

IN
THE
CLEARING



J . P . P O M A R E

PART ONE

GOOD GIRL,
KEEP GOING

FREYA

Four days to go

A CHILD WAS taken, it was on the news, and I just had to get out of the house. You see, there are some things Freya Heywood – that is to say, *I* – can't see without changing. I'm like you, but then again I'm different.

I wear the skin of others the way you wear clothes. Not in a *Silence of the Lambs* kind of way – although, now that I think about it, I *do* have something of a dungeon, and a dog that I care about more than I do other people. No, this layer of skin I wear is pure metaphor.

I learnt how to behave by watching others, slowly building up an ideal of a person, but if you were to slide a scalpel from my head down to my toes, an entirely different woman might climb out. There's an art in the small details, the idiosyncrasies that make someone convincing. It's not easy to be this person twenty-four seven, while everyone else is just *so* natural.

I could be the neighbour you've only met a few times, or the woman you've seen reading the nutritional label on a box of muesli

at the supermarket, or someone at your local cafe, rocking a pram with her foot while she googles the answers to the crossword. If you watch me for a day, you might be fooled, but if you watch me closely for long enough you would see the moments when the other woman comes out. They are only brief, these moments, but they are impossible to miss. When I saw that news story about the missing girl today, the skin began to slip.

We all act; I'm just *better* at it than you. You do it when the service station attendant asks how your day is, and you smile and say, *Good, thanks*, because that's what's expected. You're doing it with every small lie, every interaction in which you must consult that ideal inner version of yourself before you respond. Unconsciously you are always asking, *What would a normal person say or do?* You're exactly like me; the difference is I'm prepared to admit what I am. I'm doing it right now, as I walk my dog down to the river. In a way I'm like an actor, except that most actors yearn to be seen while my aim is to disappear.

Freya Heywood drinks kombucha and believes that it will counter the effect of last night's two glasses of pinot noir. Imagine being so gullible; as if a fermented tea could really make up for washing alcohol, a known carcinogen, through the sensitive human digestive tract. I want to be one of the normal people with their strange and fickle ambitions, the types that become accountants or chefs or, in my case, yoga instructors. Normal people eat organic, if they can afford it, and stop having sex somewhere in their forties when they have had children or have given up trying for children. People don't need to know about the violence beneath the surface, the coils of razor wire turning inside like the inner workings of a watch. That's all I ever wanted: for people to know and love Freya Heywood. Is that so much to ask?

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Today is different. I can feel it in my bones, feel it in the scar below my belly button. The air is weighted. Maybe there's pollen on the hot breeze, maybe it was the news report about the girl, but as my Rottweiler, Rocky, disappears around the bend ahead, I feel an avocado stone grow beneath my sternum, my limbs tingle like the moments after you take a drug. Something is going to happen.

The sky is a hard ceramic blue. The heat seems to flow down from the hills, collecting in the valley among the native bush lining the river. It's been hot for weeks but this afternoon the temperature crashed through forty-five degrees. Those few leaves still on the trees are frayed and curled. *Leaves are the respiratory organs of trees.* What attracted me to this place was the private river access, the isolation – sometimes I could go weeks without encountering strangers.

The air is so thick with humidity that it barely fills my lungs and only the flies seem to have the energy to move in the heat, hovering in a cloud over something dead near the track's edge. The flies, and the indefatigable Rocky, whose tongue drips as he huffs away from me. The bush opens a path down to a mud flat beside the river where the water is still and silty. This is where I expect to find him rolling about, snapping at the nub of his tail. I carry the chain in my hand and the tennis ball with the receding hairline in my pocket.

Instead, Rocky is growling low and fierce. Has he seen a snake? Or a wallaby in the scrub, maybe?

Squeezing the clip of the leash in my fist, I pick up the pace. Beside the river I see Rocky, his body angled low, fur bristling, his lips drawn back to reveal the white stones of his teeth. Only then do I notice the smell, something that casts my mind back to my late teens. The tangy herb, as rich and potent as body odour. I think of the back seat of Wayne's Datsun. Carpet on the dash, cigarette butts stuffed into the ashtray. I can almost taste the cheap

beer sipped from dusty cans, feel the heavy Doc Martens on my feet. I can almost see the Melbourne cityscape from Ruckers Hill. I once loved Wayne so much – or I wanted to – which is exactly the same thing.

‘What is it, Rocky?’ I say, striding towards him.

A shape steps out from the shadows in the enclave of trees.
A man.

‘Oh,’ I say, resisting the impulse to apologise. I clear my throat.
‘Hi.’

Sitting behind him in the shade is a young woman, nude but for her white cotton underwear. They seem young, despite the man’s patchy facial hair.

‘Can you get him away from us?’ the man says.

‘Rocky,’ I say, stern. On my command he would latch on to the man’s forearm, and I can’t say I’m not tempted. The man wears mascara and his earlobes are stretched to the size of a five-cent piece. His nose is drawn up in a sneer but there is something vaguely familiar about him.

Rocky backs away.

‘What are you doing here?’ I ask.

‘Having a swim,’ the man says. ‘Free country.’

‘Right.’ I let my eyes linger on them for a moment longer.

A hot breeze pulls through the trees and the smell of dope fades. Did they know to put the joint out and bury it in a matchbox? Did they know that when the bush is this dry just a single spark could devour hectares in minutes? I imagine the undergrowth exploding, the trees aflame, fire spreading like spilt ink and the sky disappearing in smoke.

‘Follow, Rocky,’ I say with force, showing these people that my dog is trained and obedient. *This is private property*, I could add for effect. The river’s edge technically does not belong to me – anyone could come via kayak – and the land across the river and north of

here form part of North Tullawarra National Park, but this pair has walked across my land to get here. I whistle and jerk my head. Rocky barks once then runs to my side.

The couple will move on. Rocky has given them enough of a scare. They're harmless, I'm sure, yet I can feel the man's eyes following me as I walk away.

I fiddle with the tennis ball in my pocket, scratching it with my fingernail. As I climb the next hill, I bounce it once on the hard earth, thinking about Billy.

I can't help but imagine Billy choking, or drowning, or swept up from a roadside. Perhaps that's an affliction of motherhood, the way we evolved; mothers must always consider the worst scenarios in order to prepare for them, to keep us alert. It was the same with Aspen, until one slip and he was gone.

My connection with Billy is not something you can fake, the bond forged in childbirth; the earthy mud smell, the feeling of being split in two, the overwhelming sense of relief when the nurse wrapped him in cotton with my blood drying in his hair. I think about my own mother, how her indifference tempered me. The brief glimpses of love she did show drove me into a frenzy for more; the slightest hint of affection could make me buzz.

I bounce the ball again and Rocky leaps up, barking. 'Just a little further,' I tell him.

The trail follows the curve of the river, the incline levelling out. Looking down, I can see the couple still watching me. Their voices are low, reaching me as a hum. So long as they're gone by evening it will be okay. So long as they leave and don't come back.

I continue on, walking much further than I'd planned to, all the way to the next gap in the shrub. I hurl the ball into the water for Rocky, who swims out, ploughing through the mirrored surface.

Eventually, I clip him back on to his leash and head for home. The leash is for show; he obeys every command. I could take him

anywhere and he would only listen to me, but people feel more comfortable when he is leashed.

Four eyes track me down around the bend beside the river, then through the bush. Their voices are quiet and rushed over the trickle of the river. Rocky walks stiffly beside me. That grey washing sensation in my gut comes back.

‘Good boy,’ I say. ‘Good boy, Rocky.’

Inside, the clock reads 1 pm. I look out over the sun-bleached yard to Rocky who flicks his legs back with military decorum, his post-shit dance. I’ve locked him out so he is lingering down in the shade at the fence line. Even in the cool breath of the air-conditioning, I still feel the burn of the walk. Despite the efforts of surgeons and the ‘wellness’ industry, we all age, we all wither. After exercise, I’m reminded of my age by the tightness in my muscles. Yoga helps, I suppose, but seeing all the petite yoga-toned mums in their late twenties doesn’t.

There’s a white-tailed spider in the corner of my bedroom. I use a glass from the kitchen to trap the spider before sliding a piece of paper underneath. I carry it out into the garden to set down near the paperbark tree.

Back inside in the lounge, I do my push-ups, three sets of twenty, then step into the cold shower, my skin prickling and my legs becoming blue. You don’t get used to cold showers; even when the mercury hits the forties, it still feels like hands slapping all over my body.

I turn the TV on and head to the room to get dressed. A quirk of the open-planned home means my kitchen, dining room and lounge are all one giant L-shaped room – I can watch the afternoon news while I down my tonics and eat a chia bowl at the kitchen bench. On TV, they’re talking about the Great Barrier Reef again, sixty percent bleached and not coming back any time soon. Run-off

from a new coalmine in Queensland will hasten the decline. I open the fridge and pull out my bottle of kombucha, twisting off the cap.

Another news story is running: ‘. . . *the girl went missing yesterday afternoon between three and four . . .*’

I face the TV as the news cuts to an aerial view of a paddock with a line of people walking slowly, heads bowed, scanning the long grass. I rush to the remote and snatch it up.

‘. . . *police are asking for members of the public to come forward with any informa—*’

I mute the story and turn to watch the backyard, feeling the anxiety continue to churn within. *The girl went missing*. I know what the parents are going through.

Rocky stands at attention, watching something on the other side of the fence. Maybe it’s the couple walking back up to the road? I want to wait, to be certain that they have left, but I have a class soon and a boss – or she prefers ‘spiritual coach’ – named Milly who is all Lululemon, meditation and sunshine until you are late, then she is Old Testament wrath. When I had a flat tyre she reminded me that it might have been ‘negative energy’ that caused it, and that it was something I should work on. I sense the studio is just a tax write-off for her wealthy husband.

I sip my kombucha and turn back to the TV. There is an image of the child on the screen now, a school photo, hair back in a ponytail, wide grin, blue eyes shining. The type of child designed for the twenty-four-hour news cycle. I drum my fingers on my lips. *It won’t happen again*, I tell myself.

I open the door, call to Rocky, then aim the hose at the grass to clear it of hot water before filling his steel bowl. I lock the house and, for the first time in years, I set the alarm and roll down all the external aluminium shutters over the windows and doors – to keep the house cool, but also for security, because Freya Heywood

doesn't trust strangers and those people at the river were verifiably strange.

My front door opens into the dining room, and when I go to leave I find a bouquet on my doorstep. My heart stops. I glance up towards the road and about the house. A spray of yellow wattle, bunched in native fern. I don't pick up the flowers; I simply kick them away from the door. There is no note, nothing to indicate who has sent them or why. Heat floods my cheeks. Anger or fear? Is this a sick joke? Taking a few deep breaths, I manage to calm myself, the facade restored. I walk out to the car, alert but not tense. I watch for movement in my periphery.

When I shifted out here all those years ago, the road to the house was muddy and my hatchback got bogged. Derek, the stooped retiree from next door, backed his truck up and winched me out.

'Gunna need something with a bit more guts out here, I reckon,' he had said. I looked at his Land Rover, the badge on the side reading *Discovery*. 'Good rig, especially when the river floods or the track is washed away. You ever need to get out of here in a hurry, you're gunna need something like this,' he said, patting the bonnet.

Thank you, Derek. I went out and bought my own *Discovery*. The *very* had chipped off the side leaving only *Disco*. Now I tote my cork yoga mat out to the *Disco* and take off, gravel spitting out from beneath my wheels and a dragon of dust rising in my wake. I love all the euphemisms I have picked up from that old man, pocketing the vernacular like pretty flowers or perfectly shaped river stones. *Bogged* – now there is a word that Freya Heywood loves. *Roo, Disco, crikey*; I could never speak them out loud myself, but I love the sound of them when they come from Derek's tobacco-stained mouth.

My road is too narrow for cars to pass, so I pull onto the shoulder with a wave as a car comes the other way. Derek must have visitors. I'm running late so I speed along.

At the dip where the drain runs out beneath the road, I slow and glance at the flattened road's edge where visitors to the national park leave their cars. There is an old white kombi van parked with tinted windows. I repeat the first three letters of the number plate to myself. *OUP*. It sounds like a mantra. *O-U-P. O-U-P.*

In the rear-view mirror the van disappears in the dust.