

Praise for *The Rush*

‘Michelle Prak doesn’t give you a minute to catch your breath on this Australian outback rollercoaster. Compelling and explosive: you won’t be able to put this book down.’

Hayley Scrivenor, author of *Dirt Town*

‘An electrifying outback thriller that’s unlike anything I’ve read – I couldn’t put it down. *The Rush* will make you rethink your next road trip.’

Mark Brandi, author of *Wimmera*

‘This has to be the most terrifying book I’ve read in years! Michelle is a very assured writer, and her characters are so believable. I genuinely cared whether they lived or died, which is what made the book so deliciously tense.’

Shelley Burr, author of *Wake*

‘*The Rush* is a wild ride through the remote outback during an extreme weather event. Some threats aren’t obvious at first glance, but Andrea, Mark, Quinn, Scott, Livia, Hayley, and Joost are all on a collision course which will send shockwaves through the remote communities. Compelling drama in a backdrop of flooding, Michelle Prak takes the reader through flooded roads and washed-out generators and menacing strangers who come knocking in the dark.

An utterly chilling read with an unexpected twist, this crime novel is hard to put down.’

Vikki Petraitis, author of *The Unbelieved*

‘A sunny outback road trip with two friendly young couples: what could possibly go wrong? *The Rush* flips the trope with sudden floods, then piles on the threats for its women heroes – stranded far from home, isolated and vulnerable . . . not just to flooded creeks and cut off roads, but to the deadly games of a predator. Like a river in full flood, Michelle Prak’s heart-pounding debut thriller sweeps the reader along through masterful twists all the way to its shattering ending.’

Greg Woodland, author of *The Night Whistler*

‘What a rollercoaster ride! The outback is both terrifying and a safe haven in this assured debut from Michelle Prak. This book grabs you by the throat and doesn’t let go until the very last page. A cracking debut you won’t be able to put down. Michelle Prak writes so vividly about the outback, highlighting its beauty and terrifying the reader with its dangers. I loved it! Michelle Prak shows outback Australia in all its dangerous glory, a place to which villains are drawn and where heroes are made.’

Kelli Hawkins, author of *Other People’s Houses*

‘Taut, unpredictable, terrifying; the uniquely Australian weather and landscape are both joyful and become an unwitting accomplice. Michelle Prak weaves such a suspenseful story that you might never want to be alone or isolated again.’

Neela Janakiraman, author of *The Registrar*

‘Great characters and a wicked plot. A haunting road trip through the outback with a terrifying finale. I loved this book.’

Tim Ayliffe, author of *The Enemy Within*

THE
RUSH

MICHELLE PRAK



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THE RUSH

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PROLOGUE

TUESDAY 7 FEBRUARY
6 PM

‘That sky could be trouble. We better hustle.’

Quinn Durand climbs into her four-wheel drive and Bronte, panting, springs over to her. Quinn checks her phone. She’s spent too much time at the farmhouse and now curses quietly. No reception, the network flaky already. She’d checked the storm updates regularly for the first few hours. When did she forget?

She starts the engine and heads to the gates, black poles in the distance. The horizon is an otherworldly purple and rainclouds, woven tightly together, bring forth an early night. The sun would usually be blazing for another few hours, but it’s being outgunned.

At the gates, Quinn turns left to head back to The Pindarry, gripping the steering wheel just like her mother coached her. ‘Both hands on the wheel, love. If you have an accident, it’ll be hours before any help arrives.’ The dirt on either side of the road is orange and beyond it there’s scratchy saltbush squatting in orderly lines as far as the eye can see. The sunlight grows

harsher each year and there will come a time when even the tough scrub can't put up a fight. This prickly field will survive for now, though. By tonight, rain will bounce onto the hard earth like pebbles.

The water is welcome yet it seems this region never gets the balance right. Earlier, radio reports predicted that roads would be swamped and towns cut off. Quinn's heart beats faster. She was eleven years old during the last flood, and her father was still alive. She remembers racing beneath the rain, giggling and shouting, shadowed by the family's dogs, their teeth snapping at each other in contagious excitement. Her mother had laughed, spinning with her arms out like a movie star. Quinn had never seen a wider smile on her face. 'Think of the rainwater tanks!' her mother cried.

That downpour had continued for another day, and then another, and soon the dancing and smiling stopped. Her father and his team trudged around with scowling faces and dripping hats. 'Nothing but water and dead animals,' he said on the phone. They lost more than half their cattle to drowning and something Quinn found hard to pronounce back then – hypothermia. Crews of neighbours and volunteers banded together with bulldozers and excavators for the dreadful task of burying carcasses.

A decade later, and back into consecutive years of drought, that flood is a bleak memory. The local landowners crave rain once again, essential to their livelihoods, yet it still unsettles Quinn.

The car cabin darkens and fat drops splat the windscreen, early warnings of what's to come. The wipers smear dust across

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the glass, as messy as a child's finger painting. Bronte turns to her with anxious brown eyes. The dog has been with Quinn since she was a red-and-blond pup and travels everywhere with her.

'It's all right, girl.'

There's still time to reach The Pindarry before the sun disappears.

Only this morning, she'd helped Matt and Andrea fill sandbags and stack them against walls, leaving an emergency pile near the pub's entrance for easy access while they were unsure where they might be needed. They have enough food if the storm leaves them isolated for a few days. They have enough for the next few weeks – that's always the way out here. Quinn doesn't know how she'll cope, being holed up with her employers and their toddler son, Ethan. They're nice people, calm and polite even during the pub's busiest times, yet it's their home and Quinn needs her alone time. That was another reason to spend most of the day at the old house. Bit by bit, she's been packing up the rooms, removing three generations of the Durand family. She's stopped consulting with her mother and brother, who no longer want to talk about what to keep and what to throw away. They're scattered across the continent now, each in a different home, starting new lives. They don't understand the comfort Quinn finds here – early evenings on the cement verandah, the feel of the February breeze on her neck.

Each time Quinn returns to the farm, she retrieves items to stow in her room at the pub. Today it was more photo albums, plus some of her father's tools, which Matt may like. And her father's rifle. She isn't sure what to do with that. Perhaps Ryan

will want it. Her father taught them both how to use it many years ago. For now, it's zipped in a gun bag lying along the length of the boot.

Quinn knows the bends and dips of the road so well she jokes that she could drive it blindfolded. So when an alien mound appears on the shoulder up ahead, she slows and squints through the drizzle. It could be a dead roo, but there haven't been kangaroos in this district for a long time. There's nothing for them here. Is it a bag of rubbish?

Bronte whines and scrabbles across the seat nervously as the four-wheel drive decelerates. Quinn buzzes down her window and flecks of rain fly into her face. The air is still warm. She slowly passes the hump, staring.

'Shit,' she whispers.

It's a body, a bizarre and fragile sight, its head vulnerable on the ground.

She pulls over and switches off the engine, reaching for the worn Akubra that will give coverage from the rain.

She shoves Bronte away. 'You stay here.' If this is what it looks like, her red heeler shouldn't be sniffing around.

Rain peppers Quinn as she runs back to the body. As she nears, her steps slow, her eyes widen. She watches for movement, some sign of life. It's an adult, arms and legs motionless, unshielded from the barrage above. She gasps at the pale face, bruised and swelling. A male, heavysset, his eyes sealed shut. She lowers herself, crouching within arm's reach, finally seeing the chest rise and fall beneath a rain-sodden T-shirt.

'Hey, can you hear me?' Her voice sounds girlish to her own ears.

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Bronte yaps from the car as Quinn scans the area. There's no vehicle, no skid marks, no broken glass. No other bodies. How did this man get here? It's like he's dropped from the sky. The Pindarry is another ninety kilometres west and the nearest working property is seventy kilometres to the southwest. The nearest town is Minnarie, 202 kilometres south, and that's little more than a fuel stop and a dying store. Quinn and this man are the only two people for miles around.

Whoever this is, wherever he came from, he needs medical attention, urgently.

Then his arm flings up and a cold hand clutches Quinn's wrist.

She shrieks and tries to pull away, hears Bronte's faraway barking. Her heels dig into the ground but the stranger's hand is a vice she can't break.