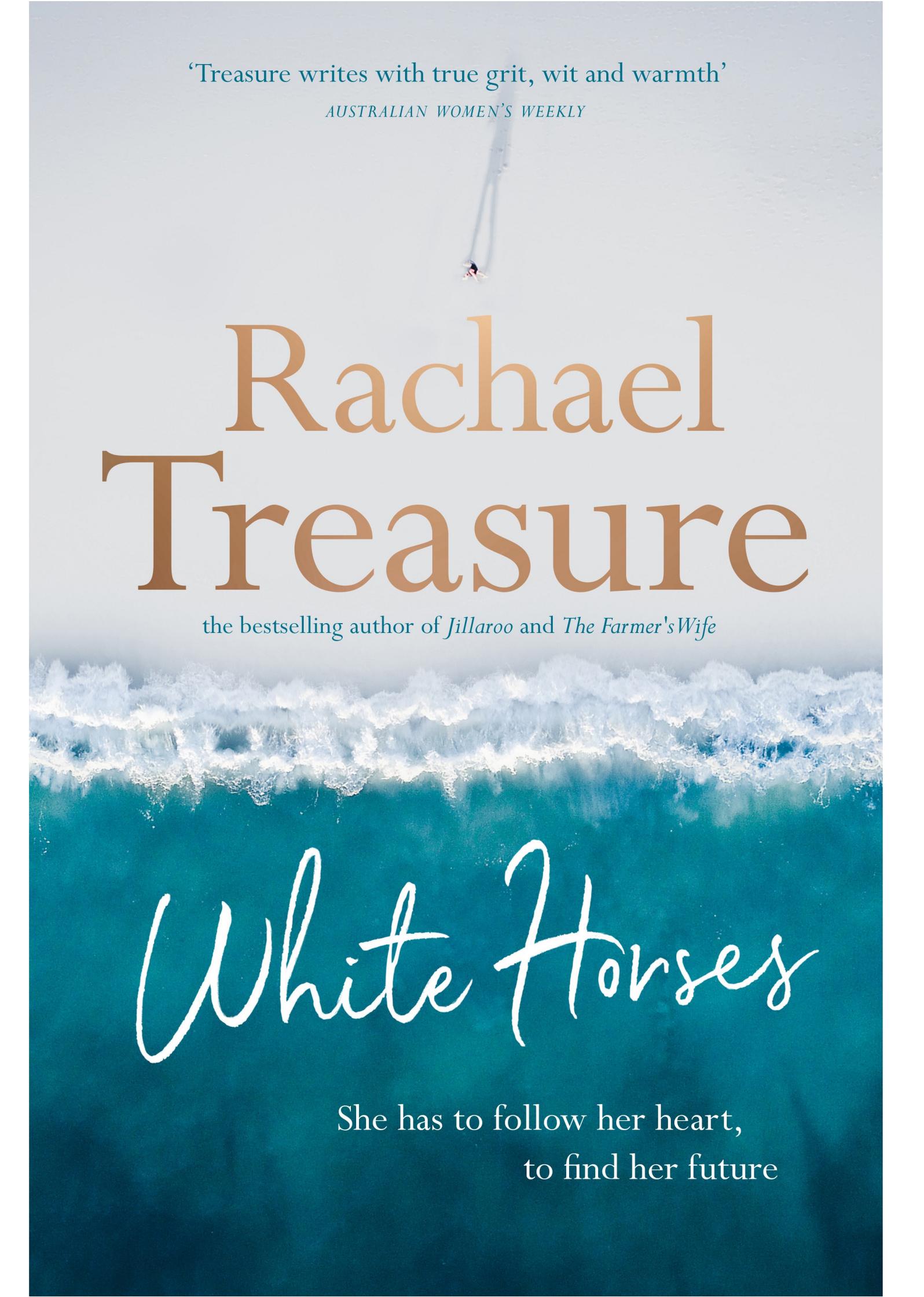


‘Treasure writes with true grit, wit and warmth’

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S WEEKLY



# Rachael Treasure

the bestselling author of *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer's Wife*

## White Horses

She has to follow her heart,  
to find her future

# Rachael Treasure

*White Horses*

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

## **HarperCollinsPublishers**

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*For Daniel and Maggie*



*'I have realised that the future depends upon the  
feminine principle in all things because all things are  
born of woman'*

Wisdom Keeper, from Jamie Sams,  
*The 13 Original Clan Mothers*

#metoo

#metoomothernature



# Chapter 1

The bell of the Wigenup Store door was still jangling as Drift walked in and Shaynene instantly started blabbing about the latest drama on her Facebook feed.

‘Well, I’m *totally dev-voed*. Just *dev-vo-stated*,’ Shaynene moaned from behind the counter cluttered with chewing gum and chocolate bars.

Drift swiped her wide-brimmed stockman’s hat from her head, enjoying the cool of the air-conditioning on her brow, and thought, *Here she goes ...*

Shaynene threw her phone down theatrically, her melon breasts wobbling in her low-cut red tank top, causing the tiger tattooed on her left boob to jiggle too. She interrupted her monologue and swung around to the pigeonhole mailboxes and gathered up a large bundle for Drift.

‘Your dad has *two* copies of his brainbox magazine in there — it means youse two must’ve been gone a while. What? Over four months? I’ve had two roots since. And not from the same bloke neither.’

Drift took up the *New Philosopher* magazines bound up in a rubber band with the other mail, relieved her dad would have something to distract him. She smiled at Shaynene. Hearing about Shay’s life was like trying to follow the plot of a long-running, badly written TV soapie. Drift lifted the hot weight of her long hair from the back of her neck and wound it into a blonde knot,

waiting for Shay's verbal diarrhoea of daily drama. Today, her friend's short flop of lank hair was a chalky purple. The last time she'd seen Shay was when she and her dad had carted the first lot of cattle out from Pinrush Point. Back then, Shaynene's hair had been flame red on top, shaven on the back and sides.

'Such a shame. He was *such a spunk*,' Shaynene said, picking up her phone and staring at it again. 'Far too young to cark it. What a bugger. And *here* if you can believe it. Nothin ever happens here!'

'Who's died? One of the blokes you had sexual relations with?' Drift asked, framing the words 'sexual relations' in inverted commas with her index fingers.

'No! You dick.' Shaynene flashed a picture on her phone of a shirtless Islander man, boardies slung low on lean hips, dark hair long and surfer-cool. 'Kai Kaahea. You know. He's famous — with a capital F for *fucking* famous.'

'Oh, yeah, him,' said Drift, without a clue as to who she was talking about. Steering away from Shaynene's celeb news, she instead turned her attention to the chocolates on the counter. 'I didn't know they did M&Ms in chocolate blocks nowadays. How weird.'

'You friggin redneck on-the-road hobo! What rock have you been hiding under?' Shaynene said, looking at her with her dark gaze. 'They've been around for-*eva*! Honestly, you and your dad might act like professors of Pinrush Point, but you don't know *nothin*.'

There was a *chirrup* from the tinned foods aisle, and a bird the colour of custard slice and cement fluttered towards them. It landed on Shaynene's shoulder and nibbled one of her ear piercings with its curved grey beak.

Shaynene lifted a finger to stroke the vibrant orange blob on its cheek. 'Hello, Head Bob,' she whispered to the bird. 'I know she's backward ... but we still love her.'

The bird, true to his name, bobbed his head up and down. 'Blow me, blow me. *Faaaark*,' he screeched.

Drift cocked her eyebrow at him. ‘That’s new, Head Bob.’

‘My little brother taught him,’ Shaynene explained. ‘Little shit. Disgusting language. Anyways,’ she continued, tugging down her summer tank over her tummy rolls and fully taking in the sight of Drift, ‘welcome back to town, cowgirl.’ She clicked her tongue and winked at her. ‘I’m lovin them Daisy Dukes, sister,’ she said, pointing to Drift’s ragged denim cut-offs and flicking an index finger under her own frayed shorts. ‘We could be twins,’ she joked.

Drift glanced at Shaynene’s all-woman apple-round body and short-as-short shorts, which bit into thighs as juicy as delicious Christmas hams. Shay’s toenails were painted a sparkling green, and peeking from pink rubber thongs was a new tattoo of a bluebird. Drift looked down at her own skinny legs; they seemed especially gangly today, teamed with her big clobbering workboots and thick socks. Next to Shaynene, Drift felt like a scrawny foal.

‘What can I do youse for today, madame?’ Shaynene asked, giving an expansive wave around the shop as if it were a New York boutique and not a remote general store cum post office that sold crappy gift cards, cheap ‘made in China’ billy cans for caravanning tourists, out-of-date chips and dried dim sims.

Drift nodded towards the bright glare outside on the main drag, where her father sat hulking in the rumbling LandCruiser flat-tray ute, still sweating despite the aircon. ‘It’s my birthday and Dad wants to get me a present.’

‘Well what the fuck’s he doin sittin in the cab? Why isn’t he in here gettin somethin for you?’

Drift shrugged. ‘You know what he’s like. He’s got his nose in a ye olde English book of sonnets, so he’s gone all iambic pentameter on me.’

‘Huh?’ Shaynene looked puzzled for a moment. ‘Poetry, huh? Well, whatever floats your boat.’

‘At least he’s out of his bush ballad phase,’ Drift said. ‘*Oh, the weary, weary journey on the trek, day after day, With sun above and silent veldt below,*’ she said tiredly.

‘Jeez.’

‘He’s worse when he’s on his horse. Hits me over the head with Banjo twenty-four/seven.’

‘Better than being hit over the head with *a* banjo,’ Shaynene said. ‘One of my step-dads hit me on the head with a recorder once. They may be plastic, but those things bloody hurt.’ She sighed. ‘Poetry on your ponies. You two. You both oughta be working at one of them universities in the city, not stock contracting. Silly buggers.’ Shay tilted her head. ‘What’s he wanna get you for your birthday?’

‘Don’t know. He gave me fifty bucks and said, “*But search in shop you wander for present and for cake!*”’

‘Fifty bucks for food *and* a present, along with really bad poetry? Bloody tight arse. That’s tragic!’

‘The cocky hasn’t paid us for the last lot of cattle yet,’ Drift said.

‘Meatworks being slow again?’

Drift nodded.

‘Bloody aioli holies.’ Shaynene reached for a KitKat, ripping it open and offering Drift a stick.

Drift shook her head. ‘No thanks.’

‘Skinny bitch,’ Shaynene said, biting into the chocolate. ‘What else did you get for your birthday?’

‘I didn’t get anything,’ Drift said.

‘Oh well. Happy birthday anyway, sweet thang. How old ya turning?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘Jeez, woman! You can’t be. You sure you’re not turning eighty? You speak like friggin Yoda somedays. You never want to come out with me and you act like an old fart. Why don’t you ’n your dad get your nose out of your bloody books and come out tonight with me to the pub?’

‘I would ... but ... you know ...’ Drift’s words faded. ‘He likes to keep to himself.’

They both looked at Split Wood, out in the driver’s seat,

staring ahead at nothing. He'd taken off his hat, so they could see the close-clipped grey-flecked brown hair forming a dark line on his pinkish bull neck. The tight expression on his face and his overweight form made it difficult to see the good-looking man he had been. It made Drift sad to look at him these days.

Shaynene put her hand on Drift's arm. 'Has he been OK, since ... you know ...?' she asked quietly, as if Split Wood might be able to hear.

Drift nodded. 'Mostly.'

'You're twenty-one now. Surely you can hoof off and get on with your own life? He'd be right, wouldn't he?'

'Maybe.'

Then, as sudden as a whip crack, a siren shredded the hot air of Wigenup's main drag. A police car roared past, travelling well over the town speed limit, lights flashing. Followed by a second cop car. Then yet another. A fire truck came soon after, along with an ambulance and a State Emergency Services vehicle.

'Jeez!' Shaynene said, rushing to the window. 'Someone's called in the entire Cooperville cavalry!'

Above the girls' heads, beyond the store's spinning ceiling fans, helicopter blades whumped. At the unfamiliar sound, Head Bob squawked, taking off to the safety of his cage in the lunch room.

Shaynene reeled open the shop door, sending the bell stuttering again. She and Drift hurried out to the baking hot footpath, watching the brake lights of the emergency vehicles pulse at the end of the main street before turning down the mostly unused road towards Pinrush Point. Above them in a squintingly bright blue sky two choppers angled their noses purposefully in the same direction.

'Far out!' said Shaynene. 'They're headed towards your stock camp.'

'What's going on?' Drift asked. She could see her dad watching from the vehicle and reaching to turn on the ute's radio for clues on the ABC news.

‘It’s really happening!’ Shaynene said, grabbing Drift’s arm and bouncing up and down, sending the tiger tattoo into another jiggle in its jungle. ‘They’ve started searching for him!’

‘Who?’

‘Bloody Kai Kaahea, you idiot. I thought you said you knew.’

‘Kai who?’

‘*I told you.* The pro surfer. They reckon he’s gone missing off Pinrush Point. Swept out to sea.’

‘Swept out to sea,’ Drift murmured.

Shaynene saw the colour drain from her friend’s face. ‘Oh, sorry. I forgot.’

‘It’s OK, Shaynene. Ancient history. But I don’t know this Kai Car Keys or whatever his name is. Wouldn’t know him if I fell on him.’

‘I would’ve liked to have fallen on him,’ Shaynene said wistfully. ‘I wish! If I’d known he was in this neck of the woods, I would’ve conned you into tracking his camp down! He was hotter than a Marble Bar pavement.’

Shaynene’s eyes returned to the choppers, now just black dots.

‘This’ll be the biggest thing that’s happened to Widgenup since that billionaire woman bought up all the land on the Point,’ she said excitedly. ‘Remember the fuss then? We ran out of frozen chips for the fryer. Those bloody journos were hungry bastards, and fucken fussy when it came to their coffee. But some weren’t too fussy with their women.’ She gave a giggle at the memory.

Drift smiled for her friend’s benefit, watching the choppers disappear in the distance, while her stomach turned.

‘You know what this also means?’ Shaynene said.

Drift shook her head.

‘It won’t just be the news crews who will be here soon. There’ll be a ton of groupie surf nuts showing up. Kai Kaahea is a god to them. They’ll come to help look for him, or just hang out to worship him on the beach. All those fit young bods.’ Shaynene poked her tongue out and wagged it.

*White Horses*

Drift rolled her eyes. 'Friggin surfers. I hate 'em.'

But Shaynene still wasn't listening. 'Can I come camp with you on my days off?'

'S'pose,' Drift said.

Shaynene bounced again. 'C'mon, girl ... let's get your birthday present ... something to spruce you up, ya bloody cowpoke dag. And after work, I'd better go shave me legs and tizz up me southerly bits. And maybe recolour me hair? Do you think this purple suits me?' She hoicked up her breasts and dragged down her top, not waiting for an answer, to Drift's relief.

'G'day, Mr Wood,' Shaynene shouted, waving to him before linking arms with Drift and leading her back inside the store.

'C'mon, woman,' Shaynene said as the bell jingled dramatically, 'I get the feeling love is coming to this little arse-end town!'

## Chapter 2

The Woods' stock camp, nestled between the road and the dunes down on Pinrush Point, was just as they'd left it that morning, with no sign of any urgent missing surfer chaos. Relieved, Drift got out of the LandCruiser with her shopping bags and reached to the Esky hitched by an occy strap on the back.

'G'day, clowns,' she called to the dogs as Molly, Hamlet and Dunno emerged from their sand-dug bunkers beneath the stock truck and danced on the ends of their chains. The horses on the tether line whickered, their empty hay nets pegged on the ground beside them like wilted black balloons.

Split picked up the box of beer and hoisted it onto his shoulder happily, as if he were carrying a premiership-winning footballer, then grabbed the mail.

'Go kick Gerald in the arse, will you? Get him going,' he said to Drift as he trudged in the sandy soil towards the caravan. 'That way I can get an early tea on.'

'No worries,' she said, relieved he'd given up on the Shakespearean speak for now. 'Then shall I go wrap up my *own* present that I bought for me?'

Split glanced at her, read her expression as cheeky, and gave her a wry smile. '*If presents be thy love of life, then wrap on,*' he said to her.

She pulled a sarcastic jokey face at him, but inside Drift felt a twinge of sadness. 'Getting her tea on' meant he would

crack his first can. After the third he'd be reading bits out of his philosophy magazine to her in a desperate fashion, and by the sixth he'd be morosely ruminating on life, the universe and the stupidity of humans. Then he'd start on the topic of her mother.

She hated beer box nights.

As the sea breeze gathered strength Drift made her way over to the generator. They'd set it a distance away, behind the stock truck, to mask the riot of noise it made. She unscrewed the cap and checked the diesel level, wishing again her dad would buy them a new, beaut modern one.

'You gunna behave, Gerald?' she asked as she grabbed the ripcord. Gerald was a complex beast and sometimes took fifty shoulder-aching tugs to get going. This evening though, to Drift's surprise, he started first go, shuddering and spluttering to a wheezy kind of life instantly. 'Good boy. Is this my birthday present, you starting first pop?'

Drift made her way to the horses, tethered on a line strung between two wind-pruned paperbarks, and gathered up the hay nets. Minty nuzzled her shoulder as she did. The wind bit. A change was coming through. The nearby copse of sheoaks moaned eerily. Black clouds gathered far out to sea like an army waiting to attack, but Drift turned her back on the weather.

'Hungry, girl?' she asked, placing her hand on Minty's muzzle and running it over the horse's snow-flecked face. 'Me too.'

She thought of her 'birthday tea': a cardboard box of frozen herb and garlic crumbed 'fish' triangles that her dad would drop into the deep fryer along with the 'treat' of frozen crinkle-cut chips. She knew after eating she'd say, 'Thanks, Dad,' but she'd feel disappointment.

She wished her dad would stand long enough beside her in the froth of the ocean on her birthday to catch a real fish. But the old rods were now slowly rusting in the stock truck cab, time rendering their reels immobile. She imagined sizzling fresh-caught fish on an open campfire, her dad and her, side by side, like they had done in the old days. She let the fresh blast of

onshore wind catch her thoughts and carry them away. It was her birthday. New cattle would be here tomorrow. Shaynene was likely to arrive in a few days as entertainment. Wilma the Wondrous was due for a visit too. Life was all as it should be, Drift tried to reassure herself. But, like the surge of the ocean just over the dunes she felt resentment for her father roll in her, images of him and his betrayal invading her mind.

‘The thing about your dad is, you just gotta look beyond his grief and pain and love the Hell out of him, because he’s doing his best and he loves ya to bits. But the trick is not to get sucked into his moods,’ her elderly friend Charlie Weatherbourne had coached her afterwards, like a bush preacher and counsellor combined. Today though, Drift couldn’t find that return to love Charlie spoke of. These days her dad seemed particularly irritating. She could see people mistook Split’s moods as long-held grief for her mother. But Drift now knew better. The grief was actually anger; for her betrayal. Her neglect. Her unfaithfulness. The past being dragged into the present each time he looked at his daughter. Drift shuddered at the memory of what Split’d chosen to do to himself — and to her — just three short months earlier. As she worked to feed the animals, she blocked the horror from her mind.

With the hay nets filled, and Bear, Roger, Dunston and Minty happily snorting into their feed, Drift scooped out pellets for the dogs from a tin tub set beneath the stock truck. The sound caused Molly, the collie-kelpie cross with the feathery ears, to sit bolt upright, and sweep her tail on the ground, eyes bright with expectation. Young Hamlet splayed his long red teenager limbs and raised his wagging bottom. Dunno, the stray, sat rigidly in his odd-dog body, gazing at her, drool falling from sagging black lips that always reminded Drift of the edges of freshly knifed abalone.

‘You are one uggerly dawg,’ Drift drawled, ‘but I love you, buddy.’ Her palm caressed Dunno’s excessively domed head, stroking ears that were too small for his face. He was black

and tan and as big as a kelpie, but had gnomishly short legs, an overly long catlike tail and a barrel ribcage and brisket that should belong on a cow. Drift gazed into his dark too-close-together eyes and sifted through the joy the funny-looking dog had brought her.

When she'd found the pup that first year on the road, she had fleetingly thought her father had deliberately placed the puppy in the concrete culvert especially for her eleventh birthday. The pup was huddled in the shade, a shadow himself. After she'd scooped him up and wrapped the shaking puppy in her flannie, she realised his litter mates lay in a pile nearby, maggots already at work on the little bodies. With a jolt, she knew he wasn't a gift from her father. The puppy, she realised, was like her. Alone on the road and without a mother. Drift had jogged over to her father, who was equally surprised to see the bizarre-looking creature. He had stopped girthing his horse to lean his hands on his knees and peer at the tiny bag of dehydrated bones.

'Where do you think he came from?' Split had asked.

'Dunno,' Drift answered.

'What breed do you reckon he is?'

'Dunno,' Drift said, inspecting the pup.

'What's his name?'

'Dunno,' she had said again, lifting and dropping her little-girl shoulders.

'Well then,' her father had said, ruffling her curly blonde mop, 'we'd better go find Dunno something to eat and drink, and make him a bed.'

Drift's face had lit up when she realised what her dad was saying. He had gone back to his saddling, calling over his shoulder to her, 'Dunno if he'll live or not, but if he does, do you reckon he'll work stock?'

'Dunno,' Drift had replied, then giggled, already knowing the puppy would be hers for life.

Now she hugged Dunno good night and on her way back to the van looked to the aluminium-framed water tank: it sat

lopsided on a hillock of sand. She ought to get Split to help her slide it onto the Cruiser now, along with the water pump, before the beer carton emptied. Big day tomorrow, she thought. The cattle arriving would be long-haul thirsty, but Drift knew her birthday reminded her dad of her mother, and when he was reminded of her mother life took a slide. She decided to just get the job done herself. As she strained to lift the tank up, she remembered the box of leg-wax strips and the bottle of nail polish she and Shaynene had chosen as a present, still nestled in the shopping bag. A shiver of amusement ran through her.

‘Good on you, Shaynene,’ she said quietly. A smile curved her wind-chapped lips. The water run could wait until morning, she decided as she went into the van to prepare for her best birthday gift yet.

## Chapter 3

*'Behold you, a feast to be had!'* her dad pronounced as Drift entered the van. He proudly held aloft two dented enamel plates laden with yellow chips, an orange number-21 birthday candle jammed into one of the fish fillets. The tiny fold-out table in the van was set with a tomato sauce bottle, plastic salt and pepper shakers, mismatching cutlery plonked in a pile, and a couple of sachets of tartare sauce Shaynene had thrown in for free. Looking at her father's birthday spread, Drift remembered the pain of blowing out her eleventh birthday candle — the first birthday with Dunno, but also the first without her mother.

'Happy birthday, bovine beachside maid,' Split said, giving her a loving shove.

'Thanks, old pilgrim,' she said, grinning back at him, pushing down the sadness and restlessness. She noticed three beers had been downed already.

He reached over and patted the back of her hand. 'I know I'm not so good with presents, but what did I get you?'

'You'll find out. It's a surprise for both of us, later,' she said, pulling a face at him. She wondered if he could tell her mood was forced. Drift wished he had for once given her a surprise. Her hand roamed to her wide hobble belt and knife pouch. Her most precious gift. She'd got it for her thirteenth birthday from her old friend Charlie. Charlie Weatherbourne was a legendary saddler and had long grey hair plaited down to her waist, so long

it could almost be flicked and cracked like the stock whips the old woman made. Her mobile saddlery truck was cluttered with ancient but solid sewing machines set up in a cavern of leather smell, old tools and gypsy creativity.

Drift wished Charlie's dusty truck would arrive now like a mirage and deliver her the amazing birthday gift of her wise warmth and humour. For Drift's eighteenth, Charlie had given her a quart-pot holder, and a new saddle blanket with the coveted CW brand for old Bear, who was feeling the droving work a little more these days. But Drift and her dad hadn't seen Charlie for months now. She looked over to the unpacked shopping bag from the store. The gift in there would just have to do.

An hour later in the caravan's oily fish-fry air, Drift looked over to her father where he sat in a midden of empty cans and cast-aside books, their open pages flapping in the draught like stranded butterflies. Before he'd dozed off he'd jabbed his finger at the magazine.

'See! See!' he said. 'David Rabbitburrow has it right.'

Drift had glanced over to the article in the *New Philosopher* magazine quoting naturalist David Attenborough.

Her father excitedly began reading. 'Old Rabbitburrow said *Ten thousand years ago man regarded the natural world as divine, but as he domesticated animals and plants, so nature lost some of its mystery and appeared to be little more than a larder that could be raided with impunity.*' Her father looked at her in distress. 'That's exactly what we see when we go to all those desolate farms with all those shutdown, blinkered farmers and managers chasing the almighty dollar. Why can't anyone see this? That we're ransacking our very own planet?' He spoke as if in extreme pain.

Often she wondered why he worked in agriculture, when he said he hated modern-day industrial agricultural practices. He was always banging on about attracting a better class of farming client who understood the link between economy and ecology, but he never made any attempt to find those kinds of clients.

On nights like this Drift could see clearly just how addicted her father was to his pain.

Drift nodded to pacify him, knowing how much the world of humans cut him, but after this many drinks, there was no point conversing with him about it. Instead she simply agreed and told him to get some shuteye.

Soon, her father was in the deepest sleep, and the weather was really coming in, shaking the van violently. Above the roar, Split was making sounds from the back of his throat like a gigantic dying fly as he slept in his greasy roadside-found armchair, which stank of dust and motor oil. His feet were encased in polyester orange work socks that carried grass seed and the dirt of several days.

Drift caught the whiff of his socks as she moved nearer to where her dad's ankles were crossed on a machinery lubrication drum converted to a stool with a rough-sawn top. An almost exhausted bottle of Bundy Red was nestled between his legs, leaning into his rounded tummy like a sleepy child. Her father reminded Drift of a tranquillised bear; she was relieved the roar of his pain was silenced for a while. She poked him with her index finger on the shoulder. 'Oi. Dad? *Dad? Yo, shepherd who first taught thy chosen seed?*'

He didn't respond.

'Good,' she said, grabbing up the leg-waxing strips. She took one from the box and warmed it between the palms of her hands, listening beyond the thin shell of the caravan. Outside, the relentless boom-crash of surf beyond the dunes and the bucking wind brought rattling shudders as if the nearby turmoil of the missing surfer was being echoed by the sea.

She tried to push away the image of a man, a body, out there on the water, floating. Bloating. It made her shiver. It wasn't her business, even though Shaynene sorely wanted to make it theirs. Drift found comfort in the fact that tomorrow, adding to the sound of the ocean would also be the deep moaning bellows of the drought-starved Northern cattle arriving weak and shit-covered

on the trucks, ready for their long paddock drive to recovery on rich coastal feed. Above all else, driving in this people-less landscape was Drift's favourite work, especially nurturing cattle back to health. But the shadow of her father's depression sat with her. She resolved to jolly him out of it, before he was swallowed again. And she knew just how to do it. Practical jokes were their tradition and there was more stirring between them than a Mixmaster, so Drift set about on yet another prank.

Slowly, she drew the cloudy paper apart, the pink smear of wax sticky like gum sap. She squatted in front of her father and gently pasted the strips above his orange socks, up his chunky black-haired legs, over his thick banged-up knees before stopping at his thighs just below the line where the tan ran out. Split stirred and snorted. Drift paused, watching his eyebrows furrow, but she knew his booze-soaked brain would soon lull him back into blackness. The box emptied as she papier-mâché'd her father and, when the last wax strip was pasted, Drift leaned back on her haunches to survey her masterpiece ... There: her birthday present all wrapped. But she wasn't done yet.

Reaching into her pocket, her fingertips met with shards of hay and rolled bits of bale twine before locating the bottle of nail polish she and Shaynene had chosen. She held the bottle up to the grey light that shone weakly through the flyspecked gauze curtains, steadying herself as the caravan rocked in the wild wind.

'Perfect,' she said, holding the little brush up against the vibrancy of his socks and then his shirt. She supposed some women would choose the colour because it reminded them of orange trees fruiting in summer sunshine, or tequila sunrises by the pool. But not her. It was the same full-force orange of her father's hi-vis shirt: it spoke of their long days of stock contracting, working under biting sun, and the iron-hard nights they spent living in either a cold, rattling or sullenly roasting van, depending on the weather. First she chose her father's right index finger. Then she moved to paint the next, tilting her head as she ran the brush carefully, last, over his lined thumbnail.

This close to him, she saw the deep etchings of his square, rough hands, which were gnarled from filing horse coconut shavings from hard hooves and trimming the hard shells of sheep's feet. His were hands that didn't just speak of hard work, but shouted the fact. They were buckled and worn from thousands of cattle castrated and lamb's tails docked, ewes crutched, needles jabbed into hides, drench guns squeezed into mouths and ear tags crunched into cartilage. Mile upon mile of animals walked. Along roads, through races, up ramps. A never-ending stream of animal-husbandry work needing to be done in whatever weather, in whatever district that the road and the rhythm of the seasons took them. As she painted, she noticed how knotted his knuckles were, his fingers beginning to bend at odd angles with early-onset arthritis.

When she was little she had loved his hands. They had been so certain. Hands that gathered up their washing, dried fresh and crispy at whatever laundrette they could find in whatever town. His were hands that would never punch dogs when they barked on the back of the ute, like she had seen other men do. Nor would they ever whack a hard-worked horse on its soft muzzle when it keenly edged too close at the end of a thirsty day. Her dad's hands would lift a lead rope lightly, or stroke the warm back of a working dog steadily. They would slide over the back of her head, with protection and love.

His square giant's hands were such a contrast to the fading, fraying memory of her mother's. Her mother had thin mermaid fingers that strummed guitar strings and beaded shells onto fishing line and twined daisies into Drift's baby-soft long blonde hair. Harmony Wood's fingers were often wrinkled by the sea, or imprinted with a garden's deep brown soil, sometimes coated in gentle pastel shades from shelling vibrant peas or peeling the skins from steamed beetroot. Slim hands carefully placing eggs gathered into the frothy skirts that Harmony had dressed her in. Fingertips melding butter and flour bought from the wholefoods store in the nearest hippy-infused rural town for birthday cakes and biscuits.

Drift looked at the half-eaten yellow supermarket sponge cake sitting on a plastic tray next to the deep fryer. It had sickly sweet filling labelled 'jam' and icing sugar as fine as lice powder dusting its bald top. The number-21 candle, half melted, lay beside it, and the wish that her life would change was already released on the wild winds.

Drift knew she ought to clean it all away, not just because it would set her father off on a rant about how food corporations forced them to buy unsustainable packaging and chemical-permeated food, but also because of the mice that forever kept finding their way inside the van. No matter how many times she set traps and plugged holes with steel wool, they still invaded the space. Then there was the sand ... always the sand that scattered over the worn lino floor each time they peeled work socks from their overheated feet. She knew she could never go back to that time when life held her mother at its heart. And a garden. Drift longed for a garden one day. But for now, with her father, there was only one choice: to keep moving forward on this long, endless road of work. But today, for whatever reason, forward felt like standing still.

She scrunched her eyes shut tight and twirled the birthday candle around in her fingers. 'Please change. *Life*. Please change.'

## Chapter 4

After she'd finished painting Split's fingernails, Drift sat back on her heels and sighed. Through the tiny salt-crusted window, clouds scudded across a dull sky. It was January and supposed to be summer, but not in this part of the Western Australian countryside, where the weather blew in over vast, wild oceans and betrayed the seasons with a suddenness that jolted. The sinister shift in conditions had brought with it a grey angry surge that boiled incessantly against the jagged rocks, which Drift knew would be making life treacherous and near impossible for the search-and-rescue team assembled down at the end of the beach, where the more hardcore surfers camped. In a dusk sky a pale orange full moon was just peeking over the wind-trimmed scrub to the east. She hoped her birthday wish would work, doubly so with the power of the moon behind it.

'Happy birthday to me, Melody Wood,' she said, picking up her father's phone and taking a quick picture of him. She wanted to send the photo to Shaynene, but there on the wildly isolated Pinrush Point they were out of range. The shared joke would have to wait.

A sudden banging on the door shook Drift from her daydream with a start. She flew to the other side of the caravan and drew back the curtain. A police four-wheel drive was parked there. The gusting wind was so loud the animals hadn't heard the vehicle. The tether-line horse team stood with their ears

folded back, tails to the wind, dozing in a determined meditation against the weather. Even the dogs lay curled in balls beneath the stock trailer, noses covered by tails, unwilling to unfold themselves against the cold blast. Drift glanced towards her father, still sound asleep, before opening the door a little.

She looked down at the cops. An older policeman with grey hair and a walrus moustache braced himself against the thrust of the wind. Behind him a tall, lean, dark-haired young man with a classic chiselled face like an elite Aussie Rules footballer stood holding onto his police cap to stop it blowing from his head. Her eyes lingered on him.

The dogs at last sensed strangers and stood suddenly, barking. Piercingly, she whistled to them to be quiet without unlocking her eyes from the young policeman's. A small involuntary smile arrived on her face. She noticed slightly pitted skin that spoke of the torture of adolescent acne, but even with it he was still a babe-magnet, as Shaynene would say. He was the sort of good-looking man in uniform Shaynene would convulse over, shouting, 'Frisk me! Frisk me!'

'Could we come in?' the older man shouted just as a gust tried to rip the words from his mouth and steal the door from her hands. Even without the wind, she could barely hear him over the boom of giant waves beyond the dune. She looked back again at her father, sprawled senseless on his chair, and a flush ran over her face. Puddle-sized raindrops began to dollop onto the earth.

'Um ...' she hesitated, '... sure.' Her dad would kill her. Her birthday joke was suddenly not just backfiring but exploding in her face.

'Just a sec. Gotta, um, make some room,' she shouted, before shutting the door quickly; the rain began to teem down, bedraggling the officers.

'Shit, shit, *shit*,' she said at the sight of her father, his nails glowing like a brand-new Stihl chainsaw case, the pinkish wax strips plastered to his legs, fluttering slightly in the breezy van

like roadwork bunting. Drift couldn't help a laugh escaping. There was going to be hell to pay.

*'Tis not so sweet now as it was before!'* Drift muttered to herself as she hastily grabbed his blanket from behind the curtain around his bed and threw it over his lap. Next, she gathered up the clattering cans and shoved them into the tiny sink, flinging a tea towel over them. She shoved the Bundy bottle under the chair and began to shake her father awake.

*'Dad! Dad? It's the cops.'*

As he waded through fog to wake up, she went back to the door. The police officers were in the same stance as she'd found them moments before, faces tilted against the onslaught of fat drops of sideways rain.

*'Sorry,'* she yelled. *'It's my birthday and it's a bit of a mess in here. Dad and I had a little party.'* She gestured for them to come in, the young policeman taking the door from her to hold it steady as they stepped up and entered, pooling rain drops on the vinyl.

*'Happy birthday,'* the younger cop said loudly over the rain.

*'Thanks,'* she said glancing at him shyly. Once in the van the men seemed huge. The younger one was stooping his head, his cap with the chequered banding now in his hands, his hair as black as night, clipped short on the sides, but slicked back like an old-time gent. The older one, as thick and short set as a Murray Grey bull, looked imposing in his crisp blue shirt and jacket emblazoned with the badge of black swan and regal crown, darkened by rain.

*'I'm Sergeant Dodge and this is Constable Swain, Cooperville Police,'* he said, indicating his young offsider and flashing his ID. As he spoke, he looked around the van. Drift flushed at what he must be thinking about the mess. Her and her father's clutter of books, their sketches and paintings pinned all over the walls and cupboards, the tumble of clothing and livestock equipment, along with saddlery she was halfway through mending under the direction of Charlie Weatherbourne.

On the table lay the dirty plates, sauce smears like a bloodied crime scene. Cocaine-style spilled icing sugar on the table. Vaccination needles for animals looking dodgy. Her dad's philosophy magazines laid open and already marked with etched sticky notes. She wondered if she ought to pretend this was some kind of normal and offer them some cake. But then the officers' eyes fell to her father, who was awake now and had a deep furrow on his brow and a look of utter confusion. He was clenching his fists to hide his nails and shifting his legs uncomfortably under the blanket, blinking at the sight of the two cops standing in his van above him.

'This is my dad, Split ... er ... Dennis Wood, and I'm Melody. But you can just call me Drift. Everyone does. Um ... Dad's having a bit of trouble with leg cramps. The gout or something,' Drift stammered, as her father's dark eyes glared at her.

'Don't get up,' Sergeant Dodge said. 'We won't keep you long.' He cleared his throat as if about to make a public speech. 'You have probably heard a man's gone missing.'

Sergeant Dodge retrieved a photo of the surfer from his pocket and flashed it at them, Drift not taking in the image. All she could feel was the flame in her cheeks, not just from the fury her father was emitting towards her, but also because the young Constable Swain had not taken his eyes off her.

'We'll have a phone-reception booster set up for the duration of the search as of tonight, so if you have any information please call us. We're asking you to keep an eye out. A body washed up on the beach. Clothing. A board, maybe? That sort of thing,' he said.

Drift felt the chill of the past soak through her system as she watched her father's face turn ashen.

'Of course,' Drift said. 'How terrible for his family.'

Constable Swain added gently, 'There is hope he could've clung to his board and washed in somewhere on the current. But this change ...'

'Not to mention the sharks,' came the harder voice of Sergeant Dodge. There was an empty silence. Dodge's eyes roamed from

father to daughter, as if he were looking for a piece of a puzzle he couldn't quite locate. 'Well,' he said, as he offered Split his card, 'thanks for your time. Better head back to base camp.'

Reluctantly, Split unfurled his fist to take the card. The sergeant's head tilted ever so slightly as he saw Split's hand, the orange polish standing out like flashing tow-truck lights. One dark, perfectly curved eyebrow lifted on Constable Swain's face.

'Thanks for stopping by,' Drift said a little too loudly, flinging the door open to the wild wind.

'It was nice to meet you,' Constable Swain said. He leaned closer to her and muttered, 'Your father? He's not Priscilla, Queen of the Desert is he? Interesting. Different.' He pulled a face at her and winked. His senior officer gave him a scowl but it did nothing to dim the glimmer in his eye as he looked at Drift.

She blushed as she watched his broad back walking away in the wildness of the storm, trying not to think of the missing man, her mother, or the fury she was about to receive from her father. She pulled the door shut and braced herself for what was to come.