

DEEP IN THE FOREST

ERINA REDDAN



PANTERA
PRESS

Deep in the Forest was written on the Traditional lands of the Wurrundjeri Woi Wurrung and the Yirrganydji peoples.

I acknowledge that First Nation peoples were the first story tellers of this continent and that colonisation and systemic racism has attempted to destroy their stories, voices and way of life.

I acknowledge the debt I owe to past and present generations for the privilege I have in being able to tell the stories I tell at this moment in our history.

The Gathering Dark

Ice always melts.

That's what my mother said to me in the grip of a winter chill. It was her way of saying that, in the end, truth will out. But I don't know. I think it's just a fairytale, the kind mothers tell their kids to buy them the precious years they need to thicken up enough to face the real truth: that life is a twisty, dark affair.

I've had the years. All twenty-seven, but still I'm shiver-thin on the inside with nowhere near enough layers to confront life's unexpected curves. I gear down to avoid a pothole on this long winding drive, as familiar to me as my own skin. I always go gently at night under the canopy of spreading eucalyptus trees. Switching off the pound of music, I bathe in the sudden quiet. Just the even hum of the engine and me, easing through the shadowy forest. It's funny how the night softens you out.

I miss my mother the most when I drive through the estate's elaborate wrought iron gates. Every time. I give in to the need to knock my knuckle against the car door three times to help swallow down the jag of grief before it gets to be something. When I pull on the handbrake in front of my house, this grand

sandstone passed down through generations, built on stolen land, it takes me a while to gather my energy against my reluctance to get out, but eventually it's the cold that makes me open the door. I pick up the bean casserole Amra gave me and do my usual jump to the ground. Amra can't understand why I bought a Ford Ranger with a cabin so stupidly high that I need to hoist myself up into it and jump out of it. Maybe it's because it's so big it carapaces around me like a protective shell. Up there, nobody can touch me.

Needing to be behind closed, familiar doors now, I stride past the fountain that hasn't seen water for a year and sprint up the wide marble stairs to the verandah, taking them two at a time to keep ahead of the icy alpine night air. The sound of the door closing behind me echoes through the cavernous space like loneliness. I hunch over against it and keep my head down as I bolt towards the kitchen at the back of the house. I never let myself even glance at the curving elegance of the staircase that soars to the second floor. It's the deal I made with myself the night my mother died a year back; I can get through this if I just stay away from all her places.

In the kitchen, I click on the heater and slide the casserole into the fridge, businesslike, turning to put on the kettle, until I snag on the hard stare of the woman looking back at me in the reflection from the window. I'm skewered by the sharp, white planes of the face in the cold glass and the way it's swallowed into the dark of my hair and the black of my hoodie. I'm a pale outline of being, all angles and no substance, as if I'm an apparition in my own life. I widen my eyes to break the spell, chastising myself for my predilection for the gothic and stride back through the house to get to the only other room I still call home. The soft lamps of my studio are on a timer so they're already glowing. My body exhales as if

the whole time I've been away I've been holding my breath. I leave the door slightly ajar for Bojo to snuffle in when she's ready, but it's closed enough to shut out the rest of the house and all its absences. I hunch my fists into my armpits to stop myself knuckle tapping on the corner of my worktable. It's cold so I cross to the fireplace, squat down and strike a match to the pile of brambles criss-crossed under two logs ready to flame up.

At nine in the evening, the last thing I want is to start work, but I promised Amra I'd concentrate on the binding of the Sanctuary's book tonight because all I do is moan about how far behind schedule I am and how I wish I wasn't doing it at all. I place another few strategic logs on the fire and blow on my cold hands before holding them out to the first leap of flame. I've got exactly fourteen days before a government senator is coming to launch this book at the Sanctuary's one hundredth anniversary.

I suck in air, grimacing over how long I let myself procrastinate over this project. There's just too much at stake. With this one I'm not binding a book for far-off multi-nationals or wealthy philanthropic families I'll never meet. This time it's for the Sanctuary, the closed community who run a drug rehabilitation program on the other side of the lake.

The eyes of this town are watching.

Once the people of Stone Lake found out that the Sanctuary commissioned me to bind this book they tried to stop it. Some feel I shouldn't be rewarded after what they say I've done. Others worry that I will put something damning in the book which will bring the media down on the Sanctuary again.

After a former Sanctuary member disappeared a couple of years back, the media went into a frenzy and tourists stayed away from the town's stores until well after the police cleared

the Sanctuary of any involvement. Nobody in Stone Lake can afford another economic hit like that. Especially not after the brutal Covid lockdowns kept Melbournians away and the bushfire that roared through the community last summer. It's been a hard few years.

I rub my face like I might take the skin right off, because there's much more to my unwillingness to complete this project than just the judgement of those watching eyes. The real truth is buried further down, underneath the mud. My mother was one of the Sanctuary's financial donors and I'm not yet strong enough to stumble across her name in some unseen corner somewhere in the box of memorabilia they've given me. To be reminded of who she once was – flesh and bones and here.

The fire pops and I twist away to dodge the shower of sparks, jumping to my feet to stamp them out before they burn a hole in the carpet. I shake out my hands, trying to close down this useless whir about my mother in my brain. Tea. I need tea before I can start work.

In the kitchen I cut up ginger and thyme and steep them in boiling water in the teapot. Briefly I wonder if I should be worried about my missing-in-action shaggy, grey bundle of a dog. Since she just strayed into our yard a few years back, I'm not always sure Bojo will return whenever she goes off chasing something in the forest out the back. I stir the steaming water in the teapot and replace the lid, making the decision to give Bojo some more time before I yell for her to come home.

I take the teapot and my favourite mug with the black and white puzzle pieces back to my studio. I slip onto the stool and smooth my hand along the worn, honey-blond boards.

My mother had this table made for me when I turned twenty. She commissioned it from the artisan woodcrafters up at the Sanctuary, who used recycled floorboards from a

nineteenth-century church. That's what she did. One good thing, turned in to three. Something beautiful for me, support the Sanctuary, save the planet. The side of my mouth turns up into what could become a smile if I allowed it a little more oxygen.

I look out through the floor-to-ceiling French windows to the dark. Despite my resolution to avoid all further distractions, I'm not quite still enough in my bones to open their box. I've done absolutely everything I can do on this book without going through their physical materials.

Instead I pull the book I've just finished binding towards me, sip the sharp heat of the tea and open the front cover. I turn every page, eyes assessing fonts, borders, spaces, images and how they all hold each other in this bound world. The quiet perfection of the book washes through me. When I reach the end page, I close it up. Reluctant to let it go, my index finger traces the embossed Celtic Cross on the front cover and then the fleur-de-lis silver clips at each corner of this history of the Gilchrist Royal Academy.

This.

It calms me.

This stillness. This warmth. This work.

The sing of it.

'Good of you to show up,' I say without looking up as Bojo finally noses the studio door open. She pads over and snuffles into my thigh, breathing heavily like she's spent her life propped on a bar stool, chain smoking. I bend so I can pull up the ruff at her neck to welcome her home, and then release it. Her eyes roll back as if she's in heaven. 'Got work to do, mate.' I nudge her with my knee towards the fireplace and her nest of rugs. For a second, I wonder if I should close the drapes since I'm going to be working late tonight, but I don't move. We're

so deep in the bush here, there's nobody for miles. Just Amra's family up this road and the Sanctuary community a forty-minute run through the forest. I wrap the Academy's book in its linen and place it in its box for the courier tomorrow.

I'm still not ready to focus on the Sanctuary's book but I don't have the luxury of ready anymore. I have two weeks before the book has to be finished. That's all. And then I'm on that plane for Venice.

At last.

I close my eyes over the relief. It's not just the thought of working with the world-expert on Venetian sunk-panel binding. It's knowing that I'm finally getting out of this town which despises me.

With a surge of determination, I haul the Sanctuary's box to my worktable and dust off the top, frowning. I must have had this material longer than I thought.

Right.

I twist my hair up into a work bun, using a large bulldog clip to peg it into place, like I do when I mean business. I unpack the documents, the photographs, the objects, carefully spreading each thing across my long table into piles. I need to see all the elements lined up like soldiers amassing for battle. Zack chose the sunk-panel style I'm known best for but left the rest to me. They trust me, he said.

'Why wouldn't we?' he added, in his melodious Texan accent. 'One of the world's most innovative fine book specialists right here in Stone Lake.'

He is right though, I do have the experience and the skills to do this book despite the Stone Lake critics. Yet, he's also wrong because this book is different. I usually have a lot of material to work with, people to talk to, public documents to research. But because the Sanctuary is basically a closed

community I can only talk to a single person: Zack. It's like working with one hand tied.

I've already combed through what media there is and a sea of their stylish cottage core sensuality on their Instagram, with their neck-to-ankle calico dresses for the women and blousy white cotton shirts for the guys. Whoever manages the account up there is an artist who seems to understand a modern aesthetic despite their strict ban on technology for the general membership. The waft of a breeze among the buttercups as the camera pans across two young women resting beside hoes, the shiny clean angle of some kind of machine as a young muscly back is bent to the work, the smooth bark of a mountain ash towering towards the sky in the Sanctuary's part of the forest. All the photographs respectfully anonymous, so that nobody can be identified except the leaders. But it's hard to see behind these clean spring-greens and sky-blues. I'm worried I won't be able to get to the heart of who they are and in the end this book will offer no more insight than the gauzy, organic sensuality of their Instagram feed.

Cradling my tea for warmth, I throw another log onto the struggling flames. The room's still chilly, so I pull my grandmother's crocheted blanket from the sofa and wrap myself in it, surrendering into its warmth for a moment. But then a terrible howling rents the quiet. My hand freezes as the talons of a sharp panic takes hold. It's a few moments before I talk myself back into my skin. It's just those wild dogs again. I knuckle-tap the underside of the table three times, but then force my fingers to straighten to shut off the urge, expelling my held breath. Every small *no* is a triumph, says my therapist's voice in my head. I'm still rattled though because it's been a long time since those dogs have been on this side of the mountain. I count back to distract myself from their howling shrieks. The

last time I heard them must have been just before the big freeze a few months back. And even now, I reassure myself, they're far, far away, much closer to the Sanctuary's part of the forest. I wonder if any of the Sanctuary people are lying in their beds right now, scared by this savage shredding of the night calm just beyond their compound. But I guess they don't have those high fortress walls for nothing.

I drop my elbows to the table and cover my ears, but still can't drown out the brutality of those dogs. I bite my lip and consider, eyes on the dark beyond the window. In the end I decide that I've done enough on the book for tonight so I can go to bed and jam Netflix loud through earbuds into my brain to shut out the howling. I switch off each of the lamps and drag the grate in front of the fire.

But that's when I hear something much worse than wild dogs. I freeze again, my heart shutting down. The distant roar of turbo-charged engines rev along my road. Beyond this place there's only forested mountain so it's me they're coming for.

Bojo leaps up, growling. She bounds forward, clawing at the door to be let out. I vault after her.

'Shh, shh, shh.' She just barks up at me as if she's wondering what the hell I'm about, taking so long to open the door. 'Please Bojo. Shh.' My voice high and panicky. She barks back, scratching at the polished oak panelling of the door. I lunge to close her jaws, pouring sorry from my eyes into hers.

She bucks away, outraged, barking and circling. I grab her by the collar and run with her up the back of the house, clipping her on to her lead in the backyard. She growls and snarls and jerks on her chain. But at least this way she won't be hurt. And she can't give me away, chained up here where you might expect a dog to be if their owner was away. An

owl hoots in a tree nearby. I smile with relief. I have a way out. I can hide out in the bush back here. I'll take my chances with those wild dogs in the forest, rather than with whatever is heading my way on that road.

But then my phone pings.

I'm on my way.

Of course, she is. They have to roar past Amra's place to get to mine, and she'd never let me face this alone.

No, I shoot straight back to Amra. It's late. I tap out a new message. Lights out already. They won't know I'm here.

Except for the small problem that I left my ute in the open garage, telling the world exactly where I am, but Amra doesn't need to know that. I don't have time to see what she messages back because those cars are blasting up my driveway. But I can't escape into the forest now just in case Amra ignores me and comes anyway. I can't let her face them on her own either. I run back through the house to my studio, hiding behind the drapes of the window, praying Amra will stay away, while also scanning the room for clues about what I'm supposed to do. Outside, in the driveway, three cars wheel to a skidding stop. Engines are cut and doors open, spilling death metal music into the night before it's switched off into silence.

Which is worse.

My chest heaves. I clamp my palm to my heart, willing it to calm. Even if the darkness convinces them that I'm not home despite my ute out there, none of these doors are locked so there's nothing to stop them walking straight in to search for me. I hope Amra doesn't come anywhere near this. I breathe as small as I can – as if that will make a difference.

Outside a terrible hush gathers.

Then.

'Anybody home?'

My blood races. It's that kid, Alex Balaskas. I guess he must have somehow found out that I'm leaving Stone Lake in two weeks. He's gotten bold.

My wild eyes scour the room, but there's no better place to hide. Behind the chaise-longue is too obvious, but there's not enough cover in the adjoining butler's annex where I store my presses and rollers.

'Charliiii. Charliiii. Come out, come out, wherever you are,' he sings, horror-movie style.

I can't move. Can't think. The boys in the front and the wild dogs out the back. I have to go deeper, below all these layers of panic, down to a place where my brain can function.

'Your time's up, Charli.'

My veins ice over, as several of the boys howl like they're part of that distant wild dog pack.

'Tonight's the night you're gonna get what you deserve.'

I can't bear seeing my shaking hands clutching at the fabric of the curtains, so I let go and drop to the floor, getting lower, beneath their line of sight. But I can see them. Alex is making his slow way towards my front door, taking his time, dragging the tip of a cricket bat through the gravel, making a sinister noise. The others, all in regulation checked mountain man lumber jackets, stand, legs apart, watching, waiting.

All except Bron Smythe, who's climbing into the basin of the fountain. I squint to see what he's doing. He's got a can of something. One of the others stumbles over with their phone torch, giving him light. He slops red paint across the dried dolphin's flanks to make a *B*.

They came prepared.

I don't have to watch what comes next. The words *Burn Bitch* have been sprayed all over the walls of buildings in Stone Lake. The town's graffiti mafia has been much slower than they

usually are to clean it off. My hands find their way to my skull, entwining through my hair to grab great hunks and pull, my breath coming in fast, but still I can't tear my wide, unblinking eyes away from the boys outside.

Somebody I don't recognise tips his head back to swig the last of the beer in his bottle, then hurls it in my direction. I flinch away as it smashes against the sandstone, shattering on the other side of the wall to where I'm hiding.

'Bullseye,' he crows, as if he knows I'm here. All the boys howl and yip now, high fiving each other.

Alex, bull-necked and built like a rugby player, ignores them, still advancing. Slow and deliberate, as if he knows I'm taking in his every move. As he gets closer, he stops dragging the bat through the gravel and instead thumps it into the ground, over and over, a steady threatening rhythm.

'It's been a long time coming, Charli,' Alex croons.

My eyes scabble for something, anything. They snag on my phone on the table, only a couple of metres away. For a second, I contemplate making a dive for it, but who's going to help the town pariah? The police are never going to take my side. With a spurt of relief I realise that if Amra was coming she would have been here by now. I slither, long and low, across the floorboards. If I can reach the back door before they come through the front, I can still get to the forest to hide.

But then I hear a distant engine and my heart stills, begging that car to turn back, but instead it turns into my place, burns up my driveway and skids to a stop.

'Get out of here, you fuckwits,' Amra yells, smashing her door shut.

I scabble on hands and knees back to the window, my body tight with a new fear, because her height and solidness can give her more confidence than she should have in a situation like

this. But none of the boys moves to block her as she strides through them in the cold mountain mist. She reaches the stairs and spins around so she's right up in Alex's face, her hands on her waist, her body rigid with adrenaline.

'You want me to call the cops?'

I wince. Doesn't she realise who he is?

Alex grins as if she amuses him, then steps up beside her to take back his height advantage. He leans slowly into her face. She doesn't flinch, holds her position.

'You.' He jabs towards her chest. 'Can still walk away.' He points towards the house now. 'But that arsonist bitch deserves what's coming.' She grabs his pointing finger and twists it downwards. He goes down with it, yelping in pain but his other fist reflexes up fast and hard into her stomach. She cries out and doubles over while the watching boys hoot and howl.

Rage volcanos through me. Alex Balaskas hasn't even left school yet. How dare he talk to Amra like that? In an instant I'm on my feet, slamming out of the house to put myself between him and Amra, short as I am compared to them, forcing him away from her, my hand behind me on her heaving back.

'What the fuck, Alex? Just back off and fuck off out of here.'

'Not until you've paid the price.' His breath reeks of cheap booze.

'I was never charged.'

Amra gasps behind me, finally realising he's the police sergeant's kid.

He doesn't back off, just puts his head to one side, takes his time, as if considering the evidence, scratches his chin. 'On a technicality.'

I throw my hands in the air. 'What technicality? I wasn't anywhere near that fire.'

The other boys gather in close at the foot of the stairs, hands on hips, as if they're waiting for a signal. A short one, with a crew cut, puts his boot on the first step, poised.

Alex spits at the ground beside my boot. 'Just because you're a bloody Trenthen. Shit never sticks to people like you.'

'Charli,' says Amra. I feel the warning in the pressure of her hand on my arm.

She's right. I measure the distance between Amra and me and the door, backing away, as I assess Alex's face, contorted with alcohol and bitterness, his wolf pack beyond him. I search each of their eyes for any uncertainty about Alex's leadership, but find only fury, mirroring his.

'We hear you're leaving us,' says Alex, closing the space I've just put between us. 'But see, we don't reckon that can be fair. None of *us* get to just walk away.'

'If his old man wasn't taken off that case, you'd be behind bars right now,' yells the boy with the crew cut, his voice breaking at the edges.

I ease backwards, pushing into Amra behind me. We can't look like we're in retreat, but we have to get away. Alcohol, testosterone, pack mentality, and now this most dangerous element, self-righteousness. We can't win.

'Listen,' I say urgently, but not knowing what it is I want them to listen to. I use all my strength to rein in my rage at what he's done to Amra so that I can locate the words that will hold him back, but I find nothing that I can turn into a weapon.

He bites his lower lip. For a second I register the pain in his eyes beyond his school yard bravado. I remember that he's only seventeen. He lost everything in that bushfire. That's when I slam into a truth, finally saying the thing that nobody in this town has let me say.

‘I’m sorry.’ The words get stuck in my throat so I try again.
‘I’m sorry you lost your farm.’

His eyes narrow, confused.

‘It was terrible.’

He wipes his chin with the back of his hand, considering my words.

‘She’s a liar,’ the boy with the crew cut yells. ‘No ghost lit that fire.’ He leaps up the steps, two at a time, grabs Alex’s bat, and strides around us to smash in the first panel of bay windows in the winter salon. Blow after blow. Amra, Alex and I jump out of the way as glass shards skitter across the verandah. I hear my voice cry out, but I don’t recognise any words.

In the distraction, Amra yanks me inside the house and closes the door, panting, her back against it. I face her, hands clasping hands.

‘You boys better go home now,’ she calls out. ‘You’ve done what you came to do.’

We can’t make out what they’re saying out there, but there’s no movement one way or another. Amra and I swap a wild look. She licks her parched lips.

‘I’ve got a photographic memory,’ she yells. ‘I know who you all are. I’m going to go to each of your houses tomorrow to tell your mothers if you don’t leave right this second.’

Our eyes lock, as if the force of our will can drive them off.

‘You okay?’ I whisper, gently touching her middle. Amra dismisses my concern with a shake of her head.

Slowly we hear their footsteps retreating. I collapse against the door beside her, but she grabs hold of me and stumbles me towards the windows in my studio. Side by side, we stare into the night, our palms pressed to the cold glass. We watch as they move out, spraying gravel. We watch until the dark swallows them whole.