quite certain she'd just fallen in love.

Cynthia bit her glossy lips. "That's my new sister."

The other girls gathered. "She looks like a wog," Penny's blondest friend said, as she put her arm around Cynthia.

"You're not supposed to say that," said Penny's second-blond friend.

"She's a bit Portuguese or something," Cynthia said, tearing-up.

Over the next month, Penny watched for the new girl, but rarely saw her. Although she knew it was weird, she counted: once under the Chinese elm, once running from the bus, twice going into the principal's office. The new girl, whose name was Adeline, didn't make eye contact, instead she stared down every germ, every cell.

There was a sort-of-meeting in the toilets when Penny slipped out of class to collect weed-blooms. From across the quadrangle she saw Adeline enter the toilets and found her in the last cubicle digging up a tile with a miniature hammer. It was one of those tiles that old people

have in their old people bathrooms, so small it looks more like an eyeball than floor-covering. She'd expected to find her smoking, not digging.

"Did one of those teachers send you to arrest me?" Adeline said.

"No," Penny said.

"Bullshit." With three tiles in hand, she went to pass but paused. "What are all those flowers doing on the floor?"

The Queen Anne's Lace looked like it'd been in a street-fight. "I pick flowers," Penny said. "I prefer weeds, but I can't find any here because the gardeners kill them all."

Adeline half-smiled. "How old are you?"

"Almost thirteen."

"You're my height," she said, slipping a tile in her hand. "I'd better start eating my greens."

When she walked away, Penny ran to the door and called out, "You should wash your hands."

"Soap's filthy."

After that, she didn't see her at school even though she kept slipping out of class and returning to the toilets to see if more tiles had been taken; she kept her own tile in her pocket, hadn't even washed it clean. Each day, three more tiles were gone, but she never saw the thief. The principal started making stern announcements about thieving flooring. It wasn't till a month after the sort-of-meeting, and the toilet cubicle was tile-less, that she finally got to truly meet Adeline.

Penny had always hated sleep-overs, but there wasn't much else to do with her friends,

because unlike her, they weren't into crafting weapons. Once again, Cynthia's mum was running some charity event and all their parents had gone to drop thousands for the tragic youths of Sydney. That night, the girls had till eleven to make use of the parent-free home. When Penny discovered Adeline was their sitter, she worked free her last baby-tooth.

As the girls prepared fairy-bread and elderflower sparkling-waters, Penny asked, "Where's Adeline?"

"How would I know?" Cynthia said.

"What does she think about baby-sitting...teen-sitting...whatever it's called?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. I haven't really spoken to her since she came to live with us. She's rude."

"Does she stay in her room all the time?"

"She does laps in the pool and weights in Dad's gym."

"Weird," Penny said, because she could tell that's what Cynthia needed her to say.

"Mum says sixteen is a strange age."

"My mum says that too."

In the beginning, the party was the same as all their parties, with lots of talk about boys and teachers, most especially the combination of the two; nobody ever had anything to say about girls. Adeline was nowhere to be seen. At 9.30, Cynthia got a call from her mum to say the charity event had bombed-out. Something about there being far too many women and not enough men. Something about Virginia Benton wearing the same coral gown as Lucy Lee.

Penny went in frantic search of Adeline, determined not to miss another opportunity for making herself known to the locket-sized girl. It seemed important that they meet when no parents were around. There were so many bedrooms in the house that she got through six before

finding the one that was definitely Adeline's. It was messy, even though there wasn't much in it but a cupboard full of brand new clothes that'd obviously never been worn, never mind touched. The drawer of the bedside table was lying on the floor, the contents splayed: a dog-collar, a map of New South Wales with roads pencil-traced, an Ani DiFranco CD with "love mum" scrawled over the cover-art, and a photograph of Adeline when she was a kid, dancing in underwear on a picnic-bench, a woman by her side with a scar on her knee that looked like she'd been splitting wood and copped the axe-head. The woman looked ecstatic, as if she'd caught the sun right before it hit the earth. Penny pocketed the photo but felt guilty, so she replaced it, face-down.

There was only one more place to look. From the back decking she saw the harbour at the furthest reach of the property. The boat-shed looked like it was trying to hide where the land met the sea, its body charcoal camouflaged. Running down, she bust the door open and saw nothing but life-jackets and a boat bobbing in the water of the floor-less shed. She hadn't said *fuck* before, but having not found Adeline it felt like the right time to start.

Stepping outside, she looked along the jetty and saw a figure. "Adeline?"

"How do you know my name?" She had a boy voice.

"Everybody knows your name."

"You're that girl who stares at me—the one who likes weeds."

Penny walked towards the shadow.

"Cynthia said your dad died."

Penny stopped.

"My mum died too. Last year, in spring."

Light glistened on the harbour, making the surface look frozen. "People always die in spring," Penny said.

A scream came from the house and they got closer. They were both so little their eyes met at just the right height. “Want to play a game with me?” Adeline asked. “Close your eyes.”

With her eyes shut, the world brightened.

“Open your mouth.”

A fingertip touched her tongue and a fizz dazzled her taste-buds. Hand-in-hand, they stepped into a rowboat.

The two girls were the only ones on the Opera House steps. Penny’s crotch was so wet it felt like the first time she bled just a month earlier. She would’ve dried herself but the rowboat had no fabric for clean ups. Her memory was housed between her legs, no longer brain-bound. She hated getting caught in memory, because thinking back was for old people who drink too much tea and get weepy eyed at tales of their youthful hips. But there she was, thirteen, already digging at a past (just hours past). And yet, who would she ever tell about the sensation of closing her thighs over a head? The girls at school would call her gross, if they could even get their words out between savage bites of salad (anorexia was already in vogue).

Adeline was gnawing beef jerky. “Do you think we’re the last ones alive on earth?” she asked.

“I hope so.” Penny’s high lulled. “I want everybody in this city dead.”

“Penny?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you like what I did to you in the boat?”

“I think so,” she said, and picked a pimple on her neck.

“Cynthia’s brother did it to me. Said it was ok because we’re not blood siblings.”

“He’s a freak,” Penny said, remembering him taking that picture of her sitting backwards on the horse in the Swiss Alps. She’d jumped down—without even buttoning her shirt—and thrown a stray tree branch at him. It split the back of his skull, so he had to get stitches. She was sent home on the next plane.

Adeline chucked the last bite of beef jerky. “I have to run away.”

“No—” Penny said, and yet she knew that itch. “Where will you go?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“What about my dad’s old orchard? It’s in a town called Shearsend. When he was in high-school he did a welding class. He made a tin-woman out of corrugated iron, painted her yellow, and stuck her on top of a windmill at the orchard. Once you find her, you’ll know you’re safe.”

“Ok.”

“I’m coming.”

“No, if you come they’ll find us. Nobody will look for me for long. But you, they’ll look forever.”

“I have to come! It’s my dad’s orchard.”

“You’ve got to wait till you’re a proper adult age.” She took Penny’s fingertip and held on tight. “Because then they won’t be able to take you away. You need to trust me.”

“Fine. I’ll wait,” Penny said, but she was lying.

The first people they’d seen that morning jogged around the Quay, their shorts emergency-red. “Are you girls ok?” the men asked.

The girls belted up Macquarie Street past bus-stops, rubbish bins, and endless stretches of sandstone wall. As the sun made an erratic announcement across the harbour, Adeline surged

into the botanic gardens. But she wasn't leading, she was leaving. She dodged passersby like they were gunmen, her limbs jagged and potent. A pram sat stationary. She cleared it in a single leap, ran through an archway that spilled onto a road, and sprinted across multi-lanes just seconds before a flood of cyclists. When the hundreds of wheels passed, no girl remained. Penny never forgot all that power—all that confusion—made known in flight.

The police station smelt like bumble-bees or maybe it was Penny's underwear. Her heart ground to a halt: what if everybody can smell girl-sweetness on me? Her mum was there, and so was the family lawyer who tried to calm Penny by saying investigators aren't scary if you imagine them in tutus. Rather than tutus, the investigators were in casual attire, not even suits. She reckoned they probably weren't supposed to look like cops, since she was a kid and uniforms might scare kids. She wanted to go home and inspect her underwear—alone. She wanted to say, "I'm an adult," to make them move her to a room that didn't have Winnie The Pooh art on the wall. She also wanted to tell them she'd dropped a little pill last night that made her world sizzle and pop. What she wouldn't mention was that little pill had used itself all up, and she felt like she'd been swallowed whole by a whale. Yes, things had gotten that biblical.

"She can pace," the cop said to her mum.

This made her sit and speak words loudly at the bundle of adults, tell them from the beginning. She talked so hard the cops stopped scribbling notes and just left it up to the recorder, their pens poised above their blank sheets. She nailed her speech, moved straight from declaring she loved Adeline, to the pier, the pill, the boat, the come-down on the steps of the Opera House as the sun ascended like the Virgin Mary to the heavens. There was one thing she didn't tell them—the thing that happened in the boat—because it was a secret.

She was crying by the end of her speech, amazed at the beauty of what had happened to her—Penelope Moore—the girl who never escaped. Her mum was crying too. Penny beamed, thinking she finally understood how free she'd become. But then her mum started wailing about getting her to a hospital. Penny checked her knees, thinking she might've split a body-part.

“Fucking ecstasy. She's thirteen!”

At the hospital, the nurses suggested a warm bath and water (but not too much). “The drug will be out of her system soon enough.”

“Water isn't going to save her.”

Later, there were threats of being grounded for an eternity. What was strange was she felt no real concern for her mum's explosions. It all seemed at such a great distance from her, as if she was out at sea with not a drop of water to drink but was the first person to never thirst. After the fourth round of lectures, she was sent to her room where she took off her underwear and read the smudges like an escape route, thinking about the investigators' final question.

“Where has Adeline gone?”

Penny said Wollongong, because that was the first city she could think of other than Sydney. What she didn't say was Shearsend, the safest place in the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

People were coming, lots of them. Penny rested on top of the weir beside Jen, their bodies bedded by algae and stone. They'd spent all morning swimming, impressed with each other's ability to take on kilometres of the river that never shallowed. Lizards shared the waters. The women were naked, Jen had insisted. She pointed at an ingrown hair, said she'd been fighting the bastard for ages. It was endearing the way she made bodies feel less complicated.

Singing echoed across the gorge. Penny shook Jen who slept beside her. They ran to the weir's edge and grabbed their clothes, pulling them on over their sun pulsing skin. Coming down the track was a line of people who knew the landscape, navigated it with carelessness, as if the ledges and drops were old mates, ones who didn't let them fall. Dogs charged, knocking everyone off balance. The people chucked their loads into the river as they got closer to the cliff's base, turning the water playful with Lilos, bottles, and inner-tubes.

"That's them, isn't it," Penny said. "The Mumbo crew."

"Yep." Jen rubbed her eyes and checked her phone. "Shit, I need to get back to the pub."

"What about the orchard? Adeline?"

"Another day," Jen said over her shoulder as she crossed the weir.

Penny followed, not giving up. "Open the pub late. It might do all the alcoholics—sorry—some good."

"Jen," the Mumbo crew cheered.

"We'll be seeing you tonight for a big one," said a girl who couldn't have been old enough to legally drink. Her face was rotten with acne, but that didn't seem to have put a dent in her self-esteem. She appeared to be in a permanent gentle-backbend, her hips jutting forward to get noticed.

“Nobody will be seeing me if I don’t get a move on,” Jen said, shoving past the girl.

A bundle of flies lingered as the crew gathered around Penny. They were all sunburnt and freckled, lips lit up with bloody-splits.

“Who are you?” the acne girl asked, but her suspicion was clearly overpowered by curiosity. She gave her a VB and asked her to stay and play. Penny was up for being the crew’s new toy if it meant she could ask them about Adeline, possibly even get a lift to her dad’s old orchard. But then she realised Jen was her only way home and told them so. The acne girl promised they’d take her back to the pub.

Penny chucked her car keys to Jen. “I’ll see you later.”

The afternoon passed in a blaze of disjointed conversation. The crew ranged from mid-teens to mid-thirties. There was one guy who looked like a grandfather but everybody said he wasn’t even thirty, it’s just that he’d sworn off showering, claiming his body needed the natural oils. She tried counting them, but every time she set on a number—twelve, twenty—more tumble-weeds of teens flipped off a cliff.

“One Sunday,” a Brit named Digby said, “a girl jumped and never resurfaced.” This inspired a litany of stories about all the pretty dead people.

Penny had a feeling she was going to like the Brit and his gentleness. He was the only one who wore a hat in the water. His hair was oddly clean, considering how dirty his body was, and since his skin wasn’t flaking she figured he moisturised. They were sharing a handful of nuts when she asked if he knew Adeline.

“No Frenchies here.”

“She’s Aussie, with Portuguese heritage.”

He gave her the last cashew and arched his neck. “We’ve got an Amber—proper tough

one—and an Angie, but no Adeline. Describe her.”

“Angry.”

He laughed. “Amber’s definitely angry.”

“Unless she’s coloured her hair, it’s black. And she’s got perfect muscles. Plum eyes.”

“You didn’t mention unbathed, so I’d say she’s not part of our crew.”

The group decided to swim up the river. Penny said she’d rest and see them when they got back to the weir, because she’d met her limit of people. And frankly, although she felt pressure to keep up her search, she was exhausted.

“You’re sure you’ll come back this way?” she called as they fanned across the water.

“Don’t forget me, ok?”

“Never!” the acne girl said, and shot an arc of water from her big-lipped mouth.

From a boulder, Penny watched their departure, the neatness of their strokes. Their dogs paddled in the wake. When the last body disappeared, she lay and watched the movement of one cloud, wishing it wouldn’t tease land so dry.

The gorge was as bedazzled as Kings Cross and then turned gothic hazy. Penny had waited all day for the orchard workers return, and finally accepted they were gone for good. At first she felt anger and then only anger at herself.

She stared at the track’s ascent but couldn’t bring herself to get started on it, because once she reached the top she’d just have to keep walking, and then what? Thinking back to her drive into the gorge, she couldn’t even remember if it was one road or if there’d been intersections. Apart from being stuck, she was hungry. And even though a sandwich wouldn’t fix anything, she would’ve paid serious money for one. Imagining avocado, she started the ascent,

but before she even made it to the first ledge she saw a figure on the cliff top. No, two figures.

Their voices started out as whispers, as if the bushland held seat as judge and jury, but then they forgot their natural audience and pitches rose. At first it sounded like two men, but then it became clear it was a man and woman with pack-a-day coughs. It wasn't easy to figure out what they were saying: something about abandonment. Something about a baby. Something about a man who'd come home.

The woman didn't like the thing about the man. Her voice rose. "He isn't back."

The man who tried to keep up with the woman said, "They're saying he's back."

It didn't seem like a good time to interrupt the couple, and going by the gravel of their voices they mightn't have been too welcoming. She slipped back across the weir and wedged herself behind a boulder.

The couple skittered down ledges, followed by a kelpie, and split off to where a rope-swing hung from a ghost gum. The woman reached for the rope but couldn't get a good grip. She told the man to grab it but he said jumping at night was suicide. She grabbed a stick and pulled the rope in close.

"If he's back," she said, voice raised. "Why the fuck wouldn't he call...people don't ignore a dead baby...they say things...sorry about that sperm...your womb."

The man dangled his legs off the cliff. Although his position was casual, his tone wasn't: "Amber, don't jump."

She ignored his warning. When the rope got to its bravest peak she dropped. Penny screamed on her behalf. The dog barked.

Grabbing at the rope, the man pitched off the edge with a yell. He was air-born when she realised he could kill the woman—if she wasn't already dead. Penny couldn't see anything but

black water. Black sky. She ripped off her dress and prepared to dive in search of bodies, but then heard the woman's laughter. Followed by the man's curse.

"Someone's here," the man said. "I heard a scream."

Penny pulled her dress back on and scrambled up the cliff. The metal barrier at the peak clung to the day's heat. She heard rock fall. They were coming. There were two options: introduce herself or run. She hadn't run in years.

There was a glint ahead. Jumping, she cleared the gate and landed so hard her sandal broke. She didn't feel any pain until she stepped and winced. Walking into town was impossible. Hobbling, she moved off the road, and came to a Kombi that even in the darkness was clearly the colour of the sun's guts. Hadn't she seen it before?

In minutes, the couple would bundle onto the linoleum seats. It was her only way out of there. Before she could overthink it, she yanked the side door and crawled onto the mattress in the back. The van smelt like man, the type of man who ate dirt. She changed her mind, thinking she was safer walking injured than putting her life in the hands of the couple.

About to jump, she heard voices. "Oi, why'd you leave the door open?" the man said.

"Didn't," the woman said.

"Where's Skull?"

"Pissing."

"Get him, would you?"

"He's your dog. You get him."

Penny lunged for a mustard blanket and buried herself. The van shuddered when the couple got in, as if the suspension blew out years back and they never bothered to get it sorted. Acoustic tunes belched from the speakers, the singer wailing about the lover who did him wrong.

“Fucking country music,” the woman said.

The couple obviously had hippy impulses: cross-country ventures were likely in their blood. Penny wanted to spew—where were they going? The other side of Oz? The van kicked into action.

“I never thought he’d come back.” The woman’s voice was quarry-deep. Even deeper than it’d sounded from a distance. Penny shivered at the memory of Adeline, her boy voice.

“Ambs, let’s get out of here. Drive to the rainforest.”

She scoffed. “All you’re good at is running.”

Silence sucked at the space.

When the van stopped, the couple got out and Penny copped a face full of diesel stench. There was muttering about money. Once their voices died down, she chucked the blanket aside and looked out the window. The couple stood inside the service station, in front of a shelf of beef jerky. The woman was surprisingly short and the man surprisingly tall. Everything about the woman suggested attack, her hair taken off in hunks like a dog had gone at its meat-flavour.

“Jesus,” Penny whispered. The woman looked just like Adeline.

Although her crown was a mess, it looked lush. Deliberate. The ink-shade of it matched her tats. She was darker than her sixteen-year-old self, darkened by her heritage, sun-stroke, and ink. Even when she stood she wasn’t still. She probably never slept. Soundly. The lick of midriff that showed looked more accidental than suggestive, as if her clothes did a lot of falling off when she went cliff-diving.

There was no worse time to be reunited with Adeline—if the woman was Adeline—than after she’d invaded her space—heard things that were likely secrets—all because she lacked the guts to ask to be rescued by strangers. Over all the years she imagined their reunion, she never

saw herself hobbling and apologetic. She waited till the couple were paying for their already eaten goods, and limped to the side of the station. When they sped away, she watched for the next truck to try her hand at hitchhiking. There was always tomorrow for reunions.

CHAPTER FIVE

Before the sun was up, Penny washed her dress in the sink and dried it on a makeshift washing-line; she was going to meet Adeline the right way. Kegs were being delivered to the pub, so Jen couldn't join Penny, but she promised the orchard wouldn't be hard to find.

The winding lane snuck between hills that converged and nestled a cottage at the base. On the drive in, Penny was surprised not to get car-sick, like she did as a child. Being the driver made all the difference. The orchard was so much smaller than she remembered. Citrus-trees flanked the neat strip of valley that reached to the mountain rise, their branches jagged and so fat with fruit they looked troubled. It was clear nobody ever bothered to pick what the plants produced. A flock of cockatoos demolished mandarins. There was too much dead-grass inserting itself everywhere, preparing to stoke future bushfires.

She could barely see the cottage for the junkyard of rusted Ferguson tractors, reams of barbed wire, dinged-up Datsuns, sheets of corrugated iron, washing-machines, dog kennels, and jerry cans. In different circumstances, she would've wanted to rummage, but she felt a pain in her temple, faced with the disaster that'd become her father's home.

Penny had Adeline's first letter memorised:

p

i found your dads old orchard. a family live here who are portuguese—just like my mum—and they adopted me. having a new family is sort of like eating heaps good steak. the mum says i'm even better than her real kids. the orchard is practically the best in all of australia. the fruit tastes like ecstasy. not that that tastes good. but you know how it fizzes on your tongue and its hot and exciting? our home is heaps clean and the couch in

the sunroom is so fat you can hide in the cushions. if you come visit one day, they'll want to adopt you too. then we can be sisters, but we can still kiss.

x

a

But that was the first letter. There was only one more after that. Penny did not have it memorised, because she dropped it in the ocean. It said something like:

p

what we did was bad. without each other we might be good.

don't come and find me. i want to have a good life.

a

Penny never knew what made Adeline stop liking her, but it made sense. After twelve years of her parent's fights—her mum claiming she was a bad kid, her dad claiming she was a good kid—it wasn't a surprise to Penny that Adeline wanted separation. With her dad gone, who was there to convince anybody she was good? It was around the same time all her school friends stopped talking to her. She'd thought she was giving them a gift, doing to them what Adeline had done to her, but they seemed to think she was weird after that, and she accepted that identity. Twelve years passed in which she believed she was bad for Adeline—bad for everyone. But it wasn't always lonely. Sometimes new kids came to school, and usually they'd think she was fascinating for a bit, and they'd be sort of friends, but then the other girls would get to them, and soon enough she'd be alone again.

Being an adult was easier because she got an apartment, and hooked up with people for just enough time to not let them know her. She jumped from job to job—florist, kitchen-hand, nursery assistant—committing to little. Feeling little. But there was a rhythm to her solitude, and much of the time she was alright being alone, because in the quiet, she'd remember stepping into the rowboat with Adeline and feeling that although her dad was dead, she had belly-happiness. Someday, she believed, she'd have a chance to find Adeline again, and prove she was her dad's version of herself; the time came with the threat of Cynthia Cunningham's blog. Penny couldn't stay in Sydney with her story about to go viral, so she decided there was no better time to go in search of a lost love.

Parking, she walked through the waste and saw the cottage. She swore. It was multi-coloured, covered in graffiti of sexed-up Bambi, and bits and tits of women. At the base of the art was the tag "Rhi-gid." Beneath the mayhem were tin panel walls, worthy of a shed, not a home. The windows were nothing but shards, and the door was wide-open and splintered. Although it looked abandoned, she needed more convincing it wasn't Adeline's home.

Jen had warned her not to get her bandaged foot dirty—more concerned with her handiwork than Penny's wound—but there was so much gauze she couldn't wear a shoe. Anyway, she was shoeless, after blowing-out her sandal at the gorge. So she put all the pressure on her heel to keep partially clean and walked to the shack.

She knocked. There was no response. Inside, she couldn't see well but could smell the mould that had grown out of the remains of lives. The floorboards were surprisingly certain, so she moved into the centre of the room. The space was bare, except for an armchair that probably housed a few mice in its lesions. The walls were pock-scarred with nails. She could imagine the pictures that once hung, farm settings matching what could just as easily be seen out the window.

The shack had three rooms: kitchen, lounge, bedroom. Where had her dad slept as a kid? The toilet was in an outhouse and there was a bath behind the shack, surrounded by a corrugated iron wall. Her dad had spoken often of trying to get a private bath, the birds ducking down to cause havoc. They'd grown bold; he supposed it had something to do with the seed he'd lined along the bath rim. That's how most of his stories were told, with an, "Oh, did I mention that thing about the bird seed?"

Since Adeline wasn't in the house, Penny searched the land, but it wasn't easy with her wounded foot. The earth was hot and nasty with burs and ant-mounds. She got hungry and ate too many mandarins. When she copped a bite from a bull-ant she returned to the house and lay in the rusty bath to nurse her twice-injured foot, hoping a bird might trust her enough to visit her in her sickbed.

It was late afternoon when she heard a vehicle. Finally, Adeline had arrived. She tried to brush rust-marks off her dress, but ended with copper-palms. Impatient, she limped around the house and saw the Kombi coming along the lane. In the time it took the van to reach the shack, a lone goat ambled down the side of the hill and disappeared amidst the fruit-trees.

But it wasn't Adeline. It was the tall man. When Penny saw the man in the service station the night before, all she'd noticed was his height. Without the woman who looked like Adeline, he had Penny's attention. It was also the same man she saw in the courtyard of the pub, the one who came out of the women's toilet and chatted to the bat flying overhead, the one who moved like he was underwater.

He circled her Volvo with a low whistle and pulled a spray can out his back-pocket. For a second she thought he was going to mark her car, but then he approached the shack, only then seeing her.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “This is my dad’s house.”

He glanced at her foot. “Your bandage is coming undone,” he said.

“I know.”

Digging in his pocket he took out a packet of rollies, and revealed two cigarettes, as if he’d planned the meeting, wanted to have something to pacify whoever caught him. She took his offering. “You sure Old Mags is your dad?” he asked.

“Who’s Old Mags?”

“Just a nasty bastard who buys up all of Shearsend. Real hoarder. Let’s the properties go to the dogs.”

She wondered how to broach the subject of Adeline, who he called Amb. “Did he ever foster any children?”

He puffed smoke when he laughed. “He hates children. Would hose them before he housed them.”

“So no one lives here?”

“Look at the place!”

She would’ve felt defeated if she hadn’t already seen Adeline by the man’s side. “Your eye.” The pupil bled a trickle of black through the hazel iris.

“My brother shot me with a nail gun when I was a kid.” He nodded slowly with a slight smile, like he’d just spoken something that made a lot of sense. “Good thing the nail had to make it a distance before hitting me.”

“What’s your name?”

“Angus.”

“Penny.”

“You a real faithful one then?”

“Pardon?”

“Penelope—comes with the name.”

He obviously wasn't after a response, but she wanted to be acquitted; it mattered that she convince someone she was a decent person. “Yes, I'm really faithful,” she said and dusted her copper-hands. “And sometimes really unfaithful.”

“Mate, I was just mucking around. No need to get all confessional with me.” He held the nozzle of the can to the wall and started painting sage over the catastrophe of colour. “And by the way, I'm not bugging up the shack. I'm getting rid of Bambi and Co.”

“Why?”

“Got this plan to buy the orchard. Thought I'd start by tidying it up.”

“Is it for sale?”

“Yeah, has been for ages. I'm the only one who wants it.”

“What if I buy it first?”

“No chance,” he said.

The orchard was fat with birds settling down to sleep, their chatter softening with the light. “Have you got the money?”

“You're not shy,” he said with a smile. “Of course not.”

Penny hadn't expected the man with the matted hair and underfed belly to make her want to stay around. She went ahead and told him, “My dad died when I was young and left some money to me. He wasn't financially savvy, but Mum loves a good trust fund, so she'd prepared for his death. Long story short, I have money that I've always planned to use on buying back his childhood orchard—this orchard.”

He'd stopped painting. "That must've been bullshit losing your dad."

She wasn't in the mood for dad talk, but she liked Angus. Trusted him. "Do you know a woman called Adeline?"

"Ada-what?"

"I meant Ambs."

"Amber? Bloody oath. Looks like you need a drink." He went to the Kombi and grabbed a longneck. They sat, their backs against the graffiti-wall. "It's not cold," he said, handing her the bottle. "But it does the job."

She took a swig. It was warm, as promised. "Have you been mates for a while?"

"Mates," he snorted. "I suppose."

"When did you first meet her?"

"What are all these questions? If you weren't wearing a cream dress and the proud owner of a Volvo I'd reckon you were a cop."

She should've known he'd be the closed-book type, with all his swagger and leaking-pupil. "I'm looking for somebody and Amber reminds me of her."

He cracked his knuckles. "And what made you think I know Amber?"

"This is a small town," she said. "I guessed everybody knows everybody."

"Fair." He pinched tobacco from a pouch and licked a sheet of Tally-ho.

"And you're dirty—she's dirty."

He chuckled. "Righto."

"Look, I could be wrong, but yesterday I met Amber in the women's toilet at the petrol station." She hoped he wouldn't remember Amber had been by his side the whole time. "And she reminded me of this girl I used to know."

“Well, tell me about the girl.”

“We met at a party and something happened in a rowboat. I was thirteen. She was sixteen.”

“Started partying early, did you?”

“With her help,” she said.

“Where was the party?”

“Sydney.”

“Amber, in Sydney?”

“It’s possible, yeah?”

“If you knew anything about Amber you’d know she won’t go near the city—has a phobia of the place.”

She tugged at a tangled bunch of her hair. “How did you meet?”

“I found her,” he said, “sleeping out the back of the public-toilets in Wattle Park. I used to go there to avoid school. The usual story, I was fifteen and pissed off at the system. Getting lined up for juvey.” He swigged some beer. “I needed space, which I found under the Cootamundras, until Amber messed up my haven. I remember the first day I saw her in the park the trees were flat-out in bloom, you know when wattles just go mental? Drooping with bees? I was lying there thinking about honey, when I heard someone barfing. I looked over and behind the toilet-block was this girl, just a bit older than me, buckled over and chucking up her guts. She was pretty filth, so I kept away.”

“What a hero.”

“Give me a chance! The next day, I showed up at the park and she’s there again, asleep. Thought it was time to, you know, be the hero. So we got talking and she told me about some

filthy foster brother. I said come back to my mums, she'll save you. The two of them got all woman-y with a cup of tea, and Mum said we'd keep DOCS out of it, so she moved in undocumented and we all lived happily ever after.”

“Bullshit.”

“Mate, that’s the biggest word count I’ve had in a few years, so forgive me if I end it there.” He caught a bug in flight and released it. “Does that match up with the woman you’re after? Is she a tough one from a mental foster home?”

Penny shook her head; it seemed to matter that Adeline had changed her name and didn’t want to be known as her old self. “No, that’s not her.”

“Bugger. How’re you going to track her down then?”

“The phone book—do they still exist?”

“And when you show up with a bag-full of nostalgia, then what?”

“Do the woman-y thing, I suppose.”

“Tea and talk. That’ll do it.” They finished the beer and Penny stood to leave. “Where you staying?”

“The pub.”

“Nice one,” he said. “I’ll see you there tonight. And although Amber’s not your woman, I’ll introduce you. She comes across as a bit unfriendly, but she’s solid once she trusts you.”

As Penny drove away, she watched the junk in the rearview mirror, resplendent in the setting sun. She was ready for reunion.

CHAPTER SIX

The pub was overflowing onto the footpath with people who roared when they laughed. Knowing she'd meet Amber that night gave her the sensation of headlessness. The orchard workers remembered Penny from the gorge, and also remembered they'd left her there. Remorseful, they offered grog, and as these things go, one drink led to another. The VB was cold; the Little Creatures was better than the VB; the Bundy and Rum tasted like a kid had spat a lolly in a cup, but by that stage she wasn't bothered with backwash. The crew reminded her of their names: Digby (the token Brit), Rhi, Mac, Stevo, Ryder, Munted (she didn't ask for clarification); there were more, so many more, but she lost track.

Digby wanted to buy her a drink. "I—of all people—shouldn't have forgotten you. The Brits don't have much going for them, but we usually have manners." She said all was forgiven and insisted on shouting a round.

The crush at the bar was livestock inspired. Penny could hardly see over the elbows and armpits and stubble, but that didn't stop her searching for Amber in the slideshow glimpses of body-parts. She was sweat-drenched by the time she made it to the bar. Jen grinned, proud of Penny's immersion, and slapped two schooners down, refusing payment.

But before Penny could collect the glasses, a man shoved her aside and ordered shots. He was short but his upper body was so overblown with muscles he domineered. Fish-tatts chewed his neck. His crown was buzzed to the skin. And yet aside from all his testosterone, he had boyish blue eyes, suggesting he was once a nice kid. She was about to reach across and grab her drinks when the teen with all the acne came up beside the man and took hold of his bicep.

"Hey stranger," she said.

He shoved her off. "Amber's here."

“Where?” Penny asked. She’d been meaning to get rid of her dress and buy some jeans, but her search for Amber had gotten in the way, which she regretted; the muscles of the man’s neck strained like he was chewing fat.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Just answer my question,” she said.

The acne girl got in closer to the man, said, “Let’s all stop talking about Amber.”

“Are these your beers?” he asked Penny. Taking the glasses, he rested them on Rhi’s cheeks. Condensation teared down her throat. “Drink up, kid.”

Penny had to calm her anger at having her drinks stolen by a man who touched a girl. Whenever she felt aggression, her mum suggested she eat. While it didn’t stop her violent thoughts, food always tasted good. Jen was in the kitchen ordering the waitresses to get the burgers out faster: “They need something out there to soak up what I serve.” Penny asked for some roast chicken, but the cook handed her a burger, saying take a bite and tell me if it’s undercooked. There was just the right amount of red, which Penny told the cook, who clapped her hands and barked.

The courtyard was people free but noisy from the thud of pub mania. Penny shared her burger with Digby and told him about the man who stole her beer. “Fish-tatts, right? Roids?” Digby said. “That’s definitely Pete Slater. He’s been gone for a while, working in the mines out west. He’d be worth a fortune now. Anyway, can’t say I’ve missed him much.”

“I don’t like the way he touches that girl, Rhi. He must be twice her age. More.”

“When you see things that worry you around here, it’s best to turn the other way.”

“She’s not even eighteen.”

“I’m sure she just looks young for her age.”

Burger juice ran down her chin, which she didn't wipe away until she said, "You don't believe that."

He sighed to be heard and stretched on a table, rubbing his belly. "I've been in this town long enough to know my opinion isn't going to stop illegal activity."

"Kids deserve protection."

"Teens aren't kids. They're teens."

"Don't pull the semantics card, Digby. Teens are just as vulnerable as kids."

"Why do you care what happens to Rhi? She's quite awful, you know. Last Christmas she killed another orchard worker's goat just to prove a point. They'd been arguing about over-grazing our campsite. I don't mind humans injuring one another, but I hate when they involve animals."

"Look, I don't know the girl, but I do know it's easy to make choices when you're young that have consequences that stick. Maybe if someone mentioned that to me I would've done things differently."

"Really? You believe that?" He stretched his arms overhead. "Because I don't think you can stop a teen once they're on path for destruction."

"Maybe you're right," she said, and knew he was.

The ivy-vines that trailed from the canopy of the courtyard rustled and a gate opened. Angus entered. He stopped where she sat, said, "Penny." She noticed the wood grain of his sun-fucked skin. He offered a gift to her loose fingers. When he went into the pub, the song of drunks exploded: "We're the boys from the bush and we're back in town, we get high when the sun goes down." She lit the smoke he'd given her and thought about the last time she'd slept with a man. He was her mum's gardener and subsisted on a diet of fish, bok-choy, and root vegetables. Her

mum had gone to France for an interior design conference, and Penny was dog-sitting. They had sex in her cubby-house, and she liked that he didn't repeat the same words over when he came. Before him was an unemployed zoologist. And then there was the pot-smoker who wore Uggs in summer. There were others, but she couldn't remember details. The problem with Sydney men was that they admired adventure but only planned for it, as if someday it might come to term like a superannuation fund. And the problem with Sydney women was that they liked adventure but afterwards, on reflection, it made them cry.

“What was that between you and Angus?” Digby asked, inspecting a strand of his Hereford-brown hair.

She finished the smoke too fast, no good at pacing herself. “We met earlier today.”

“You might want to do a background check before you go anywhere near him.” He tried to braid his hair, but it wouldn't hold. “He doesn't come from good blood.”

“Trust a Brit to worry about blood.”

“You met his brother.”

“Shit—Pete's his brother?”

“Apart from pointing out the superiority of British blood, I did actually have reason for suggesting caution. Look, don't get me wrong, Angus isn't as feral as his brother, but you still don't want to get tangled up with that bunch.”

“He's just a mate. A new mate,” she said, not ready to think about brotherhood. “And a bloody good looking one.”

It was time to get back to searching for Amber. The dance-floor was like a livestock auction, people banging about in clusters and liquid sloshes. There was so much sweetness in the air. Penny thought she saw Amber, and reached for her arm, but it was another dark haired

woman who winked.

Digby yelled all over her ear. “You’re a proper good dancer.”

“My mum hates my dancing these days.”

“Your brother?”

“MY MOTHER.”

The music didn’t cut when Amber entered the pub, even though it should’ve, and although the lights were dim everywhere looked lit. Her hair was the only definitively black blotch in all the room, and yet it too was lit. Fuck, she was so sexy Penny felt like she’d overdosed on oranges: her body sizzled with candy and acid. Amber’s dark bra showed through the white of her singlet, the straps revealed where the sleeves were rib-cut. A tat spider-crawled up from her cleavage. There were those eyes again, seeing everything. Penny couldn’t imagine her applying makeup, but even at a distance she could see a coal shadow around her eyes, and the overarching fuck-you of her brows. That nose, Penny knew that nose. It’s thin bridge. And those lips, thin, but not so thin there weren’t enough of them. Everything about her was enough—more than enough—too much. Penny remembered the rowboat. The saturation.

Angus came to Amber, his dog trailing. He held out a plate of breaded chicken legs. A bottle of tomato sauce. Amber squatted, with her back against the wall, and put the plate on the floor. The kelpie sat, obviously used to obeying her, even when so close to meat. She ate the chicken with her hands, ripping off the meat mounds and dropping them in her mouth. She chucked a few hunks to the kelpie. Gave Angus a leg. The clean bones she dropped in a pile. And yet even though she was busy eating, she was clearly looking for someone. Her coal eyes combed the room, but never rested on Penny.

A girl collided with Penny—Rhi—and although the air was already alcohol electric, she

reeked dangerously of rum. Her mess of acne begged for medical attention. Parental care. She screamed something about a dog and a fire-engine. Or God and the Sanhedrin. But then there was another scream that cut all the dancing off at the knees.

“PETE!”

It was Amber, but Angus had her by the shoulders and was coaxing her out the door.

“I’m going to puke,” said Rhi, and barged past Penny.

All Penny wanted to do was go to Amber, but as she watched the girl stumble towards the courtyard, she remembered what it was like to be underage, to have taken her body that one step too far, where the world warps and whispers violence. She felt it was her duty to offer protection. But as she followed, she found she wasn’t the only one.

At the far end of the otherwise empty courtyard, Rhi heaved up grog. Behind her, Pete chuckled, and said, “Come on, babe, better out than in.” Penny lingered in the shade, not wanting to leave the girl to the man’s mercy.

Rhi wiped her mouth on his shirt. “Haven’t seen you in ages.”

He slipped his hand down the back of her jeans. Her body bent C-shaped into his, revealing he’d already had her somewhere out of the way, when the law wasn’t watching. Penny wanted to put a jacket on the kid and zip it right up to her chin.

Pete pushed Rhi into the women’s toilets. Penny followed. Inside, there were three cubicles and below the door of the furthest were boots and Chucks. Rhi was putting on her finest show: sloppy breaths filled the room. Penny was thankful for the performance that masked the noise of her entrance.

Rhi’s underwear dropped to the floor with a blood-slicked liner and she moaned, “Wait.” One of her feet rose as she likely yanked out a tampon. “Bet you’re glad you’re fucking me and

not your wife.” Pete snorted. “Kinda gross she’s going for your brother these days.”

“My brother?”

“Yeah—Angus.”

He slammed her against the cubicle door. The crack of her head was immense. Chucks dangled an inch from the floor. Penny rammed the door only to damage her shoulder—although the thing looked flimsy, it lied.

Rhi came out, her hair a shock. Penny wanted to mother her mess with a pair of shears. “You need to piss or something?” the girl asked and shoved past into the courtyard.

Pete came out the cubicle, zipping his jeans. “Fancy seeing you again.” The girl’s post-vomit spit webbed his shirt. There was hardly any room between them; the sink, stained around the drain, took up the only free space. “I don’t like your eyes.”

She leant against the wall. “You’re married?”

“Eight years of bliss.”

“That’s so sad.”

He grinned and soaped his hands. “You might reckon I’m a nasty piece of work, but you haven’t met the missus. She’s as mad as a cut snake. And you know the real mental thing? Amber loves me. Won’t leave me for nothing.”

Alone, she leant over the sink and willed the drip to dry. Amber. She wasn’t supposed to be married. And fuck, not to that man. Did she really walk down an aisle in white? Was her dress thrift-shop cheap or had she gone into one of those posh shops and got fitted for the roided-up rapist? Penny hadn’t ever pretended she knew Amber in any complete way, but she still believed what little she knew was enough to someday pursue their adult-match. She’d never accounted for the possibility that she might find a woman who wasn’t anything like the original version. A

woman with dangerously bad taste.

The pub had choked on all its noise. Suffocated. The entrance from the courtyard was bolted. Had she really missed lock-up? And where had Pete gone? The girl?

Ivy draped Penny's body as she pushed through the gate into the carpark, that was empty but for her Volvo and the Kombi. Even Jen's LandCruiser was gone. She ran to the front of the pub and saw a colony of baby bats performing tricks off the verandah roof, which was just below her bedroom window. The light was on and she could see the flamingo shade. She felt the impulse to call out, as if some friend was inside and would throw down a sheet for her to climb to safety. Logically, she was sure she wasn't in danger, but Pete and his muscles were stamped at the forefront of her mind, making her check her blind-spots.

Remembering a fire-escape, she slipped back to the carpark and climbed onto a ladder that led up the pub's exterior. On the second story, there was a metal grate, from where she tried the door. Of course it was locked. She reached over the barrier and pushed at a window. Its resistance made her swear. Slouching, with her back against the bricks, she took in the carpark's dirt bowl of ruts and rocks, accepting the inevitable all-nighter.

The silence ended when a train approached from out west, its brakes trying to rope in the energy of its journey. Although she couldn't see the carriages, she could hear the little girl screech of metal on metal. Muffled beneath the screeching she heard an extended moan. When the train passed the moan sharpened and she realised, yet again, she was overhearing another woman's pleasure. After Pete and Rhi, she was riled. She'd witnessed too much in one night. Getting on her hands and knees, she searched through the grate of the fire-escape, but only saw a skip over-flowing with another of Jen's demolitions. She had to get down, unseen, and disappear.

She jumped off the last rung of the ladder and heard a sex-scream, “Pete!” He was at it again with the girl. She didn’t give a shit what Digby said, she wasn’t keeping out of it; she wrenched a pole from the skip and circled to where the couple were hard against its side. Pete’s jeans bunched around his ankles as he took the girl from behind. The back of his skull picked up the glint of a streetlight. The pole was chilled; all she had to do was choose which part of his body to hit and the girl would be free. But the back of his head seemed too fragile, and if she went for his knees she might cripple him. The more she tried to decide which body-part she could justify destroying, the slower her mind worked. And then it was too late because he came, and buckled over the girl, panting all over her crown.

The girl got out from under him and turned to face Penny. “Nice night for a walk,” said Amber. She yanked up her shorts, but zipped them so slowly Penny saw her cunt.

Penny had always thought their reunion might happen in a field where there’d be a breeze, pollen-ridden. Or in water, where their bodies never sank. Or on a roadside where they were stranded and thirsty. She’d gotten it all wrong. There was no field, water, or road. They weren’t thirsty. They were full of alcohol. And there was just a carpark of ruts and streetlight glaze. The temperature wasn’t warm enough or cool enough. And yes, there was dirt (she’d always known there’d be dirt) but there was a man, too. There was never supposed to be a man.

Cicadas throbbed. “I thought you were someone else,” Penny said, searching her coal-eyes for recognition.

Pete moved into the shadow of the skip, clearly hoping she wouldn’t mention what he’d done with the girl. But Penny wasn’t thinking about the incident in the toilet-cubicle anymore, because she finally had Amber at arm’s reach.

“Where’d you come from?” Amber said, not interested in talking about the interruption;

it made sense that if she enjoyed sex outside, she wasn't concerned with privacy. "Never seen you before."

Penny didn't believe her, but answered the question honestly. "Manly."

Amber didn't flinch at the mention of her previous home. Instead, she slipped her hand up her singlet and picked at her belly, sleepy-eyed and distracted. "What're you doing out here?"

"Looking for someone."

"Me?" she asked, but although she smiled, it didn't look like she joked often.

"Yes," Penny said, not laughing.

"Not the first time someone's comes looking for me," she said. "How much do I owe you?"

"Owe me?"

She dug in her pockets and brought out a hunk of beef jerky and a ten buck note. She ate the food and offered the cash. "Here, you can split this with all the other bastards who're chasing me."

Penny started to wonder if it was true: was she unrecognisable? Could she really look all that different to her thirteen-year-old self? Her eyes were just as green; her hips hadn't gotten much more womanly; her features were still alien. Unmistakable. She thought back to their night, and realised most of it had happened in the dark. And while dawn came on when they escaped the Opera House steps, the light had been murky. Or had it been? No, she was just making excuses for what was—almost—impossible. Of course Amber knew her. So why was she pretending they were strangers? To mock her? To hurt her?

Resentment building, Penny said, "I caught your husband raping a girl."

Pete stepped out the shadows. "Raping?"

“She’s underage,” Penny said, wishing she’d gone for his skull.

“You’ve got a screw loose, woman. I wouldn’t fuck a teenager.”

Amber crossed her arms over her belly. Penny spoke quietly, “He isn’t denying it.”

Pete strode towards Penny and grabbed the pole. She tried to duck, but he took her by the neck with his free hand. She expected him to squeeze the breath out of her, but his hold was just enough to keep her restrained. Yet each time she tried to pull free, his fingers tightened.

“Oi,” someone yelled, but her eyes watered, so she couldn’t see through the blur. Pete released her and chucked the pole into the skip. She rubbed at her vision and searched for the person who’d cried out, but only saw Pete walking away.

Amber remained. “He loves me.”

Penny coughed and ran her fingers across the spine of her throat. “What—”

“He loves me,” she repeated.

“Does he wring your neck too?”

“If you tell anyone this bullshit story about the girl,” she said, “I’ll come looking for you.”

“You’ll find me here,” Penny said.

“Tell me your name.”

“Penelope Moore,” she said, and knew, finally, there’d be recognition.

But instead Amber fisted her hands till her biceps popped. “When are you getting out of here? Tomorrow?”

“Maybe never.” Amber stiffened. Penny went on, “I once knew a girl whose foster brother made a mess of her, so I’m not keen to see something like that happen again.”

“We don’t need any saviours here,” Amber said. “We deal with our domestics

privately.”

Penny was sure she'd get punched if she touched Amber, but she reached anyway, and brushed her elbow. Her skin was fever hot. She'd expected that. “So you believe me then?” she asked. “About Pete?”

Amber walked away, pausing at the edge of the skip. “Get out of here—tomorrow.”

When Penny heard the chug of the Kombi, she watched it leave, wanting to be certain Pete was gone, but wishing Amber wasn't gone with him. Pete wasn't going to forgive Penny, and his style of revenge would likely be ugly. She'd never felt truly threatened in her life, and it wasn't a sensation she could sleep through. She stayed awake till sunrise, when Jen arrived in her LandCruiser and grinned on seeing the outcast.

Penny was showered and tucked in bed when Jen brought tea and toast. “It's time you got yourself a job,” Jen said, dumping too much milk in her cup. “What about working for me?”

Penny rubbed at her entire face, as if she could palm away confusion and exhaustion. Jen was right—she had planned on getting a job. Wasn't she going to buy her dad's orchard? Didn't she need to learn a thing or two about citrus trees? The more she thought about the plans she made in the city, the crazier it all seemed in the real Shearsend. At least getting a job at Mumblety-Peg would give her a focus till she figured out how to deal with Pete. And if, someday, she dealt with Pete, she could get Amber and her orchard and maybe even a dog.

Penny asked for a bedtime story. Jen searched her phone for the local news and read about an ice-head who murdered her boyfriend's best friend's father's son. Before Penny fell asleep, they argued over whether the best friend was the son or if the father had another son. It seemed to matter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sign was too big: Mumblety-Peg Orchard. The workers walked up the driveway shoulder to shoulder, as if they were heading somewhere they didn't want to go, but were happy to be going together. A breeze tousled the feathers and coloured wool in their hair, making carnivals of their crowns. Their clothes didn't fit right, as if they'd all traded wears as they walked to work. Penny hadn't seen them in shoes much, but on that morning they wore steel-capped boots. A flock of rosellas passed overhead and they watched the passing as if the sky was their religion and that was how they prayed.

Her footsteps must've been loud. "Alien girl," came the collective cry.

"About time we put you to work," Digby said and hugged her till her ribs clicked.

Together, they all got back to walking, trashing their boots with each dragging step. "Isn't it time for an outfit change?"

"I've been meaning to buy jeans, but I've had a few things going on."

"You've been shagging Angus!"

"Shit no."

"I've been shagging Mac," he said and pointed to the only other person with clean hair.

"But I have a feeling she'll be gone soon. She doesn't seem to be enjoying herself. It's a shame. I think she was the love of my life."

Ahead the trees opened up and there was a huge corrugated iron shed with no windows, just immense doors and a peach the size of a hot air balloon painted on the west facing wall. "I painted that," a young girl said. The fact that Penny hadn't recognised Pete's girl sooner was unsettling. Was her head that muddled? The confusion was shared; the girl introduced herself as Rhi. "Don't call me Rhiannon."

Penny double-checked the group to make sure Pete wasn't part of the crew. Digby had said he was loaded after working out in the mines, so why would he sign up for a minimum wage job? She needed to calm down and trust she was safe on the orchard. At least for a day. But what if Amber showed up? While Penny had been confident she was no real danger, something about the daylight was making her question her conviction. The previous night she'd been buzzed on alcohol and dancing; it wasn't the first time that'd made her feel invincible. With the sun doing damage to her skin, she thought of Amber's second letter claiming they were bad for each other. Penny's plan had been to convince her otherwise, but what if she wasn't easily convinced? And it couldn't be good that she'd claimed her husband was a criminal. The sequel to their reunion wasn't playing out well.

Rhi split open a watermelon with an axe and handed out mangled chunks. Penny took the offering and walked into the shed where there were clean tractors in orderly rows. Further along began conveyer belts and packing stations. The boxes stacked on high read "That's Mumbo Good!" Triple J announcers introduced a grassroots band over speakers. Industrial fans blew gales of already warm air.

Outside, there were white tables with red awnings, that suggested weekenders visited to play at farming for a day. The lawn was taking it hard with the heat, but what was left was mowed. There was an office with rocking chairs on the verandah, and a woman in a green dress hosed a rose garden. Everything spoke of no-nonsense. If Penny had any luck getting a job, she suspected she'd get fired within the week.

An ironbark, so big it was nearing obscene, offered shade to the crew who lay out, slumping their forearms over their eyes. Watermelon rinds lay beside them. They clearly didn't work until the clock struck seven. Penny lent against the tree, but it was hardly comfortable as

the bark was just as the name suggested, like shaved iron. Utes parked in a distant field and more workers approached with page-boy cuts and RM William's shirts that looked too clean to dirty. They clustered under an opposing ironbark and set their gaze on their shined boots.

"They don't seem to like you lot much," Penny said to Digby.

"Townies," Digby said. "Mostly kids who've just finished their final year of school and want to earn a few quid before running off to the city. If they talk to us they might contract failure."

A red ute arrived with a bumper the size of a cattle-grid. It was loaded down with kelpies and loose tools that looked like weapons. Two men got out: one tall, one short. The tall man defined country handsome, his freckles made his blue eyes look chilled against his skin's heat. He released a piercing whistle right as one of the kelpies lifted its leg to piss on a chainsaw. Righted, the dog sniffed the chain, wetting it with drool.

"That's Dezza," Digby said. "Boss man."

"The tall one, I suppose," she said. The short one was Thai and strong jawed. "Why do tall people always make short people look so short? My brother's tall."

"You say that like you want to cut him off at the knees."

"I like my brother."

"Sounds it."

"And so does the rest of the world." She murdered a circling fly. "How could you not love Dominic Moore?"

"The dancer?"

"The dancer."

He whistled. "Good God. What's your talent?"

She pointed at her face. “I’m weird looking.”

Dezza whistled at Penny like she was one of the drooling kelpies. Although he didn’t come close to her, he felt near. She saw herself naked with him on the tray of his ute, a chainsaw-head hard against her cheek. He wasn’t a man to tease, but she couldn’t help smirking at her imagination.

“Who’s the kid in the dress?” he asked everyone, but kept his gaze on her.

“She’s city,” one of the crew said. “But she’s alright.”

“My name’s Penny.” He seemed surprised when she addressed him directly. She wasn’t going to say she left Sydney when a blog about her teen-antics was released, so she fabricated an explanation. “I’ve been travelling and I lost my bags. I’m not trying to make a fashion statement.”

“You want to pack?”

“No—pick.”

Digby leaned in. “Pack, Penny.”

“Pick,” she said. “My dad was Cole Moore. I can do the job.”

Dezza whistled. “That bastard stole my girlfriend in tenth grade and claimed it was an accident.”

“He was expert at accidents,” she said.

Dezza nodded for her to follow. In the office, she signed on the dotted line. As they stepped outside, he told her to get a pair of jeans for God’s sake, and stuck a tube of sunscreen in her hand. A tractor rumbled out the shed, pulling an open-face trailer; all the men jumped on but Digby.

He slipped his hat on her head, said, “Off you go then.”

A guy with arms the colour of freshly cut meat slapped the spot beside him on the trailer. She tried not to breathe in his week-old scent. He offered his name, but she didn't offer hers because there was a single cloud that had passed over the sun and everything had darkened. In the distance an engine chugged as if it was facing a steep incline.

The Kombi came into view. Of course they worked at Mumblety-Peg. Why did she decide Angus and Amber worked at the abattoir? Having met the adult version of Amber it was hard to imagine her picking fruit—boxing sweet things—but she could see her cutting up cows. And what if Pete was with the pair?

The side door of the van opened and Amber got out. She wore a trucker's cap and a singlet with a sketch of an upturned horse. Angus followed, but there was no Pete.

Dezza whistled through the gap in his front teeth. "Work starts at sunrise, love."

"Give her a break," the short man said, his jaw working gum.

Dezza thumped his shoulder. "Why do you always stick up for her, Chai?"

Amber grabbed some beef jerky from her back pocket. It looked like she was going to eat it, but instead she chucked it to the dogs and they went wild. Seeing Penny, she flicked the last bit of jerky at her and it landed in front of the trailer. The dogs fought with barks and saliva. Penny tried to swallow.

Angus looked between the two women and crossed his arms like a southerly had hit. It took him a second before he walked towards Penny, blinking against the sun. He didn't even have to look at the sunburnt man to make him shift. When his thigh touched hers she tried to move but she was wedged: with a brother like Pete, she wasn't keen anymore on closeness. The trailer jolted and they moved towards the trees overburdened with fruit.

"Hey," he said.

Sweat built, making their thighs slip every time the trailer hit a pothole. The tractor slowed and people started jumping down in pairs with canvas bags. The sunburnt man was telling a story—something about guns and boars and spotlights. He got off with a guy who kept saying, “Nice one.”

She shifted, but Angus said, “Hang on. You may as well pick with me. I can show you the ropes.”

An ant clung to her thigh, fighting against the breeze. A moment later only she, Angus, and the ant were left. She got off the trailer, even though it was moving too fast. Her feet landed sound.

A canvas bag fell beside her. “You’ll be needing that,” he called out from where he’d bailed. She twisted a peach from a branch, but the skin tore. Regardless, she dropped it into the bag that was still on the ground. “Might want to think about strapping your Joey on or you’ll be sore tonight.”

On impulse, she told Angus to piss-off, and he smiled like she was a good laugh. Looking into the bag she saw her single peach. It wasn’t in good shape. She chucked it to rot.

The tree before her was so heavy with fruit it appeared exhausted by its own success. It was hard to believe she’d only worked half a day. The tractor kept winding along the lanes between the rows of trees. No sooner had she started picking than it’d be back, ready for her to empty her findings. Her bag wasn’t even close to full. Her back hurt. She was itchy. The fruit-flies were doing her head in.

It was possible she was never going to be a decent orchardist; the thought made her as exhausted as the over-burdened trees. It was possible, in fact, she was going to be a complete

failure. Likely, even. Just like every other career she'd given a go; her most ridiculous plan was joining the Navy. She liked the idea of sailing away from Sydney to never return. But of course she'd come back—the boomerang stupidity of her life.

Angus had gotten so far away he looked like a young boy. He worked slowly, his movements languid, yet once again he'd filled his pouch. The bags weren't even that big—just right for stone fruit—but Penny's always seemed empty. Maybe she was being too choosy. Angus headed back towards her, one hand outstretched to brush the fruit he passed, his footsteps not leading him straight, but threading him from tree to opposite tree. He stopped to stare at the canopies as if considering whether or not to climb. The softness of the scene—man, trees, fruit—was so at odds with the violence of Saturday night.

“Not feeling chatty?” he asked.

“I met your feral brother,” she said.

“Half-brother.” He unclipped his bag and rolled his shoulders. After kicking aside some stray peaches, he sat down. “Anyway, I know. I stopped the prick strangling you.”

“You were the one who yelled at him?” She took off her hat. “Shit—I didn't realise it was you.”

He shrugged. “That seems to be why I was put here on earth, to stop Pete killing everyone.”

“Which parent do you share?”

“Mum,” he said. “Pete's dad necked himself.”

“Jesus,” she said and clutched her pouch.

“Don't feel sorry for him. He would've turned out an asshole with or without a dead dad.”

“Easy to say when you’ve got a dad.”

He watched a Galah that picked over a head of grass, taking each seed to its beak and tearing it free. When he didn’t speak, she wondered if his dad wasn’t around. Why did everything in life have to come back to parents: how much they’d damaged you in their presence or how damaged you were from their absence?

She unbuckled the cross-back straps and released herself from the pouch. Her dress was sweat stained, and still copper marked from the rusted bath at her dad’s orchard. The sun kept marching higher overhead. She moved closer to Angus to get some shade. Cross-legged, they faced each other, not hiding their analysing stares.

“So are you a psycho like your brother?” she asked.

“Given the chance I’d kill him, so yeah, I suppose I am,” he said, and drank from a bottle. Her water had run out ages ago, but she wasn’t going to highlight her lack of preparation, so she didn’t ask for a sip. Watching the liquid tilt and meet his lips made her ache.

“Can’t be that hard to kill a sibling,” she said, imagining how devastated her mum would be if she killed her brother. Her mum loved to say, “In the Victorian era it was perfectly alright to have a favourite child.” People always thought she was so funny, and sometimes, even Penny laughed at her table talk.

“Listen to you, little miss murderer.” Angus grinned. “If you’re so bloody good at it, give me some tips.”

“I’m no murderer,” she said, sucking the juice out a peach to quench her thirst. “And I doubt you are either.”

“You better not eat too many of those or you’ll get a sore stomach. Where’s your water?” She waved towards no place in particular. “So did you find Adeline?”

She tossed her peach. “No.”

“I’m not a dumb prick,” he said. “I know Amber’s the woman you’re after. Saw you staring at her across the pub with your green eyes lit up.”

Penny wasn’t usually a lip biter, but she tore skin and tasted blood. “Please don’t talk to her about me,” she said.

“Why are you going undercover?”

“Last night I told her Pete was with some girl. It didn’t go down well, as you saw. So I’m going to wait till things settle, before bringing up the past.”

“You do realise Pete’s her god.”

“For now,” she said, and handed him a peach, as if an offering of something in surplus was worth bargaining weight. “You won’t say anything, will you?”

He bit a bruise from the peach and spat. Juice made tracks down his Adam’s apple. “So what actually happened between you two?” he asked. “It must’ve been wild enough to make a real impact.”

“Something happened in a rowboat,” she said.

“Sounds like a lot happened in a rowboat.”

The tractor approached and she swore. Getting to her feet she tore down a bundle of peaches, but they were all too ripe. She dropped them in a heap and one split on Angus’s boot. It seemed unfair that she’d lose her job in under a day. Yeah, she’d had jobs for fewer hours, but she wanted to keep the one that would teach her something she finally wanted to know: how to grow and feed.

Angus held out her pouch. “Get a move on.”

Together they picked until her Joey was full. The tractor pulled up and Chai took his

glasses off to wipe the dust from the lenses. She unclipped the pouch at the base and fruit funneled into the trailer. “So you can pick a full bag,” he said.

As the tractor left, Penny turned to thank Angus, but although she could hear his whistle, he was camouflaged by the trees.

They were all stretched out under the ironbark with the names carved on the trunk. Penny’s body was itchy with peach fibers and she was finding it hard to believe she’d ever not be itchy. “You’ll get used to it,” they all assured her. She was sunburnt on the backs of her hands, the back of her neck, the scoop of flesh between her collarbones. It was even possible she was burnt under her dress.

Rhi was up the ironbark in shorts so short her underwear showed. She was smoking a joint and grabbing at gum-nuts. Whatever she was singing agitated the group on the high notes. Digby told her to shut it and everyone went back to dozing except Penny. Rhi slid along the branch till she was above Amber. She dropped a gum-nut. It struck Amber’s shin but she didn’t wake. Rhi dropped two more nuts. Still no response.

Penny whispered, “Rhiannon!”

“Don’t call me that,” she said, full volume, and dumped the rest of the nuts.

Amber opened her eyes. “Oi—”

Rhi leapt down, landed soft. “Say hi to your husband for me,” she said, and ran.

Penny expected Amber to chase the girl, but instead she remained prostrate.

The commotion had woken the crew. They all yawned and stretched. Someone asked why Rhi was running so fast, then picked up the joint she’d dropped and smoked the last few tokes. They chucked “goodbyes” at Penny and started ambling down the road.

Digby straggled. “We’re having a party tonight at our campsite,” he said. “It’s about time you were properly initiated into the crew. Come at sunset.”

“I’m so tired.”

“It’ll be fun.”

“I’m so tired.”

Amber still hadn’t gotten off the ground. Penny could feel her watching as she started down the lane. Throwing open her car door she stepped back with the cough of heat. Cranking the air-conditioner, she waited to feel cool for the first time in a week.

“Oi.” Amber stood at her window. She smelled of tea-tree. “Do you know Rhi?”

“Yeah—” Penny took hold of the wheel. “She’s the girl.”

Amber puffed her cheeks, as if amassing sick. “Well, you coming tonight?” she asked.

“Do you want me to?” Penny asked, then wished they met at eye level, so she didn’t feel so small.

Amber licked a tooth so completely it looked like she was trying to erase the enamel, give herself a sandpaper bite. “You were supposed to fuck off,” she said, and hit the roof.

Penny returned to the pub and found a garbage bag on her bed, but couldn’t be bothered inspecting the contents. The shower was cold, but the pressure stung her sunburnt skin. She lay on the tiles and let her body get clean. The bathroom door bust open and Jen chucked some Red Back boots on the bathmat, said they belonged to a sister who was in rehab so could do without steel-caps. Penny crawled out and grabbed her towel, but the rack fell off the wall.

Jen swore at her and dumped the contents of the garbage bag onto the bed. There were jeans and band shirts. “You should say thank you for this priceless gift,” Jen said. Penny yawned

a thanks. “Look, this t-shirt’s pure gold.”

Penny pulled herself into a Magic Dirt tee and black jean shorts. “All dressed up and nowhere to go,” she said and shouldered Jen out the door.

At sunset, she woke on top of the pile of clothes to Jen hammering the towel-rack in the bathroom. No sooner had Jen fixed the rack than she inspected some loose tiles, and demanded Penny get the grout from her office. Penny saw an evening of renovations stretch before her. If she was going to stay in Shearsend, she shouldn’t hide behind fixer-upper projects.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The first thing Penny saw wasn't a tent, but a pig on a spit rotating in the air, its limbs stretched out as if it was leaping into water. The fire burnt beneath the body, sending smoke and the scent of meat into the treetops. Surrounding the animal, people lounged on the dirt. The tents weren't store-bought, but pieced together with tarpaulins, sheets of corrugated iron, crumbling plasterboard, and leaf-heavy branches. There were enough couches to seat the nation, scattered about the campsite at random, with broken frames and gouged cushions that coughed feather and foam. Flags swayed in the light breeze and wooden wind-chimes could be heard but not seen. On the bank of the creek a vegetable garden thrived with climbing beans and tomatoes, all but shielding the sight of the water. When Penny strained to see between the trellises she noticed a few naked teens all hanging from a single rope-swing as it arched across the water; they dropped—a mess of bodies.

Digby whistled. "Look at you."

"All class," she said, pointing at the hole in her jean shorts that showed a cent sized glimpse of her arse. "Jen gave me some wears."

"I didn't think you'd come."

"Needed to get out of the pub. The maroon carpet saps all my hope for humanity." She searched the crowd. "Is—"

"Angus here?" He winked. "No."

"Amber? Pete?"

"None of that lot."

She linked an arm with him and they went on tour. A boy, no older than sixteen, came out of a tent clutching a butcher's knife which he took to the pig. Beside him stood a girl who

obviously loved him—his cuts made her smile. A generator whirred by a tent which was packed with 1960s fridges shaped like bubbles. People selected beers and cracked the tops off on logs.

“We all brew,” Digby said, throwing open a fridge and showing the repurposed bottles: milk, coke, medicine.

“Is that an ink bottle?”

“Why not!” He gave it to her; it surprisingly tasted ink-free. “We each have a shelf and anybody is welcome to anybody’s beer. I’m the least popular brewer. They only drink my stuff once we’re dry.”

“I’ll give it a go,” she said taking a bottle. It was so hop heavy she coughed. When they came out the tent, Rhi offered a plate mounded high with meat. Penny leant in close to Digby.

“Is there anything green to eat?”

“Weed,” he answered. “Buckets full of the stuff.” He split away to chat with Mac—the love of his life—but she was preoccupied with tying rags onto her tent-pegs. And yet, a boy tripped on a peg with the boldest flag. She threw up her hands. Digby returned with a sigh. “I’d say she’ll leave within the week.”

The sun set and the night cooled. They scrunched themselves up on a couch around a campfire. A cluster of girls tumbled around with axes, taking the heads to broken chairs, missing each other’s legs by inches. They chucked the fuel into the flames. The fire looked fit to explode. Panting, the girls lay on a couch with pig-bits in hand, eating with their eyes set on the stars. Grease ran down their cheeks and pooled on the couch’s leather.

“Why is that so sexy?” Penny asked.

“You’d be amazed what starts to seem appealing out here.” Digby pointed to the driveway where headlights bobbed. “Looks like somebody decided to come after all.”

The Kombi was more orange—more burnt—blazed by all the campfires. Amber and Angus sauntered to the tent, coming out with milk-bottles of beer. Angus was skinnier than she remembered. She saw herself in his hunger. She'd offer him the last hunk of her dinner, ask why his mum hadn't taught him to eat well. Didn't you watch Popeye? Any kids' shows?

The fire was a terror. Digby brought over a fresh bundle of beers. She dropped her empty onto the pile at their feet and half listened as he told her about London and the woman he'd wanted to marry and how she'd decided to become a nun. Right when she asked if Digby was a Catholic and he said, "Not anymore! I'm not following a God who takes my women," a black Datsun with a gutsy grumble skidded next to the Kombi.

Pete was shouting before his feet even hit the ground, "Benno, mate, good to see you." He back-slapped the boys who flocked to him, hugged the couch-girls who got their limbs all over him, wiped grease off all their cheeks. It dawned on Penny he had the sort of sex appeal a lot of women went for, all the pumping veins and hair cut down to the root. The teeth that threatened to eat babies. Amber stood at the beer-tent, her eyes taking in the girls and their cupcake sized breasts. Rhi was among the cluster and kissed him in the crease where his lips met. He gave her a shove, then yanked her back and let her do it again. What worried Penny was Amber's look of satisfaction, as if everything was going to plan.

"Things will get wild tonight," Digby said.

Angus wandered to the campfire where Penny sat, but said no hellos. He grabbed a stray chair and tossed it into the flames. The stack collapsed with the weight of the addition, sending a tsunami of fireflies skywards. She went to give Angus the last of her meat, but Amber got to him first and spoke low in his ear. He tried to take Amber's hand, but she pulled away. Spoke louder. When he opened his mouth to respond, she told him to fuck off. So he did. To the other side of

the fire, where he picked up a guitar.

“While you’re obviously finding my story a riveting one,” Digby said, “I’d better point out that Amber looks rather unimpressed with you.”

Penny was already starting to feel one step beyond tipsy when she pulled her gaze away from Angus and saw Amber by a eucalyptus, leaning her shoulder into a knotted wound. It wasn’t so much the way she stared at Penny, but more where her hand sat, slipped down the waist of her jeans, taking firm hold of her protruding hipbone. Maybe it should’ve looked casual—like she wasn’t aware of where she touched herself—or perhaps it was even supposed to be enticing in some way, but instead it looked desperate, as if she needed to keep hold of her own bones to stop herself doing something she’d regret.

“Jesus,” Digby said, nodding towards Amber. “She looks fit to stab you.”

“Don’t say stab,” Penny said.

“Why not?”

“I hate that word.”

“Slater,” Rhi yelled to Angus. “Play that guitar!” His fingers came down on the strings with aggression. He sang, his voice barbed-wire. Rhi danced in nothing but a man’s shirt and boots, screaming words. Although her cheeks were acne-wounded, she was spectacular in her movement. A hoard of teens slung arms around each other’s shoulders. Yelled noise. A boy rolled a forty-four-gallon drum into the open and stomped on the lid.

“Moist,” Digby said.

“Pardon?”

“Hate that word.” He grabbed her wrist, pulling her into the centre of the group.

She hadn’t known alcohol would make her forget about Amber. Hadn’t known alcohol

would make her forget about violence. Bodies left scent on her skin, but she didn't mind, felt good to know people were welcoming her into the place they called home. They were all dancing as the fire burnt through the darkness, made them sweat, take off their shirts, unbutton the first notch of their jeans, cry out to cool down. Then Angus was there, before her, and the crowd surged—stomping and screaming and clapping—and their bodies crushed. Angus's hips touched her hips, and her ribs touched his ribs, and every breath was full of tannin, and he was looking down at her, half-smiling, and she could see a chipped tooth—the split of his pupil—and he said something, but she couldn't hear the words, yet it didn't seem to matter because when she didn't respond—just kept looking up at his broken eye—he leaned lower and licked her eyelash, taking a stray strand onto his taste-buds, but then the group began to shift and there was no reason for them to be pressed together anymore, and it was clear that if she'd just stayed in that space, she wouldn't feel cold. Tired. Alone. And nobody else was alone. They had tents. Lovers.

She dropped a bottle that she'd forgotten she held. A boy picked it up, tried to give it to her. “No,” she cried, but the singing drowned her out.

Faintly, from somewhere in the dark, Amber yelled, “Where's Pete? The girl?”

Angus spoke to Penny—he wasn't so far. “They've taken the Kombi.”

The pig rotated, fleshless.

The creek was warm. A bottle brushed her shin. Rum. She drunk and forced herself to swallow. The moon looked lonely. She wanted to reach out and bring it in closer. The rum moved inside her, felt more sore than good. She leant over, saw her reflection and replaced it with ripples.

“Oi.” Amber stood on the shore. At a distance, dancers blurred in the firelight. Flames.

Limbs. “Why’d you run off?”

Penny kicked the water, wet the shore.

“You scared of me or something?” Amber said, stepping into the shallows and crossing the gap between them, boots still on.

“Why’d you follow me?”

“You wanna fuck Angus.”

Owls flew through the canopies, didn’t stop to land. “Why does it matter to you who I want? You seem to think you don’t even know me.”

At the campsite, the fire burst with a boom and embers erupted. “Stupid pricks,” she said, barely looking over her shoulder. “They’ll burn their faces off.”

Penny strained to see boys running with empty jerry-cans. She couldn’t stand seeing anymore fire. “I’m going home,” she said.

“You’re too drunk to drive. You could hurt someone.” Amber slipped her finger into a belt-loop of Penny’s jeans. Her breath smelt like weed. “Stay for a bit.”

“I need to sleep.”

“How old were you when you first kissed a woman?”

The owls. There must’ve been hundreds of them. All the cooing. “Thirteen.”

“That’s kinda young.” She tongued a cut on her hand.

“We were in a rowboat.” Penny could taste salt in her saliva. “Do you know who I am?”

“Nope,” Amber said, and took Penny’s bottom lip into her mouth and dug her sharpest tooth into the softest flesh. Penny tasted barbed-wire blood.

Footsteps thundered. The women split as the group flooded onto the creek’s shore, lost their clothes to the ground, tripped and fell into the shallows. They broke into a water fight.

Everybody was naked, tackling like kids who are still young enough to think nothing of their sex. Amber was gone, which made Penny anxious. She wanted her in sight, just in case she planned to wound her again. Digby swam to the other side of the creek. Inspired, everyone followed, leaving Penny.

In her gut was sadness the size of a rat. When her dad was taken from her, she learned that people can be erased with a bit of rain and an oil-slick road. To say life was fragile made something abysmal sound pretty. She wasn't into making beauty out of death. She wanted the facts expressed plainly. She wanted to know that his temple hit the tarmac first. She wanted to know that his left leg shattered, while his right was unbruised. She wanted to know that he wedged between barrier and bike. It was in knowing these facts that she comprehended his death, and in comprehending his death, she understood when the daughter he held in his mind was killed. Yet while her dad's death had killed a version of her, she also believed those who were still alive could ensure her life. But Amber was alive and had killed the Penny of her youth. And no prompting could remedy the erasure. Penny resolved to delete Amber.

When Angus said, "Hey," she was focused on the distant bodies tangling in the water.

She had nothing left to stay awake for. "Can I go sleep in your tent? I'm sick of this party."

"I don't live here," he said. "My place is out on Lee's Lane." His eyelids were soft, as if he wanted to fall asleep too, but something was driving him to stay alert.

Her lip wept. She wanted everyone to occupy one place, so she could keep track of them. "Where does Amber live?"

"Not with me." He cracked his neck. "You getting in the water?"

The commotion in her head blunted when she saw he'd taken off his jeans. He was one

shade lighter than night. She already felt bare. The cicadas' song was aggressive, but Angus's movements were hushed, tempering nature's racket. The ripples he made whispered. She slipped her shirt overhead, let her shorts fall. The water at first felt warm then cool. As she dipped her hips below the surface, her thighs were talkative. There was no more room left inside of her for things that didn't matter. She was only body.

A shadow appeared, darker than night's cover, and began moving up the creek, creating no splash. It drew towards a bend that some said led to a waterfall. When Angus started to follow the shadow, Penny knew it was Amber. When he reached her, she dragged him into the creek's depths.

The water rushed around Penny, as the group returned from the opposite bank, their screams filling the sky. They surrounded her, although she fought against them, trying desperately to see what Amber was doing to Angus. The crew turned into faceless bodies as they circled and chanted between screeches of laughter. A shudder passed through her and kept coming in waves. They moved clockwise, so she moved counter to them, walking on the spot, trying to make their movement seem like something she could control. But the more she moved, the faster they whirled, until the water whipped, coastal-storm-manic. She ran at the bodies and they took hold of her, laughing at her weakness, and pushed her beneath the surface; she forgot she was in liquid and drank it back like air.

Retching, she stumbled to the shore. When they crept closer to see if she was ok—told her they were just having a bit of fun, didn't mean to drown her or anything—she didn't pay any attention, because as soon as she wiped her eyes, she saw Amber straddling Angus as they fucked standing.

A cloud covered the moon and the scene darkened to a shade that was ungodly. She

wished they were all fighting against the night, making do with what little they had, discovering something more than dirt and suffering.

CHAPTER NINE

Penny woke under a tree to a Kookaburra screech. Whoever said those birds laugh? She threw a stick but it didn't budge. There were Blackbutts everywhere—some alive, some dead. Going by the touch of light on the tree-limbs she reckoned it must be dawn. The world seemed too big so she focused on the underside of a leaf covered in ants. The wind blew and forced the leaf upright, yet the ants clung. Sitting, she felt stiffness all up her ribs. Her Magic Dirt t-shirt was covered in dirt. She smelled a wet-patch on the fabric and wanted to puke at the kick of rum. Her jean shorts appeared more ripped, but maybe they'd always been demolished. Squinting, she searched for the camp, but her surroundings were tent free. How'd she gotten lost in the bush? Her dad had taught her about disorientation: something to do with the sun. Something to do with not walking. She was certain it also involved fire. There'd been so much fire the night before. And there'd been the river. And Amber. And Angus.

Rather than walk, she run. Although she wore steel-capped boots, she picked up speed, and didn't slow when the scrub slashed. The earth got fluffy—pock-marked with ant holes—but she kept springing and clearing logs. She stopped at a creek and drunk, even though her dad had warned against still streams. If she filled herself with mosquito larvae, perhaps she'd have poisonous babies. Over the creek, bracken barraged, so tall it slashed her cheeks. She stomped down the trunks and flattened a green-leafed path.

Faced with a cliff-face she buckled over and caught her breath: there was no getting to the top. The earth was cool. So damp. All along the surface were dents from where rain had once bored. Perhaps she'd stay. Rest. Hearing a scuffle, she saw a wombat hole, wondered if it was really evening already, when animals came out to feed. Spending another night in the bush was going to be tough. She'd wake even more hungry.

She run her hands across the cliff-slab and found one crimp. And a ledge. And that was how she got to the top, sweat feral. She looked below to where she'd found water, and was grateful to the land that allowed her passage. Right when she doubted her legs could take another step, she hit a dirt track and saw tyre-prints.

Ahead, Amber stood before the Kombi that was parked in a discrete clearing. A nasty light cut through the Blackbutts and warned of bushfire. All inside Penny was fury—the kind she couldn't dull. There was the woman who drew her into a rowboat and shared secrets that should've been inseparable from love; there was the woman who never mentioned passing the secrets on to other girls would spread trauma; there was the woman who married a man who hurt girls; there was the woman who fucked a brother for revenge; there was the woman who'd erased Penny.

Penny stood before her. Amber smiled, said, "You look pretty this morning."

"What's wrong with you?" she said, taking a leaf off the Kombi's wipers, preparing the vehicle for something unknown. "I'm a disaster."

Amber spoke in whispers, as if a baby slept nearby. "I've been looking for Pete. Have you seen him?"

"No," Penny whispered too, tone serrated. "But I saw you with Angus."

"We all see things in the dark." Amber's gaze didn't straighten up. Was she sick?

On the edge of the clearing was a freshly dug hole, deep enough for a thin body. Penny couldn't help questioning if Amber had dug it, even though the hole wasn't neat, was probably created by claws. Penny was sweating where she wasn't supposed to; taking in Amber's face, she wanted to cry. Twelve years wasted on obsession. Wasted on a bullshit hope that Amber would be as equally defined by their escape in a rowboat.

“Who’re you planning on burying?” Penny demanded, pointing at the hole, too angry to feel like an idiot.

“The girl,” Amber said and smiled like murder jokes were funny.

Penny heard snoring. “Who’s here?” The sun split between the trees and blinded her. “Angus!” She threw open the Kombi’s side door. The mattress was bare. The mustard blanket gone. She tried to piece through the dust in her head. Getting too close to Amber, she said, “You know me—”

Amber rubbed her arms from top to bottom, like she’d picked up a virus and was coming down hard. “Have you seen the keys?”

“Sydney. Twelve years ago,” Penny chucked words at her, but she circled the Kombi out of sight. “You and me—”

With keys in hand, she returned. “You ready?”

“For what?”

“To leave.”

“Go where?”

“Somewhere warm.” But it was already warm. So warm. How could they need any more heat? “The gorge,” she said. “There’s a rowboat. You and me. We’ll spend the day on the water.”

Penny’s heart hit from the inside out. “You remember.”

Amber placed a finger over Penny’s mouth. “But first I’ve got to do something about the girl.” Her finger fell from Penny’s lips and rested on her throat. Penny nodded. “You’ll help me.” There was sun absolutely everywhere. Birds. Absolutely everywhere. “Come with me.” The sun passed through a breeze full of dust, transforming it into an infinity of stars. Amber took Penny’s

hand. They were moving back into their teen-union as they got in the Kombi. They were returning to rowboats. Amber turned the ignition and said, “This is the right thing to do.”

“Yes,” Penny said, and rested her head against the seat.

They hadn’t moved an inch when Amber dropped over the steering wheel as if she carried a backpack full of bricks. There was once another backpack full of bricks. There was once a little girl. The 80s. A murderer. A dam. Little girl’s bag loaded with rocks, her Dunlop Volleys the only thing to later rise. “What if it’d been our girl?” Penny’s mum said to their neighbour Gilbert Tartt. “She’s so wild she’d jump into any stranger’s car.” Until then, it’d never crossed Penny’s mind that she could’ve been the girl. But what nobody knew is she also could’ve been the murderer. She stole her brother’s bag, filled it with his trophies and sunk it in the harbour.

Amber sat up, the red impression of the steering wheel on her forehead. “Please, will you drive?”

“I can’t drive manual.”

“I’ll teach you.”

Later that day (the longest day) Penny would remember the sweat on the driver’s seat. She would also remember the ship-big steering wheel, and the sense that she’d gotten herself involved in a mutiny. What she’d forget was the glimpse of a blanket behind the vehicle just before she got in to drive. Was it brown? Mustard? There wasn’t time to think about anything misplaced because in that moment the cabin filled with tunes. Amber offered Penny a cigarette that she took without lighting, not wanting the smoke, but wanting to say yes—again—always. The space between them was squishy. Amber hummed, lining her paper with tobacco, and Penny lent in with a lighter, smelled her tea-tree skin. The words were coming to her, tumbling from her

blood-cells: Amber, do you remember how cold it was that night, out on the water? But before she articulated the chill, Amber pointed at the gearstick and said, “Reverse.” Going backwards didn’t make much sense, since there was space all around, but there were so many pedals and so many gears that her mind clunked. She placed her hand on the gearstick and Amber sealed hers on top, said, “Give her lots of accelerator.” She planted her right foot and dropped the clutch. The van lunged and the back left tyre shot high. Plummeted.

Penny screamed. Amber did not.

It had to be a creature. It had to be a human. Penny threw herself out and ran to the rear. Saw Pete, behind the back tyre, mouth wide and spit-fucked. She dropped and pawed his body. He was under a mustard blanket. She couldn’t bring herself to remove the wool.

He grabbed her forearm with all his feral strength. “Get Amber.”

“Amber!”

Seeing Pete, Amber whispered, “The girl,” and moaned low.

Penny stood, tripped, took to the ground on all fours. Beneath her were sugar-ants in a frenzy of work. They marched, while she suffocated. Amber dragged her husband—blanket clad—into the van.

“Come on,” Amber said and grabbed at her shirt. “I need you!”

Penny tried to find a focal point to steady herself, only to see a figure. A girl. Naked. “Rhi?”

The girl backed into the foliage, her mass of hair getting caught in branches, making her contort her neck to set herself free. “You wanted that to be me,” she said, pointing to where Pete had lain. She kept backing. Getting caught. “If I hadn’t gone to piss—”

Penny cried out, “I didn’t know.” The girl fled into the bush.

Amber picked Penny up. Although she was strong, Penny's limbs fell free of her hold. She threw Penny in the driver's seat and told her to drive. As Penny fought the gears, Amber crawled onto the mattress and lay beside her husband.

CHAPTER TEN

Alone, Penny tried to leave the hospital but couldn't remember how to put the Kombi in first gear, couldn't even recall what the clutch released. She wanted her Volvo with its automatic simplicity, the air-conditioning that'd cool her perpetually slicked skin. A man stepped outside Emergency and stared at her with an emptiness that revealed he was just using the backdrop of her pained expression to think about his own sickness. It was no surprise that when she'd pulled up at the hospital Amber run. What did surprise her was that the nurses had no questions about Pete. The hand-off shouldn't have been so easy.

Of course the police station was at the highest peak of the hill, like a hunter's platform towering over prey. She glugged from third to first and stalled on the roadside. Getting out the Kombi, she inspected her reflection in the panels. Her body distorted, her limbs shooting out like a liar's nose. Not trusting her image, she turned the side mirror and saw the garden-bed of dirt on her face. Spitting in her palms she worked her cheeks down to the freckles. Her hair looked post-sex, so she flattened the crown, knotted the tail, and hoped it held. There was nothing she could do to make her clothes look less rebel, so she folded her arms and walked to the station.

A gate seesawed behind her and she stood on the path between hyacinth and pansies. The station was a federation cottage, with a lover's bench and a bundle of peach-faces in a birdcage on the verandah. An elderly woman slipped past and commented on the birds at play, saying the smallest was the fiercest. On entering reception, Penny saw a pile of men in blue behind the counter, each taking mouthfuls of bacon sandwiches. She edged closer and saw the laptop they surrounded and a video on repeat: woman jet skier falls and loses bikini top. Seeing Penny, they laughed hard, said, "Do you jet ski?" The door nicked her shin on her exit.

Across the street was a church. Her dad had liked to play guitar and sing about something

higher than himself. Not a believer, her mum would fight the instrument from his hands, and they'd kiss, between grins. "Don't you dare teach my kids that crap," she'd warned. Entering the gloom of the church, Penny finally found the one place in town that was cool, so cool she shuddered, her skin unfamiliar with anything but heat. She hadn't expected to be alone and didn't much like the idea of it. Priests? Where were the priests? Weren't they supposed to be hanging around ready for people in distress? She'd explain nobody could've known there was a body behind the van. The priest would ask, "But why did you reverse? You said the clearing was big. There was room all around." She couldn't say it's what Amber told her to do, because it couldn't actually be possible that Amber had planned for her to hurt somebody. Women who smell like tea-tree can't be deranged. But then words passed hot through her mind, "I'll teach you." No, Amber knew there was a body behind the van, it just turned out to be the wrong body.

The altar was small but complicated with saints and virgins who all looked up, rather than head-on. Penny wanted them to stop being ceramic and useless. Hadn't they ever been led astray by another's hand? She didn't believe in their drapery and rosebud cheeks. She was certain it'd all been dirtier in real life, that there'd been blood and muscle-strain. Disbelief. She wrenched a bundle of hymnals from a pew and chucked the books at the unseeing saints and virgins.

Jen called out instructions to the late-teens who worked with a sneer. Penny wanted to hide in her room, sleep off the last twenty-four hours—her life—but Jen waved her over and pushed a Bundy across the bar, saying she looked low on sugar. Penny sipped and felt worse.

"Anybody ever tell you it's in your interest to shower?" Jen asked, and glanced at one of her workers mopping the floor. "For God's sake, Kayla, change that road-kill water." Jen shoved her bleached hair into a pony-tail. "Morons. They're all morons. Once they turn twenty-one they

grow a brain, but it doesn't start to work until they're thirty. How old did you say you are?" A group of miners entered, deep in talk about a fishing expedition, their faces scrubbed but permanently coal stained. She loaded them up with beers and refilled Penny's glass. "So, you've been hanging out with Slater."

Penny swallowed. "Pete?"

"Angus."

"Oh, he works at Mumblety-Peg," she said, demolishing a drink coaster. "I see him a bit."

"He was in here looking for you. I told him you're a lesbian, which you are, hey? Or are you keen on blokes too? Anyway, he acted all confused, like he wasn't after sex." She grabbed a knife, chopped through a lime. "He was really agitated. Kept asking where you were. Wouldn't take no for an answer. It's a shame you're a lesbian, because let's be honest, he's a right looker. Can you imagine if you just shaved all that knotted-mayhem off his head? He's not really like that filthy brother of his or that batty sheila, but he's been around them too long and doesn't want to break the shackles." Penny swatted at a blowfly the size of that whale that ate Jonah. "Oi, are you even listening? I'm saying Angus, he goes alright. It's the weepy pupil that is—"

"Spectacular," Penny said. Tears flooded down her cheeks before she registered sadness.

Alarmed, Jen grabbed at some top-shelf gin and sloshed a sizable pour into a schooner. "Shit, are you in love with him?"

"I wish life was that simple," she said and mopped her face with a bundle of napkins.

In her room, she tried to read, but the shag carpet got to her. The flamingo lamp. Was she really justified in leaving the police station just because the cops were watching a woman stripped bare? Probably not, but were they going to believe she accidentally reversed over a

sleeping man? She repeated, “I reversed because...” as she paced. Why was Angus looking for her? Did he already know what she did? Was he going to make her testify to the bacon eating cops? Her pacing was making things worse. She broke her technology ban: grabbed the phone by the bed. The dial-tone deafened. The nurse rambled about not being able to release information.

“Is Pete Slater dead or not,” Penny demanded. The nurse said not. She expected to feel relieved, but realised he could still be dying, just not dead.

Downstairs she pestered Jen for talk—distraction—until the miners who’d come in earlier asked if she wanted to play darts. It seemed better to do something with her hands since her mind ran feral. They cheered as she knocked each man out with needle-point precision. She felt thankful to have scored herself a temporary band of brothers. For just a few hours she stopped teething ulcers.

It was midnight and she was on the verandah smoking a pack of cigarettes she found on the cistern of the toilet. The miners were gone. Jen and the sullen workers were doing the final clean up, banging mops against cornices, over-spraying countertops with disinfectant, hosing down mats in the carpark. A train passed so slowly it looked stationary. Why was she just sitting around counting carriages?

“Jen?”

She popped her head out the door. “Yeah, darl.”

“Where’s Lee Lane?”

“So you are in love with Slater.” An insect sizzled in a bug zapper. “He lives out on Lee.”

Penny grabbed a zapped bug, inspecting its twitching wings. “No, you know Sarah? Works at the supermarket...she lives out there...asked if I’d visit.”

“At midnight?” She lit a cigarette, held the smoke down till it disappeared. “Follow Ridge Road to the mountain range. You know it? Past that ugly cottage—the pink one—you’ll come to Lee, near a burnt down truck-stop.”

“And then what?”

She shrugged. “Look for a caravan, I suppose.”

“I’m not—”

“It’s the only residence out there, you dickhead. Well and truly in the mountains—perfect place for people to act up.” She was already walking inside when she called back, “And don’t even think about going there at this time of night. If you get lost—or killed—I’m not coming to save you.”

Penny watched from her bedroom window for Jen’s troop carrier to growl down the road. Fighting the double-bolt, she stepped into the carpark. The moon was dancing with the clouds, seeking moments of revelation; the beauty of it made her slow, consider her fractured headspace, question if she should wait for morning when the world might seem more unified. A scuffle made her flinch. Dogs slunk from behind the skip, their eyes reflecting the shine of the single streetlight. The baby of the pack clutched a hunk of bread between its milk teeth. She run to the Kombi, already feeling bites on her shins.

The pink cottage wasn’t too hard to find and neither was Ridge Road. When the burnt truck-stop appeared in all its ash-remains, she realised Jen might’ve had a point when she said there wouldn’t be any saviours out there on the remote roads. But Penny had no other option, because she needed Angus, the one other person who loved Amber and hated Pete.

A sign flashed: Lee, no ‘Lane.’ It wasn’t council approved, just a slab of wood with a

crooked L and a bundle of seashell-small e's. The Kombi didn't want to fit beneath the overhang. All the witch-fingers of foliage grasped at the panels; she tried to hum over the screeches. The track steepened, and the tyres snarled, spat rubble. She almost stalled, still not any good at working gears. It crossed her mind that after the amount of beer she'd drunk, it might not be the best time for driving. Stuff tumbled off the dashboard—glass, plastic, paper, something fishy. Shaking off the debris, she leant forward for the uphill climb. Mounting an elephant-back-rock, the steering wheel kicked so hard she lost grip and the roadside gravel sucked her into the foliage. She grabbed the handbrake but not hard enough. She hit a tree and her skull smacked the headrest. Planting the accelerator, the van dug itself into the dirt. It was time to go on foot.

Geography wasn't her strong suit, especially not in the dark, but she figured since the caravan wasn't behind her, it had to be ahead, and it must be warm. Intimate. Clean? She started walking, knowing not to pretend it'd be clean. She was surprised at the smarts of her senses, how she climbed without vision. It helped to hum so the night animals didn't sound quite so out for blood. When sweat ran between her breasts, she realised she must've walked far.

The rise flattened onto a clearing where a fire burned low surrounded by three caravans. She never expected to find more than one home. One caravan had a clothesline strung with rotting shirts and a bundle of bones on the step, dog gnarled. Out the front of another caravan was a deckchair on a tilt, surrounded by paperbacks bent beyond their ability to stay bound, and three dolls sitting on a flowerless-pot, dresses grungy. The dolls made her draw closer. Through the window she saw a lamp glowing honeycomb tender. The bed was empty. The benches empty. The armchair empty, but for a cat. In contrast, the floor didn't have an inch that wasn't clothes strewn. She cracked the door and whispered hello to the tabby.

The scent of tea-tree was anything but subtle. Fuck, she'd walked right into Amber's lair.

Why hadn't Angus said he lived in some kind of commune with her? Couldn't anybody live alone in the country? The city was supposed to be where humans clustered, garlic cloves of terrified adults. She slouched against the bar-fridge, weakened by how thankful she was that Amber wasn't there. She would never be ready to see that woman again. There wasn't even a word for what she'd done, at least not in English. Betrayal made it sound like it'd been sexy. No, there'd only been violence.

And yet, regardless of wanting to reject all things Amber, she didn't leave. Instead, she dismantled her teen-idol's home, throwing open drawers and tossing empty packs of tobacco, cat-treats, and nasal spray. She had no sense of what she was looking for, but that didn't tame her mania. Standing on top of a colander, she gutted the kitchen cupboards, spilling cayenne over a stray polaroid. Stumbling to the light, she dusted the picture, and saw Amber and Pete on their wedding day. Without having known it, she'd found what she was after.

Turned out, Pete hadn't always been a roids man, had once been underfed like Angus, but clean in contrast. Back then there was no fish-tat, no muscles, just lots of hair. Curly. Expansive. He wore a black velvet suit with an overconfident flower and he was laughing. Amber held him, like he might fall and crack his head—she, his stability—but a weak one, because she too was fat with laughter. She wore a baby-pink dress with full sleeves and a high collar. Her hair was furiously crow-black. And there was that church again, the one full of saints and virgins. The joy of it all made Penny want to stuff the picture in her mouth. Choke on their happiness. Why did Pete get to laugh like that with Amber? Only to abandon her with a belly full of baby? Penny's instincts told her to rip them apart, but no tear would untwine their arms and fingers, all strewn splendid on the other's body. How could one woman's tendrils reach so far and cause such disaster? Jesus—she never thought she'd think it, but she needed Pete not to die. He and his wife

were of one mind. One body. With him around, Amber would always be an impossibility and she had come to decide that was for the best.

The final caravan was a loner, had a campfire of its own that made the garden glow otherworldly. There were shelves of hollowed-out guitars, fat with bloody, engorged tomatoes. Herbs hounded the tomatoes for territory, tackling their trellises. Dead trees gave reach to hopvines that towered over the caravan. On the edge of the firelight were chicken coops—birds asleep on their perches—and duck ponds with islands as refuge. The earth was fetid with bird scent and adorned with feathers that had built up over the years, waiting for a breeze to send them away down the mountainside.

The door of the caravan was open. She slipped inside. It was dark, except for a sliver of light that came through a sarong draped window. Angus slept, covered only by a sheet, the kelpie, Skull, by his head. She could smell his breath held captive in the space. Tannin. Tobacco. If he woke, she'd tell him she was hungry and explain why she'd come once he fed her toast. She felt her way to a bench by a fold-out table and lay down. Her thoughts slowed. Patchworks of Pete. Amber.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It might've been the Cockatoos that woke her or the wood chopping, both were loud. Dried saliva caked her cheek. The smell of smoke coming through the open door struck her the wrong way. She coughed herself hoarse. Angus wasn't in bed, which meant he'd seen her and not woken her. There was nothing to do but go outside.

Angus looked weak in the morning light as he chopped logs. Fog hung low. He didn't have a shirt on, just wore jeans that'd lost one leg below the knee to age. It'd only been two nights since they stood naked on the riverside dressed in liquor. Dressed in expectation.

"Angus," she said, not moving from the step of the caravan.

He leant on the axe, looked through the fog. "Penny."

The morning wasn't bringing clarity, was taking away her conviction. Why exactly had she come to him? Was he supposed to tell her what to do? What if he didn't know what happened? Amber, the only person likely to tell, seemed to have gone into hiding. Was Penny really going to admit, "Hey, I run your brother over"? She searched his expression for hints, but he wasn't giving anything away. He worked intently, securing the axe-head to the handle. Maybe she shouldn't have shown up in his space. Maybe he wasn't the type of man to welcome the uninvited.

The billy bubbled. "Can I have some tea?" she asked.

He rubbed his sternum as if he was trying to get a good breath of air. Dropping the axe, he disappeared in the caravan and returned with a bag of loose leaf. "It's strong. Got it off this woman in Byron."

"Is it tea?" she asked, licking her sharpest tooth.

He sniffed. "Yeah mate, a clean brew."

She sat on the dirt by the fire and held her palms up as close to the flames as she could without getting burnt. “What time is it?”

“Five-ish.”

She sighed. “God, I never sleep in the country.”

“Gotta stop calling this ‘the country’ like it’s one big space that isn’t the city. Right now you’re on Lee’s Ridge. You should call it that.” He sprinkled leaves into the billy, stirred with a tannin stained stick.

There were upturned metal camping cups on a log. She passed him two. “Maybe one day you’ll come to the city and I’ll show you I know places by name,” she said, seeing them arriving in the dragonfly-smattered Kombi, trying to find parking on Victoria Street, as they laughed at the clean jeans everybody wore but them. All the city women would trip over their toy-dogs to get close to a man so dirty, if only for a moment.

“No chance,” he said, blowing a squall of steam from his cup. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in Sydney. Used to go to The Cross a bit when I was younger, drop a pill or two, stay up till the streets looked even uglier in daylight. Couldn’t do it now. I need space when I wake up—shit loads of the stuff.”

“You can go out in the city without taking drugs, you know.”

“You say that like a school teacher.”

“I studied to be a teacher, but failed a test on some guy and a drooling dog. I just couldn’t figure out why they were relating students to dogs.” She sipped her tea, burnt the roof of her mouth.

“Dogs are sharper than students.”

“What about teachers?” she asked. “I take it you don’t think much of them either.”

“Mate, nobody likes teachers. You organise fetes and get upset when the fairy-floss guy doesn’t show up.”

“Are you deliberately using inclusive language or do you mean me specifically?”

He took a gulp of tea, not frightened by the burn. “Penny?”

She tried to stop blinking so much. “Yeah?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Just...needed to...wanted to see where you live...”

“At midnight?”

She focused on a flurry of sparks. “Jen said you came looking for me at the pub.”

“Yeah.” He dumped more tea into his cup. “Can’t find Ambs. You know where she is?”

“Nope.”

“The last I saw of her was when we were all swimming,” he said.

God, she’d forgotten about Angus and Amber slipping up the river towards the waterfall that may or may not’ve existed. How could so much have happened to make that insignificant? If it hadn’t been for them, maybe she wouldn’t have escaped into the bush, woken with a rattled mind, eaten the lies she was fed, and taken the driver’s seat.

“Remember?” he said with impatience. Urgency. “We were all swimming?”

She scoffed. “Don’t remember much swimming.”

He split a log with the fury of a lumberjack facing a long hard winter. “I know you were drunk.” He raised his voice over the claps. “But really, you don’t remember kitting off—”

“How long have you been fucking your brother’s wife?” She read shock in his knuckles, the double-handed clutch of the axe. The relief of stopping his questioning got her frantic with more words. “Is that why you want Pete dead? Let everybody kill each other while you wait for

your prize, Amber? You're a weak prick."

"Jesus." He sat on the chopping-block. "Say what you mean, Penny."

"You don't betray family. For God's sake, Pete's your brother."

"Half-brother."

"Still brother!" She jammed her eyes shut to steady her bleached-vision. "It doesn't matter if siblings get all the love you want. You can't just wipe them off the face of the earth."

He worked his hands like a butcher washing fat scum down the drain. "Look, I know all that stuff in the bible about not coveting your brother's wife, but you of all people must understand the impact Amber can have on you. I mean honestly, are you trying to tell me if she offered herself you'd say no?"

"I did!"

He snorted. "Once! Jesus, I've gotten away with one turn-down and called myself a hero. I'd like to see you make it through another round."

"I wouldn't let her within an inch of me. She's a sickness."

He stopped wringing his hands. "Then what the hell are you doing out here, Penny? You packed up your entire life in Sydney to track her down. You won't back out that easily. To do what you've done takes a level of obsession the average person can't muster up overnight. You've been refining this level of crazy for half your life, so I'll place my bet on you staying around till the last dying breath."

Penny hadn't known she wanted Angus's understanding until she lost it; he was supposed to be the gentle one. The one who understood weakness. Weren't they in the crazy together? She wanted to thumb the furrow from his brow. Making his expression sleepy, like it was supposed to be. "If you knew what happened between us, you wouldn't call me crazy."

“Well go on, tell me what happened.” He dusted his hands. “It’d better be good.”

She fisted her eyes to stop the blinking. “Amber had a foster brother who showed her things,” she said, but on saying brother, she saw Pete’s mouth wide, the spit like mould. “God, he’s probably already dead.”

“The brother?”

“Your brother.” She lowered her voice as she spoke his name. Going by Angus’s expression, he wasn’t handling the possibility of his brother’s death. It might’ve been the fog, but he’d lost his colour and his eyes weren’t teary, but mushy. What about that day in the orchard where he said he wanted Pete dead? As someone who’d lost her dad, she didn’t think it was possible to joke about death, but she had to remind herself that everyone loved to play big until they were made small. She’d been made miniscule by grief, and couldn’t help forgetting that so many others had only ever lost a grandparent. A rabbit. And so they teased death, thinking it was a poorly dressed friend-of-a-friend who showed up at a dinner uninvited, who complained about the overcooked steak and underdone vegetables. What they didn’t understand is death is anti-social and not to be mistaken with the weak: she remembered the doorbell the evening after her dad left on his motorbike, her mum’s heels on the marble, (the police saying words), her mum falling on the marble, (the police picking her up), her mum falling on the marble. Penny would never be the police, paralysing people with news of death.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean dead,” she said. “I just meant Pete must be really sad.”

“Sad? Because of me and Ambs? He probably doesn’t have a clue about the other night. Mate, he’s not exactly an attentive husband. Look, I’m sorry if you’re jealous of me and Amber, but I wouldn’t be if I were you. The fact is, she’s always going to choose Pete. She just came after me because she was in a filthy mood about him and Rhi. I can promise you, as soon as the

sun came up she forgave the prick.” He looked skyward. “There’s no altering the hierarchy.”

A bundle of chickens scurried past her, making her flinch. She hated the way their necks craned as they walked, like they were offering to have their heads cut off. “I need a shovel.”

Angus smiled, but didn’t laugh. “So that’s it, we’re done talking?”

“Yep.”

From a toolshed, he dragged five shovels. “Take your pick.” She grabbed the biggest and said goodbye. When she was almost over the crest of the driveway, he called, “Oi, have you seen my Kombi?” She said no and kept walking.

It took longer than she expected to hike back to where she’d gotten bogged. By the time she reached the Kombi, her thighs burned from the descent. She’d never thought there was an art to digging till she tried it. Her dad had always been a fierce digger. He’d have a hole with a few stomps on the shovel and a flick over his shoulder. She tried to replicate his ease, till her palms blistered and wept.

In the late afternoon, she returned to the caravans and chucked the shovel by the campfire. There was a half-empty beer on a log that she drunk without pausing for breath. Angus came up a bush-track wearing a mesh bee-keeper hat and placed sweet-gum in her open palm.

“Honeycomb,” he said. “You ever eaten it fresh?”

They owed each other something more than sweetness after the conversation they’d had that morning, but she wasn’t going to question his form of reconciliation. “I need your help,” she said.

“Not half obvious,” he said.

“I bogged your Kombi and tried to dig it out.”

“So you’re the thief,” he said, taking a swig from the beer bottle only to find it empty.

“What are you doing with my Kombi?”

She told a deliberately muddled story about the morning after the party. Her Volvo. A flat tyre. The Kombi, just waiting with the keys in the ignition. She said the only reason she came to visit him at midnight was to drop off the Kombi. Angus lost interest before she even got to the drop-off part and started jarring honeycomb.

“I’ve got to get back to town tonight,” she said.

She had a plan—a good one. She’d go the hospital and see if Pete was dead. If he was alive, she’d explain why it hadn’t been her fault, and she’d convince him that they shouldn’t get the cops involved; after all, country people deal with their domestics privately. She could even offer him money from her fund. Yeah, she wanted that money to buy back her dad’s orchard, but paying out a few grand wouldn’t put much of a dent in the total. Everything would be wrapped up within hours.

“It’s getting late,” Angus said. “You’ll have to stay and we’ll get the Kombi out in the morning.”

“We can dig at night.”

“You got a flood-light handy?”

“Just use the light on your phone.”

“Phone?” he grabbed a shopping basket. “You must be hungry.”

Dusk came on fast, the sky eggplant pummeled. Angus wandered around his bite-sized farm with the basket, collecting eggs, spring onion, rocket, and a bundle of herbs. From a bar-fridge he produced a heart-shaped blob of goats’ cheese.

She half-smiled. “You have a goat?” He pointed to where the butterscotch kid nosed

through the bracken.

There was so much to worry about, but the mountaintop did a good job convincing her her problems were valley-bound. If she could stay out of reach, Angus would never hear what she'd done to his brother, and they could subsist off the farm, live in ignorance. She didn't believe her dreams, but pretending had a band-aid effect. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Angus, she filled her shirt with cherry tomatoes. Over a log, he got to preparing a meal with the swiftness of an overworked chef, but with the calm of a fisherman. The campfire coals were fox rich in colour. He swirled scrambled egg across the face of sheet-metal that served as a pan, added a mound of ingredients.

When he dropped an omelet onto her plate, she couldn't help but scoff. "Where did you learn to cook?"

"I haven't always worked at the orchard, Pen," he said, cracking pepper over her meal.

"Where have you been?"

He sat across from her, the firelight tinging his hair red. "The desert. Rainforest. But mostly the sea. I was up north fishing for ages when Pete and Amber got married. Not a big ship or anything, just this old bloke and me. We rented a little shack and on the weekends we fed the locals. Got a bit of a name for ourselves as having an alright feed. But then some critic came in from Melbourne and wrote a big review about our sustainable seafood, and that's when we got all these people showing up in their posh cars and making a mess of our home. So I left." She was surprised at him sharing histories, wondered if he was relieved, having voiced some of his Amber-confusion and discovered an equally confused ally.

With a burst of chive across her taste buds, she could hardly concentrate. "God, I haven't eaten a proper meal in ages," she said.

“Not much more you need in life than a good feed, hey.”

She wanted to agree, but life had taught her otherwise. “Why were you worried about your restaurant getting successful?”

“It wasn’t a restaurant.”

“Alright, whatever it was.”

“A home, Penny.”

“But people paid for the food, right?”

“They donated a bit if they felt like it.”

“What’s the difference between donating and paying?”

“There’s a huge difference. Some of the local boys were out of work, so they ate for free. A girl showed up and couldn’t speak English, and although we never figured out her story, we connected through food.”

“That’s touching.” She rolled her eyes. “But why couldn’t the critic like what you did?”

He sucked a strand of rocket. “Those people want things I don’t want.”

“Money?”

“Success.”

“And that’s bad?”

“You telling me you’re keen on success?” He leant against a log and stretched, like the king of a dirt-castle.

She scraped some pepper off her omelet. “My mum’s keen on success.”

“Bet she thinks you’re a right hopeless case.”

She laughed hearing it said so plainly. “Stop looking so pleased with yourself, dickhead,” she said. “You haven’t got it all figured out. I was good at something once. Experimental dance.

Some street styles.”

He chuckled. “Everyone noticed you dancing that night at the pub. Some of the lads decided you must be a stripper, since that’s the only people they know who dance well.”

“That’s what I hate about dancing. You can never go unnoticed.”

“Penny,” he said. “Even if you danced like shit, I have a feeling you wouldn’t go unnoticed.”

She put her empty plate down and rested her chin in her palms. “Yeah, I am weird looking.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?”

“I sometimes wonder if that’s why I won all those competitions. People like aliens on stage. Mum would drive me all over the country, even flew me to the States, and I won almost everything. Most of the time was waiting: travel, makeup, stretches. But on-stage I’d get in this trance and go somewhere remote. Mum loved that I had a talent; I suppose she thought it would fulfill me, but Dad wasn’t keen on it, said fame wasn’t for kids. Once he died, I quit, certain that I didn’t want to wait around back-stage for a few minutes of intoxication. My brother was an even better dancer than me, so I thought Mum could just throw herself into his career, but it took her a good year before she forgot I ever had a talent. The weird thing was, once my brutal schedule was gone, I faced massive emptiness. To this day, I’m waiting to care about something the way Dad cared about plants and Mum cares about design.”

“Do you regret quitting?”

“Not exactly,” she said. “But I do sometimes wonder if I’d kept dancing, maybe I wouldn’t have followed a girl so completely catastrophic into a rowboat.”

“So your Mum was right,” he said. “You need restrictions, like one of those leash-kids.”

She ran her tongue over her teeth, so he wouldn't notice she was smiling. "No, Angus, I just need to have healthy passions."

He moved from his log and sat beside her, cross-legged. She liked that their knees touched. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to take the piss."

"Yes you did," she said, leaning into him.

"Yeah," he said and kissed her temple, "I did."

The valley was black, but for a few smoke pockets that must've escaped from farmhouses. She wondered about the need for fire when all the night had on offer was heat. They stayed resting into one another until she asked if he'd play. He took up his guitar and sung sad songs, but his eyes weren't sad. He watched her, no longer with bemused curiosity, but with a look that said she was worth knowing. When he asked her to dance, said mountains don't tend to pay much attention to people, she told him to close his eyes, which he did, and she shook out her stiffness. She moved muddled, the way she liked, while he sung like a river.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The cops swiveled on their stools at the bar and grinned like they'd been served a steak with pepper-sauce. Penny looked a state after digging the Kombi out all morning with Angus. The cops probably had questions for her, and although she'd temporarily saved herself by getting Angus off the scent, she didn't like her chances with evading representatives of the law. All she needed was an hour to get to Pete, and have him assure her they'd keep things private. But then again, she could hardly imagine Pete was the forgiving type, so coming out with everything to the cops could've been her post option. She felt a caffeine-overdose tension in her gut.

"Look at you!" Jen yelled from the bar. "Don't need half a brain to know where you've been. Haven't I told you not to hang out with Slater."

"Yes mum," Penny said, even though it wasn't the time for jokes. Not even lame ones.

"Come here and drink some water, would you?"

The cops swore at the television that Jen had plonked on the bar for the cricket. Penny gazed at the stairs, but didn't want to appear suspicious by escaping, so she stood as far from the cops as possible and downed the water.

The ads came on screen right as she went to leave. "Well you're a pretty little thing," the lean cop said, slugging back beer and getting head on his upper lip. "Where you from?"

"Not here."

"That's not half obvious," the less-lean cop said. Tattoos showed through the fabric of his uniform. Words in bold print, probably his kid's names, just in case he forgot. "Hang on, you're that sheila from the other day. Stood out the front of the station for ages, leaning against Slater's Kombi."

"What'd you just say?" Jen asked, turning the television down to stop the yelling about

discounted underwear.

“This one, she was out the front of the station. Me and the boys were getting a real good look at her through the window. Making bets on which one of us she’d—”

“That wasn’t me,” Penny said, shoved her empty glass away.

The lean cop sniffed. “I suppose she wasn’t as dirty as you, but then again she wasn’t that much cleaner.”

Jen rose her over-plucked eyebrow. “Not many women around here look like Lady Penelope Moore.”

“Maybe she was your twin,” less-lean cop said, licking head from his mustache. “Nice thought, two dirty little things.”

“You coming to the match?” lean cop asked. Penny squinted. “Footy, love. We could take you down to the oval. Introduce you to a few of the local lads. I reckon they could make your time here a bit more interesting.”

“Interesting,” the less-lean cop repeated with a snigger.

Jen slapped the bar with a towel. “Come on boys, pull your heads in.”

“Are you two actually on duty?” Penny asked, leaning against the wall.

“You got a complaint?” lean cop asked. “We’d be happy to do anything for a young lady like you.”

“Anything,” less-lean cop said and licked a drip of foam from his schooner, pleased at being able to lick something at that moment.

“Nope,” she said.

There was a knock at the door. She lay in the bath submerged to her chin. Jen fought the door but Penny had chained the lock. Jen’s voice carried through, “What’s this about you going

to the cops? You're a lying little shit, that girl they were talking about is you. What's going on? I heard a rumour that Pete Slater's in hospital. Mindy Johnson's saying she thinks he got run-over. You better not be getting caught up in Slater mayhem or I'll pack your bags and send you home."

"This is my home."

"Well it's a shit one."

"I don't have any bags to pack."

"I'll buy you some."

"And what the hell will you put in them? All your shit advice?"

"A book on manners, you bitch."

Penny dropped beneath the water and opened her eyes. The world looked prettier when bleary. She exhaled, liked the noise the bubbles made when they burst on the surface. So that was it, she wasn't going to the cops. Wasn't telling Jen. Angus. She'd just let the whole thing sink. Pete, he'd keep his mouth shut because that's what country people do. That was if he didn't die; she really needed to find out if he was dying. Once she knew about that, she could put the whole thing to rest. And maybe someday it'd resurface but it wouldn't matter because nobody could draw a link back to her. Time would bury all the evidence. As of that moment, she promised herself no more Amber. It was time to simplify her days. Get back to picking fruit. She'd even get a dog—call it Samson—never cut its hair. Let the thing grow up strong.

Her search started on the east wing. Standing on a bin, she peered through a window at nurses eating take-away Chinese and watching Home and Away. One doctor was demonstrating a dance move in the far corner to the receptionist who denied Penny's plea to visit Pete, "Our

patients need their rest.” Penny could’ve shown the doctor how to Free Spin without knocking a glass of water to the floor. The hospital was an architect’s migraine, a bundle of eras best forgotten. In the 70s wing was mustard everything and shelves of pharmaceuticals. In the 90s was peach everything and the patient ward. It occurred to Penny there would be cameras around the grounds and her slinking about wouldn’t be looked upon kindly. The grounds weren’t private, but there were probably rules about break-ins, and yet the thought of getting caught versus not speaking to Pete for fifteen hours was enough to push her on to each window, peer in at the bed-bound.

Pete was in the fifth room, asleep. The window was open. Penny kicked the fly-screen and climbed inside. He woke with groggy eyes. She jogged to the door and pushed it shut. Grabbing a visitor’s chair, she jammed it under the handle. Standing over Pete, she folded her arms and inspected him. He licked his lips like he needed water, but said nothing. He didn’t look too bad to her, apart from the tube coming from his arm which was probably just keeping him hydrated. There were no tubes up his nose, which seemed good. No screen showing a dodgy heartbeat. No flowers—but maybe that meant he wasn’t expected to get well.

“How are you?” she asked, unfolding her arms.

“Firing on all cylinders.”

She hadn’t expected jokes, or sarcasm, whatever he was attempting. “No, really. Are you...?”

“All good, mate.”

“Your bones? Organs?”

“Good as gold.”

She dropped into the armchair by his bed. “Thank God!”

“Yeah, thanks to him.”

“Shit—I really thought—”

“Tell Amber she’ll have to try again. Maybe next time she can take Rhi out too.”

It’d never crossed her mind that he could mistake the driver. She let out one sharp laugh. Her absolution felt dirty but she had no desire to clean Amber’s name. What did she owe the woman?

“Well, are you going to report her?” she asked.

“Haven’t you learned anything about us lot? We keep things private.” She nodded and tried not to smile. When she went to climb through the window, he said, “Oi, you reckon you could grab me some grog?”

“No.”

“Come on, woman. Just a bottle of something,” he reached for her but his strength was zapped. “They’ve got me on detox here.”

“Then I’d say you need the cleansing.”

“Fuck you,” he said, but weakly. His eyes were getting heavy again. “Do you reckon you could stay for an episode of Home and Away.”

“Why?”

“I’m lonely.”

“Whatever they’ve got you on is making you vulnerable.”

He patted the bed. She denied the invitation and grabbed a chair. It seemed right to stay around so he didn’t get suspicious. Pete fell asleep, as an actress who couldn’t have been old enough to vote wept over a man who’d left her for a woman who bred Whippets.

Penny jogged through town, invigorated with her freedom, in search of the one and only

real estate agency. The door was locked, but she could see a woman with an up-do imprisoned by hairspray rubbing her eyes at her desk. Penny knocked until the woman came to the door.

When she said she wanted to put an offer on No Man's Land, the woman said, "The orchard? You're kidding?"

Penny paced as the call was made to the vendor, Old Mags. He agreed to the offer, didn't even try to bargain. The agent said they usually gave a gift on settlement, but she went ahead and handed Penny a bottle of Chardonnay, saying she deserved it, having scored herself a life-long project.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The orchard crew arrived within the hour. Penny was waiting for them, dying to secretly celebrate her acquittal and her impending orchard-ownership. When they entered the pub a thin cluster of drinkers shifted off their stools at the bar and went outside to mull over their hostility. The first beer tasted the best.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” Digby asked.

“It’s my birthday,” she lied and laughed.

A band set up on stage. They all looked too old to be the entertainment but when they started to play, their mullets and loose jeans no longer seemed ill-fitting. The set was just right. Singing loud, they got everybody dancing, and when glasses smashed it only served to rile up the crowd, get them crunching broken glass to the beat. All the tunes were just as old as the singers, but for every song Penny had ever thought ridiculous she suddenly claimed them as an all-time favourite. Why would they dance to anything other than Guns N’ Roses? Digby picked her up and strummed air guitar across her midriff and she fought him off with a playful punch. The crew fanned into a rapturous circle, unable to keep their cool with the build of “Where do we go?”

Penny took in all the crazies she’d come to love like she loved friends when she was five, unreservedly. But there was one person not smiling back. Rhi stood opposite not screaming, not swaying, but still. Penny couldn’t figure out how underage drinkers got in with their acne-tormented faces, but it wasn’t her place to care. She dropped her head back for the ultimate, “I, I, I, I,” but rather than finding ecstasy, her memory erupted: Rhi, the morning of the accident, naked in the bushland, her fixed-expression in an otherwise unloosed world. Penny’s eyes shot open and she met Rhi’s gaze head-on, as everybody but the staring-two harmonised the final,

“Sweet. Child. O. Mine.” How could’ve she forgotten? It was that child who witnessed her drop the Kombi in reverse and crunch Pete. The band worked the crowd into a rabid cheer. Everyone tumbled across the dance-floor, knocking Penny to the wall.

“You right there?” someone yelled when she shoved past.

She ordered a drink she could’ve done without, but needed to clutch. She didn’t want to look for Rhi, but couldn’t help seeing her at the jukebox, swaying her teen-hips and rubbing herself against the technicolour face of “Tunes Now!” The CDs shifted at her touch, making room for a sole black disc. The noise that clattered through the speakers sounded like mechanics at work, crunching through metal panels, fitting bolts in place. When the singer got going, Penny knew it was no other than Nick Cave; she could be nothing but worried. Rhi took up the centre of the dance-floor and moved like a kid who knew how to get herself fucked like a woman.

Jen laughed hard, pointing. “What the bloody hell is she doing?”

“It’s your fault she’s here,” Penny yelled over Cave’s murder ballad. “She’s obviously underage.”

She shrugged. “I know, but look at her, she’s having the time of her life. Don’t you remember when alcohol and the possibility of sex got you that blazed? Lighten up, Penny.”

“Are you aware it’s illegal?”

“I have so much shit on the cops they could never lock me away for underage drinkers.”

“I mean the sex.”

Penny tried to grab her beer but knocked it across the bar. All the glass and foam made her escape towards the exit, but Rhi cut in front, curls as aggressive as Nick Cave’s growls. She got her hands up in Penny’s face, her fingers cocked to shoot, and laid a round of bullets into her skull, screaming, “*Oh God, he can’t be dead!*”

The pub walls shook with the collective yell of the crew, “*Just count the holes in the mother fucker’s head!*”

Penny got hold of Rhi’s tiny hips, tossed her aside, and strode onto the verandah to get air into her eye-sockets—so full of lead.

“Penny!” God, there wasn’t supposed to be anymore yelling.

Angus ran down the middle of the road, his hair a halo in the lights of a semi. The truck blasted its horn. She saw him get tumble-dried by the twenty-two wheels. But her eyesight was playing bullet-tricks on her.

He belted up the steps. “I need you,” he said and grabbed her hand. She ran but tripped down the steps, grinding to a halt on the footpath. Angus collected her like a kid-goat, rough but familiar. She wasn’t used to him being anything but gentle. She rested against a rubbish bin.

“Mate, you’re a mess!” he said, looking down at her with a smirk, like he’d just eaten a mouthful of salt.

She touched her cheek and brought her hand away bloody. “Sorry, I’ve had a rough night.”

“I’d say Pete’s having a worse night. Was out at Derk’s Produce buying chaff and I hear he’s in hospital with his legs crunched.”

“No, Pete’s fine.”

“I can promise you the nurses aren’t saying he’s fine. Dropped by the hospital just now and they tell me his legs are fucked—need to pack him full of metal rods—but they haven’t been able to operate because he needs to detox first.”

“But, he said...”

“You think anyone’s in a rush to speak plainly when they’re doped up on morphine?”

“I’m sure he’ll get better...”

“It’s not the flu, Penny. Didn’t you hear me? Metal rods for bones.”

It was a weak move, but it was all the energy she had left to save herself. She got to her feet, steadied herself on the bin, and walked back into the pub (past Rhi who screamed “murderer”), took hold of the balustrade, ready to go upstairs, but then Digby sung, “Happy birthday to you,” and a storm of friends surrounded her, while she stood stiff amidst the celebration.

Angus sat fully clothed in the dry bath reading the bible. A cigarette burned on the ceramic-lip, turning the white paint fawn. He dog-eared a page. Meeting her gaze, he held the book firm. She touched the disaster of scab on her cheek; she hadn’t felt embarrassed since arriving in Shearsend.

She had to prove she was in control. “Where did you sleep?” she demanded.

He rose an eyebrow. “Not in your bed.”

“What are you doing here?”

“We need to talk.”

A freight train passed. She moved to the window (that should’ve been tinted for privacy) and counted the carriages...one...hadn't Rhi been at the pub last night...two...hadn't there been Nick Cave, gunshots to the head...three...hadn't Amber phoned Angus...she stepped onto the toilet and pushed her face up against the fly-screen for a breeze, but there was none, only carriages leaving town.

“You ready to tell me what you did to Pete?” he asked, dropping the bible to the floor.

Angus said they'd need water—an apple or two—for the trip, said it could be slow going getting over the mountain, and they'd better be prepared. They drove through town, past the Christmas decorations clinging to lampposts and the clock tower; she thought of her mum, wondered why she hadn't tried to track her down. Maybe she'd finally let her daughter go. The thought made Penny almost sad.

Angus swung into the supermarket carpark. "Milk," he said. Wouldn't dairy spoil? But he was in a don't-talk-back mood, so she didn't question.

He hadn't taken the Pete story well; it was hard to describe how she knew he wasn't happy, since his body didn't tighten to the bad news, but his calm seemed too calm. She'd wanted him to smoke, swear, and agree that Pete deserved what he got. Instead, he was immobile. When there wasn't anything more she could say, he said it was time to find Amber. She couldn't agree more. Finally, they were back on side. Once she got a hold of Amber, she'd keep her composure, because raging wouldn't get the result she was after. Somehow she had to convince Amber to deal with Rhi and stop her going to the cops. Without Amber's testimony, Penny was screwed.

Angus walked into the supermarket as four hatchbacks pulled up, all red, and women got out who looked like they thought nothing of a twenty kilometer run, and favoured fat-free lattes over builder's-tea. They wore maxis with flowers the size of watermelons. By the click made when they walked, they also wore heels. They were chattering, and everything they said to each other was welcomed with big-lipped laughs. Penny wondered why she'd never fit in with women who wore fuchsia; maybe life would've been more simple if she'd just settled somewhere bright.

She was sweating so much she went to help Angus in the air-conditioned supermarket. He was standing in front of apples. But he wasn't reaching for any produce, instead he stared

through the fruit. His hands were stuffed in his pockets, and his shoulders hung so low it looked like his fruit-picking days had worn him down. Penny couldn't work out why he was so sad about Pete. She'd explained that he was fine, just angry because they had him detoxing. "I even watched an episode of Home and Away with him," she said. But she couldn't muster up indignation since Angus looked so plainly broken. She was contemplating rounding the banana stand to the apples and giving his hand a squeeze, when the maxi-dress women cut towards the berry stand. They were piecing through punnets of strawberries when they saw Angus and gasped so loudly a security guard shuddered awake on his chair by a blow-up Santa Claus.

"God, is that Angus Slater?"

"No, it can't be."

"I thought he lived up north."

"He came back to look after that slut, Amber."

"What was wrong with her?"

"Meth or something."

"Didn't her husband lock her in a caravan for a week with no food? Or was it the other way around?"

"I think he was planning to eat her."

They all turned back to Angus, still immobile, just a few fruit-stands away.

"Remember him in high-school?"

"He was so cool. Now he's such a derelict."

"Didn't you used to have a crush on him?"

"Me!"

"Oh come on ladies, we all did. He was beautiful."

“I could’ve sworn you lost your virginity to him. Remember, at the rodeo?”

“Ok, we had sex once, but it wasn’t at the rodeo. It was at the gorge. I swear he was stoned. Took him forever to come.”

Angus reached for two Pink Ladies, not checking them over for bruises, and went to pay. Outside, Penny saw him step into a thrift shop, and minutes later exit wearing dark denim jeans—no tears—and a powder blue shirt. He even wore shoes and he’d fought his hair into a band that strained against the knots.

“You look better derelict,” Penny said as they got in the kombi and he dumped the groceries at her feet.

The drive was familiar: pink cottage, burnt truck stop, Lee’s Lane. The world came in contradictions, rushes and freeze frames, sticking only when something shocked: roadkill—a branch jammed upright from a pouch—cows packed shoulder to shoulder in a field turned muddy from their shit. And then the terrain was alien.

“You shouldn’t worry about those women,” Penny said.

“What women?”

“The ones from your school.”

He blinked.

“Well if you don’t care, why’d you get dressed up?”

“To see my mum.” He slammed the brakes, as a wallaby darted before them, and veered onto a dirt track that descended so steeply everything in the back of the Kombi tumbled forward. A loose chain circled Penny’s boot. She was untangling herself when a branch came through the window and lashed her.

“Are we taking this trip to see your mum or find Amber?” she said, chucking leaves out

the window. “Because it doesn’t seem like the right time for meet the parents.”

“Of course it’s about finding Amber, but seeing my mum’s never easy. The least you could’ve done was showered.”

“Why does it matter what I look like? I’m just some random woman who got tangled up in your family’s bullshit. Your mum doesn’t even need to know my name.”

“You’re not random, Penny. Amber’s never gone this mental.”

She scoffed. “Are you saying this happened because of me?”

“I’m just saying you make an impact.”

Her defenses were lined up like tsunami waves, but right when she was ready to cause havoc, he picked up a leaf that rested between her thighs. The brush of his fingers sent a salt surge through her spine. What if things were different? What if he’d never slipped up the river with Amber, but rather they’d gotten the Kombi—not reversed—driven to her orchard and cooked up snags, eaten till the meat and fat soaked up the drink and made them clear headed. And clear headed, what would’ve she done with him? She remembered his body, naked, there on the riverbank. In that moment, she’d wanted him. She wondered if that desire was still there, could still the rattle in her head. He, unlike the rest of the world, moved like a man underwater. She touched the back of his neck, which she was seeing for the first time, his hair bundled into a band.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

They hit a boulder that felt like a body. Her ribs tightened like a climber’s ropes. “Angus, I’m sorry about your brother. I wanted to say that before in the bath, but then we started on Amber.”

“That’s all that matters right now,” he said and jammed the Kombi in second to take on

another rock—another body.

It was becoming clear his motives had nothing to do with confrontation, and everything to do with saving Amber. Of course Angus wasn't worried about his brother. She should've known. And he likely didn't give a shit if Penny went down on Amber's behalf. He'd only grabbed the leaf from her thighs to clean her up, ensure she wasn't an embarrassment. Why'd she agreed to drive out past the caravans, down the other side of the mountain to farmland so vast she could only see a single fence, more mirage than actual wire? She'd never been any good at knowing who was on her side.

The house was neat. The gardens not there to look pretty, but to feed. She'd imagined burs and breakages, felt increasingly anxious at the order. She stood behind Angus when he knocked on the door. She'd wanted to confront Amber, but there on the threshold of the Slater's home, she realised she was on enemy territory. When the law said the Slaters should've reported Amber as a teen runaway, they'd offered her protection. What kind of family took a girl in on her word, without contacting DOCS? The type of family who were sucked into her manipulations. Looking around at the self-sufficient farm, no other houses in sight, Penny realised the property served as the perfect hideout. Who would ever come looking for anybody out there?

“Take your shoes off,” Angus said once he knocked and nobody answered. They lined their boots, soles not touching.

The cottage was dimly lit and dust free. On either side of the hallway were rooms with no nonsense: bed, cupboard, curtains. Angus pointed: “Mine, Amber's, Pete's.” And yet apart from a different shade of stone wallpaper, the rooms were the same. The kitchen was at the furthest reach of the house, as if food was a mean necessity. It was a small kitchen that didn't support

gatherings. The wood-stove let off heat like a dog warning against intrusion.

Angus filled the kettle and placed it on a hotplate. “Sit down,” he said and pointed at a bench hard against the side wall. The tea he made was too black, but she drank it because refusal wasn’t on the cards.

“Where’s your mum?” she asked.

“I don’t know—she only leaves in emergencies.”

It was then she saw a cross over the stove, and beside it, a photograph of a teenage girl. The light was dim, but she could just make out a face she remembered. “Adeline,” she whispered.

“That’s the day I brought her home,” Angus said.

She wasn’t the teen Penny remembered: an almost woman. She was simply a girl. And she was sitting on a verandah, alone, and smiling, like if she could look friendly somebody might want to keep her. There wasn’t a hint of confidence in her posture: her feet turned in so her toes touched. She was not muscular. Her arms were too skinny and knees too pronounced. How could Amber have ended up anything but angry? And why did Penny think she understood her anger? They were strangers to one another, which was why Penny hadn’t preempted her potential for violence. If she knew her, she would’ve known when to stop her.

It was the hottest hour of the day. The house was at its dimmest. The front door opened and snapped shut. Angus re-tucked his shirt. “Maud,” he said. “Where have you been?”

Maud wore grey pants and a man’s shirt. Her aged hair was slicked into a bun. She had Angus’s eyes, but her pupils weren’t ruined. She placed her handbag, that looked like a brick, by her feet. “I could ask the same about you,” she said.

“I brought you milk,” he said.

Penny had forgotten about the milk that they'd placed by the bench. It only then seemed strange that they hadn't put it in the fridge. It may've soured. Maud picked up the bottle and did what they should've done.

"What are you doing here, Angus?" she asked, hanging her keys on a hook that read *keys*. "You've been back all these months and haven't even offered a hand during lambing season."

"I was taking care of Amber."

"Were you now." She smirked, skin stiff. "I heard from your dad while you were away. He got kicked in the face by a horse he was shodding." She arranged a Stanley Knife and pencils on the windowsill. "I'm surprised. Thought he was better at his job. He's in a bad way."

Angus placed his hand on the stove, likely thinking it was countertop, and cursed at the burn. "Why'd he ring you?"

"For help," she said.

"Did you give him any?"

"I sent him flowers."

"What good is that to his face?"

She shook her head in a practiced way. "Why are you here, Angus?"

"Looking for Amber."

"As usual," she said. "She's not here. I thought you were finally going to give her some peace."

"When did you last see her?"

Maud turned to Penny who noticed the inch-thick tread of her boots. "What are you doing with my son? You do realise he's not well."

"He's one of the healthiest people I know," Penny said.

“I’m not talking about his body. I’m talking about his mind,” she said. “Are you his missus?”

“Friend.”

“What’s he told you about his obsession with my foster daughter, Amber?”

“Enough.”

“I doubt that,” she said. “Has he ever told you about the wedding cake?”

Angus wasn’t supposed to walk out, leaving her with Maud. But to follow, she would’ve had to squeeze past the woman in a man’s shirt, with some poor apology, and she suspected she wouldn’t be let out so lightly. She knew a lot about having a difficult mum, but she knew little about having a cruel mum. For all her mum’s failings, she never revealed Penny’s flaws in public.

“It’s only right that I warn you about him,” Maud said as she took a pair of clippers from her handbag and squared her nails. “You know, before Amber there was Violet. Next, it’ll be you.”

“That doesn’t scare me,” Penny said. “I understand obsession.”

She wanted the door to slam as she stepped outside, but instead it yawned. The Kombi was still parked under a jacaranda, but Angus wasn’t in it. She didn’t like the idea of searching the property, but she had to find him, make sure he was okay. The hayshed was packed to the rafters, so offered no space to hideout. The kale in the garden wasn’t high enough to cover a body. She circled the water-tank, found only grass and a stray whistle; it was surprising to find something misplaced.

Down the hill was a shed on a tilt. She jogged to it and fought the doors, triple her size. It was so dark her eyes took a moment to adjust before making out the shape of a Ferguson tractor,

it's bonnet spider-web strewn. From the beams hung ropes with hooks on the end which surely weren't intended for carcasses, but still resembled a butcher's workspace. Shelves along the far walls had tumbled and spat rusted tools to the ground. Rotting tarpaulins hung, tattered with wounds. The scent of moist earth struck the back of her throat. The northern corner was lightly covered with ferns, where rivulets snuck from the soil. It was so rare to see wet land and new growth that she knelt and placed her palms to the cool.

Hearing a rope creak, she stood. "Angus?" One of the tarpaulins swayed. She flung it aside. No one was there, yet she was certain she wasn't alone. She heard footsteps and flung another tarpaulin aside. A car-door croaked. One of the sheets tore in her hand and she saw a Datsun so dirt covered she couldn't make out the body colour. She got in and the driver's tweed seat mushroomed dust.

"I'll tell you about the wedding cake," she heard Angus from the backseat. She wanted to cough, because her throat was so dust coated, but feared he'd shock out of sharing. "I guess it all started with a bottle of gin. Clear liquor's never done me good. It was the night before Amber and Pete got married, and everyone was in the hayshed having a piss-up. That's how it always was back then, they'd party before a party. Amber, she was a favourite around town. Everyone liked her black hair and cheek. Knew she brought the fun. But I wasn't feeling festive, knowing I was about to officially lose her to Pete, so I took a bottle of Bombay and got to work on it in the vegetable garden. At some point I needed to piss, so I went into the house, but hit a wall of food. Mum and Amber had spent the last few days cooking up a storm for the wedding reception. Amber had baked every dessert you can imagine."

Penny cleared her throat. "Amber bakes?"

"Oh yeah, she's remarkable." She heard him move—maybe lie down. "I started grabbing

at some of the slices, and shoving them in my mouth. I don't remember being hungry, but something about the sugar got me going. I moved from the slices to the biscuits to the rum balls. And then I got to the fridge and found the wedding cake. I didn't have a plan at first, just wanted to look over Amber's handiwork. The cake didn't have icing, so you could see all the inner-workings. It was a sponge cake, with layers of cream, cookie crumbs, chocolate drops, and sprinkles. At first, I just planned on eating one of the layers, but thought I should grab from the bottom, so that I didn't bugger up the top. It's harder than you'd think to hold a cake up and take from the base. I dented one side. That got me worried, so I figured I'd better try to roll it back into shape, but the layers started splitting apart and the cream got everywhere. I was feeling heaps rough about what I'd done, so stepped away and looked out to the hayshed. Amber was there, dancing with Pete. I don't know if you've ever seen her dance, but she's funny. Throws herself into every move. Somehow looks good doing it. Pete was laughing, like he'd never hurt her in his life. I remembered I needed to piss, so I started for the toilet, but stopped at the kitchen, where the cake was mangled. Before I knew it, I'd taken myself out and was pissing on the cream, saturating the layers. Halfway through I stopped, realising what a psycho move I'd made. Nervous as fuck, I clutched myself and ran to the toilet, where I finished off. I must've stayed in there a good hour before I came out. But then I saw Amber at the kitchen. She didn't get close to the cake. And she didn't look at me. She just said, "Your mum's right, Angus. You're sick."

A flock of firetails flooded the shed and landed in neat rows along the beams. They were festive. Penny wished they'd be quiet, because if she knew anything about Angus, she knew he didn't want an audience and he didn't want a response. But she was certain he'd shared with her, hopeful she'd offer healing. And yet she couldn't decipher how to care for him without words. She felt pathetic, her hands plastered to a wheel of a car that's battery was likely dead. The least

she could've done was show ease, but she worried that shifting her posture would suggest discomfort. Enough time passed for the firetails to hunt their fill of insects and leave.

“In the Kombi,” Angus said. “You touched me.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I just sometimes wonder what it'd be like—”

“You and me?” His tobacco smoke filled the cabin. “We could go alright.”

She climbed over the centre console and onto him where he lay, but her knees stabbed at his groin and he cried out. She tried to reposition herself, but jabbed his stomach. Felt his ribs, pronounced. She kept expecting him to move right, to make space on the dusty tweed, but they shifted the same way and met in more injury. The higher up his body she worked, the closer she got to sitting on his face. Soon enough they were laughing; soon enough they couldn't stop.

Once their laughter had them tummy-sore, they agreed they were disposable to everyone but each other. They agreed they should head north, back to Angus's fishing shack, which was hopefully still around. They agreed barramundi tasted best with just a dash of lemon. Nothing fancy.

That evening they bought a turkey from a farmer since it could've been Christmas, and it was their last night in Shearsend. The woman had a hoard of kids running around in the front yard, naked, under a sprinkler. Her husband slept in a hammock under a jacaranda and didn't wake to the sound of them parking. The kids paid no attention to Penny, as they tumbled and flipped about in explosions of droplets. A soft overspray dappled her body; she wanted to take her clothes off and run.

Angus stood on the verandah holding a plastic-wrapped turkey and chatting with the woman who wore a reindeer shirt. The woman was laughing at something he said and pointing enthusiastically at the land that stretched flat without ceasing. Turkeys foraged in the drought distraught fields, finding little. Something about the way Angus stood made it look as if he owned the home and the woman was just a visitor. If he were a farmer, Penny would marry him, and they'd have children who ran naked under a sprinkler not only on holidays but every day, and when it was night the kids would go to bed and Penny would listen to Angus's stories about straining fences, and she'd share about feeding the cattle and getting drool on her arm when they nuzzled, and when it grew late they'd leave all the French-doors open to let a breeze pass through the sleeping house, and on most nights they'd have sex under a sheet, but some nights, they'd have sex under the jacaranda that stood in solitude by the house. She would love Angus until he died and then, a widow, she'd work the land in silence, without anybody's help, and when the truck came to take her Herefords to the abattoir she wouldn't cry until it was out of sight and all she was left with was shit and hoof-prints.

Angus came to her with the bird. She touched the wrapped body and felt the chill of ice on its breast. Taking the band from his hair, she let the knots down. "When we run," she said, "let's run as ourselves."

He opened the door of the Kombi. She glanced at the farm disappearing in the rearview mirror, imagining she and Angus were just going to the markets to sell the tomatoes that sat in boxes, their red faces taut and supple. There was no need to run north, because everything that happened with his brother had never really happened at all. He had no brother. Amber had never been born.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They turned down Ridge Road and sped along the gravel that neither dipped or rose. The turkey sat between them, and they rested a hand on its breast, their fingers loosely intertwined. There was dust ahead, the colour of blood. Clouds on the horizon were building up big—churning—and she believed if she could taste them they'd taste sweet. There was darkness in their colour but she no longer tried to predict rainfall. In the north a tractor plowed, tearing up the earth, creating ridges and canals, and the wind blew strong, collecting the bare earth and transforming it into clouds.

Angus put the radio on and something acoustic played. A woman with the voice of a little girl sang of the sea and the ones she'd left behind. When they entered the dust cloud, a man started harmonising with the woman, voices imperfect, slick yet fat, overheated like a kettle that wouldn't stop boiling. It sounded so good to Penny. The dirt was moving around them and the atmosphere was darkening like twilight and they could barely see a metre ahead when they pulled over and lent their seats back to take in the clouds full of heat and nature. The woman hit a note and followed through with another that was equally as solitary and yet in no way alone. Penny rested her ear up to the window as the final touch of the cloud battered the panels; it hit harder than all the dirt that had gone before; it hit with fury; and then it was gone.

There was no more music.

The caravan was cold. It was dark. The generator growled. Angus flicked the light switch, but the bulb blew. He lit candles. It started to rain. Amazed, Penny stepped outside to touch the first drops, to experience the low dip of the sky. She came inside, wet. Angus had gotten the heater going, made scrambled eggs, browned grain-heavy bread. Wrapping a towel

that smelled like parsley around her shivering body, he lifted her onto the countertop. Side by side, they ate from a shared plate, dripping butter onto their thighs. The food gone, Angus chewed a hunk of his hair.

“I’ve never seen a man do that before,” she said, her words lightly muffled by the pounding rain.

He took a hunk of her hair and placed it in his mouth. She took a strand of his—the only that wasn’t knotted—and with shared hunks they gnawed. Spat. Standing, she pulled him in to straddle her. His weight made her breathless, even though there was a bushfire scarceness about him. He inspected her face with his fingertips, tracing her structures, stopping just before her open eye. She tried to carry him to the bed, but tripped and they landed on the mattress. On her knees, she removed his thrift-shop shirt, his jeans. His chest had dirt freckles, his collarbone a river of muck.

“You need a bath,” she said.

He touched behind her ear, scraping earth colours and revealing it under his nail. “I don’t have a bath.”

“A shower?”

“We need to heat the water.”

“A cold shower?”

They ran outside in the frigid rain to the jacaranda, where there was a ladder reaching up to a suspended feeding-trough with holes punctured along the base already gushing water. Angus fought his boxers off and scaled the ladder, called out for her to grab the bucket by the tank. She filled the bucket and heaved, but the mud brought her down. From where she lay she took in the man—all white teeth flashes—as he cheered, welcomed the thunder. It was true, he was glorious

up there, like a pirate who didn't torture.

She hauled the bucket and passed it up to Angus who dumped it into the trough. There was something magical about adding rainwater to rainwater. Rivers heaved down the mountain, flooding their feet with bounties of foliage: thorn, bark, seed-pod, mush. They screamed against the cold, soaped one another with fury.

Rain stewed, they stumbled to the caravan and in candlelight studied the speckles of one another's skin. Penny asked if she could kiss his ribs. He asked if he could draw tongue circles behind her knees. Between her thighs. She asked if she could bite where his voice-box hid. He asked if he could take her earlobe between his teeth. She asked if he would lick her clit, trace planets. He moved about her body in brushes and pauses.

Their bodies got wet again. So wet that when she climbed onto him, and put him inside her, she felt like she'd slipped into some sort of death, but a wonderful one, her body brilliant in all the crashing. She'd always liked breath, but when she came, she came breathless.

The rain changed direction and rushed in from the south, struck the caravan so hard it felt like it might be thrown into the valley, closer to the town it resisted. A sneeze of rain entered when the plastic sheet that served as a window came loose. Angus held Penny with a grip that seemed more for his protection than hers.

"I don't like storms," he said.

"I do," she said, thinking of the mess of clouds that would come over the bay and break right above her childhood home, her dad's laughter. "My dad loved storms."

"I know your old man's not around anymore," Angus said, touching the gash on her cheek, "but still, post-sex and dad talk don't mix."

“Tell me about having sex with Amber.”

“You’re breaking all the rules, Pen.”

“You should’ve known I would.”

“Alright—” She hid against his chest, her head under the blanket so she would hear in muffled tones. “I first had sex with her the week she moved into my mum’s house. We’d just caught a chook for dinner and chopped its head off when Amber—her palms bloody—unzipped my jeans. I hadn’t expected to lose my virginity with an axe in hand.”

“When did she choose Pete over you?”

“The next day.”

“But did you keep sleeping together?”

“It stopped when she went for Pete, but started again when he ran off to the mines. She was pregnant and desperate. Got a letter to me up north—no idea how she found me—told me to come home. She treated me like shit, you know, after the cake thing, but she needed me. I was making her meals to keep her from dying and she was taking a medley of pills she scored off this nasty piece of work named Mindy. Anyway, the pills didn’t do the baby much good. She went manic after the miscarriage, was sleeping till sunset and spending all night painting the tree-trunks red. I kept telling her it was no good for the trees, but she came at me, her hands red—again—I’d wash the trunks when she was sleeping.”

“Do you love her?”

“Of course I do.”

“I think I hate her.”

He peered beneath the blanket and smiled, as if he knew something she didn’t.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was already too much light. Angus lay naked beside her and she felt the fatness of her vagina. The sex the night before had made such good sense after buying a turkey and speeding along in a dust storm, but seeing his knots, she started to wonder if they'd been drunk on confusion. It's not that he wasn't beautiful there on the sheet free mattress, but was she just being another Amber, fucking him to distract from her broken life? No, she wasn't ready to compare herself with that woman.

And weren't they supposed to be running north? Going by the sunlight it was close to midday. For all she knew, Rhi had already gone to the police; it wasn't long before the boys in blue would arrive on the mountainside. For just a second she thought of her mum: she would've known exactly how to face the law. She had a solution for everything.

Penny woke Angus by stroking him. They had sex, quickly, she bent on all fours because sex was sometimes best when she could swallow the other whole. When they came, she reached back, and caught his come in her hand. Washed the white globs down the sink.

"Next," Angus said. "Are you going to eat me alive?"

"We're in a rush."

"Then why'd we just—"

"That barely took any time—"

"I think I'm offended." He laughed, openly, and she could see he was delighted by her, for some unknown reason.

"Angus, start packing."

"What about having a cuppa?"

"You can make tea any day."

They boxed vegetables from his garden, threw a garbage bag of clothes together, and searched for camping gear: tent, stove, torch, matches. When she was sorting through dinged-up kitchenware, she heard something boiling, and saw Angus pouring himself a brew. She tossed a can opener, that struck his billy. He winked. She figured that was flirting, and supposed it was fine. She could maybe even like it, if she didn't feel a mixture of threat and her utter incompetency to avoid disaster. When they opened up the Kombi to pack, they both swore. The turkey: its plastic-wrapped body. She told him to get rid of it, and he told her to get rid of it. The bird remained.

But then Angus couldn't find Skull and he immediately unravelled. She didn't know he had the capacity to get so desperate so quickly. He paced his farm, muttering about when he'd last seen the dog. Yes, he was there at the caravan before he came to find Penny at the pub—found her drunk and she smashed up her face (she demanded to know why that was relevant)—but when they came home the previous night, where was Skull?

“I'm going bush. He must be at the waterhole.”

“That's insane. We have to leave.”

“Not without Skull.”

“Angus, the cops!”

But he was already strapping on his rucksack, filling his camelback with water. She yelled at him as he disappeared down a trail. He wasn't even wearing a hat. Would probably burn to death. She searched for the Kombi keys, shaky at the thought of leaving alone, but on scouring for an eternity, she realised he'd taken the one thing she needed to fuck off without him. The keys.

There was wind that night, unlike all the other nights, and it was chomping at the trees, murdering the limbs. It wasn't yet dark but everything was dark all the same, even the bushland greens sucked up the twilight, rejecting any sun they'd ever known. Penny couldn't understand why night was always coming in the country. The caravans seemed to have drawn in closer to tell secrets.

She heard tins-clanking and yelled out, "Angus, is that you?"

Amber came over the ridge and threw off her backpack. Beside her stood the kelpie, Skull. Behind her came Angus. So she'd been hiding out in the bush, eating baked beans to stay alive. She unclipped the cans from her pack, and brought her rubbish into her caravan. Seeing her do something so domestic made Penny shift out of shock into fury.

Amber came to the fire and they stood opposite, while Angus remained dimly lit on the lip of the ridge. "Why'd you make me do it?" Penny said.

"It was supposed to be the girl."

"What's the difference? Why'd you make me do it?"

"I tried...but I couldn't."

Penny grabbed a log and threw it on the fire, coals shot and bred flames. "Rhi, she saw me. She's going to the cops."

"Blame me."

"I want to."

"Then do it."

"How can I?" Penny cried. "After everything that happened that night in the rowboat." She choked. "I was just a kid..." No, that was wrong, she was a teen, by three days.

Amber bent her knees and sat in a squat, so close to the fire she must've scorched.

“You’re fucking Angus, aren’t you?” she said.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“This is my town, Penny. My men.”

“Your men!” She was shaking although her hands remained steady. “Angus, he’s just your bag of ribs to pick on when you’re bored.” Just like she was. A kid. “And Pete, you’re lucky he didn’t run you over first. He’s brutal and you chose him! Why would you go for a man who hurts you? You should hate that man. I hate that man!”

Amber picked up a stray bottle. “I do hate him, but he’s the father of my baby.”

“Your baby’s dead!” Penny grabbed the bottle and chucked it into the bush. The shatter was animal. “And it’s lucky it’s not living on this mountain with parents who hate each other. You’d be a terrible mother. Should never make more violent people like you.”

It looked like Amber had never cried before, and couldn’t make sense of the aggravation in her eyes, kept wiping her face across her forearm. Penny strode to Angus’s caravan as Amber said, “I’m sorry, Penny.”

“Are you? For what?”

“I can get us help.”

“Please,” Penny said. “Don’t.”

The scent of Angus in the caravan was a comfort when she pulled all the blankets over her shaking body. And yet, she resisted the comfort, wanted his scent gone. Wanted all the people gone, all the ones from that fucked up town.

She’d never owned that she was a kid when she ran off with Adeline and she’d never wondered how many kids get up to mischief so extravagant. What sort of kid needs to run? She’d fallen for a miniature woman who could provide escape, in all her muscled possibility. Which is

exactly what she did: “Get in.” Together they rowed across the Sydney Harbour. And it’d taken ages. And there’d been hand blisters. And passing ferries. And squalls. And no light. And sometimes they’d stopped laughing when they ran out of energy, wondered if they’d die, and sat in the lull of the waters, surrounded by moonlight flashes that might’ve been shark flanks. That is what she’d chosen, yes, but did she choose the pill that was slipped onto her tongue right before they made their escape? And stuck out there on the harbour in all that molasses, when Adeline ran her hand up Penny’s leg and slipped her finger under the lip of her undies and into her vagina, was that choice? Or was that confusion? A decision that was made for her before she could say no? Anyway, when it came to vaginas and fingers, when was the right time to say no? Was there time for that at all? Or did these things happen before there was such a thing as time? Perhaps, even, happened outside of time, in an orbit where manners and words aren’t so easily accessible. She’d never considered the fact that she wasn’t, possibly, ready for fingers. What she’d wanted was to put her lips on Adeline’s lips, there weren’t even supposed to be tongues. But before there were lips came a knife in the form of a finger. Not a big knife, but a butter-knife, handle made of bone. It felt like resistance, as if the handle didn’t want to be there, and her vagina would’ve preferred to stay sealed. But the more she focused on the resistance the more it felt jagged, so she tried to lie down in the hope that the bone would soften, become more like the flesh of her insides, but there was all this stuff on the floor of the dingy—like fish-hooks and fish-remains—and as far as she could remember boys always said vaginas smelled like fish, so she started to worry that the smell was in fact her and not her boat-bed. If anybody asked, she would’ve told them she really smelled like salty-porridge, but decisions, often, seem to be made about bodies before bodies can talk. When Adeline asked if Penny liked her finger, she said yes, because when something was inside her it didn’t feel right to say no. She wanted it to be a yes

time, because no was for bad times, and she needed that time to be a good time. That's also what she told herself when Adeline pulled her undies off and got down between her legs. She wondered, initially, if Adeline was in search of something, maybe she had a tick and needed its removal to be done expertly, leaving no poisonous head; teens with teeth so complete could manage bodies and venom. The finger came out and another thing touched her vagina that made her groan, like she'd swallowed a mouthful of Sunkist and it'd bubbled through her blood-cells. But she couldn't tell what the thing was that made her giggle. It was warm, but it sort of felt like pudding that hadn't been cooked yet, just a big glob of it, but then it probed right where all her senses came to a point. Penny reached down between her legs and found Adeline's head. What if Adeline didn't like her once she realised she smelled like salty porridge? She pushed lightly at Adeline's head and the pudding sensation stopped. Her heart clamoured. The pudding wasn't pudding. The pudding was a tongue. Having just turned thirteen there were quite a few things Penny had figured out about sex, but nothing she'd ever learned from friends or her mum taught her that pudding made a lot more sense than knife-handles.

Adeline said, "Want me to stop?"

And although Penny did, she also didn't. "No, keep going."

It was dark. The bush was so loud with animal calls—death—she wouldn't be getting sleep. She peered outside and saw the fire was down to coals, some already black. Angus and Amber were not at the fire, were probably in bed; she needed to see them together.

She opened Amber's door, walked to the bed, and stood over them. Amber looked gentle in the light coming from the alarm clock that blinked the wrong time, her tattoos and scars not what was most obvious, but rather the olive patches of unmarked skin, like islands between

broken bodies of water. Penny wanted to put her hands on Amber, feel her asleep, forget the woman she was when she was awake.

Penny slunk to the floor. The noises of the bush sounded soft, as if somebody was overseeing the insects and creatures, telling them now wasn't the time to scream. The room darkened, the moon finally cloud-covered. Those clouds would never rain.

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Amber didn't stop on the outskirts of Shearsend. It may or may not have been Boxing Day. Between the women sat the raw turkey. It'd never occurred to Penny how far you could drive in the country without stopping, how far you could be taken in the prison of a vehicle. The road cut across a paddock so flat it resembled a Big W carpark. There wasn't a mountain or even a rise in sight, only sheep like tiny clouds scattered across the flatland. Other than the sheep there were a few boulders and skeletal trees that looked as if they'd drowned in a pre-human flood. A lamb stood atop a boulder with the proud look of any elevated creature. Every time they reached a town, which was rare, Penny hoped for a stop sign, but none appeared. There were railway tracks with barriers wide open, no flashing red lights; Penny wondered if trains ever came, if people really lived in the houses with their rocking chairs on the verandahs catching the morning breeze and lulling their empty-cargo.

Amber had lied when she woke to find Penny at the base of her bed. She simply said get in the Kombi and I'll take you back to the pub. Penny looked back at Angus, the man she'd momentarily imagined running away with—to what? Although he was beautiful, he was a hopeless case of split pupil and agitated rib-cage. Had she really thought they'd find his seaside shack and she'd grow fat with his babies and those babies would grow into toddlers who'd climb trees barefoot, make nests in the canopies? She slipped back to his bedside and kissed him goodbye. He did not wake. As Amber dropped the Kombi in fourth gear and they tumbled down the mountainside, Penny actually laughed, believing she was finally coming to the end of a royally fucked threesome.

Penny turned off the radio that had covered their silence for hours. When she tried to speak her sticky-mouth revealed her anxiety. "The droughts pretty bad here."

“Aren’t you going to ask where we’re going?” They crossed a causeway. Creek-water dazzled.

“Where are we going?”

“To get help.” Amber turned down an even straighter road. “You know, Penny, I don’t just break things. I fix things too.”

It was unusual to see a look of pride in Amber’s expression, but Penny didn’t feel at all comforted. She was certain they were heading towards Central Australia. She rolled herself a cigarette and smoked in a dull stupor, considering what it’d be like to die by a clump of spinifex. She imagined the mice who’d poke their heads out from the blades, inspect her crazed digs for water. When she’d trained to be a teacher, and done a practicum at an all-girls school, she made the students read those type of books, the ones where women fought to survive in the desert. The girls liked it best when the women died and especially when their death took chapters, not just pages. They wanted barbecued breasts. They wanted bodily fluids leaking from every welt and unsealed hole. She marvelled at the student’s manic imaginations, asked why they always preferred the victim to be a woman.

“It’s less beautiful to watch a man die,” they chimed.

She understood herself to be a bad teacher.

The more she saw roadkill, the more she was convinced she’d be the girls next beautiful victim. It all seemed too tailored. Too Australian. But then, right when she was considering how much it could really hurt throwing herself from a moving vehicle, the towns became more frequent.

Her head floated buoyant. “Look!” She pointed. “People!”

Amber touched her forehead. “Shit, you’re boiling.” She turned a vent her way. Hot air

blew into hot air.

It probably made her a shit person that she'd never seen a prison before. Not in real life. Some of her classmates were from families who enjoyed road-trips in their 4WD Porsches, spoke of journeys to Melbourne, passing, from a distance, the Goulburn prison. When Penny asked for a description they couldn't say much other than, "It's just like a box... a big box that you put people in." They spoke of the archery range on the outskirts of the city (that they said wasn't really a city), the targets amidst the mountain-side rubble. Penny had wanted to drive to Melbourne, not fly, to see the innards that connected the cities, the parts of Australia that had never been revealed to her except through the imprecise words of those who didn't want to know boxed-people, wanted to be the judges of the boxed.

On seeing a prison for the first time, Penny realised her classmate's descriptions hadn't been all that imprecise. A big box was nestled in a valley, like a futuristic warning amidst humble paddocks. Penny was too consumed with taking in the premises to consider why they had left the freeway to follow a gape-mouthed creek towards the box. Amber held the steering-wheel like she'd never let it go and she squinted although the sun was behind a cloud. An eruption of Lorikeets puffed like autumn leaves from the box, as if prison escapes were that easy.

The carpark had a small selection of dinged up Corollas and Commodores, leaving wide selections for new comers. Amber circled a few times, seemingly worried about finding the perfect spot, then swung into a slot that was too small, had to reverse and reposition the van in a non-compact space. She kept explaining that there were no shaded spots, apologising again and again for the heat. There was such a jumble of sorries, so unlike Amber, that Penny focused on assuring her it was a good park. No sooner had they finished patting each other's hands across the body of the turkey, than Amber got out and walked towards the glass-entrance of the

complex.

Penny, only then, faced Amber committing herself. She jumped out the van and called for her, but she'd already entered the sliding doors, turning for just a moment to wave goodbye. Penny ran; the sun's glare on the glass prophetic in its blaze. As she got closer, the glare vanished and she saw her passing through a security arch. The doors of the reception hummed open, sensing her on the threshold.

A broken-nosed cop smiled, said, "You're a fast runner, aren't you?"

She backed away shaking her head, terrified that her entry would signify her guilt and seal her containment. "Amber," she called, but she was already nodding to the cop on the other side, clutching an empty water bottle, only, when instructed, to drop it in a bin.

"Adeline," she screamed.

Amber turned and said, "Finally. My real name." Her hair covered one eye, the visible eye showing a tender humour. "But I prefer Amber."

The cop who'd been impressed with Penny's running was no longer impressed, demanded that she enter or return to her vehicle. Heat spread along her sinuses. Reaching her hand out she tried to catch Amber with desire. Her outstretched hand looked weaker than a strand of grass facing a slasher. It was clear, so clear, there'd never been any strength in her reach. She was happy to be weak, to wait only on Amber's selection rather than simply saying, "I want you."

Facing her half-smile, Penny saw how expectant she was of loss, how she had a childhood full of it, teen years riddled. Slipping into being an abandoned adult was as easy as starting a bushfire in drought. There was a simplicity to her shrug, a lightness to her sadness, an unwillingness to admit that some things hurt, and are never diminished to dust.

You're not supposed to want your mum at twenty-five, but Penny did. And yet, she also didn't. She wanted the platonic form of mum, the one who was never disappointed with her choices, was proud of each decision she made, even the ones that inspired her to rally her school-friends to skip school and get on a train to Carnes, only for one girl to be pulled into the toilet and tickled by a sparsely-bearded man who smelt of petunia (like he'd been handling women so often he was feminine-scented). Even if she kept secrets, years of secrets: all twelve girls in her class, one-by-one.

All it took was a look that said, "I need to know," and Penny would lead a school-friend into the toilets where Adeline had stolen the tiles. Over the ceramic-absence, she'd lie out a towel, say, "I'll show you." Some of her classmates interested her, like Sammy with her buckteeth and the tattoo on her upper thigh that read 'Cunt,' as if it was even cool to make explicit what could be found just an inch beyond the ink. Others were as insipid as fat-free yoghurt, incapable of curdling. They were the ones who didn't talk, whose eyes spoke of the need for knowledge and the terrors they expected to encounter in its discovery.

Sometimes Penny said, "You don't have to do this, it's not like all teenagers really know what they say they know."

But the yoghurt-ones would exchange one terror (of the knowledge) with its opposite (not knowing) and they'd beg. That was the grossest, but she felt she owed it to the girls. If she'd had it with Amber, why couldn't they have it at all?

It was Sammy who bit Penny once on the nipple and said, between skin and teeth, "My mum says you're a bad influence."

"My mum would agree. She says I'm possessed, even though she doesn't believe in

demons.”

“Can your head spin around?”

They both giggled. “Mum says I’ll never meet a nice person until I start being a nice girl.”

“Maybe you’re just not nice,” Sammy said, then looked away, as if it wasn’t her who’d spoken. “Like no matter what you do, you’ll always be this way.”

A car pulled up beside the Kombi, even though there were endless free spaces. It seemed the nearness of panels gave the driver comfort. A woman got out dressed like she’d just received her first pay-cheque and spent it on the suit that made her wriggle. Lawyer, Penny knew. Maybe she’d end up Amber’s aid.

The woman said something about the heat, adding, “Perhaps you should sit inside your van so you don’t get heatstroke.”

The sun looked unusually dominant, revealing killer instincts. She wanted to tell the lawyer about all the women in the books who died from not seeking out shade, but she was distracted by the purple burns colouring her legs, could already see the future water-warts that would consume the tops of her feet. It was true, she wished for winter, wanted to be rallying against the cold. She saw herself, scarf-sized, wrapped in the safety of her mother’s palm.

There was a sandstorm of light in the cabin of the van. Angus lay beside her, his cheeks sunburnt mottled, his lips caked with blood clumps. Penny reached for his hand, but he disappeared. The foliage through the window was blue-green.

“Hi, sleepy head.”

The first sight of Amber was a punch. Penny clambered onto her knees, taking her in like

it was the first time, ever, and she'd wound it all back, no history of stops and starts.

Penny hiccupped. "You're here."

"Where else would I be?" Amber said.

Penny clambered over the back of the seat, bumping the turkey, and touched her thigh to ensure she wouldn't disappear like Angus. Amber placed one hand on top of hers, kept the other on the wheel.

"You must be sore," she said. Penny shook her head, even though she was damper-baked. "Did you think I was dobbing myself in or something?"

"Yeah." She moved her pinky finger in tiny circles across Amber's stubbled upper thigh.

"Neither of us will ever do time for that prick, Pete."

It all seemed so obvious. How did she ever fear Amber was gone for good? Why would she drive hours to some remote prison when all she had to do was head over to the station in Shearsend, push open the un-greased door and offer up her wrists for the cuffs.

Amber touched the burns on Penny's cheeks. "Fuck, you really did yourself some damage," she said.

Penny was so close to feeling embarrassed, but there was Amber touching her, no hint of mockery, just concern. Yet for all the tenderness there was something about it that seemed wholly unrelated to the burns. Whatever happened in the prison had softened Amber. Shattered Amber.

"My mum used to take me here when I was a kid," Amber said. It was startling to realise they'd driven as far as the Blue Mountains, that they were only a couple of hours from Sydney. "She really liked cliffs, used to put me on one of those kid leash things because I was a bit of a runner and we'd hike out to bluffs where we could suck that blue haze into our lungs which

Mum said was magic. Her favourite views were the ones out on dirt roads that the tourists don't know about."

There was only a half hour left of light, as they grumbled down a pot-holed track behind houses with kids getting in their final bite of daylight play. It seemed strange how quickly you could cross from suburb into bushland, how remote and frightening the cliffs. They ducked and rose till they reached a lookout with no barrier. Amber parked so close to the edge Penny's gut got sandbag heavy. They dug through the box of food that Penny and Angus had packed for their escape north, and each got a lettuce-head and some carrots.

Amber beckoned her to follow on foot, took her hand, saying, you better be my leash this time since Mum's not here.

"Sit."

The two women dangled their feet over the edge, their hips glued, as they ate, and Amber pointed out the intricacies of the gully, the fracture lines Penny never would've seen unaided.

"The creek-beds are the beauties; if you walk there you'll find good water."

She spoke with pleading eyes, as if they were kids and she had a secret that didn't tell well, left her listeners questioning the plausibility. Her teeth worked away at the pulp of her mouth. Penny saw her—all those years ago—on the Opera House steps, her head all ecstasy mangled, her teeth all ecstasy manic.

Placing her index finger on Amber's lips she said, "Don't hurt yourself," and with that her jawline softened, and she went back to speaking of the valley with loose, virgin-words.

Penny knew Amber was dabbling in firsts: the act of sharing, the trembling vulnerability, the delight in beauty. Their four hands were muddled together, cocktail sweet and connected,

shots of communication passing from finger to finger. The shock of their new found closeness made Penny giddy. They were in the heavens, the two girls who had both been escape-artists and had grown into escaped-women.

Where the creek went jagged, Amber pointed, said, “That’s where she left me.”

All the giddiness sizzled. “Who?” Penny asked.

“Mum.”

“Left you?”

Her explanation came in bitten-words. She was eleven. She liked yellow-shorts the best back then and just happened to be wearing them the day her mum pulled her out of school. Before that day, there’d been a few months of certainty. Her mum had hung onto a job even though the pay was shit, and her boss sometimes locked her in the men’s toilets. “Sometimes,” she said, “men do things like that.”

During those months, the lady in the blue dress came to their house to see if things were going alright—her name was Sunny, which Amber thought was cool—and she seemed happy with the regular servings of macaroni cheese, said intervention wasn’t looking so necessary. Amber hadn’t known what intervention meant, but she wrote it phonically on a McDonald’s receipt, “intervenshone.” It sounded like a good kind of fire.

But then one day her mum came to her school with an aggressive smile and pulled her out, even though Ms. Banks warned about “intervenshone.” They couldn’t afford train-tickets, so they jumped the stiles and slept as they were taken mountain high. They hiked, built a campfire, ate beans, shared the same sleeping-bag, and slept. When the morning came and Amber saw her mum was gone, she dug her hand under her ribcage to see if she could remove bones. The fire was raging and she kept it going for five days, which was how long it took for a hiker to happen

upon her, right when she was standing in the creek, considering if she could eat rocks.

It was the lady in the blue dress, Sunny, who told Amber the truth about her mum, that she'd been picked up by the police and sentenced for abandoning her daughter and stabbing her boss in the hand with a pen. It was Mrs. Cunningham, her posh foster parent, who later told her that her mum wasn't getting out of prison as she'd been "bad" and her sentence was extended fifteen years.

"So that's why we went to the prison," Penny said. "To see your mum?"

"I thought she could help us. Tell us what to do."

"Amber, she abandoned you! How could you go to her for help?"

"Some mothers have done a lot worse."

"I'm not interested in comparisons," Penny said. "You could've died."

"But I didn't."

"So that's it? You forgive her?"

"At least she didn't go with her only other option and put me in foster care."

"Are you saying it was a loving act?"

"Yes!"

The Rosellas got aggressive, exploding from the treetops and scratching the sky with their squawks. "What kind of explanations has she given for what she did?"

"Haven't really spoken about it," Amber said. Her tatts made the dusk darker. "I've never gone to see her before."

"Not once?"

"No."

"So you've been avoiding her—you know what she did was wrong."

“That’s not what I said.” She pulled at the neck of her singlet. “She’s just been pretty far away.”

“You’ve been scared.”

She cleared her throat. “Wouldn’t you be?”

“Of course. But why are you going to her now, after all this time?”

“Because I had you to come with me.”

“Me?” Penny touched her throat. “What have I got to do with anything?”

“I’m not heaps into thinking about emotions,” she said as she dug a tiny-grave with a stick. “But even I know seeing mum in those wattle-greens might make me get pretty messy. I’ve spent all these years imagining how it’ll feel to hold her hand across some shitty table—you know, the type with a plasticky surface—and thinking about how different my life could’ve been if she didn’t get taken from me by the bush. The cops. Men.” Cockatoos drowned-out the Rosellas with their gut-concertos. “But then you came along and did what I asked. You drove when I asked you to, just because you knew I needed help. It’s like you care about me. Or something. And then you confronted me on the mountain about how I hurt people. And nobody confronts me. Not even the dickheads who love me. And then that night on the mountain I just kept thinking to myself nobody can handle me. Except you. And maybe, if we go to my mum—you and me—we’ll tie up all these loose ends that have hung around my neck for years.”

Penny got the mustard blanket from the Kombi and wrapped Amber up, warm. “So,” she said. “What did you and your mum talk about yesterday?”

“Turns out I needed to make a booking to visit her.” Amber scratched doggedly at her shin. “I scheduled it for today.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Mum’s our only hope.”

“For what?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“Do you remember,” Penny said, “when we were teens and about to get in the rowboat?”

“Yeah.”

“You said your mum died in spring, just like my dad.”

“I couldn’t tell you the truth, but I wanted you to get me.” She threw the heads of her carrots off the cliff and they landed in darkness.

Penny handed her a lettuce leaf, rolled like a scroll. Amber ate it in one bite. “I wonder who we’d be if they were still around, keeping us on track?”

Lying on the rock, Amber spread the mustard blanket across them, and rested her forehead between Penny’s shoulders. When her breath came soft, Penny allowed herself to cry for her.

Being back at the prison felt like the type of déjà vu that wouldn’t end well. Amber was jittery as they snuck along the road. She’d always been a fast driver, but that day she took it slow and swerved to avoid insects on the gravel. The turkey sat between them, its juices bleeding between its flesh and the clear wrap. Penny couldn’t justify why they hadn’t thrown the thing off the cliff, even just lobbed it out the window in transit, but the act of getting rid of a whole body seemed too obscene. There had to be a more dignified method of disposal.

When they parked, Amber asked Penny to check her over. Penny wanted to cry for the hopelessness of it all. She already looked like she’d scored a few jail tats and her jean-shorts were split up the left side, showing off her dull white boy-shorts. She chewed at her bottom lip

like it was her last meal.

Penny raised Amber's chin, said, "Look straight."

"Like this?" she asked, staring hard but blinking too often.

A plane crossed the sky leaving a trail of smoke that released pinned, fanned out to a broad cloud. The two women stood shoulder-to-shoulder and waited for the cloud to dissipate, but although the smoke broke up it didn't seem to want to disappear.

"Want me to come with you?" Penny asked.

Amber shook her head and took hold of her split shorts, her fingers serving as stitches, and walked to the entrance. She'd only ever looked big to Penny—big in her littleness—but in that moment she was miniature.

Amber came out of the prison quicker than expected. She wore a dulled expression, like she'd seen what she'd expected, without knowing she'd expected anything at all. Her skin, although previously tanned, had a fishy sickness about it. She no longer clutched the split of her shorts that she'd been trying to cover up in a vain attempt at decency. The split ran so high it was taking on the waist-band, would likely tear completely by day's end. Penny was unconvinced by what she saw, disbelieving anybody could be so changed in the span of fifteen minutes.

"Please drive." Amber spoke like the van was full of sleeping children.

They departed the prison as slowly as they'd approached it, the revs so low Penny almost stalled crossing a creek's causeway. When Amber gave no directions, she just started driving south.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They stopped on the outskirts of Sydney in a town Penny had never been to before, but had heard, back in her city days, was pretty but rough. Their trip had taken hours that felt like dying hours. The turkey smelled like semolina. Amber banged at the radio, crunching out tunes that made the van increasingly more claustrophobic with the racket of harmonicas and tambourines. One station got Jesus-y and Penny put an end to that with her fist; faith wasn't making any kind of sense to her, until Amber lent her head on Penny's shoulder and fell asleep. Her loose neck was puppy-innocent, made Penny reposition her cheek on her shoulder each time she dropped forward. When a drop of spit slunk down her shoulder she let it stay.

There was a creek, caves (so signs said), a tattoo parlor, and bikies enough to dominate the pub. Penny would've expected the bikies to be suspicious of her, but they greeted her with nods, laughed at her friend's shorts, asked if she needed a nappy-pin or two. A woman with an 80s blaze of blonde curls offered pins from her leather jacket, said she'd pinned them there when she first became a mum, but left them there when her kids grew up to be arseholes, wanting to remember she'd once been loved.

Penny ordered steaks at the bistro, but was told her credit card had been declined. She was surprised it'd taken her mum that long to cut her off. Outside, the courtyard was flanked with rooms for accommodation and lattice covered in ivy.

"I couldn't buy us any food," Penny said. "My credit card was declined. Mums!"

She hoped Amber would laugh, but she was sitting at a table tormenting a napkin, creating shapes kids would've been scared of, building them up in bonfire union. Penny reached for one of the monstrous shapes.

"You want to tell me what your mum said?" Penny asked.

Amber shook her head, kept tearing.

“You sure?”

She nodded, kept tearing.

Penny went to the bar and asked how much beers were. She shook out coins and grabbed the cheapest larger they had, brought it to Amber who just stared. Penny wanted to complain about all her money being used up, ask a few questions about fuel. Futures. Fresh underwear. But Amber didn't seem open to talking, just wanted to get smaller, hug her knees to her chest and stare down her unlit napkin-bonfire.

Penny said, “So now what?”

“I don't like plans.”

“You planned seeing your mum.”

Her eyes read the graffiti of the table, focusing on one particular stick-figure chewing the edge of a heart. Penny wondered if she'd carved it herself. Where'd she gotten a knife?

“I want to see where you're from,” Amber said, without looking up.

It was Penny who flinched that time. “You don't mean...”

She smiled, traced the chewing figure. “Come on, what else have we got to do?”

“Well I don't know...keep running from the cops.”

“Is that what we're doing?”

“I suppose so.”

“Sydney's big. They'll never find us there.”

“Isn't it common knowledge that criminals always go back to where they're from and get caught within days?”

“What crime shows have you been watching?” Amber asked, finally sipping her beer.

“Anyway, why’re you using the word criminal? It can’t be that easy to become one.”

“Drunk driving. Bodily damages. Seems pretty criminal to me.”

“Good thing you didn’t get into the legal system. You’re so unforgiving.” She used her nail to dig at her carving, but no wood came away. “We don’t need to do a Thelma and Louise. It’s not like you killed Pete. And Rhi—who should be dead—doesn’t even have a bruise.”

“I don’t believe you think this is all a joke,” Penny said and run a finger down her schooner-glass, helping a teardrop of condensation fall. “Anyway, you’ve seen where I grew up.”

“Manly—yeah. But never your home.”

“What do you want to know about me? Just ask.”

“I can’t learn about you from you,” she said, removing a Stanley-knife from her pocket and reworking the carving of the heart. Penny wondered how she’d been carrying that thing around without the shape of it being revealed through the denim of her shorts.

“What don’t I know about myself?”

“You’re a feral. And that’s why I like you.”

It’d never crossed Penny’s mind that Amber might actually like her. “You like me?”

Amber put a flame to the napkins and winked. The bonfire of monsters puffed a toxic puff of black and left ash remains. “Alright, we don’t have to go back to your childhood home, but let’s at least see the Opera House, sit on the steps where we made those promises when we were young.”

Penny had thought the first time she’d mention their past would be epic, not a line within so many other lines. Those words were supposed to stand out, purely, apart from all other worries and interruptions. And yet something about the mess of it all made it ten times more

brilliant.

Homecomings are only for those who believe in homes. For others, it's an incarceration. There were cars, everywhere, all so clean, so fast, so irritated by the slowness of the Kombi. Wind knocked the van around as they crossed the bridge, making Penny clutch the wheel with both hands. She didn't want to be the driver, but Amber wasn't to be trusted; she knelt on the seat pointing at the yachts on the harbour, claiming she had plans to sail around the world. She was beaming, sweat bullets slipping from her scalp, her hands spider explorative, tracking out webs of travel. Her words came at a speed-addict pace, all about her mum's arrival in Australia as an infant, the seamstress skills that kept her family alive, the explorer outfits she'd made for her daughter once the family cut her off as a pregnant teen. She hiccupped the more she spoke.

Penny hadn't gotten lost in Sydney for as long as she could remember, but she did that day. They found themselves in Alexandria and had to backtrack to find the Opera House. By the time they reached an underground carpark, Penny was getting a migraine from all Amber's talk. She'd learnt too much about her mum.

The pair burst out the lift and the sun came on like a pride parade. Amber clutched the turkey's body to her belly; Penny couldn't be fucked asking why she was mothering the thing, it's not like she'd get a straight answer. The Opera House was desert-creature-splendid, with windows, wings, and waves. The house made the sky appear inconsequential—why a house? Nobody lived there. But for all its immensity, Penny wasn't overcome. Instead, she felt sheltered, but that feeling of sanctuary passed when Amber bumped her with the turkey and told her to get up the steps. They stood on the top platform alone in masses of wind, under the watch of the three monstrous blow-fly eyes. If she'd felt assured of anything in life, it was that there'd

be floods of tourists, but they were all making their way up the tiers of stairs, their awe turning their steps bovine. And yet, maybe it wasn't just their awe that was causing them to slow, but had more to do with the woman who ran to the furthest edge of the platform and chucked a turkey into the harbour.

After all Penny's repulsion towards their dead cargo, she couldn't help feeling Amber had tossed the bird too soon. Tourists pointed. Her exposure reminded her of those early days in high school where she'd be stuck at some girl's party, feeling sticky with her sense of difference, and there'd be some bullshit horror movie playing for their entertainment, some woman running from a lover who turned out to be a killer, but the type of killer all the other girls thought was sexy, and down in Penny's guts there'd be a scream clawing, not of voyeuristic delight, but of unparalleled desperation for how hopeless it all was: this business of being a woman on a wide open platform with the slow approaching world of barricades and brickwalls.

"Amber—Amber—listen to me." Penny grabbed her shoulders. "What happened with your mum?"

"I've been telling you." She scoffed. "For hours."

"No, at the prison."

"Stuff."

The first tourists came into their territory: sunburnt kids and their "I climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge" shirted parents. Penny clutched her shirt, that smelled like rusted tins and tears, ordering Amber to sit where they'd sat as teens, but she was too busy fighting for the best vantage point, refusing to take any tourist's pictures, instead shoving her phone into a kid's hand and demanding he take her picture with Penny. Once the boy had followed the orders, Amber shook his hand like she was the Prime Minister and she ran the boy's world.

“What’s your name?” she asked, after checking the pictures and telling him it was good he’d taken two, because the first one was shit.

“Devon.”

“Oh, God, are you an American?” He shrugged, as if he could cover up his heritage with cool. “That’s a shame. See this woman? We met when she was your age. What are you, thirteen? I gave her a bit of danger so she fell in love with me. And now she isn’t so sure she loves me, because I’m a handful. She doesn’t even know that yet, but it’s true. See, Devon, that’s what people do. They fall in love with your tattoos and rage, but then they realise you require a lot of maintenance and they aren’t willing to put in that kind of time. Sort of like mothers. They get sick of you once you start to act crazy like them. Don’t ever think you’re safe just because you’re the fruit of your mother’s loins.”

The boy run.

Penny turned on Amber. “What are you on about? Me, not willing to put up with you? I’ve spent my li—”

“Let’s go clubbing.”

Penny knew she wanted her to scream. To throw a punch would’ve been like a birthday surprise—the type she expected—but Penny wasn’t willing to give her what she wanted. “That’s a great idea,” she said.

Only the flinch of Amber’s mouth revealed her smarts; she knew, of course, Penny was raging.

They owed twenty bucks for parking on prime real estate. Penny ranted about how shit Sydney was, and how they were all filthy Wall Street types, even though they didn’t have the

bagels and nobody drank drip coffee. They had to dig around the Kombi for change, through all the vegetables and camping gear. When they could only scrounge up twelve bucks, Amber started begging from everyone who passed by; Penny refused to help. After an hour they were no wealthier, and Penny realised the longer she refused to beg, the more she owed on the ticket.

Amber lay on the mattress in the back of the Kombi, claiming they were going to get more money if she remained hidden. “Just offer one of the suits a blowjob,” she suggested.

“Many suits would prefer your filth,” Penny said. “Don’t you know anything about human psychology?”

“Sort of like you—you’re my girl-suit—I’m your filthy colony.”

Penny slammed the Kombi door. Five minutes later she returned with a hundred-dollar bill.

Amber scrapped and flicked at the note to check it was real. “How’d you do it?”

“I’ll tell you,” Penny said, cranking the engine. “As soon as you tell me what your mum said.”

As they drove up Macquarie Street, and Amber hung her head out the window, waving their leftover cash, calling things out to tourists: surprisingly pleasant things about the heat of the evening, the beauty of their dress. The tourists, once again, looked terrified of the woman they likely considered a real Australian, as if what qualified you was being dirty.

One man called out, “Show us your tits.”

Penny wanted her to cut him, but right when she wanted Amber crude, she said something so simple, “I don’t really have any.”

Penny felt like she hadn’t been in Sydney for years, when it’d really just been weeks. She’d actually loved clubbing—not all that long ago—for the dancing and drinking and the way

she grabbed at attention in her Nudy-jeans. Her alien face suited weird lighting. And yet, as she drove down Oxford Street, she couldn't, for the life of her, remember which clubs she used to go to, and which one had been her favourite. They all looked like they were impersonating clubs, as if they'd been slapped up overnight and the marketing team hadn't bothered to sell them as anything but gaudy. There were too many women—not her type of women—all the skirts so short and heels so high. Couldn't they just keep low to the ground? Wasn't life safer that way?

She couldn't find a park, had to wind endlessly through backstreets to steal a spot where the Kombi only just fit. She scratched her eyebrows so intensely she worried she'd drawn blood.

“It's only eight-thirty and I already want to go to bed.”

“This is when you get all rich girl,” Amber said. “When you're not getting your way.”

The club was sad. She knew it well, had gone there in her uni-days but stopped when she kept bumping into women from her high-school who she didn't like much and who certainly didn't like her. The club was full of its city-swagger, decked out with complicated couches, chandeliers, and a dance-floor that was so shiny it appeared slippery. There was only a single group of women who seemed undecided if they wanted to dance or cry. The city, while so full of people, was capable of feeling so empty. Amber bought the women shots (ignored Penny's questions about blowing the last of their cash), which momentarily cheered them up, but only till they licked salt from their hands, and squinted, offended by the lemon. The music was all cries of people who'd died young in tragic ways, the type of deaths that got a young journalist an award for documenting the choked-end. Penny was in no mood for synthetic notes and repetition. The bartender, a woman she would've usually flirted with, said it looked like she needed a drink.

“All I do is drink,” Penny said.

Amber was the only one on the dance floor, her nappy-pinned shorts allowing for her

pirouettes and sashays. The sad women were glad for Amber's theatrics, their cheeks reddened with expectancy; Penny, too, was sure she'd fall and break her head open, hoped she'd do it sooner rather than later so they could finally escape south.

When a new bundle of women arrived, Penny hoped they'd flood the dance floor and make Amber have to retreat, but instead they went to the bar and ordered wines and waters. Penny was annoyed by their drink choices, the fact that they all had sauvignon blanc preferences. She was so busy with her irritation that she didn't recognise they were old classmates. The ones who wrote the blog about her teen-antics.

Lily was the first to cry out, "Penelope Moore?" All Penny could remember about Lily was the year she got ringworm, wore inch thick foundation to cover up the infestation on her cheek. She wasn't certain, but Lily was the only girl in the group she'd never taken into the bathroom-stall. Lily surged across the room and went to hug her, only to collect herself and say, "You're filthy."

Penny supposed it'd been a while since her last bath. The last time she remembered being in a bath, it was dry, and Angus was in it; fuck, she missed him so much it made her saliva run salty. He would've known what to do with Amber. She wanted to be better at saving Amber than Angus, but she had her suspicions he'd know how to make her leave without so much as a word. Angus. Shearsend. It all seemed so long ago.

"Didn't you disappear?" Lily asked. Penny glanced at Amber, ready to say, no it was her. "Your mum met my mum at the Earth Food Store, said you never showing up for your birthday breakfast. I admire you. Birthdays can be so overdone. I get tired of opening presents. Cake, I hate cake."

Lily was shorter than Penny; she didn't know how to not look down at her. "Me too," she

said, and it was true.

“Your mum got a private investigator to find out where you were, you know. She’s probably told you all this...”

“A private...” She scoffed. “For fuck’s—”

“You and your mum never got on that well, since you were sort of bad, weren’t you? Is she glad you’re home? Or pissed? It only took the investigator fifteen minutes to find you’d gone to your dad’s childhood town. These days you just can’t hide, can you!”

“I’m going to get a dr—”

“Mothers! Aren’t they strange. So did you plan on becoming a farmer?” she asked, sipping her wine. “That’s sort of fashionable these days. Remember Bianca? What was her surname—yeah, Goldsworthy—she moved to Tasmania and started an organic farm. She’s been in heaps of magazines, you know, *Frankie* and that other hipster one where they tell you how to bake for your new man but not in a sexist way or anything, more in that ironically traditional way that people are into. Whoever said the 1950s weren’t a glory era?” She waited for Penny to say something of interest, but when she said nothing, Lily went on, “So is that why you’re so dirty? The quick bout of farming?”

“No.”

“How long have you been gone?”

“Weeks,” she said. “I think.”

“Penny,” Lily said, scratching at a keloid scar on her ear. Penny didn’t like that she used her name. Knew it was time for the blog. “Are you angry about the blog?”

It seemed best to lie, in the hope Lily would shy out of discussing the mess. “What blog?”

Lily snorted into her glass. “You can’t be serious?”

“I hate it when people say that.”

“God, you haven’t changed a bit. You were always so rude in school. Honestly, how could you not know about the blog? You’re all over the internet.” Lily tried to take a sip of her drink but it was finished. “People are loving it...I suppose they think it’s sexy, you know, all that girl-on-girl crap. It was Martha’s idea, I think, she ended up in publishing, and she’s really doing well for herself. Remember how we all knew she’d be so successful?” Penny did not. “Anyway, she went to counseling and learned what you did to them all was really damaging. Martha got the girls together and they decided to write about it, you know, reveal the crime, and now the blog is getting so popular they’re going to turn it into a book, but don’t worry, they’ve given you a different name, like Pamela or something; you should be buxom to get a name like that, well bigger at least. Anyway, I’ve heard the book will tell all the “untold” stories of these victims. They’ll have baby pictures of the girls on tricycles to really solidify their innocence. I thought they’d want to be anonymous but they’re saying they shouldn’t be ashamed.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Best to hear it from me, right?”

It was only then Penny noticed all the backwards glances from her classmates. She tried to remember which women she’d gone to the cubicle with, laid the towel out over the tile-absence, but it was all so long ago, and it’d had such a small impression on her. There in the club was the first time it’d ever dawned on her that her lack of care was odd; she should’ve felt something about what she’d offered them, all those bites of her body. Shouldn’t she? A feeling of utter estrangement came over her; all the people in the room (Amber included) and all the objects (lights, mirrors, glass) became flashes of invisibility.

Morally undressed, Penny slunk onto a couch. Teen impulses. Fuck. It was true, she'd probably confused those girls, but weren't they all in a mess of desire anyway? Each one of them had begged her. Was it her role to say "no." There was Amber rallying an entire dance-floor, all because her Mum had pushed her into a frenzy; Amber, a woman who'd chosen frenzy since she was a kid in a vain attempt to clench freedom. Penny was supposed to feel fury towards the woman, once teen, who'd gone-down on her in a rowboat before she'd even grown breasts. But she only felt sadness at her theatrics. Penny got it, throwing yourself belly-bared at the world, disgracing yourself for the sake of explosive sensation. Yeah, people got hurt. Learnt a few too many things before they could even write in cursive. But there wasn't just hurt. There was realisation, both vast and grotesque: the world is immense, the human experience urgent, tragic, transformative.

Outside, a storm had been and gone, turned the pavement from black to black. The women linked arms and went in search of the Kombi.

"Penny, where's the..."

"I forgot to lock it..."

"You realise people steal shit in the city. I shouldn't have to tell you that."

They dropped on the footpath, saturating themselves, and lowered their heads between their knees.

"God, why's it taking the cops so long to find me?" Amber said to the gravel.

"You say that like you want to get caught."

"I'm so tired."

"There are beds in places other than cells."

“I could hangout with my mum.”

“It’s not even you they’re after. It’s me!” Penny pressed her knees against her skull.

“I’m heaps sorry,” Amber said with a sniff. “I’ve never thought of keeping anybody other than myself safe. The Slater brothers are such disasters that I couldn’t make their lives more complicated. But you, you had a tidy life.”

Penny didn’t raise her head as she spoke about the Pamela version of herself. “You’re not my mess, Amber,” she said. “I’m my mess.”

Amber tilted Penny’s head back. “Twelve girls?”

“Twelve.”

“You are feral!”

The idea came to Penny: spa-bath, silk, open-doors, sea breeze, all that white. She’d wash Amber, just as she’d washed Angus, and they’d both be so warm, so sleepy, so clean. They’d find each other’s bodies, again, and nobody would say the other hadn’t given themselves over completely. They both had no hindrances. It was a terrible idea, going to the clean place, but she was expert at terrible.

The last ferry departed Circular Quay. On the water, they sat at the bow and watched the city pull away from them like a motherland, shedding high-rises, clubs, and shelters, all for a better world. Amber lent her head on Penny’s shoulder, shivering at the whisk of headland winds. For a moment Penny thought she’d fallen asleep but then she said something. So softly. “My mum refused to see me.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Behind them was a fireweed of lights on the bay; it was a Saturday night, after all, so the city was busy making friends. Timid parties were coming to an end in the backyards of the houses Penny had always feared, their size dwarfing her kid-self. As a dirty-nailed adult she felt equally as intimidated by the neighbourhood. Wasn't she supposed to have changed? She wished the palm trees could uproot themselves and find a rainforest, far from the immaculate slanted hill, Porsche bedazzled.

A woman burst out a driveway, glorious in a maxi-dress. Penny knew the type of party she'd attended because she'd been to hundreds as a child. It was winter and drizzling at one particular party, months after her dad's death, where she lit a campfire while her brother was indoors entertaining the adults with one of his latest dance routines. Penny watched Dom through the window, shivering each time the audience roared, "Encore." Later that night when she put the stick, aflame, to Dom's bell-bottoms, she'd expected them to be flame-retardant; when the burn healed, the scar on his shin looked like the stain of menstrual blood on tissue.

The woman in the maxi saw Penny and Amber and clutched her Gucci handbag, cried out for her partner. The partner ran out, his shirt wine soaked, and bundled her into a convertible. "What are you two doing around here?" he demanded. "You know the cops are just a call away."

"Good! They can arrest for drunk-driving," Amber said. The man didn't stay around for further conversation.

There were four houses on the street, each bigger than the last, the Moore residence the most sizable of all. Its glow reached the women who froze under its Madonna intensity.

"Wow," Amber said. "Subtle."

Penny scaled the wall and leapt into the backyard. She wondered what her home must

look like to Amber; it was so big while somehow pretending to be neat—the gardens working to make the construction appear like it'd sprung from the land, earth breeding balconies, pillars, cathedral-windows, an infinity pool.

Amber clambered up the wall but didn't jump into the yard. "You grew up in a glass-museum," she said. "When you die, archeologists will pick over your bones."

Penny stared up at her mum's bedroom window. Her parents had once slept in that room. Had sex in that room.

Amber jumped down. "I think this is a bad idea," she said quietly.

"You wanted this, remember—" Penny's voice strained.

"I get the picture. Can we go?"

"Don't you want to see my room?"

"This all feels dodgy."

"How else did you expect it to feel?"

"I just thought we could do it the traditional way: ring the doorbell, have tea, avoid topics on sex and politics."

"At one in the morning?"

"Mums deserve to be treated better than this," Amber said.

"Daughters deserve to be treated better than us," Penny said.

"What'd your mum ever do that was so bad? Never heard you mention anything about her abandoning you."

"I thought you said your mum was saving you."

"We're not talking about my mum."

A car pulled up at the gates and they ducked under king ferns. The vehicle sat so long it

seemed likely the driver had died at the wheel, but when Penny stuck her head out, it reversed and pulled into the neighbour's driveway.

A bundle of voices exploded, "I told you that was the wrong house."

"I thought that was your mum," Amber said. "I almost wished I'd worn a dress." She giggled, something Penny had never heard her do.

Penny walked to her tree, the one she'd escaped down throughout her teens, but her perfect branch had been trimmed, making it too short to reach her balcony. She had no other option: she grabbed a down-pipe and climbed to the second story. The window was locked. She shifted her toes onto an inch-wide ledge and snuck a glance at the ground. There were shrubs she'd planted with her dad and from what she could remember they were thorny.

"You stuck?" Amber asked. Penny wasn't going to satisfy her with an answer.

King and Queen, the Great Danes, burst through the door of her bedroom, their paws slamming against the window, pie-sized aggressions. She fell. Her memory served her correctly, the shrubs had thorns and determined stalks that didn't cow-tail to ribs. Amber dropped to her knees and searched Penny for breakages. King and Queen's aggression turned to recognition and they went into a flurry of barks, their tails slathering the window as they ran in circles.

Amber stomped across the verandah to the sliding door. She yanked the handle and it opened. "I'm going to get your mum."

Penny rolled off the shrub and coughed. From the verandah, she watched Amber take the main stairwell, three steps at a time. Penny was well practiced in silence—had ensured, as a teen, she escaped during the night to adventure, rarely getting caught—but Amber seemed to think you could bring your wild indoors. When Penny stepped inside, she could hear Amber thundering down the hall in her boots. It wasn't like Penny to care about her mum's home, but

she should at least guide Amber through the invasion.

“God, how many rooms are in this bloody house?” Amber yelled. “Which one’s your mum’s?”

“Near the nymphs,” Penny whispered. Twenty-five and she was still scared of making too much noise under her mum’s roof.

Penny found Amber in her moonlit bedroom. Her mum believed bedrooms were soul-sanctuaries, and insisted her kids style them however they liked. Penny had built a bedframe with her dad out of timber they bought from a farm outside of Bowral, and her mum had sown ivy vines into a canopy (even though her dad was anti-ivy, saying it never did any other plants much good). There was shag green carpet, and the walls were chalk-boards that she scribbled secrets on and sketched jungles over. Plant-boxes were overflowing with creepers. All the creepers were still alive. Had her mum watered them?

Amber was on the bed, under the ivy canopy, and she was on her knees, her hands flat against the wall, where she was squinting at a picture of Penny and her brother, just one picture among many. Penny climbed beside her, unsettling her position. She fell, but Penny braced her. It seemed Amber didn’t need a whole lot for sight. She used her index finger like a torch, drawing out the image. Penny knew it well. It’d always been her favourite. Dom was dressed in a dragon costume he’d spent a month designing. His eyelashes were flames. In both hands, he held giant cookies, each with a bite taken out of the sphere. Penny stood to his side and stared hard at the camera, even though his arms were in her way. She wore a dress that made her look sad because the lines were so straight. She wore shoes that made her look sad because the buckles were so decisive. Her hair was bobbed with so much precision she looked like a child adopted by aliens. What Penny had always loved about the picture was her gaze that troubled her otherwise

clean appearance. Her eyes said she'd see things that other people wouldn't see. While her brother would perform, she would discover.

Amber pulled the picture off the wall, and held it so close to her face she tipped back and sat on her heels.

"Penny," she said. "You're so young."

"Three."

"Ten years before I met you." She folded the picture so there was no more dragon. "Which means you were still a kid when we met. I shouldn't have taken you in the boat," she said. "You were a kid."

"A teen," Penny said, although she'd stopped believing her age was anything but child.

"I'm so sorry," Amber said, and dug her nails into Penny's palm, as if stapling her apology.

"You," Penny said, "were a kid too."

They knelt till their legs went numb, and even then, they knelt.

It was still dark—no morning in sight—when Amber stumbled off the bed. Penny followed. Across the hallway was her brother's room, pumped full of gold. She stopped at her mum's door, listening for voices, imagining Amber on the bed, telling her history of abandonment; her recent return to a mother disinterested in lost-and-found. Would her mum feel that same thing everyone felt when confronted with Amber: awe? Would she forgive her split-shorts and tats because of her wet-dirt eyes? Her compact body with equal possibilities both neat and explosive? Would she see her as a beauty when she wasn't fighting, fucking, provoking?

The bed was empty. "She's not here," Amber said, as if she'd known all along.

Drawing open the walk-in cupboard, Amber turned on the light. She ran her fingertip across fabrics as vibrant as blood-sacrifice. Her nails, smoke stained and apple sticky, tweaked the stitches and freed a thread which she tried to yank free but the strand was stubborn. She looked back like a girl who'd been caught stealing, but still wanted a helping hand. Penny came to her and saw a split had gone wretched at the side of her mouth. Penny couldn't make sense of how that had happened—they'd been together for days, slept under the same blanket, shared the same bottle they filled at petrol stations under blotched taps—things didn't go unnoticed under Penny's watch. And yet the woman she considered her sole fascination had split before her, and she hadn't even offered a swab of papaw.

"I'm sorry about your mum," Penny said.

"Do you think she'll one day be ready for me?"

"I can't predict mums," she said. "But I hope so."

Crouching, Penny took the loose thread in her mouth and bit. She tried to imagine what it might be like to be a mum, but all she could relate it to was the time her cat had kittens, and there'd been so much blindness and hunger. It didn't seem much fun for the cat until the kittens put on fur coats and went into the sunshine and gave the mum some space.

Standing, Penny pulled open the glass-knobbed drawer that held her mum's intimates. French everything. She preferred cotton but felt the occasion called for lace. She took her jeans off and then her underpants. Amber watched unashamedly. Penny grabbed at the first item she touched and slipped it over her hair-mound; she hadn't been waxed since she moved to Shearsend, felt proud of the strands that snuck out from behind the lace. She took her top off—bra—to present her courage. And she danced in the neat space, banging her hands against all the wears she'd wanted to bleach white to make less complicated, all the gold, blood, and silver not

found in gardens.

“Dress me in one of your mum’s gowns,” Amber said, unfolding her crossed-legs and straightening her arms overhead.

Penny waited for her to get playful, but her expression was earnest. It couldn’t be possible she wanted to put on the skins of Sydney types, the ones who’d played saviour to her teen self. It would’ve been fine if she wanted to mock, but that clearly wasn’t her intention. She was ready to see how her body held wealth.

“If you won’t do it, I will,” Amber said, her arms still overhead.

“I can’t,” Penny said, pushing herself against the far wall and drawing her knees into her hurt-ribs.

Amber tugged agitatedly at her shorts, as if they’d been steeped in boiling water, stumbling in her haste to get them off. One leg of the shorts split completely. Her shirt got caught on her head. She removed no bra because she wore none. The jaggedness of her movements reminded Penny of the woman she knew—the woman she loved—but that same woman was transforming into gold.

Her naked body looked cold, even though the room was as hot as a womb. Although her body wasn’t fragile in any way, everything jutted, her hips and dark nipples demanding fleece. Once she selected a backless gown from the rubble of fabric she calmed, and held the dress against her flesh to see if her shoulders and hips would fit the folds of gold. Shucking the dress on, she smoothed the fabric over her ribs, touching herself before the mirror, marvelling at how precious she was when wrapped like royalty. She looked at Penny, expectant, but Penny couldn’t smile. She left.

Penny crawled on all fours to the jean-shorts, taking the unravelled leg and feeling where

the threads came loose, wishing she had a needle to stitch the pair back together.

It was still dark. She didn't want to call out Amber's name, because she didn't want to admit she was once again in search of her, but as she passed through rooms and didn't find her, she became nervous. Amber was likely on the edge of doing something mental. There were too many signs to ignore: twelve years of signs! Penny screamed her name, without warming up her lungs.

Coming down the stairwell, she saw the open-gas-fireplace burning in the centre of the room, like a banquet table aflame. What did it matter? The house was already a furnace—it couldn't get hotter. Amber sat neatly on an armchair, drinking a glass of champagne. The bottle was nowhere to be seen. Camille Saint-Saens turned on the record-player—her mum's favourite—and Amber tapped the surround-sound remote on her knee.

Penny couldn't recall seeing her mum in the gold dress that Amber wore, but she could recall her sitting in the exact chair, looking up the stairwell and seeming surprised to see her daughter, as if she didn't remember ever giving birth.

“Why did you give all this up, Penny?” Amber asked.

“I never gave it up,” she said. “What belongs to my mum doesn't belong to me.”

“No, this could've been yours,” Amber said. “If you'd just played your cards right.”

“My brother's played them right. That'll do.”

“Soon enough you'll regret what you've lost. It's easy to think glass walls don't matter till you don't have any walls.”

“I know something about loss,” Penny said.

“You know a thing or two, but you've got a lot more to lose before you know emptiness.”

The windows lit up, red and blue, but Penny didn't focus on the warning because she'd never been caught before.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The gate blocked the cops. They stood before the car, fidgeting with a loud speaker to flush the intruders out of the house. French underwear ground Penny's crotch; all she wanted was a second to finger it out. She wore a yellow raincoat to cover the lingerie; why did rain call for the colours of emergency?

"Can you turn off your full-beam?" Penny called out.

There was commotion from behind the gate then darkness. She waved and the sensor lights came on. The cops said important things, but she was only half-listening as she glanced back to see if Amber had followed. It didn't surprise her that she was alone, but it hurt. She'd never believed in being cursed, but faced with the cops and Amber's absence—wearing that damn yellow coat—she wondered if she'd been wrong to brand herself an atheist. There was a God—who was definitely male—and he was out to get her.

"Open the gate," the cops demanded. Penny pressed the button and waited as the gate proved its self-importance by opening slowly.

"Nice coat," one of the cops said.

Penny couldn't believe there was room for anything but gravity in such a moment. Was the woman mocking or even possibly flirting? She was familiar with being treated as sexually intriguing, but wasn't there a time and place for come-ons? There'd been such relief running from Sydney and covering herself over in dirt. There she was exposed again, without her dirt and her dirty companion.

A hand slipped into her hand. "Hey," Amber said. She still wore the gold, but she also wore her self-assurance in the face of disaster.

High heels sounded a new arrival. It was a neighbour, Ms. Venus, and she clutched her

handbag as defense. Her hair gave away the fact she'd recently crawled out of bed. She rattled rancid to the cops, as they all stood at the entrance of the house, on and on about why she'd called in the crime, how she was the only neighbour trusted to care for the Moore's house, and how truly appalling it was to face the hot hand of criminals these days.

"Ms. Venus—Macy—it's me, Penelope Moore."

"Nonsense," she said. "She might be a rough girl, but she's not as rough as you."

Hadn't Penny's eyes marked her from birth? "Look at me!"

Macy's hands fluttered. "Do something!" she said to the police.

"For God's sake, just call my mum," Penny said. "She'll know my voice."

It was Amber who placed a phone in her palm, smiling in a way Penny didn't understand. Did she think it was funny that she was calling her mum for help? Did it mean they were the same: two pathetic adults in need of parenting? Or was she smiling at their difference? The fact that Penny had a mum to call. And she would answer.

Penny stood at the kitchen sink, looking out more glass, seeing more garden. Everything was green and yet everything was blue. Those were the mornings she knew from her childhood, the ones to which she'd always wanted to add a different hue. It all seemed too tailored, their garden big enough to feign borderless-ness.

She heard her come through the front door. "Peach," her mum said. "Are you ok?"

Outside, four pigeons landed on electric wires and all but one sat immobile. The one that moved did neck-tricks, preening its upper back. Penny wondered if they were family, if the immobile three hated the one in contortions.

"No," Penny said.

Her mum came closer. “Darling, you smell like...”

“Rum. It’s my shirt.”

There were questions in the air, Penny felt them like a spring swarm of flying-ants, but if her mum knew anything she knew how to maintain poise, when not to bite. “Are you hungry?”

The sun split the horizon. Penny felt it was her last day—not on earth—but, still, her last day. “No,” she answered as more pigeons landed. At least the contortionist had friends, even if the other birds thought her odd.

“What do you need?”

There was one final thing she wanted. “A bath.”

She waited for her mum to leave before she turned to follow. When she first saw the woman she’d spent her life running from, she was stooped over the bath adding rose-water to the stream. She, like Penny, had poise, but unlike Penny, even kneeling she was tall. Her neck was tall, her fingers tall, her forehead tall. It still upset Penny to see her mum’s white hair, a decision she’d made as soon as she got a few grey wisps. She claimed it had something to do with dignity, but Penny felt she’d started wanting to be elsewhere once her husband died.

“I don’t want a bath anymore.”

Her mum pulled the plug.

Penny called King and Queen outside; they cocked their heads and went back to sleep in front of the gas fire Amber hadn’t turned off. Penny wondered how late Amber would sleep, and once she woke, who Penny would say she was. Would the truth matter?

Her mum wasn’t even out the door when Penny said, “I ran a man over.”

She took hold of the sliding door. “Is he dead?”

“Legs crushed.”

“Were you drunk?”

“Yeah.”

“On drugs?”

“No.”

Her mum sat on the edge of a chair, as if it didn't have the strength to hold her and she needed to compensate with muscle. “Have you gone to the police?”

“Well yes and no. I parked out the front of the station, but I knew if I went inside they'd be men, eating bacon sandwiches.”

“You've always hated bacon.”

“I was going to go back, but I never...” Penny shoved her hair out her face. “Why are you so calm?”

“Peach—”

“Why?”

“I've been preparing myself for this for twenty-five years.”

“You think this was inevitable?”

Her mum double folded her legs, so one ankle hid behind another. “Somewhat.”

“It's your fault.”

“What should've I done differently?”

“Stopped me!”

“How? Grounded you?”

“This isn't funny.”

“Of course not—I just—”

“Mum, it was an accident.”

“I know, darling.”

“Can’t you help me?”

Her mum reached her tea-warmed hands to Penny’s cheek. “I’ve spent my life trying to get you out of trouble,” she said, “trying to explain to schools and parents and relatives that you’re not bad, you’re just a risk taker. I’ve taken you to every psychologist in all of Sydney, only for you to think I’m not accepting you for who you are.” She paused, as if expecting Penny to disagree, but she didn’t. “You’re my only daughter. And yet, the more I try to love you and understand you, the less you love and understand me. I thought we’d be friends, but we’re not, and I appreciate that I’m very likely at fault, but no matter how I’ve adjusted, I can’t seem to find a way to know you. I love you, darling, but I’ve accepted that not even mothers can save daughters.”

Penny licked her lips. “So now what?”

“We go to the police station with my lawyer,” she said. “But let me feed you first.”

Penny regretted not having the bath. She could’ve smelled like rose-water, her mother’s bedtime scent, but instead she smelled like the sheets of an abandoned mountain-hut. There was still time to wash, to ready herself for the cops, but washing felt too demanding, brushing her hair too purposeless. She imagined entering the station. Maybe the cops would nod slowly as they imagined themselves jumping in the driver’s seat, dropping the van in reverse. “How could’ve you known?”

The sunrise exploded like a helicopter mustering cattle for the slaughter, but she wasn’t seeing blood in light. Her mum brought toast with smoked-salmon and avocado to the outdoor table and added water to the teapot. They ate and talked softly, while the Rainbow Lorikeets

corroborated. Although Penny wasn't hungry, she felt comforted by the offering of tea and toast. She picked at the remaining seeds on her plate.

"You always loved seeds," said her mum, who had been watchful. "Ate them from the grass-heads."

They walked down the garden steps to the infinity pool and Penny slipped off her t-shirt and shorts, only to see her mum's lingerie that she'd nicked. Exposed, she dove into the waters, and swam the full length without coming up for air.

When she resurfaced, her mum was laughing and undressed to her underwear. "Have you been in my wardrobe again?" She dived and was by Penny's side in seconds, although the pool was Olympian worthy.

"Mum, are you sad?" Penny asked. "You could've had a better daughter."

"I just wish," she said, "you knew your limits."

Cupping water, Penny tried to stop it running through her fingers. "There's a woman I love sleeping in my bed," she said. "Can you tell her I've gone to the cops. And will you tell her I'll miss her?"

A dragonfly skimmed the water's surface, not too heavy, not too light.

Sun-dried, she came upstairs and found her mum in her walk-in wardrobe, face-down on the mess of her clothes. For once, she looked small. It all seemed too cruel to take her to the station, too cruel to wake Amber.

Penny left, alone.

The station looked as happy as beach-goers, the architecture so modern it appeared

centuries ahead of its surroundings, suggesting law and order had superseded human expectation. Men exited the sliding doors, laughing, wide-mouthed. Penny was wondering about the weight of hand-cuffs—did they bruise—when she saw a woman in her favourite teen, “Freakshow” shirt, stolen from her cupboard.

Butcher Birds squabbled in the palm trees as Penny sat next to Amber, said, “Come here often?”

Maybe it wasn’t time for jokes, and maybe it wasn’t time to mention they’d both loved the Silverchair album “Freakshow” best of all, and maybe there wasn’t time to share Amber’s coffee—no sugar—in a takeaway cup decorated in sketch-art, and maybe when the sun dazzled them and Amber said, “Let me fall on my sword,” and Penny said, “Why so phallic?”, they should’ve run for it, but Penny was convinced that she and Amber were invincible. The sun was, after all, so summer certain.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Penny was clear headed walking into the station, certain Amber was clear headed too. There were four simple words they had to say—lingering on the final with certitude—and everything would be ok: “It was an accident.”

The station was in a gentle hum of action with mechanised Santas bobbing on desks and cleanly attired police taking tea orders and stifling yawns; they all appeared to be normal. Maybe even nice. At reception, there was only a woman ahead of them, complaining about a neighbour who let his dog shit in her yard, and a parent with a kid fundraising for his soccer tournament. Once they left, it was their turn.

Penny felt thankful there wasn't much noise, just a radio softly playing Dire Straits. The cop at reception was a young man with neatly trimmed facial hair and high-arched eyebrows that made him look dramatically engaged, but not shocked. Penny felt he had the right kind of face to confess to; she didn't even wish for different brows.

“We've come to testify—is that the right word?” Penny smiled. “About an accident.”

“It wasn't an accident,” Amber said. “I wanted to kill the girl.”

Penny tried to grab Amber's hand, but her body wasn't working. The cop nodded, as if “kill” was like any other k-word. Maybe it was an act, to keep the women calm. Or maybe he hadn't heard Amber, even though she'd spoken as clearly as a speech therapist.

“Ok ladies,” he said, touching his facial hair and looking pleased when he discovered decisive prickles. “Let's leave the details for your statements.”

“There's only one statement,” Penny said, spider-clinging her fingers to the counter. “My statement.” Every part of her was leaning forward. “Amber, she didn't have anything to do with the accident.”

“Look,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Penny—Penelope—Penelope Moore.”

“Penny, I know coming in here can do a real number on your nerves, but let’s do this the right way. Come with me.”

“And Amber? Can she just wait there—there on that chair?”

The softness Amber had gained over the previous days was buried under the palm tree out the front of the station, where they shared their last coffee. Her Freakshow shirt was no longer bringing back cheeky youthful memories for Penny, but was making her look like the right kind of suspect, the type who’d attempt to kill the lover of her husband. Fuck, Penny had forgotten all about the girl. How could’ve that been categorised in her brain as inconsequential? Was it worse to try to kill teens than adults?

“You’ll want to call me Adeline,” Amber said to the cop.

“Is that your name?” he asked.

“Adeline Rocha,” she said, sounding the surname soft. “And I want to make a statement.”

The three of them walked down a hallway that was severely straight and artless. When they reached an open glass door Penny walked right in, because walking was safer than being stationary. But then she was faced with a light-blue room. And all its four walls. And for all Amber’s talk about walls, Penny knew there was nothing good about that plasterboard. Soon that plasterboard would be replaced by metal, and at the top would be a tiny window so high she couldn’t look out, never mind get out. What if there was a fire? Were there fire-drills for prisoners?

Amber didn’t follow. “Hey,” Penny said, sharply. “Come in.”

But she stayed behind the cop. “That’s not how it works,” she said. “They’ll question us

separately.”

“No—” Penny said. “You’re wrong.”

“Actually,” the cop said, “she’s right.”

Penny pushed into the hallway, where she could see natural light at the far end. “We can still leave,” she said to Amber. “Let’s go.”

Amber slipped her hands under her armpits, so Penny couldn’t get hold of her. “We’re here now.”

Penny whispered, “We need to do this together or not at all.”

Amber placed the backs of her fingers against Penny’s cheeks, showing there was no more holding on. Penny had never thought about the hairs of her cheeks till that moment, their ability to translate electricity from flesh to flesh. She felt they could keep almost-touching for an eternity, and that closeness could be enough. She tried not to swallow or blink or blush or breathe, but that didn’t work because Amber took her fingers away and said, “Seems to me it’ll do us good to go our separate ways.”

Without knowing where the cop intended to take her, Amber walked down the hallway. There were doors flanking either side, leading to tiny blue rooms, and a fire-exit with an image of a stick figure in flight.

Penny called out, “None of this—you—me—was an accident.”

Amber looked back. Penny heard a dog bark and even had enough time to wonder what dogs were doing in the station. If dogs could come in, then maybe it wasn’t such a bad place, and maybe on hearing the dog, Amber might recognise the interruption, realise she was still free to leave.

But then the facial hair cop gestured to Penny to get in the room. His patience was gone,

along with the once boyish look of his appearance. How did she ever think he was barely eighteen? He was clearly her age, even older, and unlike her, he'd probably dedicated himself to law and order since he was a boy. Told stories of cops and robbers where he shot the baddy in the eye. The mouth. The tummy. And those barks, that she heard once more, weren't poodles, or shitzus, or Chihuahuas. She saw a flash of red and black. Alsatians—they too had a job.

There was no more oxygen. And no point looking at Amber. She accepted they were destined for walls. Vision milky, she looked beyond Amber, beyond those walls, beyond Sydney, beyond the Blue Mountains, to an orchard she owned.

She could smell the farm—not the lemon scented bleach of the station—and she realised in all those weeks, she'd never even planted a peach tree; this made her so sad that when the cop told her to stop wasting his time, she just kept staring out to that soil where she should've dug. If she'd just planted, she and Amber would've been roped into the good sense of the land.

“Bye, Penny,” Amber said.

And as both women moved away from the natural light and into tiny blue rooms, Penny couldn't smell anything anymore. No bumble-bees. No peaches. No rum.

PART THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Elizabeth had a party planned—one of her biggest yet—and lifestyle photographers were coming from four corners of the world. It was rumoured, a French ballerina was attending with a name that sounded like a dessert few people could afford. Penny had promised her mum she'd put in an effort; she even bought a boxy-tee dress from Sass and Bide that cost her a week's pay. Her mum almost praised the dress, saying, "All the black makes you look tall."

Penny assured her mum she'd finish work early—give herself over to the hairdresser—but once she started serving coffees to the body conscious, she forgot she was alive.

"Aren't you late?" asked Rosannah, Penny's one ally at the Boatshed kiosk who'd stopped her getting fired on a weekly basis.

"No."

"You sure?"

There were already cars flanking the road to the house: florists, caterers, entertainers. Frantic workers run, arms loaded with aids to fix impending disasters. They had smiles that revealed their anxiety disorders and refusal to medicate. Penny's legs pulsed from walking, as if she'd climbed Kosciuszko in a snowstorm, fighting for each foothold. Her body no longer felt like her own. And although the sea-breeze had once tasted like the freedom of swimming out past the headlands, that afternoon it tasted more like drowning; drowning appealed to her for the first time in her twenty-six years.

The security guard at the gate said, "Do you have an invitation—"

"I live here," Penny said.

"Shit, are you the daughter?" He tilted his head. "Sorry. Epic house!"

The entranceway was barricaded by a cake. Penny skirted around the house to the

verandah where a florists wept. She offered him a cigarette to cheer him up but he said he was underage. She climbed a tree to her balcony and smoked the roly. When she saw dolphins at play way out in the harbour, she jammed her cigarette-butt into an overflowing jar and yanked open the sliding door. That morning her mum gently suggested her room was depressing, told her to stop punishing herself; it had nothing to do with punishment and everything to do with sadness.

She considered showering, but changed her mind. The dress, advertised as boxy-fit, ate her. She couldn't find any sandals—never mind heels—so she grabbed her Chucks with the beetroot stain on the toe. Mussing her hair, she checked herself in the mirror. She, almost, looked like herself. But which self?

Her mum's bedroom was heavy with champagne and women. The hairdresser lunged at Penny, pushing her into a chair and scolding, "You're late! When did you last wash your hair?"

"Mum," Penny called out.

She came and sat on the dressing-table, her legs tidily folded, but her shoulders unusually slouched. "How are you?"

"It looks really...good...down there."

"Don't bullshit me, Peach," she said. "I know you hate all this, but if we didn't have dancers tonight, we'd be too sad."

Penny knew she was right, but she still wanted to call her a bitch. A party felt sickeningly wrong. So wrong she swallowed compulsively like she'd downed a handful of pills. And yet, imagining herself as a dying anybody was so indulgent: all she had was food and shelter and good health and freedom. And to call her mum a bitch, even to think it, was so misplaced. All that woman had done was try to clean up the mess. And yeah, she'd failed, but Penny had really

set her a task. If she'd just followed her mum's initial plan—gone to the police station with her lawyer—it could've all been different. So different.

The previous day, Penny ate cereal like she was speeding. Her mum was dressed to attend court, but Penny felt unwell seeing the shade of her blouse: peach. Everything was making her see fruit. And feel itchy, like her body was still covered in fibres.

“Will you call me—”

“Straight away, darling.”

“—I can't go to work.”

“If you don't, this day will go on forever.”

She got the call as she was dumping a bag of coffee to be ground. The line was out the door, because there was about to be a wedding on Shelly Beach—Friday was, after all, a cheaper day to tie the knot—and everyone looked preemptively hungover, in no mood to wait for their caffeine.

She walked away from the beans and the Sydney-needy, and went out the back where the waterfall was playing harmonies and the trees were so green they appeared damp. There was a light breeze, teasing the glass decorations that hung from the old trees. If sunshine could've made it through the canopies, the glass would've transformed the courtyard into a carnival. She felt such gratitude that there was no sunlight.

“Twelve years,” her mum said.

“Not eight? They said it could be eight.”

“No darling, twelve.”

“Twelve.”

Penny left work, without giving notice, and walked straight into the ocean.

The hairdresser questioned her split-ends, said she'd never seen anything like it in her career. Entire strands. Split. She was anxious about the future, said a conditioning treatment may not have the power to undo the damage. "You might have to shave it all off," she said.

Penny rocked as she imagined coming out clean from under her knots, but nothing was that simple: it'd just grow back and split again.

Her mum muffled the pop of champagne in a towel. When the flutes fizzed over, she didn't bother wiping up the spill. It'd been a while since Penny smiled, but she did then, proud of her mum for allowing timely mess. They clinked their glasses, but looked away at the sound of celebration.

"Ladies, I'm sure you all remember my daughter," her mum said. "She's been living here for over a year, but this is the first time she's braving one of my parties."

"You're the Pamela girl," a woman said, whose mouth moved like it was injured. Something about it was sexy.

"Pardon, Genevieve?" Penny's mum said.

The woman looked frightened. "Oh Liz, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up. I promised myself—but then Lily was over for our Sunday roast—Penny, I think you know my daughter Lily—and she was talking about the book launch. It was just fascinating, thinking about how hard it must be for Penny to face this public humiliation."

The other women had clustered close to Genevieve. One patted her, likely in the hope of silencing her. There was just one woman who hadn't fallen into the bouquet of silencers. She lit a blue cigarette as she stepped one foot onto the palm clustered balcony.

“Oh fuck, Genevieve. Stop apologising,” she said, and blew her smoke at a frond, as if annoyed the plant was in her way. “The fact that none of us have even mentioned this bloody book is typical of our group. Liz, your daughter is a disaster. We’re sorry.”

But before her mum could rip the woman, Penny got out of her chair. “I reckon my hair looks good enough, don’t you, Mum?”

Her mum looked pained at the distraction. The other women stared at Penny like she was a lion coming off sedatives, but she wasn’t all that interested in theatrics, instead was in desperate need of nicotine.

She walked over to the woman who didn’t like plants. “Can I’ve a cigarette?”

The woman glistened through her foundation and fought her clutch, retrieving a case. “Do you have a colour preference?”

“I like green.”

She took out two green cigarettes. “And here’s one for later.”

“Cheers,” Penny said. And walked into the cluster of fronds till she was buried by the rustle and hush of nature.

There with the insects, she prepared herself to make the call, turning her words over and upside down. Should she start with explanations? Sorry? Thank you? There was obviously an order, but very little had been clear since the day at the police station; in that moment when she walked outside and sat under the palm trees, she reignited her waiting for Amber practice, one that required her fingers remain steady, her legs not jiggle, nothing send her body into cycles of agitation. And she practiced denial: Amber will walk out that door, will come to me on this bench, will say, “We’ll never do time for that bastard.”

Her statement would have to get Amber free. She’d detailed everything about the party:

the home-brew, jerry-cans of fuel, pig on the spit. The pig mattered. She wasn't stupid, she knew you were supposed to keep it simple for the police, but sometimes life happens in a way that shifts the rules. And in retelling, more is better, because once the cops could picture the party—smell the roasting flesh—they'd comprehend how accidents happen.

It was somewhere around midday when Penny saw a woman running towards her, and she ran towards the woman.

Her mum collected her in her arms. "I've been looking for you—everywhere."

"She's gone, mum," Penny said. "I couldn't save her. She's gone."

The sun was wandering up when Penny walked through the rich wreckage of the party, side-stepping a stray Jimmy Choo and flattening a cluster of hors'deouvres. She didn't have long till he arrived—half an hour. An hour at most.

There was a sleepy cluster of dancers on the fat expanse of verandah. "Moondance" didn't seem a fitting song as the sun nudged the horizon, and neither did the slow shuffle of steps to the trumpet. Her mum was dancing by herself. Penny sat with her back against the banister and took in the woman; another fighter, just of a different nature.

It wasn't like they would never see each other again and yet there was a weightiness of finality in the morning rays that insisted she do their goodbye right. She'd start with a song request, let a verse pass, another. When Cave crooned, "This is her dress that I loved best," she'd walk to her mum and ask for this dance. Her mum would fall into her daughter's arms.

Or maybe it'd play out nothing like that. It'd be clunky. Like all their engagements. Limbs that never seemed to rest when in close proximity to the other's heat. But at least they'd

sway, and at least the sun would be rising, and at least there'd be words making sense of her loss,
and at least she'd be holding one woman she could never shed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

He arrived at her parents in his same jeans with the leg lost below one knee, and he strode to where she danced with her mum. He was shirtless, the divot where his ribs met more pronounced. Everything about him was more: more tan, more hair, more split-pupil.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Lord,” her mum said, features wide as she moved her gaze across his body. “My—
Lord.”

“Mum,” Penny said. “Angus.”

“I would’ve worn a shirt—” he said, then shrugged.

Shearsend was a smudge on the horizon. The Kombi smelled like freshly flayed barramundi and wet dog: a familiar zoo. And yet for all that was familiar, much was alien. Angus wasn’t as she remembered, all ease and water-movements. There’d been a lot of silence in the Kombi as they travelled over the Blue Mountains and into the Central Tablelands. The wintery morning light was hazy and transformative, but it was the wrong time for getting carried away with nature’s romance.

She took a smoke from behind her ear, offering Angus a drag. “Quit,” he said.

“No, you didn’t.”

“I said I quit.”

She ran her hand over the dashboard and rested her pinky over a sun-split. “Angus, I—

“Don’t start.”

“At least give me a chance to—

“Penny, although I’m struggling for words, I’m not ready for yours.” He thumped the steering wheel. “I looked after her for twelve years and you got her locked up for twelve.”

Hearing him say it made her rigid. Yeah, she'd been blaming herself, but nobody else had—not her mum, the lawyer. And now, there was that man with the wrecked pupil telling her she was to blame. The man who knew Amber better than she did.

“Angus, I know I could've done things differently, but to say it's my fault is...” Was it wrong? “You weren't there that morning when we hit Pete.”

“It wasn't we, Penny. It was you.”

“I didn't mean it.”

“You said you weren't even sure—you said you might've seen the blanket.”

“A blanket, Angus. Not a body.”

“And why'd there be a blanket behind a van?”

“Because in Shearsend there's stuff everywhere it's not supposed to be: boots in fireplaces, men in girls' beds, you, fucking me.”

She couldn't see him roll his eyes, but she bet he did. And yeah, she was embarrassed by herself, but she felt like a teen again. A bad teen who needed to get adults to stop coming down so hard on her.

“God—sorry,” she said, and tried to wind the window down more but it was as far as it'd go. “What I'm trying to say is I never knew there was a body there, Angus. For God's sake, I was confused. I was in love. But I wasn't attempting to murder your brother. Or the girl. Anyway, isn't it a bit late for this conversation?”

“You just got her locked up. I'd say it's the perfect time.”

“So what, you think it should've been me who got sentenced to twelve years?”

“I'm not saying that. I just think it's bullshit that she takes the full hit. You mightn't have been trying to kill anyone, but you and I both know what it's like to do Amber's dirty work, and

there's one thing I'm sure of, you never thought you were just learning to drive manual. You knew there was more to that job than met the eye. And you did it anyway."

She folded her hands up under her armpits. He was right. She'd never heard it said right before. She knew something, without knowing anything at all, and while what she did was an accident, it didn't feel clean like an accident. It felt like she'd dipped her toe in tar and it wasn't coming off without flesh. And what made it even more agonising, was the fact she'd done it for the one she thought she loved, and sent her straight to prison.

"Where were you on Friday, hey?" He wasn't done with her, even though it was clear she was taking herself to pieces. "Even your mum was there at court. But you! Where were you?"

She groaned—there were too many words.

"Tell me!"

"Amber said no!"

"Is 'no' all it takes for you to ditch a mate?"

"I went to her, in custody, and she refused to see me." She breathed into her cupped hands, although she was sweating like crazy. "And then she writes to me, on this nasty piece of paper, not even paper—paper-towel— and I get it in my mailbox, with her ID number written on the envelope—God, did you even know they number them—and she says, 'I don't want you here. And I don't want you there. On the day.'" And that's it. I'm left to figure out if she blames me for all of this." She wasn't shaking but she was sure she'd start. "Right when we could've put an end to it all, called it what it was—an accident—she said she wanted that acne-girl dead."

"That's the truth," he said, but his voice was softer. More like water, once again. "But really, Penny, how could you stay away?"

"When all she's got is a bit of paper-towel to talk, I'm going to listen."

“So you’re saying her words matter.”

“Yes.” She shut her eyes tight and listened to the Kombi take them on, along the road.

“Twelve years, Angus.”

“Twelve damn years.”

“Will she get hurt?”

He nodded. “But she’ll end up queen bee.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It’s an Amber thing.”

The fields looked as if they were weeping mists upwards. And there, under the mists were grasses and wattle-scrub and cattle and houses which would’ve once been hidden from the road until the government slapped a highway down on their doorstep. Nothing could stay remote, not even in a country so sparsely populated. Nobody could go nomadic. And yet that’s all Penny wanted, was to get away from Sydney, just as she’d planned for the last nineteen months—still dreaming, between bouts of despair, that once the court case was over, Amber would come too—and they’d return to their home, like sailors who got washed up on the shore, right when they’d already accepted their ocean burial.

But rather, she was once again facing her future alone. And yet for all her resistance, she’d come to accept it was going to be lonely, and it was going to be hard, and it was going to be cold in the winter, and bloody hot in the summer, and she wasn’t going to know what the land meant in drought or flood, and she wasn’t even going to feel it was her rightful home, but regardless, she was going to plant that tree and fold herself into the good sense of the land.

The racket reached them before they made it up the pub steps. In the courtyard, Jen was

taking down a shed with a sledgehammer. Seeing them, she chucked the hammer. Her Docs growled, showing off her toes. Her blonde hair was discoloured, as if she'd taken up swimming but wasn't interested in washing out the chlorine. She had new scars, but Penny couldn't distinguish the old from the new.

“The return of the runner,” Jen said. “Thanks for the goodbye, mate.”

“I like what you've done with your hair.”

She smirked. “Tried bleaching it with the stuff we use on the floors. Think I might've actually nuked what was left of my brain after the 90s. See, that wouldn't have happened if you'd been around to help. Happen to pick up some wisdom on the road?” It crossed Penny's mind that Jen might not know about Amber; in fact, the whole town might not know, which meant there was a slice of the world where she was remembered as free. “No, didn't think so. You want your old room back?”

“Actually, I bought my dad's orchard.”

“You. Rich. Bitch.” Jen shook her head.

“Reckon I can borrow a few things to set myself up?”

“What do you need? It'll cost you.”

Penny climbed the ladder into the attic in search of homewares. Angus didn't follow, instead lay out on a table in the courtyard, preferring to go deaf in his close proximity to Jen's demolition rather than giving Penny a hand. He could've just pissed off back to his caravan, but he seemed to think it was worthwhile hanging around, reminding her she was doing everything on her own.

Once she'd ransacked the attic, she lugged her final milk-crate through the pub, stopping at a table where the Staghounds snoozed. She ran her hand over the lip of a jar, sneaking a tiny

wood-skeleton and slipping it into her pocket. There was still a boot in the fireplace, still carvings across every wooden surface, not only from strangers, but from punters she knew. Polaroids were tacked all around, huddles of the crew, who were dirty like her and alien like her. And then she saw Amber in profile, touching her mouth after she'd probably said something that made a man cry, and she closed her eyes in gratitude.

The clatter of a sledge-hammer made her turn. Jen came to her, squeezed her shoulder. "Oi—she'll be ok."

Penny rested her forehead against the wall. "How did you find out?"

"I'm Jen," she said.

"Does the whole town know?"

"They reckon she's up in Darwin. Fishing."

"Amber—fishing."

They hugged, rigid but unhurried, and then Penny picked up her crate.

"Grab yourself a uniform on your way out," Jen said. "You'll be needing a job to pay me back."

"Thanks," she said.

"You might need a few bucks to sort out your car. When you pissed off, I brought it back from the orchard. You must've left it there after that party. Remember, the one where you ran over Pete?" Penny shook her head to warn Jen to stop grinning. "Anyway, can't say your car's in a good way."

Her Volvo was in the carpark and it was no longer blue. It sat under the only tree, covered in sap, leaf fossils, and dirt that'd sprouted weeds along the base of the windscreen. The paint was flecked. And there were carvings beneath the layers of muck. She wiped and read,

“CUNT.”

Climbing onto the bonnet, she knelt and took off her jumper to use as a cloth. The carver had used something fierce to cut through the paint to the metal. Maybe it'd been a butcher's knife. Whatever it was, it'd done the job. The letters were deep and rusted.

Angus came with a bucket of soapy water and a rag. “Looks like you need a hand.”

She wiped filth from her cheek. “I'll be right,” she said, and kept at it.

He ignored her dismissal and got to work. “I suppose,” he said, as he fisted the driver's side door, “you can't really blame the girl.”

It must've been the twentieth C she'd cleaned. “What girl?”

“What girl do you reckon?”

“That little—”

It must've been mania that took hold of them. They yelled the word and all its power up to the tired winter clouds. And then they got back to scrubbing. Poor girl, Penny thought. Poor girl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Penny woke, alone, to the alarm of birds. The air was so cold her breath came in chuffs. In the kitchen, she opened the wood stove. The fire was out. She'd never lit a blaze single-handedly. It took a few goes. Her fingertips bled colour, agitated by heat. The kettle boiled and she made her first cup of tea. Nobody had ever warned her about the chill of the country in winter. She bundled on Angus's fleece-lined coat that he'd given her as a house-warming present, and the beanie Jen dropped by, along with a tool-box. It seemed they were fast paced forgivers.

The grass was ice tipped and talkative beneath her boots. She moved through the dew dappled fruit-trees. Rotten fruit was crystal clustered with the remains of the night's chill. The branches were bare, shooting out in various directions, like they couldn't agree on which way was up. The grass around the trunks was so high it grazed the lower branches. She picked up a stone, that had once been a fleshy-peach, and carried it with a soft grip up the hillside.

The view from the top was so expansive that she placed her stone beside her and sat for hours to understand the land. As a city girl, she'd always thought scenery was still, but as she considered the hills and valley, she came to understand that even land changes in breaths. Although she was freezing, her cheeks burnt under the winter sun.

A white flash at the far end of her laneway caught her attention. At first she thought she might be delirious; could people get sunstroke in winter? Start seeing things? She started to make out a van. And a human, who got out the van, only to get back in and drive away.

Downhill running was the closest she'd ever come to flight. She reached the spot where the van had paused and saw a mailbox. It was barely standing on its rotted post and its mouth hung like a loose-lipped teen. Panting, she tried to guess who had written. Perhaps it was just a

bill, or perhaps it was from someone who wanted money, or perhaps it was from a woman.

One woman.

—END—

Curriculum Vitae

Ann-Marie Laura Blanchard

Education

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
PhD in English with a concentration in Fiction (commenced 2014, defense scheduled 11 June 2018)

University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with a concentration in Fiction (2012-2014)

University of Notre Dame Australia
B.A. in Literature, specialty in Philosophy (2007-2010)

University of Sydney
Cross-institutional studies of Australian Literature (2009)

Fiction Publications

“Fireweed.” *Westerly Magazine*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2015. 133-138.

Poetry Publications

“Freak.” *Bone Bouquet*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2017. 38.

“resc(you) dog.” *Cordite Poetry Review*, vol. 57: CONFESSIO, 2017.

“aerie” & “Halfway House.” *Storm Cellar*, vol. 5, no. 2. 2017. 57-58.

“Transubstantiation.” *EatLocal::ReadLocal*, 2017. Poem showcased in local restaurants across Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin, during National Poetry Month.

“Blessed Are You Among Women.” *Going Down Swinging*, vol. 37. 2016. 88.

“Don’t Feed the Girl.” *Sycamore Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2016. 87.

“Her Majesty the Queen.” *Bat City Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015. 154-155.

“Dreams of Pink Victrolas,” & “B&E Queen of the ‘70s.” *Sundog Lit: Scorched Earth Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2015.

Book Chapter & Anthology Inclusion

“resc(you) dog.” *Australian Poets Anthology 2018*. Australian Poetry Ltd.: Melbourne. Forthcoming July 2018.

“Oceanic Baptism.” *Underneath: The University of Canberra’s Vice Chancellor’s International Poetry Prize 2015*. Axon Elements: Canberra, 2015. 53.

“The Play of Style.” *Rhetorical Approaches of College Writing*. Hayden McNeil: Plymouth, 2015. 73-78.

Interview

“An Interview with Laura van den Berg.” *storySouth*. Issue 36, Fall 2013.

Writing Awards

Finalist, 2018 International Literary Awards: Penelope Niven Award in Creative Nonfiction, “Live at the Troubadour.”

1st Place, William Harrold Poetry Prize, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2018)

1st Place, The Academy of American Poets Edward Ryan Prize, “Don’t Feed the Girl,” (2017)

Commendations, “Pith,” Peter Porter Poetry Prize (2016)

“Don’t Feed the Girl.” Nominated by the *Sycamore Review* for the annual anthologised work celebrating emerging writers, *Best New Poets 2016*

1st Place, *Dust*, The Ellen Hunnicut Prize, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2016)

Long-listed for the University of Canberra’s Vice Chancellor’s International Poetry Prize (2015)

1st Place, William Harrold Poetry Prize, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2015)

2nd Place, “Fireweed,” Katherine Susannah Prichard Award for Short Fiction (2014)

Conferences & Residencies

“Girls Gone Gaga: Catholic Women, Catastrophe, and Redemption.” Catholic Theology in the Public Academy: Searching the Questions, Sounding the Depths. Centre for Catholic Studies 10th Anniversary Conference, Durham University, United Kingdom (April 2018)

Writer-in-Residence at Weymouth Center, North Carolina (June-July 2017)

“Structures of Engagement: Identity, Authority, Space.” Composition colloquium for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee & Marquette University, Panel: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (March 2015)

“Slow.” Sydney International Writers’ Festival, Bangarra Theatre (April 2007)

Fellowships

Distinguished Graduate Dissertator Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2016-2017)

The Wladyslaw Cieszynski Fellowship, awarded to an immigrant to the United States by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2017-2018).

Teaching & Academic Awards

Students’ Choice Teacher Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2014)

Student Success Award, acknowledged by the English Department for exceptional performance, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2014-2015)

Chancellor’s Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2014-2015)

Outstanding Achievement Awards, measured across all units of study, against entire university cohort, University of Notre Dame Australia, (2008 & 2009)

Gaudeamus Award, top students who made the Deans’ List with distinctions across all subjects of study, University of Notre Dame Australia, (2007)

Faculty Awards for Top Performance, based on total marks in relevant discipline, measured against entire university cohort: 1st year English commendation (2007), 1st year English commendation (2008), Upper Level History commendation (2008), Upper Level English first prize (2009), University of Notre Dame Australia

Teaching & Related Experience

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee:

Introduction to English Literature (2016, 2017), traditional & online, Instructor of Record
Introduction to Creative Writing (2015, 2016), traditional & online, Instructor of Record
College Level Research and Writing (2016, 2017, 2018), Instructor of Record
College Level Writing (2014, 2016), Instructor of Record

University of North Carolina at Greensboro:
English Composition 1 (2013, 2014), Instructor of Record

Work Related Experience

Fiction Editor (commenced 2014), *cream city review*
Manage assistant editors and interns, meet publication deadlines, edit fiction, solicit authors, arrange for visiting writers, represent magazine and work book-table at national conferences (i.e. AWP).

Assistant Fiction Editor (2012-2014), *Greensboro Review*
Read submissions, edit fiction, solicit authors, meet publication deadlines, represent magazine and work book-table at national conferences (i.e. AWP).

Editor and Proof-reader (commenced 2017), Western Sydney University
Document preparation for the Centre for Infrastructure Engineering, suggest edits and proofreads for Masters and PhD theses, ensure revisions are completed for a timely thesis submission.

Graduate student representative for the Creative Writing Advisory Committee (2017-2018), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Bring student concerns to the faculty's attention, discuss issues relevant to the plan and department, lend perspective and suggest solutions to bettering aspects of program.

Creative Writing Instructor at Milwaukee Incarceration Facility (2015), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
Implemented a creative writing program in a men's incarceration centre, designed syllabi, liaised with head administrators of the facility, trained teachers to carry out program.

Writing Consultant (2012-2014)
The Writing Center: University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Provided individual and group conferences for students, face-to-face and online, reviewed papers, dialogued with writers and offered feedback.

Professional References

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