

Chapter 1

Eve ran, pulling the girl along behind her.

It was difficult in the soft sand. The other girl fell, but she dragged her to her feet. She grabbed her head, hands on either side of her face, and looked directly into her eyes.

“You must run. You must keep up with me.”

She turned and looked back towards the headland. She could see figures on the rocks, and she could hear their muffled shouts. It was the men. She imagined that the two of them stood out against the white sand, the moon illuminating the beach like a giant searchlight, their elongated shadows stretching towards the dunes.

There was a sharp crack. The girl dived to the ground again. Eve dropped beside her.

“We have to get away,” she whispered, her mouth close to her ear. There was no sound. She reached out and touched her face. It was wet and sticky. She rolled her over. Her eyes sparkled, reflecting the moonlight, but they were still, staring up at the sky.

“Maeve, wake up!” She shook her. The men were getting closer. She was limp in her arms. She looked back towards the men, sobbing.

She kissed Maeve’s forehead, lingering for a moment with her hand resting lightly on her cheek, before running towards the dune.

The dune rose steeply, her bare feet sunk into the sand with every step, her legs were heavy, her heart raced, her chest heaved, and she struggled to breathe. Reaching the top she fell into the sparse scrub, before crawling back to the edge and looking back towards the beach. The men were with the other girl. They stood over her, not touching her. The figures were blurred, as her eyes watered and her body shook with sobs. One knelt on his knee and reached towards the body before standing and pointing towards the dune. They started towards her. She did not have much time.

Exhausted, she started to run again. The scrub gave way to grass and low, intermittent trees which reached for her as she tried to push past, scratching, and clinging to her. The ground was uneven with scattered rocks which made her trip and slide. Her bare feet burned with pain. As she cleared a small rise, she saw a light. It was impossible to see what it was, but it was a warm, orange glow with a slight irregularity. It was the only sign of people.

As she got closer, she could see it was a shack, of sorts, cobbled together from corrugated iron sheets and bits and pieces of wood. The light emitted from a solitary window, more an opening with no glass, just gauze. Now she could hear the steady rhythmic murmur of a generator and the slight smell of diesel.

She approached it cautiously, but she had no other option. She needed help. She looked back towards the beach but there was no sign of the men. They couldn’t be far away. There was a dog. It watched her, its head still. She reached the back of her hand towards it to show she was not a threat. It lunged at her barring its teeth, its eyes wide and wild. It fell backwards as the chain reached its limit, but it kept growling and jumping and testing the strength of the chain. She heard a noise and the door opened. A dark silhouette filled the doorway.

“Who the fuck is it?”

“I need help,” she whispered, her voice breaking from emotion and fatigue.

The man relaxed and lowered his rifle, reassured.

He let out a barely audible laugh and stepped back into the shack.

She followed him inside, into the light. He leaned the rifle against the metal wall and turned towards her.

“What’s the problem, luv?”

He wore navy shorts and a dirty light blue singlet which showed the two faded green and red tattoos he wore on each bicep. He was mid-fifties, maybe sixty, his long wavy hair was white and receded upwards from his forehead. He looked fit. Thin, tanned, muscular legs ended with heavy mustard coloured work boots. His tone didn’t really do justice to her situation. It was casual and calm. Matter of fact. He looked her up and down, not studiously, but quickly. Her dress was ripped, and her legs cut and bloodied from the bushes. Her hair had partially dried and clung to her face, sticky with salt. She flicked it away from her eyes.

Shortness of breath made it hard for her to talk. “They took us, but we got away. They killed her.”

“Killed her?” he asked with a tone of disbelief.

She nodded, tears starting to well before tumbling over her lids and down her cheeks.

“Where are they?” The disbelief still present.

“They’re out there.” She jerked her head towards the open door.

“OK luv. Sit on that crate. I’ll find ‘em.” He took the rifle. She heard him unchain the dog and then the soft sound of his boots as he moved away from the shack. She wanted to stop him. She didn’t want to be alone.

She sat on the crate and looked around. It was bigger than she had imagined. The walls were just metal sheets supported by timber frames. There was a basic kitchen with a gas cook-top, a crazed porcelain sink and a small white fridge, tinged with rust. A rough timber bench top stretched from wall to wall. She was sitting on one of three timber crates, like the ones that soft drinks used to come in years ago, a name she didn’t recognise stencilled on the sides. One of them had been turned upside down as a table. A crushed beer can and an empty bowl, with a film of thin red sauce, in its centre. She was hungry.

Within one of the wooden frames on the walls there was a photo of the man holding a fish. She realised she didn’t know his name, knew nothing about him. She stood and picked up the photograph. He was on a boat. A broad brimmed, straw hat shaded his face but his teeth were white breaking his face into a wide smile. His pride was obvious as he held the fish against his chest. To the left she saw another. An unframed black and white photo. She thought it was him again, but much younger. The same smile. His arm around the waist of an attractive black woman. An out of focus streetscape behind them. She didn’t recognise the place. The girl wore a floral dress and light-coloured dress shoes, the man a pressed, short sleeved shirt, shorts, and long socks. She picked the photograph up and turned it over.

On the back there was a Darwin photo developer's stamp and "Darwin 1982" written in pencil in a neat cursive. She looked at the photo again. It was curious, somehow out of place in the shack.

She turned, there was another room. A bedroom. She shook her head in answer to her thoughts. It wouldn't be right to look. It wasn't her place.

She could hear noise, footsteps, the rustle of bodies pushing through the scrub and the eagerness of the dog straining against the chain. There were voices but they talked with familiarity, light, at ease. She looked towards the doorway and then around the room. There was one window, one door and the bedroom. She could hear them clearly now.

"Well, we're bloody lucky she ended up here."

She rushed to the bedroom but there was no way out. As she wriggled under the stretcher bed, she realised it was futile, but she had to do something. Now the footsteps were heavy as they stepped onto the front timber porch, sand and timber scraping together.

"Hey luv. No point hidin'. I found 'em. Why don't you come out and we can talk." She heard laughter from the porch. She could see the worn work boots, spread across the doorway.

Then she saw it, a glimmer of moonlight at her feet where the iron sheets had come adrift. She kicked hard and the glimmer became a hole. The sheet flexed.

"We've got yah. Just come here. There's no way out."

She pushed her body backwards along the floor towards the panel pushing it outwards. Her feet were through, and the rough edge of the metal scraped against her legs as she continued to push.

"Alright, that's it." The boots moved forward, a bare knee dropped to the floor, a hand on the timber floor supported his weight, and then she was out. She saw the dog. It was unchained. Its eyes watched her intently, but it did not move towards her, it did not growl, maybe it was acknowledging her determination. She ran.

"Fuck. The bitch is out!"

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The end of the cigarette glowed brightly as he inhaled deeply before blowing a steady stream of smoke into the air. He leaned against the rail looking up towards the sky, watching the barely visible smoke disappearing. He could hear the steady lapping of the sea against the hull. It was calm and there was almost no wind. The reflection of the full moon shimmered on the water, widening as it reached towards the ship. He flicked the cigarette butt into the sea, watching the red glow as it arced through the air before disappearing. It was a clear night, he could see the beach, the whiteness of the sand broken by low clusters of rocks at each end.

There was a sound. A dull thud. He tilted his head straining to hear and then turned, leaning out over the rail. He looked down the side of the hull, but he couldn't see anything. There it was again, a heavy sound. He moved towards it, along the railing until he felt he was above it. He could see the dark bulk below him. It looked like a blanket, or a canvas bag suspended by a rope. He pulled on the rope. It was heavy, too heavy for him on his own. He looked

towards the dim fluorescent lights of the ship's bridge. There was no movement but there would be someone up there.

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As soon as she had pushed through the metal she had started running but seeing the white Landcruiser she'd taken a punt and dived under it. At first, she had seen them talking on the porch, unhurried, planning their search, confident that she could not get far. Then they had headed in separate directions, her gaze following the jerking patterns of their torches as they moved away from the shack.

She stood slowly, pressed against the side of the car, and tried the door handle. It was unlocked. A dull light on the roof lit the interior anaemically. She opened the door wider reaching for the switch. She turned back towards the searchers. No one had noticed, they were too intent on the thrill of the chase. She felt around the steering wheel, but there were no keys. She dropped to her haunches, still pressed against the car, and watched the search. One of the lights seemed to be coming back towards the shack. She closed her eyes tightly. Maybe there wasn't a key. She felt around the dashboard and found it. A button. She climbed into the driver's seat. The torch was closer now. She pressed it. Nothing. Not a sound. Clearly the key wasn't close by, but then the dashboard beeped at her, and writing scrolled across the screen. "Depress brake pedal." This time the car started, the large diesel engine shattering the silence. She pressed the accelerator and careered around the shack searching for a way out. She saw him running towards her, awkwardly holding a rifle and a torch, the light bouncing off the car. He lurched towards the vehicle just before she felt the soft impact.

The trees sprang up like ghosts in the beam of the headlights as she turned the car sharply looking for the track out. As soon as she saw the gap she floored it, hoping she was right.

She was, she smiled to herself. She hadn't seen another vehicle.

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