

PROLOGUE

The sound of a twig snapping from somewhere behind made the girls freeze.

‘Did you hear that?’ Cecilia tugged on the back of Gypsy’s shirt again. ‘Someone’s out here – with us.’

‘Stop being such a baby,’ Scarlett groaned from the front. ‘It’ll just be a fox, or a wallaby.’

‘Probably only a possum,’ Gypsy agreed, brushing away the trembling hand that was resting on her left shoulder. She hoped her friend couldn’t feel her own steadily increasing pulse.

In silence the trio continued along the sandy track, weaving their way through the native shrubbery, inhaling the familiar, comforting scent of tea-tree. For most of their journey they relied on the dim light from the night sky to guide them, but at times, like now, it was pitch black, the dense canopy of moonah trees enveloping them in darkness.

‘Ow.’ Gypsy let out a little yelp as she tripped over an exposed root.

‘Shh,’ Scarlett hissed. ‘We’re almost there.’

Sure enough, the girls came to the sharp bend in the trail, which led down to Blairgowrie’s notorious Koonya Ocean Beach. It was a magnificent stretch of coastline, punctuated by towering sandstone rocks and crashing waves – majestic, but also deadly. Every summer they would hear tales of how the icy waters that rolled in from Bass Strait had taken the life of yet another naïve tourist who had underestimated the strong tides and killer rips.

But that night, the girls weren’t worried about the dangerous coast. Instead, they were staying on higher ground, looking for the forked tree that would lead them to the clearing.

‘Here it is,’ Scarlett whispered, running her hand over the papery bark. ‘And we’d better hurry, it must be getting close to midnight.’

Pressing her lips together, Gypsy followed her friend, stepping off the track and making her way through the ever-deepening shrubbery. She did her best to ignore the increasing rustle of branches all around, and the short, anxious breaths of Cecilia from behind.

‘We found it,’ Scarlett gasped, as the banksia bushes opened up, allowing the blood moon to bathe the girls in a dull, red light.

At the centre of the clearing, the ring of rocks they’d previously placed lay undisturbed; the inverted pentagrams still hanging from the surrounding trees.

‘Reckon our carvings have lasted?’ Gypsy motioned for her two friends to join her at the nearest moonah tree, where she traced her fingertips along the rough trunk until she found what she was looking for: the sharp etching of horned ears.

In quiet synchronicity the girls walked from tree to tree, completing a full lap of the clearing before gathering in the centre.

‘We’ve arrived.’ Scarlett grinned. ‘Welcome back to The Devil’s Landing.’

A nervous rasp escaped from Cecilia’s mouth. Gypsy shuffled from foot to foot.

'Should we get started?' She felt herself anxiously eye the bag of supplies, that Cecilia had reluctantly carried and now sat at their feet.

From her jeans pocket, Scarlett pulled out a small knife – the one she'd stolen from her dad's fishing kit. She waved the blade. 'Who will do the honours?'

Cecilia turned away.

Gypsy stared at the moon. This was her duty.

She took the knife and crouched down, then pressed the blade firmly into the sandy ground as she moved around the rocks.

Scarlett was first to step into the circle. 'The ritual has started,' she whispered dramatically.

Gypsy joined her. Cecilia hugged her arms to her chest; frozen. 'Will you hurry up?' Scarlett snapped.

'I'm scared. I think we should leave.'

'Give it a go. It'll be fun,' Gypsy urged, reaching a hand. Beside her she could sense Scarlett's anger building.

'Something's in the bushes.' Cecilia's lips were trembling. 'I don't think we're alone.'

'Why can't you stop making shit up?' Scarlett snarled.

Gypsy stepped out of the circle and reached for the bag. 'Maybe we should have a drink first?' She pulled out a can of beer. 'Oh.'

'It's all Dad had.' Scarlett's eyes flickered between her friends, daring either of them to complain.

The yeasty liquid hissed as Gypsy flicked the aluminium lid open. She took a small, tentative sip.

'Give it here.' Scarlett marched over and gulped a mouthful. 'You get used to it.'

'Try some, Cecilia.' Gypsy waved her friend closer. From the corner of her eye she saw Scarlett fumbling with a plastic sleeve. White pills. What was she doing?

'It'll help us relax.' Scarlett winked at Gypsy, dropping the pills into the can and swirling it, before passing it on to Cecilia. Oblivious.

Holding her breath, Gypsy watched Cecilia drink, chugging at the can awkwardly as though in a rush to get it over with.

'Don't finish it all.' She heard the stammer in her voice. High-pitched. Nervous.

'Yeah, give it back.' Scarlett took another swig, leaving Gypsy to finish the dregs.

She tossed the empty can to the side. 'Wanna get the fire going?' 'Yeah. But where's the kindling?' Scarlett was rummaging through the bag.

Gypsy's mouth turned dry. 'I think I left it behind.'

'You left it?'

'I just forgot.'

Her friend glowered. 'Then you'll need to find some. Quickly.' In a panic, Gypsy delved back through the shrubbery, foraging for any sticks or dry grass that might help to start a fire. But the further she ventured from the clearing, the harder it was to see, and the black shapes around her became distorted; terrifying.

Using the pocketknife, she hacked at nearby branches, her actions becoming increasingly frenzied, her mind playing tricks on her. Was Cecilia right? Was that a dark figure hiding in the bushes? Was that another? Was she surrounded?

She must have been gone for at least a few minutes when her name was shouted several times. Then came the rustle in the bushes, the heavy breathing, her wild, swinging arm.

But what happened next would forever remain a blur.

In the coming days, Gypsy would tell police she'd heard a scream – a high-pitched wail that had risen through the night, so piercing that flocks of birds had jolted from their slumber and taken flight. She'd say she had no idea where her friends had got to; that she'd searched desperately for hours. Only giving up when she'd become disoriented and lost.

Of course, she wouldn't tell them about the devils that were carved on the trees, the magic white pills, or the rituals the girls had been carrying out.

And she certainly wouldn't mention how she'd fled along the dirt track, hiding in the backyard of her friend's family home until first light, at which time she'd shakily turned on the garden tap, able to see just enough to make sure all the blood was washed from her hands.