

MATT NABLE

**STILL**

THE LONG TUFTS of spinifex curled over on a gust of warm wind. Whispered voices broke with a gravelled edge and the sounds of violence disturbed a brown snake resting in a tight coil on the corner of a steep embankment. The snake's head lifted, its tongue flickered and it looked at the shadowy figures, like a fighter adopting its stance. It unravelled itself and moved away, down the embankment into the large snarls of lantana and wild saltbush.

'Stand him up.' The voice came from a large broad-shouldered man, his shape caught briefly in the half-moon's light. The voice wasn't much more than a whisper, though considering where they were, it wouldn't have mattered had he yelled. The only sign of civilisation was the corona from the town's lights to the west of them and even it had been dulled by the ocean mist. In the darkness in front of the blockish end of a derelict machine-gun post, a slumped man was pulled up by his armpits. He stood, his face lifting from the shadows and into the light. His bottom lip was split in its centre and fell loosely either side of the gash.

'You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

The punch that followed struck the beaten man on the side of his jaw, the sound of bone against bone echoing through the concrete walls of the machine-gun post.

‘Hit him again.’

The second punch hit him squarely on the side of his head. His knees dipped and he swayed, and though he tried to stay standing, he fell slowly onto his back.

The large man took a pistol held in his beltline and poked the barrel hard against the man’s chest. ‘Your troubles are over, mate.’

A gunshot rang out, and the ground shuddered underfoot. Colonies of fruit bats rustled in the canopies of casuarina trees close by and then took flight, their shadows hopping over the corpse.

‘Shoot him again.’ The gun was passed to another.

‘He’s already dead, though.’

‘Do it. In the head.’

Another shot rang throughout the darkness.

The metallic tang of blood and the chemical spark of cordite mixed with the salty evening air. The snake was long gone.

## CHAPTER 1

CHARLOTTE CLARK STOOD in her kitchen looking out the window above the sink at the row of weedy lots of land that were vacant and signposted for sale. She could hear the whirr of her husband's voice, and though she wasn't listening, she knew by the sounds that clipped his words that he was telling a story with fervour. She closed her eyes and remembered a time when his words and voice commanded her attention, and she'd wait for the climax of his tale, or for the declaration of his love. She had revelled in those three words, *I love you*. She wasn't sure when she'd stopped listening.

It was summer, 1963, and the humidity in Darwin sat still and thick over everything. In Nightcliff, where Charlotte lived, the humid air had rolled itself around the heat and made her every drawn breath laboured. It was the wet season and the afternoon storms were a reprieve Charlotte very much looked forward to. She loved the smells that signalled the weather on approach. The floral bouquets from her backyard garden, the last jasmine sprouts that had endured past spring and the tomato vines broadening their

leaves to accept the rain. Even the town's garbage that was picked up by the wind at the front of the storm and thrown around in smelly gusts.

Looking out the window, she thought of her life and where she'd made it to. At twenty-three, with no children, she felt stuck. She'd left school five years previous, had abandoned a place at nurse's college to get married and start a family. But that hadn't happened. She'd fallen pregnant twice, both times miscarrying after twelve weeks. It had been hard. Somewhere in between she lost herself and also the connection to her husband. During the months after the last miscarriage, Charlotte wondered with some surrender if her body might not be made to carry a baby. That she may never become a mother. She had begun to think about reapplying to nurse's college. On a few occasions she steeled herself throughout the day, while washing clothes and preparing dinner, to broach the possibility with her husband. But she always faltered when he got home from work, either cranky or tired, and on more than one occasion too drunk to talk sense with. She had decided if she were to reapply it would be done in secret, and only if successful would she unfurl her ambition to her husband.

She felt restless, and as though her life were still. She found some joy in listening to the wireless as she folded clothes and cooked. The broadcasts sometimes brought news from places far removed from Nightcliff. Much of it from America. Charlotte listened, fascinated, the United States seemed so modern and robust, and moving so quickly toward uncharted experiences. The moon, *for goodness sake*. Charlotte wondered whether she could enjoy a place so rapid and busy. She liked the thought of one day visiting, to see a Christmas in the snow, to walk a street so far from where she knew; novel experiences that she could use to help her work out

who she was. Without some adventure or challenge, she feared her identity may be close to complete.

At twenty-three, it bothered her that her entire life might only be lived in the spaces she could see in front of her. She didn't feel anywhere near complete. She wanted to learn, to talk about things that mattered, about important things. Politics and social issues. Too often in company when talking about such things, she found herself politely quiet and then on the margins of whatever followed. But she liked the thought that one day she'd be more vocal, more refined, and if she were asked why she stood where she did on an issue, she'd be able to respond with her own answers. Responses that were formed by her own thought, her own reckonings, and without parroting anything she'd heard someone else say. So far, she'd stayed quiet and still and mostly unseen. But her husband had noticed her, and after only a month of meeting, had focused on her completely. He'd talked and talked, mostly about himself and his family, but she'd never felt such attention. It was overwhelming and exquisite.

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Charlotte looked down at her hands. Her fingernails were short, cut neatly so that small crescents of flesh protruded from them. She'd cut one of them too short and it stung beneath the nail. She put the finger in her mouth and felt a heat against her skin. She wondered immediately what her breath might smell like. She pulled the finger out and sniffed it. It smelt acidic and stale, and she ran herself a glass of water from the tap over the kitchen sink. She drank it quickly and then placed her sore finger back inside her mouth to feel the coolness.

She looked out the window again, past her ghostly reflection and to the sky. Clouds had begun to gather, but it was too late in the day for a storm. The forecast for the coming week had warned that precautions were necessary in case the storm building in the Arafura Sea strengthened and formed a cyclone. Charlotte, like most who'd lived in Darwin long enough, knew that a cyclone wasn't likely, and if it did form, then it was probably going to blow itself out before reaching land. She hadn't made a single preparation or given it any more thought. The warmth from the oven had risen, hit the ceiling and turned on itself, settling in an idle lump in the middle of the room and it made it hard for her to breathe. She could see the heat outside, vapour rolling in fuzzy waves across the bitumen street leading to a watery mirage. She looked at the window, at its corners where the fasteners had rusted through and been lapped by coats of heavy paint. It hadn't been opened in years. She wanted to smash through the glass and feel a gust of wind as proof it was just her life that was so stagnant in that moment and not the rest of the world.

'Charlotte, that pie ready?'

She turned away from the window, her head falling. About to answer, she was transfixed by the beads of sweat gathered between the fine hair on her forearm.

'Sweetheart?'

'It's comin.'

She opened the oven, turned her head to the side and caught the squall of searing heat across her neck.

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Bobby Clark sat at the table, held his plate to his mouth and licked at the last traces of gravy. Charlotte studied her husband. His dark

brown hair looked black beside his ears where it was lank with sweat. The eyes she knew so well were sky blue, made brighter by the bronzed colour of his skin. His nose was flattened across its bridge, pushed slightly to one side, and whistled when he was out of wind or drunk.

She stared at his thick neck, it was thicker than when they'd first met, and when he spoke a knotty mass of veins rose and scurried like bolts of lightning. His rough-house look and love of drink had been shaped by his years of rodeo. She'd been charmed by his rugged swagger when they'd first met. She'd listened to his stories and learnt about Bobby starting rodeo as a six-year-old, bareback on bulky calves and tying goats, and by the time he was fourteen he was competing against men in saddle bronc riding. By sixteen he was riding bulls. His father and older brothers were national champions at steer wrestling and team roping. He'd spent his youth travelling through the Territory and into Queensland following the rodeo circuit. His stories of other places and the disparate people who occupied them had fascinated her.

Often the rodeo was part of an agricultural show and accompanied by a boxing tent. At a show in Gladstone in Queensland, Bobby's father offered him up to a young Aboriginal fighter who was part of Jim Sharman's boxing troupe. Bobby was twelve. He had his nose broken, and the last of his baby molars knocked loose. Charlotte was horrified that Bobby's father had pushed him forward and allowed such violence to attach itself to his son. She shuddered when she learnt the crowd showered both fighters with coins at the end of the contest and that, afterward, Bobby's father straightened his nose with the shaft of a tablespoon and bought him his first beer pulled from a draught tap. She never met Bobby's father. He'd died a year after that fight in a

car accident while transporting young brumbies from North Queensland. Bobby had spoken to her about him and his passing. It was the first time she'd seen him cry. He didn't hide his pain with her, and his willingness to be vulnerable was a reason she fell in love with him.

Charlotte held the crockery dish out in front of her, the action unknowingly pushing her breasts to a heavy cleavage. The man next to her husband looked there until she placed the apple pie down on the table and stared at him long enough for his eyes to return to her face.

'Thank you, Charlotte.' Danny Lewis was a tall man, thickset with a rugby player's physique. A local policeman, he and Bobby drank at the same pub. Lewis enjoyed being in Bobby's presence, it nourished his ego to be mates with someone so authentically rough and tumble.

'She makes it from scratch.' Bobby smiled at his wife and tapped her gently on the backside.

Charlotte cut into the apple pie, smelt the stink of her underarm and hoped her husband and Danny Lewis were spared. She served them and then left for the kitchen.

Bobby leant closer to Lewis, lowered his voice and whispered, 'If ya don't like it, don't eat it. I'll have it. Just don't leave it on ya plate.'

Lewis nodded. 'It's a bit tart.'

'The apples aren't ripe. Not her fault.'

Bobby cut into his pie with the blunt edge of a fork, blew on it to cool it down. 'It's like eatin' fuckin' lemons.' Both men laughed as Charlotte came back into the room.

'Please don't swear.' Charlotte took her seat next to her husband.

Bobby looked at Lewis and with a glare encouraged him to finish what was left on his plate.

Later that evening, the men left the house and headed for Hotel Darwin, a pub on the harbour foreshore. They were already drunk and, before walking out the door, Bobby took Charlotte by the hand and led her to the bedroom. He thanked her for the meal and for the pie, and then kissed her deeply. Charlotte steeled herself to not pull away.

Later, she stood on the front porch smoking a cigarette, the warm breeze carrying a brackish waft from the Timor Sea. She took a deep breath and savoured the essence from the nearby beach, the salt water, the fishy odour from the vestiges of gutted whiting and pikey bream, and the bitter smack of rotting kelp that had washed in on a ripping southerly wind a week before. She straightened her elbow and looked, knowing they'd be there, the fine clusters of salt carried on the breeze that swept across the Timor's skin now come to rest on the ginger ends of hair across her forearms.

Standing there, Charlotte wondered, not without guilt, what another life might be like. With another man. In another place. As a nurse. Where she might end up. Whom she might become friends with and what kinds of people she would spend time with. Looking across the road to the vacant blocks of land, she waited for the cooler wind that was forecast just before midnight. She saw it first over the thick weedy lots across from her, the grass suddenly shifting in one direction. And then she felt it, across her arms and face, and billowing her dress. She closed her eyes and lifted the hem of her dress waist-high to let the breeze drift between her legs. It felt good.

She went to bed, knowing Bobby would be home soon. Even if sleep didn't come before that, she would pretend. He would be

drunk, sloppy, and wanting sex. It would be fast and over quickly but she'd started to refuse him and she watched him wrestle with anger each time she did. She feared that his anger would turn into enquiry and suspicion. He would not want to know the truth. That she no longer loved him. Not the way or in the amount she thought was needed to remain married. She wished she could explain to him that she believed they got married too early. That expectation made her say yes. She knew he wouldn't understand, wouldn't listen. Women her age were expected to marry. To stifle their ambition. She'd done that, but the years had only made her more restless and her love for Bobby had waned. If he asked, would she be brave enough to say that, though she loved him, it wasn't enough? She wouldn't. She'd often wondered whether the women she knew who were the same age, and in similar circumstances, ever indulged in such thoughts of another life. She didn't believe they did. She'd listened to them, the sound of their voices, and watched as they smiled easily. They were happy, she'd decided. Right where they wanted to be.

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Bobby arrived home just as Charlotte had drifted off to sleep. He woke her up and sat on the edge of the bed, crying, telling her how much he loved her, and that *this would be the year* they would have their baby. He lay beside her, mumbling through some laughter, though it was nothing she could interpret. She spoke softly to him, told him to *get some sleep*, and gently ran her fingers through his hair. Not a minute later he was asleep but Charlotte lay awake until morning.

## CHAPTER 2

NED POTTER, A fishing rod resting loosely on his hip, looked north. The Timor Sea in front of him, bumpy and moving in all directions, was rebounding in torn crests off the weathered edges of the rock platform he stood on. His short sandy hair moved with the wind across the sharp part on the left side of his scalp. His light blue eyes shone, bouncing off golden ribbons of reflected morning glow that rolled over the swell. The colour of his skin looked more bronze than usual under the rising sun and above the russet water of the Timor. He was clenching his teeth tightly together in a pulse-like rhythm, something he did when concentrating or in deep thought.

At twenty-eight years of age, Ned was easy to look at. Handsome, taller than most, his body though not overly muscled was taut and lean. His thick hand, which was more palm than fingers, held the fishing rod lightly. He looked beyond the churn of the sea close to the rocks, and watched a collection of debris and rubbish that had been washed from the streets into the stormwater drains the day before now slowly heading to shore on the tide. He

chewed on his lip as he shook his head. *Who'll clean that up?* That was Ned's thought while he stood there on the southern end of the East Point rock platform.

His thoughts turned to work and what was required for the day. Ned had been made a senior constable two years before. He'd studied hard to pass his exams and fought harder to gain the respect of the more senior policemen he was working with. In particular, Damien Clooney, who had been the oldest senior sergeant working in the Northern Territory Police Department. A returned infantry soldier from the Second World War, he'd served in the machine-gun battalion in New Guinea. Ned had attached himself to the older man, keen to learn, and had persisted through Clooney's apathy for getting to know him and reluctance to converse. Eventually, it was Clooney who gave up, saying, *Jesus fucking Christ, you're not goin' away, are you? Keep ya fuckin' ears open and less talk.* From that moment until Clooney retired, Ned spent most working hours with him. And he learnt. Clooney showed him how to manoeuvre through a stagnant investigation, pointed him toward the who and where to call upon favours, and demonstrated to him, sometimes in a violent manner, that some criminals were worth considerably more out of jail than what they were inside. Ned felt that his education under Clooney had him positioned as one of the Territory's most efficient investigators. It was a self-appraisal that Ned knew wasn't shared by some of the other senior policemen and certainly not by Senior Sergeant Joe Riley.

Ned had grown up in a big family, four brothers and two sisters, following Terry, their father, and his search for work during and post wartime. Ned was born while his father had worked at the Kent Brewery in Sydney. They'd lived in Redfern then, and when the wind blew the right way the sweet scent of fermenting

alcohol blew into their old terrace house making it smell like a big apple pie. When his father grew tired of working indoors at the brewery, they moved to Coffs Harbour where he worked on the banana plantations. Two years later they moved further north to Murwillumbah to the cane fields where he drove heavy machinery. The Potter family landed in Darwin when Ned was twelve, where his father worked at Darwin Port and then bought a newsagency. He'd been a quiet man, made uncertain of himself and cloaked by disproportionate guilt due to his inability to serve during the war. A bacterial infection in his corneas had almost made him blind as a young boy and he had been forced to wear thick glasses for the rest of his life.

Ned's mother, Frances, had borne all six children before she was thirty and had never favoured any of them. She had no time, and praise and punishment were uniformly direct and moved on from quickly. Ned had been a good boy, the fourth born, and had looked after his younger brother and sister. In winter he'd slept in the same bed as they did until he was at high school. He told them stories to calm them when they were made afraid by their thoughts, and prayed with them for slumber without nightmares, or fever.

Ned's heart was good. His father had died when he was sixteen, and then three years later his mother had followed. During both periods, though distraught himself, he'd been a comfort for all of his siblings. He'd nursed them through their mourning, watched them carefully, rendering whatever help they needed. A hug. To be told it was going to be okay. To cook them dinner. To make them laugh.

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He threaded his long shank hook with the bottom half of a school prawn and cast his last line. A moment later the lithe end of his rod quivered and then bent back on itself. He reeled as fast as he could, and just when he saw the red bream's colour flash through the dusky caramel water, his rod flicked forward and straightened. 'Bugger.' He walked home, the sun rising slowly, its heat melting the thin bands of stratus clouds cast from the cooler air moving across the sea at night. He turned into his street, a block back from the beach in the northern suburb of Casuarina in Darwin. Its name given to it by the abundance of casuarina trees that grew on the shores and banks of the beach. Ned's house was a small timber-clad cottage lifted up by rows of brick piers. He'd not long before painted the exterior, and had plans to tack another bedroom onto its end. When he got inside, his wife was asleep. He walked quietly to the bassinet at the foot of the bed and looked at his daughter. She had a drunkard's smile from a bosom full of milk. He leant in and kissed her forehead. Her eyes crossed, trying to focus, and Ned laughed at her silly look.

'You catch anything?'

'No.' Ned sat on the foot of the bed. 'You should go back to sleep. It's still early.'

'I had a dream. A bad one.'

'About what?'

'A cyclone.'

'It's clear out there.' Ned crawled up the length of the bed and settled next to his wife.

'Everything was flooded. I couldn't find her.'

'She's right over there. In her bassinet. Smilin' like you've got beer in those breasts of yours.'

Bonnie Potter was beautiful; long straight hair, darker than brown and black when it was wet. Her eyes were hazel, greenish in the light, her lips full. And her skin was brown and became darker when she'd been in the sun. People thought she was Italian, Aboriginal, and everything but what she was, which was pure Irish stock. Her parents were immigrants, her colour from the remnants of the Spanish Armada.

'I'm going to have a shower and go to work.' Ned leant over and kissed her on the forehead.

'What would you like for dinner?' Bonnie asked, her voice croaky from sleep.

'I was hoping fish.'

'I'll buy some. Fry it up.'

'And some beer. It's going to be hot today.'

'Okay.' Bonnie yawned and turned to her side to sleep some more.

'I'll see you tonight.' Ned leant over, kissed her cheek and then left for work.

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Along the unsealed road leading to Tabletop Swamp, Ned always drove slowly. The Land Rover he'd been assigned was twenty years old and had been rebuilt from the axle up twice before. The terrain out of Darwin to the wetlands was severe, particularly during wet season when the ochre-coloured earth became saturated and turned to a clay muck that filled in tyre treads and stuck to the undercarriage of the truck, increasing its weight and compromising its handling. The steering became leaden, every gear change chewed through the box like cattle bone through a meat grinder,

and the oil through the old engine boiled while it worked to keep the blunted wheels moving through the mire and across exposed mounds of ragged stone.

He often saw men on his patrols through the wetlands; sometimes alone, sometimes with a family. They were hunting, for kangaroo or pig, or on their way to a nearby billabong to fish and swim. He usually stopped to talk with them, enquired about their families and how they were, asked advice on the best waterholes to fish at and whether any crocodiles had been seen. One man he saw regularly was Michael Roberts. He hunted for kangaroo and fished by hand, something he'd shown Ned how to do. Ned looked into the reaches of the Darwin woollybutt and stringybark trees either side of him now, hoping to see Michael with his young son, mid-hunt or walking back through the bush with a catch of barramundi woven through a fish stringer.

Ned had his window down, but it did nothing to allay the choking humidity that kept him constantly thirsty and in a sweat. He travelled out this way routinely, always hoping to be back in the station before 3 pm to write a report, record who he'd seen, whom he'd spoken to, if anybody, and what condition the swamp was in and whether it had flooded.

He looked out over the wetlands, warm squalls of wind blowing rippling smears across the water's surface, and then long stretches of stagnant water reaching out to the knotty mangroves that stood from the water like wading bathers. Ned liked the tart smell of the swamp. It reminded him of his youth, long days spent on his father's tinny at the edge of the mangroves fishing for barramundi. His father would take a foam cooler full of beer, and Ned and his brothers were allowed two cans each, and one extra for whoever hauled in the prize fish, won not by its length, but by the width of its belly.

He wasn't ten minutes from the mouth of Tabletop Swamp when he saw two men standing by the side of the track. They turned his way when they heard the rumble of his vehicle, and then looked back toward the edge of the marshland. Ned stopped and got out.

'Dead,' one of the men said before Ned uttered a word.

Ned walked quickly and settled beside them, and the man who'd spoken pointed out past a small bed of swamp lilies. Ned followed the trajectory of his extended arm and saw it. The clothed back of a person, face down and swollen in a shallow edge of the swamp.

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An hour later, Ned looked over the body that he and the two men had dragged from the shallow marshland and onto the side of the track. Ned knew the dead man, Ernie Clay, who had lived in the same suburb as him. While driving to work early of a morning, Ned had often seen him walking back from the beach with a cork reel and bucket of whatever he'd caught. Ernie was a tall man, broad across the shoulders and thin through the waist. Ned had spoken to him only on the odd occasion when they crossed paths, walking a nearby street, or at the small store they both shopped at from time to time. Ned had always thought Ernie to be a quiet man, had said as much to Bonnie. It was known that Ernie had been taken from his mother by the government at a young age and placed into a church-run mission. Bonnie had wondered how that may have affected him, torn from his family and dumped somewhere completely unfamiliar.

The dead man was barely recognisable. Ernie Clay's bottom lip was riven and white, his teeth uneven and broken, his nose bent

and swollen, and there was a miasma of faeces where he lay. Ned got down on his haunches and looked closely at the body. There appeared to be a gunshot wound through the chest and another through Ernie's left temple.

'This is big trouble.'

Ned looked up, and one of the men looked down at him.

'Not for us, fella.' The man turned and walked away with his friend, following the track down toward the open mouth of Tabletop Swamp.

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Ned radioed for an ambulance and, as he waited, watched the clouds above twist over themselves and thicken, like a block of dough rolled across sheets of flour, broadening and turning to stodge. Their colour changed as he watched, white no longer, they were deep grey, black in places and purple in the centre. They looked like the fresh bruises of pure violence, and with Ernie Clay dead in the mud next to Ned, he couldn't help heed the resemblance of the brutality building above and what lay at his feet. The storm was coming, the thunder clapped and echoed across the floodplain wetlands, scattering a colony of broilgas picking at sedge tubers in the shallows.

When the ambulance arrived, the rain had already stopped and the sun had broken through the dissolving clouds in long broad bands that hit the sodden earth and quickly cooked the still water. Its breath rose up, stinking and hot, and settled over Ned. He watched the two ambulance officers cover Ernie Clay's body with a white bedsheet, and lift him onto a gurney.

'What happened here?' one of them asked Ned as they pushed the gurney into the back of the ambulance.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Well, from the look of him, he pissed someone off.’ The officer closed the doors. ‘One of his own, ya reckon?’

Ned raised his brow. ‘What?’

Ned thought of the questions he’d asked himself while waiting for the ambulance. Race wasn’t one he’d considered. ‘No. I don’t think so.’

A mountain of paperwork back at the station meant that Ned got home well after dark. Bonnie was asleep, curled up on their bed with her top half exposed, a single sheet tightly around the contour of her buttocks and bent legs. Even in that moment, after the horrors of his day, she looked desirable. He looked at his baby, asleep in her bassinet, and then back to Bonnie. He spoke quietly, making sure not to wake her. ‘There’s trouble, my love. I don’t know just how bad. But it’s bad.’