

WATERHOLE

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Prologue

There's a spirit living in the river near my home. She lies in the clear, green depths waiting for her lost lover to return. The weight of a thousand years of water has passed over her. But she is patient. When the young, strong men come to swim in that cool water, she calls them to her. They come. And they drown. She pulls them deep between the boulders and channels to lie with her. Sixteen men have drowned in this place, no women. The tribal elders say she's still there now and she'll never give up searching and calling for her man.

One

They say the stages of grief are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

You're supposed to progress through them in a predictably human way. You're supposed to. But it took me a while to get to number five. It wasn't completely my fault. Whoever designed this model didn't take into account what happens when the dead person hangs around for a while.

Let's get something straight – I don't believe in ghosts and all that spiritual stuff. I'm not the kind of person who likes creepy stories. I've heard lots in my time, things like how old Mrs Ashworth hears her departed husband calling her from the graveyard every night after she goes to bed or the one about the teenaged drunk driver who killed himself and four of his friends, and forever paces the dark highway moaning in a guilt-wracked eternity.

I never believed in any of that. I didn't believe in much at all. But then mum died and I used to see her all the time.

The first time something unusual happened, the first time I realized things were not quite right, was the last day of

school before Christmas break. Most of the other boarders had left and I was killing time in the library before I had to see the counsellor, Mr Greenwood. He wanted to “check in” with me before I left for holidays. I wasn’t your classic library nerd or anything but the library was a haven for me. It was church quiet and after the hordes of day-girls went home it was always pretty much deserted.

‘Good afternoon, Sunny.’ The librarian, Mr Fletcher, sort of sighed my name as I walked past the front desk. He angled his bald, wrinkly head to the side as if disappointed in something I’d done. I’ve since realized that this is the look people reserve for waifs or orphans or whatever you want to call people like me.

‘Afternoon, Sir,’ I muttered, hurrying past.

‘Taking some books home for the holidays?’ he called after me.

Now that I was sixteen I was allowed to do that – one of the privileges of being a Saint Clarence’s senior and believe me, there weren’t that many.

‘Yeah, maybe, Mr Fletcher.’ I ducked into the fiction section to avoid any chance of further chit chat. Conversation avoidance had become my *modus operandi*. I found it to be the easiest and most efficient way to get through the school day and could go from breakfast to bedtime without saying more than a couple of words to anyone. Mind you having a recently deceased mother was like having a sign around your neck saying ‘Please do not disturb.’

I found my way to ‘Fiction – S to U’ and keeping one eye firmly on Fletcher – because even though he walked with a

stick, he was lightning fast at getting around the library – I pulled down *The Catcher in the Rye*. I knew exactly where it was on the shelf. It was my ‘go to’ book when I couldn’t find any other decent ones.

The main character, Holden, was the closest thing I’d ever had to a boyfriend. We had a lot in common because he felt kind of alone in the world. But he didn’t feel sorry for himself, not in the way you’d think; he was just bewildered by humanity. I’d always thought that if we’d met, Holden would’ve liked a girl like me. He was a harsh judge of character and for that reason alone I reckon we’d get on pretty well.

I sat, cross-legged, half-way down the aisle and flicked through the yellowed pages in my lap. I always felt a kind of peace in the library, like there was protective power in the books surrounding me. It’s not like I wanted to read them all but I found comfort in the fact that the people living between those pages had lives that were far more tragic and pathetic than mine.

Despite my connection with Holden Caulfield, he wasn’t getting through to me that day. I wasn’t really taking in the words, just turned a page every now and then so if Mr Fletcher saw me he wouldn’t get suspicious and tell the counsellor. It was bad enough I was having a fictional relationship with a fictional boy but according to the teachers I was a little unstable. They’d been helicoptering around me since mum died so I had to remember to act normal at all times.

As I sat there pretending to read, the skin on my arms suddenly shrank up two sizes too small for my body. It was

at that precise moment I had my first what I would call, experience. A kind of shudder went through me. It was like when someone walks up behind you and you know someone's there even though you haven't turned around to look. You feel a presence and the hairs on the back of your neck fan up.

I had an overwhelming urge to turn around and look behind me. Someone was there. No not just someone. My mother. I wanted to confirm it with my eyes but at the same time I knew it didn't make sense. So instead I said something really stupid.

'Mum?' I took a deep breath and with a racing heart I made myself look around.

Shelves, books, green carpet.

I turned back and leant on my hands, breathed in and out slowly like mum showed me when I was little and I had scraped my knees and needed to get through the pain without blubbering. Slowly with each ragged breath, the feeling ebbed away.

When my wits returned I crawled on my hands and knees to the end of the aisle to see if Fletcher had heard me. But he was just staring at his computer screen like normal, shiny blue squares reflected in his glasses, his stick leaning up against the bench.

I knelt there for a second, heat crawling up my cheeks. Mum couldn't actually be there in the library of Saint Clarence's – the laws of physics precluded that. Firstly she had been dead for nearly three months and secondly, she was ashes scattered at her childhood home in Constant Creek a few hundred kilometres away. I was left with a sense not like

the heaviness on my chest I had felt for months, more like a handful of ice-cubes down the back of my shirt.

‘Idiot,’ I mumbled and crawled back to my spot in Fiction – S to U. I picked up the book, but my fingers trembled as I turned the pages and looked at the jumble of words.

‘Ms Maguire.’ It was Fletcher. ‘Are you looking for something?’ I glanced up and the librarian was there, leaning on his stick. One of the many seams in his face had split into an inquiring smile. I still don’t know how he got there so fast – the girls at school used to say he could teleport.

‘No.’

He must have seen the deathly white of my skin because the seams of his face quickly re-joined. ‘Are you alright, Sunny? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

I made a huge mistake. I told Mr Greenwood, the counsellor. I don’t know why I did it. I guess I was in shock or something.

‘You thought she was there in the library? He took off his glasses as if that would somehow make things clearer.

‘Yeah, sort of. I mean just for a second. It was...’ I was standing in front of his desk, my thumbs hooked into my backpack.

‘Why don’t you sit down, Sunshine.’

My whole body tensed. Almost no one called me ‘Sunshine’. I was chronically embarrassed by the hippy name my mother had seen fit to bestow on me in a moment of after-birth euphoria and I had taken great pains to hide this crippling piece of information from the cruel, judgemental

world. But no matter how many times I told him, Greenwood always called me Sunshine as though seeing my name on some file had seared that particular sequence of letters into his brain where they remained forever imprinted.

He cleared his throat. 'So, tell me more about this feeling you had.'

Profoundly regretting any mention of what had just happened, I pulled up a chair and shrugged off the backpack. 'It doesn't matter,' I said. Some major backpedalling would be required to fix this situation. 'You wanted to see me before I went home?' I tried to smile.

'Sunshine, it's not uncommon for people to *think* they see their loved-one somewhere after they pass...'

'I didn't actually see anything, it's nothing. Maybe I'm just going a little nuts.'

That was a pretty stupid thing to say to a counsellor.

He shook his head. 'I wouldn't say that.'

I laughed. 'No, I guess that wouldn't be very professional.' Trying to make a joke of it somehow made me sound even more deranged. 'Look it was nothing,' I said. 'You wanted to see me about something though?'

'Right. Yes,' he seemed a little reluctant to leave the topic.

'It's just that my bus leaves soon,' I added. 'And I have to get my bags ready, so ...'

'Right, yes of course,' he said. 'I wanted to ask how you're feeling about going home.'

'Oh you mean, how do I feel about going home to Kevin? Yeah, great, can't wait.' I was a little prone to sarcasm, I admit it.

‘Your father is very concerned about you.’

‘Step-father.’

‘Oh yes. Of course.’ Greenwood frowned. ‘Your...Kevin and I spoke on the phone today, he’s looking forward to you being home.’

‘Really? Well that makes one of us.’

He sighed. I think I wore him out a little. ‘Well, if you need to talk about anything, I’m here. You can email or call.’

I reached down for my backpack, sensing I was about to be released. ‘Sure. Okay. I will.’ I had no intention of making any contact with Greenwood via any kind of technology.

‘I’m only trying to help you, you know, Sunshine. Remember that.’

I stood and slung my pack over one shoulder. ‘It’s okay, Sir. I know you are.’

The truth is I didn’t want to talk about it, to him or anyone else. There was nothing to talk about. Mum had crashed the old Datsun into a tree. She was dead.

Full stop.

I was cut up about it, more than anyone could know or understand. My insides were shredded, but that was that, and I had to get on with things. Humans have an incredible capacity to carry on regardless of all sorts of crazy stuff going on in their lives. The world is full of broken people pretending to be all put together.

I hid in my room until it was time to go to the bus. I figured Greenwood, despite his obvious lack of any-credible-qualifications-in-psychoanalysis-what-so-ever, had to be right. What happened in the library was just a glitch

brought on by the grief of losing my mother. I managed to make myself believe that for a while.

But now I know better, because that wasn't the only time I saw her. And as it turned out she had her reasons for hanging around.

Two

It was a two hour bus journey from my boarding school in Dawson to Constant Creek. I sat with my head against the window as the sugar cane fields blurred by and thought about the fact that Kevin would be waiting for me at the bus stop in the little main street. He'd pick me up now, not mum. These are the little things that tear your heart out.

I hadn't seen him since the last school holidays which were spent arranging the funeral at the Constant Creek crematorium. And no matter which way I imagined it, this new beginning was bound to be uncomfortable for both of us.

What can I say about Kevin? Kevin is my step-father. Mum met him four years ago at the mechanic's in Dawson. Her big old FJ Holden had broken down again. I called the old ute a bomb. She called it a vintage car. I was with her when she took the car in, a twelve year old waiting impatiently in the front seat as the adults talked for way too long.

'What's up with the old girl, Lily?' Kevin said as mum got out of the car.

At some point in the mechanics of things they'd reached first name terms.

'Hi Kevin. Pretty sure it's the gear box this time.' She sighed patting the domed bonnet.

'Thought you'd have a go at that yourself,' he said.

'I'm afraid changing the oil is about my limit.'

There was definitely flirting going on, old people flirting but flirting nonetheless. I was twelve years old and not unaware of when men tried to chat up my mum – she was a natural beauty after all.

'Okay, let's have a look at her.' He lifted the bonnet so I could no longer see them.

Turns out they had a lot to talk about. They shared a love of old cars, both wanted to live on the land. Mum thought he was great and fell in love with his blue, blue eyes. I've always thought blue eyes are completely over-rated.

Pretty soon they were going out and about year after that mum married him. I guess she was happy when he came along. Happier. Though I'd always thought we were fine on our own. Mum seemed to think it was some sort of wild coincidence that she, a car lover, and he, a mechanic, could actually get together.

'A match made in heaven,' she used to say. 'Do you realize how lucky that is, Sunny?'

Of course, Greenwood was right. I had to go home. I had to see Kevin. Bloody hell, I had to live with him until I was legally old enough not to. He was my legal guardian now, mainly because there wasn't really anyone else. I did have a real dad of course. Everyone does. But mine

was a stranger I didn't even remember. We had a photo somewhere but it was just him standing on his own holding up a big fish he'd caught in some river a long time ago. He didn't seem to have anything to do with me or mum. She told people he was out of the picture but I did wonder if anyone had bothered to tell the man who fathered me about the accident.

I don't like thinking about it, the accident that is, because it starts a nervous feeling in my stomach. The shredded bits of my insides flap around and then tie themselves in knots, wringing and wringing inside me. No matter how many times I go back to it I get the same pain – it hasn't eased like people said it would. That's one of those lies people tell.

You'll get over it.

No you won't. Not like they mean.

Anyway, it was an accident and my theory was that accidents happen when a series of events line up, a set of freaky coincidences. In the airline industry they call it the 'Swiss cheese effect', that is, for some reason all the random holes in the slices of the cheese line up, creating a way through for a set of events to occur that would not normally occur.

Here is what happened to my mother.

First hole – the Craigsville show was on that weekend. Second hole – she made a chocolate mud cake for the show's cake competition and put it into the oven. Third hole (here's where things start to go wrong) – one of the cows (Connie, a profoundly stupid – even by cow standards, bony, little Jersey) got caught in a barbed wire fence near the

house and Mum had to run outside and help Kevin free her. Fourth hole – the cake burnt.

I can just hear her. ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph!’ She used that particular expression a lot, which was strange for a woman who had become a Buddhist. I think she got it from Grandma.

Anyway that night she had to stay up really late to make another one and then she was totally zapped for the drive to the show the next day – fifth hole.

The following morning she got up at early and nudged Kevin.

‘You coming, Kev? Cake’s got to be in to the show by 7.30.’

But Kevin decided to stay home that trip, he had too much to do around the place or so he must have said – hole number six.

Then came number seven. He said: ‘Take the Datsun so I can work on the FJ.’

It’s a long drive to Craigsville, an hour or so from Constant Creek along narrow roads that meander through sugar cane country then merge onto the main coastal highway. But mum never made it that far. I can only imagine what happened because no-one will ever really know. Her eyes started to get heavy, her head lolled, and the old Datsun sedan swerved straight into the old gum tree at a hundred clicks. The car became a maelstrom of metal and plastic, the tree severing and twisting it like Aluminium foil.

And mum, well I had imagined the different ways you can imagine this. I’d been to the driver’s education talks by

the police. I'd seen the photos of human roadkill. Those scenarios with all the broken bones and the blood and disjointed limbs jutting out at unnatural angles were too much, so I had chosen a more palatable one where she was knocked out cold, not a mark on her. Her face perfect and peaceful. Perhaps a little graze at her temple. But she was dead of course.

I was away at school when it happened but mum had told me about the cake show on the phone. The rest, I'd overheard Kevin telling his mother at the funeral, whispering it to her in dull monotone while she twisted her diamond rings on wrinkly fingers. But he told it like they were just things that happened on the day, he didn't see the connection, how they linked together in a deadly chain or how he was the crucial fatal link.

I had to blame someone; the question was who did I blame? The person who sent the stupid flyer about the cake show, the brainless cow for getting caught in the fence, or Mum for wanting to go to the stupid show in the first place – the truth is she was not that great at baking. You know how people choose something they really want to do and for some weird reason they are crap at it but they keep on going anyway.

I tried to tell her. Many a time I'd be shaking my head in disapproval, chewing some fancy cake she had made. She always made me taste them because she 'appreciated my honesty'.

'Just tell me straight, Sunny (wiping hands anxiously on apron). Is it any good?'

But when it comes to blame – Kevin takes the cake. He shouldn't have made her take that flimsy little Datsun. He shouldn't have had his head stuck inside some old ute. He should have gone with her. If he had, she would be alive. Simple. I told him so too, right after the funeral and that was the start of the cold war.

Finally the bus reached Constant Creek. As it slowed and I stared through the window at the little shop fronts with their faded signs hanging from the awnings. 'Shopping mall' was not a phrase the Constant Creek dwellers would have in their vocabulary. If it wasn't for the bitumen, the main street could have been straight out of some old cowboy movie, a few struggling shops, a post office, a pub. I half expected some drunks to burst through the doors of the hotel and start rolling around in the dust.

The bus glided to halt, hissing like an elephant beetle, and the door jerked open. Through the smeared window I saw a pensioner throw a bottle into a wheelie bin. 'Constant Creek Waste' was printed on the bin. Someone had spray-painted 'of space' underneath in large white letters. My thoughts exactly.

I scanned the street and saw Kevin's white Toyota parked on the other side of the narrow street. Lead sinkers attached themselves to my heart. I was back.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

The woman across the aisle glanced my way. Had I said that out loud?

Three

‘Welcome to Constant Creek.’ The bus driver’s droned over the intercom. He sounded kind of depressed and I had a strange urge to laugh. I dragged my backpack from the overhead locker and shuffled off with the others. There were only three people left on the bus – this little rural town was quite literally, the end of the line.

A few adventurous tourists came to Constant Creek to experience the quaintness and whatnot, and if they were into nature the rugged rainforest landscape and swimming holes, but apart from that, this place was so off map you wouldn’t even know it was there unless you really made an effort to find it.

Each time I returned I felt like a bit of a tourist. When your family ups stumps and moves you to a new place and you’ve spent most of that two years at boarding school, you have a permanent feeling of being temporary.

By the time I stepped onto the pavement, Kevin had appeared from nowhere, standing under the newsagency sign that hung from the awning above. He stood holding his hat across his stomach with one hand, the other hung by

his side. Embracing the farmer role, he wore a faded-blue chequered shirt and, despite the damp heat of summer, jeans that hung scarecrow-like from his skinny frame.

He was even thinner than when I saw him at the funeral, and gaunt – is that the word they use for someone whose face is tormented with guilt? He was tanned but somehow this didn't give him a healthy glow. His face seemed to absorb the bright country light and turn it into shadow.

Seeing him again was like going into a time machine, as if not a minute had passed since the funeral. The whole wretched term of boarding school vanished into some sort of black hole. I swallowed back the massive lump that was ascending my throat and threatening to choke me.

Kevin raised his hand, then walked over and grabbed my red suitcase from the driver who had pulled it from the locker under the bus. As Kevin wheeled it over to me my whole face ached with the effort of trying not to show any emotion. I wasn't even sure myself what would come out, anger or despair. I imagined from Kevin's pulsating jaw muscles that he was undergoing a similar facial challenge.

'Welcome home, Sunny,' he said, going in for a hug.

I stood with my arms hanging down and he came toward me in a waft of shaving cream. He had cut himself and a glob of blood had congealed in the corner crease between his upper and lower lip. Kevin patted me on the back and my rib cage vibrated like a hollow drum. I tried to relax but the best I could do was stand still and not resist.

As he squeezed me, my eyes drifted to the doorway of the fish and chip shop where Leanne, the owner, stood. She

was a friend of mum's; they'd gone to school together at the little primary school down the road. Thanks to mum I'd got a job working in Leanne's shop on the school holidays. She lifted her hand in a small wave of welcome. Her face was kind of haunted, maybe because I hadn't seen her since the funeral. We'd never really had a chance to talk on that day and I'd kept myself pretty hidden away until the holidays finished and it had been time to return to school.

I pulled away from Kevin, glad the disingenuous display of our affection was over.

'How are you?' Loaded question.

'Yeah, alright,' I said. Non-committal response, minimal eye contact.

We walked around the back of the bus toward Kevin's Toyota. Irritation festered in me at the sight of his stupid four-wheel-drive. Ever since we'd moved from Dawson where he'd been a plain old mechanic, he'd been becoming more and more countrified.

'Hey, Kevin! Wait a sec.' I turned towards the sound of the voice and saw Leanne waving an arm from across the road. She checked for non-existent traffic, then ran across the baking bitumen, her white apron flapping in the hot, still air.

'Hi, Leanne,' I said.

'Hello, Sunny.' She stepped forward and hugged me. 'How are you holding up, Sweetheart?'

'I'm OK,' I mumbled into her soft shoulder, again swallowing the persistent bulge that tried to ride up my throat.

She stood back and brushed back her crimped, sandy hair which made me think of two minute noodles. ‘It’s good to see you home.’ I watched her fingers go to the gold necklace hanging at her throat. As she played with the shiny crucifix it caught the sun and reflected tiny shards of light. ‘How has school been?’

‘Same as ever. Just school... you know.’ The sun bore down on us and I lifted my hand to shade my eyes. The light was too much; my face ached with it. I longed to get into the air-conditioned cab of the vehicle – that humming cool cocoon.

‘How are you, Leanne?’ said Kevin.

‘Oh, fine.’ She tucked loose hair behind an ear. ‘Actually I just wanted to tell Sunny I could use some help in the shop again, on Friday nights, or Saturdays.’ She glanced at me. ‘You know, if you want to, Sunny.’

I nodded. ‘Oh, okay. Thanks, that’d be good.’

‘Right then.’ Leanne started to back away. ‘I’ll give you a few days to settle in, alright. I’ll give you a call.’

‘Okay.’ I hoped she would ring. Working in the shop would be a welcome distraction from my pitiful life and I could definitely use the cash.

Her eyes lingered on Kevin for a moment and she looked as though she was going to say something else to him, but he was already ignoring her, focused on lifting my bright red suitcase onto the tray of the ute.

‘Okay bye then.’ She adjusted the noodles, gave me a quick smile and scurried back across the road.

It was mean about the hair. I know. I blame my negative frame of mind.

Kevin wedged my suitcase in behind his giant tool box. 'There we go,' he said. 'Let's hit the road.'

With a heavy sigh, I swung myself up into the ute and slammed the creaky door. This was it now – me and Kevin.

'How was the trip?'

'Long... It was alright.'

It felt wrong, just the two of us together like this. We'd never really been alone in the four years or so since he'd been on the scene. Mum had always been around before to dilute the weirdness between us. To me, we were strangers. I was the sixteen year-old orphan, Sunny, and he was the forty-five year old widower, Kevin, and the glue that had stretched and strained to hold us together was gone. We had nothing in common and we both knew it. I watched the bus pull into a U turn at the end of the street and wished I was on it.

Four

I guess my grandmother meant well, leaving the farm to mum in her will. Mum always said she wanted to return to Constant Creek for good one day, she grew up as a farm girl after-all and always wanted to grow stuff, be a real farmer instead of rotating various seasonal crops in our suburban back yard in Dawson and turning it into a market garden, but I never thought it would actually happen. I mean I had a life and friends and school in Dawson. I was a fourteen year old girl then. You don't just uproot someone like they're a lettuce that's gone to seed.

But two years ago that day came. Grandma died and mum became a landowner just like that. So here we were, residents of Constant Creek. The sweetener for me had been they let me stay on at my school, and become a boarder. At least that way I kept part of my old life. Grandma's money helped pay for that. Bless you for that small mercy Granny.

Kevin turned the key and the ute grumbled and shook to life with a diesel rumble. He took a hand from the steering wheel to light a cigarette.

‘What are you doing?’ I said. ‘You gave that up?’

‘Yep. I did.’ Kevin nodded, exhaling a stream of blue smoke.

As I focused on the cigarette and its reappearance into our lives I noticed it trembling just a tiny bit between his fingers. He moved it across to the other hand, like he was trying to hide the fact. Kevin had huge hands; the cigarette looked like a matchstick. I don’t know whether it was the physical work he’d done or what, but his fingers were thick beef sausages and his palms wide and flat like slabs of chuck steak. I could never imagine those meaty hands on my mother’s thin frame without grimacing.

‘You haven’t smoked for years. What would mum think?’

That got him for a second. ‘It’s just temporary,’ he said, cracking the window and flicking the ash.

I examined his worn face. ‘Can I have one?’

Kevin turned to look at me. ‘Don’t be stupid.’ He shook his head and concentrated on the road ahead. ‘What would your mum think?’

I half meant it, about the cigarette. I’d even bought a pack back at school but I wasn’t that good at smoking. I didn’t even really like it; it was just something to do. Greenwood would think that was the anger coming out. Stage two of grief. But he would be wrong. I just didn’t care – a slow death is as good as any.

As Kevin gazed at the road ahead, his blue eyes narrowed. Furrows of wrinkles splayed out from his eyes and he’s cultivated a few new rows since I saw him last.

I sighed and turned to the window. We had driven out

town leaving behind the smattering of houses that perched along the edge of the river and were headed towards the mountains.

‘It’s been a dry Autumn,’ he said.

‘Yeah.’ This is what we were reduced to. Weather talk.

We passed the servo and I twisted around to look at the rusted sign, a loose panel flapped in the wake of our vehicle. Someone had painted (in the sixties I was pretty sure) a picture of a Brahman bull, some sugar cane and a tractor ploughing a field.

“Welcome to Constant Creek – population 850.”

Lock up your daughters people.

‘Eight hundred and fifty people. Bloody hell, this place is such a dump?’ I said to no-one in particular.

Kevin shook his head and blew out twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. ‘More like seven-fifty now. Since they closed the mill.’

‘Or seven-forty-nine,’ I said, thinking of mum.

Kevin’s eyes slid sideways and he sucked hungrily on his cigarette. ‘What’s wrong, Sunny, Constant Creek too small for you these days?’

It had always been small, and even though I’d spent a few school holidays in the town, it was always hard to get used to the smallness all over again.

Not far from the petrol station we passed a young man in long cotton pants, a singlet and with bare feet walking along the left edge of the bitumen. Kevin didn’t slow down or even look sideways at the boy who had stepped back off the road to let us pass. Through my dusty window I caught

a glimpse of dark, straggly hair falling around serious black eyes. 'Who's that?' I said.

'Matthew Bright.'

'Bright?'

'His mum's renting the Harrison's farm next door to us.'

'Why didn't you give him a lift then?'

'It's not that far.' Kevin glanced into the rear vision mirror.

'Not very neighbourly of you,' I said twisting and looking through the back window as the boy shrank away. 'You could've offered.' I knew the code of outback Queensland roads. You always offered people lifts, especially if you knew them.

Kevin dragged deeply on the cigarette. A tiny rim of fire ate the thin paper back towards his lips, leaving a chunk of ash. The cigarette went back to the hand as he exhaled his smoky words. 'Do you want me to stop?'

'No, it's too late now.'

I rested my head, cupped in my hand on the window. An overwhelming feeling of homesickness ached in my chest. But I had no home to be sick about. I'd been at boarding school since we'd lived in Constant Creek. Grandma's farm didn't belong to me and I didn't belong to it. Despite that, the longing remained there in my chest, a hollow yearning for something that didn't exist. If home is where the heart is, my heart was definitely a vagrant.

We didn't speak as we drove through the gates of the farm a few minutes later. When I saw the sign on the top gate, *Bindi Creek Farm*. It was the same carved wooden sign from my childhood, and every time I saw it excitement

whispered through me, the five-year-old's anticipation of seeing her Grandma or of riding Rocket, the old racehorse she kept in the home paddock – and then just as quickly the feeling was gone. I couldn't hold on to it. It seeped away like water through sand, like the residue of pleasant dream that slips from your waking mind no matter how hard you grasp at the fleeting fragments.

Spewing out red dust, the ute rumbled over hills and through gullies until we reached the farmhouse. Mum and Kevin were supposed to be renovating Grandma's house, but the old Queenslander's roof was still rusty and the veranda still wonky with missing railings. Kevin had mowed the square of buffalo around the house but apart from that the leggy shrubs and unweeded garden under the giant Flame tree beside the house told me he hadn't bothered with much.

Kevin pulled around to the back of the house. I surveyed the crooked veranda, the rusted roof, the white paint, still flaking from the walls in sheets like tissue paper.

'I like what you've done with the place,' I said.

Kevin glanced at me through the corners of his eyes. 'It's getting there.'

Near the sheds, various vehicle corpses lay around in their own little garden of weeds. But there was no sign of Mum's old FJ ute. A crucial part of the Swiss cheese theory, apart from Kevin not going with mum the day of the show, was that if she had been driving the old FJ instead of the Datsun she wouldn't have died. It was such a solid hunk of metal, she would have made better time in it; she would not

have fallen asleep at the second she passed that big tree. But the FJ was gone now. Kevin must have sold it.

Another ute, like Mum's but rusted out and missing the doors, had appeared since I was last home, along with the wreck of a white Commodore, the windscreen a spider web of silver cracks.

'What's with all the cars?' I said.

'Parts,' he said, pulling on the handbrake. 'I'm working from home a bit.'

'They still got you on at the mechanic's in town?'

'Yep, but I like doing my own thing.'

The sight of the car wrecks made my skin crawl. I didn't know how Kevin could stand having these horrible reminders in the yard. I tried not to think about what the Datsun would look like now, but the image of a twisted hunk of metal came to mind unbidden. It didn't matter. I was used to that image. I could handle that one. Worse ones continually elbowed their way into my consciousness.

My heart lifted when I heard the dogs barking, Mervin's high pitched yap and Wolfie's low bark, but they didn't come running. Kevin pulled my suitcase from the tray and we crossed the dusty yard.

'Where are the dogs?' I asked.

'Tied up out back.' Kevin mounted the wooden steps and walked across the wide veranda, to the front door.

'Tied up! Why?'

'They've been wandering around when I'm out, chasing the new neighbour's goats next door.'

'Mum never tied them up.'

Kevin shrugged and was about to say something but then didn't.

'What about the cat?' I said.

'Haven't seen him for a few days. He's around somewhere.'

I sighed, and stood on the veranda, waiting as Kevin opened the unlocked door. It's true what they say about country people. They don't lock their doors.

I glanced across to mum's favourite chair in the far left corner of the veranda – she'd had it for years, a white wicker thing with a big green cushion. I could picture her sitting there. She used to curl one leg underneath her, her long dark hair falling between her shoulder blades like a song. I'd taken to sitting on the love seat opposite; it hung on chains from the rafters and I'd swing back and forth, pushing with my toes while we chatted. She loved gazing out toward the purple ranges to the West. She said it calmed her as well as Camomile tea.

A gaping hole opened up inside me. How could it be possible that she would never sit in that chair again? That I'd not be opposite her, swinging back and forth, laughing at her lame jokes.

Kevin stopped in the hallway and I felt his eyes on me.

'You okay?' He started towards me, like he was going to put his hand on my shoulder or something.

I held up my hand. 'I'm fine.'

I could do this. I could.

I followed him inside. Kevin had prepared my bedroom for me; it was tidy, the bed neatly made. He'd made an effort. Mum and I had plans to completely redecorate it but we'd

hadn't gotten round to it yet. I still had the same bed cover I'd have since I was twelve, swirls of pink flowers. Mum promised me a new one when we'd moved to Constant Creek, but hadn't gotten round to that either. I'd been over pink flowers for a while, along with My Little Ponies and other childish things. But she was like that, always promising stuff and leaving things until the last minute. And dying didn't help.

I stood facing Kevin. 'Well, there you go,' he said.

'Thanks, for picking me up.'

'It's good to have you home.' He stared at me for a moment too long so I broke his gaze and held out my hand for the suitcase. 'Okay right, well,' he said. 'I'll let you settle in.' He went out, closing the door behind him.

I sat on the bed staring out through my window at the ridge in the distance, the one mum looked at from her seat on the veranda. I can't explain what it's like wanting someone back as much as I wanted her back at that moment. You'd sell your soul to go back in time for a just for a glance, a touch, a word. In that second I would have settled for one little piece of her, even just a whisper, like I'd felt in the library. Anything would be better than the sheer nothingness of being there without her.

But be careful what you wish for.