

**School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts**

**Indigenous stories, Indigenous realities: reconciliation and  
resistance in Indigenous Australian narratives**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of Master of Media,  
Culture and Creative Arts, Master Thesis of Curtin University**

## **DECLARATION:**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

*E. Kwaymullina*

**Ezekiel Kwaymullina 30 January 2016**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Dr David Whish-Wilson, who went above and beyond to help get me into the masters program. Thank you for taking a chance on me and for all your efforts along the way as my supervisor.

Many thanks to Thor Kerr, for your patience, dedication and guidance on my exegesis. Whenever I thought I had the perfect draft you always had ways to make it better and I have benefited greatly from the process of your supervision.

Thank you to Curtin University and everyone at the Humanities Research and Graduate Studies. Thank you for funding me with the CUPS scholarship and for signing off on me taking on this thesis. I know I am not the standard research student and I appreciate the courage it took to allow me to take on this project.

Lastly, thank you to my family, who when an illiterate fourteen year old kid told them he wanted to be a writer you didn't tell him it was impossible, but instead asked when you could read his first piece of writing. I'd be nowhere without you all.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines selected texts written by Indigenous Australian authors with a view to exploring what each text reveals about Indigenous Australian realities. The texts chosen for analysis are Bronwyn Bancroft's *Patterns of Australia*, Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Ruby Moonlight*, and Sue McPherson's *Grace Beside Me*. All three narratives are works of children's literature. *Patterns of Australia* is a picture book, written and illustrated by Bundjalung author and artist Bronwyn Bancroft, and it relates to the diverse Indigenous environments of Australia. *Ruby Moonlight*, is a verse novel, written by Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha author and poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, and it tells the story of a young woman who survives a massacre in colonial Australia. *Grace Beside Me* is a young adult novel written by Wiradjuri and Torres Strait Islander author Sue McPherson, which is set in 2008 and follows the life of 'Fuzzy' Mac, an Indigenous teenager (South Sea Islander and Koori) living with her grandparents in a small country town. These particular texts have been chosen because they speak to three sets of relationships: first, Indigenous relationships with animate environments; second, the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people forged in the violence of frontier Australia; and finally, the relationships in the process of being formed as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people navigate a changing Australia. As such, engaging with these and all other Australian Indigenous narratives can be viewed as part of the broader project of reconciliation.

The texts are examined through the lens of an Indigenous epistemology that is grounded in Indigenous worldviews. The work of key Indigenous scholars in this area – such as Linda Smith, Karen Martin, Martin Nakata, and Lester Irabinna Rigney – is drawn upon to elucidate an Indigenous epistemological approach and the characteristics of Indigenous worldviews that inform that approach. This in turn provides the basis for what I am characterising as a 'deep reading' of each text. I contend that through applying an approach to textual analysis that reflects the underlying Indigenous context that shaped the narrative, it is possible to achieve a greater appreciation of the layers (or depths) of meaning within each narrative. In addition, I suggest that this approach also facilitates a better understanding of the connections between each chosen narrative and the broader Indigenous realities that shape that narrative.

My creative work is a young adult novel titled *Catching the Grey* -a mystery that features a fifteen year old Aboriginal protagonist named Isabel Catching. The story is told through the interaction between Isabel and a police officer named Michael Teller. *Catching the Grey* addresses the same sets of relationships that underlie the three texts examined in the exegetical portion of this thesis: Indigenous connections to our environments, the Indigenous experience of colonialism, and the resolution of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in contemporary Australia. In this way, *Catching the Grey* represents my own exploration of Indigenous realities as an Aboriginal writer.

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**Exegesis: Indigenous stories, Indigenous realities: relationships,  
resistance and reconciliation in Indigenous Australian  
narratives**



## I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the way in which selected Australian Indigenous narratives reveal aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander realities. The texts chosen for analysis are Bronwyn Bancroft's *Patterns of Australia*, Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Ruby Moonlight*, and Sue McPherson's *Grace Beside Me*. These narratives address three key elements of Indigenous existence: our connection to our homelands, our experiences of colonialism, and our lives in a changing Australia. Each text reveals layers of meaning and complexity that are part and parcel of the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples. *Patterns of Australia* invites the reader into an Indigenous experience of our homelands, speaking to the diversity of Australian landscapes and of Australian Indigenous peoples. *Ruby Moonlight* addresses the violence of the colonial period from the perspective of the colonised. *Grace Beside Me* deals with the power of stories, and the role of story in sustaining Indigenous peoples and in resolving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in present-day Australia. These three stories are all stories of the lived experience of Indigenous peoples, and in a broader sense, constitute profound contributions towards the reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Overall, these texts are among the multitude of Indigenous voices speaking through literature that open windows into the worlds of Indigenous Australia.

The analysis undertaken throughout the course of the thesis is based on an Indigenous research methodology, shaped by Indigenous worldviews. This first chapter sets out the overarching structure of the thesis, and the relationship between the thesis and my creative work.

### 1. A note on terminology

There is a long history of research in relation to Indigenous peoples being conducted in such a way as to be dehumanising and destructive of Indigenous cultures, both within Australia and elsewhere (Smith 2012, Nakata 2007). This includes the use of inappropriate terminology. For this reason, it seems worthwhile to begin with an explanation of the use of terminology throughout this thesis.

First, this thesis follows the guidance set out in the document *General Information: Indigenous Australian people and appropriate terminology* (Curtin University, n.d). Second, as an Aboriginal scholar, I am aware of how the inherent

diversity of the Indigenous peoples of the world has been ignored or obscured, and the way in which this lack of understanding has been facilitated by the broad labels that were imposed upon us by colonialism. For example, the numerous Indigenous nations who occupied mainland Australia, Tasmania and some off-shore islands were grouped together under the single descriptor 'Aboriginal'. I note that there are occasions when the use of such terms is appropriate, for example, when referring to Australia's First Peoples or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a group. However, it is also important to be aware of the need to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous existence in order to avoid continuing to obscure the reality of Indigenous lives. In the words of Professor Maggie Walter (2008), a Trawlwoolway woman of the Pymmerrairrener nation of north-east Tasmania:

...while Indigeneity is shared, and this shared status is acknowledged and recognised, it is Indigenous peoples, each with a unique history, affiliation to country and cultural identity, who make up the Australian Indigenous population. It is as *Walpiri, Noongar, Yorta Yorta, Yolgnu, Quandamooka* and many other peoples that Indigenous Australians primarily identify. Strong links to the home country of the broader family group is retained and maintained, even if individuals or families are not presently physically living in those locations. (Walter 2008, 2)

Therefore, throughout this thesis, Indigenous people are identified by the name of the specific people(s) from whom they come the first time an individual is named. A general term such as 'Aboriginal' is only used where the specific people that an individual is from could not be identified.

The term 'Indigenous' is used in this thesis in two ways. One is to refer to Indigenous peoples across the globe. As has been set out by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, a modern understanding of the term 'Indigenous' is based on the following:

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member;
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies;
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources;
- Distinct social, economic or political systems;
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs;
- Form non-dominant groups of society;
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities. (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues n.d., 1)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia are recognised as Indigenous peoples, as are the Maori of Aotearoa (New Zealand) and the many First Nations of the Americas and Canada, along with the numerous other Indigenous peoples who comprise the 370 million-strong Indigenous population worldwide (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues n.d., 1).

The second way in which the term ‘Indigenous’ is used in this thesis is in referring to the Indigenous peoples of Australia: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When used in this sense, it is always made clear from the context that that the term is intended to refer to Australian Indigenous peoples only (for example by referring to ‘Indigenous Australians’).

The term ‘Aboriginal’ is only ever used to refer to the Aboriginal people of Australia. It is not used an ‘umbrella’ term which also includes Torres Strait Islander peoples, again in order to avoid obscuring the diversity of Indigenous Australia.

## **2. Structure of this Thesis**

The content of this first chapter is set out above. Chapter Two of this thesis examines Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous epistemologies, drawing on the work of Indigenous scholars both within Australia and elsewhere. It then considers how these epistemologies can be ‘operationalised’ so as to apply them to conduct an analysis of the literary works considered in the thesis. As is explained in Chapter Two, the narratives selected have been chosen to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing that showcases the different forms used by Indigenous Australian authors within the children’s literature genre, and that speak to a range of experiences.

Chapters Three, Four and Five of this thesis examines three narratives written by Indigenous Australian writers: *Patterns of Australia* by Bronwyn Bancroft (Chapter Three); *Ruby Moonlight* by Ali Cobby Eckermann (Chapter Four); and *Grace Beside Me* by Sue McPherson (Chapter Five).

*Patterns of Australia* is a picture book, written and illustrated by Bundjalung author and artist Bronwyn Bancroft. Throughout the book, Bancroft details how she ‘reads’ the presence of patterns in the landscape. Thus, the book offers an Aboriginal perspective on the animate nature of Indigenous realities. The second book examined, *Ruby Moonlight*, is a verse novel, written by Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha author and poet Ali Cobby Eckermann. *Ruby Moonlight* is the story of a young woman who survives a massacre in colonial Australia. This book addresses the

Aboriginal experience of frontier violence and tells a tale of terror, survival and resistance.

*Grace Beside Me*, written by Wiradjuri and Torres Strait Islander author Sue McPherson, follows the life of ‘Fuzzy’ Mac, an Indigenous teenager (South Sea Islander and Koori) living with her grandparents in a small country town. Set in 2008

– the year then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations – the book captures the struggles and triumphs of an Indigenous teenager in the broader context of a changing Australia.

As is explained in Chapter Two, these particular texts have been chosen because they speak to three sets of relationships: first, Indigenous relationships with animate environments; second, the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people forged in the violence of frontier Australia; and finally, the relationships in the process of being formed as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people navigate a changing Australia. As such, engaging with these and all other Australian Indigenous narratives can be viewed as part of the broader project of reconciliation. In the words of Palyku writer and artist Sally Morgan (1998):

In the telling [of our stories] we assert the validity of our own experiences and we call the silence of two hundred years a lie. And it is important for you, the listener, because like it or not, we are a part of you. We have to find a way of living together in this country and that will only come when our hearts, minds and wills are set towards reconciliation. It will only come when thousands of stories have been spoken and listened to with understanding. (Morgan quoted in Edwards and Read 1989, vii)

It is noted that this silence can also be thought of in another way. Historian Tom Griffiths – referencing anthropologist William Stanner’s concept of the erasure of Indigenous peoples from history as being the great Australian silence – suggests it is not silence but rather ‘white noise’ (1996, 4). Chapter Six of this thesis draws some final thoughts together and concludes the analysis.

### **3. Connection to creative work**

My creative work is a young adult novel titled *Catching the Grey*, featuring a fifteen year old Aboriginal protagonist named Isabel Catching. The story is told partly in first person point of view (from Isabel’s perspective) and partly in third person.

When the book begins, Teller has been called to a burned out building, a children's home, which contains a body. Isabel is found nearby and he is tasked with interviewing her. At the hospital Isabel recounts a story about travelling to another world. As the book progresses and more bodies appear, the link between the 'fantasy' world which Isabel has been describing and the events occurring in the real world slowly becomes clear. By the conclusion of the novel, it is left to Teller, and the reader, to determine which version of the world is real.

The books examined in this thesis speak to the same sets of relationships which underlie the creation of *Catching the Grey*. The analysis in Chapter 3 of *Patterns of Australia* deals with Australian Indigenous understandings of our environments as animate, many-layered places which hide deeper truths beneath the surfaces of the world. In *Catching the Grey*, the character of Michael Teller begins with a 'surface' knowledge of the world. As the book progresses and he engages with Isabel's story and worldview, he is forced to look deeper. By the end of the narrative, his perspective as a Western observer has been turned on its head and he is no longer sure where the boundaries lie between what he previously conceived of as being 'real' and 'unreal'.

The analysis in Chapter Four of *Ruby Moonlight* deals with colonial violence and Indigenous resistance and survival. The analysis in Chapter Five of *Grace Beside Me* deals with an Indigenous Australian teenager navigating her cultural inheritance and the legacy of colonial history in contemporary Australia. Both these sets of relationships also inform the overarching narrative of *Catching the Grey*. When the book begins, Isabel has fled from a situation of terrible violence and brutality. That violence was facilitated by the working of government agencies and government officials. Although, in the book, the officials were acting in a way that was outside the rule of law, they were able to do so because of Isabel's vulnerability as a marginalised person within the larger society. This mirrors the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were denied the protection of the rule of law for much of Australian history post-1788, and the way in which the legal institutions failed to protect Australian Indigenous peoples. Although Indigenous peoples were purportedly British subjects, they were often denied the protection of the rule of law, as is noted by lawyer and author Larissa Behrendt of the Eualeyai and Kammilaroi peoples, and legal academics Chris Cuneen and Teri Libesman (2009):

The position of Aboriginal people, as British subjects, at the time of

colonisation was at best ambiguous. Two basic tenets of the rule of law have been denied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consistently from the time of colonisation, the first being that laws should not be exercised arbitrarily and the second that law should sustain a normative order and thereby contribute to the maintenance of law and order within communities. (Behrendt, Cuneen and Libesman 2009, 9)

The character of Teller is a representative of a system Isabel has learned to fear. Nonetheless, through her interactions with him, she gradually finds that he is (as she says at the end of the book) a “good man”. He in turn intensifies his own questioning of the system he serves. The gradual building of trust between Isabel and Teller addresses the sets of relationships examined in Chapter Five in the context of *Grace Beside Me*, and to the building of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples which is much needed in present day Australia. The latest ‘Reconciliation Barometer’ – a survey conducted by Reconciliation Australia to measure progress towards Reconciliation – found that only 26% of Australians have a high level of trust of Indigenous Australians (Reconciliation Australia 2015, 5). But the Reconciliation Barometer also found that 86% of non-Indigenous Australians believe the relationship with Indigenous Australians is important, and 80% believe it is important to know about Australian Indigenous cultures (Reconciliation Australia 2015, 5, 13).

The establishment of trust can also be viewed as part of Australia’s journey towards post-colonialism. It is noted that the degree to which Australia can presently be described as a post-colonial nation is a contested matter. Wiradjuri academic Jeanine Leane defines post-colonialism as “a continuation of colonialism through different or new relationships concerning power and the control and production of knowledge” (2010, 35). Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss, in examining the views of a range of Australian Aboriginal views on this issue, has commented that “most Aboriginal writers ... see the term [as] implying that colonialism is a matter of the past and that decolonization has taken place, which of course is not the case. In this way, most writers do not even consider the term in relation to their writing at all” (Heiss 2003, 43). One of the most obvious difficulties in applying the term post-colonial to Australia is that if colonialism is over, then it seems that the least that Indigenous peoples might expect is a degree of approximation between the health, education and employment conditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, national statistics demonstrate that this is not so. While the

Federal Government's *Closing the Gap* policy has made some improvements, the most recent Prime Minister's report on the policy has indicated that it is not on track to meet most of its targets (Australian Government, 2015, 1). The gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is 10.6 years for Indigenous men and 9.5 years for Indigenous women (Australian Government, 2015, 9). Only 58.5% of Indigenous Australians aged between 20 – 24 achieved Year 12 or equivalent in 2012-13, compared to 86.5% of non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2015, 17). Finally, the employment rate for Indigenous Australians in 2012-13 was 47.5%, compared to 75.6% for non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2015, 18).

The nuances and complexities of what a post-colonial Australia might ultimately look like is outside the scope of this thesis. However, I contend that the building of trust is an essential precursor to more positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and therefore to any possibility of a post-colonial Australia in any shape or form. Thus, like *Patterns of Australia*, *Ruby Moonlight*, and *Grace Beside Me, Catching the Grey* is one of the diverse body of Indigenous Australian works that Sally Morgan has spoken of as the “thousands of stories that need to be spoken and listened to with understanding” (Morgan quoted in Edwards and Read 1989, vii).

## II. INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS AND INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGIES: DEFINING AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

### 1. The negative effects of research practices on Indigenous peoples

In her groundbreaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Maori scholar Linda Smith wrote that “The word... research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the [I]ndigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith 2012, 31). In the second edition of her work, she commented that this sentence was the most oft-quoted portion of the book (2012, 3). This reflects the low regard in which some Western research practices are held by Indigenous peoples across the globe. Indigenous peoples in Australia and elsewhere regard themselves as the most researched peoples in the world and view research with “apprehension and caution” (Rigney 1997, 109). Murri academic Bronwyn Fredericks has identified the following issues with regard to past research practices and Australian Indigenous peoples: that research has invaded the lives of Indigenous peoples and communities; that it has often been undertaken without permission and without regard to Indigenous peoples right to participate or to choose not to; and that in some circumstances communities have been unaware that non-Indigenous visitors were conducting research (Fredericks 2008, 24).

The concerns raised in a research context extend to unauthorised commercial publication of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories without the permission of the Indigenous storytellers and with no return of benefits, which was one of the issues that prompted the establishment of Indigenous publisher Magabala Books in 1987 (Merilee Lands in Thompson 1990, 49). The continuing relevance of these issues to the Australian Arts sector can be demonstrated by the proliferation of guidelines and protocols as to how to appropriately deal with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities, and stories. These include the Australia Council for the Arts Indigenous Cultural Protocol guides (Australia Council for the Arts, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e); Screen Australia’s *Pathways and Protocols: A filmmaker’s guide to working with Indigenous people, culture and concepts* (Screen Australia, 2009), and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ *Guidelines for the ethical publishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and research from those communities* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2015).

It is noted that the concept of ‘literature’ has often itself been problematic



when applied by Western scholars to the works of Indigenous peoples. Consistent with the disempowering research practices discussed above, Indigenous works have been positioned as ‘less than’ literature. As Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2004) has written:

In the past few decades, indigenous writers have challenged the narrow and Eurocentric perspectives of the Western literary canon and convention. In many cases still today, indigenous literatures are not regarded as ‘literature proper.’ ... Due to differences in structure, format, story line, mode of telling or expression and even purpose, indigenous literary conventions are often rendered as ‘folklore,’ ‘myths’ and ‘legends’ which usually carry the implicit message of being something less significant and noteworthy than ‘literature.’ Literary criticism alien to these conventions may also violate the integrity of indigenous literatures. (Kuokkanen 2004, 92)

In an Australian context, non-Indigenous academic Penny van Toorn (2006), in her examination of Indigenous literary cultures in Australia, has raised questions as to the way in which Australian literary traditions continue to exclude Australia’s Indigenous peoples:

It is often said that literacy is empowering. Literacy opens doors. By learning to read and write, people broaden their opportunities. There are many varieties of literacy, however, and not all are available to everyone. Nor does each type of literacy bring about the same benefits ... We still need to ask: Whose traditions open up what kinds of opportunities? Whose literacy rules? Whose literacy is clothed in what kinds of power? (van Toorn 2006, 229-230)

As an Aboriginal author and scholar, it therefore becomes important to ensure that my research is conducted in a way that does not mirror the past practices which have proved damaging to Indigenous peoples and communities in Australia and elsewhere. In this, I am informed by the scholarship of Indigenous academics around the world who have taken up the challenge of articulating an Indigenous research agenda.

## **2. Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous research methodologies**

Australian Indigenous scholars Aileen Moreton-Robinson (a Geonpul woman from the Quandamooka First Nation) and Maggie Walter (2010) have explained the content of Indigenous research methodologies as follows:

Indigenous research methodologies reflect our

- Epistemologies (ways of knowing);
- Axiologies (ways of doing); and
- Ontologies (ways of being). (Moreton-Robinson and Walter, 2010, 36)

Linda Smith (2012) has also commented on the need to centre research in the Indigenous ‘self’:

What researchers may call methodology, for example, Maori researchers in New Zealand call Kaupapa Maori research or Maori-centred research. This form of naming is about bringing to the centre and privileging [I]ndigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within Westernized labels such as ‘collaborative research’. (Smith, 2012, 214)

As was noted in Chapter One of this thesis, there is much diversity between the Indigenous nations of the world, including those of Australia. There are however some broad common characteristics which underlie the worldviews of all Indigenous people, even though the way in which those worldviews are interpreted is shaped by local and individual factors. In an Australian context, Nyungar woman Tjalaminu Mia has spoken of diversity and commonality amongst Aboriginal nations as ‘differences and sameness’ whereby “Aboriginal people are the first people of country in the many lands that make up Australia, but we have distinct cultural and spiritual autonomy over particular areas of country” (Mia 2008, 187). This means that, in applying an Indigenous research methodology, it becomes important both to identify the common characteristics that shape Indigenous worldviews and to recognise the diversity in how those characteristics are applied by different Indigenous peoples, communities and individuals. Meriam academic Kerry Arabena – in the context of writing of Australian Indigenous concepts of citizenship and belonging – has drawn on the work of Indigenous scholars worldwide to conclude that a common theme in Indigenous philosophy is that the universe is dynamic, constantly changing, and profoundly inter-related (2008, 9). It is noted that these characteristics are not unique to Indigenous worldviews and are also found in the worldviews of other peoples, however, the focus of this exegesis is on the ways in which these characteristics manifest within Indigenous Australian narratives, and are given meaning and content by Australian Indigenous systems.

An understanding of the world as an animate, inter-related whole has also been highlighted by other Indigenous scholars and thinkers, both within Australia and elsewhere, as being fundamental to Indigenous worldviews (Arbon 2008, Atkinson 2002, 27 – 30, Cajete 2000, Collard 2008, Deloria 1999, Graham 2008, Graveline 1998, Grieves 2009, Henderson 2000, Kuokkanen, Rauna 2005, Kwaymullina 2005, Little Bear 2000, Martin 2003). It can therefore be stated that, firstly, Indigenous worldviews are life-centred, in that the world is viewed as a living, dynamic being which is itself comprised of many forms of life moving through cycles of creation.

Everything is alive, including things that would be classified as ‘inanimate’ or ‘non-living’ within Western scientific taxonomies (such as rock, for example). Secondly, Indigenous worldviews are holistic in that everything is viewed as part of an interconnected whole. Finally, Indigenous worldviews are relationships-focused, in that everything exists in relationship(s) to everything else.

Again, these broad characteristics are also true of other worldviews elsewhere in the world. They find their distinctiveness when applied by individual Indigenous peoples in the context of specific Indigenous cultures, histories and environments. The task of this exegesis is to examine the manifestation of these principles in three narratives shaped by the different cultural and historical positioning of the three Indigenous authors. These broad characteristics also do not require that all Indigenous people in the world will always draw the same conclusions. In using an Indigenous research methodology, I am applying a perspective that is shaped by characteristics common to Indigenous worldviews, but drawing conclusions based on my own understanding and experience. In order to ensure my research remains Indigenous-centred, I am guided by the four principles that have been articulated by Quandamooka scholar Karen Martin (2003), expanding upon earlier work done by Narungga, Kurna and Ngarrindjeri man Lester Irabinna Rigney. These principles are:

Recognition of our worldviews, knowledges and our realities as distinctive and vital to our existence and survival;

Honouring our social mores as an essential process through which we live, learn and situate ourselves as Aboriginal people in our own lands and when in the lands of other Aboriginal people;

Emphasis of social, historical and political contexts which shape our experiences, lives, positions and futures;

Privileging the voices, experiences and lives of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal lands. (Martin 2003 4-5).

In summary, an Indigenous research methodology is centred in the Indigenous ‘self’. This means, firstly, that it’s informed by Indigenous worldviews and so is life-centred, holistic, and relationships focused. As set out by Karen Martin, it must recognise Indigenous worldviews as vital to our existence; honour our social mores; emphasise the social, historical and political contexts in which we live; and privilege Indigenous voices. Secondly, an Indigenous research methodology does not facilitate the drawing of universal conclusions such that all Indigenous peoples arrive at the same opinion, but rather is applied by one Indigenous self or selves among many, and as such, is influenced by the specific cultures from which we come and our own

knowledge and experiences.

### **3. Application of an Indigenous research methodology**

#### **3.1. Selection and use of sources**

My creative work falls within the field of children's literature (and more specifically, Young Adult literature), and in order to maintain the link between my thesis and my creative work, I have chosen texts for analysis that are within the children's literature field. All three texts are written by women. This also connects to my creative work, which features a female protagonist who was herself inspired by the generations of strong Palyku women in my family. Consistent with the characteristics of Indigenous worldviews set out above, each text will be examined from a life-centred, holistic, and relationships focused perspective (see below at 'b' for a explanation of how this will shape the analysis). In addition, in order to maintain the Indigenous 'centre' which is so essential to an Indigenous methodology, my choice of all the sources drawn upon in this thesis has been guided by the four principles set out by Karen Martin (2003), which I have set out above.

#### **3.1.1. Principle 1: Recognition of our worldviews, knowledges and our realities as distinctive and vital to our existence and survival**

#### **Principle 2: Honouring our social mores as an essential process through which we live, learn and situate ourselves as Aboriginal people in our own lands and when in the lands of other Aboriginal people**

Indigenous worldviews and knowledges are essential to our survival. 'Knowledges' includes stories, which are themselves expressions of the Indigenous 'self'. In the words of Wiradjuri poet Kerry Reed-Gilbert "Aboriginal identity is who we are as writers, as people. We live our lives as the Indigenous people of this land, we write as Indigenous people of this land" (quoted in Heiss 2003, 41).

Historically, Indigenous stories, like all Indigenous knowledges, have been dealt with in ways that are sometimes disrespectful and disempowering of Indigenous peoples and communities (Heiss, 2010). Aboriginal narratives have been, and are, under threat from the very practices which sparked the creation of Indigenous research methodologies in the first place, and resulted in the development of the sets of protocols set out under Principle 1), above. In order to ensure Indigenous knowledges are dealt with in a way that does not threaten the survival of the

knowledge, the texts chosen for analysis and all other Indigenous sources used throughout this thesis are published narratives. No use has been made of knowledge that Indigenous people have not chosen to place in the public domain. Finally, in recognition that there has been much past publication of Indigenous stories without the consent of the Indigenous storytellers, all sources are themselves written or co-written by Indigenous people.

Principle 2 requires honouring the social mores by which Indigenous people “live, learn and situate ourselves”. This has affected the way in which sources are chosen and treated in two ways. First, no distinction is made in this thesis between Indigenous stories or perspectives on the basis of what is sometimes called a ‘traditional’ story or perspective and all other stories and perspectives. It is recognised that the use of the word ‘traditional’ can be value-laden and connect to stereotypes of what constitutes Indigeneity. Thus, as is set out in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ *Guidelines for the ethical publishing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and research from those communities* “words like ‘contemporary’, ‘urban’ and ‘traditional’ ... can cause hurt to some Aboriginal people” by perpetuating misguided notions of what constitutes a ‘real’ Aboriginal person” (2015, 12).

The second way in which Principle 2 has affected text selection is that the three texts chosen for analysis are written by authors from different areas of Australia, and from both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, in order to honour the diversity of Indigenous Australia. The stories are also told in different ways – *Grace Beside Me* is a prose novel; *Ruby Moonlight* a verse novel; and *Patterns of Australia* is a picture book. This honours the diversity of creative expression that has always been a part of Australian Indigenous cultures. Pre-contact, stories were told through a range of mediums such as dance, song and ceremony. Stories continue to be told in this way, but are also told in other ways as Indigenous peoples negotiate Western forms in order to communicate and celebrate Indigenous realities.

### **3.1.2. Principle 3: Emphasis of social, historical and political contexts which shape our experiences, lives, positions and futures**

Consistent with the above principle, the three texts chosen for analysis speak to three different aspects of the contexts that shape Indigenous experiences, lives, positions and futures. As these themes are expanded in the analysis of each text, they

will only be discussed briefly here.

*Patterns of Australia* concerns the many environments of Australia and the way in which these environments are ‘read’ when viewed through the lens of an Aboriginal perspective. In this sense, the book addresses itself to the context of the homelands that shape all aspects of Indigenous existence. *Ruby Moonlight* addresses colonialism and particularly to the violence of the frontier; it is also a tale of Aboriginal resistance and survival. Finally, *Grace Beside Me* relates to the present day Australia and the experience of being Indigenous within a settler-state.

### **3.13. Principle 4: Privileging the voices, experiences and lives of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal lands**

The need to privilege Indigenous voices is something that has been highlighted by Lester Irabinna Rigney, whose work Karen Martin drew upon in developing the four principles I am applying in this thesis. Rigney writes that “[g]iven the history of exploitation, suspicion, misunderstanding, and prejudice, it is particularly appropriate that Indigenous Australians access and make public the voice and experience of other Indigenous Australians” (Rigney 1999, 117).

Palyku scholars Ambelin and Blaze Kwaymullina, and non-Indigenous academic Lauren Butterly, have suggested a means by which the privileging of Indigenous voices can be ‘operationalised’ (2013, 1 - 13). They have put forth a primary/secondary source dichotomy, where the primary and preferred sources for analysing Indigenous knowledges are Indigenous texts that have been properly authorised to be in the public domain by the relevant knowledge-holders, preferably with the least degree of mediation. Secondary sources then include a range of sources by non-Indigenous scholars, providing the use of the secondary sources does not overshadow the Indigenous texts (2013:10). This approach is adopted throughout this thesis. Thus, the texts chosen for analysis are written (and in the case of *Patterns of Australia*, illustrated) by Australian Indigenous authors. In addition, in the sources chosen to inform my interpretation of these texts, my primary material consists of works by Indigenous peoples in Australia and elsewhere, with the works of non-Indigenous people drawn upon as and when appropriate.

### **3.2. Analysis of the chosen texts: deep reading**

Each of the chosen texts will be examined on the basis of a life-centred, holistic, relationships focused approach, consistent with the methodology set out in

this chapter. I characterise this approach as a deep reading of the narratives, for the reasons laid out later in this section.

My analysis will be 'life centred' in that the existence of an animate universe is assumed. This means that rather than asking whether the universe is an animate place, the focus shifts to the ways in which it is animate and how each of the chosen texts 'speaks' to a living world. In this sense, I am conducting the kind of inquiry referenced by Kombumerri Elder Mary Graham (2008) when she wrote of the difference between Western and Aboriginal conceptions of the meaning of life:

Western: what is the meaning of life?

Aboriginal: what is it that wants to know? (Graham 2008, 181)

In this, Graham is referencing the notion that in Indigenous systems, everything is alive, conscious and capable of forming conclusions as to what the meaning of life is, and the meaning will itself differ between individual shapes of life. My analysis will also be both holistic and relationship focused. It will be holistic in that rather than being viewed through a reductionist lens as isolated narratives, each text will be examined in the context of the connections between the text and broader aspects of Indigenous realities. As is noted above under 3) a) ii) the three texts have been chosen with a view to examining how they address three different aspects of the contexts that shape Indigenous experiences, lives, positions and futures. In addition, as is discussed above under 2), in Indigenous realities everything exists in relationship(s) to everything else. Since the word is animate and constantly shifting, relationships move too with shapes of life drawing closer together and then further apart. Relationships are not fixed but are part of the greater cycles through which all creation moves and this means that the relationships which are primary at any given moment depends on part on the different positions life occupies in that moment. My analysis, therefore, necessitates a focus on the sets of relationships to which each text speaks. I have divided the analysis conducted over the course of the next three Chapters as follows: Relationships and Environments (*Patterns of Australia*); Relationships and Colonialism (*Ruby Moonlight*); Relationships and Resolutions (*Grace Beside Me*).

The underlying methodology and its application in this way constitutes a deep reading of the texts in two ways. First, it allows for a greater appreciation of the layers (or depths) of meaning within each text. For example, as will be seen in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, all three texts reference the animate nature of Indigenous homelands (in that everything within homelands lives, including that which Western

taxonomies might characterise as inanimate, and everything is conscious). Applying an approach that assumes this to be true allows for the exploration of the ways in which a narrative communicates and engages with that reality, rather than entering into a discussion of whether the world is animate or not. This means that instead of measuring a particular aspect of a text against the way it does or does not conform to Western conceptions of the world, I am focusing on what the text conveys regarding Indigenous conceptions of the world.

The second way in which this approach allows for deep reading is to facilitate a better understanding of the connections between each narrative and the broader Indigenous realities that shape the text itself. It is submitted that an analysis grounded in an Indigenous worldview provides a basis on which to more fully, and deeply comprehend these connections, than one which examines connections through the lens of Western conceptions of Indigenous realities. This is especially the case given the degree to which *misconceptions* regarding Indigenous peoples are embedded within Western literary traditions. Jeanine Leane has written of these misconceptions being part of the “metanarratives of the national literary landscape” such that the work of non-Aboriginal writers regarding Aboriginal people can “reveal more about the consciousness of the writer as part of a greater dominant social group than... [it does] about being Aboriginal at any given time” (2010, 33). I believe that it’s also important to be aware of the metanarratives spoken of by Leane. When the analysis of the work of Indigenous writers is shaped by such metanarratives, it can result in an examination that speaks more to the dominant culture than to the Indigenous text itself and the culture that formed it. A deep reading, grounded in an Indigenous centre, allows this danger to be avoided.

My analysis in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 is shaped by a range of sources that facilitate the deep reading of the core three texts. Most of these sources are Indigenous, as is consistent with the principle of privileging Indigenous voice set out above, although I have also made some limited use of non-Indigenous sources. The Indigenous sources cited in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 can be grouped into two categories. First, narratives of Aboriginal Elders (Harrison 2003, Lester 1995, Malnic and Mowaljarlai 2001, Turner 2010). These texts contain the reflections of Aboriginal Elders on culture, history, philosophy, spirituality and future possibilities. Second, the work of Indigenous thinkers, including commentary from the authors of the three core texts (Atkinson 2002, Bancroft 2007, Behrendt 2004, Campbell quoted in Hawthorne Jenkins and Corbett 2008, Dixon 2008, Eckermann 2015, Eckermann and



Simpson 2012, Grieves 2009, Kwaymullina 2005, Mia 2008). I have used these sources both to inform the analysis more broadly and to illustrate particular aspects of Indigenous realities.

The non-Indigenous sources cited in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 consist of the work of academics Andrew Markus and Clare Land (Markus 2004, Land 2015), and government documents in the form of the *Bringing Them Home: Report into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997) and the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing* (2004). These are used to provide broader background in relation to specific issues raised by the core texts.

I also note that the works of Indigenous Elders and other thinkers cited within this Chapter (Arbon 2008, Arabena 2008, Atkinson 2002, Cajete 2000, Collard 2008, Deloria 1999, Fredericks 2008, Graveline, 1998, Grieves 2009, Heiss 2003, 2010, Henderson 2000, Kuokkanen 2004, Kwaymullina 2005, Little Bear 2000, Martin 2003 Rigney, Lester-Irabinna 1999, Leane 2010, Merilee Lands in Thompson 1990, Mia 2008, Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2010, Reed-Gilbert in Heiss 2003) underlie my approach to the chosen texts and constitute a major influence on my work, contributing to my understanding of the texts themselves, as well as to the broader Indigenous worldviews and realities that shape the narratives.

### III. RELATIONSHIPS AND ENVIRONMENTS: *PATTERNS OF AUSTRALIA*

#### 1. About the book

*Patterns of Australia* is a 32 page picture book that is written and illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft, a New South Wales Aboriginal writer and artist who comes from the Bundjalung people. Each page features a different Australian environment, illustrated with brightly coloured artwork painted in acrylic paint. Every image references a different ‘pattern’ of Australia, for example: ‘patterns of the forest’, ‘patterns of the sea’ and ‘patterns of the sky’.

#### 2. Australian Indigenous peoples, environments, and world-creating stories

The worldviews of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, like those of Indigenous peoples elsewhere across the globe, are founded in stories. The tales of how the world is made are sometimes referred to as Dreaming stories in the context of the Aboriginal people of mainland Australia and Tasmania. The name for Dreaming is different in the many different Aboriginal languages in Australia, and as Warrimay historian Vicki Grieves has noted, there are some difficulties with the use of the word ‘Dreaming’, including that no English word can adequately convey the concept of Dreaming or Law as “[t]hese English terms carry the burden of communicating what life itself is all about, in every manifestation and meaning, in all time, and as such they are not at all equivalent to the Aboriginal meaning” (2009, 8).

These foundational stories remain of central importance to Australian Indigenous worldviews since they are not of the ‘past’ but rather speak of the ongoing and continual creation of a world that is constantly being remade. However, the telling of stories of particular homelands is restricted to the Indigenous peoples who belong to that homeland, and to those within that group who are the custodians of a particular story. As Arrernte Elder Margaret Turner (2010) comments, speaking of the networks of relationships within her homeland:

‘Talking for Land’ means like if you’re talking on behalf of your parents, or really your father’s father. That sort of talking is like, “well, this is my country, this is my grandfather’s country, that’s how I fit into this Land. And that country holds everything that belongs to us. And I can talk about it because I’m this person, I’m related to my father’s father. (Turner 2010, 32)

Thus, consistent with Indigenous cultural traditions, while *Patterns of Australia* deals with the different environments of Australia it does not tell the stories

that belong to those environments. Rather than writing of specific relationships, Bancroft writes of *how* to relate, by providing an Indigenous ‘lens’ on a biodiverse Australia through both words and the accompanying artwork. As she states, in the introduction to the book “[M]y work is influenced by the stories and artwork of my ancestors. I see myself as creating another platform from which to read Aboriginal Australia, creating a new way of seeing – my way of seeing – while drawing on the old ways” (2005).

In this sense, Bancroft is also creating a culturally safe space whereby she conveys the manner in which Indigenous people form relationships with their homelands whilst complying with appropriate cultural protocols. Through inviting readers into this space, the book is itself an example of a pathway into Indigenous culture that allows for respectful learning and the building of respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

### **3. Deep reading: patterns, layers, holism and a living land**

Every picture in *Patterns of Australia* references a different pattern, which is displayed through artwork and discussed in text. For example, in ‘patterns of the rainforest’, leaves coloured with white, greens, yellows, and blues spiral across the page, hiding within their depths animals such as a goanna, a frog and a snake. The text associated with the picture tells of how Bancroft grew up with the rainforest of the Bundjalung State Forest and so can “paint it fluently.” In this sense, Bancroft is referencing a different kind of literacy than that of the written word; a fluency with landscape in which Indigenous Australians have long been adept. As Yankunytjatjara man Yami Lester has said “The land is full of stories. Every square mile is just like a book, a book with a lot of pages...” (1995, 2). All aspects of the land, and all life within it, has meaning. Bancroft references this at the beginning of the book, where she depicts an eagle. She writes “When wedge-tailed eagles come to you, it means “welcome to country.” I have depicted one here to welcome you to my book” (2005).

In holistic Indigenous systems, patterns in environments are of larger importance. The patterns in Country reflect the journeys and presence of the Ancestors. As Jutta Malnic (2001) has written, in relation to Wandjina Ancestral beings and her journeys through the Kimberley region of Western Australia with Ngarinyin Elder David Mowaljarlai:

“Why are there so many sites near the coast, Mowal?”

“That’s where the spirit came into Australia. Wandjina marked the

old coastline from long-long time ago. We need a helicopter to go there.”

Connecting the dots into a hypothetical helicopter route brings a surprise. “I’ve drawn a Wandjina!”

He is unimpressed. “I’ve been telling you all along that Wandjina painted where spirit came into this country.” (Malnic and Mowaljarlai 2001, 33)

*Patterns of Australia* also references the presence of Ancestral Beings in the landscape. In relation to rivers, Bancroft writes “The old stories tell of the rainbow serpent that went through the land and created the rivers, and you can see the sinuous shape of the serpent behind the patterns of this picture” (2005). The artwork associated with the text shows bubbles reflecting light, and beneath that, larger swirls through the water depict the travels of the serpent. Common to each of the pictures in Bancroft’s book are the creation of layers, whereby the dimensions and depth of each picture are not apparent until the reader looks more closely into the image. As Bancroft notes “The pictures in this book ... are an introduction to how I see the diverse and beautiful landscapes that make up Australia. Remember to look beneath the patterns, the outer story, and you will see so much more than is visible at first sight” (2005). Thus, in relation to rivers, Bancroft is encouraging the reader to see the life in the landscape, both in the small animals hidden beneath the waves, and the larger movement of the serpent that gave shape to all the other life present. This, in itself, is an invitation to revelation that can result from seeing beyond surfaces to the spirits and depths of the land. Nyungar poet and writer Graham Dixon (2008) has spoken of this, in relation to a journey into Nyungar country:

Uncle pointed to a distant, black, rocky range to the south-west, saying, ‘See that wide track that goes up and over the hills, leaving a gap in the undergrowth.’ Like the others I gazed in the direction Uncle was pointing, eventually spotting a groove that channeled through the bush... It was like seeing a miracle, actual evidence of the Waugal who, Uncle went on to say, slithered that way after having a rest in the creek at the base of the sloping granite surface. (Dixon 2008, 302–303)

Viewing the land in this way has significant consequences for the way in which land is related to and managed. It leads to a more holistic relationship that seeks to keep all things in balance (Gammage 2011).

One of the keys to sustaining the land, and for Indigenous Australians to sustain themselves, was to understand the hidden depths of the landscape and this concept of hidden depths is referenced throughout *Patterns of Australia*. The ‘patterns of the wildflowers’ picture is placed in a desert setting, showing colourful wildflowers bursting out of red desert sand. The text beneath the image explains this

was done “to show that even though a landscape may appear barren, it doesn’t mean there’s nothing there. For in the ever-changing seasonal landscape, a barren land may burst into bloom.” This conveys a lesson well known to Aboriginal people: that the land holds life for those who know how to read its layers and complexities. As Tjalaminu Mia (2008) has written in relation to water sources in Nyungar homelands:

*Kepwaamwinberkup* [nightwell] derives its name from a particular part in the creek where the water runs over granite rock. There is a hole in that rock... At night, the water rises up in the hole, but it disappears during the day. There are various *gnamma* holes throughout Nyungar country and knowledge of them was imperative to the survival of Nyungar people. (Mia 2008, 188)

Bancroft notes that the wildflowers are not particular to a specific place, and that “Some [wildflowers] you will be familiar with, like the Sturt’s desert pea, a waratah, wattle, kangaroo paws. But can you recognise callistemons, sundew, phebalium fringe myrtle, emu bush and snow daisies?” (2005). So at one level, the ‘Patterns of the Desert’ picture and accompanying text relates to the diversity of Australian environments, and to the need to ‘read’ the hidden life within if you are to sustain yourself. Thus, the book captures the reciprocal nurturing relationship between land and people which has always been, and remains, vital to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and happiness. The book is itself dedicated to land: it is “for Grandmothers Country” (Bancroft 2005).

It should also be noted that in Indigenous systems, it not possible to speak of the land without also speaking of people. This means that, when examined holistically and in light of the life-centred worldviews that shape Indigenous stories, *Patterns of Australia* can also be read as narrating the diversity of Australian Indigenous existence. Bardi Jawi woman Erica Spry (2009) has written of the ways in which diverse environments shape diverse Aboriginal people:

Saltwater Country people are strong like the rising of daily tides, which expose beauty and growth on coral reefs;

River Country people are strong like their Rivers which flow to maintain health for all;

Rangelands Country people are wise as their Rangelands heights gives them sight into the distance; displaying a wholesome view of the diversity of hidden valleys and water ways; and

Desert Country people have hidden healing gifts just like the Desert Country Deserts which can be conceived as dry, but has various times when there are carpets of colourful wild flowers in full bloom, depicting serenity and healing to ones soul/spirit.

All that Country encompasses, contributes to shaping people’s lifestyle and personalities. (Spry 2009, 135-136)

The reference above to desert wildflowers links back to Bancroft's observation of the hidden beauty of deserts. As Bancroft comments in her introduction to *Patterns of Australia*, seeing life in landscapes "has to do with perception and observation." Spry has also spoken of the broader effects of greater knowledge of the qualities of Indigenous homelands and peoples (2009, 135). She writes: "There are many unknown Aboriginal connection to country attributes that are waiting to be discovered, recognised rightfully and shared, that could strengthen our national Australian identity." In speaking of healthy relationships between Indigenous peoples and homelands, *Patterns of Australia* can also be viewed as a book that promotes healthy relationships in furthering knowledge and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This is perhaps especially significant in the context of increasing the understanding of the significance of Indigenous environmental knowledge, the value of which has gradually been recognised by Western scholars and institutions (Gammage 2011, *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010–2030* 2010). However, bearing in mind the holistic nature of Indigenous cultures, it is important to acknowledge that it is not only information regarding specific characteristics of a given environment that has significance but also the larger relationship to the environment from which that information comes. *Patterns of Australia* addresses this larger relationship and a mode of interaction with environments founded in an understanding of an animate reality. In this sense this text contributes to reconciliation and the greater healing that needs to take place in Australia, not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples but between non-Indigenous peoples and the land that they inhabit.

#### IV. RELATIONSHIPS AND COLONIALISM: *RUBY MOONLIGHT*

##### 1. About the book

*Ruby Moonlight* is written by Yankunytjatjara author and poet Ali Cobby Eckermann. The book, which is told in verse, is set around 1880 in South Australia (Eckermann 2012). It tells the story of an Aboriginal woman who survives the massacre of her people. She travels away from the massacre site and forms a relationship with a non-Indigenous man (Jack). But in colonial Australia the relationship cannot endure and Ruby is still in danger from other colonists who are capable of inflicting terrible violence on Indigenous peoples. At the end of the book she joins another Aboriginal group and leaves Jack behind.

##### 2. Australian Indigenous peoples, violence, and world--ending stories

*Ruby Moonlight* begins with two chapters titled 'Nature' and 'Harmony', depicting Ruby and her tribe living in balanced relationships with each other and their environment. In this sense the book concerns the relationships that *Patterns of Australia* referenced between Indigenous Australian people and their homelands:

in warm afternoon light  
a family group rove the plains murmur delight as  
landscapes become familiar parrots surge their welcome at the old  
meeting place  
a young woman gathers  
wild fruits and berries (Eckermann 2012, 7)

Almost immediately however the relationships in *Ruby Moonlight* are disrupted by violence, by "pale men" who "burst from the river" (2012, 9).

Eckermann captures the horror of massacre in stripped back verse:

hack hack hack hands heads hearts  
the clan slaughtered  
dying dying  
dead (Eckermann 2012, 10)

The desolation the massacre leads in its wake for the sole survivor is captured in a sentence: "love will exist here no more" (2012, 11).

The period of colonial history to which *Ruby Moonlight* speaks is that of the 'killing times', that is, the frontier. The massacre in *Ruby Moonlight* occurs in a morning raid. In this respect, historian Andrew Markus describes punitive

expeditions as a “hallowed tradition of the colonial period” where “[Aboriginal people] found in open country were shot, as were those surprised in early morning attacks on camp sites” (1994, 38). Bundjalung and Jiman psychologist Judy Atkinson (2002) has written of the compounding effect of the traumas of this period of history:

The arrival of the prison hulks at Sydney Cove in 1788 set in motion a series of disasters, one precipitating another, to propagate trauma on trauma on trauma. Aboriginal peoples did not abandon their ways. They resisted. But some of the man-made disasters perpetrated by those who came to the country in 1788 and thereafter were outside the comprehension, the previous experience, of Aboriginal peoples. In many instances, resistance was not sufficient for survival. (Atkinson 2002, 59)

*Ruby Moonlight* is thus set in a period of chaos and terror. As Markus writes (1994, 36) “whatever differences there were amongst individual settlers...the dominant value system sanctioned rule by violence, and rule by violence was a feature of frontier life.” However, just as *Patterns of Australia* does not depict a particular homeland, *Ruby Moonlight* does not depict a specific massacre. Rather, it speaks to the Australian Indigenous experience of violence in the colonial period.

Eckermann herself, in speaking of why she chose to write the book, has said that she “wanted to write the story so that every language group could place it in their location” (Eckermann and Simpson, 2012). So as *Patterns of Australia* addresses the Indigenous relationship with our homelands, there is a degree to which *Ruby Moonlight* addresses the Indigenous relationship with colonial violence and with the fractured relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that were created by this violence.

### **3. Deep reading: history, environments, survival and healing**

While *Ruby Moonlight* might be viewed as a novel that concerns the ‘past’, it has continuing relevance to the present. Atkinson has written of the way in which colonial violence has created trans-generational trauma in Indigenous Australia that has present day effects (2002). Eckermann herself, in talking of why she chose to write the book, has said that she’d found in her work with remote communities that “when I would sit down the Elders consistently the first story I would be told would be the local massacre history” (Eckermann and Simpson, 2012). She views the way in which these stories are not spoken of is “a hole in Australia’s psychology” (Eckermann and Simpson, 2012). It is noted that some Australian historians – principally Henry Reynolds (2006; 2013) – have addressed this aspect of history;



however, as Eckermann notes, there still remains a silence around these stories. *Ruby Moonlight* is dedicated in part to the victims of the frontier:

To all our mob who died  
Innocent  
Brave in true  
Spirit (Eckermann 2012, 5)

Importantly, however, the massacre in *Ruby Moonlight* is not the end of the book, but the beginning. In this sense *Ruby Moonlight* is a story of survival, and part of the way in which Ruby survives is through her connection to living landscapes.

For example:

Senses shattered by loss  
She staggers to follow bird song  
*trust nature*  
Chirping red-browed finches lead to water  
Ringneck parrots place berries in her path  
*Trust nature*  
(Eckermann 2012, 13)

These connections continue to sustain Indigenous peoples into the present day, as has been acknowledged by the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing* (2004) which has as one of its guiding principles:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is viewed in a holistic context, that encompasses mental health and physical, cultural and spiritual health. Land is central to wellbeing. Crucially, it must be understood that when the harmony of these interrelations is disrupted, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ill health will persist. (2004, 13)

Read in this light, *Ruby Moonlight* is the tale of a people and a culture surviving despite efforts to destroy or subjugate both. Moreover, the creative process through which the book was written is also a testament to the living cultures of Indigenous people. Eckermann has said that “the river and the trees and the landscape gave me snippets of the story ... if you're in tune with the country the country tells our stories and songs” (Eckermann and Simpson, 2012). Bronwyn Bancroft has also spoken of the influence of her living culture on her work in relation to illustrating *Dirrangun*, a picture book about an Ancestral Being (Williams, Daley, Robinson, and Bancroft, 2005). Bancroft (2007) writes:

I was trying to paint Dirrangun ... and I was having great difficulty so I asked her for guidance ... I was in the bedroom retrieving a brush when a huge gust of wind slammed the two outside doors. ,, The hairs on my arms just stood up

higher than I had ever seen them and I went to my desk and started painting her. I sensed her guiding me, and that is an incredible feeling, to know that an ancient spirit is standing right next to you. (Bancroft 2007, 284)

The living homelands of Indigenous people are thus a presence both within the texts and within the authors themselves. When understood in this way these narratives form part of a larger cultural continuum whereby Australian Indigenous peoples draw on ancient cultural traditions and wisdom to continually iterate our identities, histories and cultures. By doing so we engage with the Australia of the present day and contribute to the larger body of Indigenous literary works and other cultural expressions that will form part of the cultural capital of the Australia of the future.

As the reader follows Ruby's journey through the book, Eckermann offers a nuanced portrayal of the colonisers and frontier relationships. The sense of the overarching framework of violence – which as Markus notes above formed the underlying context in which relationships were formed – is maintained throughout *Ruby Moonlight*. However, the colonisers are not presented as a homogenous group with a single way of interacting with Indigenous peoples. Thus, the character of Jack, with whom Ruby forms a relationship, is portrayed sympathetically:

his name is Miner Jack  
a solitary life he has chosen  
...  
a lean Irish man of thirty his chin is stubbled red  
  
he is a timid male  
in this pioneer country  
...  
he lives in the memory of his childhood  
before the famine and fighting (Eckermann 2012, 25)

While Ruby and Jack's relationship appears to be consensual, this might be viewed as open to interpretation in light of the times in which it occurred and Ruby's need for shelter and protection in a dangerous world. But perhaps this is the point, that there is a complexity here that is left to the reader to ponder over. There is certainly never any doubt that the relationship is doomed given the time and place in which it was occurring. For example:

It is forbidden for Europeans  
To fornicate with blacks (Eckermann 2012, 31)  
...

shame in her eyes she knows  
their tryst is over  
(Eckermann 2012, 71)

In the references to how other colonists will view Jack's relationship with Ruby, the narrative gives a sense of dominant attitudes:

abo lovers are despised in these parts  
Fear can fuel the hardest hatred (Eckermann 2012, 49)

The colonists capable of acts of extreme violence, such as those who massacred Ruby's family, are chillingly portrayed in the character of the 'man without music':

hunting diseased stinking blacks for civil duty and personal pleasure  
a particular ambush sticks in his mind

fizzing with frenzy he fired his gun with precise accuracy  
maiming a black man and his whore

in a fur pouch he found crystals and their newborn son  
that day he lost his music heart

...  
he carries his wickedness in his saddle bag  
the mummified hands of the boy (Eckermann 2012, 57)

The man without music hunts Ruby and Jack, together with companions cast in the same mould: "easily hired on the promise to kill blacks/they argue nonstop over rights to the *gin*" (2012, 63). The hunters ultimately fail, foiled by a protective spirit. In the townsfolk's reaction to their passing, Eckermann captures the cycles of violence of colonial Australia:

townsfolk drag the bodies from the river the children run to fetch the  
priest women watch behind their hands  
that night a meeting is held at the hall kerosene lamps flicker eerie  
shadows on community faces filled with fear  
the priest refuses burial at the cemetery unmarked graves will suffice  
these sinners their character known to all  
the publican fuels fear retells stories of witchcraft  
as slurred by breath now dead  
all gather in fear  
the priest presides over  
the next hunting party (Eckermann 2012, 69)

*Ruby Moonlight* ends with Ruby disappearing into the bush, joining another Aboriginal group. The larger question that the book evokes – but does not answer – is

how Australia deals with this history now. Eckermann has said of *Ruby Moonlight* that she was trying to “get some discussion and you know generate some healing because we really need to do some healing in Australia” (Eckermann and Simpson, 2012). But she has also spoken of the degree to which she believes colonial relationships remain unrecognised and unresolved:

So much damage and hurt has been inflicted on Aboriginal people since colonisation, and mainstream Australia seems to be moving away from reconciliation and reparations. Australia is a country that holds much denial, both historically and today. (Eckermann 2015)

When viewed from a holistic perspective, therefore, *Ruby Moonlight* addresses a violence that continues to reverberate through the present day and a history that remains largely unacknowledged. *Patterns of Australia* invited the reader into an Indigenous ‘way-of-seeing’ that reveals the living nature and hidden depths of Indigenous landscapes. *Ruby Moonlight* offers a different invitation, into the experience of colonialism from the perspective of the colonised. As Eckermann herself has said of the book “I’m trying to get the audience to sit in my poetry and imagine what it feels like for us” (Eckermann and Simpson, 2012).

## V. RELATIONSHIPS AND RESOLUTIONS: *GRACE BESIDE ME*

### 1. About the book

*Grace Beside Me* is a Young Adult novel written by Torres Strait Islander and Wiradjuri author Sue McPherson. The book is told from the perspective of Fuzzy Mac (Ocean Skye McCardell), a teenage protagonist living with her grandparents in country New South Wales (Laurel Dale, known to the locals as ‘Laurie’) in 2008.

Fuzzy’s heritage is a mixture of Koori and South Sea Islander. Her grandfather is descended from Islanders who were kidnapped and brought to Australia as slave labour for sugar plantations (McPherson 2012, 43). Her grandmother is a member of the Stolen Generations and has worked as “a housemaid for wealthy station owners, as a nurse at a hospital and as a drover’s cook up in Queensland” (McPherson 2012, 14). Fuzzy’s mother has died of a drug overdose and her father is largely absent; her grandparents are the centre of her world. The story revolves around Fuzzy’s life in a small country town and the characters who inhabit it.

### 2. Australian Indigenous peoples, literature and reconciliation stories

The overall narrative of *Grace Beside Me* concerns navigating relationships in order to move forward. In this, much of the narrative is driven by the character of Nan, and by her influence on Fuzzy. As Fuzzy reflects:

Life has not been easy for Nan. She reckons if we don’t learn from our mistakes we’re bugged, so that’s what she encourages us to do. We listen and we learn and if we keep doing that we usually continue to move forward. That’s the whole idea, you see, you have to keep moving forward. (McPherson 2012, 15)

Like the rest of the narrative, this portion is expressed in Fuzzy’s distinctive voice. The sentence “Life has not been easy for Nan” references her grandmother’s history that is expanded upon later in the text especially as concerns Nan’s experience as a member of the Stolen Generations (McPherson 2012, 70 - 72). The balance of the paragraph addresses one of the many lessons Nan passes on to Fuzzy throughout the text, and the need to move on or through trauma is echoed later in the narrative when Fuzzy herself is the victim of an assault (McPherson 2012, 177 – 203). The concept of moving forward also carries the sense of hope that is carried through the text in its entirety, as is discussed at the conclusion of this Chapter. In this sense *Grace Beside Me* tells a reconciliation story, although the notion of ‘reconciliation’

itself can be a contested one amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As non-Indigenous academic Clare Land (2015) has written:

Indigenous people from the south-east Australian political community have made concise critiques of government-sponsored reconciliation, seen as an agenda to empty out or depoliticize Indigenous demands for justice and truth. In Gary Foley's words, 'Reconciliation is not justice.' Yuin warrior Chicka Dixon (interview) has pejoratively labeled the 'reconciliation mob' the 'kiss and make up tribe' (Land 2015, 118)

In part, this sentiment can be read as going to a broader concern of symbolism without substance that lies at the heart of many of the conversations relating to resolution of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It also echoes the concerns noted in Chapter 2 – that to describe Australia as post-colonial is to ignore the realities of life for Indigenous peoples in present day Australia, including the continuing disadvantage that colonialism created and the structures and discourses that reinforce that disadvantage. However in *Grace Beside Me*, the substance of what it could mean to achieve a meaningful reconciliation – that would in turn contribute to moving beyond colonialism – is provided by the characters themselves. The possibility of this broader healing is grounded in relationships in the 'real world' as portrayed by McPherson. Larger events and their significance is simply one aspect of the lives of flawed and human characters. Yuin Elder Max Dulumumnun Harrison, in speaking of reconciliation, has said that "it's the heart sorry and not the head sorry that would mean a lot and heal people" (Harrison 2003, 3). It is this 'heart sorry' in the lives of everyday people to which *Grace Beside Me* directs itself.

### **3. Deep reading: land, connections, and stories**

Storytelling has always been an important part of Australia's Indigenous cultures, as it is of Indigenous cultures elsewhere in the world, and there is a degree to which *Grace Beside Me* is a story about stories. The power and presence of stories is frequently referenced throughout the book. As Fuzzy reflects (McPherson 2012, 107) "[E]veryone has a story. As ordinary as you feel your life might be, once you start to look into each family member over the years, your story, just like mine, will begin retelling itself. I reckon you will be surprised with the end result." Consistently with this, *Grace Beside Me* is a tapestry of a book into which many stories are woven. For example, there is the Steiner family who arrived in Australia as Jewish refugees after World War II (McPherson 2012, 25 – 29). The Moriokas, the Japanese

family who live in the city (McPherson 2012, 135). The Mullins boys, caught up in a cycle of crime and detention (McPherson 2012, 97). But at the centre of the narrative is Fuzzy's family. Theirs is the story through which the other stories connect, and the one that connects the reader to the overarching narrative.

If *Patterns of Australia* is an invitation into a view of a living land, and *Ruby Moonlight* into colonial history, then *Grace Beside Me* takes the reader into the Australian Indigenous relationship with stories themselves and the way in which an understanding of stories – both your own and other peoples – is essential to make sense of existence itself. As Fuzzy's Nan tells her:

Stories can be all kinds, good or bad. If you don't hear the painful ones, that there spirit of yours gets tricked into thinkin' there's only good in the world. Thinkin' that way is gammon, a lie. We bring you up so you have a better understandin' of all things. (McPherson 2012, 106)

*Grace Beside Me* is itself an example of a story that provides a 'better understanding'. McPherson offers a nuanced portrayal of an Indigenous family in present-day Australia, and in so doing touches upon important aspects of Indigenous history and how that history is dealt with in the here and now. Fuzzy's grandmother, a member of the Stolen Generations, grew up in a mission. This has given her grandmother a connection to Christianity which she continues to maintain: "Although Nan doesn't go to church every Sunday, her love for Jesus is unconditional. Because Nan grew up in mission homes, religion is an important part of her life" (McPherson 2012, 31). However, Nan's view of heaven quickly diverges from a classical Biblical portrayal:

"Yep I'll tell you what I know about heaven, Fuzzy. That dear man Jesus is a mixture of Denzel Washington, Vivian Richards, Sydney Poitier and, of course, Marvin Gaye. And when the day comes and I glide up through them pearly gates, straight in front of me Jesus will stand, saintly, smilin' and admirin' the sweet and gentle woman that I am." (McPherson 2012, 31-32)

Nor does Christianity subsume or replace Fuzzy's grandmother's connection to her own traditions. Fuzzy's Nan communicates with 'the other side' and lives much of her life guided by the messages she receives (McPherson 2012, 52-53, 63). In this sense, McPherson's portrayal of Nan moves beyond essentialist colonial binaries and instead offers a glimpse into more complex Indigenous realities.

*Grace Beside Me* is set in 2008, the year then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. The narrative offers a view into the Apology through Fuzzy's eyes, and particularly her observations of her

grandmother: “a childhood full of abuse and sadness sits raw and close to Nan’s spirit and, crazy as it sounds, it all comes down to a government policy” (McPherson 2012, 68). In *Grace Beside Me*, Fuzzy’s grandmother and her three sisters are all members of the Stolen Generations, reflecting the way in which removals often affected more than one family member. The Australian Human Rights Commission’s *Bringing Them Home* report found that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed between 1910 and 1970 under successive laws and policies of State and Federal governments (1997, Chapter 2). The *Bringing Them Home* report also found that among the negative effects of removal were that the children received little formal education, were subjected to harsh living conditions, were vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and were often completely separated from their families (1997, Chapter 3). Their own identity was also degraded:

In an attempt to force ‘white ways’ upon the children and to ensure they did not return to ‘the camp’ on their release, Aboriginality was denigrated and Aboriginal people were held in open contempt. This denigration was among the most common experiences of witnesses to the Inquiry. (1997, Chapter 3)

The Apology was nationally televised; *Grace Beside Me* captures the experience of Fuzzy and her grandparents, watching the Apology from their living room couch:

At about nine o’clock we listened to Mr Rudd’s speech....I don’t know if Nan heard everything because she was quietly sobbing through most of it, reaching up every now and then to blow her nose

... After the speech the three of us stood up and clapped like everyone on telly ... Nan continued to wipe away tears but her face transformed into something special. I guess you could call it some type of rebirth. (McPherson 2012, 71 – 72)

McPherson also captures the very different reaction to the speech delivered on the same day by the-then Leader of the Opposition, Brendan Nelson. His apology – which included a comment that the current generation should not feel sorry for actions done ‘with the best intentions’ – provoked anger amongst many of those watching, including hundreds turning their backs (*The Age*, February 13 2008). Fuzzy relates the moment in this way:

Nan had little to say after [Dr Nelson’s] speech. I guess her body language said it all. She started shifting in her seat the sighing, deep breathing and constant rubbing of her arms were all signs that things were not going well for Dr Nelson ... Many of the mob on telly turned their backs to him when he was speaking and to be perfectly honest I don’t blame them. (2012, 72)

In the aftermath of Dr Nelson’s speech, Stolen Generations member Sylvia



Campbell said that “it felt like our moment was taken away from us” (Hawthorne, Jenkins and Corbett, 2008). In *Grace Beside Me*, there is no healing gained for Fuzzy and her family out of the words of Dr Nelson. Fuzzy concludes that he has introduced something bitter into the day, and that he has a lot to learn (McPherson 2012, 73). In this, *Grace Beside Me* connects to broader concerns as to the need for meaningful action if reconciliation is to be achieved.

As with *Patterns of Australia* and *Ruby Moonlight*, a living land is a continual presence throughout *Grace Beside Me*. Towards the beginning of the book, the reader is introduced to the concept of ‘sit a while’ as a means of coping with difficult situations:

Sit on the ground and hold some dirt, sand or a rock in your hands, and work towards getting your breathing normal, then slow it down a little ... When you calm your spirit and allow it to connect again to Country and if you are still and quiet enough you may be able to feel a subtle shift in your emotion – like a wave of strong wind – then calm. (McPherson 2012, 45)

This connection to Country is the ‘grace’ spoken of in the title of the book. Fuzzy’s grandmother instructs her that when she has ‘sit a while’ right, Fuzzy would know because grace would sit beside her (McPherson 2012, 45).

Throughout the book Fuzzy struggles to find that deeper connection that leads to grace. The reader follows her life through friendship and first love and the intersections between her life and the lives of others. But Fuzzy’s existence is shadowed by one of her grandmother’s premonitions, which eventually manifests in the actions of the local mayor. He assaults Fuzzy, who fights him off in a powerfully written scene where it emerges that he had previously assaulted her mother:

“Fuzzy, let me tell you something,’ his voice is composed but calculated, ‘you probably don’t want to hear it but your so-called mother was nothing ... but a little ... black ... slut.’

From my left shoulder a burst of pain shoots straight across to my right side. I sit at the table stunned to silence, my breathing is fast, my neck and chest cold. My ears burn. I am not shaking but my hands are ice.

“Your mother, her mother, all of you nigger bitches are a drain on society. Good for only one thing. You will open your legs to anyone eager to give you a little financial backing.” (McPherson 2012, 182)

In this passage McPherson is evoking colonial constructions of Indigenous Australian women that continue to become manifest into the present day. Atkinson (2008) has noted that:

a whole language evolved in Australia around the sexual violations of Aboriginal women: “gin” busts, “gin” sprees, “gin” jockeys, “gin” shepherds... such terminology places sexual violence against women in the context of sport

and contextualises Aboriginal women as animals to be used for sporting pleasure. (2008, 61-62)

As noted in Chapter Four, Eckermann used the same language in *Ruby Moonlight* and in this, both authors are speaking not only to the sexual violence of the frontier but the way in which it continues to shape perceptions of Indigenous women in Australia today. Author and legal academic Larissa Behrendt (2004) has written of the way in which the destructive, degrading power of these constructions has manifested themselves within the confines of the law:

Colonial notions that Aboriginal women are 'easy sexual sport' have ... contributed to the perception that incidents of sexual assault are the fault of Aboriginal women. ... no context is provided for the colonial attitudes that have seen the sexuality of Aboriginal women demeaned, devalued and degraded. The result of these messages given to Aboriginal women by their contact with the criminal justice system would only reinforce any sense of worthlessness and lack of respect that sexual assault and abuse have scarred them with. (2004, 8)

In the aftermath of the attack, Fuzzy struggles to regain balance until her grandparents take her out to the land and she finds her 'grace':

Warm clouds of energy move over each arm, my chest, all of me. What I am experiencing now is real and beautiful ... freedom. This is what Pop and Nan have been talking about. (McPherson 2012, 199)

As with *Ruby Moonlight*, it is the land that brings Fuzzy back to herself, and her connection to it mirrors the shift in perception required to see a living country depicted in *Patterns of Australia*.

*Grace Beside Me* ultimately concerns the power of stories to cause both harm and healing, and to the way the stories of the past continue to shape the present.

Although the evils of colonialism are acknowledged and the unresolved legacy of colonial relationships is made clear, the final message of the book is one of hope:

Within us lies a great bundle of strength capable of surviving just about anything. We are so much stronger than we realise, that I know for sure. My message to you is simple.

We don't need to worry about what everyone else thinks or likes. I dare you to sing your own song, do your own thing.

We don't have to dislike someone just because they look, sound or come across different. I dare you to be tolerant and fair.

We don't have to give up when things are bugged. I dare you to fight for what you want and what you believe. You have the strength.

I dare you to love yourself ... because no matter what you think, you are deadly. And don't you forget it.

Grace beside you, always. (McPherson 2012, 217)

## VI. CONCLUSION

The three books examined in this thesis all speak to Australian Indigenous culture. They also speak to holding onto faith in others, and in the land, through difficult times and circumstances. When read as a whole and examined in the context of the connections between the texts and the larger world, these three narratives each tell a tale of an enduring connection to a living landscape. They also speak to the trauma of colonialism and the way in which this trauma continues to influence the present day, as well as to the possibility of the broader resolution of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in post-colonial Australia.

A deep reading of the three texts reveals layers to the analysis that may not be immediately apparent when these texts are not examined in the context of an Indigenous research methodology and therefore not read from an Indigenous centre. *Patterns of Australia* is, on its surface, a simple picture book with hidden items in each picture. Hidden items are not uncommon in picture books for children and so in this sense it could appear to be on its surface just another picture book. However, a deep reading unearths many levels of understanding present in that text. The text relates to the diversity of both Australian Indigenous peoples and Indigenous environments and to the way in which environments shaped Indigenous peoples and vice versa. It also addresses the overall relationship between Australian Indigenous peoples and their homelands, giving the reader a window into the experience of living environments from an Indigenous perspective.

*Ruby Moonlight* is an evocative verse novel that tells a tale of terror and resistance in the colonial era. But a deep reading of the text demonstrates the degree to which this book concerns the present day and the way in which both the text itself, and the process of its creation, in itself shows the continuing connection of Australian Indigenous peoples to the landscape and how that connection continues to nurture and sustain them. It also demonstrates the degree to which the author is asking questions of Australia.

*Grace Beside Me* is a young adult novel, and on its surface, a tale of a quirky country town. However, a deep reading shows the way in which this book captures the complexities of negotiating colonial history in present-day spaces and the way in which colonialism continues to cast its shadow. It also speaks powerfully to what all peoples have in common and the way in which stories connect the different peoples of the earth together.

All three books and perhaps all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature can also be viewed as contributing to the broader project of reconciliation and the as yet unrealised prospect of post-colonialism. As noted in Chapter Five, the concept of reconciliation can be a contested one amongst Australian Indigenous peoples, however, the reconciliation spoken of here is not an empty gesture or sets of interactions that ignore the influence of the past. All three of these texts deal, in different ways, with aspects of Australian Indigenous realities and communicate the experience of what it is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to live these realities. In reading these texts, non-Indigenous readers are engaging with these realities in a respectful way because the authors have invited readers into their worlds and chosen what they wish to share.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature provides a pathway for the general community to ‘know’ about Australian Indigenous cultures in a way that does not repeat disrespectful patterns discussed in Chapter Two. *Patterns of Australia*, *Ruby Moonlight* and *Grace Beside Me* are three of a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander texts. None present themselves as telling absolute and universal truths, rather, each addresses an experience and are three of the many pathways into a better understanding of Indigenous Australia.

## **Creative Work: Catching the Grey**

## Chapter One

Michael Teller put a gun in his mouth and closed his eyes.

Darkness came for him, as it always did, to scrape at the back of his eyes.

His leg shook, like an impatient child waiting to open a present. And he supposed, in some sick way death would be a present for him. A release. Memories played like a recording stuck on repeat. A time and a life he could no longer return to.

*-Dad, what are you doing?*

The voice belonged to his daughter. Only it didn't.

Because she was dead and he had buried her.

*-Are you seriously doing this again? You're not a coward Dad.*

His hand shook holding the gun. Being a coward implied you were brave to begin with. Brave people bear everything on their shoulders and just get on with it. People like that...Michael never understood them. How did they deal with the weight of it?

Michael knew he was never strong. Hence the gun. And the whisky. And all the bad choices he had made. His finger trembled on the trigger.

*-Seriously Dad, think about the news headline. Alcoholic Detective blows his brain out because he couldn't get over the grief of losing his daughter. A little cliché don't you think? Why don't you think of my death as me moving out, how weird would it be if my Dad came to live with me?*

Michael stared at the images playing behind his closed eyes, then his finger left the trigger and his arm went slack. Tears in his eyes.

*-Dad. You were always the strongest person I knew. Don't lose that.*

He could feel her in the room with him, her voice so clear in his head, so very Beth. He opened his eyes, hoped she'd be standing in front of him. Only she wasn't. All that greeted him was his own reflection in the mirror.

He sat in his boxers on the edge of the hotel bed, looking through the door to the bathroom. He had bloodshot eyes with black bags under them and a month's worth of beard growth. His hair was messy, his face thin. His body was skinny, and not the ripped athletic type but the *I've-been-having-bourbon-instead-of-breakfast* kind of thinness.

'You look like shit man,' he said to his reflection. Someone banged on his hotel door.

‘Michael let’s go,’ a woman yelled.

The voice belonged to Anna Morrison. His partner. He turned back to his reflection.

Show time.

‘One sec!’ Michael called.

He stood, tugged on a pair of jeans and a shirt then put his holster on, slid the gun in and returned his gaze to the mirror. He smiled. The smile looked normal. Kinda. He tried again. The second time was better.

Another bang on the door. ‘Michael!’

He grabbed the bottle of anti-depressants. Took one out, swallowed it. Then headed for the front door, yanking it open.

Anna glared up at him. She was five foot five, a blue eyed blonde. Only she had these broad shoulders and thick neck that she had gotten from doing judo for the last twenty years. Most people wouldn’t find her particularly threatening. But then most people hadn’t seen her hip toss a 100kg bodybuilder on meth onto the floor so hard it knocked him unconscious. Michael tried to stay on her good side.

Michael walked past her and out onto the hotel verandah. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Oh *now* you’re in a hurry.’

He flashed her a grin, and they headed for the car. Michael jumped in the driver’s seat and pulled out his phone to type in the GPS. He entered Littleton Children’s home. Nothing came up.

‘You got an address on the children’s home?’ he asked. ‘Should be just outside of town, off Bussel road.’

Michael pulled out of the hotel parking lot and headed for the town centre. Littleton wasn’t a big place. Eight hours out of Perth, surrounded by dense bushland. A population of three hundred. Not another town within a three hour drive - it was mostly a farming community. They had left Perth at 8pm last night. Gotten in at 4am. Michael hadn’t slept.

Anna reached down onto the floor of the passenger seat and grabbed the yellow folders there. She began sifting through the files.

‘So, what’s the go?’ Michael asked.

Anna grabbed a file and pulled it out, scanning the contents. ‘Littleton Children’s home burned down last night. Fire started around 5pm. All finished by 7pm. We got a body.’

Michael nodded. Most of the time, if there was a dead body and foul play

hadn't been ruled out they'd send Detectives from Perth to investigate it. Western Australia was a huge place and they simply didn't have the people to police it sufficiently. Let alone station a Forensics teams or Fire investigators anywhere close. Even the small police presence in Littleton was responsible for enforcing the law two towns over. So the response time when something *did* happen was slow.

'Fire investigation should already be there as well as the forensics team,' she said.

'Arson?'

'Maybe. Guess we won't know till we get there and speak to the firies,' Anna said, dropping the first folder and grabbing the other one.

'Two cases?'

'Seriously Michael, you didn't even read the brief?'

Michael shrugged.

'We also have to interview a girl who went missing in the northwest,' Anna said, flipping open the file and reading from the report. 'One year ago, Frank Catching died in a car accident in the Pilbara during the cyclone season. His daughter was with him at that time. Only she wasn't found at the crash site along the coastal rivers of the Pilbara. Search parties went out. But she was never located and eventually they gave up. Exactly one year from that day she appeared in Littleton, by the Gascoyne River. The first thing she said to the officers was that she wanted to speak to her Dad. Despite being in the crash she thinks her father is still alive.'

Michal frowned. 'Post traumatic shock, probably suppressed the memory. The strange thing is how she survived in the outback all this time.'

'According to her statement she was in another world.'

Michael took his eyes off the road to stare at her. She didn't smile. He looked frontwards again.

'Another world?'

'Yep,' Anna replied.

'Huh. Cool.'

'Michael, her father died and she disappeared for a year. You do know that she wasn't actually *in* another world right?'

'Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't. We won't know unless we go speak to her.'

'Oh god, I forgot who I was talking to.'

'I'm just a believer. The truth is out there.'



Anna rolled her eyes. 'You're no Mulder.'

'But how hot would I be if I was. Am'irite?'

'Shut up and drive Mike.'

She only called him Mike when she was getting annoyed. And when she got annoyed she liked to hip-throw people.

So he shut up.

Well, he stopped talking at least. It didn't prevent him from humming the X - Files tune. And he'd be damned if he didn't do an excellent job of ignoring Anna's glare as well.

Five minutes of off-tune humming and he arrived at the town centre. It was basically three streets, surrounded by bushland. There were a few people walking about, mostly shop owners setting up for the day. Michael pulled alongside a jogger. He was old, about seventy or so. 'Excuse me.'

The jogger slowed, glanced at the police siren inside the car and gave them his attention.

'We're looking for Littleton Children's home.'

'Aren't *you* supposed to be the Detectives?' the old man asked. Michael was a little taken aback. Most people didn't smart mouth cops. 'Ah, we're a little lost.'

The old man frowned. '*That* way, then you have to leave town, wrap around the bush....there's signs.'

'Thank you,' Michael replied.

He pulled away and headed in the direction the jogger had indicated. They rounded the corner.

'Sign,' Anna said, pointing at a board that read - *This way to Littleton Children's Home.*

'Fancy that. Did you see the look on that guy's face?'

'Detectives asking for directions probably doesn't inspire a lot of faith in our abilities.'

'Have we become the dumb cop stereotype the T.V shows make fun of?'

'I dunno. Do you feel an insatiable hunger for donuts?'

Michael's eyes went wide 'Now that that you mention it...'

Anna laughed and they followed the directions to Littleton Children's Home.

The Children's Home sat on fifteen acres of bush land.

'I thought we got rid of children's homes?' Michael asked as they drove down

the longest tree lined driveway he had ever seen.

‘We did. Now they’re back. A lot of kids were bouncing around twenty different families in the foster care system. So they thought they’d try children’s homes again. This time they opened them up to the private sector.’

‘Right. Great idea, let’s use a previously failed system to replace the system that is currently failing.’

‘You know how government is. In twenty years they’ll be raving about the foster care system and switch back. At least they’re offering subsidies to private business who want to get into Child Care.’

‘Cause a bunch of money hungry business men taking care of children is a swell idea.’

Anna grimaced. ‘Yeah. Seems stupid to me as well. But, it’s been working. *Apparently.*’

Michael shook his head. ‘The foster system was ‘working’, technically, and look at how many messed up kids that produced.’

‘Okay, okay, calm down Captain Australia, I know how you get when kids are involved.’

It took them five minutes to get all the way down the driveway. Eventually trees gave way to ash and the black charcoal of what was once a building. There was white and blue tape sectioning off the burnt mass of rubble. Three local police officers were standing around at different areas of the scene. Michael got out the car and headed for the tape. He pulled out his identification as he approached and flashed it to a young officer.

‘Michael Teller, sent up as part of the investigation team. This is my partner Anna Morrison.’

‘Ah sure, one sec, let me get Derek.’ The lad darted off, returning with a fat older man that waddled. His skin was sun damaged and spotted and he had light hazel eyes.

‘Derek?’ Michael asked extending his hand.

‘You must be Michael, Anna, pleasure to meet you both. I’m Derek Bell. I head the police division up here.’

‘Pleasures ours, sorry we took so long,’ Anna said.

‘Can’t be helped. I’ve been saying for years we need forensic teams and special investigators stationed up north but do they listen? Now they got to send teams up from Perth, takes them hours to get here, then they have to send the evidence back,

takes days for that to happen. Meanwhile, we're all stuck waiting.'

Michael shrugged. 'Budget cuts. Bad economy. Efficiency drives.'

'Yeah and a whole bunch of criminals getting away,' Derek said.

'Get a lot of them up here do you Derek?' Anna asked, a hint of amusement in her voice.

Derek eyed Anna. 'We get enough.'

They walked onto the scene. By the size of the burned foundations, whatever house had been there was huge. He stepped around the Crime Scene Investigation unit who were bagging and tagging evidence while a Crime Scene photographer snapped shots of a body.

The body was burned to the bone. Flesh had melted away, leaving a grotesque corpse that looked like a plastic G.I Joe set alight.

'Has the body been identified?' Anna asked.

Derek shook his head. 'Not yet. The Children's home has two employees that handle the nightshift. Joshua Lenning and Peter Worth. Figured it was probably one of them.'

Anna frowned. 'This the only body?'

'Yep. Kids rooms were close to the front, so we can thank the Lord's good graces for that.'

'And the other staff member?' Michael asked.

Derek shrugged. 'Wasn't around when we arrived. Kids got themselves out of the building. Could have skipped his shift.'

'Or one of them could have set fire to this house and burned it to the ground,' Michael replied.

Derek frowned, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him.

'Where are the kids now?' Anna asked.

'They got checked over at the hospital. We're moving them to the local recreation centre to spend the night. A few officers will stay with them. Then I guess they'll be sent back to Perth tomorrow. Nowhere up here for them now the Children's home's gone.'

'Tell your officers I'll be over to speak with the kids today,' Anna said. 'You have an address for the recreation centre?'

'It's in the middle of town. Can't miss it,' Derek replied.

Michael glanced over at the corpse. 'Guess we'll have to wait till the body gets sent back to Perth to identify him.'

‘Yeah,’ Anna replied then glanced at Derek. ‘We’ll be fine from here.’

Derek looked from Michael to Anna, a flash of annoyance in his gaze. ‘Just give me a yell if you need anything.’

He waddled back to the blue tape and began having a conversation with the younger officers there.

Michael turned to look back at the scene. ‘Charming guy.’

‘Out of shape, I guess they don’t have fast criminals in Littleton.’

Michael glanced at Anna. ‘Not everyone wants to be a T1000.’

‘I get reminded of that every day I get in the car with you.’

‘Ouch,’ he replied, ‘I thought we were going to be donut buddies?’

She gave him a smile, and then something caught her eye over his shoulder and her smile suddenly widened.

‘John,’ she called.

Michael turned. A man with a square jaw, green eyes and light brown hair glanced at them. John Gardener looked more like a runway model than he did a fire investigator. Most people probably wondered why John bothered doing a job like fire investigation when he could probably get through most of life’s obstacles by smiling. But then most people didn’t know his father had been caught in an arson when he was young, which melted away his Dad’s hand and covered sixty percent of his body in burn scar tissue.

‘Anna,’ John said, smiling and giving Michael a glance. ‘I see you’re babysitting again?’

‘Not all of us can spend our time pretending to be Thor,’ Michael replied.

John laughed. ‘You look like you’ve lost weight Michael. You should come workout with me back in Perth.’

‘I already have enough confidence issues without having to stand side by side with you in a gym. Why do you work out anyway, I thought Ken dolls are built to factory specifications?’

‘Easy boys. Crime scene is big enough for all of us.’

‘Tell that to his guns,’ Michael replied.

‘*Okay!*’ Anna said, ‘how about we get back to, oh, you know, our jobs.’

Michael gave Anna a grin. ‘What have we got John?’

‘Nada,’ John replied, pronounced with a perfect Spanish accent. ‘We need to examine some of the materials here and we still haven’t completed a full investigation of the area yet. The place was an old restored weatherboard so it went up pretty fast. A

house this big, with furniture for fuel,' John shrugged. 'Honestly, we're just lucky there were no winds and it didn't spread to the surrounding bush.'

Michael glanced at the nearby trees. Any wind and the whole town could have burned down.

'I'm surprised you guys haven't talked to the kids.'

Michael glanced at John. 'Why's that?'

'No one told you?'

Anna frowned. 'Told us what?'

'Apparently a ghost was the one that warned the kids to get out.'

Anna glanced at Michael. 'Don't do it,' she warned.

But he couldn't help himself. He hummed the X-Files tune again.

## Chapter Two

‘Okay Anna, you go talk to the kids, I’ll call Egon, Peter and Ray and get the ghost busters here,’ Michael said.

Anna turned her glare towards John. ‘You had to go and tell him that.’

John raised his hands innocently. ‘It was most likely rats in the walls fleeing the fire that woke them and they thought it was a ghost. They’re pretty young.’

Michael opened his mouth to say something but his words died in his throat.

Beth was standing next to Michael, staring down at the corpse. Her delicate eyes tracing over the melted flesh to where bone was stretching out from the skin on the hands.

Michael closed his eyes. *She’s not here. She’s not.*

One. Breath. Two.

He was aware of Anna and John continuing their conversation, and he didn’t dare keep his eyes shut any longer than a few seconds, lest he draw attention to himself.

When he opened his eyes, Beth was gone. He swallowed, his guts swirling, his hands suddenly clammy. The world was feeling far too small all of a sudden, as if the air itself was pressing in on him. He adjusted his collar.

‘Anna, are you good to handle this, I was thinking I’d go talk to Isabel Catching,’ Michael said.

‘Seriously?’ Anna asked, ‘you haven’t even walked the scene and written a report.’

‘Take care of this one for me,’ Michael said, turning and heading for the car. Anna quickly followed after him. ‘You okay Mike?’

He took a breath, steadied himself, then turned and flashed her a smile. ‘Fine. You know I’d rather go listen to a girl who went to another world than hang around here. You good to get back to the hotel?’

Anna glanced at John. ‘I’ll get John to give me a ride. You look a bit pale, you sure you’re okay?’

‘Golden,’ Michael said, ‘later Anna.’

Michael walked towards the car and got into the driver’s seat. He took a slow steadying breath. Beth appeared in the passenger seat next to him. The clothes she wore were the last ones he saw her in. A white T-shirt and denim jeans. Her hair was

loose around her shoulders and she was gazing out the car window at the crime scene.

*-You're getting pretty good at pretending Dad. Maybe if you get good enough you'll forget about me completely.*

'A person can't forget a heartbeat Beth. Not the feel of it. Not the importance,' he said, glancing down at the clock in the car.

7am.

*Just get through the day.*

He started the car and drove down the road, the burned down building growing distant in his rear-view mirror. His fingers tingled. His arms shook. He could feel the start of a headache gathering at his temples. The antidepressants usually did that to him. He blinked, only it took seconds instead of a moment, and he nearly swerved off the road. Shit.

*-Relax Dad, you're fine.*

'Evidently not if I'm seeing you. I'm most likely having some kind of psychotic break.'

*-Everything's always so black and white with you huh Mr. Detective. You know it's actually pretty common for people to hear the voices of loved ones they've lost.*

'I know that, because I learned it in training on how to handle victim's families. Which, by the way, is also the reason you know it, because you are some figment of my subconscious. In any case, the bereaved usually only hear the voices of loved ones just after their death. You've been gone two years, Beth. I'm not just hearing you, I'm seeing you as well. I'm heading towards full blown crazy.'

*-Or, maybe I'm a ghost? Maybe I'm hanging around to make sure you don't do anything stupid before I can move on.*

Michael smiled. As much as he joked, as much as he'd love ghosts and aliens and parallel worlds to be real, he knew they weren't. But grief is a funny thing, sometimes if you want something badly enough, you can convince yourself of anything. But he didn't want to go down that path, because once he did, once he thought of Beth as truly being a ghost, being her and not something his mind had manufactured, he'd never come back.

'Parents shouldn't outlive their children,' he whispered, more to himself than to Beth.

*-Part of outliving a child is actually being alive Dad, not some half-awake zombie.*

'You don't understand Beth!'

*- You're the one that doesn't understand. Do you think any child wants to see their father broken? You were the strongest existence in my life, now you shove a gun in your mouth every day. You're pathetic Dad. I can't stand to see you like that just because of me...because I'm gone.*

Tears stung his eyes. 'I should have been there.'

*-But you weren't. And you can't go back and change it. But there are others that you can be there for. Listen...this town...this investigation...don't you think something weird is going on?*

Something jolted in Michael's chest at her words. He blinked and glanced at himself in the mirror, a sudden sense of danger fluttering about his gut.

'What do you mean?'

But she didn't answer. She was gone and Michael realised he was sitting in his car, letting it idle in front of the Hospital.

He turned the car off and relaxed into his seat. He placed his hands over his face, took a breath then dragged his fingers downward, as though he could pull the crazy from his mind. He leaned forward, resting his head on the steering wheel.

'Get it together man,' he whispered.

Then he closed his eyes, took another breath and waited. Beth didn't speak to him again. He got out the car and climbed the steps towards the front doors of Littleton Hospital. It was a small building surrounded by bushland on the edge of Littleton. It looked relatively modern, most likely built or renovated in the last five years.

Michael walked into the reception area. An older lady wearing a black blouse and glasses looked up at him as he approached. Her nametag read "Jess Andrews." He pulled out his police identification and showed it to her.

'I'm here to speak to Isabel Catching.'

'I'll get the doctor.'

The receptionist stood and walked through a set of doors. A moment later a doctor appeared with the receptionist behind him. 'Detective...?' the doctor said, extending his hand.

'Teller. Michael Teller.'

'Jacob Lesner. Jess tells me you want to speak to Isabel?' 'Yes, is she fit to talk?'

'She's awake and lucid. She can talk but I'm not sure how much of it will make sense to you.'

'Another world, right?'



‘Something like that. She was screaming about Crows and Monsters, figured she was on something, but tests came back clean.’

‘I’d still like to speak to her.’

‘Your call,’ Jacob said, turning and walking through a set of doors. ‘She’s a big talker once she gets started but there’s not much reality to it.’

Michael followed after him. They zigzagged through the hospital until they arrived at the east wing, stopping in front of a wooden door. Jacob knocked twice and opened it without waiting for a reply.

‘Isabel, there’s a police officer here to speak with you. A Detective Teller.’

Michael stepped in behind Jacob. It was a small ward. Isabel was the only occupant. She lay in the bed, glancing out the window. She didn’t look his way. Jacob gave Michael a glance, as if to say- *your turn*.

‘Just press the buzzer if you need us to get rid of this guy,’ Jacob said, heading for the door.

Michael stood at the foot of the bed.

‘My name is Michael Teller. I’m a detective from Perth. I’m here to interview you about what happened to you. About where you’ve been.’

Isabel didn’t glance his way. She just continued to stare out the window.

Michael grabbed the chair in the corner and moved it towards the bed, taking a seat and studying Isabel’s profile. She had brown hair that fell in a slow wave, framing her delicate features before falling by her shoulders and twirling upon her bronze skin. She was skinny - *too* skinny- her face looked gaunt. It gave her a sense of fragility, as if she was some piece of thinly blown glass that might break at any moment.

Then she turned her head and met his eyes and any sense of fragility she had about her was instantly dispelled. A scar ran down her pretty face. It had healed roughly from improper care and stood out against her cheek.

But that’s not what caused him to catch his breath.

It was her eyes, cold and blue like the ocean frozen over. Something shifted in the depths of that sea, something that screamed to be heard but couldn’t break that horribly hard surface. He had put murderers away with softer eyes than this girl. Just what had happened to you kid?

‘Isabel, where have you been this, what hap-’

‘Is my father really dead Detective Teller?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

Isabel took a shaking breath, her lip trembling. Then her jaw clenched. ‘I didn’t

want to believe it when they told me. What happened to him?’

‘He died in a flood caused by cyclone. You were with him at that time. But there’s no record of any search parties finding you. It’s been a year since then, Isabel,’ He paused, ran one hand through his hair. ‘Where were you all that time?’ He leaned forward gently. ‘ Can you tell me anything about what happened to you after the accident?’

She turned her gaze on him and her stare was such that it was like she’d levelled a gun at his head.

‘Call me Catching. Only my family calls me Isabel.’

Michael paused. ‘That’s an odd last name, Catching.’

‘Yeah, it was the name they gave my grandfather on the station. He was good at hunting, so the owner called him Catching. We’ve had it since,’ she said, returning her gaze to the window. ‘Where’s my father buried?’

‘I have no idea. Would you like me to find out for you?’

She nodded, a slight inclination of her head. A minute went by. Catching staring at the trees outside her window, Michael studying her face.

‘Your dad, can you tell me about him?’

A sad smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

‘My father loved to tell stories. He use to read to me and when we had no books he told me the old stories Grandad use to tell him. Do you like stories, Detective Teller?’

‘Not so much now, when I was younger.’

‘I have a story. But it’s a story you won’t believe. Do you still want to hear it?’

‘That’s why I’m here kid.’

Isabel closed her eyes. ‘It was just an ordinary day...’

### Chapter Three

My name is Isabel Catching, fifteen years old and I'm trapped in hell. Okay, not literally. But it was close. It was school holidays and instead of being out with my friends, going to parties and actually enjoying being a teenager, I was trapped in my Dad's 4WD while he sang John Farnham's *The Voice*.

Dad's head snapped to me as the chorus hit: *You're the voice, try and understand it Make noise and make it clear ... Oh-o-o-o, Who-o-o-o ... We're not gonna sit in silence We're not gonna live with fear Oh-o-o-o, Who-o-o-o*

I smiled at him as he continued singing and looked frontward again. When his gaze left me I rolled my eyes and sank into my seat. It wasn't that Dad was a bad singer. It's just that we had been driving for four hours and as radio reception didn't reach all the way out here I had to listen to Dad sing the entire time.

I glanced out the window, at the expanse of flat country covered in red dirt and spinifex that stretched on endlessly. This was a land of purples and reds and yellows and blues. Which you might be able to admire if the heat that reached upwards of forty degrees didn't melt you in place. On this trip Dad had banned phones, tablets and books! He reckons books will distract me from seeing what's in front of me and technology will deafen my ears to the voice of the country. So here we were, technology free. Dad belting out songs. Me wishing I had earplugs.

'Dad, how much further is it?' I asked.

'Not far.' He'd been saying 'not far' for the last hour.

We were surrounded by hills. Small hills, big hills, rolling hills. Purple hills, green hills.

'Why can't we stop at that hill over there?' I said, pointing.

Dad laughed, a deep booming sound. 'Well that's certainly *a* hill, but it's not *the* hill we're going to,' he said.

It was *the* hill for me if it meant we could stop driving and camp for the night. I was sick of being stuck in the car. 'How can you even tell the difference between all the hills?'

'You wouldn't mistake a person you've known for a long time for someone else would you?'

'Of course not.'

Dad grinned. 'Then there's your answer.'

I frowned and stared at the different shaped hills covered in spinifex. Dad always spoke of Country like some living person that he could talk to.

I frowned. 'I guess I don't get it.'

'Country isn't just here,' he said waving a hand at the land around us, 'it's also here,' he pointed to his heart.

I knew what he meant. Kinda. Sometimes I felt it. I gazed back out the window, not focusing on any one thing in particular. Another hour went by. Finally Dad pulled over at a hill that had a rock face along one side.

'We're here,' he said, 'grab your stuff.' By stuff he meant my swag and pack.

I got out the car and walked around to the back, grabbing my gear. 'Come on,' he said smiling. 'Got a walk ahead of us.'

I followed Dad up a small rise, the sharp spines of the spinifex stabbing through my jeans and into my legs. We had a good view from there. The sight of the sinking sun basking our car and the country in pinks and oranges and reds was breathtaking.

'Bella,' Dad said proudly. 'This is our country.'

I smiled as a gentle breeze brushed my cheek. It was worth it, I realised. Sitting in the car, not having a phone or tablet or a book. Putting up with Dad's singing.

'Thanks for bringing me here, Dad.'

'My pleasure Bella.'

Thunder echoed gently, a long way off. I glanced to my right. Dark clouds loomed in the distance.

'A storm?' I said.

Dad pushed back his hat and narrowed his eyes 'Looks a few days out. We'll be out of here before it hits. Come on, there's more to see.'

I followed him to a flattened area of rock with water pooling. 'What is this place?' I asked.

'Your granddad use to bring me here when I was a kid. People camped here from time to time in the old days because of the rock pools. In this country, water is often hard to find.'

I trailed behind him, noting a lizard scampering away. It was probably sick of the heat too.

'We'll set up camp in that sandy patch for the night.' He pointed downwards, over some rocks. 'Reckon we can make ourselves comfortable there.'

While Dad gathered some dry sticks for a fire, I rolled out my swag and

dropped my pack into the sand. After Dad lit the fire he tossed me some beef jerky. I ate and watched silently while he gazed into the flames, one hand absently flicking the lid on a gold coloured zippo lighter. I didn't know what memory he was lost in, but I knew who it was of. The lighter in his hand was his lucky lighter. He had it on him the first time he met mum. Only when she got pregnant with me, she made him promise to quit smoking. Mum died giving birth to me and Dad said the lighter never worked again after that. He had it checked, there was nothing wrong with it. I reckoned its Mum's spirit making sure Dad keeps his promise and doesn't smoke again.

'Thinking about Mum?' I asked.

Dad blinked, dispelling the memory and smiled gently at me.

'She loved it out here. Loved the purple hills and red desert dust,' Dad said, 'she liked to get out of town any chance she could.'

'Dad, you know I wouldn't care if you met someone else, I don't want you to be lonely.'

Dad shook his head. 'Your mother used to get mad cause I use to talk about her all the time to everyone. It wasn't that I was bragging, it's just, you know, when you see something amazing, you want to tell everyone?'

I nodded.

'Everyday she amazed me. Every moment. When you get a girl like that, there's never one that comes after.'

A lump formed in my throat. Dad was alone because I was born. I had taken away the person who meant everything to him. I know it wasn't my fault, but I couldn't help feel that I was the cause of him being so heart-broken. I glanced away, hiding the tears that stung my eyes.

'You said you loved this place?' I sighed, changing the subject.

'Yeah,' he nodded. 'Your grandfather use to bring me here as a boy. We'd do a bit of prospecting, never found much gold though. We'd camp here and he'd tell me yarns when we were cooking a feed over the campfire. He was like you. He loved stories. Use to make them up all the time. I was easily bored as a kid. Made a bloody nuisance of myself. Reckon that's why he became such a good yarner, to keep me entertained.'

'Can you tell me one, Dad?'

'I'll tell you my favourite. Old fella reckoned he made it up for me, so I've never forgotten it.'

I wrapped my arms around my legs, ready to listen.

‘Well,’ Dad grunted, ‘there was a snake that longed for the sky. She tried jumping from a large rock but landed in the dirt. She leapt off a hill but crashed in the spinifex. She threw herself from a tree but slammed into the earth. The others animals laughed and made fun of her, because it was obvious that snakes can’t fly. All night she cried and cried, but then she noticed something strange. The moon was shining on the water nearby. The moon was in the sky, but it was in the water too, so it belonged to both the sky and the earth.

‘If the moon can belong to the sky and the earth,’ snake said, ‘then why can’t I?’

‘So what did she do?’ I asked.

Dad laughed. ‘Jumped into the reflection of the moon. Hit the water like she’d hit everything else and splashed about.’ ‘So she never reached the moon?’

‘She kept trying and each time she sank. But she never gave up. Then one night, after weeks and weeks of attempts, she dove into the reflection of the moon and appeared in the sky amongst the stars.’

‘So then she belonged to the earth and the sky?’

Dad nodded. ‘Like we all do. We can’t fly because we believe we don’t have wings. But if you truly believe, anything is possible.’

‘I guess so.’

I left Dad to the fire. Stretched out on my swag on my back and stared up at the stars. *If I really wanted to, could I fly up into the sky like Snake? Could I go visit other worlds?*

Dad chucked sand on the fire. ‘Get some sleep, we’re up early tomorrow.’

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Someone shook me violently. My eyes snapped open. Dad was staring down at me. ‘Get up we have to go!’

He was in a panic and then a moment later I realised rain was pouring down on top of us. We had weatherproof swags so I hadn’t felt it, but I knew what it meant.

Rain. Storm. Flooding.

I jolted upright and scrambled out of the swag, rolling it up. I tugged on my shoes and bolted across the spinifex with Dad towards the car. I tossed everything in the back and jumped in. Dad got in the driver seat, started the car.

‘Check the radio,’ he said.

I tried the station. But like yesterday there was no reception. Dad face looked grim. ‘Storm must have come in early’

‘A cyclone?’

Dad nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line. We flew down the road, at least a hundred kilometres per hour.

‘Dad, are we going to get stuck out here in the flood?’

Dad flashed me a grin. ‘Nah Bella, we’ll be fine. Just a bit of an adventure.’ But his smile didn’t reach his eyes and I could see the nervousness there.

I shivered and flipped on the heater. The rain pelted down on the car so hard it was almost impossible to see out the front windscreen. The car sloshed and bounced on the dirt road, the rain turning it into mud.

Dad rounded a corner, flew up over a small hill and we hurtled down the other side. We turned off the dirt road, onto a bitumen highway and sped up. Signs flashed by us that had flood warnings on them.

‘Shit,’ Dad said, slowing the car.

A bridge was in front of us. If you could call it a bridge. It didn’t have any guardrails and was a built-up mass of stone designed to funnel the flooding underneath. Below the bridge what was normally a dry riverbed was a raging mass of water that slammed against the bridge sending spray flying over the top.

‘Cyclone must have hit,’ Dad muttered. ‘Higher ground on the other side.’

I nodded but my nerves didn’t go anywhere. My hand gripped the car door as if the harder I held onto it the safer I’d become.

We drove onto the bridge. Spray erupted, pelting Dad’s side window with enough force to make it sound like rocks were hitting the car.

‘Almost there,’ he said, smiling at me reassuringly. I smiled back and looked forwards.

I only had an instant to see it between the rain hitting the windscreen. A part of the bridge had collapsed and fallen away on the right.

‘Sto-.’

We hit the hole, the front of the car tipped to the right. Dad slammed the car in reverse, wheels spun on the wet road. It was too late. The car tipped then slid off the bridge. We hit the water, my head slamming against the side window. Black spots flashed in front of my eyes.

The world spun.

Darkness splashed across my vision like ink was dripped into my eyes. One

heartbeat. Two.

The blow had made me groggy. My mind was fighting to stay awake. Fending off the concussion.

*Don't sleep. You'll die if you sleep.*

My eyes closed.

Distantly I was aware that the river was carrying us away. Sinking.

How long had my eyes been closed for? A second? A minute?

I couldn't tell.

But I knew I had to open them.

*Wake up!*

My body obeyed. My eyes opened. Water was pouring in through a broken window in the back, filling up the car, and dragging us beneath the river's surface. I tried to move, but my body was strangely slow to respond, as if all my limbs had fallen asleep. Someone was tugging at my seat belt. It must have been stuck, because they couldn't unclip it.

I turned my eyes, coming to rest on Dad's panicked face. He was frantically trying to free me. His mouth was moving. He was saying something to me but I couldn't hear him.

Why couldn't I hear?

I raised my hand to my ear, my fingers coming back bloody. Had I ruptured my eardrum?

Dad continued to talk. But my head swirled, my skull lolling useless on my neck.

I blinked but instead of taking an instant it took seconds. Water was up to my chest now. Dad still spoke, still worked at my seat belt. The water reached my collarbone.

Then my throat.

I looked at Dad. His face was panicked. His mouth was moving still. He was telling me something. Something important.

Dad, I can't hear you.

The water reached my chin. I was going to die. 'Dad,' I said, tears in my eyes. His gaze met mine. He said one last thing. Then the water submerged us.

My seatbelt clicked, I was free.

But it was too late. The water had already taken me. I didn't think I could swim anyway. I had hit my head too hard. I was falling to the world of shadows beneath the



water. My mind becoming slower and slower as my lungs screamed for air.

There was a flash of light. For a brief moment the water suddenly changed and became crystal clear.

It no longer raged. It longer thrashed.

As if it was an entirely different river.

Then water flooded my lungs and as the darkness came from me jagged fragments of memory stabbed through my brain.

Dad and I on that hill. The waterhole.

The fire. The story. The drive. The bridge. The fall.

Dad's last words.

I finally heard them.

*You were telling me you loved me.*

Blackness.

## Chapter Four

My heart was beating like a drum in my chest, calling my body to wake. My mind was fuzzy. I opened my eyes. Clouds covered the sky but in between the gaps I could make out dozens of sparkling lights. Stars.

It was night. I sat up. Yellow sand stretched out before me, meeting a slow trickling river. Black trees without leaves surrounded me, the dead branches stretching towards the sky.

Where was I?

How had I gotten here?

Memories floated through my mind. Dad tearing at the seat belt.

The water submerging us. My lungs screaming.

Dad's last words.

Somehow I had gotten free of the car and floated to shore. But where was Dad? If I had gotten out he must have as well. I stood, my head spun. I stumbled, stabbing out my right leg to catch me before I fell. My head throbbed in pain. I raised a hand to my face. Something hard and grainy was matted into my hair.

Blood. From when I ruptured my ear.

I took a breath, steadied myself. Then tried to walk again. This time I did better. I headed for the river's edge. The water was crystal clear. Not the violent muddy mass we had fallen into. How far had I travelled downstream?

'Dad!' I shouted.

My voice echoed over the river. No one answered. I filled my lungs again while my eyes scanned the riverbank. But before I released another shout my eyes fell upon a 4WD that was banked on the shore thirty metres away.

Dad.

I ran, but slowed as I neared. It was our car, covered in mud and flecks of dirt that blocked out the windows. The driver side panel was smashed in, from the hole we hit or the fall into the water.

I reached for the driver side door, pausing before my fingers touched the handle. I opened the door. There was no one inside. On the seat, dirty, was Dad's lucky lighter. I reached out with a shaking hand and grabbed it. Dad would never leave this behind. Had it fallen out of his pocket?

Light shone at me from behind. I glanced over my shoulder. The clouds had

cleared. Two moons hung in the air. One Red. One Yellow. For a moment my mind went blank. I reached out a hand while staring at those moons and twisted the skin of my arm. It hurt. But I didn't wake up.

Was I dead? Was this some kind of purgatory?

A memory flashed in my mind. The water had become clear as I was drowning. As if the river wasn't the same. Was I like snake? Had I dived through the water to some other place?

'Dad!' I screamed.

My voice echoed in the silence. 'Dad!'

Nothing but the stickling of the river. I was alone. Lost. I glanced at the river. Walked over to it and plunged myself in. I stayed underwater. Holding my breath, wishing to be taken back home.

My lungs screamed. My head thudded.

But nothing happened.

I came up gasping in air. How do I get back?

\*\*\*\*\*

I wasn't sure how much time passed. I fell asleep at some point. When I opened my eyes I expected to be back home. Instead, two suns; one red, one orange greeted me.

My stomach grumbled. The last thing I ate was the jerky Dad had given me. I got up and searched the car. But our packs weren't there.

Had Dad taken them when he left?

Had he even come to this place with me?

I stared at the black trees, then grabbed hold of a long straight branch and snapped it off. I walked over to a rock and sharpened it by filing it against the rough surface, rotating it to make sure I got a fine point.

Slowly I crept back towards the river. As my shadow neared, fish darted away from it. I had seen Dad spear fish before. He always managed to get lots of fish and it didn't look that hard.

I waded into the water then stood still and waited. As the ripples stopped the fish slowly returned, swimming about me as if I was part of the river.

I raised my spear and hurled it at a fish. It penetrated the water's surface and stabbed into the sandy bottom, missing the fish completely. I tried again and again I missed.

Then again. And again. And again.

Okay, maybe it wasn't as easy as I thought. The fish seemed to move as soon as I raised my arm. I stared at the water and moved my arm about. The fish scattered.

It's not my arm they are moving from. It's my shadow on the bottom of the water. Did I need to go deeper? But deeper in I wouldn't be able to see.

Maybe I should try aiming at fish further away. So I tried.

And hours passed.

And I still didn't have any food. So I gave up.

I waded out of the water, hurled my spear into the sand and tried to ignore the growling of my stomach.

In the distance I could make out a forest. I could probably find some kind of berries or seeds to eat.

It'd be a lot easier than catching fish.

I retrieved my spear and headed off towards the forest edge. It was further then I thought but at least the sand continued all the way up to the tree line.

As I entered, shadows fell over me and a coolness brushed against my cheeks.

Tall trees blocked out the sun with their branches and littered the floor with leaves.

I walked, making sure I kept to a straight line so I could turn back and find my way out again. Half an hour passed. Still no berries. Plenty of moss though. Rocks.

But no birds. No lizards. No living creatures. The forest was strangely quiet.

Which was weird because the bush back home was always alive with noise.

Dry leaves crushed behind me, followed by a low growl and I turned, very slowly to look over my shoulder.

I expected to see some kind of dog. Instead, an odd long creature that had leathery black skin stood before me. It was about the size of a golden retriever and its two black eyes were central in its head. It didn't have any ears and its mouth opened both downwards and out to the sides.

My blue eyes met its black eyes and then it snarled, its massive mouth flying open revealing hundreds of razor sharp teeth and a long tongue with a barb at its end.

It launched forward.

A mad snarl escaped my throat and I hurled the spear at the same moment the creature lunged at me. The spear punctured through the monster's open mouth and into its brain. It crashed to the ground, the momentum making it slide along the forest floor to stop in front of me.

My chest was heaving. My heart pounding. I could feel adrenaline running through my veins.

I had nearly died.

The forest became silent. I stood there, staring at the body.

Then I stepped forward slowly, not completely convinced the thing was dead.

When it didn't move I grabbed hold of my spear and yanked it free. Purple blood gushed from the wound, spilling out onto the forest floor.

I frowned. It almost looked like a dog...if it was crossed with an alien. I wondered if I could eat it.

Dry leaves crunched. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and a tingle ran down my spine. I straightened myself. Looked over my shoulder and froze.

In the distance, between the trees, some standing on rocks, others crept forward. Ten or more. They froze as our eyes met. Silence. Then low growls echoed through the forest.

Adrenaline pumped anew. I bared my teeth in a smile that had nothing to do with joy and a lot to do with my mind tinkering on the edge of madness.

I'm going to need more spears.

## Chapter Five

Leaves shattered under my feet. My heart pounded in my chest.

My blood rushed through my veins.

I erupted through a bush, the branches scraping the skin from my arms.

Something flashed at my side.

I lashed out with the spear. A snarl sounded out as the end hit something and I kept moving.

Over rocks. Under branches. Around trees.

The forest became a blur around me, its details unimportant. Only the path mattered.

Only escape. Survival.

Something sharp sank into my calf. White-hot fire lanced up my leg and a scream erupted from my lips. My jaw clenched against the pain and I slammed my spear down into the ribs of the creature. It yelped and released my leg, its dozens of teeth coming away with bits of my flesh.

My jaw clenched and I pressed on, ignoring the pain, emerging from the dense trees to be confronted with a cliff wall.

Trapped.

I closed my eyes. My heart slammed in my chest. Then my senses rushed in. The breeze rustling the leaves. Birds making noises. The padding of paws upon the forest floor.

I turned, pressed my back against the wall, holding out my spear in front of me. They came in packs of twos and threes, emerging from the tree line with slow deliberate gaits. I had been herded here. Guided to a place where I wouldn't be able to run. Where the kill was assured.

The pack sniffed the air, confirming the scent of blood gushing from my calf and pooling in my shoe.

They edged forward, the biggest one among them taking the lead. It approached with a low crouching walk, power nestling in its leathery muscles.

The spear shook in my hand. My legs became weak, from blood loss or fear or both.

The monster took one last step. Our eyes met, and then he lunged forward in a blur of motion. I jabbed my spear at the air, my eyes flinching, expecting pain to tear

through my body. Instead the trees to my right tilted and something giant and fast and horrible crashed into the dog creature, snatching it out the air. It thrashed its head from side to side, sending flecks of blood and gore spraying through the air as bits of dog monster spattered the ground. My instincts screamed to run, but instead I went still, pressing my back into the cliff wall like I could become a part of it.

The new monster looked like a Komodo dragon, but only if it was the size of a car and could dislocate its jaw to make it big enough to swallow a person.

Bits of the dog monster's crushed skull still in its mouth. Bile rose in the back of my throat and I tried to ignore the wave of nausea that swept over me.

The dog monster's scattered, spreading out in a wide arc, growls escaping their throats. They weren't running. They were up for a fight.

The giant lizard heaved, and then it let out a screech that would have done a T-rex proud. The dogs shrank back under the onslaught of sound. The forest went still.

Then one of them snarled back. Then another, until a chorus of growls echoed through the clearing. There was a flash of movement, and then one of the dog mouths was locked around the lizard's leg.

The lizard thrashed, tossing the dog off, snapping its jaws but only catching air. The other dogs leapt in to join the attack and suddenly none of them were concerned with eating me. I glanced to my left. Dogs. To my right. Giant lizard fighting dogs.

Straight was no good because it'd take me too close to the fight. I glanced above myself. Ten metres up the rock extended out in a small overhang then continued on upwards into the sky. I was good at climbing trees when I was young. Not sure how good a rock climber that made me but it was better than getting my throat ripped out.

I climbed.

The first few metres were easy. There were giant foot and handholds and I scaled it rapidly. It got a little harder after that but nothing I couldn't handle. Then I hit the overhang and all progress stopped. It really hadn't seemed that big from down on the ground. But now that I was up here, dangling at an angle, it was a lot harder than I thought.

I guess rocks and trees were different.

Or I had gotten a lot weaker since I was a kid.

A savage screech from below sounded. I glanced over my shoulder. Giant lizard was pacing back and forth below me. Its massive mouth open, red-slit eyes pinned on me. Around him were the broken mangled corpses of the dog monsters.

I guess he was still hungry. And I was still stuck.

And my arms were starting to shake from the effort of holding me against the wall.

*Okay. Let's do this.*

I moved into the overhang. Gripping onto the small rock holds beneath it.

Then I froze, glancing around. No more hand holds. I was stuck. Again.

Only this time I didn't think I could climb backwards to get out of it. Above me was the ledge of the overhang. I reached out a hand, stretching my body as much as I could. I wasn't going to reach it.

Another screech from below. The lizard was tired of pacing circles and was now trying to scramble up the wall. Only his giant frame kept falling to the ground, tearing rocks from the cliff. I couldn't get down or I'd be eaten. My arms were exhausted and getting worse the longer I stayed pinned under the overhang. I was going to have to jump. Push off the wall and grab the ledge with my free hand.

Knots formed in my stomach. My imagination treated me to an image of me tumbling through the air and being swallowed whole by the lizard below me like some kind of cartoon. Only a cartoon was fake and the thing below me was far too real.

I took a breath, focused on the edge of the overhang, forming an image of it in my mind.

Then I jumped.

My wounded leg gave way under the explosiveness with which I sprang from the wall and I didn't jump as far as I wanted.

My left hand slapped at the overhang, fingers slamming into a pocket of rock and gripping on.

Then the rest of my body swung out, the momentum from the jump carrying me through and something in my hand snapped.

I screamed.

But I didn't let go.

Instead I slammed my other hand into the same crevice and dangled there, white-hot pain stabbing through my fingers and down my wrist.

'Gff hffn' I groaned staring above my hands at the next hold that seemed impossibly out of reach. Beyond the hold was a flat ledge. I could lie there. Rest.

Sweat covered my body. My breath came in ragged pants and pain thrummed through me.

*Come on. Pull yourself up.* 'Up!' I shouted.

I arched my body in a kind of whiplash motion and at the same time pulled



with my hands yanking myself upward. With my right hand I reached out for the next hold. I grabbed it and yanked myself over the ledge, driving my feet into the crevice where my left hand had been. I pushed off my good leg and clawed myself onto the flat part of the ledge, collapsing onto my face in an exhausted heap.

I didn't try and stand again. My body ached from using muscles that hadn't done anything that strenuous in years. The wound on my leg was throbbing and stabbing pain lanced through my hand as if the bones were broken. That or I had snapped the tendons inside it. Either way, I didn't think I'd be using it for a while.

At least I'm not dead. Not yet anyway.

I closed my eyes, feeling more tired than I had in my entire life. I slept.

## Chapter Six

Throbbing pain woke me. My hand reached down to where I had been bitten, my fingers brushing against the wound. White heat stabbed up my leg and I let out a cry, tears stinging my eyes. The skin was swollen. Stretched.

Was it infected?

Did infections kick in that quickly?

But then I remembered the barb in the dog monster's mouth. Poison?

I shuffled up onto my hands and knees. My leg was useless, and I wouldn't be able to climb down. I couldn't get food. Water. I'd die up here.

There was a shuffling sound to my right. I snapped my gaze to it but couldn't make out anything in the darkness.

The wind blew. Silence fell. 'Hello?' I said.

Someone whispered, 'It speaks.' Other voices chimed in:

'All girls speak.'

'Yes. Speak. Scream. Cry.' 'She's dying.'

'Do we take her?'

*Take me where?* 'Who are you?' I asked.

The voices went silent. My heart slammed against my chest and I swallowed down on a bout of panic.

Then *things* stepped out of the shadows. They had the general shape of people, only their skin was twisted and gnarled. Like wounds had festered, and crusted all over them, distorting what flesh was meant to look like. And their faces were...wrong. Eyes where mouths should be. Noses where ears belonged. Ears where foreheads were. Teeth snapped open and closed at the sides of their necks and hair grew matted in patches. Giant wings that resembled leather stretched out from their backs. Dozens of red eyes were on the wings, all of them blinking and looking about at different things.

I wanted to scream. Cry. Flee. But I didn't do any of those things. Instead I sat, frozen. Terrified.

They spoke again: 'She has colours.' 'Bright. Beautiful.' 'He will be pleased.'

I retreated until my back hit the wall of the mountain. 'What are you?'

Their heads all snapped to me, and all the eyes on all their wings looked upon me.

'We catch the colours and bring them back,' said the creature. 'Are you all

alone, little colour?’

I swallowed. ‘No, my father he’s...he’s by the river. He’s waiting for me.’ The thing looked at me, then tipped its head to the left and glanced at the others.

He sniffed the air. ‘You’re *lying*. No parents, no nothing. You’re a lost little colour. We make lost things found. We’ll make you *found* too.’

I shook my head. ‘I’m not lost. I have a father. He’s by the river.’ ‘*Liar!*’ the creature’s hand darted out, gripping me by the throat. I froze. It sniffed the air then glanced down at my wounded leg. ‘It’s killing her,’ one of them said.

‘She can be fixed.’ ‘Only to be broken?’

‘Not our job. Our job is to take. To mend. To make found. To give to *them*.’ ‘Take her to Scrived Elchis?’

‘Yes.’

‘Please,’ I begged, ‘listen to m-’

There was a flash of movement as the hand on my throat gripped my wrist instead. I struggled, but each movement sent my injured leg flaring in pain. The creature dragged me up. It took two steps, then jumped off the edge of the cliff and a moment later we were soaring through the skies. Above the trees and the hills and the mountains, getting further and further away from the river.

I didn’t try to fight. Not because I’d fall to my death if they let go of me. But because something inside me had snapped. Too much had happened. Too many horrible things, one after another. Somewhere in the back of my head an insane whisper giggled that this couldn’t be real. That I was losing my mind. That I was better dying on the ledge from fever. Only now I wouldn’t die.

I would be *fixed*. Only to be *broken*.

Wind wrapped around me, washing over me, leaving its cool fingers upon my skin. We were so high up, soaring through the clouds. Everything looked so beautiful from up here. I could almost forget a monster was taking me away. *Almost*.

I closed my eyes, lost in the touch of the sky. It was peaceful. If only I was like Snake and could become a Sky Child. Then I could escape the monsters and the things that wanted to hurt me. How at peace I would be, up in the clouds, basking in the sun, dancing beneath the moon. But I wasn’t a sky child. I was of the earth. Of rock, of river, of tree. I was only stolen away into the sky world. And the problem with a rock child visiting the sky world is that eventually, you have to fall back down to earth.

The monster dipped and we fell. *Fast*.

My stomach slammed into my throat like a roller-coaster ride gone wrong and for a second I thought I was going to vomit. Then the second passed, replaced with a greater fear of smashing against the trees that we were rapidly approaching. We were going to hit them.

‘Stop!’ I shouted.

Before we crashed into the treetops the monster leveled out, soaring above the tips. My breath came in sharp gasps, adrenaline bouncing through my blood. The other winged creatures sped up, zigzagging in front of us, twirling upside down as playfully as birds. Only they weren’t birds. They were monsters and I was their prisoner.

Ahead I could make out a giant forest. Except it wasn’t on the ground, it was in the sky. And it was upside down, the roots extending up through the air and vanishing into the clouds. It had no leaves. Instead it had strange pods.

Cocoons, I realised, as we got closer.

A hand stabbed out of one them and the cocoon was torn apart and one of *them* came out of it. Flying up into the air and off into the sky. They were birthing cocoons. And the thing I thought was a forest wasn’t trees at all but clumps of mud and clay padded together and anchored somewhere up in the sky. Like a giant hornet’s nest.

The monster angled upwards, dipping through branches of mud, heading for a giant clump the size of a skyscraper at the centre of the mud forest. We flew through a yawning opening and suddenly the feeling of something gripping my wrist vanished and I was falling. I hit the ground in a tumbling roll. A pang of pain arced through my shoulder. I got to my feet slowly, staring about myself.

I was in a giant domed room, bits of loose mud dripping from the ceiling. All around me were the flying creatures dragging children. Dozens of them, all being herded into groups or transported one by one around the hive. They all had strange, blank looks on their faces, devoid of any emotion, any reaction, like dolls. Only I knew they were people, like me, or at least, they had been. Once.

‘What is this place?’

‘Scried Elchis. We take the lost colours and deliver them. We are the Ricksha’Teld. We are takers and givers but never keepers.’

I swallowed. ‘What happened to them?’

‘They no longer have colours, so no one wants them,’ the creature said, its thin fingers lacing around my wrist and yanking me forward.

I thought about fighting. About running and trying to escape. But the more I thought about it the more I realised it would be impossible. We were up in the air with

no way to climb down to the ground. My leg hurt and so did my wrist from where I'd been carried. Not to mention all the Ricksha'Teld around. There was nowhere to run. No way to escape. I was trapped.

We zigzagged through the crowd of faceless people, making our way to a door. It was pushed aside and I stepped in. Inside the room was a small sickly thin Ricksha'Teld. He glanced over at me and the mouths on the side of its neck smiled.

'A colour?'

'Yes, but she's broken.'

'Then she can be fixed.'

'Yes. Will he be pleased?'

The sickly Ricksha'Teld looked at me and the mouths on its neck smiled. 'Yes. Pleased. Happy. Hungry.'

A shiver ran up my spine. The mouths smiled wider, and the thin Ricksha'Teld waved the one who'd brought me here away. 'Leave us.'

My captor bowed its head and left. The sound of the door closing shook my heart.

The Ricksha'Teld circled me, its dozens of eyes roaming over my body. 'You're such a bright colour. How rare.'

'Why do you keep calling me a colour?'

The Ricksha'Teld tilted its head to the side. 'Colors always have the same questions. But my job is not to answer. My job is to take, to send, to deliver. You will understand soon.'

He walked over to the wall and scraped a handful of gunk from it. Then he slapped it onto my wound. It was cool, soothing. Then fire surged inside my wound.

'It hurts!' I snapped, reaching for the mud to wipe it away. But the Ricksha'Teld gripped my wrists. I writhed in agony, my body contorting as the pain surged up my leg to my thigh. like acid was flowing through my veins.

Ten minutes passed...twenty...then slowly the pain faded and the Ricksha'Teld released me. I collapsed on the ground, covered in sweat, and lay still.

'Why are you doing this?' I whispered. 'Why can't you let me go. Send me home.'

'Lost colours have no home. They only have places to be sent. He demands colours. I cannot disobey. Not never. Not ever. Because I need bits of your colours too.' The Ricksha'Teld walked closer to me and crouched down. 'Truth. I am one that makes things not exist and He is the one that makes things wish they did not exist.'

Truth, you are all alone. No one will come to save you.'

He leaned in close to me. I could smell the breath from the mouths on his neck.

'Farewell,' it said, standing. 'Take her.'

More Ricksha'Telds appeared behind me so quickly it was like they had been there all along. I lashed out with the back of my hand, my fist hitting one of them on the shoulder. A pang of pain lanced through my wrist. Its skin was like concrete.

'Let me go!' I shouted, struggling in their grip. I flailed. Twisted. Thrashed. But I didn't get loose.

Their grip was too tight. Their hands too strong. And I was too weak. They dragged me towards the exit.

'Please! Don't do this!'

But no one listened. Things that don't exist cannot be heard. They dragged me across the ground like a child carrying a doll. My eyes darted to the other children trapped in the main room. The faceless dolls sat slumped on the floor like puppets with their strings cut. I screamed to them for help. But they didn't so much as raise their heads.

No one was going to save me. No one was going to stop them. There was only me, but I wasn't enough.

One of the Ricksha'Telds lifted me up, taking two steps and then exploding into the air, giant wings flapping. It carried me out of the hive and into the night sky. I'm not sure how long we flew. Long enough that the chill in the air numbed my face. Eventually a building came into view amongst the forest. A tower that stood out of the trees spiralling into the air, at least seven stories high. It was made of wood and surrounded by a giant moat of water. It didn't look like a conventional tower, more like a building that had been constructed by a child, rooms and floors jutting out at odd angles from the main structure.

The Ricksha'Teld descended, angling us down towards the giant structure, sending the wind whipping by my face. We flew in a spiral around the building. The Ricksha'Teld dropped me to the ground then landed gently next to me.

At first, there was no one there. Only my captor and I, staring at the hulking wooden building in front of us. Then *things* came out of the shadows of the entrance. They were monsters but not ones like the Ricksha'Teld. These ones looked like mutilated humans. Their eyes were gone, as if someone had scooped them out with spoons and left only gaping black holes in their place. Their ears had been torn off

leaving only stumps. Their mouths were sewn together by thick leather thread that tore at the skin and made blood and pus drip down their chins. Their skin was the worst part of them. It was like someone had poured acid that had eaten bits of it away allowing me to gaze into the side of their cheeks to their teeth and inside their mouth.

The Ricksha'Teld nudged me towards them, hissing, 'Go to the Servants.'

Servants? That's what these things were called? I backed away in revulsion. A firm hand gripped the back of my neck and this time I wasn't nudged. I was thrown. I stumbled forwards but before I fell someone grabbed me by the wrist with enough strength to make my bones creak.

It stared up into its face. It stared down with its black eyeless gaze.

The thing spun, dragging me away. Had I been better off with the Ricksha'Teld than here? Should I have tried to stay in that horrible hive?

Too late.

They dragged me towards the cold of the wooden building. I clawed at the floor trying to stop them. But I was too weak and we vanished into the darkness of the doorway. As the shadows fell over me, it was like a mouth was closing shut and I was being eaten whole.

The Rickcha'Teld had kept their promise. They had fixed me. Then, was this where I was to be broken?

I pressed down on the terror that rose inside me. It would be okay. I would *be* okay.

Half of me believed it to be true. The other half knew it was a lie.

## Chapter Seven

A nurse walked into the room, interrupting Catching's story. 'Visiting hours are over.'

Michael glanced outside the window. 'Still light out.'

The nurse glowered. 'She needs her rest. You can come back tomorrow.'

Michael got to his feet. 'Well, you heard her, time's up kid.'

'Will you be back?' she asked. 'I'll try.'

Catching nodded but didn't say anything and Michael headed out the door.

He left the room and entered the corridor with a trail of others who had evidently been kicked out as well.

He reached reception, where a clerk was speaking to a thin balding man wearing a black turtleneck and khaki pants. '...visiting hours are over you'll have to come ba-'

Michael walked out of earshot, out the front doors and got into his car.

*-That was interesting.*

His daughter appeared in the passenger seat next to him.

'Of course the crazy part of my mind would find another crazy person's story interesting.'

Beth pouted and folded her arms.

*-I'm not the crazy part of your mind Dad. I'm the part that keeps you from killing yourself. Do you believe Catching's story?*

'She's talking about going to another world, Beth. That's not something you can believe no matter how much I want to.'

*-You're talking to your dead daughter. But that's pretty real to you, isn't it? Besides, there are lots of scientific theories about parallel worlds. Sometimes fiction is a truth we don't know how to translate into fact yet.*

'Beth-' He stopped talking when he looked to the passenger seat and it was empty.

Beth was gone.

He frowned, started the car and drove off. He reached into his pocket for his phone and dialled his partner. Three rings and Anna's voice mail picked up.

He hung up, waited five minutes. Tried again. This time she answered. 'Still at the scene?'



‘Yeah, finalising my report. How did the interview go?’ she asked.

‘Ah...well...it was interesting. I got kicked out so I’ll have to go back tomorrow.’

‘Michael you’re just getting the facts of where she was, how long can it possibly take to find out what happened to her?’

‘Well, it’s a story about another world...’

‘Oh god you’re humouring her. I forgot I sent the guy that had seen the extended version of Lord of The Rings thirty-two times.’

‘While I admit I am a closet geek, I want it noted that my obsession for all things awesome won’t interfere with work.’

‘Uh huh. While you were playing fairytale I was actually doing some real work. Found out who owns the building. It’s registered to a Cullet Corporation, which is a subsidiary of another business etcetera, etcetera. Anyway, an Alexander Sholts owns all of them. He’s from here.’

Michael frowned. ‘As in Australia...?’

‘As in this town. He was born here. Raised on a farm. His parents still live here. He left when he was a teenager. Ended up making millions in the construction business during the mining boom. He’s got over ten of these Children’s homes all around the country.’

‘Right, and what does Mr. Sholts think of one of them burning to the ground?’  
‘I got stonewalled by his receptionist. Gave me the old ‘he’s away on business’ line.’

‘Riiight. Poke around his financials.’ ‘You’re thinking insurance fraud?’

‘Who knows? Good to double-check. Anything else?’

‘Yeah, John took me for lunch in town.’

‘Was it the most romantic moment of your life?’ Michael teased.

‘*And,*’ Anna continued, ignoring him. ‘I took the opportunity to go talk to some of the kids that were moved to the recreation centre.’

‘Any leads?’

‘They were pretty convinced of the ghost,’ Anna said, ‘noise in the wall, one of them said they heard a voice.’

‘Saying...?’

‘It was always muffled and they could never make it out.’

‘So one case we have a girl from another world. Other case we got a dead body and ghosts. Is it me or are these the greatest two cases we’ve ever worked on?’

‘It’s you.’

‘Dream killer. You have an address on Sholt’s parent’s place?’ ‘Yeah, I’ll text it to you.’

‘Alright. Meet back at the hotel for a beer later?’

‘Sure. But I want to wrap up the interview and the site investigation tomorrow and head back down to Perth in the evening.’

‘Yes ma’am. Later Anna,’ he said, hanging up the phone.

A moment later it beeped and he put Sholt’s parent’s address into the GPS. A few hours later he was driving down the dirt road of the Sholts twenty-acre farm. A house came into view. A big double story, modern construction. He had expected some kind of shack, not a manor. But then, their son was a millionaire so I suppose he had built them something nice. That, or they sold *a lot* of corn.

He parked out the front and headed to the door, knocking three times. No answer. He knocked again. On his second rap against the door it opened and an elderly man stared at him.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

Michael showed his identification. ‘Detective Michael Teller. I’m here to talk to you about your son’s children’s home burning down.’

‘He owns a children’s home?’

‘Yes. Littleton Children’s Home.’

Mr. Sholts ran his tongue over his teeth, annoyance flitting across his gaze. ‘Alright, come in,’ he said, turning and walking back into the house leaving the door open behind him.

Michael stepped inside, onto the polished jarrah floorboards, and followed Mr. Sholts down the hallway into a large open plan living room. Sitting in the room was an old woman. She was staring out the back window. In the kitchen was a younger man washing dishes.

‘I’d introduce you to my wife but she suffers from Alzheimer’s so she won’t remember who you are. That’s Terrance, her carer,’ Mr. Sholts said, nodding at the young man washing the dishes.

The man nodded at Michael and continued to go about his work. ‘Come, take a seat.’

Michael took a seat. Mrs Sholts glanced at him.

‘Are you Alexander’s teacher, is this about cats and dogs?’ she asked.

Mr. Sholts frowned at his wife. ‘No. This is Detective Teller, he’s here to ask me a few questions.’

The woman stared blankly at Mr. Sholts. ‘But who are *you*?’

‘I’m your husband.’

‘I’m married?’

‘Yes, for many years now.’

Mrs. Sholts became quiet and went back to staring out the window. ‘Mr. Sholts-.’ Michael began

‘Call me Winston,’ Sholts interrupted.

‘Winston. When was the last time you spoke to your son?’ ‘To Xander? Must of been last week,’

‘And you were unaware he owned the Children’s Home in Littleton?’

‘I don’t know half the things that boy buys. He could own half the stores in Littleton for all I know.’

‘I see. Is he in any financial trouble?’

‘I doubt it. He’s cheap. But what do I know, I just grow corn. His finances aren’t something we discuss.’

Michael gave Winston a flat stare. ‘What *do* you discuss?’

‘His mother mostly. That’s all he ever calls here for. He never visits, never comes home and when he does it’s to see her. He and I don’t have a particularly great relationship.’

‘I see. Alexander, he left when he was still a teenager?’ A firm look entered Winston’s eyes.

‘That’s right.’

‘Any particular reason?’

‘No.’

Michael waited for the other man to elaborate. He didn’t.

‘I see. Well, I won’t take up any more of your time,’ he said, standing.

‘No problem at all Detective.’

Michael gave him a polite smile and they headed for the door. As they walked down the hall Michael paused at a set of photos on the wall. There were four of them. Winston was in one of them with his arm around a fat younger man who slightly resembled him.

‘Is that Alexander?’

‘Yep. That was taken three years ago. Last time he visited here.’

Michael glanced down at the other photos. They were of kids. Three boys, by a creek holding up fish.

‘That’s him when he was a boy,’ Winston said. ‘He used to love fishing by the Gascoyne River.’

‘I see. Well, thank you for your time.’ ‘Goodbye Detective.’

Michael left and headed for the car, got in and drove back to the hotel. When he arrived Anna wasn’t back yet. He went to his room, pulled out the portable whiteboard he had brought. He wrote down names and notes. He put Alexander up there along with his father. Wrote down ghosts, rats, then on the other side he wrote Catching’s name and underneath a few words.

Post-traumatic shock. Mental instability. Highly intelligent.

Then he began writing down bits of information from Catching’s story. Names, places, and creatures hoping that if he saw them written they’d somehow make more sense. Only they didn’t, and he was left staring at what crazy looks like when you write it on a white board.

‘You know we have these things called computers now,’ Anna said from the doorway.

He had forgotten to close it. Anna stepped inside, a six-pack in one hand and a folder in the other.

‘Tablets are useless for people with fat fingers. They need to make a plus size.’

‘Uh huh. Or you can go on a finger skinny diet,’ Anna replied, putting the beer down on his bedside table and sitting in the chair in the corner. ‘There’s a finger skinny diet?’

Anna grinned. ‘Yep. It’s called death. Bone thin.’

‘I love it how you smile at your own jokes even though they suck.’ She grimaced. ‘So what’s the verdict on Isabel Catching?’

‘I’m not sure yet. *Something* happened to her. I’m sifting through the crazy to find out what.’

‘Think she blocked out the memory?’

‘Seems like it. She’s replaced the event with the story of going to another world. In her story, she doesn’t know her father is dead. She finds the empty car. It’s aged years and she’s not in our world anymore.’

‘Fantasy aside, how did she survive all this time there?’

Michael shook his head. ‘With the kind of temperatures they get up there, you’d be dead in a few days from dehydration. We’re talking the middle of nowhere with heat around 40 degrees Celsius. Search parties checked the entire area by chopper. No sight of her. If she survived out there for a year she’d need to eat. Drink. I

don't get it.'

'Well, the alternative is that she travelled to another world.'

Michael frowned, staring at the whiteboard. 'Maybe she wandered into a town and no one reported it?'

Anna shook her head, taking a drink of the beer in her hand. 'She'd have needed medical attention by the time she reached a town.'

'So then...where was she?' Anna stayed silent.

'Maybe our Alice really did fall down a rabbit hole,' Michael said. 'You going to put that in the report?'

Michael thought about it and shrugged. 'I might not have a choice.'

He walked to the bed and sat across from Anna, staring at the white board. 'Sometimes fiction is simply truths that we don't know how to translate into fact,' he whispered.

'That sounds like something a smart person would say. You've been talking to John?'

Michael smiled despite himself and shook his head. 'Something someone mentioned to me once.'

'Either she survived alone in the Pilbara or she went to another world. If you had to pick one?'

Michael grimaced. Both seemed impossible. The part of the Pilbara where the car crashed was remote. The heat on the sand up there could melt the bottom of your shoe at midday. It was hard enough for experienced survivalists to live out there for a week let alone a teenage girl. But the alternative was that she teleported to a different reality.

'Then it's her surviving alone in the Pilbara for a year,' Michael said, 'but how did she get all the way down here? The Pilbara is at least two days drive away. Walking...who knows how long?'

'Yeah,' Anna said, staring at the whiteboard. 'All those X-Files jokes suddenly aren't so funny.'

Michael leaned back in the bed and the two of them sat in silence, staring at the board. After a while Anna glanced out the window. The moon hung low and full in the sky, making it seem unusually close.

'Big moon tonight,' Anna murmured.

'That's no moon,' Michael said, his face becoming serious, 'it's a space station!'

Anna's gave him a flat stare. 'I'm banning Star Wars jokes until we get back to Perth.'

'Alright, but you have to come and watch the new Star Wars movie with me as compensation.'

'No,' she said, standing. 'Early start tomorrow. Be. *Up*.'

'Yes ma'am.'

She shut the door behind her leaving Michael sitting on the bed with his beer.

They had only come up here to gather the evidence and walk the scene. The rest of the work would be handled by liaising with the local police and using the evidence they processed back in Perth. Tomorrow he would have to finish up his interview with Catching.

He opened another beer.

*-Drinking till you pass out again?*

Michael glanced at where Anna had been sitting. Beth now sat there, her brown hair framing her face. Something tore in his chest at the sight of her. He downed half the beer.

Ignore her. She's not real. She's *not*.

*-Dad-*

Don't listen to her voice. *Don't*. He finished his beer.

Drank another. And another.

And when he ran out of beer he drank whatever was in the minibar and eventually he didn't hear her any more. Her voice faded off to somewhere far away and he fell asleep, staring at the whiteboard wondering if tomorrow it would all make sense.

Someone was knocking inside Michael's head. He stirred awake only to realise it wasn't inside his head at all, it was the door to his room. He opened his eyes. He had passed out amongst mini bottles of alcohol and if his guess was correct a very angry judo expert was banging on his door.

He sat up, swept the bottles and the rug off his bed in one motion to hide them and opened the door.

Anna was glaring. Michael smiled in return.

'Seriously? There's this thing called alarms Michael. You have one on your phone.'

'Ah, yeah. Sorry. I kind of got carried away thinking about the case.' 'You reek of booze, must have been thinking pretty hard.'

Michael gave her a sheepish smile. 'Give me five minutes?' She shook her head. 'Hurry up.'

Michael closed the door and dashed back into the room. He grabbed his change of clothes from his bag and quickly and jumped in the shower. Brushed his teeth with such vigor he cut his gums. He got dressed, wiped the steam off the mirror and stared at himself. In the reflection Beth was behind him.

*-Dad don't go back.*

'Job will be over today Beth.'

*-The only time you're okay is when you are working on a case. If you go back, you'll sit around at the office and drink at home and then you'll put your gun in your mouth again and want it all to end.*

'I won't.'

A sad look crossed Beth's face.

*-Dad. You're lying*

Anger bubbled in Michael's stomach. He spun to face her but she was gone.

He stared at the space she had been, rage thrumming beneath his skin.

He took a breath. Then another. Get your shit together man.

He pulled on his clothes and headed for the door. Anna was standing there waiting for him. He opened his mouth, about to say 'let's go' when Anna's phone rang.

She held up her hand for Michael to be quiet as she answered. Someone spoke, she glanced at Michael. 'We'll be there right away.'

'What is it?'

'They've found two dead bodies in an alley in town. They've been identified as Joshua Lenning and Peter Worth, the child care workers from the children's home.'

Michael stared at her. 'Anna, if the bodies of Joshua and Peter were found in town then who the hell does the burned corpse at Littleton Children's Home belong to?'

They had assumed it was either Joshua or Peter and one or the other had split, only they had turned up dead somewhere else.

Anna didn't answer him and behind her a loud *caw!* sounded. Anna turned, glancing over her shoulder. A giant crow was balancing on the gutters of the hotel roof, looking down at them.

'Big crow,' Anna said. 'Yeah.'

## Chapter Eight

Michael and Anna arrived at the scene. It was an alley between the town bakery and the butcher's shop. Derek and his people were already there. Michael ducked under the police tape and walked down the alley.

Two bodies lay at odd angles, staring up into the sky, eyes open, blood pooled around them. Scattered next to the bodies were smashed mobile phones. They had probably tried to call for help.

'Defensive wounds on their arms, looks like someone attacked them with a knife,' Derek said.

The two men weren't small. They were well built, meaning the attacker would have had to either be extremely skilled with a knife or there were multiple assailants. Michael knelt and tilted his head, glancing at the wounds.

There weren't any jags at the edges of the cuts, which meant the blade was extremely sharp. The cuts were short and shallow which meant the knife wouldn't have been big.

'Any witnesses?' Michael asked.

'Happened late last night, only place open was Clancy's across the road. You can try talking to them.'

'No cameras from any of the shops?' Anna asked. Derek shook his head. 'Hasn't ever been any need.' 'Until today,' Anna said.

Derek face became solemn and he nodded. 'Until today.'

Michael turned and headed for Clancy's, the only pub in town. He stepped inside and walked straight to the bar where a skinny guy sporting a mullet stared at him.

Michael flashed him his identification. 'Detective Teller, I have a few questions for you.'

'Daniel. This is my place. This about the murders over there?'

Michael nodded. 'You see anything strange around midnight last night?' 'Close up time then. Didn't see anything but I was mostly around back at that point,' Daniel said. 'Is it really Joshua and Peter?' 'Where did you hear that?'

'Just what's going around from people that got a look in.'

Michael nodded. Someone had to find the body and he doubted they'd keep quiet about it.



‘Did you know them?’

Daniel nodded. ‘Yeah. They come in from time to time. They were always together. They never drank anything but water.’

Michael frowned. ‘Then why did they come in?’ ‘*Other* interests.’

Drugs. Only Daniel didn’t want to say that out loud. Michael paused, thinking about it. Maybe they owed someone money. Money someone came to collect.

‘Dealing or buying?’

‘Buying,’ Daniel replied, ‘but it was every Saturday man. Like clockwork. They’d meet here then go out onto the street. I don’t let anyone deal in my place.’

Which was probably bullshit, but Michael didn’t really care if people were dealing drugs in Daniel’s place.

‘What about earlier that night, you see anything unusual?’

‘Normal weeknight Detective,’ Daniel paused. ‘There was one thing that was off. Saw Will Dallington in town. Haven’t seen him for about fifteen years. Guy’s the local nut job. He was out front around 10:30 talking to himself. He’s crazy but harmless. Remember thinking it was odd.’

‘Alright, thanks for your help.’

Michael turned and walked out of the pub then went to talk to people on the street. Not many people knew the victims. Eventually he went back to the alley.

He pulled on a pair of gloves and walked over to where Anna was standing near the bodies, scribbling on a page.

‘Anna,’ Michael said as he approached her, ‘you were in Narcotics for a while, who runs the area around here?’

Anna frowned in thought. ‘Oaks do. Their territory is from here all the way to Port Hedland. Why?’

Michael knelt, patting down one of the bodies, checking the pockets. Nothing. Then he took the man’s shoes off and pulled down his socks. There was nothing inside.

‘Michael what are you doing?’

‘Guy who owns Clancy’s said these two bought drugs every Saturday,’ Michael said, searching the other body for drugs.

‘You think this is drug related?’

‘Maybe. It’s a lead at least.’ Nothing on the bodies.

‘Michael, it’s not our job to investigate it. We’re only here because these two are possibly connected to our case. If this is a homicide over drugs then we need to tag out.’

‘There’s only two other Detectives up here Anna, one is Derek. None have experience in Narcotics or know the scene like you do. It could be nothing. Or it could be connected to why the Children’s home was burned down.’

Anna glared at him for a moment. ‘Fine.’ Michael stood and headed out of the alley. ‘Find something?’ Derek asked.

Michael didn’t stop walking. ‘Maybe a lead.’

Got in his car. Anna got on her phone and started making a few calls. After five minutes of ringing around she hung up.

‘Got an address.’

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Michael sat in the car out the front of a warehouse. The warehouse had a giant sign saying Dan’s Mechanics.

‘You sure this is it?’ he asked.

‘It’s what my contact in Narcotics gave me. What, the dozens of motorbikes not enough for you?’

Michael glanced at the motorbikes stacked up at the side. Oaks were a bikie gang. They dealt in drugs, guns and god knows what else.

‘Seems kind of in the middle of nowhere.’

Anna shrugged. ‘You’re the one that wanted to talk to them.’ ‘Yeah.’

She laughed. ‘You’ve never worked gang task force before have you?’ ‘Nope.’

‘Don’t freak out. It’s not like they’ll kill us and bury us out here Michael.

They’re not that stupid. Come on,’ Anna said, getting out the car.

Michael followed her to the front of the warehouse. She banged three times on the door. A face appeared in the gap in the tin, staring at her.

‘Detective Anna Morrison and Michael Teller, got a few questions for you boys.’

The eyes looked over at Michael, and then vanished. Silence, then the door slid back.

Inside the place was a bar, pool table and mechanic pits. Bikies sat here and there, wearing jackets with their patches on. They were led through the crowd to where a young guy with a beard sat. His head was shaved and covered in tattoos. He was drinking a beer and a smile spread over his face as Anna approached.

‘Shit, you’re a little hot to be a Detective aren’t you? You boys hire a stripper

for my birthday?'

'Cute. We're here about a murder,' she said, 'what's your name?'

'Name's Jimmy,' he said. 'And I don't know shit about no murder. Someone gets killed and the first person you talk to is the guys riding the Harleys. Ain't you profiling us a little too much Detective?'

'Two guys were cut up and either dumped or killed in an ally in Littleton.

These two guys bought drugs from your crew every Saturday. What happened Jimmy, they didn't pay?'

Jimmy burst out laughing. 'Man, you got a real active imagination Detective. Cookin' up some cliché theories. You got any evidence? Find any drugs on them? Got our fingerprints at the scene? You even identified anyone here for selling drugs? No?'

'I can get a court order to search this place in twenty-four hours,' Michael said, staring at him.

Jimmy shrugged. 'We fix cars here. But let me tell you something, when someone doesn't pay after we've fixed their car. Well we don't kill them, because dead people can't pay and they can't come back when their car breaks again. It's bad for business man.'

'You know what else is bad for business, having your entire crew taken into the police station for questioning. I imagine with no one around to fix cars work would grind to a halt,' Anna said.

The smile instantly vanished from Jimmy's face. 'I don't like threats.'

The air suddenly got thick and Michael noticed out of the corner of his eye a circle had formed around them.

'Let's go,' Anna said.

Michael locked eyes with Jimmy then nodded and turned, pushing by the bikies.

'If you ever get bored while in Littleton come pay me a visit sweetheart,'

Jimmy shouted after Anna.

'Sure, I'll bring the handcuffs,' Anna replied.

\*\*\*\*

Michael and Anna sat in the car, parked behind some trees nearby Dan's Mechanics.

'You want to get a court order?' Anna asked. 'Not enough evidence.'

‘So are we going to sit here all day?’

Michael glanced at his watch. They had been waiting here for three hours already. It was nearly lunch.

He grimaced and started the car. He was hoping to throw out some threats and maybe get them to panic. Maybe send someone to hide a murder weapon or do something stupid. Only they hadn't, so instead he had wasted a bunch of time.

Michael pulled out onto the road and headed back towards town. ‘So what now?’ Anna said.

Michael was silent a moment. ‘Look up Will Dallington.’ Anna frowned. ‘Who is Will Dallington?’

‘Some guy who visited. Owner of Clancy’s pub also saw him the night of those murders. Apparently he’s not too stable. Maybe he saw something. Might be able to put our bikie friends at the scene. Worth a chat.’

Anna typed away on the computer, searching the police database. ‘Got an address,’ she said, ‘take a right down Solomon road.’

Michael and Anna headed for Will’s house. It was quiet as they drove. Anna was on her phone, chatting to someone. Michael gripped the steering wheel and tried to ignore his daughter sitting in the back seat. She didn’t say anything. Just sat there, her eyes piercing him like spears every time he looked into the rear vision mirror.

He licked his lips and focused on the road. Not now. Not with Anna here. He took a breath, exhaled.

‘You want me to drive?’ Anna said, glancing over at him. She was off the phone.

‘I’m good. A little hungry,’ Michael lied.

Anna nodded. ‘Well, we could have grabbed something before talking to Will but you were all gung ho about it.’

‘Yeah, I didn’t realise the guy lived in the middle of nowhere.’

‘The whole town is the middle of the nowhere,’ Anna said, and then glanced up. ‘Stop!’

Michael slammed on the breaks. ‘Anna what the hell?’

‘Sorry, that’s the turn off.’

They both stared at a dirt road surrounded by huge trees. Dense shrubbery and smaller stress overhung the road making it dark even during the day. ‘That’s the driveway?’

‘According to the map.’

Michael frowned and turned into the driveway. He drove slowly, mainly because he wasn't in a four-wheel drive but also because the further they got down the road the more his gut tightened. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Beth was gone, allowing him to see clearly out the back windshield. Where they entered had become a small patch of light in the distance as if some botanical monster was swallowing them.

The road curved slightly, turning and weaving deeper into the bush. Finally the road opened out and a wood cabin was before them. It was ordinary enough, two windows with curtains pulled across and a single door. There was a small verandah with an empty chair on it. At the side of the house was a four-wheel drive.

He got out the car and walked forwards, Anna appearing at his side. They climbed the steps of the verandah and knocked on the door. As his hand wrapped against the door it fell back, opening with a creak.

Michael glanced at Anna. 'Hello?'

No answer. He walked inside, Anna following closely behind him. They stepped into the living room.

'Mr. Dallington, this is the police, we're here to talk to you,' he said. Silence.

'Michael,' Anna nodded at the wall.

Pictures covered the wall. They were all of a man and young girl whose age varied in each photo. Only, the face of the man was scratched out.

There had to be at least a hundred of them. 'Creepy.'

Michael's gaze wandered to a glass cabinet that had dozens of different knives in it, from huge hunting knives all the way down to small whittling blades.

He walked over and grabbed one off the wall. He moved the blade above his arm, testing its edge. As soon as it touched the hairs on his arm it cut them clean.

'Guy likes his knives.'

'Any of these smaller blades could be the murder weapon,' Anna said, glancing at the collection.

'What...you think he killed them, what's his motive?' Michael said. Anna shrugged and glanced around at the pictures. 'Guy doesn't seem all there.'

A tension entered Michael's shoulders as he realised he might be standing in the killer's house.

He walked over to the wall with the photos. Was the man in the pictures Will? Then who was the girl...his daughter?

Something emerged out the corner of his eye and he froze. Standing in the doorway to the next room was an old man with long brown hair and dirt marks

covering his face. A military camo poncho covered his body. In his hand was a dead fox. Michael heart slammed against his chest and he reached for his identification while at the same time announced who he was. 'I am det-'

The man dropped the foxes and bolted.

'Shit!' Anna said, running after him. Michael dashed behind her, through a kitchen and out a back door. He jumped down three steps, landing on grass.

He looked up and something turned in his stomach. In front of him were hundreds of dolls carved out of wood the size of a person. The dolls looked exactly like the blonde girl from the photo, their faces were contorted in pain, and mouths open in silent screams.

Anna vanished into the maze of dolls and Michael followed after her. 'We're the police, we only want to talk to you!' Anna shouted after Will. Michael caught up to Anna as she rounded a final cluster of wooden dolls.

Something glinted in the air and Anna's legs were swept out from underneath her.

'Gnnfh,' she grunted.

Michael paused, glancing at the hunting knife sticking out of her shoulder and drew his gun, crouching down beside her.

'Anna, you okay,' he said, his eyes searching the dolls expecting another knife to come flying his way.

'I've got a knife sticking out of my damn body, what you think!?' Anna snapped. 'What are you waiting for, go after him.'

Michael shook his head. 'No. It's his territory. If I left you and he circled back around...'

He pulled out his phone and called for backup.

Police cars got there within thirty minutes. Ambulance not far behind them. In the blink of an eye Will Dallington's home was filled with flashing lights and police officers.

Michael gave a statement of what happened, and guys showed up to bag and tag stuff around the house. But Michael didn't go back inside. He stood, staring at those dolls.

'Sick bastard,' Derek said, coming alongside him. 'You think so?'

'What else do you call this?'

'Sorrow,' Michael said, staring at a doll with tears carved into her face. 'There

is a madness in diligence like this. A routine... a ritual. To produce this many dolls with this much detail. How many hours had he spent carving out here?’

‘Who knows. Anna going to be okay?’ Derek asked.

‘Yeah. Just a flesh wound, ambulance has already taken her to the hospital to patch her up. Guy’s got one hell of a throw.’

‘If you had of told me you were going to go visit Will I could have warned you. He’s a crazy old bastard but he’s an expert hunter.’

‘Good enough to slice up two guys?’

‘Easily. Guy might be fifty years old be he’s fitter then most thirty year olds and just as strong.’

‘Get the guys to check every single weapon in this house for a match on the murder weapon.’

He walked back to his car. And started it.

*-You could have died, Dad.* Beth said, appearing in the passenger seat. He nodded. *-Anna could have died too.*

‘Yeah.’

*-Dad...Don’t you think this case is strange? You’re missing something.*

Something shifted in his stomach and he turned to look at Beth. But she was gone.

## Chapter Nine

Michael leaned against the wall of the hospital room and glanced down at Anna. 'It hurt?'

'Like a bitch,' she replied, 'you think he's the killer?'

Michael frowned. 'Looks like it.'

'I can't believe he's an old guy. He sure could run.'

'Not all old people are decrepit. My Dad worked labour well into his sixties and was tough as nails. He could kick my ass,' Michael replied.

Anna eyed him. 'They sure don't make them like they used to huh?'

Michael laughed. 'No they do not.'

'They put out a search and arrest order for Will?' 'Should have. I left all that to Derek,' Michael said.

Anna tried rolling her shoulder and winced. 'Really wasn't expecting to get injured on this one.'

'Yeah. I figured we'd already be back in Perth. I'm going to pay a little visit to Isabel Catching while we're here. Finish off the rest of the interview.'

'Try not to enjoy the tale from another world too much.'

Michael smiled. 'Get the nurses to come and find me after you're done getting your stitches.'

'Will do.'

Michael exited into the hallway heading out of the emergency department and over to Catching's room.

He knocked twice on Catching's door. 'Come in,' a voice called.

Michael stepped inside and found Catching staring out her window from the bed. She looked weak, the IV sticking out of her arm, sending nutrients into her body. The doc had said she was extremely malnourished when they brought her in. To his eyes, she didn't seem to be getting much better.

'Catching, how are you?'

'Fine,' she replied, not turning to look at him.

Michael moved over to where she was and glanced outside the window.

Beyond was the side of the hospital, a small patch of parklands and in the distance the town.

The man that cleans the windows always steps on it,' Catching said. 'On



what?’

‘The flower bed.’

Michael glanced down. Below the window was a bunch of trampled flowers.

‘No one ever looks to see where they are stepping. Till it’s too late,’ she

Michael stepped back and took a seat. ‘I’ve come to hear the rest of your story.’

She nodded. ‘Do you believe in hell, Detective?’

‘Nope. ‘I never used to either....’

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They dragged me through dark corridors while I kicked and struggled. Down stairs. Through doors. Left, right, left until I was lost in the maze of shadows.

I clawed at the arm holding me. But the monster yanked me along, a casual gesture that had such force that my wrist nearly separated from my forearm. I let out a sharp breath and ignored the tears that ran down my face.

A door was flung open and I was tossed into the darkness within. It screeched shut behind me. I sat up, staring at my surroundings. The room was maybe twenty metres in width and length. It could have been bigger. Only the darkness didn’t let me see its end.

I got to my feet and walked back toward the door. There was no handle to open it on this side. Its surface was smooth, solid.

Steel?

‘Girl,’ a soft voice called from the shadows. I spun. Looked. But only darkness greeted me.

‘Hello?’ I said, my eyes moving to every corner.

The voice sang: *One more for the feed, Dead girl, dead girl, One more in need, Dead girl, dead girl. Cry yourself to sleep Dead girl, dead girl, Tomorrow monsters eat, Dead girls, dead girls*

Her voice was hauntingly beautiful. Her words horribly terrifying.

‘My name is Catching, who are you?’

‘Who means nothing to a dead girl,’ the voice said. ‘I’m not dead.’

‘Not...*dead*? How can a dead girl not know she’s dead...unless a dead girl is crazy? Are you crazy, dead girl?’

‘No, I’m not crazy.’

‘I see. Not Crazy. Not-a-dead-girl. Then what do you think you are?’ ‘I’m a

person.'

Laughter. 'A *person*? Silly thing. You're not a *person*. Not anymore. We're feed. Pigs squealing. Color to be eaten.'

I swallowed. 'Can you come out of the shadows?' 'You'll be afraid if you see me.'

The room suddenly was far too small. 'I won't. I promise.'

'They all *promise*. But what's a promise from the lips of liars? A trick!' the voice said, followed by laughter.

It wasn't anything that sounded sane.

'I'm not a liar. So my promise is real. I won't be afraid.' Silence.

Then feet shuffled along the ground and out of the darkness walked a person.

She wore a dress that might once been white but now was so filthy most of it was black. She was a small thing, skinny. She walked with her feet at inward angles giving her a strange motion to her step. Her skin was grubby with patches of grey dead flesh. Long black hair fell framing a face covered in scratches and marks. Her eyes were pure white, with lines through them as if someone had slit them with a knife.

Her sightless eyes seemed like they could stare through me. 'Are you afraid?' 'No,' I replied, 'what happened to you?'

'What happens to everyone. My colour was taken.' She looked me up and down. 'You have so much colour. Blue eyes, brown skin, red lips, pink tongue, hazel hair, do you bleed red?'

'Yes.'

'She bleeds red! A little rainbow. There aren't many things with colour any more,' the girl said, slowing her step. 'Soon they'll come to take it and you won't be full of colours any more. You'll be full of screams.'

The air froze in my throat at her words. 'What do you mean?'

She giggled. 'Silly, they eat it of course. Don't you know about monsters? I shook my head.

'They eat what's inside our *insides*. The colours. The ones that live within our spirits.'

'Our...spirits?'

The girl blinked. 'You don't even know about *that*? Our spirits are painters that splash our smiles in yellows. Our anger in reds. Our sadness in blues. The spirit is like a rainbow within us. And the monsters eat it. Feed off it. There is nothing they love more. And once they've taken bites out of you, a Grey enters your soul. Like a disease,

it festers within you. The laughter dies in your eyes. The smiles are no longer bright...everything withers.'

I stared at her, my breathing shallow in my chest. I thought about all those children who looked like dolls back at Scived Elchis. Is that what I was going to become like?

'Did your skin become like that because they fed on you?'

'As they take from the soul, so do they take from the body and the mind. One cannot live without the other. They are reflections of the same thing.'

Silence stretched between them.

'My name is Isabel Catching.'

The girl tilted her head to the side and gazed at me. 'Crow.' 'Is there a way to escape this place?'

The smile slipped from her face and she glared at me, her hands clenching into fists.

'Dead girls don't run. Dead girls don't *escape*.'

'Crow-'

The door to the room suddenly slid open. A Servant tossed something into the room, and then the door shut. I waited until I was certain the Servant wouldn't be coming back, then I moved closer.

It was a bread bun.

'Food,' Crow said, 'but dead girls don't eat.'

I glanced at her, I wasn't dead, and I was hungry. I grabbed the bread from the floor and ate. Between mouthfuls, I asked, 'How long have you been here, Crow?'

'I've always been *here*. Waiting.' 'You've never seen the outside world?'

Crow didn't reply, just watched me with those strange eyes of hers. I took another bite of the bread.

'The thing that brought me here, what was it?' 'Servant,' Crow replied.

'For who?'

'The monster.'

'Does it have a name?' I said.

'If it tells you that, then you are about to die.'

'So the things that brought me here, the ones that carried me through the air and the ones that dragged me through the shadows, they are not monsters?'

Crow shook her head. 'The Ricksha'Teld are gatherers. The Servants here, they are merely cowards.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Didn’t you notice? They choose not to see. So they gouge out their own eyes. They choose not to hear, so they cut off their ears. They choose not to speak, so they sew up their mouths. A thing that knows evil is there, but refuses to see it, to hear it, to speak of it and instead lets evil do whatever it wants. So scared. So terrified. Pitiful little servants.’

I shuddered, trying to imagine something so frightening that you’d mutilate yourself to not see it, hear or speak of it.

‘Is the monster so terrifying?’

‘It’s not what the monster *looks* like but what the monster *is* that’s terrifying.’

‘And what is it?’ I asked.

Crow’s eyes sparkled with something mad but she didn’t answer. How many times had Crow seen the monster? How long had she survived in this hell? Would I become as mad as her if I survived as long as she had? I pushed the thought aside for now. I had to focus. If I got lost in my situation it’d drown me.

‘Is this the only way they bring food in here?’ I said. ‘Sometimes bread. Sometimes meat. Always *sleep*.’

My mind went to the dogs that had chased me and the giant reptile that had interrupted them.

‘Meat from what?’

‘Who knows, maybe dead girls.’

Bile tickled the back of my throat and I had difficulty swallowing the piece of bread I was chewing. If the guards brought the food in like this, I suppose I could wait for them next time and attack them as they opened the door. But then what? I had already forgotten the way to this room. I’d be left running through the corridors. That was still better than waiting to be eaten.

A shuffling sounded in the shadows to my right. I froze, glancing toward the noise. I waited, ten seconds passed. There weren’t any more sounds but I didn’t take my eyes off the darkness.

‘Crow, is there anyone else in here?’

Crow smiled. ‘No one but you.’

I stared at the corner. I could *feel* someone staring back. I was sure of it.

‘Hello?’ I said, into the darkness.

There was no answer.

I frowned and finished eating the bread. I needed to get Crow to help me try

and escape. It'd be difficult with one person but maybe if both of us attacked at the same time we could do it. I glanced at Crow, about to say something. Only the world tipped sideways.

I blinked, my vision blurry, and Crow laughed. 'First eat, then *sleep* with eyes wide open.'

What...? Then I realised the bread had something in it.

The door to the room opened, steel screeched along the ground and two creatures stepped inside. I tried to get up, to flee, but my body wouldn't obey me and instead I stumbled and collapsed on the ground.

Blood drained from my face. Weakness spread through my body. My breath came in quick pants as panic started in my chest.

Footsteps drew my gaze up. The Servants were upon me. One grabbed my hair while the other grabbed my wrist and they yanked me up off the floor.

I yelped in pain as my hair tugged at my scalp. But I couldn't fight them. My body wouldn't do anything. I was paralysed but I could still feel everything that happened to me.

Like Crow had said. Asleep with eyes wide open. Tears ran down my cheeks.

'Please...please don't take me. Let me go,' I pressed the words past my still lips. The Servant smiled cruelly at me, the rotted holes in the sides of its face revealing black infected gums and teeth that were slowly dislodging themselves.

Then they dragged me away. My gaze fell upon Crow. 'Help me!'

But she stood there, her lips moving soundlessly. I realised she reciting the words to her song.

*One more for the feed, Dead girl, dead girl...*

## Chapter Ten

The Servants carried me through the darkness of the hallways until we reached a room. They slid the steel door back, dropped me on the floor within then left.

I lay on the ground unmoving. My body wouldn't respond to my thoughts, yet I could still *feel* everything. The coldness of the ground seeped into my skin. The musty air of the room filled my nostrils. To my right was a strange table made of dead branches, the branches curling and then opening like fingers.

Footsteps echoed on stone. My eyes strained to the corners, desperately trying to see what was in here with me.

Another footstep.

And out of the darkness *something* emerged. It had a humanoid shape but that's where the resemblance to a person ended. Its proportions were off. Its upper body was bone thin. Its oddly long arms stretched down to the floor where fingers as long as rulers trailed along the ground. From the stomach downward the thing's flesh was fat and sagging, with a bulging gut and thick legs like a tree trunk.

It walked towards me. Bits of black string were embedded into its scalp, the string pierced through thousands of fingernails that extended from its head all the way to the floor and rattled like a seashell necklace when it walked. Its eyes were red, only instead of having a single iris it had three, melded together like eggs connected in a frying pan. Its nose was angular, its jaw thin and pointed and within it had no teeth, only rotted gums.

A terrified groan slipped past my lips and in my mind I screamed at my body to move.

Only it didn't.

And now the thing was upon me. 'Please, don't hurt me.'

The monster tilted its head to the side, its brows furrowing. Then its long hand flashed out and clutched my face and with impossible strength it lifted me off the ground by my head, its fingers digging into my skull where I could feel the skin breaking...

'Gnhh,' I muffled a cry into its palm as it dragged my limp useless body with it.

It slammed me down onto the table and as soon as my back was upon it I was

placed upon the branches laced around my wrists and arms and then finally my head, pinning me in place. Blood dripped from where the vines pressed against my forehead, a crown of thorns.

But I didn't cry out, I was too afraid.

I lay still, letting the tears fall silently down my cheeks.

The monster pressed itself over me. Beneath its skin things *moved*, as if insects were crawling about under it. The monster rolled its shoulders then moved its neck as if a shiver was running up its spine.

Only it wasn't a shiver but faces shifting beneath its skin, stretching against it until its eyes and mouth were filled with its flesh, like a head with a plastic bag pulled tight over it.

Suddenly I was no longer quiet. I screamed.

Terror thrummed through me sending bile rising in the back of my throat.

The monster's hand slammed against my open mouth, its palm nearly knocking my front teeth out. It brought its face close, its eyes centimetres from my own as if it was trying to peer inside my brain. More faces writhed beneath its skin.

The monster pulled its face back, and then tore the clothes from my stomach all the while never taking its eyes off me.

He reached out with his other hand, pressing his fingers below my belly button. And they went *through* my flesh as if they were spears, I cried out in pain, but couldn't even contort my body to throw him off me.

My eyes flashed down, expected blood to be pouring out across the table.

Only there wasn't any blood. Instead where the wound was, colours leaked out of me. Reds, greens, purples, blues and yellows. Like I was bleeding rainbows. Crow's voice haunted me.

*They eat what's inside your insides*

Images of Crow's dead flesh and of the doll's dead eyes flashed through my mind.

*No!*

The monster grabbed hold of a colour leaking from me, only the colour he grabbed *felt* like a piece of my flesh in his hand. He tore it off. White-hot agony thrummed through me and my throat tore with the power of my cries.

The monster held the strip of glowing red up in front of his mouth, and then swallowed it down. The colour enter its body, a faint glow filled its skin and then died.

The monster frowned.

Then he went back to peeling the colours away from me. Another strip.

Another scream. Until my voice broke.

Until tears dried only to be renewed.

I passed out from the pain. And I wished I would never wake. I wished I would die. So it would all end and I'd never have to feel this again.

I could go where pop and mum were. I knew they would be waiting for me. But I didn't die.

Instead, the Grey entered me.

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My body swayed. I opened my eyes slowly. Walls moved by me. Servants gripped my wrists, dragging me across the floor.

Was it over then?

A door opened, the metal scraping against the floor. They slid me inside.

Slammed the door shut. It locked. I was back in the room. Back with Crow.

I could move. My body was my own again, albeit sluggish. Still, I didn't get up. I lay there on the ground where they had left me. My throat hurt from screaming. Everything hurt. But that didn't compare to the emptiness, like someone had torn out my guts and left my stomach hollow.

Images flashed in my mind. The monster's face concentrating as he tore away at me. The *faces* shifting and screaming beneath its skin. Tears leaked from my eyes and I rolled over to my side and pulled my knees to my chest. Nausea swirled in my stomach, as if black oil had been poured within me, its darkness staining my innards.

I dug my fingernails into my arms as if I could claw the *horrible* from myself. Then sobs escaped my throat and I screamed into the earth.

I was glass thrown against a rock.

I was a million jagged pieces scattered everywhere.

No matter how hard anyone looked, they wouldn't find all of me. The big pieces perhaps, but not the tiny invisible fragments that connected things together. Those would always be lost.

'Is it painful? Does it hurt? If you were a dead girl it wouldn't hurt,' Crow's voice whispered by my ear.

She had gotten close to me and I hadn't even heard her. I didn't look up, staying in my ball, silent.



‘They’ll come again, so you better become a dead girl before then. Dead girls don’t cry. They don’t scream. They don’t get hungry or tired. Dead girls don’t *feel* anything.’

*Is that how you survived here so long Crow? Have you convinced yourself you’re not even alive?*

‘Be dead, be-.’

‘Get away from me,’ I whispered, cutting Crow off.

‘Don’t be mad. You’re a dead girl, dead girls don’t get mad.’

‘Get away!’ I screamed.

Crow hopped back from me as if she was scared I might strike her. She tilted her head, like a bird trying to figure something out. Confusion skittered across her gaze.

She was trying to help. She thought that being a dead girl was the only way to survive.

‘Crow, I’m sorry I...’

But Crow didn’t listen. She faded back into the shadows and was gone. I tucked my head to my knees and cried.

I wished Dad was here. Wished we hadn’t gotten caught in that flood and I hadn’t been brought to this place.

Maybe Crow was right. What point was there to being alive if I no longer had any reason to live? Especially if living meant going through this every day.

What did I live *for*?

Even if I escaped this place, managed to get back to my own world, I’d bring it all with me. The pain, the memories. All of it.

I closed my eyes. Tried to sleep.

But images replayed themselves in the blackness of my mind like a horror movie I couldn’t press pause on.

Eventually the horrible slowed and faded and other images could enter. Images of country. Of Dad. Of home.

Sleep slowly wrapped me in its embrace. And I held on tight.

Because in the dream world I didn’t have to be afraid. In the dream world I was strong.

I was free to fly among the clouds and go wherever I wished. If only the dream world wasn’t just a dream.

If only.

## Chapter Eleven

Time passed.

The Servants brought food and they took food away. I didn't eat. I didn't so much as move. Had it been a day now? Two? I wasn't sure. I drifted in and out of dreams, lost in my own fantasies of being in any place other than where I was. And yet my body's pains brought me back to reality. My stomach hurt from hunger. My throat tore from thirst. The pain was strangely comforting despite it pulling me from my dreams. Since the monster had eaten my colours, a numbness had spread through me. As if the monster had frozen all the things inside me that let me *feel*. But the physical pain was like a heat stabbing through all of me, stirring something in the depths of my being. Self-preservation was an overbearing voice, screaming in my mind for me to stand and eat and drink.

Except once I ate ... once I drank ... they'd come again. I'd die a different kind of death. Worse than starvation or thirst. Because you can't take your body with you when you die, but surely the soul goes *somewhere*.

Except if your soul has been devoured by a monster or corroded by The Grey, then would you be truly dead?

The door scraped open. The Servants entered.

They placed food in a thin wooden bowl on the floor and water in a wooden cup. They cleared the other food that remained untouched and left.

My stomach grumbled and I swallowed what little spit I had in my mouth in an attempt to moisten my throat.

Would I be paralysed again if I ate? Would I be defenceless if I drank?

'Dead girls are only dead on the inside. If you don't eat, don't drink, you will be dead inside and out. You don't want to be inside out dead.'

I glanced weakly at Crow. 'The food is poisoned.'

'Black blood, they pour their taint into the mix, freezing your arms and legs like sticks. But only when the monster's hungry. When the monster is not hungry, the food is safe.'

I stared at the food. 'How can you tell?'

'You can't. But even if you don't eat, they will still take you. You're a princess. A beauty trapped with a beast. But there are no knights to come and save you. What can you do but eat and be helpless?'

A lump formed in my throat and my eyes moistened. It wasn't like Crow said anything particularly harsh. It was that her words amplified the helplessness in my heart.

She was right. I had no armour to protect me. No shield.

No sword.

And there would be no heroes to come save me. I was alone.

Weak, and I would die if I did not eat.

Slowly I got to my feet and walked over to the food and water. I stared down at the bowl.

Took a breath. Rolled the dice. I drank.

I ate.

I waited for my body to go numb. For the door to burst open.

For them to come and take me away. For my screams to begin anew. 'This time no poison,' Crow said.

Relief flooded me, and my fists that I hadn't even realised were clenched, relaxed.

I sat back down in the corner against the wall staring at the bowl and cup in my hand. Then I carefully broke it on the floor making thin pieces of wood. They were brittle and would break easily. But even a toothpick could cause harm if it was stabbed into the right area. Like the eye, for example.

I laughed bitterly. The Servants didn't have any eyes. The only one that did was the monster but how could I harm him when all those sticks entwined me? I raised the piece of wood and stared at its fine splintered point. No, maybe not the monster. But if I used it on myself, that was another story. Was it possible to kill myself with this? Or would it be simpler to run and smash my head into the wall?

I blinked, realising I was casually thinking about suicide. 'Crow, The Grey, does it change you?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'Each part of you that's Grey is a part of you that's died. The Grey is death. The Grey is Hopelessness. The Grey makes you think things you wouldn't normally think. Do things you wouldn't normally do. *Bad* things.'

Like killing myself.

'Is there a way to stop it?'

'The Grey is a parasite that infects you when a monster eats colour from you.'

To stop the Grey, first the suffering must end. The monsters have to go away. Then you must bring in light. Only light can kill the Grey. Only colours.'

'What do you mean colours...wouldn't I be just like the monsters if I went taking colours?'

'Colours are born within. Love. Laughter. Happiness. You chase these rainbows and slowly the Grey dies away. As long as you don't meet a monster, then you'll be fine.'

'Then I need to escape.'

'Yes, yes, yes! Flee, run, fly. But you have no claws and no fangs and no wings. How can you go anywhere? Better to be a dead girl. Because then you won't feel it when the monster feeds. You won't feel fear. You won't feel anything. You'll still become a grey girl. It just won't matter as much.'

I shook my head. 'Dead girls don't feel joy or happiness or love either. Dead girls, they won't ever be able to catch rainbows Crow. They won't be able to heal.

They'll be Grey girls forever.'

Crow nodded as if this was obvious. 'Silly thing. You will be Grey anyway. All dead. All empty. A blank eyed doll staring at space. Because even if you fight, you can't win. Can't escape. Can't *anything*. You'll slowly watch your hope dwindle bit by bit and you will feel *every* moment. But Dead girls...' Crow flashed me a smile, madness glinting in her eyes.

My stomach turned. What kind of torture would it be to hold on to a hope that never eventuated? To beg and wish and pray to be saved, only to endure and experience every second of torment and die cursing your luck?

'I won't be a dead girl, Crow.'

'Your choice. But there will come a day when you will *beg* to be a dead girl. Then we can be dead girls together.'

I lay down against the wall and closed my eyes. Being a dead girl meant giving up hope.

How could I give up when I hadn't even tried to escape?

I let my mind wander to thoughts of how I would get out of this place, and of what I'd do once I was free, until sleep took me.

*I stood at the river where I had first arrived.*

*Only it was different. There were more trees and bushes and in the distance I could hear cries. I walked towards the voices, weaving through trees and over*

*mountains and rivers until I arrived at a place filled with shadows and darkness.*

*In that place no grass grew. No trees stood tall.*

*It was a dead world.*

*At its centre was an enormous mass that looked like a mountain. But as I looked closer I noticed the mountain was moving.*

*And it was not made of rock and stone but of people.*

*Millions upon millions of naked bodies stacked up on top of each other. Half of them were completely grey and unmoving, almost as if they were dead only I could see the rise and fall of their chests and the blinking of their eyes. The others had colour in patches. Some had brown and blonde hair, others green eyes or brown skin. They hadn't become truly Grey yet.*

*As I scanned the masses my eyes locked with one man being crushed beneath the mountain. His body was completely buried but for his face and an outstretched hand. He had green eyes like the emeralds, only they were pooled with tears and he was desperately whispering something over and over again.*

*My heart tore at the agony on his face. At the loss. And I looked away from him, not wanting to connect in his misery.*

*'Does it sicken you?' a voice asked. Crow was beside me.*

*'What is this?' I asked.*

*'A dream that's not a dream.'*

*I frowned. 'Who are all these people?'*

*'It's all the grey boys and girls. All the infected and the lost.' 'All this was done by monsters?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'Why hasn't anyone noticed?'*

*'It's a 'me' world. Me, me, me, who cares about them. Their suffering. Their pain. I do not know it. I do not feel it. It is not mine. But soon it will be theirs. Once everyone becomes grey and the bodies pile up high enough to make the world sink through the universe from the weight of it. Then they all wish they had held out a hand. Too late!' Crow said, giggling to herself as if their regret amused her.*

*'We have to stop it,' I said, staring at the mountain. 'How do we stop it Crow?'*

*'Aren't you Not-A-Dead-Girl? You're supposed to figure that out,' Crow replied, a dangerous glint coming into her gaze, forcing me to take a step back.*

*Then the look was gone and she was happily hopping about me again. I turned and stared at the mountain of bodies.*

*'Will I end up here?'*

*'Silly thing, you already are.'*

*And in an instant I wasn't standing looking at the mountain of bodies any more. I was beneath the mountain of bodies, the weight suffocating me, pressing against my chest. My skin was becoming Grey as I was eaten from the inside out.*

*I screamed.*

My eyes opened.

I was on the floor in the room. My breath coming in quick pants, sweat covering my body. I raised trembling hands and grabbed a strand of my hair, pulling it in front of my face.

It was no longer brown. It was grey

Dead. Lifeless.

A feeling of overwhelming loss spread through me. I cried.

And my tears flowed on forever.

## Chapter Twelve

A knock sounded on the door.

Michael glanced over as Anna stepped inside. 'All better?'

'No.'

He grinned. 'Catching, this is my partner Anna Morrison.' Anna smiled at Catching, but the girl didn't smile back. After a moment Anna turned her attention to Michael. 'We have work to do.'

Michael looked from Catching to Anna. 'Ah right. Sorry Catching, we'll have to finish this up next time.'

'That's fine,' she replied.

Michael followed Anna out of the room. 'What was that about?'

Anna glanced at him, her brows furrowed.

'That girl...there was something strange in her eyes Michael. Something...off,' her voice trailed off and she glanced back to the door as if trying to recapture whatever she saw.

'Yeah, I know what you mean. Despite being nuts she's obviously been through something. But-.'

Anna shook her head. 'That's not it. It was something else. For a second something panged in my stomach. Like fear.'

Michael almost laughed. 'Anna, she's a teenage girl who isn't in her right mind. You were hit by a knife - you're just shaken up.'

Anna nodded. 'Maybe. In any case, she's malnourished. Maybe she did survive out in the Pilbara for a year.'

'Yeah. But then how did she get here?' 'She hasn't told you?'

'I haven't gotten to that part in the story.'

Anna blinked. 'Story? Michael, what the hell are you talking about? Ask how she got here and get an answer.'

Michael shrugged. 'She would only tell me her story from the start. And she's isn't the type you can intimidate and get an answer. If I press her for the information she might not tell me *anything*. At least this way I get something...eventually.'

Anna shook her head. 'And this has nothing to do with your love of the occult?'

'Absolutely not,' Michael said, but a smile spread across his face.

They exited the hospital and got into the car. As they were headed back

towards the hotel Anna rolled her shoulder and winced.

‘This case is getting out of hand,’ she said, ‘we were here to follow up on a fire and a body and interview a girl. Now look at this mess.’

Michael nodded. ‘The murders have to be connected to the arson and death at the children’s home, we just don’t know how yet.’

‘Or it could be coincidence, Michael,’ Anna replied. ‘Say the children’s home burns down in an accident. And also it so happens the workers owed the Oak crew money and got done in for it.’

‘Then what about Will Dallington?’

‘No idea, just saying you tend to look for dots to connect and sometimes there aren’t any. If the link shows up, great, but don’t *make* it exist.’

‘Gotcha, I won’t get carried away. Promise.’ She glared at him. ‘You’re a terrible liar.’

‘I know. It’s what made me a bad husband.’

She smiled at that, and shook her head, staring out the window.

Michael pulled into the hotel car park and stopped outside of Anna’s room. ‘You’re not getting out?’ she asked.

‘I’m going to head over to the station. See what they have on Will. Can you write up all those incident reports?’

She glared at him. ‘I’m injured.’ ‘Make sure you put that in the report.’

‘You know, Michael, lot of people back at headquarters think you’re an asshole.’

Michael waited, but she didn’t say anything else. Finally he asked, ‘Ah, any more to that story?’

Anna smiled, and he knew she’d been waiting for him to ask. ‘Nope, just thought you should know,’

She turned and headed to her room, and Michael smiled as she walked away. If she could joke then she was doing alright. Unless she had been serious. *Do they really think I’m an asshole?*

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Michael entered the police station and took over a free computer. He logged into the police database, typing in ‘Will Dallington’.

Something moved out the corner of his eye. Beth, sitting in a free chair and



spinning about. He closed his eyes. Swallowed. She wasn't there. The chair wasn't spinning. It was all in his head. When was the last time he took his antidepressants?

When he opened his eyes again, Beth had stopped spinning. She was staring at him.

*-Dad, do you think you've caught the Grey too? Maybe you putting a gun in your mouth isn't really you, it's the Grey giving you Grey thoughts like Catching?*

He ignored her. After all, talking to himself in a police station wasn't the greatest idea. Michael pinned his eyes to the screen as the search results came up. He clicked on Will's name, opening his file. A frown immediately creased his brow. Will had been in the army. He'd enlisted when he was eighteen and served until he was twenty-seven, discharged due to a hand injury. The database didn't include Will's service record. He could try asking the Defence Force for it, but that would take time. He kept scrolling down. At age twenty-eight, Will had become a teacher at Littleton Senior High School. Michael paused, staring at the related case files.

Missing person?

He clicked on the link, and a file opened up. The morning of March 15<sup>th</sup> 1985 Sarah Dallington failed to show up for school. Will had contacted the police the same day to report her missing. He was given the standard response: that he needed to wait twenty four hours before they could treat this as a missing person case. The next day, a search party went out. Local authorities in all the surrounding towns were contacted and the police began to question the residents of Littleton. No one had seen anything or anyone suspicious.

Michael leaned back in his chair, staring at the investigating officer's name: Kevin Bell. Derek's father?

*-Dad, you should go back and hear the rest of Catching's story. Maybe she has a way for you to get better.*

Michael got to his feet and walked by Beth, doing his best to stare straight ahead as he headed towards Derek's office, pausing in the doorway. 'Derek? You got five minutes?'

'Sure, what can I do for you?'

Michael walked in and took a seat. 'Your father still a cop?'

Derek shook his head. 'He retired four years ago. They had to force the old bastard out. Why do you ask?'

'I was looking into Will Dallington and came across a missing person's case.'

A Sarah Dallington, his daughter. Your Dad was the investigating officer. I was

wondering if I could have a chat to him.’

‘Sarah Dallington,’ Derek leaned back in his chair. ‘I remember that case. I was sixteen. She just didn’t come to school one day.’

‘You were in Sarah’s year?’

‘Nope. She was a year below. Will was my homeroom teacher. Rumour is that’s when he started losing it, when Sarah vanished. But everyone in his class thought he was a bit off even before that. He’d have these mood swings...I dunno. Whole town got paranoid after Sarah went missing. We weren’t allowed to go to the bus by ourselves. Had to be with an adult at all times. One of the craziest things that ever happened here.’

‘You didn’t think to mention this when he put a knife in Anna’s shoulder?’ ‘It was a long time ago, Detective. And I don’t think Will burned down the Children’s Home or killed those two in that alley. He’s been harmless all these years. The man suffers from mental illness. He’s paranoid, especially of police.’

‘Guy put a knife in my partner. We also have two bodies in an alley cut up by someone who knows what they are doing and a witness that saw Will Dallington hanging around close to the time of death. You seriously going to sit there and say he’s not connected to all this?’

Derek inclined his head. ‘Alright, I’ll give Dad a call. But he’s a stubborn old goat, so if he doesn’t want to talk to you don’t blame me.’

Michael stood and left, heading back to his computer. With a click of the mouse, he printed out the names and addresses of Will’s known acquaintances. As he strolled to the printer, he thought about Will. The man hadn’t forgotten about his daughter all this time. In fact, if the wooden carvings were an indication he had become obsessed with her. With finding her. Will was in his late fifties. But he was fit. Fast. Quick enough to outrun Anna and she was definitely in shape. Ex-army and a hunter who knew the local area. He’d be difficult to catch in the bush. Unless Michael got a lead on where he might camp, took him by surprise.

Michael grabbed the printed files and put them in a folder. A second later, Derek appeared.

‘Old man is free now if you got time?’ ‘I’m free.’

‘I’ll text you the address.’

Michael nodded and headed for his car.

Kevin Bell’s house wasn’t that far out of town. A ten-minute drive down a back

road took him to a poorly maintained property. There was a rusted four wheel drive sitting on the front lawn, half submerged by overgrown grass. The house itself was an old weatherboard, the paint peeling and worn. Michael parked behind a station wagon and got out the car.

The front door swung open as he neared it and Michael found himself facing an old man. He had thinning grey hair, a round face and stomach, and wore a white shirt and blue denim jeans. *Derek, in thirty years or so.*

Kevin Bell took a drink from the beer he had in his hand. 'Detective Teller?' 'That's me.'

'Come on in.'

Kevin stepped away from the door and Michael followed him into the house, settling onto a stained couch as Kevin slouched into a recliner.

The old man took another swig of the beer. 'So my son tells me you're looking into Sarah Dallington.'

'Yeah, Will put a knife into the shoulder of my partner so I'm trying to track him down. Stumbled onto his daughter's missing person case in the process. I was wondering if you remember anything that might give a hint on where he went.'

Kevin took a long breath. 'Long time ago that one. Nothing really stands out from what I can remember. I do recall Will started losing it after his daughter went missing. Like it snapped something in his head. Didn't surprise me when I heard he'd cut up some people.'

Michael frowned. 'Derek filled you in on an ongoing investigation?' 'Oh don't be such a hardarse for the rules Detective. Us retirees get some privilege for our service. Besides, this is a small town. Not much gets kept secret around here.'

Michael inclined his head. 'So, nothing you can recall?'

'Not that I can remember. The whole damn thing was odd. Girl vanished. No evidence. No witnesses. Working theory was someone snatched her passing through and kept driving north. Probably dumped her body somewhere in the bush.'

And a body in the bush out here could be almost impossible to find, especially if it was buried and covered well. 'According to the file she was taken on her way to school. Pretty small gap of time considering it was on her way from her house to where the local bus picks the kids up. Gives the guy what, ten minutes? So this mystery abductor happened to be driving along that stretch of road in that tiny ten minute window?'

Kevin shrugged. 'Girl was unlucky. Wrong place, wrong time. Sad thing was,

she normally didn't even take the bus. Went to school with her Dad instead. Why she decided to catch the bus that day I have no idea.'

Unlucky was an understatement. Still, things like that could happen. 'How was Will's reputation at school?' Michael asked.

'Good, as far as we could tell. None of the other teachers had a bad word to say about him. He was a pretty regular guy back then. Liked his hunting a little more than everyone else but that was it. After Sarah went missing, though ...' Kevin took another drink.

Michael frowned, remembering something. When he had visited Alexander Sholt's parents his mother had mistaken Michael for a teacher, and asked him if he was there about Cats and Dogs.

'You know anything about any incident with cats and dogs?'

Kevin blinked at Michael. 'Sorry Detective, you've lost me.'

Michael waved away the question. 'It's not important. During your investigation, did you notice anything you couldn't put in the report? Hunches, theories, anything like that?'

'He did it.' 'Who... Will?'

Kevin nodded. 'Like I said before Detective, damn unlucky right? Or maybe she never left the house to go to the bus. Maybe that was a story Will told us to distance himself from her going missing. After all, no one else but Will saw her leave for the bus stop. We found blood on a piece of wood at Will's house. It belonged to Sarah. But he had an answer for that. Sarah was a pretty talented sculptor and apparently she cut herself on the woodcarving. She got it treated at the hospital so I didn't question it further. Except maybe the blood on that wood wasn't from the same accident. We questioned him, but without a body we didn't have enough'

Kevin set down his beer on a table next to his recliner, and leaned forward. 'It didn't sit right in my gut. Will went from stable to broken way too fast. I've had a long career, Detective Teller. I've seen some terrible things. Seen how people process grief. But I've never seen someone break down as quick as Will did. For that to happen to a person, they normally have to be unstable to begin with.'

'You ever find anything that would suggest abuse? Anyone ever note any marks or bruises on Sarah?'

'Nope. But there were these doll carvings of his daughter at his place back then. Was a bit weird. And Sarah and Alexander were an item then, too, and there'd been a few incidents between Alexander and Will. He even struck the kid in public. Told him

to stay away from his daughter. Real overprotective. I dunno, maybe she wanted to run away from him. Maybe he killed her in a fit of rage. But like I said – just a theory. I could never prove it.’

‘What about his hunting? Any particular hunting grounds he sticks to?’

‘All the bush around here is filled with stuff to track. If he killed her, he could have buried her anywhere. And he could be anywhere now.’

Michael nodded. ‘Alright Mr. Bell, thanks for your time.’

He got to his feet and Kevin walked him to his car. As they reached it, Kevin said, ‘Word of advice, Detective. If you go into the bush looking for Will, you’d better be careful. He can kill you from a distance and you won’t see a damn thing. I’d wait for him to pop up somewhere without trees.’

‘Thanks for the warning,’ Michael replied ‘Take care, Mr. Bell,’

He pulled out of Kevin’s driveway and onto the back road towards town.

## Chapter Thirteen

Michael was no closer to finding Will than he had been before he talked to Kevin. But there was one more lead he could follow. Will had a brother, Jeffry Dallington, who owned a general goods store in town. He had already been questioned but Michael decided to pay him a visit anyway.

He stepped into the store. Inside, a skinny elderly man sat behind the counter reading something on his phone. He glanced at Michael as he entered.

‘Can I help you?’

Michael flashed his identification. ‘I’m looking for Jeffry Dallington.’ ‘I’m Jeffry. Is this about Will...he’s not...?’

‘No, we still haven’t found your brother. I wanted to follow up on a few things with you.’

‘I told the others that I don’t know where he went. I haven’t spoken to Will in years.’

‘I know, I just want to go over some things again with you if that’s alright,’ Michael said.

Jeffry stared at him a moment, then nodded.

‘Good. You said you haven’t spoken to your brother in what...five years was it?’

‘About that.’

‘Any reason?’

‘No. We stopped talking,’ Jeffry said.

‘I see. What about your brother’s mental state, can you give me any insight into that?’

‘Like I said, we didn’t talk. How can I tell you about things I don’t know?’

‘What about thirty years ago? When his daughter went missing. You were talking to your brother then, weren’t you?’

Jeffry eyed him suspiciously. ‘Why do you want to know about Sarah?’ ‘I’m trying to get a better picture of your brother’s life. Thirty years ago his daughter goes missing, never found. He have any grievances about that...anyone he blames?’

‘What are you getting at, Detective?’

‘That your brother is a trained hunter and ex-military. He might have a gun on him. He’s already demonstrated he is willing to inflict harm on others by putting a

knife in my partner's shoulder. He's also getting on in years. Sometimes as we get older, the thought of being put in a cell isn't as scary. My concern is that if he has held a grudge for all these years over his daughter's disappearance, he might be of the state of mind to act on those feelings.'

Jeffry was quiet then nodded to himself. 'I don't know my brother's mind, Detective. At the time of Sarah's disappearance he blamed a lot of people. He got paranoid. Got convinced it was her boyfriend at the time, Alexander. He was fixated on it, despite Alexander being on the school bus at the time she went missing. Then he got paranoid about the police. Thought they were covering things up. Hiding evidence. Even got scared for his life, began sleeping out in the bush. But years have passed since then. I don't think he ever accepted what happened, but he learned to live with it. If he wanted to act on those emotions he would have done it back then.'

'Pain's a complex thing Jeffry. Sometimes it's like a stab, quick as a flash. Pain like that heals. But other types of pain are like an infected wound. Unless you're willing to treat the infection, it eats away at you, spreading day by day. Maybe your brother's pain was a bit like that,' Michael locked eyes with Jeffry, searching his face. But if Jeffry was hiding something, he gave no sign of it.

'My brother is troubled.' Jeffry said, 'But he's not a killer. You really think he could cut up two young fellas?'

'Seemed pretty spry when he was running from us, got a damn good throwing arm too.'

'Like I told the other officers, he's not right in his head. He's paranoid about the police. He genuinely believes they want to kill him. The officers know this. I don't know why you approached him out of the blue.'

That was Michael's fault. He hadn't checked, but Jeffry didn't need to know that.

'How about Will's relationship with Sarah?' Michael asked, switching the focus of his questioning.

Jeffry frowned, confused. 'She was his daughter...what do you mean?' 'You ever notice anything, bruises...anything like that?'

'Are you out of your damn mind Detective?' Jeffry shot to his feet, glaring at Michael. 'Get out!'

'Thank you for your time, Mr. Dallington,' Michael said, heading for the door.

Jeffry had reacted just as Michael thought he would. But then he would hardly have confirmed it even if it was happening. Or maybe he didn't know. People

that hurt children were real good at keeping quiet about it. Sarah Dallington. Isabel Catching. Two girls. One missing. One found. And something had happened to Isabel. Someone had hurt her, he was convinced of that much, even if he couldn't yet unravel the strange tale she was telling him. Was there a connection between Sarah and Isabel? Had Will hurt them both? Nobody seemed to think he was capable of it. At least, no one so far.

Michael glanced down at his list of Will's family and friends. There was only one other name that seemed worth talking to: Lisa Talmet. She'd been a teacher at the school at the same time as Will, which meant she'd known him when Sarah went missing.

Getting back into his car, Michael opened his laptop, typing in Lisa's name in the database to get her contact information. Then he grabbed his phone and called her. After a few seconds, someone answered.

'Hello?'

'Lisa Talmet?' Michael asked. 'Yes, who am I speaking to?'

'Detective Michael Teller. I'm investigating Sarah Darlington's missing person's case.'

Silence.

'Lisa?' Michael prompted.

'I'm here. That was thirty years ago. I thought they never found who was responsible.'

'Yes, well there was an incident with Will Dallington which-' 'Is he okay?' Lisa interrupted.

Michael frowned. 'He's fine, as far as I know. We're currently looking for him. You wouldn't have any idea where he might have run off to, would you?'

'I'm sorry Detective. I have no idea. I haven't seen Will in twenty - five years.'

She'd seemed concerned about him for someone who hadn't seen him in that long. Maybe she knew him better than she was saying. 'Did Will ever mention any places he would go to when he was out in the Bush...landmarks, that kind of thing?'

'No Detective, Will and I mostly spoke about work.'

'What about any details from the missing persons case, do you remember anything of significance from that time?'

Silence again. Longer, this time.

'Isn't this all in the report I gave thirty years ago?'

Something twisted in Michael's gut. There wasn't any report from a Lisa



Talmet in the files. Maybe she'd never given one. Maybe it had gotten lost. Or maybe ... maybe someone had made it disappear. But why?

'Would you mind going over that report again with me?'

'It was a long time ago Detective. I don't remember. Why don't you just read the file for yourself?'

She seemed to genuinely believe the report existed, and he didn't want to let her know it wasn't there anymore. Not until he had a better idea about what had happened to it.

'You were a teacher along with Will at Littleton High School, weren't you? Did you ever notice any marks or bruises on Sarah?' 'No, but she wasn't in my class.'

'Right. One last thing. Did Will ever mention anything about Cats and Dogs to you?'

Silence. At least a minute went by. Finally, she spoke. 'They told me I wouldn't have to speak about that again.'

Michael frowned. 'Who told you?' Silence.

Then she hung up.

He called back. The phone went straight to a message bank, so he left a message. 'Lisa, it's Detective Teller. I'm not sure what happened, but you can trust me. If you're afraid, you don't have to worry, you won't be in any danger. Will is in trouble, Lisa. He hurt someone. If he resists, uses a weapon, I'm not sure what will happen. Any help you can give me will be appreciated.'

Michael hung up. This Cats and Dogs thing was starting to bother him more and more.

What was he missing?

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Michael sat with Anna back at the hotel, drinking beers out the front of his room. He filled her in on what was happening with the investigation.

'Michael, shouldn't you be trying to figure out who burned the Children's home down instead of chasing a thirty year old cold case?'

'It's connected. Will Dallington has a thirty year old grudge against Alexander Sholts, and a children's home he owns was burned to the ground and two of the workers end up dead.'

'But there's no evidence pointing to Will. None of the knives taken from his

home were the murder weapon and we have confirmed that Will Dallington suffers from extreme paranoia of police. So what's the connection?'

'There's a *link*.' Michael insisted. 'Witnesses put him at the scene of the murders a few hours before they happened.'

'But no physical evidence that he did it. Littleton is the only town within miles. He could have been there for any number of reasons. And Jeffry Dallington was right, he's always been a little off, but harmless, Michael. I just don't see him taking out two guys that easily.'

Michael stared at her in disbelief. 'Did you see how fast he ran?'

'It wasn't that fast. You're unfit and slow and he ducked about those giant wooden sculptors. I caught up to him easily before he put a knife in my shoulder.'

Michael frowned. 'If it's not him then none of it makes sense.'

'I'm not saying it isn't him. I'm saying we don't have enough right now. We can bring Will Dallington in on assault with a deadly weapon and if we get a confession out of him for the fire and the murders then that's a plus. But if we don't bring him in or find any other evidence linking him to the fire and the murder besides a thirty year old cold case, and a possible grudge that we don't even know is still relevant, we are going to look like idiots.'

Michael grinned. 'More of a problem for you than for me.'

'I'm serious Michael! What if it's not him? What if we're missing something?'

He sighed. 'I've been having that feeling all day. Any word from Perth?'

The evidence from the children's home, along with the body, had been shipped back to the city.

Anna shook her head. 'Nothing from John yet, and still no I.D on the body.'

They found some signs of wounds on the corpse from the children's home but...' She shrugged. Michael knew what it meant; the wounds could have been caused by debris falling onto the body during the fire, and weren't necessarily significant.

'As for Alexander's Sholts,' Anna continued, 'his finances check out. Still hasn't replied to my call. I'll probably hear back from his lawyer before I do him. You know how rich people are.'

They weren't getting anywhere. Michael was starting to wonder if it was like Anna had said. Maybe there weren't any dots to connect. Maybe the fire was an electrical fault. Maybe the murders in the alley were drug related. Maybe Will was a paranoid old man. But then, who did that body at the children's home belong to? And why was this cold case sitting in his gut like a litre of oil?

‘All we can do is run down the leads until there’s none left.’ he said. ‘If we still have nothing after that then I guess it’ll be another cold case in Littleton.

Hopefully we get an I.D on the body, but until then we just have to do the leg work.’ ‘Well, you will,’ Anna said, holding up her injured arm.

Michael smiled at her and finished his beer. He and Anna drank a few more before she decided to go to sleep. He returned to his room and sat staring at the whiteboard, wishing sleep was as easy for him as it was for Anna. The stillness of night was the worst time. No noise. No distractions. Beth would come to him in the quiet.

He had gotten used to her appearances at night. He would prepare for it early. He’d already warmed up with the beers, now he’d move on to whisky. A sad cliché. But it worked. It drowned out her voice. Dulled his senses. Put him to sleep.

Michael took a sip from the small whisky bottle that had been in the mini bar and read over his interview with Catching, going over her story in his mind. It was a good distraction from the children’s home case. A part of him thought Catching’s story was a puzzle he could unravel. But the more he thought on it, the more her labyrinth of madness led him astray. So he shifted his attention to his notes on Will Dallington instead. If Will was the killer then what was his motivation? He had been quiet for all these years. What was the trigger? Or had he been sitting on a killing rage all this time, and only now had the courage and determination to act on it? Then what was his reasoning...target those he thought responsible? Get at Alexander through the Children’s home? But then why kill the workers? They would have been kids when Sarah went missing. It didn’t fit. And just what had happened to her, anyway?

He finished the whisky and opened the tiny vodka. Moving to the whiteboard, he wrote: *Cats and Dogs?*

Those simple words had been enough to scare Lisa Talmet into ending their conversation. But what stuck in his mind was what she said before that. *They said I wouldn’t have to talk about that again.* So who were *they*? It had to be someone with authority. Someone who could guarantee she wouldn’t be bothered with questions.

Police? Had Kevin lied to him?

He had looked at Kevin’s face carefully as he asked about cats and dogs. The man hadn’t even batted an eyelid. He was either an incredible liar or he really had no idea what Michael was talking about. And if it wasn’t the police that gave Lisa guarantees, then who else could it be?

Michael sighed. His brain was beginning to hurt.

He fell back on the bed, the motion leaving the room spinning, and closed his eyes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, scenes played. They were of a time when his life made sense. When he had a wife and a child. Now all he had was memories that faded the longer time ticked on. Would there come a time when they were so distant he could gaze upon them without his heart tearing? Or would he be like Will? Would the hurt fester inside him until he finally blew his brains out?

The images faded, and darkness took him.

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Something was ringing.

Michael didn't know what, but he wanted to smash whatever it was to pieces. He opened his eyes slowly and stared at the phone next to his bed. He reached for it and answered.

'Detective Teller,' he said groggily.

'Open your damn door I've been knocking for five minutes,' Anna snapped, and hung up.

He could hear her voice outside his room as she spoke.

Michael blinked, noticing all the missed calls on his phone. He sat up, wiped at his eyes and rolled out of bed to the door. Outside, pinks and reds lined the sky.

The sun had risen, but only just. 'Anna what time is it?' 'There's been another murder.'

## Chapter Fourteen

The bush around the Gascoyne River was serene in its silence. A mist gently rolled and twisted above the ground, dancing along the surface of the water. Dew dripped from the tress. Magpies chortled their morning song, presiding over a body that lay twisted at odd angles on the ground, blood soaking into the earth.

Then the red and blue lights came. Feet crunched sticks and leaves.

Foreign noise invaded.

The magpies tilted their heads, and flew away. The quiet was over.

Michael stepped onto the scene to find Derek kneeling over the body. He approached slowly, his eyes coming to rest on the corpse of Kevin Bell, staring up at the morning sky blankly, half his body submerged in the shallows of the water.

Michael had spoken to the man yesterday. ‘Derek,’ Michael said.

Derek didn’t turn. He sat there staring at his father’s body. ‘I’m going to kill him,’ Derek whispered, standing.

‘Calm down,’ Anna said, ‘you don’t know Will did this.’

‘Don’t give me that shit Detective. You know as well as I do this was him.’ He marched by them, leaving the scene and heading for his car.

‘That’s not going to end well,’ Anna said.

‘I wouldn’t be too worried, if he could find Will Dallington he would have already.’

Anna nodded and walked about the body. ‘Blade wounds again.’

Michael frowned at the stab wound on the throat. Direct puncture in the shape of a crescent.

‘You think it’s Will?’ she asked.

‘Unless Kevin had some dealings with the Oaks crew that went sideways as well. Why would Kevin even be out here?’

‘Most likely killed somewhere else and his body was dumped here. I’ll send some people over to check his home, see if there were any signs of a struggle.’

Michael nodded and knelt down. Kevin’s mobile was floating in the water by his pocket. Most likely had it fallen out when he was dumped.

Michael glanced around, looking at the thick trees along the riverbank. Anna frowned at his gaze. ‘What?’

‘I was thinking the river is a five minute drive out of town. If this was Will,

then he's been pretty close by this entire time. Might even be watching us right now.'

Anna blinked and glanced about. 'Well that's spooky.' 'Yeah,' Michael said, returning his gaze towards the body.

'According to the report a fisherman found him when he came to the river early this morning. Reported it immediately,' Anna said.

Michael stared at the thin cut marks on the body. He put on a pair of gloves and patted down the corpse. Wallet, keys, and a mobile that was dead from being submerged in the river shallows.

'So we got four dead. Three since we've been here. We might get pulled off this case,' Anna said.

Michael nodded. 'Reporters will be swarming over this place soon.' 'Not much we can do about it. Will's a ghost.'

A young officer suddenly appeared. 'Detective Sergeant Bell he...' Michael frowned. 'What happened?'

'He went to find Will's brother.'

'Shit,' Michael said, rushing towards the car. Anna following along beside him.

He drove back to town, stopping out the front of the general store and went inside. Derek sat atop Jeffry, raining blows down on his face. Michael took two quick strides, grabbed Derek from under his arms and pulled him off.

It had taken them five minutes to get there. That was a long time to be kicking someone's arse. Jeffry's face was a swollen mess. Eyes beaten closed, blood leaking, teeth punched out.

Derek scrambled to his feet and rushed towards Jeffry again. He took two steps before Anna reached out with her uninjured hand and gripped hold of his collar. She yanked Derek with her while simultaneously sweeping with her foot in the opposite direction, taking Derek's legs out. Derek fell to the floor like a demolished skyscraper, hitting the hard wood with a slapping noise. A groan of pain escaped him.

'Calm the hell down!' Anna shouted, rolling him over and cuffing him expertly with a single hand.

'Told you it wouldn't end well.'

'Didn't think he'd go for the brother,' Michael replied, checking Jeffry for a pulse. It was there, he was still breathing. Any longer though and he might not have been.

He called an ambulance.

'Come on Derek,' Michael said, dragging the fat man up and taking him to the

car. He put him in the back and shut the door.

Derek didn't fight the process.

Five minutes and the ambulance got there. Paramedics took over. Michael and Anna leaned against the car.

'What now?' Anna asked.

'Pointless searching for Will and he's our only suspect,' Michael said, 'you didn't rip your stitches did you?'

Anna glanced at her shoulder then angled it towards him. Michael peeked inside the collar of her top and lifted up the bandages a little. There was no blood, and the stitches looked okay.

'Lucky,' Michael said, 'next time, don't do that.'

'Instinct. By the time I remembered my injured shoulder Derek was on the floor.'

'Uh huh,' Michael said.

'I'm going to head back to the hotel to finish all the paper work and harness Alexander's people too, get that rich asshole on the phone,' Anna said.

'As much as paper work sounds like a fantastic idea, I think I'm going to check on old Jeffry's condition and go see Catching.'

'Still think she's going to make sense at the end of it huh?' He grinned. 'Nope, it's just better than paper work.'

Michael walked around to the back of the car and opened the door, letting Derek out. Anna took the cuffs off.

'Go *home*,' Michael said.

Derek's jaw clenched, he stared Michael in the eye then nodded slowly, heading towards his car.

'We should have taken him to the lock up,' Anna said. 'Written it up.'

'If Jeffry presses charges we'll do that.'

'Bros before criminals huh?'

He dropped Anna off at the hotel, and then headed over to the hospital.

Zigzagging his way through the corridors, he arrived at Catching's room. He knocked twice on Catching's door and stepped inside.

She was staring out the window. Her cold eyes turned to him as he entered, the light playing along the scar on her face.

'You're back.' she said.

'I am. Are we getting close to the end yet?'

She smiled and it made the scar on her face dance. ‘It’s nearly all over Detective.’

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Human beings all possess the special ability to mentally time travel. To predict the future based on current or past events. It is something that protects people. It lets them know not to run blindly across a busy street by telling them they’d be hit by a car if they did.

But for me, knowing what was going to happen was the worst thing in the world. I was being carried like a pig.

One Servant held my wrists while the other held my ankles. The black blood flowed through my veins, stilling my body but allowing me to feel everything. My neck was slack, my head tipping backwards as my captors carried me down the hall, affording me a view of the darkness of the passageways as we passed by.

Images played through my mind.

Of the first time they had brought me to the monster. Of the pain.

The expectation of that horror made tears form in my eyes. Made my skin crawl.

Made bile rise in my throat.

A door opened and I was dragged into the room. This time they didn’t toss me on the floor like a discarded doll. They took me to the curling tree and placed me into it, the branches twining around my body holding me in place.

Then they left.

And the room was silent.

I wasn’t able to turn my head but I could move my eyes. I stared at the darkness. At each patch of black.

There was a strange stillness to the air. One might even think that I was alone.

Only I could hear something breathing in the shadows. Rasping, haggard breaths.

It appeared slowly, an indistinct outline of a *thing* before getting close enough that my eyes could make out details.

The monster was different. This one had a giant fat stomach and bulging taut skin as if someone had inflated its body and stopped before it burst. Its eyes blinked sideways and like the monster before it, its irises were split into three. Its nose was



long and thin, like an echidna and its mouth drooped at the right and left corners dripping with saliva.

It reached out a hand towards me, its fingers as long as a ruler. Its palm pressed against my abdomen, then its nails against my skin.

Then they pierced my flesh and dug for my soul. I screamed.

And the colours came pouring out. Darkness.

When I opened my eyes again I was back in the room. I flexed my hand. It responded slowly, the effects of the black blood hadn't quite worn off yet. I shifted and pain lanced through my abdomen where they tore at my colours.

The memory elicited a sob from my lips and tears trailed down my face. I hugged myself, trying to stop my body from trembling.

There was a filth left behind by the monsters. A corrosive *thing* that ate away beneath my skin.

The Grey.

I raised my hand up as the skin turned from golden brown to grey and dead. Watched it spread across me until not a single part of my skin had colour. 'No,' I whispered. I clawed at my arm, scraping at my flesh until the blood trailed across my fingers. My red blood dripped across my grey skin painting me. A mad broken smile twitched across my lips.

I wasn't all grey. Not yet. Just my hair. Just my flesh.

How many more things did I have left? My eyes. Once they were gone I'd be like all those dolls. Broken. I huddled into the ball, clinging to myself as if I was trying to keep all the colour I had left bottled up inside me.

'As long as you're full of things they'll come,' Crow said.

I didn't answer her, merely stared at the darkness in front of me.

'Do you still have hope, dead girl? Do you still think you will escape this place? That someone will save you? That the monsters will stop?'

I remained silent and she hopped in front of me. 'What do you think will come first? You escaping or them killing you?'

'Go away Crow!' I snapped waving my arm at her.

She skipped backwards and danced about. 'The pain, it hurts. Even in your dreams it creeps and eats away and when you wake they come to take the things from deep within. But you can be free, if you're a dead girl, there will be no pain.'

I swallowed. A dead girl doesn't feel anything. If I was dead would this

gnawing, twisting, agony end?

Free from pain.

But never to be *alive* again. ‘Stay away from me Crow.’

Crow stopped moving and her white slit eyes came to stare at me. Then she stepped backwards, fading into the darkness, leaving me alone.

I tilted to the side, resting my head on the ground. I slept.

A door scraping awoke me. A bowl was placed on the ground and a cup of water along with it.

Had I been asleep so long that a day had passed?

The door closed, the Servants left. I got to my feet, ate the food and drank the water. Then I settled back down in my corner. My arms were the first things to stop. They went slack at my side. Then everything stilled and I tilted to the side collapsing onto the ground.

*No.* A monster had just fed.

Why again? They never fed twice in a row. The door scraped open.

Tears leaked from eyes, a shallow whimper escaped my throat. And all the while Crow sang in the darkness. *One more for the feed Dead girl, dead girl...*

## Chapter Fifteen

There was a strangeness about not knowing the passage of time. The rise and fall of the sun and the moon. The ticking of a clock. The passing of a minute. Had days gone by? Weeks? ...Years?

I wasn't certain.

I tried counting the meals I was given in the hope they represented some kind of schedule. But it was useless.

Sometimes the meals came. Sometimes they didn't.

Sometimes the food was safe. Sometimes it was poisoned.

How many times had they fed me now? Was it ten times?

Twenty?

I couldn't remember. I tried to forget what they did to me. The light had long been taken from my eyes and hair and skin. There was a numbness about me now.

I didn't know how much I had left inside. Each time they fed I thought it would be the last colour inside of me. But then, I didn't break completely, so there must be something left.

'Scratch, scratch, scratch. You won't come clean,' Crow said.

She was somewhere in the shadows behind me. I was in the darkness myself. Huddling in a ball, tears leaking from my eyes but they weren't accompanied by sobs. As if there was some kind of disconnect in my head and I was no longer able to let the pain out.

I ran my fingernails across my arms, I was scratching at my skin. My blood was the only colour I had left. I liked seeing the red of it paint the Grey.

'You don't know anything Crow,' I whispered. 'you chose to be a dead girl because it's easy. You gave up. I'll never give up. I'll never stop fighting. No amount of pain they bring will break me.' Something free under my fingernails and realised it was a scab from where I had previously scratched my skin raw.

'Little, glass doll. Shattered upon the ground. You can pick up all the big pieces of yourself, but the little bits, you'll never find them again. Those little tiny invisible specs of yourself are what connect and hold everything together. They're important for the living, but not for the dead.'

I swallowed. 'I'll never be a coward like you Crow. I won't run.' 'I'm trying to *save* you!'

'I don't want to be saved by losing everything that makes me who I am!' I replied.

Crow's face contorted into an ugly scowl.

'Fine. Put all your screams upon your shoulders and let them *crush* you.' Her feet shuffled and she faded into the darkness.

I sat, scratching, legs shaking, staring at the black.

Crow didn't know anything. I'd get out here. I'd escape. Go back home. I would.

I glanced down at the broken wooden bits around me. How many bowls had I shattered? How many tiny bits of wood had I collected up? Not enough.

Not yet. But soon.

I rested my head against my legs, drifting into a slumber.

*There is a place on Hastings Street. A park with run down old swings. A sandpit that was dirty and dying bushes were everywhere. Beside it was a basketball court.*

*On one of the old swings, a young girl was being pushed by her father. She was laughing. Swinging happily.*

*Then she stopped.*

*She and her father turned to look at me.*

*The girl smiled. A wound opened up on the side of her face. A long, cut that trailed passed her eye and down her cheek.*

*But she kept smiling, even as the blood dripped from her chin.*

Searing pain awoke me.

I opened my eyes, feeling hotness on my cheek and stared into the blank eyes of Crow who sat atop me, a bloody fragment of wood in her hand.

I flung her off, rolling to my feet and clutching at my face. Blood dripped into my hands from my cheek.

'What did you do to my face?' I cried.

'You don't want to be a dead girl. If you don't want to be dead, then you have to kill the princess.'

I glared at her, my jaw clenching against the pain from my cheek. 'What the

hell are you talking about?’

‘Kill the princess. Take away the pretty. To kill a monster *be* a monster. Ugly. Inside out.’

I shook my head and took a step back from Crow. She was mad. A wild fey crazed thing.

‘Stay the hell away from me Crow. If you come close to me again I’ll kill you.’

Crow tilted her head to the side, ‘There’s a way to escape without being a dead girl. But you have to trust me. Kill the princess.’

I stared at her. ‘You’re insane Crow. If you come near me again I swear I’ll kill you.’

Crow smiled at me. ‘That’s the way. The princess is dying already.’ She backed away into the darkness of the right hand corner of the room and silence fell.

I sat a corner opposite her, my back against the wall, my eyes staring at the shadows looking for Crow.

I held my hand to my face, pressing against the wound, waiting for the bleeding to stop. Blood flowed between my trembling fingers, sticky, caking them together. Eventually the wound dried.

But the pain remained. A constant throbbing in my face.

Crow’s attack had shaken me. I had thought I was safe in here. I wasn’t, and who knew what Crow might do? She was there, in the shadows, watching me. Would she wait for me to sleep? If I did would she attack me again?

The door scraped open and the Servants entered. They put the food and water down then left.

I stood and walked over, staring down at the bowls.

I ate.

I drank.

Then I broke the bowl and cup and put the pieces in the corner with the rest of the pile.

A moment later numbness seeped into my limbs. I collapsed to the ground, paralysed.

Crow appeared, standing over me, staring down at me. ‘They won’t be happy when they see your face.’

The door opened again. Crow vanished into the darkness and the Servants carried me out. Back to the room.

They placed me in the bed of branches and then left. Moments later the monster

stood over me. It was the monster from the first time I came here. The one with the heads pressing out its skin. I never knew which of the two monsters would be waiting for me. He clutched my face, eyes pinned to the wound that jagged down my cheek. Its lips twisted as its eyes narrowed.

It didn't like my ugly.

The monster slammed my head to the right so hard something in my neck clicked. It didn't want to look at my wounded face.

The sudden violence shook me, my breath coming in sharp pants.

He pinned my head in place, pressing my wound into the branches until it split open again and blood stained the wood.

Terror shrinks the insides of you.

It makes the outside want to be small too. To huddle up.

To bury your head.

Only I had nowhere to hide. So I lay there, silent. Crying. Fingers pressed into my stomach.

The monster snatching at my colour.

Only it was harder for the monster this time. There was less colour to be had.

So he had to dig deeper.

His fingers pressing against my spine.

I screamed as he gripped hold of a colour and yanked it free.

How much more did I have left?

What would happen to me when it was all gone? Would I die but be a living doll?

Would I welcome that death?

At least death would be a conclusion. An end to all this.

But it would not be what I wanted. I wanted to go back home.

I wanted to wind back time to when I was with Dad. To when the world made sense.

To when the Grey didn't swallow me whole. I'd give anything to go back.

Even just for a moment.

The Servants dragged me back to the room and dropped me on the floor. I lay there, motionless, the black blood still coursing through my system.

Crow appeared above me, staring over me, her head tilted to the side. In her hand was a slither of wood.

Was she going to cut at me again? My finger twitched.

Feeling was returning.

‘Did he look? Did he see?’ Crow said. My breath shook as it passed my lips. I was scared.

‘Monsters don’t like their meals ruined,’ Crow said, hopping about me. ‘You don’t have much time now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re colour is almost all gone. When there’s no more. Then there’s no *more.*’

My eyes went to the wooden bits in her hand. ‘What are you going to do?’

Crow glanced down at the slither of wood.

‘I can save you if you want. I can jam this into your wrists until you spill upon the floor. A different kind of dead girl.’

‘No,’ I replied.

Crow moved to stand over me. She sighed. ‘I tried to help you.’ Then her voice filled the air. *One more for the feed, Dead girl, dead girl... One more in need, Dead girl, dead girl, Cry yourself to sleep, Dead girl, dead girl, Tomorrow Monsters eat, Dead girls, dead girls...*

She gripped hold of my limp wrist, turning, stretching my arm up so she could strike at the veins. *Cry yourself to sleep, Dead girl, dead girl, Tomorrow Monsters eat, Dead girls, dead girls...*

Her hand flashed down towards my arm. Feeling returned to my fingers and I twisted my wrist to grip hold of her, yanking her to the floor. She tumbled down, the wood slither in her hand clattering on the ground. I scampered backwards, putting as much distance between myself and Crow as possible. My back hit the wall and I stood slowly. My body was still slightly numb.

Crow slowly got to her feet.

We stood there, staring at each other in silence. Neither of us moved.

Then noises came from the darkness in the left hand corner of the room. My head snapped to the shadows. I had heard a noise over there before, when I first arrived here.

‘Hello?’ I said, staring at the shadows. ‘There’s no one there.’

I frowned at her. She had said that last time. I took a step towards the corner.

‘Stop!’ Crow snapped.

I ignored her and kept walking for the shadows. I moved into the darkness.

As I got closer to the corner of the room I could make out the shape of a person sitting in the corner.

I stopped above the person and then knelt down. It was a dead body. Decayed, the only thing remaining was long hair and a skeleton.

I glanced back at Crow who was staring at me, a horrid feeling wrenching my gut.

‘Crow...is this is you?’

Crow stared at me, but said nothing. I stood, backing away from the body.

‘Who are you really Crow...what are you?’

‘A Dead girl. A prisoner. Trapped. I watch them come and go. I help them so they don’t suffer.’

‘Like you suffered?’ I whispered.

‘I know best. I know what’s coming for you. It’s better if I help you before that.’

‘Your name’s not Crow.’ She shook her head. ‘What’s your real name?’

She smiled, but said nothing. I swallowed looking from the shadows where Crow’s corpse lay to where she was standing in the middle of the room.

‘This time will be different, Crow. This time, it’s them who should be afraid.’  
‘If you believe that, you’re a fool Not-a-dead-girl,’ Crow said. She stepped into the darkness, leaving me alone in the room, with a corpse in one corner and spirit in the other.



## Chapter Sixteen

I sat in the shadows, my hands moving. I was collecting wood, pressing the thin bits together until they were at least two fingers thick. Then I tore off a piece of my top and wrapped it around the base of the wood, binding them.

I scraped the end of the combined wooden pieces against the floor. First one side, then the other, working it to a fine point.

I stared at the blade in my hand then pressed it into my palm. The point bit into my skin, drawing a dot of blood.

This would do.

A noise sounded next to me and my head snapped to the black space. ‘Crow?’ I said.

Silence.

Crow hadn’t come back since I had discovered the body. Maybe she had given up on saving me. Or maybe she was waiting for whatever terrible thing she thought was going to happen to me.

I turned back from the shadows and stared at the blade again.

I’d only get one shot to use this. If I messed up, they’d know I had a weapon and everything would be over. But I had a plan.

It would be a gamble, but if it worked I could be completely mobile when I was in that room.

It required a little suffering first.

I moved to the darkest corner of the room and placed my weapon there. Then I sat. I waited.

Eventually the Servants brought my food.

I ate, and the numbness took me. Before my movement stilled I smiled. The Servants came back, carried me down the hall and tossed me into the room.

The monster rushed out from the darkness with a desperate pace, gripping hold of my wrist and dragging me savagely over to the twig bench. The sticks entwined my wrists, holding me in place.

The monster leaned close. The heads beneath the monster’s skin all moving at once, pressing against its flesh, screaming to be free. The Monster let out a horrid shrill then slammed its fingers into my guts.

Then he tore. Then he ripped.

Then he devoured what little was left of me. But I didn't scream.

I didn't cry. I didn't beg. I watched.

Because I was unafraid of this monster now. Not because I was accustomed to the terror. But because I knew one day soon I would come for it. One day it would know *fear*. That fear would wear my face and speak with my voice.

And it would be truly terrifying.

\*\*\*\*\*

They brought me back to my room.

I lay on the floor, a paralysed, twisted mass.

My legs sprawled to the right while my head slackly fell to the left. I could make out the small bits of dirt on the ground that scattered when I exhaled. As the black blood wore off, feeling returned and the first thing I did was laugh.

I probably seemed quite mad. And perhaps I was.

Perhaps madness was a healthy mental state in a situation like this.

But my laughter was because of relief. Because one way or another, that was the last time the monster fed from me. Either it killed, or I killed it.

I was Grey, inside and out. But not all of my colour was gone. There was a small, tiny slither left.

If I protected that last little bit, helped it grow until it was a light so bright it stunned the eyes, then I could go back to being normal. Go back to being able to smile...to *feel* again.

It was a small thing to risk my life for.

Besides, what life was there without your spirit?

A tingle returned to my legs and then my body began to fully wake from its slumber. I got up and moved towards the corner, kneeling down on the floor looking for my weapon. It was gone. Panic rose in my chest, my heart thudding. Had they searched the room when I was with the monster? Had they come and taken it? If they knew, then...

My head snapped back to the door, expecting it to burst open and the Servants to come rushing inside.

But nothing happened. The room remained quiet.

'Not-a-dead-girl,' a voice echoed about the room. My heart froze.

Footsteps sounded behind me, slowly growing close.

I glanced over my shoulder and out of the darkness came Crow. She was holding the knife in her hand, walking with a strange, odd hop.

‘Crow, give me the knife.’

‘Silly thing, what do you plan to do?’ I stared at her white slit eyes. ‘Kill it.’

Crow smiled. ‘You’ve killed the princess?’

She vanished back into the shadows. Out of the shadows, the knife slid across the floor to stop at my feet.

A day had passed. I sat in the middle of the room, waiting. The door scraped back and the zombies entered. They placed the food down in front of me and left. I glanced at the food and water.

Then moved slowly forward and took the tiniest sip.

Nothing happened. The water was clean. Then I had the smallest bite of food.

No numbness.

I smiled and ate and drank only a fraction, taking the bread and water and placing it in the shadowy corner.

This would be the only food I could trust for the next few days. Afterwards I returned to the middle of the room and continued to wait. Another day passed.

Food was brought and placed in front of me.

The Servants left. I didn’t eat any of it, instead I hid the food in the corner of the room and returned to where I had been, and tucking the knife into my clothing I lay down on the ground and pretended I was paralysed.

I waited so long I nearly fell asleep.

The Servants never came back. Which meant the food they brought was probably safe. But I didn’t want to risk it. So I ate the food from the first day and went back to waiting.

Day three.

They brought food again.

I hid it in the corner, and then lay on the ground.

The door scraped back open after a moment and the Servants entered. They grabbed my wrists and ankles and I had to swallow a cry as a pang of pain stab from where they gripped hold of me.

I let my head loll backwards, and watched dark hall go by.

They tossed me into the room and shut the door. I lay there, unmoving, but my hand had snaked about the knife hiding in my clothes.

Footsteps.

My heart slammed in my chest and my breathing quickened.

I watched as it approached. Its measured steps. Its tongue running along the side of its lips. Its grotesque face coming closer and closer. It stopped as it reached my feet, towered above me, staring down at me.

My breath caught. Did it know?

What was it waiting for?

The monster took a breath, and then reached down to grab me by my face like it had countless other times.

When its fingers were about to encircle my head I shifted to the left, lashing out with my hand and burying the knife in its neck.

The Monster staggered backwards clutching the wound and let out a roar of pain. As it screamed, the tiny faces beneath its skin shut up, stretching against its flesh like spines standing on end.

Fury flicked across its gaze. Grey blood bubbled from the wound trailing down its neck and across its chest.

I got to my feet, my fingers gripping the blade. The monster's eyes locked with mine. Silence.

Then a drop of its blood hit the floor, breaking the quiet, and it exploded towards me. Fear spread through my body like spilled poison, seeping into my limbs making me weak. I wasn't going to be able to move out the way in time.

## Chapter Seventeen

The image of the monster grew rapidly in my field of vision.

I screamed at my body to move. But my legs were rooted in place. Its hand reached for me.

My heart beat.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins.

My body snapped into motion. I ducked, leaping to the side and scrambling to my feet circled around the back of the monster, putting distance between us. The monster turned its head slowly to stare at me. Then its gaze shifted to the blade in my hand. The fragile sharpened tip had been smashed and blunted from the force of puncturing the monster's skin. But I didn't let go of it.

It approached me slowly. Arms stretched wide, herding me towards the corner of the room. I backed away until I hit a wall.

The monster smiled, then dashed towards me, its hand lashing out and striking me across the face.

Spots flashed in my eyes and the room spun. Fingers laced around my throat as the monster lifted me up off the ground. Air stopped entering my lungs, my legs kicked, my hand clawed at the monster's arm.

I bright the knife down smashing it into the monster's wrist until the blade shattered in my hand.

The monster slammed me against the wall. The broken knife fell from my grip and clattered onto the floor.

The monster brought its face close to mine, staring into my eyes, as if it wanted to watch the lights go out.

My hands kept clawing at its arms, its face, but it shrugged me off and continued to watch.

Blackness was descending on my vision, fading in from the sides. My heartbeat was slowing...

My lungs were tearing My legs no longer kicked.

The room filled with my muffled attempts to get air.

I was dying.

I was *going* to die. I wasn't afraid.

Because I knew at least death would be an end to all this. I closed my eyes.

And then a voice rang out. *One more for the feed, Dead girls, dead girls,*

The monster's fingers trembled and it turned its head away from me to stare over its shoulder. Crow was there, standing in the room, staring at the monster.

The monster let out a savage roar towards Crow, a threat, a warning, but Crow kept walking forward.

*One more in need, Dead girls, dead girls,*

The monster's hand left my throat and it dropped me to the floor. I hit the ground in a crumpled heap, desperately sucking air into my lungs. The blackness cleared from my vision and I stared as Crow continued to walk towards the monster all the while singing.

*Cry yourself to sleep, Dead girls, dead girls,*

The monster had its arms out wide, it roared again, spit flying from its mouth as it stood still staring at Crow.

It's afraid of her, I realised.

*Tomorrow monsters eat, Dead girls, dead girls...*

Then she ran towards the monster. It swiped its hand at her but its arm passed through her and she leapt up into the air and vanished, entering the monster's body.

Silence fell. The monster shuddered, and then the face of Crow pressed against its skin from within, only it was bigger than the rest. Crow had originally been one of the girls this monster had eaten. Only her spirit had escaped from inside of it.

Now it was back.

As Crow stretched against the monster's flesh, so did all the other faces.

A roar of pain escaped the monster's lips and it clawed at the faces, slamming them back into place.

I got to my feet and ran for the door.

The monster screamed as I darted by, immediately erupting forward and chasing me.

I flung the door open and weaved through the hallways.

I turned left and right, zigzagging randomly, hoping that it would lead me somewhere safe.

Steps! I ran upwards, climbing the tower.

Behind me the monster's heavy footsteps sounded.

I didn't dare look back, I kept climbing the steps, going higher and higher up the massive wooden tower.

My legs burned, my heart thumped. But I didn't stop.

Stopping meant being caught and being caught meant death.

Something yanked my foot out from under me and I fell to the ground, my body slamming into the edges of the step.

I glanced back. The monster's hand was around my ankle. I kicked back with my other leg, striking it repeatedly in the face until it let go, then scrambled forwards once more.

Sweat dripped down my body. Adrenaline pumped through my veins.

Moonlight flooded the steps as I came out at the top of the tower. For a brief second I paused, glancing about.

I was at the top of the tower. Fifty feet below me was the moat and the ground.

I was trapped.

Something crashed into the left side of my head.

The force was enough to lift me off my feet and send me crumpling to the right.

Spots flashed in front of my eyes. Nausea swirled in my stomach.

Between the black spots in my vision the monster approached. He was five feet away.

Then two.

*Get up not-a-dead-girl.*

Crow's voice echoed in my head.

My body obeyed, forcing myself up, scrambling away from the monster's outstretched hands.

I backed away until I was at the edge of the platform. If I fell I would die.

But it was better than being eaten by a monster. Only, I refused to be the only one.

The monster reached for me.

I turned, grabbed hold of its body and leaned back. We fell.

Tumbling towards the earth. The wind rushing by us.

Death growing nearer and nearer by the second. I closed my eyes.

Let my senses feel the rushing world around me.

If I survived, I would have tried to get my colour back. If I escaped, I would travel the world.

Seen all the beauty the earth had to offer me.

I would bathe in the clouds and sing in the sun and let the earth paint my soul. I would find a way home.

If I survived... We hit the water.

Pain erupted through my body.

For a moment everything was still as I floated weightless. My mind shutting down, growing dark, as if I was falling asleep.

*Crow. What's your name?*

She told me.

Then everything went dark.

\*\*\*\*\*

‘As for the rest Detective, you already know all that. I was found by the river and brought to this hospital.’

Michael was staring at her. ‘And the monster, did it come with you to this world?’

Catching shook her head. ‘I don’t know Detective. When awoke I was alone.’ Michael nodded and got to his feet. ‘Thank you for telling me your story,

Catching. I’m not sure if I can believe it. But thank you all the same.’ Catching nodded. ‘What’s going to happen to me now?’

‘You will be transported to Perth and placed with Child Services.’ She nodded slowly, and then returned her gaze toward the window.

As Michael was about to turn to leave she spoke again. ‘Detective, do you remember in my story there was a man trapped in the pile of grey bodies. That man reached out his hand for me.’

‘I remember.’

Catching turned her blue eyes to him.

‘That man was repeating a single word over and over again. That word was the thing most important to him. But it was also the thing that was killing him.’

‘What was he saying?’ ‘Beth,’ she replied.

Something panged inside Michael’s head and he blinked, staring at Catching, his stomach swirling. There was no way she could know about Beth. It was impossible. It wasn’t like you could easily look that information up. You’d have to have access to his personal files and there a sixteen-year-old girl in hospital wasn’t going to be able to get them.

‘Who told you about my daughter?’

‘So she’s your daughter.’

‘Who told you?’ Michael snapped.



Catching didn't even flinch. 'I told you Detective. You did.'

Michael stared at her for a long time. Then he turned and walked out without saying a word. Rage bubbled beneath his skin. Had she been playing him this whole time? Did she know about him before he got here? Michael thought about all the possible ways she could get hold of the information and realised it was impossible.

Only Anna knew those things and she wouldn't talk to anyone about it, certainly not Catching.

Then had she really seen him there, in that pile of bodies?

Michael swallowed and shook his head. He didn't want to believe it. He couldn't.

So he decided not to think about it. His interview with Catching was over.

He wouldn't have to speak to her again.

He headed to his car and as he was about to open the door when his phone rang.

'Detective Teller speaking.'

'Detective, it's Lisa Talmet,' A woman's voice said, 'I...have something I want to tell you, about Cats and Dogs.'

Michael went still. 'Go on.'

'A while back, just before Will's daughter went missing I went for a walk along the river. I found Alexander out in the bush. He had several cats and dogs buried in the sand up to their necks. He was hurling stones at them, shattering their skulls. The cats and dogs had gone missing from locals and turns out Alexander had stolen them. He...he killed over thirty this way. I told Will about it and he reported it to the police and spoke to Alexander's parents. But...no one did anything. Kevin Bell said it was just a kid venting his anger. They were just cats and dogs and there was no need to go any further, as long as Alexander agreed not to do it again. The thing was...he was smiling while he was doing it. He laughed every time he heard them make noises. The look on his face...terrified me. Will tried to split Alexander and his daughter up. Did his best to keep them away from each other. A week later she went missing. Will, he...he was convinced Alexander did it. That he had help that-'

'Mrs. Talmet,' Michael said, interrupting her. 'Alexander has an alibi for when Sarah went missing. Dozens of people were on the school bus with him. A kid hurt some animals. It happens a lot. Usually it's an indication that the child is either suffering abuse at home or witnessing it. Despite how disturbing it might be to have seen, it is more likely a cry for help than anything else.'

'I...see. Thank you for your time Detective,' she said, hanging up.

Michael sighed and put his phone in his pocket, leaning back in his car seat.

*-You sounded pretty convincing.*

Beth was beside him. He glanced at her but didn't say anything.

*-You know as well as I do that a teenager has cognitive maturity and the ability to understand what they are doing wrong. If they repeatedly do it anyway and take enjoyment in the act then it's a red flag Dad.*

Michael grimaced and ran his tongue along his teeth.

'It doesn't mean he's a budding serial killer. It doesn't mean he kidnapped Sarah and killed her. He has an alibi and no amount of crazy accusations from Will Dallington are going to change that.'

*-Maybe. Dad...why didn't you ask Catching how to heal? Are you scared of what she will say?*

Michael turned to Beth. But she was gone. He took a slow, steady breath. The Grey huh? He shook his head, there was no way Catching's story was real. It couldn't be. Only...how did she know about Beth?

Michael exhaled and glanced down at the clock in the car. Two pm. He might as well go check in on Derek, make sure he wasn't thinking of doing anything stupid.

Michael pulled out of the hospital and drove off.

## Chapter Eighteen

Derek's house wasn't on the opposite side of town to his father's. Five minute's drive and Michael was there.

He strode up the wooden verandah and knocked on the door. Through the stained glass windows in the door Michael could make out the figure of Derek approaching.

He opened the door, a whisky in his hand, his shirt was unbuttoned at the top and his eyes were red. He had a holstered gun at his side. Michael didn't blame him. After all, Will Dallington had eviscerated his father.

'Can I help you Detective Teller?' he asked, staring at Michael.

'Just came to check on you. You know we need to chat about what happened with Jeffrey Dallington,' Michael said.

Derek stared at him for a few breaths. Then stepped away from the door waving casually with his hand.

Michael walked inside and followed Derek down the hall. On his left was a small table with dozens of basketball trophies.

'You used to play?' Michael asked.

'Yeah, when I was a teenager, played state. Power forward.'

Michael wasn't surprised. Derek was a big guy, even if he was overweight now, Michael could imagine how when he was younger and leaner he'd have been a wrecking ball.

Derek led Michael to a lounge room with an L shaped couch facing a 60 inch T.V. On the walls were picture frames but they were too distant for Michael to make out any details.

'So what's going to happen Teller? You going to arrest me now?' Derek said.

Michael shook his head. 'Nothing like that. But people saw what you did. I'm not going to report it. But if someone comes forward, says what they saw, I won't have much of a choice will I?'

'No one will say a thing, Detective Teller. This is a small town. Everyone knows Will cut up my Dad and no one will care what happened to Jeffrey Dallington. We take care of our own here. You get that, don't you Detective?'

'Yeah. Unfortunately I do. But here's the thing Derek. I'm not from this tiny spec of a town. I don't really give a shit about you. I get it, your Dad died and you

wanted to lash out. You're a cop and Jeffrey isn't dead. I'll let it slide. *Once*. But if it happens again, well, you'll get really familiar with what happens to cops in prison.'

Derek grimaced. 'It's not like I wanted to hurt him. Just...blacked out a bit,' he grumbled.

Michael nodded and stood. 'Alright, as long as you get it.'

He walked around the opposite side of the couch and paused as something caught his eye.

It was a photo he had seen before. One of Alexander and two of his friends that had been down by the creek fishing. Something suddenly twisted in Michael's gut.

'This you?' he asked, pointing at the boy on the right.

'No, that's Thomas Wilshire. That's me on the left. Guy that caught the fish is Ryan Moore,' Derek said.

Derek was lying about Alexander being in the photo. Why would he lie about that?

'Fairly good fishing around these parts still?' Michael said, as if nothing was. His mind was racing. Alexander had an alibi for Sarah's disappearance. But say he had help, say two other boys met Sarah, took her somewhere...

'Big breams, if you're lucky.'

Michael smiled casually. 'I'll have to come back up and try the river out myself when I get some time.'

'You should.'

'Well, I'll leave you to it,' Michael said.

He walked down the hall, heading for the front door, trying to keep his pace level. Derek walked closely behind him, seeing him out. The hairs on the back of Michael's neck were standing on end. He didn't like putting his back to Derek now that he knew the man might be involved in a murder, but he had to act as normal as possible. After all, his theory could be nothing. But if it *was* something and he acted off, Derek might draw on him.

'How much longer you planning to stay in town for Detective?' Derek asked. 'Maybe we could get out on the river while you're up here.'

Michael nodded. 'Probably a few days at least.' Something struck the back of his head.

Spots flashed in front of his eyes and his equilibrium went on holiday.

Michael crumpled to the floor, the room spinning. He rolled onto his back, fumbling uselessly for his gun, staring at the double images of Derek standing over

him a basketball trophy in his hand.

‘Well...shit...’ Derek said.

The double images of Derek arced back their hand and a fist slammed into Michael’s face.

Sleep.

A shovel scraped dirt.

Generally, when you’ve been knocked unconscious and most likely abducted, the sound of someone digging a deep hole is not what you want to hear.

Michael opened his eyes. He was face down on the ground. His hands were behind his back, something cool and hard binding them.

Handcuffs?

He glanced down seeing metal around his ankles as well. Yep, definitely handcuffed.

From what he could tell from his surroundings they were somewhere in the bush.

*-What now, Dad?*

Beth was crouching down next to Michael’s head. Staring past him to where he could only assume Derek was digging a hole to bury him alive. Any point to staying still?

Not like he was going to be able to hop away. So he rolled onto his stomach, affording him a view of Derek’s shoulders and head.

He had already dug pretty deep, how long had Michael been out? Derek glanced at him.

‘You can scream if you want. We’re in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Never been a great screamer. Good runner. But my legs are cuffed, you don’t suppose you could...?’

Derek smiled. ‘You know, I like you Detective. You’re not like most of the city cops that come up. But you know, don’t you?’

‘That you most likely murdered a fourteen year old girl? Yeah, it clicked when you hit me in the back of the head with a basketball trophy.’

‘You knew when you saw that photo. The dots connected in your eyes. How’d you know I was lying about Alexander?’

‘Winston has the same photo. Pointed out his son in it.’

‘Well, it was a risk. You could have seen a photo of Alexander when he was

young, seeing that you were investigating that children home and all. But you had already seen the photo so I had to say something. Either way, you would have started looking into things. Alexander, that asshole, always leaves shit like this up to me.

Now I'll have to pay a visit to Winston later,' Derek said, spitting into the hole he was digging.

'Hey man, I'm going to be buried in there soon.'

Derek grinned. 'Won't matter much to you, I'm going to beat you to death with this shovel first.'

'Way to spoil the ending. Not cool man,' Michael replied.

Derek smiled. Only it wasn't a smile. It was something twisted and cruel that looked like a smile but definitely was *not a smile*.

'You're a funny guy, Detective. I really wish I didn't have to do this,' Derek said, going back to digging.

'Well, just to make sure my Spidey sense is still working let me think out loud for a moment. Alexander is a little sociopath, likes killing animals. Maybe he got his two friends to like it also. Only, Will found out, went to discuss it with his parents. In Alexander's mind that was probably strike one for Will. Then he tried to stop Alexander and Sarah seeing each other. That's strike two. Now a sociopath like Alexander doesn't have any real connection or love for Sarah. So he tells her that they can ride the bus together knowing that she normally gets driven to school. This way he gets an alibi. Then he has you and Ryan kidnap her. All this to punish Will for standing up to Alexander. What I don't really understand is why you and Ryan helped him. Animals are one thing. Big jump going to people.'

Derek paused his digging and took a breath wiping sweat from his brow. 'We never kidnapped her. Just told her to wag school with us. She came willingly. But once we were out there, middle of nowhere, the three of us alone with a pretty girl like that.'

Bile rose in the back of his throat.

'Alexander urged on us. Helped hold her down. After that it was too late, we'd done it and Alexander had been taking photos on his phone. We didn't have a choice but to kill her.'

'There's always a choice.' Michael replied, staring at him.

'You're right. There is. We made ours. Been making that same choice ever since. It's a powerful thing, you know. Having dominion over someone. You can get addicted to that can of feeling,' Derek said, shovelling some more dirt.

'I'm assuming Daddy dearest covered it up. That's why Will poked a hole in

his throat. So what's the play here Derek, how do you plan to stop people asking questions of a cop going missing?'

'There's lots of ways Detective. Maybe you came and spoke to me about going to check a hunting ground to look for Will. Maybe he killed you. As long as I put a bullet in Will's head so he can't talk I don't suppose I'll have any issues. If I do, Alexander will probably pay someone some money and it will all go away.'

'Almost like you've done it before,' Michael said.

Derek was smarter than Michael had given him credit for. He preferred his demented murderers more henchman B than evil genius.

Derek shoveled some more dirt, and then finally he stopped and looked up at Michael. 'All done.'

He climbed out of the hole and walked to stand over Michael.

*-Guess you'll be coming to live with me after all, Dad.*

Beth was standing next to Derek, looking down at him. A crow cawed loudly above their heads, sitting on a tree branch. It looked like the same crow he and Anna saw at the hotel.

Derek raised his shovel.

Michael didn't close his eyes. He wanted to see it fall. Derek brought the shovel down.

A gunshot sounded.

A bullet punctured Derek's shoulder, the force sending him tumbling backwards.

The crow cawed again and took to wing. Silence.

At first Michael thought Derek was dead. But then he started groaning. Leaves crunched under boots.

Then someone came out of the bush armed with a rifle, covered in a camo poncho. He walked over to Derek and smashed him in the face with the butt of his gun. Then he turned and looked at Michael.

'Will,' Michael said.

'Detective Teller,' Will said, 'sorry about your partner. I didn't know who you were then. But I spoke to my brother and to Lisa and they convinced me you weren't one of the bad ones. That you weren't a part of...*this*.'

Michael frowned in confusion. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've been following you. Figured if you asked enough questions you'd probably get into trouble.' Will glanced down at Derek. 'Been trying to get at the truth

for years, then Derek goes and tells you the whole story in five minutes.’

There were tears in his eyes, but they didn’t fall, they swam amongst the darkness of his irises.

‘What are you going to do, Will?’

‘Best you don’t know that Detective. It’s not something that will let you sleep at night.’

He took two steps towards Michael and smashed the rifle butt down on his head.

Everything went black.

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Michael woke up to his head throbbing and a beeping noise. He opened his eyes and stared out the front window of his car. The beeping noise was from his driver side door being open. Michael blinked.

He was on the Northern highway, outside of Littleton. Will had dropped him off?

Michael raised a shaking hand to the keys in the ignition and started the car.

Then he let his arm fall slack at his side.

He had nearly died.

His stomach swirled. He took a slow shaking breath. He didn’t think nearly dying would bother him. Maybe it was because someone else had been about to do it instead of him having control of the gun.

He leaned forward, resting his head against the steering wheel, his mind processing what had happened.

Will was most likely doing god knows what to Derek right about now. He could call it in, but then, how many of the cops up here were under Derek’s thumb? How many knew the truth, how many would protect that truth from seeing the light of day?

Then another thought occurred to him.

What if Derek had sent someone to get Anna?

Michael sat upright and pulled out onto the highway. He patted his own body down as he drove, searching for his phone.

He didn’t find it.

Derek had probably ditched it. Which meant he couldn’t call ahead. So instead



he drove. *Fast.*

It took him five minutes to pull out the front of their hotel room. He rushed to Anna's door and banged loudly.

No answer.

He kicked the door in. The place was empty.

The lamp next to her bed was knocked over, the chair near the desk scattered across the floor.

Signs of a struggle.

His heart thumped against his chest.

He walked over to the phone. Dialed Anna's mobile. It rang.

Someone picked up but didn't speak. 'Who is this?' Michael asked.

'Oh shit. Detective Teller, you're alive. Damn man, what happened to Derek?'

The voice belonged to Jimmy. Oaks crew.

Michael did his best to control his breathing. 'Do you have Anna?'

'Yeah, we do and man she is a tight piece of ass. You ever hit that Detective?'

Jimmy said.

Michael closed his eyes, repressing the urge to smash the phone against the wall. 'Is she alive?'

Silence, then muffled noise and Anna's voice shouting in pain. 'You hear that Detective?'

'Yes.'

'She's okay for now but my boys are getting a little restless. I mean Alexander told us not to touch her till he got here but shit, you can't blame a man right Detective? Besides, looks like you might have killed fat boy Derek. Tell you what, you come visit us, alone, no phone calls, no cops, and I'll see what I can do about stopping my boys from keeping her company?'

'I'll be there soon,' Michael said, his voice cold, calm. 'I'll be waiting.'

He hung up. For a moment he sat there. Rage spreading through his body like liquid fire.

Then he burst into motion, shattering the phone against the wall and screaming at the dent it left.

He turned and walked back to the car, popping the boot. Inside was a shotgun and a large duffel bag that belonged to Anna.

Michael wasn't really into guns.

Anna on the other hand didn't play around.

Michael unzipped the bag. Inside was an array of gear that'd do a SWAT team proud. Flash bangs, concussion grenade, smoke grenade. Two Glockes as well as Kevlar vests.

Michael eyed the concussion grenades, where the hell did she get these?

Concussion grenades were lethal inside a two-metre radius. They didn't spit out fragments and instead relied on concussive force to kill. They were mostly used for close combat encounters.

Anna sure knew how to get her hands on some crazy stuff.

Michael strapped on the vest and left the rest in the boot. He got into the car and headed for the warehouse he and Anna visited last time.

Only he didn't drive down the dirt road that led to the front, instead he continued past the place, pulled over to the side of the road next to the thick bush.

He got out, opened the boot and grabbed the grenades.

Then he walked through the bush, coming out at the side of the warehouse. He crouched down and eyed the entrance.

The rows of bikes were gone. There were only six bikes in total.

Jimmy had probably gotten rid of everyone but his inner circle. Stuff like kidnapping cops wasn't something you could trust to the whole Crew.

Which was good for Michael, the less people the better. Only problem was, Michael wasn't Anna. He couldn't drop three guys with his bare hands, nor was he particularly great with guns. He could shoot, had average aim.

He needed to get eyes on Anna. If he knew she wasn't in the blast radius then he could toss some concussion grenades in and hope to take most of them out.

He moved in a crouched run, stopping at the side of the warehouse. He paused, listening, but he could only hear his own breathing.

Shuffling down the outside of the building he paused, peeking around the corner.

There was a guy out front, looking like he was waiting for Michael to arrive. From the corner to where the man was standing was about thirty metres. No way could Michael cover that before the guy noticed.

He had to think of another way to get close. A thought occurred to him and he smiled.

He gripped the two concussion grenades, pulled the pins and held down the levers. Then he walked out towards the man at the door.

Because Michael was approaching from the side and the guy was staring

forwards at the entrance he didn't notice Michael until he had gotten close to him.

The man spun surprised and Michael smiled at him.

'Easy now. These are grenades, shoot me, or move, and we both die,' Michael said, as he kept walking closer.

The man paused, staring at the grenades in Michael hand and his face went pale.

'What the fuck man.'

'Hey, I don't like it either,' Michael said, 'now walk me in, stay in front of me and lead me straight to Jimmy. Get me close and you might survive.'

The man glared at Michael then nodded slowly. He turned, banged on the door and a face appeared in the gap, glancing at him.

'I got the cop,' he said.

The door opened and they stepped inside.

Michael let his hands fall by his sides and closely followed the man in front of him. He led Michael over to a table where four guys were drinking. Jimmy was in the middle. His shirt was off, showing his tattooed body. He looked up as they approached.

'Detective, you made it. He alone?' he asked the guy in front of Michael.

'Yeah,' the guy replied and kept walking towards the table.

'Where's Anna?' Michael said.

They were half way to the table. He could see Jimmy grinning.

'Alexander said not to touch her so we didn't. She's safe and sound,' Jimmy said, 'but you really are a dumb fuck for coming down here.'

Michael kept moving forward behind the man.

Jimmy frowned when the guy in front didn't stop walking. Three metres, Jimmy pulled a gun.

Two metres.

Too late for Jimmy.

Michael held up the grenades.

'No one move. These things are fragile man, the slightest movement and we all become paste together. I've already pulled the pins. I die, I drop these, blast radius of two of these things is easily enough to kill everyone here.'

Jimmy's face froze. So did the three guys remaining at the table. They stared at the grenades.

'Go get Anna, *now*.'

Jimmy glanced at one of his guys and nodded.

The man moved slowly from the table and headed towards an adjacent room. 'So you take orders from Alexander? He helping you move drugs?' Michael said.

'Move drugs?' Jimmy shook his head. 'You still haven't figured it out huh Detective. He didn't move drugs for us. He bought them. Not even that much either. Paid real big for small batches, you know, to keep it discreet. Hell if I know why man, but a cash cow like that ain't easy to give up,' Jimmy said, then smiled at Michael. 'What do you think's going to happen here, Detective? You think you're going to get out of here? Think you're going to trade with us for her? It's not going to go down like that.'

Michael smiled coldly. 'Jimmy, I've been putting a gun in my mouth just short of pulling the trigger every night for the last three months. I've been hearing my dead daughter talk to me. I see her sitting beside me. Like she's real. Only she's not real. So trust me when I tell you I'm not in the state of mind to be holding lethal grenades. And you can imagine the kind of impact it had when Derek tried to kill me and I come back to find you have kidnapped my partner. Man I could just blow us all up right here and not give a shit,' Michael said, pretending to throw the grenade.

'Don't!' Jimmy shouted.

Michael stopped and smiled at him. 'There won't be any negotiating. If you don't want to become chunks of flesh then shut the fuck up.'

Jimmy swallowed and didn't speak again.

A moment later a guy appeared with a gun pressed into Anna's back. Anna's clothes were tattered. She had dried blood down her face where she had been hit in the head. Her lip was swollen and one of her eyes was half closed. Her shirt was bleeding where her injured shoulder was. Her stitches had ripped.

She had probably struggled when they tried to take her.

'Tell him to bring her over here,' Michael said, loud enough for the man to hear.

'Do it,' Jimmy snapped.

Anna walked over to where Michael was. He smiled reassuringly at her.

'You okay?' Michael said.

She looked into his eyes. Nodded slowly. She grabbed the gun from the guy standing in front of Michael.

'So now what Detectives? See, now that she's here, I don't think you're going to drop those grenades,' Jimmy said.

'You don't think at all Jimmy, that's what led you to where you are now,'

Michael replied, tossing one of the concussion grenades up into the air. Everyone's eyes snapped to it. Then they all moved.

Some drew weapons while running for cover. Others didn't waste the effort and dove for the bar.

Michael lunged to the right pulling Anna along with him.

An explosion sounded.

The force of the shockwave hit them. Michael was lifted off his feet and flew forwards, smashing into the wall.

His ears pinged out. The world spun.

His chest heaved, but his body couldn't get any air. Then a gun fired and all hell broke loose.

## Chapter Nineteen

The world decided to stop spinning.

Michael blinked, and stared at the destruction around him. The tables and chairs were shattered messes.

There were two dead bodies lying broken and full of shattered bits of wood.

Another guy had been blasted all the way over to where Michael was despite running in the opposite direction.

His arm was bent at an odd angle and his neck was twisted. Anna was at his right, firing his gun.

Michael glanced down. His left arm had a giant piece of wood punched through it. Bits of debris had embedded themselves in his vest. Other than that he seemed okay. He looked up to where Anna was firing.

Jimmy along with two guys were bunkered down by the bar, returning fire.

Michael moved and his body responded like it was in quicksand. Anna grabbed hold of him, helping to drag him back towards the car pits. They dropped down taking cover.

‘What now?’ she asked.

‘Got these flash bangs,’ he said.

She glanced at the grenades Michael was carrying. ‘What are you waiting for?’

Michael stood and tossed the flash bangs over the bar. ‘Shit!’ someone shouted.

Then they went off and a cry of pain sounded. Anna sprinted out from the pit, and closed in on the bar. Four loud pops then silence.

‘Clear,’ she said.

Michael crawled out of the pit. He walked over to where Anna was. .

Jimmy and his two buddies were laid out on the floor. Each of them had two shots to the chest. Jimmy was still breathing, clutching at the wound, staring at Michael and Anna.

‘You’re both dead...when the crew finds out. When Alexander finds out...you’re done...’ Jimmy said, blood dripping from his mouth.

‘Maybe. Then again maybe I’ll burn this place to the ground and no one will know what happened.’

Jimmy smiled. ‘Dumb shit, you don’t even know what any of this is even about,’ he coughed, more blood splattering from his throat.

‘Why don’t you tell me Jimmy, what was Alexander buying from you?’

Jimmy smiled, and then he coughed again and went still. Michael stared down at the body, his mind racing

‘Michael,’ Anna said, ‘we need to call this in.’ ‘We can’t,’ he said, heading for the door.

He explained to her what happened with Derek as he walked. Why the Oaks had come after her.

‘So the three of them are murderers. And Alexander, he’s in deep with the Oaks crew. But what was he paying them for?’

‘I have no idea. But we need to get the hell out of here.’

‘Michael, there’s a piece of wood sticking out of your arm. You need to go to hospital. I’ll call direct to Perth and inform HQ.’

Michael paused, thinking about it then nodded slowly. They went back to the car. Headed for the hospital.

Michael sat in the passenger seat, his mind restless. Something wasn’t sitting right in his gut. Jimmy’s words...they were eating away at him. What was he missing?

Derek Bell. Alexander Sholts. Ryan Wilshire.

There was a third person. If he had stayed in close contact with Alexander like Derek had...

Michael grabbed the laptop and booted up the police database. He typed in a name.

Ryan Wilshire.

He got a hit. Ryan Wilshire, assistant director of child services. It had a picture next to the profile.

Michael had seen him before.

It was the guy at the hospital. The one the admin staff had been telling visiting times were over.

The thing is, Ryan Wilshire was based in Perth.

So what the hell was he doing hanging around the hospital. Was he following Michael?

No, he wouldn’t be asking about visiting hours if that was the case.

...Catching?

‘Drive fast. I think Isabel Catching is in danger.’ Anna floored it.

They pulled up out the front of the hospital and headed inside.

As soon as they walked through the emergency doors the nurses took one look

at them and called for doctors immediately.

Michael walked straight to admin and flashed his identification. 'Isabel Catching. I need you to check on her. *Now,*' he said. 'Sir one moment we need to tend to your-'

Michael turned and headed for the doors.

'Sir, wait you can't-, ' he ignored her and stepped through, making his way through emergency to the wing where Catching was.

Her door was open. A horrid feeling entered his stomach. He stepped inside.

Catching was gone. The window was open.

A nurse appeared next to him.

'What are...' her voice trailed off when she noticed the empty room. 'What happened to the girl that was in here?'

'I...she was here,' the nurse said. 'Did anyone come to see her?' 'No,' she shook her head. 'No one.'

Michael strode into the room and glanced out the window. It led to the outside of the hospital, and anyone could have entered through the window.

Michael turned to the nurse and flashed his identification. 'I want the hospital searched. *Now.*'

'What do you think happened?' Anna said.

Michael shook his head. 'I don't know. But Derek, Ryan and Alexander killed Sarah Dallington and Ryan has been here, sniffing around the hospital.'

'You think he took her?' Anna frowned.

'Maybe. Maybe she saw something the day she came back here. Maybe she knows who lit that fire,' he said. 'Let's help them look.'

They began searching. Asking if anyone had seen a bald man hanging around.

But no one had seen anything and Michael was left standing out the front of the hospital with no idea of where to go next.

The sun was almost set.

Darkness was falling over Littleton.

And Michael had no clue where Catching was.

A caw sounded and Michael stared at the roof of his car.

Standing atop it was a crow, tilting its head at Michael studying his face. Then it turned and took to wing and flew off towards the bush.

Towards the children's home.

*-Follow it, Dad.*



Beth, next to him. 'Beth I-'

*-Follow it.*

Michael clenched his jaw, got in his car and drove to the children's home. The sun set as he drove over. He turned the car off and got out, grabbing his flashlight.

The Crow was perched on a piece of rubble that stood up in the air.

Michael walked carefully towards it. As he got closer he realised that bits of the rubble had been moved revealing a steel door in the floor that was flung back, showing a set of steps. Michael hesitated for a second, then slowly stepped downwards and descended into the darkness.

The steps ended in a dirty hallway. Michael raised his flashlight, illuminating twenty metres of passageway before fading.

How far down did this hall go?

He drew his gun, wincing as he raised the torch to support his weapon.

The air cool against his skin as he moved forwards. Twenty metres in he came to a door.

He paused, stilled his thudding heart, then slowly reached out a hand and pushed it open. Within was a small empty room.

Michael released the breath he had been holding and turned back to the hallway, continuing forward.

Another ten metres and the hall ended in a half open metal door. As he stepped inside his flashlight illuminated the body of a man lying on the ground, blood pooling around him. His throat had been slit. His hands had tiny defensive cuts.

Beside him was a phone.

The body belonged to Ryan Wilshire.

Michael knelt down and picked the phone up. On the screen was a text message from Alexander Sholts: *Meet me under the Children's Home*

Michael's finger shook as he pressed the call button. A phone vibrated in the same room as him.

He snapped his gun and flashlight up in the direction of the vibrations.

They illuminated a girl wearing hospital clothes, a scalpel in her hand. She had brown hair that framed her. A scar ran down her cheek. In the shadows behind her was a bench in the shape of an X that had straps for holding someone down.

'Hello Detective,' Isabella Catching said.

Suddenly things from Catching's story stabbed at him. The car crash.

Her waking up by the river. Searching for food and water.

Being taken by the Ricksha Teld to Scrived Elchis. Taken to Solemn Strand.  
Dragged beneath the earth by Servants. Taken through the dark hallways to a  
room.

Fed the black blood and delivered to the Monsters that eats your colours....  
Realisation hit him and the implications of that realisation made tears sting his eyes.

There never was another world. Catching *had* been found by her Dad's car by  
child services. Only in her story they were the Ricksha'Teld. She had been taken there  
to be processed. But the assistant director of child services, Ryan Wilshire, had  
intervened. No parents. No family to come and ask questions. Catching's story  
overlapped with reality as he remembered what the Ricksha'Teld had said to her...

*'Truth. I am one that makes things not exist and He is the one that makes things  
wish, they did not exist.'*

So he had sent her to Solemn Strand...Littleton Children's home. The Servants,  
Joshua Lenning and Peter Worth, the two men that worked at there collected her.

*They dragged me towards the cold of the wooden building by my wrists. I  
clawed at the floor trying to stop them.*

They had taken her into the Children's home, to that metal door and ferried her  
down here. She was kept in that small room Michael had seen earlier. Fed the 'black  
blood', which were the drugs to put her to sleep that Peter and Joshua bought from the  
Oaks crew. The reason Alexander paid them so much for it was because he was buying  
their silence.

Then she was brought to this room, strapped down on that bench and...

A tear slid down Michael's cheeks. The monsters eating her colours was the  
abuse she suffered here at the hands of Alexander Sholts. Derek's words drifted across  
his mind...

*It's a powerful thing, you know. Having dominion over someone. You can get  
addicted to that kind of feeling.*

Catching had been telling him the truth all along, only from a perspective he  
couldn't understand. She was the ghost of the Children's home.

All these thoughts had happened in seconds and Michael glanced at the phone  
in Catching's hand and he suddenly knew what had happened.

'It was you,' he whispered.

Catching stared at him, not saying a word.

'The body we found burned at the children's home belongs to Alexander  
Sholts. You killed him, then set the place on fire, but not before you became the

‘ghost’ and got the kids to safety. You then made your way to the river and waited to be found. Only, before you did you took Alexander’s phone with you. You messaged Derek and Ryan pretending to be Alexander. Telling them not to worry about Isabel Catching. Then when I showed up, you told me a story I couldn’t believe. Buying yourself time. Because no one knew Alexander was dead, you used his phone to lure people out. You stole a scalpel and you ambushed them. Peter Lenning. Joshua Worth. Kevin Bell. Ryan Wilshire. You killed them.’

Catching didn’t so much as blink.

‘You’re missing the part about Will Dallington,’ Catching said. ‘He was the first person that came to see me. Heard that I had gone to another world. Asked if I saw Sarah there. He told me his story, Detective. The complete truth of it. So I told him mine. Then it was just a matter of getting him to leave a big enough impression on you to get you to start sniffing around Sarah Dallington’s murder. Apparently putting a knife in your partner’s shoulder did the trick. I had to keep you busy. If you showed up at the hospital when I wasn’t there that would have been a problem.’

‘You sent the Oaks a message pretending to be Alexander. You got them to take Anna.’

‘No Detective, Derek sent them a message saying they had taken you and the Oaks acted in their best interests and grabbed Anna. I sent them a message keeping her alive. But I couldn’t tell them to let her go, because then they’d get suspicious and probably kill her.’

Michael’s jaw tightened. She had played him from the start. The flowerbed trampled outside her window was from her coming and going when she headed out to kill.

‘Why didn’t you tell me what had happened? I could have helped you.’ ‘I did, Detective.’

He shook his head. ‘That story wasn’t real.’

‘I told you in the beginning that it’s a story you wouldn’t believe. But I never said that the story wasn’t true. You have two stories now. One is from a girl who was taken to another world. The other is from a girl who was taken in this one. Both stories are true. Which one you believe is up to you.’ She dropped the scalpel and walked to the door. As she came level with him he spoke.

‘Crow. You said she told you her real name. What was it?’

‘Sarah,’ she replied, and then continued forward without another word. Sarah Dallington. Michael swallowed then turned and raised his weapon. ‘Stop, Catching, I

can't let you go. You've killed people.'

'All I did was kill some monsters. Isn't that what heroes do? 'It's still murder.'

She stopped at the doorway but didn't look back.

'Detective, I'm going to spend the rest of my life chasing colours. I'm going to replace everything they took from me. I'm going to have a *life*. You're a good man Detective Teller, that's why I know you won't shoot.'

She darted forward, vanishing into the hall. Shit.

Michael lowered his gun and ran after her, but his body was so battered he couldn't pursue her very fast.

He emerged from the steps, moonlight shining down on him.

In the distance, Catching stood at the edge of the bush. A giant crow nestled in the tree above her. She was looking back at him and a smile danced across her face and for the first time since he had met her, it reached her eyes.

Then she turned and was gone.

He didn't chase her.

## Chapter Twenty

There is a small town, in the middle of nowhere called Littleton. A day ago no one knew it existed.

Now its name was plastered on every newspaper in the country along with the name's of Ryan Wilshire, Derek Bell and Alexander Sholts.

Corruption, imprisonment, rape, abuse of minors, the list was extensive. Along with that came the 11 murders that had taken place in the last three days, including Catching's victims and the Oaks crew. Derek's body was never found but he was presumed dead. The story shocked the nation. Especially when the police raided every single Children's Home Alexander had been involved in and found similar basements in all of them. They managed to rescue two other girls. They took bodies out of other ones.

Michael and Anna were suspended pending review for not following police protocol.

A month had gone by since everything happened. Michael was standing at a gravestone. He was quiet, head bowed, the sun warming the side of his face.

*-Here lies Beth Teller, Beloved Daughter.*

Beth appeared, sitting on her own tombstone.

*-Why did you lie, Dad?*

'You mean about the report?' he asked.

Michael had omitted Catching's part in the murders. He had also left out Will.

He had completely fabricated a story about a disagreement between Alexander, Derek and Ryan and the Oaks crew. Went on record and said that Will was a paranoid but relatively harmless old man and that Catching had gone missing...fled for fear of her life. He had promptly been suspended.

*-If you had of told them the truth, then you might not have been suspended.*

'But then a manhunt would ensue for Isabel Catching and Will Dallington and I'm not sure they deserve that.'

*-They're vigilantes Dad.*

'Depends on which story you believe is true.'

*-You think Catching is a girl who went to another world?*

'I think something happened. Something we might not be able to explain.

Maybe she didn't go to another world. Instead, she saw this one for what it

truly is.’

*-The colours of the soul?*

Michael nodded slowly. No matter how hard he thought about it he knew it was impossible for Catching to know about his daughter Beth. So that left only one other option: she really had seen him trapped beneath a pile of bodies.

‘If our souls are painters that brush our emotions in colour, that brighten our bodies, minds and hearts. Trauma, suffering, pain, those are the things that erase those colours. Monsters can be many things. It could be a person, a bully, an abuser, an assaulter or a manipulator. But it can also be yourself; the low self-esteem, the depression, the self-loathing, the monster you create in your own heart. All these things can infect you with The Grey. And if the abusers, the assaulters, the manipulators, the bullies don’t stop, the Grey will spread a little inside you each day. And if the depression, the self-loathing, the low self-esteem, the self-hate doesn’t stop then the Grey only festers. Suffering has to end, only then healing can begin.’

*-And if you can’t make it stop?*

‘Then you keep trying until it does. You try every damn day until your soul heals and the Grey fades and along the way you might have people that love you enough to help you. And if you don’t that’s okay, journeys are all different, but the destination is the same,’ Michael said, staring at his daughter.

She smiled at him, a touch of sadness in her eyes.

*-Is it time to say goodbye?’*

Tears stung Michael’s eyes and a lump formed in his throat. ‘You’re the person I love the most in the world.’

*-But my death is your monster Dad, and it’s eating all your colours.*

Michael’s breathing shook. ‘I need to let you go.’

Beth smiled. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

*-I’m glad you finally figured it out Dad. I love you. See you on the other side.*

And just like that she faded and was gone. Something in Michael’s chest tore. He cried.

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