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Becoming Kirrali Lewis

JANE HARRISON

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Magabala Books

With fierce love to my daughters, Savannah and Nova,
and to Dominic, my partner in everything.

And to Peter Seidel. You helped me and I haven’t forgotten.

PART ONE

Kirrali

– 1985

One

Here I was: Kirrali Lewis. Through a pair of ornate wrought-iron gates was one of the oldest universities in the country. Our paths had just intersected. It was the 10th of March 1985 and I, little black duck, was about to step through those gates to embark on a law degree.

I tried to burn the moment into my brain. I could almost smell the history of the place. I walked through the gates and my reverie was broken.

It was like a market at closing time. Music boomed through loudspeakers. Brightly clothed students clustered in groups of twos and threes, laughing and chatting. Dozens of university clubs were spruiking — brandishing show bags and tempting students with their offers.

'Join the debating club, The Dominators, and learn how to win every argument — even with your parents. Essential for all law students.'

'Calling all caffeine addicts. Join the Chocolattes, for all things coffee and chocolate. Try a chocolate-covered ant.'

'The Trekkie's club. For Star Trek fans … We are the club to join. Resistance is futile.'

'Law student?' He was at my right elbow.

I nodded.

'I knew it.'

I looked down at my clothes — white shirt, grey skirt and dark leggings. I looked the part? That was awesome.

'It's the law diary you're carrying.'

'Oh.'

He started to guide me in the direction of the law table when I felt a tug on my other elbow.

'Not so fast. She's ours.'

I looked at him. Dreadlocks, bare feet. Not my kind at all.

'I'm from the Koori Club.'

'Koori?'

'Yeah. We're a politically aware Aboriginal cooperative. '

I shook my head. ‘It’s my first day here.’ I gave the no-thanks smile I reserved for people begging on the street. ‘And I’m not one bit interested in politics.’

The law dude raised his eyebrows and once again tried to steer me towards the right.

But dreadlock guy wouldn’t let go. He stepped in front of me, blocking my path. ‘Looked in the mirror lately, girl? You gotta be interested in politics.’

I flushed hot. I hated people making generalisations. ‘I didn’t realise that the genes responsible for the colour of my skin made me political,’ I said. What I really felt like saying was ‘take a chill pill’.

He must have read my mind. ‘Okay, I’ll chill. But you’ve got attitude, sister. We’re fighting for your rights. Agitating to get more Aboriginal students in places like this.’

‘Well, my advice is that they should study really hard, just like I did. Ace their exams, just like I did. Then they’d have no trouble getting into university,’ I said loudly.

The law dude started a slow clap and a few people joined in, while other students shook their heads and tut-tutted. I pushed my way through the spruikers for Christian clubs, ski clubs and drama groups, all trying to sign me up. I didn’t want to join the Midnight Movie Club. I was here to achieve.

When I turned and looked back, I saw dreadlock guy standing alone like a rock in a river while groups of students flowed around him. I felt a jolt of embarrassment. My first five minutes at uni and I’d already chucked a wobbly.

✖ ✖ ✖

I was twelve before I realised I was different. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t looked in the mirror and noticed that I was the colour of Vegemite, while my friends were the colour of white bread.

In my small town, the other girls at primary school were third or fourth generation Aussies. Some even had Dutch, Italian or Polish surnames but in those days we were more likely to group each other into those who owned horses and those who didn’t. What we looked like was much less important than how many A’s we scored on our school report. Race was a thing you

went flat out trying to win on sports day. It had nothing to do with skin colour or where you came from.

So it wasn't until my first year at high school, a fifteen-minute bus ride away, that I became aware of how different I was. For the first time, there were more people I didn't know than I did.

'What country are you from?' asked a freckled, curly-haired girl while we were queuing up to buy doughnuts from the cafeteria.

'Australia,' I replied.

'No you're not,' she said confidently. 'My dad says black people come from Africa. And they should go back there.'

'I am *Australian*. An original Australian. I'm Aboriginal.' In my head there was no right or wrong about that. I just was.

I was at the start of the queue by then and the pretty lady in the lilac twin-set behind the counter was asking me what I wanted. I couldn't choose between the doughnut with chocolate icing and the one with the hundreds and thousands. We didn't have anything like that at primary school, just Sunnyboys and Wagon Wheels. But the girl at my shoulder didn't know when to stop.

'You're not Australian,' she whispered. 'You're a liar.'

I swung around, intending to stare her down but the words shot out of my mouth. 'Well, you're a moron — and so is your dad.' The way she howled anyone would have thought I'd given her one of those right-hand jabs that my brother Tray had taught me.

The cafeteria lady changed from pretty to pretty damn angry. It seemed she was the freckled brat's mother. I found out later that she was on the school board and was friends with the principal, who I got to meet rather suddenly.

I thought that the girl would be the one who was punished — after all she had called me a liar. But when I tried to explain what had happened, the principal just cut me off. I ended up with detention for a week and I missed out on my doughnut.

The tuckshop episode did teach me to keep my mouth shut though. Secondary school was full of lessons like that. I learnt not to question my history teachers when they asked who discovered Australia: 'Captain James Cook, sir'. And the first man to cross the Simpson Desert: '*doh*, Simpson, miss'. My mother and father were always telling me — well, they tried to, anyway — a different version of history.

By the time I was a teenager, my life out of school was just as educational. I learnt to ignore the remarks when I walked down the street with my parents. Once I even got strange looks when an Aboriginal family stopped off in town. The skinny black kid in the all-white family. Kirrali Lewis. Little black duck.

✖ ✖ ✖

My encounter with dreadlock guy had left me unsettled. I went off to the first of my lectures but I couldn't concentrate. Why did people have to categorise? So what if I was black? Did that mean I had to fight every cause championing black people?

I tried to tune into the lecture. The baggy-pants-to-match-his-baggy-chin dude was talking in a pompous voice about how we were the 'elite' and that we were the ones who would 'take our place in a changing world where leadership required the highest professional standards and an ability to adapt and be entrepreneurial'.

I was looking around the lecture hall when my eyes rested on someone down the front who I had hoped I would never see again. Adam Rogers.

When I was sixteen, I had a mad crush on him. Adam had black eyes and milky skin, and floppy black hair that fell over one eye. He went to an exclusive boys' school that just so happened to be on the same bus route that I used to get to my not-so-exclusive school. Every afternoon, he would be sitting in the same seat halfway down the back. I would sit across the aisle and one seat behind him so I could gaze at the back of his neck. I didn't think he ever noticed me, or even knew my name, but his name was scrawled all over my school books. On the last day of year eleven, he sat next to me.

'Would you see a film with me. During the holidays. You're not going away for the holidays.'

He spoke softly but his questions were like statements. And he said 'film' rather than 'movie'.

Who could afford to take six kids on a holiday on an abbatoir worker's wage?

'Er, no.' I stifled a giggle. He looked puzzled at my response.

'I mean no, we're not going away. And yes ...'

I gave him my phone number but he didn't call. I did get a Christmas card sent from the Whitsundays with a teddy dressed up as Santa on the

front. He wrote:

> *Dear Kirrali*
> *I really wanted to take you out but my dad thinks it's best if I don't right now because I'm about to start exams. I have to get good marks to get into law. I hope you enjoy the holidays.*
> *With regards from Adam*

With regards ... I kept the card in my undies drawer but from then on I rode my brother's rusty old bike to school.

Now here he was again, taunting me with his graceful white neck. Except this time I was immune to it, I promised myself. This time I had bigger fish to fry. I was headed for success.

Two

Getting an education wasn't the only thing on the agenda that first day. There were fees to be paid, elective subjects to finalise and fellow students to check out. I wanted to know who I was up against.

After handling all the administrative stuff and waiting in queues for what seemed like hours, I rushed over to the main lawn. My best friend, Martina, was also starting and we had arranged to meet. What I didn't count on was the other thousand or so students who had also planned to catch up. After fifteen minutes of fruitless searching, I gave up on finding her and sat down to eat lunch on my own. Things weren't going to plan, I thought, as I munched on my sandwich. Oh well, just roll with the punches, as Mum would say.

My mum was, and is, amazing. Dad, too. Four kids of their own and they still found the time and love, and whatever else it took, to adopt another two — me and my little sister, Beatrice. I was just a tiny baby when the Lewis's adopted me. Kids at school would ask me what it was like to be adopted and I'd tell them it made me proud. When I was about five, I remember telling my Aunty Rose how special I was because Mum and Dad had picked me out. I was a bit confused about the details though. The day before we had gone to the lost dogs' home and picked out Finn. Perhaps the experience of Mum telling me all the dogs needed a home, and that we had to choose just one, made me think that's where I'd come from too. Every Christmas when the family got together, they'd say, 'remember the time Kirrali told Aunty Rose she'd been chosen at the lost dogs' home'. It was one of those family jokes that always raised a laugh.

After my solitary lunch, I went to check out the library where a bunch of student services organisations were set up outside to talk to students. This time I was singled out again by the Koori Club.

'Hey, sis,' said a girl behind the table. She was older than me and was tall and slim, with long, light brown crinkly hair and the most beautiful face. 'I'm Erin. Can we help you with Abstudy, literacy support, legal advice, that sort of thing?'

Literacy support? Did she have any idea of the scores I had got in my final exams? I shook my head.

Just then Martina bounced up.

‘What about housing? Have you got a place to stay yet?’ Erin continued.

‘Not quite.’

‘There’s an Aboriginal hostel right near the uni.’

‘Thanks, I’ll be right.’

‘Well, then, what about Abstudy?’

This Erin chick wasn’t going to give up. Maybe she was one of those people addicted to helping others. (I found out later she was a social work student — that figured.) But I didn’t need help.

‘I haven’t applied for Abstudy, just the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme allowance,’ I said firmly.

‘Oh, we can fix that, that’s not a problem.’

‘But I don’t want Abstudy,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to be treated differently from anyone else.’

‘Hello?’ Another girl behind the table lobbed in to the conversation. She had a scowling face and an attitude to match. ‘You’re Aboriginal. Haven’t you noticed you’re treated differently every day of your life?’ Her voice was thick with resentment.

I could feel my skin prickling like I was about to break out in hives but I tried to be cool. ‘You just have to prove yourself. That’s what I do and it works out fine.’

‘Don’t you think you should get a little compensation to make up for everything they’ve taken away?’ she said. ‘Like some positive discrimination for a change?’

I gritted my teeth.

Martina had been observing the to-and-fro between me and the others as if she was watching a top-seeded tennis match.

‘Kirrali, you should so sign up with these guys.’ said Martina. ‘I would.’

Erin giggled good-naturedly. ‘Leave her,’ she said. ‘She can make up her own mind.’

I stared at her. Mum was always saying that.

‘And you can’t sign up. You’ve either got it or you haven’t,’ said Erin to Martina with a wink.

Martina began to make some joke about discrimination but I was already dragging her away. ‘I don’t want to get involved with those people,’ I said

under my breath.

‘Those people are your people,’ she said.

I didn’t have to reply. My glare said it all.

‘Oh, lighten up, Kirrali,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to be an Aboriginal if you don’t want to.’ She burst out laughing and I punched her on the arm. Only my oldest friend could get away with a comment like that.

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Martina and I have been friends since the year dot. She’s the life of the party — outrageous, outspoken and always making a difference. You know, right up there with Save the Whales and Walk Against Want. I’m more quiet and studious and have usually got my nose shoved in a book.

Maybe I was a bit like one of the pathetic animals she would later make a hobby of rescuing but I remember Martina ‘adopting’ me on my first day at primary school. Shyly sitting by myself, too scared to join in the noisy playtime games, she threw a big red ball at me. I caught it and then, of course, I had to throw it back. That was her way of including me in the game that she and the other kids were playing. She’s been including me ever since.

It was awesome that we’d managed to get into the same university — for a while Martina had tossed around the idea of going to acting school before deciding on political science. I was more excited about her being offered a place at uni than I was about me getting one. Our lecture times clashed but I knew we would go on being the best of friends. I couldn’t imagine it any other way.

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My lectures finished early, which was just as well because I needed to find somewhere to live. I’d been invited to stay with Dad’s cousin’s daughter (my second cousin?) out at Stony Point but what I really, *really* wanted was to be independent, to do the whole student lodging thing. I mean, what was the point of going to uni if I was still living out in the ’burbs?

With that in mind, I had left my backpack of humble belongings in a Spencer Street Station locker. If I didn’t find anything, I could always catch the train back to my second cousin’s house in brick veneer country.

I met Martina outside the law building but then we walked around in circles for twenty minutes trying to find the student housing office.

‘You’ve left it pretty late to find student housing,’ Martina said.

‘There’ll be something,’ I said, more confidently than I thought.

‘How about the Aboriginal hostel?’ teased Martina. ‘Cheap rent and subsidised meals.’

‘Exactly. I don’t need a handout.’

‘Geez, I do,’ she said. ‘My parents are really going to struggle to put me through uni.’

‘Well, mine too,’ I said. ‘But I’ll get a part-time job.’

‘Good luck with that. Have you seen the queue outside the campus employment unit?’

‘I’ll manage.’

‘I’m sure you will. You weren’t voted ‘Miss Can-do’ for nothing.’ Martina was referring to the ‘awards’ at our secondary school graduation ceremony. The very same awards where Martina was voted ‘Ms Most Likely to Do the Unlikely’. But that’s another story.

Finally we found the housing office, behind a drab brown door in what had to be the most run-down building on the campus. A frazzled looking woman had the phone wedged between her shoulder and her ear while she tapped away at a word processor. Six other students were lined up on a wooden bench, wearing looks of ‘boredom’, ‘worry’, ‘boredom’, ‘boredom’, ‘couldn’t care less’ and ‘boredom’. It wasn’t looking good. Maybe I’d have to crawl into the locker at the train station with all my gear.

When the woman got off the phone, she smiled sweetly which made me feel more pessimistic. She was going to let me down softly.

‘Now then, which one of you needs a place to stay?’ she asked, looking from Martina’s face to mine.

‘I do,’ I replied, to which she smiled even more broadly.

‘Well, sit here and fill out this form. Ignore the blue section, that’s for me to complete.’

Martina joined the bench with ‘bored’, ‘worried’, ‘bored’, while I spilled out my life history in capital letters. Miss Kennedy, as her name tag stated, checked the form giving little grunts of approval as she read each section. Then she frowned, ‘You’ve put your nationality as Australian?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t mean to be personal but …’

I knew where this was going.

‘… aren’t you Aboriginal?’

‘Well, yes, I am.’

‘It’s just that you haven’t ticked the box.’

She pointed to a box on the form. It asked, ‘Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?’

‘It’s just for our records.’

I sighed and ticked the box. She smiled at me in relief.

‘Congratulations dear, you’ve filled the last vacancy in Emerson College. Just outside the main drive of the university, single room dorm, bathroom to every four bedrooms. All meals, except for weekends, included. Linen supplied. The rent is $55 a week.’ She looked at me triumphantly and then glanced over at Martina. ‘And no sleepovers.’

With that, she handed me a key and an information kit with all the rules and regulations. I didn’t even have to write out a cheque because they would send me an invoice — an invoice! It had taken me less time to find a place to stay than it took to find the office. I stood up to leave.

She had one last question for me, ‘Excuse me for asking, but why do you call yourself Australian and not Aboriginal?’

‘I didn’t think they were mutually exclusive.’

Her smile faded. A blush swept over her face like a grassfire. I squeezed the key ring in my hand, afraid my rudeness would lose me the right to the accommodation she had just offered. But she nodded, dismissing me.

I waved the key in front of Martina. She jumped up from the bench where one of the ‘boreds’ had succumbed to sleep, his head resting on his neighbour’s shoulder. No-one else had moved in the queue.

Outside, the bright sunlight made me squint. I threw my key, on its A-shaped key ring, high up into the blue yonder and *almost* caught it.

‘Yippee. My own room in a residential college. Right next door to uni. And not too expensive. I can’t believe it.’

‘Neither can I. What about those other people on the bench? Why were they still waiting?’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe they had special requirements? Maybe they didn’t fill in the form properly. Maybe they had pets.’

Why did I care — I’d got a place. Martina wasn’t convinced though.

‘Come on, I’ll shout you a cup of tea.’ I tugged on her long plait.

She groaned. ‘Kirrali, students drink coffee. Cappuccinos, not wussy cups of tea. This is the eighties. Get radical.’

She let me buy her a cuppa anyway but when she tried again to theorise about the ease in which I'd found a place to stay, I stopped her short. Martina spent too much time seeing conspiracies where none existed. I, on the other hand, believed that if you wanted something really badly you had a good chance of getting it. My theory had just been put to the test and passed with flying colours.

Afterwards, we walked back to Spencer Street so I could pick up my backpack and Martina could catch her train. She was living with one of her aunties. It meant an hour's travelling each way but at least it was free board.

I grabbed my gear from the locker and caught a tram back up to the residential college. When I got off at my stop, I stood for a moment and took a deep breath. Wow, my new home. It was a late 1880s gothic sandstone building and it looked like something out of a movie.

It was still light outside but the marble-tiled foyer of Emerson College was cool and dark. Wood panelling lined the walls and the ceiling was domed and patterned with elaborate plasterwork. I slowly walked up the wide winding staircase with its massive balustrade, drinking it all in. The stained-glass windows cast jewel-like rays of light on the stone steps, worn down from countless feet as if they were the floor of a canyon where water had flowed for centuries. I loved old buildings.

I paused at the first floor landing and wondered who else had stayed here and what they had gone on to achieve. I wondered what friendships had begun from chance encounters on these very stairs.

From the landing, halls ran to the right and the left. Each room had an emerald green door with a brass number on it. My room, 119, was at the very end of the left-hand corridor. My hand shook slightly as I slid the key in and opened the door.

The first thing I noticed was the enormous old elm tree outside the window. It was so close I could almost have reached out and climbed along its sturdy branches in a daring escape. Except I didn't want to escape because this was where I had always wanted to be. The room was basic but I loved it. The carpet was a frayed grey floral, the paint a rich clotted cream. A chunky dark-stained wardrobe occupied one corner and under the window, a timber desk cried out for a spread of law books.

I unpacked carefully. First came Shonky, the teddy bear given to me when I had first gone to live with the Lewis's. Nowadays he was more like

a teddy ‘bare’ — most of his fur was missing — the result of a run-in with Finn.

Next, I unpacked my textbooks and some notepads and pens. Tray had promised to get me a word processor but I wasn’t going to hold my breath. He was so busy making his mark in this new age of computing that I wondered if he remembered the rest of us existed.

Clothes. Just as well I didn’t have many because there wasn’t much room in the wardrobe to hang them.

Last of all, I put a framed photo of my family on the narrow ledge above the bed. Sure I’m sentimental but I loved my family. They were my rocks. They were always there — even when I made silly mistakes. Like the time a boy down the road pushed me over and called me names. I punched him in the guts and that night his father banged on our front door wanting to punch Dad. I could hear Dad’s soothing tones, talking the guy down from his anger.

When the man had left, Dad and Mum sat me down for a ‘talk’. I was quaking, thinking I’d get in real trouble. Mum’s dead against violence but she quietly told me to try and talk my way out of trouble and not to ever, ever punch anyone again — unless it was really necessary. And while they didn’t fight my battles for me, they were always ready to give me moral support and to urge me on to bigger and better things. So I had to have a photo of them all: Mum, Dad, Rochelle, Tray, Tarquin, Michael and Beatrice — my family. And Finn, my dog — I kind of missed him the most. Silly old thing.

I looked around at my new home. The room was the size of a shoebox but it was *my* shoebox. I was eighteen years old and I was independent for the first time in my life.

Three

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that everything was where I'd left it. When you share a bedroom with two sisters you're constantly elbowing their 'junk' out of the way to make room for your 'treasures'. In our house, wardrobe space was at a premium and Beatrice's floral dresses, ribbons, frilly socks and white cardigans spilled over the back of every chair.

Tarquin, my older sister, was even worse. She was something of a local swimming hero and, most days, her wet bathers made a kaleidoscope of black, lime green and hot pink on the floor. Our bedroom was chaos. But now here I was, in *my* room, with everything neat and tidy. Pure bliss.

I lay staring up at the cracks in the ceiling paintwork, luxuriating in my good fortune. I was in the heart of the city at university. A law student.

The other kids at my school wanted to be hairdressers, clothes designers or work with horses. Some wanted to be vets or firefighters. No one wanted to be a lawyer. I don't know where I got the idea from — no one in my family is a lawyer or even knows one — but since the age of twelve I have not swayed in my ambition.

The only time I was questioned about my choice was during my mandatory visit to the careers teacher at the end of year eleven.

Mr Nicholoides peered at me through his thick glasses. 'So, Kirrali, you've got excellent grades. Were you thinking of going on to university?'

'Yes, sir. I'm going to become a lawyer.'

'Ah, I detect a zealot in my midst. Social reform, eh? And then you'll work for the Aboriginal Land Council, eh? Or human rights, yeah?'

Mr Nicholoides looked quite pleased at his summing up of my career path. Except he'd got it totally wrong.

'Actually sir, I'm hoping to get into corporate law, or even international law, to get as far away from small communities and people's narrow expectations as possible.'

Mr Nicholoides shuffled the papers in front of him nervously. 'Yes, er, well, I can see you don't need my help,' he said.

‘No, sir,’ I said and left. Wanker. I remembered how furious I had been at his presumption.

The chiming of a dining bell disturbed my memories. ‘Hell, what’s the time?’

I read through the information kit and saw that breakfast at Emerson Hall was only served until 8am. I had forgotten to set my alarm clock because I was so used to Tarquin waking me up when she went to do her morning laps.

It was 7.52am — eight minutes to get downstairs. I leapt out of bed and into jeans and a T-shirt before you could say ‘scrambled eggs’.

When I burst into the dining room, the only people left were two girls who had piled up their plates with bacon, eggs, sausages and tomato. I wondered if there was any food left — I was starving. I hadn’t eaten the night before because I was too late for the dining room and had been too chicken to go out and find a cheap takeaway. The city was cool — in daylight hours.

At the servery, the menu was scrawled on a blackboard. I was considering my options when a head popped out from behind the counter. ‘Kitchen’s closed. Oh, it’s you.’

It was the girl from the Aboriginal Student Association, the one with the long crinkly hair. Except now her hair was tied up in a fluoro bandana. What was her name again? Erin?

‘The kitchen’s closed,’ she repeated.

‘Right,’ I turned to leave.

‘And I am pretty sure *you* wouldn’t want special treatment?’ she said in a deadpan voice. When I turned back, I caught the faint ghost of a smile. I could play by the rules or I could let go of my stupid pride.

‘Could you make an exception, just this once?’

‘Hmm,’ she said, as if she was thinking about my request, while at the same time shovelling scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, tomato, mushrooms and toast onto a plate.

‘And porridge?’ I said, pushing my luck.

She just laughed and scooped up a bowl full to the brim.

‘Thanks, Erin.’ What a nice person. Bit of a pushover though.

‘No worries,’ she said, flashing me that beautiful smile. ‘I know what it’s like.’

Just then, this blonde girl rushed up to the servery.

‘Uh-uh, Janelle. Rules are rules and it’s after eight.’

‘Erin, *pleease* ...’

Erin shook her head.

‘Worth a try!’ Janelle didn’t seem too fazed, giving Erin a ‘ta-ta’ wave as she left the dining room.

‘She’ll live,’ said Erin. ‘In fact she will live very well.’

I looked at her in surprise. Maybe she wasn’t such a soft touch after all.

✖ ✖ ✖

The first week at uni was a blur. I thought I’d bump into Martina most days but our timetables clashed so I didn’t get to see her until Friday. It was good to hang out on the lawn sharing a bucket of chips with vinegar, just like we used to at school. ‘I’ve missed you. How was your week?’

‘Amazing. I have met so many people. Though public transport is a real pain. I practically fell asleep on someone’s shoulder on the train home last night. What about you? How’s law, Ms Fancy-pants? Tell me all about it.’

‘There’s not that much to tell.’ I wracked my brains for something interesting. Martina wouldn’t want to know I was already spending three hours a night in the library. She’d want to know what fascinating people I had met or what outrageous gossip I’d overheard. ‘Oh, guess who’s in some of my lectures? Adam Rogers.’

‘Oh my God, that boy with the luscious curls from the school bus? Have you spoken to him?’

‘Of course not. He sits up the front. I sit up the back. Anyway, it’s not like we’re friends.’

‘He asked you out that time.’

‘Yeah, then he chickened out.’

‘Oh, we can do something about that.’

Martina began to rave on about the animal liberation meeting she’d been to and how some of the more radical students had looked at her suspiciously. ‘I swear they could smell that I’d eaten a roast the night before! I’m trying to go vego for the sake of the planet but my aunty makes a mean leg of lamb.’

I laughed. This was typical Martina. But I was so glad to see her. We hugged and then she raced off. Martina was always in a rush.

Every other day though, I had to make do with my own company. I’m not a person who makes friends easily. I never know what to say to people and

it’s only after a long time that I open up. I had started chatting to Amber, another law student, but it wasn’t like I suddenly had a set of new best friends. My biggest opportunity to meet people was during meal times at Emerson College but at dinner time I ate in a real hurry while simultaneously devouring law books. And at breakfast, I somehow always managed to be a minute or two late when nearly everyone else had left. It became such a habit that each morning Erin just put a plate aside for me.

One day, after saving me from starvation once again, she came around the other side of the counter with her own plate of bacon and eggs piled high. ‘Mind if I join you?’ she asked shyly.

I had a mouth full of toast and marmalade so just nodded. She watched as I shovelled sugar — four teaspoons — into my cup of tea.

‘Sis, how do you manage to do that and still stay skinny?’

I pointed to her plate. ‘How do you?’

She leant forward conspiratorially. ‘I don’t eat for the rest of the day,’ she whispered.

I whispered back. ‘I don’t either — well, not until dinner time.’ We had a big laugh about that.

‘I get brekkie for free ’cos I work here but I don’t work here at night. I’m an usher at a cinema so I usually just have a bag of popcorn for dinner,’ she admitted.

‘That’s not enough — you’ll starve,’ I said, sounding like my mum. I wondered how Erin found time to study.

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘I’m used to getting by on not much.’

I waited for her to continue but it seemed like that was the end of the conversation. She finished her breakfast and got up to go back to work. ‘See you tomorrow, Kirrali Lewis.’

How did she know my name? Never mind, it was the longest conversation I’d had with anyone for days.

✖ ✖ ✖

I didn’t get around to ringing my parents very often as a lot of the phone booths on the campus had been vandalised and I never seemed to have the right change. I had promised that I would write to them at least once a week.

Dear Mum and Dad

I'm loving university. I only have eighteen contact hours a week — that's when I go to lectures and tutorials — but it seems like I've got double that again in homework. In my spare time (what spare time?) I'm looking for a part-time job, like 2,000 other students. My room is great. I gave you the phone number, didn't I? But only ring if there's an emergency — they don't like boarders getting personal calls. You'll be happy to know that the food's quite good. If I eat a big breakfast, I don't have to spend much on lunch. I'm trying to make my allowance cover my expenses but there are temptations — coffee scrolls, Vietnamese food and every movie ever released showing. You can even eat sushi — just like in the movie Valley Girl. *How's Finn? Gotta go. Don't let Tarquin borrow my clothes.*
Love Kirrali

That'll keep them happy, I thought as I posted the letter. No need to tell them that I was as lonely as hell.

✖ ✖ ✖

Life settled into a routine of lectures and tutorials, study and essays. If I thought lectures were daunting — two hundred students in an auditorium with some dude preaching the finer aspects of law — then tutorials were even more so.

Take my contract law tutorial. The tutor, Guy Hancock, was barely older than me and he was such a geek that I wondered how he ever got the job. Most weeks he would forget to photocopy the handouts but yet he never forgot the date or detail of a case or precedent. Whenever students asked questions, he would cross-examine them until they had run out of answers and were a quivering mess. He expected us to have photographic memories too. Needless to say I didn't say a word in class for fear of looking like a fool. It was always a relief to have his tutorial over and done with for the week, I can tell you.

On this particular day, Guy started going on about the intersection between rights and law and then an image popped up on the overhead projector. It was a close-up photograph of former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, and an old Aboriginal man.

‘So does anyone know who the other man in the photo is?’ asked Guy. ‘He was part of a famous moment in Australian history and yet it was only ten years ago. Kirrali?’

I could feel my skin getting hot as all heads in the room turned to stare at me. Typical. Just because the guy in the photo was Aboriginal. ‘Ah … no. Not really.’

‘Vincent Lingiari,’ Adam’s voice rang out with confidence. ‘In 1975, Gough Whitlam poured sand into his hand to signify the return of Wave Hill Station to the traditional owners.’

‘Thank you, Adam. As usual, your general knowledge is exemplary.’

‘That’s not fair, sir. That’s hardly *general* knowledge,’ interjected the class smart-arse, Tom. ‘Not like who won the VFL final in 1982 … Carlton. The name of the female streaker at that match … Helen. Heleenn.’

The class erupted into laughter but Guy wasn’t amused. Adam asked him to explain land rights and so Guy began a detailed explanation about how the government, in recognition of dispossession, gave land back to claimants if they could provide evidence of their traditional association with their land. I wasn’t sure of all the terminology used but I admired Guy for calmly talking down the naysayers in the class. I also appreciated Adam for drawing attention away from me. Was he intentionally trying to rescue me?

After the class, Guy asked if I could stay back. I hadn’t spoken to him one-on-one before.

‘Kirrali, how are you finding the tutorials?’ he asked.

‘Great. Very informative.’

‘I want you to feel free to add your expertise. Don’t hold back. The class would benefit from your point of view. I am guessing you’ve been inspired by Pat O’Shane and Bob Bellear for leading the way as Aboriginal lawyers. I met Bob a few years ago which was a personal highlight.’

My face must have been blank.

‘You do know who I’m talking about, don’t you?’

I shook my head.

‘Sorry. I think I’ve made an assumption ...’ He picked up his books and left. I was the little black duck who didn’t know how to quack.

✘ ✘ ✘

Despite standing out with my dark skin and wild hair, I found that I could also blend in by not drawing attention to myself. Then people soon forgot

that I was even there. In year ten, I did work experience at a hairdressing salon — not that I wanted to be a hairdresser. It was the first business I saw after I got off the bus and when I went in to ask, they agreed to take me on for two weeks.

Gerard, Lucy and I got on like a house on fire. Lucy was a Goth with black, dead-straight hair, dark red lips and glow-in-the-dark skin. Gerard was a platinum blond and depending on the day and his horoscope, would arrive at work either dolled up as a leather-clad biker, in all white, or in a construction-worker ensemble of ironed overalls and expensive flannelette shirt. Who would pay big bucks for a flannie? He cut hair with reckless enthusiasm but he did a good line in perms and gossip. While the perming solution was applied, a glam soapie star would be exposed as a drunk or even worse, as having no clothes sense. The high-flyers who graced the society pages of women's magazines would be slandered as crooks and con artists. The blue-rinse set loved him.

In the salon's quiet moments, Lucy and Gerard would drink lattes and puff on gold-tipped cigarettes while they flicked through the latest women's mags. I'd be rearranging the conditioners and hair treatments for the tenth time that day, tuning in but not contributing. They seemed to know something about everybody and it was often a morsel of juicy news that would probably have surprised that person's best friend. One day, they fixed their gaze on me.

'Ironed. Dead straight,' said Gerard, eyeing my hair with professional lust.

'Blow dry and flick the fringe?' said Lucy.

'Braids,' they said in sync.

They plaited and beaded for hours and hours, fast fingers but even faster tongues.

'Mrs Areba. Having a hot affair with the owner of the garage down the road,' said Gerard, as a middle-aged woman walked past the window.

'Really? Hubby know?' inquired Lucy.

'Of course not. Nobody does. She's very discreet.' They checked out the woman, who looked like the last person in the world to be having a clandestine affair.

'Oh, will you look at that tragedy?' groaned Gerard.

Mark, the wedding photographer, having just parked his red Nissan 300 ZX, was heading for the café while studiously avoiding looking in the

direction of the salon. He had, I gathered, been a ‘close friend’ of Gerard’s until recently.

‘And wearing a citrus suit. How passé.’

‘Puce is more his colour,’ said Lucy.

Gerard mimicked putting his fingers down his throat, which set them both off into peels of laughter.

Then another person, a woman sitting in a bus stop across the street, caught Gerard’s gimlet eye.

‘Disgusting. In broad daylight too,’ he snorted.

‘And at the bus stop. Eww,’ added Lucy.

I looked to see what heinous crime this woman had committed — wearing last year’s parachute pants or sporting a pageboy haircut perhaps. But all I saw was a woman sitting at the bus stop drinking from a can that may have been a soft drink or may have been a beer and that she was Aboriginal. The bus pulled up and when it drove off, the woman was gone.

‘I saw that one peeing in the bushes last week. Right behind the butcher’s shop.’ Lucy broke out into hysterical laughter.

‘A woman? Dir-ty bloo-dy ab-o,’ said Gerard, stringing the words out.

I cleared my throat and they glanced at me in the mirror. Should I mention all the times I’d seen Gerard ‘watering’ the lemon tree out the back of the salon?

‘We don’t mean you, love,’ said Gerard, tying off the last braid.

‘You’re okay.’

‘She’s more than okay — she’s awesome. Check out that hair!’ said Lucy.

I looked at my reflection. I resembled a black American pop singer or someone who’d just got off a plane from Bali.

Four

Classes were going well and I loved my cute little room but there was one thing that was causing me problems — money. It seemed like every class required half a dozen books and they were all expensive. Second-hand wasn't an option because the lecturers wanted you to have the latest edition — the law changed so fast, they said. The price of books didn't seem to worry most of the other students but they were the same ones who were wearing flash boots and jackets. It seemed rich parents sent their kids to study law so they could get rich too. Every day, I watched them spend more money on morning tea than I had for my entire weekend meals. I *had* to get a job.

I tried everywhere — shops, restaurants, bookstores, department stores. Most places wouldn't even put your name on a list because they already had too many students lined up. It wasn't what you knew, it was who you knew when it came to getting a job. And I didn't know anyone really — except Erin.

She sidled next to me one morning at breakfast. 'Doing anything this Saturday night?' she asked.

This kind of surprised me. We weren't, like, friends.

'No.' If she was going to ask me out, I couldn't go. I was down to my last few dollars and still had a week to go until my next Tertiary Allowance cheque.

'Good, then you're working. Midway Cinema. Usher. Start at 4.30pm, finish at 11.30. It's only $5.50 an hour. But if they like you, it's eighteen hours a week, mainly weekends. Is that okay? Great. Gotta go. Late for my lecture.'

I sat there open-mouthed. I hadn't even said I was looking for a job and she'd got one for me.

On Saturday afternoon at 4.30pm, I reported for work. My boss, Margaret, the customer service manager, was not what I'd expected. A formidable woman, nearly two metres tall, she looked more like a bouncer than an usher. She examined me up and down. I'd managed to borrow a

black skirt and tights from Erin and the white shirt that they supplied was only one size too big. I'd also found a black jacket with padded shoulders in an op shop that I thought made me look very professional.

'Hmmph,' she muttered. 'Is this the kind of riff-raff that I'm supposed to work with?' She turned to Erin, 'Where did you get this one? Another cousin off the mish?'

To my amazement, Erin just smiled.

Ms Redneck turned to me, 'Do you think we have an affirmative action policy or something? And you'd better smile a lot girl, or else the patrons won't see you in the dark.' She broke into hoarse laughter.

'Go on,' she said to Erin. 'Show her the ropes. And don't forget girl, you're only on trial. If I catch you slacking off or helping yourself to the choc tops, choc top, it's ...' She swiped the air in a cutting movement.

With that, Margaret grabbed her packet of smokes and marched off into the back lane for what was to be, I soon discovered, one of her many cigarette breaks.

I looked at Erin, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. 'She called me a choc top!'

I was weighing up whether to quit before I'd even started.

'She's just got a warped sense of humour, Kirrali,' said Erin gently. 'Honestly, she's a pussycat. She fancies herself as a comedian.'

'She thinks that's funny?'

I thought about the money I was going to make and how Erin had gone to the trouble of getting me the job. I knew I just had to get on with it. My hairdressing work had taught me how to be as small a target as possible — I could do it again. But I swore I'd never forget what Margaret had said. And I'd never forgive her.

I didn't see her for the rest of the shift so it was easy enough to enjoy the job. All I had to do was shine my torch and show people to their seats. When everyone was settled, I could watch the movie from the door. That night it was *The Breakfast Club* starring Emilio Estevez, who I thought was a bit of a spunk. My shift finally finished at 11.30pm and — oh — my feet.

'You'll get used to it,' Erin said.

It was a warm night and although I was tired, I was exhilarated. Not wanting to miss the last bus, Erin and I ran shrieking down the street, zigzagging past clusters of teenagers outside McDonalds, buskers with

forlorn guitar breaks trying to emulate Bruce Springsteen and hawkers selling silver earrings.

I could get used to this, I thought — the fairy lights in the trees, music thumping out of the clubs, garlic aromas wafting from the Italian bistros. I was beginning to fall in love with this city in a way I never had with my home town with its one bakery, one milk bar, one pub and one point of view.

It was exciting to smell other smells, see other skins, hear other sounds. That first night, when I'd been too scared to even walk around the corner to the takeaway bar, seemed years ago. After all that rushing, we got to the bus stop in plenty of time.

'What did Margaret mean today when she said something about your cousin?' I asked. Erin didn't talk much about herself, or her family.

'My cousin, Kirk. He works there sometimes. You'll get to meet him on a shift.'

'You mean I didn't get the ...?' I mimicked Margaret's cutting action.

'I told you she's a pussycat. Her bark's worse than her bite.' 'Cat's don't bark, Erin. You're mixing your metaphors,' I said sternly.

'And what did she mean by "the mish"?'

'You've never heard that before?'

I shook my head.

'An Aboriginal mission. Like where they put a whole lot of us mob together. I was brought up on one. A long way from here.'

I wanted to ask her more but it was like there was a big full stop at the end of her sentence. It was clear that she didn't want to talk about it.

The bus arrived. We travelled home in silence and went straight to our rooms. I crawled into bed, still in my work skirt and shirt. I was wrecked.

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I realised I was double-booked for the next evening. Martina was going on a pub crawl with her new uni friends and was coming back to my room afterwards to sleep. But Margaret had rostered me on for another shift. I rang Martina to explain my dilemma.

'What a choice,' she said. 'Check a thousand grotty kids' tickets for *The Never Ending Story* or cruise hot spots with me and my friends.'

'But I need the money ...' I said feebly.

‘Oh, all right, meet us after your shift. We’ll have a head start but I’m sure a one-pot screamer like you can make up for lost time.’

I arranged to meet Martina at 11.00pm at a pub in town that was popular with uni students. Actually, it suited me just fine. I was down to my last $8.20 and that wouldn’t buy many drinks.

After my shift, I quickly got changed out of my usher’s outfit into some jeans and a T-shirt. I was running down the steps of the cinema when Erin caught up with me.

‘You’re in a hurry,’ she said, gazing at me curiously.

I was conscious of my hastily applied eye shadow — normally I didn’t wear any. ‘Meeting some friends for a pub crawl — gotta go.’

Her face brightened and I got the feeling that she wanted me to ask her along. I did, hoping that she would refuse but she didn’t. As we walked, I had to stifle my feelings of resentment. Erin had been nothing but kind to me and had got me the job and everything but I wasn’t sure if I wanted her as a ‘friend’. Was it that deep down I was scared of hanging out with another Aboriginal person?

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Thump, ta-da-ta, ta-da-ta, thump, da-ta, ta-da-ta. A block away from the pub, the footpath practically vibrated with the beat of the music. Erin became more excited and I became more jittery. I knew Martina would be okay with Erin but I wasn’t sure how Erin would react to Martina.

Within minutes, they were both screaming in each other’s ear, laughing at some joke over the sound of the band. I envied Martina’s talent to talk about anything to anyone. She was in fine form — although she told me the drinks card had run out hours before — but I could hardly hear myself think, let alone add any sparkling wit to their conversation. Most of Martina’s friends were on the dance floor but during the break they came back to our table. It was then that I saw Adam. After lectures, I always snuck out quickly because talking to him would be mega awkward. But this time there was no way to avoid him. We stared at each other.

Martina broke the silence. ‘Adam, you might remember …’

‘… Kirrali Lewis. I do.’

Martina added. ‘We all come from the same town. Amazing coincidence, don’t you think?’ Martina smiled innocently enough but I could smell a set-up.

Adam smiled but it wasn’t an easy smile. ‘Can I get you ladies a drink?’ he asked.

A drink is a drink and so I nodded. As Adam walked to the bar, I saw his curly hair was gone and that he was sporting neat short back and sides. He was looking like a lawyer already.

The pub closed at midnight and it was Erin’s idea to go on to the Fiddler’s Arms, which had a late license. The Fiddler’s was close and she knew the barman who was good for cheap drinks. The others were easily swayed — actually they were swaying easily — and we walked the few blocks to the pub. Erin was right about it being cheap — the décor and the drinks. Everyone looked at us as we walked in. The pub was an Aboriginal hangout and one of Martina’s friends whispered, ‘They’re all Aborigines’.

Within half an hour the others had vanished into taxis, except an increasingly happy Martina and a very quiet Adam. Erin was chatting to some people over the other side of the room. I went to the toilet and when I got back, Martina was on the dance floor getting up close with a big hunky guy.

‘Robbie Jonus, VFL footy player. You know the Jonus family, greatest footballers this state has ever produced,’ said the guy standing beside me. ‘Best thing for pulling the chicks too. Gubba girls love ’em.’

I peered closer at Martina’s stud. I didn’t recognise him but then footy was never my game.

‘I should know,’ continued my confidante, ‘because I was in the seniors for Essendon and I was a lady slayer. I was up to me neck in them.’ He started laughing — a wheezing, cackling sound — and I realised he was much older than I’d first thought. Older but kind of childish. He took another swig of his beer. It wasn’t his first, I thought, noticing his bleary eyes. He made a lunge towards me and I backed into our table, knocking over Adam’s beer.

‘Sorry, bros, I’ll buy you another,’ said the ex-footballer sorrowfully.

‘That’s okay, mate,’ replied Adam stiffly.

The ex-footballer insisted and staggered to the bar to get another pot for Adam. Before he got there, though, he turned and shouted at me. ‘You going to sleep with me tonight, girl, aren’t ya? I’m a shit-hot lover.’

If a black girl could go pale, I would have at that moment.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ I grabbed Adam by the hand and we pushed through the sweaty bodies on the dance floor. Erin wanted to stay and

Martina shook her head, casually draping one arm around the footy player's well-muscled neck. I tucked the spare key of my room into her pocket and we left.

My heart was thumping like you wouldn't believe. Was it the sensation of holding Adam's hand? His presence still had some sort of grip on me but I was mistaken if I thought that the feeling was mutual. He let go of my hand and asked if I had money for a taxi home. I lied. He said goodnight and walked off, leaving me without a lift. It took me almost an hour to walk home and my anger overcame any fear I might have had. It was more than enough time to get any romantic thoughts about Adam out of my system forever.

The next morning, I saw that the makeshift bed on the floor was untouched and I felt a rush of panic. Where was Martina? What if something had happened to her? All sorts of things happened in the city, or so my mum often warned me. But then again, this was Martina. Fearless. She looked pretty in control last time I saw her, hanging off that footballer. My rush of concern was replaced by a hint of envy. Even though it wasn't my thing, in some ways I was miffed at Martina's one-night stand. Would I ever lie in a man's arms? Not Adam's, that's for sure.

Downstairs at breakfast, Erin was sitting at an empty table so I sat down beside her. Her long hair didn't hide the shadows under her eyes but she didn't mention anything about the night before. I could tell by the way she was poking at her breakfast that she had something on her mind.

'Where are you from, Kirrali? You never talk about your family,' she said tentatively, as if the question might open up some wound in me.

But I was quite happy to tell her. I told her all about my small home town, my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and the ins-and-outs of living in a house with five siblings and a dog, guinea pigs, rabbits and numerous goldfish, all called 'Goldie' after Goldie Hawn, the actress. Dad was a massive fan. I bubbled along sharing amusing stories, I thought, until Erin pushed her plate away and stood up.

'They all sound really nice. But I meant your real family.'

'They are my real family.'

'Yes. I can see that. It doesn't matter. They sound cool. You're lucky.'

She stood up and gave me a little wave goodbye. It was then — maybe for the first time — I realised how far away I was from my beginnings.

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On the eve of my thirteenth birthday, Mum came into my room for a chat. I was sprawled on my bed, my homework all around me. I thought it might be an addendum to our previous little chat about the birds and the bees but that's not what she had in mind.

'Kirrali, your dad and I have never really spoken to you about your biological family. We wondered if now might be a good time. If you have any questions, we'll do our best to answer them. And if you feel like you want to find them, you know we'd help you.'

For a long time I said nothing. Then I opened up my maths textbook. 'I'm kind of busy at the moment, Mum. My assignment is due tomorrow.'

'When you're ready,' she said as she left the room.

Mum tried to bring up the subject again but each time I put her off. I was happy with the family I knew and I didn't want to know about the one that gave me up. The thought of meeting my biological mother was too huge to deal with. I wasn't ready.

Now it was catching up with me and Erin was reminding me that I had unfinished business. Somewhere out there, I had a mother who I hadn't seen since I was a few hours old. She had got rid of me then, would she want to see me again? More to the point, did I want to see her?

Five

Martina and I had planned to meet for lunch every Friday but most came and went while I ate my bucket of hot chips alone. Her night with the VFL footballer, Robbie, had turned into a regular thing and she was now officially ‘seeing’ him. I did ring her a few times but all she wanted to talk about was ‘Robbie this’ and ‘Robbie that’.

A month had passed since the night at the Fiddler’s Arms and I was tired of being stood up. I looked up her class timetable on the noticeboard and resolved to hang outside her lecture room until I saw her.

I was on my way there, passing by the student admin office, when I bumped into her. Literally. Martina didn’t even see me until we collided. Papers flew in all directions.

‘Wow, sis, it’s you,’ she exclaimed.

Sis? Since when did she call me ‘sis’? Erin called me sis — it was an Aboriginal thing, I had noticed. Martina seemed different in other ways too — her red hair was wilder, or her blue eyes brighter, or was it her clothes? Was she on something?

We bent down to pick up the folders and assignments scattered on the floor.

‘Are you going to a lecture?’ I asked. ‘I’ll walk with you. I haven’t seen you in ages.’

‘Well, no. I’m finished here.’

‘Finished where?’

‘I’m dropping out.’

‘What! But you love politics. You’ve wanted to do this course forever. You were going to change the world.’

‘True, but a degree in political science isn’t gunna do it. I can do more out in the “real” world. It’s so conservative here. You have no idea of the twats in my lectures. They haven’t had an original thought in their lives. They are so wealthy and it’s such a boys’ club. Kirrali, it’s 1985! I can do more helping out with grassroots campaigns. Like Aboriginal land rights. Robbie’s mum is a mover and shaker in the land rights movement.’

‘Robbie’s mum?’

‘Yeah, I’ve been hanging out with his family a lot. They’re awesome.’

‘So that’s where you’ve been.’

‘Well, actually, guess what? I’ve got news. I’m getting married.’

‘What! Are you crazy?’

Martina took that as a compliment.

‘Yes, crazy. We are both crazy. Unreal, isn’t it?’

Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘We think I’m pregnant. I don’t know for sure but Robbie and I are hoping we are.’

Again, she misread the look on my face.

‘Oh Kirrali, don’t worry, I’ve got an invite for you.’

Martina shuffled the paper in her arms before passing me a fancy envelope.

Confused, I ripped it open.

Ms Kirrali Lewis and guest
You are cordially invited to the wedding of
Martina Louise Russell
and
Robert Roy Jonus
at 4pm on Sunday, 28 April 1985
Blessington Gardens, St Kilda
and later at the Essendon Football Clubrooms

‘Got to get married now because the footy season has already started. As it is we’re only going to have three days’ honeymoon in town because Robbie is so busy with training and games.’ She giggled happily. ‘Isn’t it fantastic?’

I must have been gaping at her but the last thing Martina wanted was my honest response so I just hugged her tightly. I could hardly believe that my best friend was marrying someone she’d only known for weeks. Maybe it was one of those soulmate things. You meet someone and it just seems right. As for her being pregnant, I mean, what were the chances? Maybe that was what she was ‘on’ — pregnancy hormones. It was too much to contemplate. I was dealing with juggling my shifts at the cinema and getting assignments in on time, while Martina was making plans to get married — and was maybe having a baby.

But I had more immediate things to worry about. A wedding. What on earth was I going to wear? What should I buy them? Should I invite someone to go with me? Who?

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The days flew by — lectures, study, reading and more reading, and writing essays as well as work on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights with the occasional Sunday shift. I did my best to avoid the ogre boss, Margaret, and apart from the odd sarcastic remark thrown my way, she was, as Erin had said, pretty harmless. I was still sensitive to her comments but she was disparaging to everyone. Whatever their skin colour or nationality, Margaret had a bigoted comment. Even the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants — WASPs, my mum called them — were put down and bullied. I began to see it as just her strange way of dealing with people.

Finding someone to do my shift so I could go to Martina's wedding was an ordeal. Margaret told me to 'get one of your bloody relatives, it'd make a change for them to do some work instead of bloody sitting around spending their dole money on grog'. Erin gave me her cousin Kirk's phone number and when I rang he agreed without too much persuasion. He sounded nice, not that I had time for small talk.

I decided to go to the wedding alone but I still had the problem of what to wear. It was my best friend's wedding and my wardrobe was just jeans, jeans, and acid-washed jeans. I scoured the op shops and eventually found a dress that was purple and spangly. Purple wasn't the best colour for a wedding but at least the diamantés would add a festive note. Erin lent me some high-heeled gold shoes to match the spangly bits and I wore gold earrings and phoofed my hair up. I reckoned I looked like a black Kylie Minogue.

Of course, the whole idea of Martina getting married was too weird. She was only nineteen but I was happy for her. They looked amazing together — Robbie, athletic, broad-shouldered, black and handsome in his suit and green silk cummerbund, and Martina's pale skin set off by a green velvet frock, her red hair cascading down her back.

The ceremony was really casual and the marriage celebrant invited guests to come up and say a few words about the couple. There were a few delightful reminiscences about the reckless, daredevil child Robbie once was and tall tales about the Jonus brothers' prowess — on and off the field.

Was I the only one who noticed that nobody had much to say about the bride? Martina's parents weren't there so I guessed it was because her folks didn't approve of Robbie or the wedding. Martina was the black sheep of the family. She looked radiant but she must have felt sad not to have her family there.

At the 'after party' — they didn't call it a reception — Martina whispered to me that the pregnancy had been a false alarm. At first I was relieved but when Robbie made a speech about how busy they were going to be making little footballers, I felt uneasy again. My free-spirited Martina, a baby-making machine?

Robbie's family were really enjoying themselves — a gaggle of energetic kids chasing mini footballs and teenagers boogieing on the dance floor. As a stranger to all but Martina, I felt alone. I hovered on the edge, watching as if it was a movie.

One curious thing happened though. An older Aboriginal woman, maybe in her seventies, came up and asked me my name. She frowned at my answer. She asked me where I came from. When I told her, she shook her head.

'That can't be right,' she said.

'What?'

'Well, bub, I coulda sworn you were a Smith. From up around Bree, New South Wales.'

I shook my head. She patted me on the arm as if to console me for my bad luck in not being a member of the Smith clan. Maybe they were like royalty or something.

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Dear Mum and Dad
I said that I'd write and tell you about Martina's wedding but I had to wait until payday so I could get the photos developed. Didn't she look beautiful? Unusual wedding dress — emerald green velvet. Quite casual and none of the 'obey' stuff like at cousin Audrey's. It was fun though — especially afterwards at the Essendon Footy Club. Dad, I know you'll be jealous but I got to meet one of your football heroes, except I forget his name. You'll know who I mean, that 'on-baller' you rave about. I didn't ask for his autograph, too shy.

I hope Martina will be happy. It was all a bit rushed and her family didn't go. Sorry, this letter is beginning to sound like gossip.
What else? I can't come home for the holidays because I've got extra shifts at work. I should make enough to pay for next term's accommodation so don't send me a cheque. Spend the money on yourselves. GO FOR A HOLIDAY! I've made a couple of friends. There's Amber who's also doing law and another girl called Erin. She's Aboriginal actually. Oh, and Adam Rogers. Remember him? He's in my lectures, not that I talk to him much.
If Tarquin is coming down, I can sneak her into my room but only if she brings my doona and a few jumpers. It's going to be a long cold winter. Love to the others. Please give Finn a big hug and a treat and say it's from me.
Love Kirrali
PS I almost forgot. I got two High Distinctions in my first lot of results. Yippee!

✖ ✖ ✖

I was flying through the uni gates, running late as usual, and who should I bump into but the dreadlock guy who'd tried to railroad me on my first day.

'It's you,' I snapped in a tone that I hoped said, 'don't mess with me'.

'What's up?' He fell into pace beside me.

This time he wasn't barefoot and he was carrying a book, but he still looked scruffy. Nice green eyes though. I hadn't noticed that the first time. I decided to be direct with him. 'Look, I'm in a hurry. Don't you have anything better to do? Like read that book?'

He stood still while I kept walking. 'It's a play. *Medea*.'

The barefoot dreadlocked guy reading a Greek tragedy? Before I could fully process what he'd said, he called out, 'And actually sometimes I'm very busy. Last week I even filled in at work for one of my cousin's friends who had a wedding to go to.'

I stopped walking. *He* was Kirk, Erin's cousin? 'I ... I'm sorry. I didn't realise you were Erin's cousin.'

He shrugged his shoulders and headed off down another path. I stared after him, feeling pretty bad. That's not really how I wanted to treat people.

Dad would have disowned me if he'd seen my behaviour. I should probably apologise.

When I told Erin what had happened, she'd already heard.

'I thought I should buy him something? Maybe a bottle of chardonnay?'

She looked at me with a barely concealed smirk, 'Chardonnay? Kirk? I don't think so.'

'What about a record or a tape? Maybe he's got a CD player. I could get him a CD voucher.'

'You're joking, right?'

'Ah, no. Then what?'

'He wants to go on a date with you.'

'What?'

'He likes you. For some reason he thinks you're pretty. I dunno, I told him to get his eyes checked.'

'What?'

'You're so easy to stir. How about it? A romantic night out with Kirk?'

I groaned, 'He's not my kind, Erin. He's cute, but dreadlocks? Ugh.'

'Kirk is the sweetest guy you could ever meet. He'd do anything for anyone. And he's talented. A really good actor.'

'Then why's he working as an usher? Oh, I know, to pick up other actor's techniques.'

'Are you kidding? Do you know how little work there is for Koori actors? I mean, when was the last time you saw an Aboriginal person on *Neighbours*?'

I looked at her, 'I don't watch *Neighbours*.'

'But you do know what I'm talking about?'

My blank expression must have shown my ignorance.

'How many roles do you see filled by Aboriginal actors? Occasionally they get to play *Aboriginals* but they don't actually get to play *people*. You don't see Aboriginal nurses or teachers, or even Aboriginal social workers, in films or on TV, do you? Those roles are always filled by white people. When they just pick the best actor for the role instead of the best white actor, Kirk will get plenty of work.'

It was the first time I'd seen Erin angry but she did have a point. Now I felt guilty for being one of the great unwashed who hadn't even noticed the lack of cultural diversity among characters on our screen.

Just like that, Erin realised — like a cat playing with a mouse — that she had the upper hand.

‘He’s too shy to ask you out unless he knows you’ll say yes. You have to say yes.’

I hesitated. Her eyes glinted and she knew she had me.

‘Umm.’

‘That’s not a yes.’

‘Yes.’ It came out like a whimper.

‘Great. I’ll let him know you’re free on Thursday.’

Me on a date with a rastaman. You wouldn’t write home about it. So I didn’t.

Six

That's how I found myself back at the Fiddler's Arms. Obviously Kirk's choice. Last time I'd been here, it'd been too crowded to notice much except that both the décor and the drinks were cheap. Now I had a good chance to look around. It was a funny old pub. No mirrored bar, or shag pile, or sunken lounge. No attempt to be trendy. It had grotty red flock wallpaper and sticky carpet. Even the toilet doors had those old-fashioned symbols of a silhouetted lady with a parasol and a man wearing a top hat, holding a cane.

Still, it was popular. There were maybe a hundred people there — not bad for a Wednesday night. Some were playing pool, some were dancing. The band was nothing special but the crowd was tearing up the floor. Most of them were young, about my age, though there were a few older. In their thirties, forties, fifties, it didn't seem to matter. They all danced together. The last time I'd seen oldies dancing with teenagers was at my cousin Audrey's wedding. There, the dads were trying to shake it, the mums were trying to look sexy and the kids were trying to get away as fast as possible. But here everyone seemed cool with one another, old or young.

Kirk left me to go and buy drinks at the bar. I hid in the shadows, hoping I would go unnoticed.

'Wanna dance?' The bloke was swaying and it wasn't to the rhythm. He flashed a smile but my heart sank. I was going to be harassed, just like the last time I'd been here.

'No, thank you,' I replied.

'Yeah, me neither.' He laughed, and despite myself, I did too. 'That's okay, sis, I just wanted to come up and have a yarn. The name's Michael. Michael Jackson. Like in the Jackson Five.' He grabbed at his crotch and chuckled again at his own joke. He held out his hand — the other one — and I was obliged to shake it.

'Kirrali.' At least I could try and be polite.

Just then Kirk returned. 'Hey, Mick, my boy,' he said, putting our drinks down on the bar table to shake the bloke's hand. 'Eh, Kirrali, better keep

away from this one. He's deadly with the ladies.'

Mick looked bashful but pleased. 'Deadly,' he repeated.

Kirk and Mick got into all that 'how's your cousin' stuff that I've noticed Aboriginal people like to get into. Aboriginal people other than me, I mean. I didn't know anyone's cousin — except for Erin's.

Just then I spotted Erin in the crowd. I waved to her and she came over. 'It's about time we got you here again,' she said, giving me a drunk hug. Her beautiful hair, usually tied back, had been let loose. It was like a glowing aura around her.

'Coke, Erin?' shouted Kirk, who had a tequila sunrise for me and a whiskey and Coke for himself.

'No thanks, cuz, I'm fine,' she replied.

'Erin doesn't drink. She's a teetotaller,' he added, for my benefit.

'Like it's a crime not to drink,' she poked her tongue out at him.

So she wasn't drunk. Innocent until proven guilty. I must remember that, I thought, sipping on my sunrise as she spun on to the dance floor.

That night, I reckoned Erin and Kirk introduced me to half the crowd. Everyone was someone's cousin, or aunt, or nephew, and if they weren't, they were 'bro' or 'sis'. It was very complicated, especially when I got the feeling that there were one or two cliques who weren't exactly on speaking terms. But it was pretty civilised — in fact I'd never seen a crowd of people have such a good time.

I did notice one older guy alone at the bar who seemed to be on nodding terms with just about everyone. He was a powerful looking man and his shaved head added to the impression that he wasn't a guy you'd mess with.

'What's his story?' I asked Kirk.

'That's Uncle Jacko. Don't you recognise him? He's always on the tellie. Leading the marches. Protesting, that kind of thing.'

'And he's your uncle?'

'No, silly, he's an Elder. That's why he's called Uncle. A sign of respect.' Kirk leant forward to whisper in my ear, 'He thinks all gubbas should be put on a boat and sent home.'

I was a bit embarrassed but I had to ask. 'What's a gubba?'

Kirk put his arm around my shoulder. 'For an "edumacated" person, you're as dumb as a fence post sometimes. A gubba's a white person. You know, as in "the gubberment".'

'Oh. Ha ha.'

I looked over at Uncle Jacko. A real-life activist. Still, it wasn't winning him much of a fan club. He seemed to have this space around him that made people keep their distance.

'Want me to introduce you?' asked Kirk, following my gaze.

'Oh no,' I replied, alarmed. My ignorance would really show up if I had to talk to someone like that. We sat there awkwardly for a bit. I wasn't good at small talk and the band was a bit loud anyway.

'How's uni?' Kirk asked, over the thump of a drummer who loved drum solos.

'Well, I have a torts essay to finish. Not my favourite topic. I need to find an example of a case where "proximate cause" of damages is borderline and argue if punitive damages are warranted. Sorry, I'm talking gobbledygook.'

'You mean, like an employer knowingly exposing one of his workers to asbestos, who goes on to suffer from mesothelioma years later, who brings a lawsuit against his employer?' Kirk said. 'That's what I based my torts essay on.'

I stared at him.

'Erin didn't tell you? I did two years of law. I was only the third Aboriginal law student the university has ever had. Why do you think I was agitating for more places for Aboriginal students?'

'But you're an actor.'

'Now I am. I took a year off to see if I could make a living out of it and ...'

'I don't understand. You have to be really smart to get into law. And actors, well …'

'You sure say what you think, don't you? I love acting. And it will be a stepping stone to writing a film script. Directing. Maybe running an Aboriginal theatre company some day. There's more than one way to change the world, Kirrali.'

How quick I had been to size Kirk up, on that first day, as a barefoot hippie with no future. He could have summed me up as an uptight goody-goody but somehow he had seen beyond that.

A couple of young guys came up to Kirk and they shook hands. They started to banter about people and things I knew nothing about. I looked at my watch. It was nearly midnight. The band had finished and one of the guys was asking Kirk if he felt like going on to a disco. He turned to me to gauge my interest.

‘Not for me. I’m doing extra shifts this weekend ’cos of the public holiday. I try to work all of them — ANZAC Day, Moomba.’

Kirk’s mates started laughing.

‘Moom. Ba.’

‘Moom-ba — what a crack-up that is.’

‘Crack-up — good one, bros.’

‘Did I say something funny?’ I asked.

‘Just the name Moomba. It’s an Aboriginal word.’

I still didn’t get it. ‘I really have to go.’ I stood up to leave.

Kirk leapt up. ‘I’ll walk you home.’

‘You don’t have to do that. I’m fine.’

I was worried that Kirk might try to kiss me and even though I was seeing him in a new light, he wasn’t my type. But he insisted.

After the smoky air of the Fiddler’s, the fresh air was like a slap. Kirk was still trying to charm me. The song *Billie Jean* had been playing as we left and Kirk was moonwalking like Michael Jackson — the real one, not the guy at the bar. I couldn’t help laughing at his over-the-top expressions that went with every crotch-grabbing movement.

Out of the darkness came a voice. ‘Well, if it isn’t God’s gift to the disco floor. Out partying with his pretty little girlfriend.’

‘She’s not my girlfriend …’ Kirk began to say in a friendly voice.

‘So the nigger’s a faggot then?’

The cold hand of dread reached up and dug its fingernails into my heart. I reached out and clutched Kirk’s hand.

The bloke turned to the shadows, from where two other guys emerged. ‘Hey fellas, he’s not just a dirty bloody abo, he’s a dirty bloody poo-puncher too.’

Kirk and I bolted. My clunky heels skidded on the uneven bluestone surface of the alley and within a few strides they had overtaken and surrounded us. I was flooded with fear.

It happened quickly. I saw the flash of a fist and heard a crack like dry thunder. I realised Thug One must have broken Kirk’s nose. He staggered back into the paling fence which shuddered along its length. Thug Two flung his arm around my neck in a headlock and I bit him as hard as I could. He leapt back, yelping in pain. I took a wild swing with my shoe at Thug Three’s genitalia but missed. He lashed out with a backhanded punch and I went down, my knees hitting the pavers. Someone held me, someone

stomped on my head. The pain was excruciating. Somewhere, Kirk was moaning.

Worse than the pain was hearing guys my age, guys I might have gone to school with, or been neighbours with — ordinary guys — use those words. They called us niggers. No-hopers. Bludgers. Boongs. Filthy abos. And after each curse, came their disgusting laughter.

A porch light flickered on and I heard the thugs running off down the alley. It was over. My mind slid into a sticky black sadness.

✖ ✖ ✖

When I came to, Kirk was hunched, whimpering. At least he was alive. I was alive. I touched my throbbing face. My fingers reached my cheek, puffed up flesh, before they expected to.

Kirk sat up slowly. In the glare of the porch light, I could see that his dreadlocks were matted with blood and his nose was sticking out at a funny angle.

‘You look like Chaka Khan,’ Kirk croaked, touching my swollen lips.

‘You look like shit,’ I retorted. I started to sing *I feel for you*, Chaka Khan’s mega soul hit. Kirk joined in.

‘I think I love you …’

We started to laugh, even though it hurt like hell. I think we laughed because we realised we were going to be okay. I staggered to my feet. My ribs were sore, one arm was tingling and my head felt like it’d been squashed under the weight of someone who was heavy with hate. I gently pulled Kirk to his feet.

‘Is anything broken? Apart from your nose?’

‘My pride? I’m sorry I didn’t protect you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ I said. ‘C’mon, we’re going to the police.’

‘What? The cops aren’t going to do anything.’

‘Of course they are. It’s called the law.’

‘Kirrali, it doesn’t work that way when it comes to us.’

I started to argue but he kept shaking his head.

‘Come on Kirk, it’s the eighties. Equality and all that. They could have killed us. They need to be stopped before they do kill someone. And they need to be punished. Jailed.’

‘Kirrali, you are so naïve.’

I started to walk purposely, albeit slowly, towards the main street where I was certain I could flag down a taxi. Kirk soon caught up with me, as I was sure he would. My hopes faded when the first three taxis sped up as they drove past. I guess we looked like troublemakers or drunks. So we walked, more like hobbled, the kilometre or so to the police station. We walked in and the glow from the fluorescent light made the blood on Kirk's face look like melted chocolate. I started to laugh again. He looked like someone out of a horror movie. But the response we got wasn't funny.

The interviewing cop treated us like we'd asked for it. I told him I was a law student but he kept up the same line of questioning — did I have a criminal record, had we taken drugs, how much had we had to drink, was I behaving in a sexually provocative way?

'It is a first date.' I said through clenched teeth but the cop just looked at me as if I was dirt.

I was furious. I asked to see the officer-in-charge but was told that if I had a complaint I should take it to the Koori Legal Resource because 'that's what all that taxpayer's money is for'.

On the steps outside, Kirk hugged me. He didn't have to say 'I told you so'. His look said it all.

There was a taxi rank beside the police station. The first driver waved us on but the second one, a black guy, let us ease our bruised bodies into the back seat of his car.

'Someone didn't like the colour of your skin?' he said a lilting accent. I guessed he was from Jamaica.

'You're not wrong. I suppose you'd know all about that too,' Kirk replied.

'Not so much in Australia. I get treated with quite a degree of courtesy. Maybe I'm somewhat of a novelty, being from the Caribbean. But you poor fellows ... it is a very sad state of affairs.' He shook his head sadly. 'To the hospital then?'

'Yep, to point his nose back in the right direction.'

I looked at Kirk's face. 'You look like you've done a couple of rounds with Rocky Balboa.'

'Geez, Kirrali, I saw you swing a punch like Rocky Balboa. Where did you learn to do that? Can you teach me?'

'Two big brothers. And no way am I going to teach you to punch. What are you planning to do — turn vigilante?'

‘Nah, I want to learn for my acting. I’ve got an audition for a play about that Aboriginal boxing troupe who toured the country during the Depression.’

‘An Aboriginal version of Rocky? Isn’t that taking method acting a little too far?’

Kirk looked at me with his mesmerising green eyes and then leaned over and gently kissed me. It hurt my lips but a surge of electricity spread through my body. When I looked up, I saw the taxi driver smiling in the rear-vision mirror.

By the time we got to the hospital, the pain was worse because the adrenaline had worn off. We had a long wait in casualty before we eventually got our bumps, bruises and breaks attended to by the frazzled intern. I convinced him to take some photos of our injuries. I was determined to get some justice and those photos might just be the hard evidence we needed.

It was 4.30am when we finally got back to the college. I hugged Kirk goodbye and when I crawled into bed, I fell straight to sleep.

✘ ✘ ✘

My aching ribs slowed me down but with a whisker to spare, I got to the dining room just before it closed for breakfast. I kept my head down and avoided eye contact. I didn’t know what could be done about my black eye. I didn’t have a steak handy and a sausage was hardly an appropriate substitute. Anyway, who would waste good food — I was ravenous. I reached over the counter and grabbed more toast from the rack. I sat at the furthest table from the counter but Erin didn’t miss a trick. She raced over.

‘Oh my God, what happened?’

‘It’s okay.’

Tears sprung into her eyes. ‘It’s definitely not okay. Who did this to you? Was it a bloke? Oh my God, did this happen when you were out with Kirk?’

‘These three blokes …’

‘What three blokes? Not Koori fellas?’

‘Three racist thugs.’

She plonked down on the chair opposite me. ‘Are you okay? Is Kirk okay?’

‘Well, he’s had his nose rearranged a couple of times, first from the punches and then by the doctor. Didn’t even give him an anaesthetic. He

just went “crunch”.’

‘You’re so calm.’

‘Underneath I’m a wreck. I’m going to shovel down some food and go back to bed. This afternoon, I’ll see if the Koori Legal Resource can be more help than the police.’

‘Do you want me to come? I know a few people there, I can introduce you.’

‘Thanks. It’s fine. Kirk would’ve come but he’s got an audition.’ I started to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’ Erin was looking bewildered.

‘It’s just ...’ I said between gasps. ‘It’s just that he’s auditioning for a play … about a boxing troupe.’

Erin didn’t see the humour but Kirk and I had. While we were waiting for the doctor, I’d taught him how to throw a pretty convincing punch. I wasn’t about to admit it, especially to Erin, but I was warming to Kirk. Maybe even more than just warming.

✖ ✖ ✖

In high school, Martina used to chant, ‘Good guys get the flick, bad boys get the chick’, whenever some sweet but daggy guy asked her out. Not to their face of course. But while she went for the bad boy type, I was more attracted to nice guys like my dad.

My dad was big and tall and kind of slow. He never rushed and he would pause before giving his answer or responding to something you had said. Sometimes I would get impatient with him but he didn’t let that bother him either. I never saw him lose his temper and he never smacked us kids — he left that to Mum. She just had to rattle the bottom drawer with the wooden spoons in it and we would quake in fear. That was usually enough of a threat to get us to behave. I only recall her actually smacking one of us once.

What was most important to Dad, apart from providing for Mum and all us kids, was being fair. He was a union rep in the days when unions really were about protecting those who weren’t in a position to do so themselves. Once he organised a strike at the shoe factory where he worked because some of the immigrant workers were getting paid two dollars less than the rest of the assembly line. The bosses tried to squirm out of it by saying they were less experienced but the books showed they were only paying the

reduced amount to workers who couldn’t speak English. They thought the workers wouldn’t complain because they needed the jobs but they didn’t figure that Dad would fight their cause for them. He won and management was forced to back pay the wronged workers.

Of course someone had to pay for this and it was Dad. Coincidentally (yeah, sure) he lost his job at the factory four months later. Restructuring, they called it. Dad got work at the abattoirs instead. ‘A bloody job’s a bloody job,’ he’d joke but it wasn’t. There was even less money than before.

Much as I admired Dad, I resolved I’d *never* be a blue collar worker. There was nothing noble about being poor. It sucked. That was partly the reason I chose law — the opportunity to make money. Dentists might make more but I didn’t fancy staring into people’s mouths all day. Pharmacists? Chemistry wasn’t my strongest subject. Doctors had to work a hundred hours a week as interns and were always at the mercy of their patients. They were either considered saints or else they were being sued as sinners. I didn’t see myself as either. But lawyers made good money and they could shut the office door at the end of the day and walk away. A lawyer wouldn’t be called out in the middle of the night to do emergency surgery. Law seemed like a civilised profession with money to be made.

Seven

So lawyers made good money and could walk away at the end of the day, did they? The one I saw at the Koori Legal Resource didn't.

At 2pm, I stood at the front desk while the receptionist took my name and told me to take a seat. I smoothed down the charcoal grey skirt of my only suit. I wanted to make a good impression. I didn't want them to think I was some loser but that I was a responsible citizen who had never been in trouble. An hour later, I was still sitting there.

I fronted up to the desk, 'Excuse me, but have you forgotten me?'

'No, darl, we haven't. There's been a bit of a drama, that's all, and the staff are trying to deal with it.'

'Well, I've had my own drama,' I said. 'My friend and I were bashed up last night.'

But the phone rang and the receptionist just smiled at me apologetically. The phone hadn't stopped ringing since I'd arrived.

Just then the door burst open and a reporter and a cameraman bustled in. The receptionist put her hand over the phone and told them to go down the hall to the last office. I wondered what the hell had happened. She finished her call and hurried after them. I was left in the deserted reception area.

Maybe there was someone famous in the back office? I was just sneaking around the counter to have a peek at the appointment book when another woman entered the waiting area. She approached me with a winning smile.

'Samantha Jones from the *Tribune*. Can you tell me something about the victim?' she asked.

For a second, I thought she was talking about me and Kirk. I quickly eased my way back to the customer side of the counter.

'I really need to know if it was reasonable, in your opinion, for the police to shoot this Aboriginal woman dead.'

'The *police* shot an Aboriginal woman! What happened?'

She looked at her notes. 'It seems she had a screwdriver and was threatening a young police officer.'

'A screwdriver! And he killed her?'

My mind flew into law school mode. ‘That’s unreasonable force. If a police officer can’t overpower a mere woman armed with a screwdriver then the police need retraining in unarmed combat. How many times did her shoot her?’

‘The officer fired four times apparently. She died before the ambulance arrived.’

‘That poor woman. She was probably crying out for help. She needed a hug, not a bullet.’ I was so angry over what had happened to this woman, hot on the heels of my own bashing, I didn’t even notice that the reporter was writing down everything I said.

‘What do you do here, love? And what’s your name?’ She got out a small camera and pointed it at me.

‘Oh, my name’s Kirrali Lewis and I’m a law … I’m here … there was a bashing. I’m here regarding a witness statement.’ I was too embarrassed to tell her that I was a victim, or at least one of them.

The camera flashed. She thanked me and left. Why did she need a photo? Too late to ask.

What a crazy place this was. I was glad I was never going to work in an office like this one. I gazed around at the posters in the waiting room. They all featured Aboriginal art and catchy slogans about safe sex and eating the right food. There was one striking poster that proclaimed, ‘You are on Aboriginal land’. I hadn’t really thought of it like that before. I scanned through a pamphlet about the local Koori Advancement Centre before turning to the pile of magazines on the coffee table.

Finally the receptionist returned. ‘I’m sorry about the wait. The TV stations are chasing interviews for the six o’clock news. Marlene will see you now. Come through.’

Marlene was younger than I expected and more casually dressed than I was. She offered her hand but I was disappointed.

‘I thought I’d see an Aboriginal lawyer.’

‘You will when there’s enough to keep up with the demand. Until then I’ll have to do,’ she said firmly. ‘Now, how can I help?’

She listened to my story without interruption and without surprise, making notes on a yellow pad. I told her I had asked the hospital to take photos.

‘Well, that will help if we ever bring the perpetrators to court. Well done to have had the foresight to get them taken. I’ll follow it up with the

hospital.’

I blushed despite myself. ‘Well, I am a first-year law student.’

‘Great, well you know we need more Aboriginal lawyers.’

‘Actually, I was thinking of going into international law.’

She said nothing, fixing me with a cool gaze. She turned over a page on her yellow pad. ‘Okay, now we need your details. Let’s start with your address, where you come from.’

I felt like I was telling my life story to this woman. It was nearly 6pm before she put down her pen and stood up and stretched, stifling a yawn.

‘So what’s going to happen now?’ I asked.

‘We’ll follow up with the police but unless they catch the perpetrators, there’s not much we can do.’

‘But we could have been killed. And what about the police? They were so racist towards us.’

‘Look, Kirrali, you’re not the first Aboriginal person to be bashed up. See that pile of folders, the one that’s about to topple over? All assaults against Koori people and that’s only in the last eighteen months. Most of them go no further than that. They’re just the ones where people bother to make a complaint — most people don’t. That other pile, the one on the chair? They’re all complaints we’ve had about mistreatment at the hands of the police. False arrests, harassments, a bit of a bashing with a phone book, the list goes on. And that’s just in my office. Multiply that by the other four solicitors working here and you start to get a sense of the magnitude of the problem. We’re understaffed and now our budget’s been cut, which doesn’t help. But I’m surprised that this is all new to you. You’re from a country town. What about the rest of your family? It must have happened to them.’

I blushed. ‘No it hasn’t. Actually, my family aren’t Aboriginal. They’re white.’

‘Right. Now I understand,’ she looked sympathetic. ‘So you haven’t experienced this kind of thing before?’

I shook my head. ‘Never. When I’d read things in the paper about Aboriginal people getting pushed around by the police, I thought it was just the media being sensational.’

‘Mostly the media don’t want to know. Unless of course it’s something dramatic like the police shooting today.’

‘What happened?’

‘Poor Mavis. We’ve had dealings with her before. She’s an alcoholic, or rather was. She got into a fight with one of the other residents of the boarding house where she was living and the landlord called the cops. She wouldn’t let them into her room so they broke the door down. The police aren’t saying much but it seems she was hiding behind the bathroom door holding up a screwdriver. They shot her — four times at close range. She was a harmless soul, except for her swearing. Mavis could swear like no one I’ve ever met before. But that wasn’t much of a weapon against a cop’s .38 Smith & Wesson, now was it?’

‘It’s unbelievable.’

‘It happens. She’s not the first and she won’t be the last,’ she said. ‘Well, I’m in court tomorrow and I need to prepare so you’ll have to excuse me. I’ll be in touch if we hear anything.’

‘Well, thanks for your time.’ I didn’t know what else to say.

‘That’s okay. And Kirrali — good luck with your studies.’

My face flushed red. She probably thought I was the biggest wannabe in the world for wanting to do international law. But who in their right mind would want her job? I shuddered, even more determined to aim for the best possible law firm after I graduated. And no community work.

✖ ✖ ✖

The next morning, I was woken up by a loud banging on the door. I buried my head under the pillow but the thumping didn’t stop.

‘All right, all right, I’m coming’, I mumbled.

I pulled on my old dressing gown and opened the door just a crack. The door pushed open and a newspaper was shoved up against my nose. Behind it was Erin’s animated face.

‘Look!’ she cried, her voice high-pitched with excitement.

I rubbed my eyes, wincing when my knuckles made contact with my bruises. I adjusted my focus to the paper she was waving about and read the headline:

POLICE OVERKILL CRIES KOORI LEGAL RESOURCE

A lawyer for the Koori Legal Resource claimed today that police used excessive force in the shooting of St Kilda boarding house resident, Mavis Berry. ‘If a police officer can’t overpower a mere woman armed with nothing more dangerous than a screwdriver then I think they need retraining in unarmed combat,’ said Kirrali Lewis, a lawyer with the Koori Legal

Resource. It is alleged that the victim, the fourth person to be shot dead by police this year, was suffering from a mental illness. ‘She was probably crying out for help. She needed a hug, not a bullet,’ Ms Lewis went on to say.

Suddenly I was wide-awake.

‘Oh my God,’ I croaked.

I read the paragraph more slowly the second time — the black text swimming before my eyes like ants having a corroboree — and then I saw the photos. One was a mug shot of a sad-looking Aboriginal woman and the other photo was of a well-dressed woman standing underneath the Koori Legal Resource sign. It was me.

‘Uh oh.’ My limbs went limp, like someone had pulled a plug out from the soles of my feet and all my strength was glugging out. I slumped. Erin grabbed me and pushed me back on to the bed.

‘Geez, girl, I let you go alone and look what happens. You end up on page three,’ she said laughing.

‘They’ve made a mistake,’ I said weakly.

‘I’ll say — “a mere woman”! Where’s your solidarity, sister?’ She laughed again.

I lay down on the bed and pulled the newspaper over my eyes. I knew no one at uni would read a trashy newspaper like the *Tribune* so I felt safe going to my morning lecture. There were benefits to having two hundred students in the one class; you were guaranteed anonymity unless you were one of the smart-arses who liked to engage in argy bargy with the lecturers. And I wasn’t one of those. I made sure I kept my head down and my opinions to myself.

Today’s lecture was on torts and I still hadn’t handed in my essay. It was the hardest subject and I really had to concentrate to understand it. I mean, defining liability versus intentional conduct ... finding intent in regard to trespass on land … false imprisonment … It was all about violation of rights and while that was uppermost in my mind, given the drama of what had happened, I couldn’t focus on the dry old examples the lecturer was giving.

My hand drifted to my forehead. The cut above my eye had two stitches although it didn’t hurt unless I touched it. The bruises were tender and my ribs were aching but the doctor said they would just have to heal

themselves. I was wondering how Kirk was going — physically — but also at his audition, when something the lecturer said made me snap to attention.

‘— one of our students, Kirrali Lewis, it appears, has fast- tracked her law degree and is already working at the Koori Legal Resource where her opinion is *so* highly regarded that it has made the pages of the illustrious tabloid, the *Tribune*. Our congratulations, Kirrali.’

All of the students turned around to look at me. The lecturer was flourishing page three of the paper. As Erin would say, ‘what a shame job’.

I had to ring my parents before they got wind of the story. I collected my loose coins and headed back to my college precinct where I could find a private pay phone. I also wanted to ring Kirk to see if he was okay. But he would have to wait. My parents came first.

‘Dad? What are you doing at home? Why aren’t you at work?’

‘Kirrali, is that you? Are you all right? Are you mixed up in this shooting? We’ve been worried sick.’

‘Dad, I’m all right.’ I quickly decided not to tell him that I’d been attacked. If he was that worried by the article in the paper, he’d be hysterical if I told him the whole story. Lucky the photo wasn’t great and you couldn’t see my stitches.

‘We’ve been trying to reach you at the College all morning. Your mother has left a dozen messages. The car’s packed and we’re ready to come down.’

‘Dad, it’s a big mistake. I had nothing to do with the shooting. I didn’t see it and I don’t even know the woman involved.’ I couldn’t help myself, I started to laugh. It was all so crazy.

‘But why were you quoted then? And why did they say you were from the Koori Legal Resource? Are you doing volunteer work there?’ Dad sounded hurt, probably from my laughter.

‘Um, I just happened to be there when the story broke. The journalist mistook me for someone who worked there. Like they say, you can’t always believe what you read in the papers.’

‘We’re coming down anyway. Tarquin and Michael, Beatrice too. We’re just waiting for Bea to get home from school. We’ll be there by 6.30 tonight.’

‘Dad, please don’t come down. Really, I’m fine.’

‘Your mother would make herself sick if she didn’t see you. We’ll take you out for tea. Okay?’

What could I do? I was touched by their concern but I really didn't want to see them. How was I going to hide my bruises?

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'Kirrali, I don't know how you are *ever* going to be a successful lawyer,' sighed my mother.

We were at a local Vietnamese restaurant.

'What do you mean?' I said indignantly. 'I wasn't passing myself off as a lawyer. It was the journalist who made the mistake.'

'No love, I didn't mean that. It's just that you have great difficulty …' She lowered her voice to a whisper, 'You have great difficulty *avoiding the truth* .'

It was true. I had spent the afternoon holed up in Erin's room trying to disguise my swollen eye with the makeup for black skin that she'd imported from the States. The afternoon had been a bit of a giggle fest and I was so chilled by the time we got to the restaurant, I had told my family everything before the jasmine tea had even been poured.

Mum looked fluttery and close to tears. Dad looked grim, while Tarquin and Beatrice couldn't hide their fascination. Michael had his nose in a book. It seemed cartoon action was more interesting than real life.

'Did you really kick that guy in the goolies?' asked Beatrice, wide-eyed. She was only ten but she had a gift for the vernacular.

'Beatrice, really,' Mum scolded. 'Anyway if she did, it was self-defence. And I hope it hurt like hell.'

'Hear, hear.' said Dad.

'Mum! Dad!' This time it was Tarquin's turn to be shocked.

The night wore on, the dishes kept coming and Mum and Dad spurted forth outrage in response to my bashing. We did talk about other things: my studies, my lovely room at the college. They asked if I'd made new friends and I told them about Amber and Erin. Dad was one to stir if I ever mentioned a boy so I didn't say much about Kirk. At the end of the night, Mum gave me some spending money and Dad gave me a huge bear hug.

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I was dead exhausted but I couldn't sleep. The events of the last few days kept spiralling around in my head. I couldn't make sense of the racism I'd experienced. I'd copped a tiny bit in the past — a few mean words and

some teasing. Things like going shopping with my mother for something to wear to my end-of-school social and the shop assistant ignoring me while she fawned over my mother, not realising that we were together. Or having Tarquin get into a fight at the local swimming pool because someone had said something about ‘that ugly black chick’, not knowing that she was my sister.

Looking back, I would always tell people I was Aboriginal if they asked but I guess I was a bit embarrassed about being different from everyone else in town. I just wanted to fit in.

One day, when I was still at high school, I did go home and ask Mum about my birth mother. ‘Are you sure my mother was Aboriginal?’ I asked. ‘Maybe she was from Jamaica. They have black people there too, you know.’ I had just got an A+ for an assignment on Jamaica in my social studies class.

‘Darling, there’s no doubt you are Aboriginal,’ my mother said. ‘But that’s a great thing. Your ancestors were the first Australians.’

‘Nobody else says it’s a great thing,’ I said.

There were times when I would daydream about a fantasy mother who I would meet one day. And she wasn’t Aboriginal. She would be someone exotic, like the disco singer Donna Summers. I bet Donna Summers never got teased.

Being a teenager was challenging but these recent events were in a whole different league. The bashing. The police station. The Koori Legal Resource. The *Tribune*. Seeing my parents. And the kiss from Kirk. Life in the city was becoming way too complicated.

Eight

A few days later, I got a call from Martina. ‘Come over Friday night for drinks’, she said. Bring a friend, she urged.

I still hadn’t rung Kirk to see how he had gone with his audition so now I had two reasons to call him. Three reasons, if I counted wanting to know how he was recovering. Four if ... why did I need another reason? It was time to ’fess up. I actually liked the guy. I wasn’t too sure about the dreadlocks but he was funny and sweet and had gorgeous eyes. I picked up the phone. Maybe he wouldn’t want to go out with me again because I attracted bad luck. I was obsessing. Just ring the bloody number.

‘Kirk? Hi, it’s … oh, great. Yeah, me too, except for the sore ribs. Ha ha. Hey, what I’m ringing about ... You were? … I am going over to my friend Martina’s on Friday and wondered if you were free … Meet you at eight. So how did you go in the audition? … Fantastic! … See you Friday … Bye.’

Phew. I looked down and realised I had been doodling Kirk’s name all over my address book. I hadn’t done that since I’d fallen for Adam. I had to get back on track. I was here to get a law degree, not fall in … I couldn’t bring myself to even *think* the word. So I settled down to my torts essay which was totally overdue. If anything could distract me from my daydreams, it was torts.

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Martina looked gorgeous when she opened the door. I’m glad we had her beauty to focus on because the house was a mess. Overflowing ashtrays, crushed beer cans and sports pages from newspapers covered every surface.

‘Excuse the clutter,’ she said.

I gave her a half-hearted smile and introduced her to Kirk. He just shoved some newspapers over on the couch and made himself at home. It turned out that he knew Robbie through his cousin so he and Martina fell into an easy conversation about Robbie’s form and how awesome Rioli was playing.

While they traded ‘great moments in football’, I looked around. So this was married life. It was a new townhouse, very swish from the outside. The inside was flash too, all shag pile carpet and glamorous granite in the kitchen. The furniture though was another story. Old, sagging and faded. Nothing matched. The biggest fridge I had ever seen and a twenty-six inch television were the exceptions. Did the furniture have sentimental value? Did they run out of money after paying for the TV? Martina saw me looking around.

‘We haven’t got around to furnishing the place yet,’ she said.

I blushed. She could still read my mind.

‘It’s just that Robbie trains five nights a week. He plays on the weekends, sometimes in Sydney against the Swans, and during the day there’s often public appearances. He’s busy. And I want us to choose our furniture together. Not that he minds. If I wanted to, all I’d have to do is go out with the Gold Amex card the footy club gave him and buy, buy, buy.’

Her voice had an unnaturally bright edge to it. She did look beautiful but I wasn’t used to seeing her wearing so much make-up — blush, glossy apricot lips and brown eye shadow. When I looked closely, I saw she’d been crying. Immediately I felt guilty. I hadn’t even rung her once since the wedding.

‘Martina, how have you been?’ I asked carefully.

‘Great. Fantastic. Loving married life. Loving every minute of it.’ She flung her golden red hair back with a flourish. It didn’t fool me for one second.

‘Drinks? What would you like? Spirits, beer, soft drink, wine, champagne? I’m drinking gin and tonic.’

Martina playfully rattled the ice cubes in her glass. Kirk settled on a light beer and I opted for wine. I followed Martina into the kitchen and she pulled a bottle of red wine from the wine rack, its label adorned with gold medals.

‘Don’t waste the good stuff on me,’ I said, alarmed. ‘El cheapo will do fine.’

‘Oh no, nothing but the best in this house.’ She raided the cupboards and emerged with two wine goblets.

‘Good to see you’re using the goblets. Do you like them?’ I had given them to her and Robbie as a wedding present. They were hand blown and iridescent and quite beautiful.

‘Love them! I use them all the time.’

She swung around to hand me the glass, now swirling with deep claret, but it slipped through her fingers and crashed onto the terracotta tiles. Shards of glass, glistening with blood red wine, were all around us.

‘Shit.’ She burst into tears. ‘Everything’s falling apart.’

I figured that she wasn’t just talking about the glass. I found a mop and cleaned up the mess while Kirk led Martina to the couch. He didn’t seem to mind as she cried on his shoulder, even though her snot left a snail’s trail on his black hooded jacket. I searched around and found a box of tissues. Martina plucked one out, blew her nose and threw it onto the floor. Soon she was surrounded by the snowy peaks of discarded tissues.

I made us all a cup of tea, just the drink for a crisis. Meanwhile, Kirk was patting Martina’s back just like I’d seen my sister, Rochelle, do when she was burping my niece, Alice.

I began to straighten up the living room. Maybe Martina would feel better with some order in her life. I thought I’d ask her about something positive to distract her from whatever was troubling her.

‘How’s the land rights campaign going?

‘It’s not. Well, I’m not.’

‘Why not? I know you, when you get a bee in your bonnet ...’

She cut me off, ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

That went over well. I went back to the kitchen, piled up the newspapers, emptied the ashtrays and started on the sink full of coffee cups. It was my chore at home to wash the dishes and I settled into a soapy rhythm. Cups clinked and water sloshed. After a while I could hear laughter coming from the living room. Putting the last dish on the draining board, I tiptoed past the door to see what they were doing. Kirk and Martina were curled up on the couch munching potato chips while they watched *Gilligan’s Island* reruns. They looked like an old married couple.

I went in and began to pick up the few cushions strewn over the floor. I didn’t dare pick up the tissues.

‘Will you stop it?’ Martina bellowed at me.

‘What?’

‘You’re not the bloody cleaning lady. I’ve got one of those.’

‘You have? You’d better sack her,’ I retorted.

‘Sit down, have a drink and talk to me.’

‘Okay,’ I said cautiously. Even though she was my best friend, deep and meaningfuls weren’t my cup of tea. Speaking of which ... ‘Another cup of tea?’ I asked.

‘Arggghh,’ howled Martina, while Kirk chucked a pillow at me. Its zip caught me beneath my eye where I was still tender after the bashing.

‘Ouch.’

Kirk leapt up, concerned, but I told him I was okay. Martina chucked over another pack of potato chips and the sound of our munching filled the silence. *Gilligan’s Island* had finished and Martina flicked through every channel using a remote control — no one I knew had one of those.

When she complained that she was still hungry, Kirk offered to go downstairs. The apartment complex had its own convenience store, Chinese takeaway, laundrette and bottle shop: the essentials of modern life, I guessed.

Alone with Martina, I knew I had to bring up the subject of her marriage but being tactful wasn’t one of my virtues.

‘Martina, is everything okay with you and Robbie?’

‘Everything’s fine,’ she insisted, but her hand was shaking as she poured another gin and tonic. Then she lit up a cigarette — I opened my mouth to say something but shut it instead. *My* Martina didn’t smoke.

Martina was happy to talk as long as it wasn’t about *her*. She quickly steered the conversation to my page three fiasco. By the time I’d told her everything that had happened, Kirk was back with a stack of food and we all got cosy on the couch. Despite the shaky start, the night turned out to be fun.

It was late when we left and Robbie still wasn’t home. We caught a taxi back to the college, paid for with a footy club voucher. Martina had dozens of them.

Finally I was alone with Kirk. I hadn’t wanted to get lovey in front of Martina so it was a relief to be in the back of the taxi — feeling a bit nervous, a bit excited — gently kissing. I was still worried about Martina but Kirk reassured me she would be okay. Anyway, I didn’t have a clue how I could help her.

The taxi ride was over too soon. Kirk wound down the window to say a lingering goodbye but he said nothing about seeing me again. It was back to reality.

Nine

I wanted to thank Erin for looking out for me after the bashing and the *Tribune* disaster so I stopped by to see her. Aboriginal Student Services had a tiny cubicle in the student services area. It was just a desk, filing cabinet, noticeboard, two steel-framed chairs, a phone and a typewriter.

I popped my head around the partition to find Erin staring into space, her hand still on the phone receiver.

'Am I interrupting?'

'Hmm? Oh sorry, Kirrali, come in.' Turning away from me for just a minute, she wiped her eye with the back of her hand.

'Is everything okay?'

Erin had the most beautiful smile, even when it was suffused with sadness, like now. She waved her hand in the direction of the phone, 'Just the usual. Another false lead.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm looking for my sister,' she said.

'Has she gone missing?'

'She was a stolen child,' Erin said, as if that explained everything.

'You mean she was from the Stolen Generation? One of the Aboriginal children who were taken away? But wasn't that a long time ago?'

'No way. It was still happening in the sixties and seventies — they just made out that the children were neglected. Maybe some of them were or maybe they just didn't trust Aboriginal mothers to bring up their kids. My oldest sister was taken from Mum when she was a day old and adopted out. Mum had five more kids but she was allowed to keep them.'

Erin's voice was even but her anger and sorrow was evident. It sparked off my own thoughts. I wasn't born until 1967 but perhaps that had been my fate too. I had always assumed that my mother had given me up because she was too young to look after me. It had never occurred to me that I might have been taken against her will. I wanted to find out more but Erin was crying and I had to shove aside my own concerns.

Lately it seemed that people all around me were having crises and I didn't know how to respond. When I fell over as a kid, Dad would 'kiss it better with a bandaid'. Mum believed chicken soup, fresh air and a good night's sleep cured practically anything but none of those seemed right for Erin's troubles. Kirk's approach worked well with Martina so I gave it a go.

I went behind the desk and patted her softly on the back. After a while, she blew her nose on her hanky and gave me a grateful smile. Unlike Martina, Erin wasn't avoiding the issue that was troubling her.

'I haven't spoken much about my sister to you because I didn't know whether you were … stolen, too.'

I shook my head and she continued.

'My family's been searching for my sister for a few years but it's really hard to track someone down. She would be in her mid-thirties by now. Family Connect, the agency that tries to link you up with the adoptee family, has to tread carefully.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Well, the adopted person has to want to meet their biological family. Sometimes it's too traumatic and it brings up memories that they can't deal with. Plus it takes ages. Family Connect has to check records and follow up leads from where the person was adopted but they might be married or have changed their name. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack.' Erin lowered her eyes. 'Even if they find my sister, she might not want to meet us.' She added, 'But you probably know this stuff anyway.'

I shook my head and she gave me a puzzled look.

'Look, my parents have encouraged me to look for my birth family, as they did for my sister, Beatrice. She's white but she was also adopted. A few years ago she wanted to meet her 'real' mum. So she did and we all went out to a Smorgy's restaurant. Bea ate too much ice-cream and got a stomach ache. Afterwards, Bea didn't really want to see her again. But me — I never felt the need to meet my birth parents.'

Erin gathered her thoughts. 'I'm only a few years older than you but as you get older you become more interested in where you come from. When you're a teenager, you're just caught up in your daily life. I know I was. A pimple was a major trauma. Now I hardly even look in the mirror.'

'You don't have to, you're beautiful,' I blurted out.

'Quit gammon me.'

'Huh?'

‘Kidding me, joking.’

‘I’m not. You’re gorgeous. But that stuff about looking for my family, I think I’m just scared of what I might find. My mother gave me away once ...’

‘Kirrali, you really have no idea. So many of our women were forced to give up their babies. Say if she was sixteen when she had you …’

‘But how could a sixteen-year-old look after a baby?’

‘Because the extended family would have helped. The nuclear family is a white thing. We don’t work that way. If your mother had a sister, she would have taken on the role of mother as well.’

‘Hold on a second. My aunties would have been my mothers too? Oh, it’s too complicated. An aunty can be another mother but an aunty might not even be related to me because that’s what you call Elders.’

‘Yeah, you got it. It’s not that hard. The important thing to remember is that with our mob, family look after family.’

‘So even if my mother was a teenager there would have been plenty of people around to look after me?’

‘Yep. I’ve got two brothers and two sisters and we had two uncles and an aunty living in the house, as well as my grandmother. Mum and Dad were often away picking fruit so my two sisters practically brought us up.’

‘And I thought we had a big family. You must have had a huge house.’

‘Nah, only two bedrooms. We had a built-in verandah and most of the kids slept there. Bloody cold in winter but. Dad would plug up the walls with newspaper to keep out the wind.’

I sighed. I had been mapping out my future since I was twelve. I imagined being offered a plum job at a prestigious law firm, not getting bashed up or getting caught up in Aboriginal issues. But as Erin pointed out, I was getting older and maybe, just maybe, it was time I started finding out a little more about who I was.

Erin suggested another possibility. ‘Have you ever thought that your mother could be looking for you?’

‘Can she do that without my permission?’ It was all very well if I decided to look for my birth parents but I hadn’t even considered they might be looking for me.

Erin shrugged. ‘She could look. As for meeting you, she would have to go through the same channels as everyone else. Someone from one of the agencies would contact you to see if you wanted to meet her.’

‘Well, no one has ever rung me. Chances are she doesn’t want to meet me. She probably wants to forget she ever had me.’

Erin smiled at me sadly. ‘No mother can ever forget her own child, Kirrali. No matter what else has happened to her in her life, she will always remember you.’

With that, I remembered I had a tutorial. I hugged Erin and flew through the university grounds. But when I got to the study room, I stopped. Stuff the tutorial, I thought. It was time I did something far more important.

I walked back to the student lounge and grabbed the tattered telephone directory. In a strangely disconnected way, I watched my finger punch out the phone number.

‘Hello, Koori Family Connect, how can I help you?’

The receptionist put my call through to a woman called Rosie.

She asked me a few questions which I answered as best I could.

‘Well, Kirrali, we’ll certainly try to help you. I’ll put you back to reception so you can make an appointment to come in. Let’s see what can be done about reconnecting you.’

I put down the phone and tottered over to the nearest chair, collapsing into it. My stomach was churning and my left leg was twitching uncontrollably. I felt sick. I had made the first step towards finding my birth mother.

Who knows how long I sat there? My body was in neutral but my mind was revved to the max. Next thing, Amber was flopping into the chair next to mine. I usually sat next to her in tutorials or we swapped notes if one of us missed a class — not that we did very often as we both tried to be conscientious.

‘Hey, Kirrali. Missed you in the tutorial. Hey, are you all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘Do I? Well, I feel like I’ve been digging up ghosts or perhaps it’s skeletons in the family closet. It’s a long story. Anyway, how was the tutorial?’ I didn’t want to explain myself to Amber when I hadn’t even processed in my own mind what I was setting out to do.

‘Oh, the tute was okay. It was on research skills for lawyers. How to chase up precedents, that kind of thing. The juicy bit was how to dig up the dirt on your courtroom opponent or how to track down someone who’s vital to your defence. Detective work. Like in *Charlie’s Angels*. I so love that

show. It is like, legit, the best thing on TV. Did you see the episode where Tiffany was having psychic premonitions?'

I looked at her in amazement. What was she going on about?

'Stop! I have a feeling I am going to need those skills … from the tutorial, not from the TV show. You'd better give me a rundown.'

While Amber bounced off to the library to photocopy her notes, I had a chance to calm down. I told myself I didn't have to keep my appointment with Rosie. I didn't have to follow through with it if I didn't want to. I was perfectly happy with the family I had already. But then I remembered the look of despair on Erin's face.

Maybe, just maybe, my birth parents were looking for me, or even just wondering how I'd turned out. Maybe I could help set their minds at rest. Maybe that was all I needed to do and I wouldn't have to get involved with them if I didn't want to.

Ten

When I walked home that afternoon, my thoughts were zipping from one to another. There was Martina and her marriage. Erin and the pall of sadness that hung over her like early morning fog. And the possibility of finding my birth parents — that was a confronting thought. If I met them, what would I call them? Definitely not Mum and Dad. Were they married or had I been illegitimate? Probably. That didn't worry me. Maybe they'd married later on and maybe I had real brothers and sisters. I already had 'real' brothers and sisters. Rochelle, Tray, Tarquin, Michael and Beatrice were as real as you could get.

Suddenly I had pangs of homesickness and tears welled up in my eyes. I turned the corner and there was Kirk waiting on the college steps. He took one look at my face and ran towards me.

'What's wrong?'

'I want my mum.' I sobbed.

'You'll find her one day, Kirrali.' He put his arm around my shoulders.

'I mean my *real* mother. I mean, the one I've always had — I don't care that she's not my biological mother, she's real to me.'

'Oh.'

I pulled myself away from Kirk and went inside. I couldn't explain to him how I was feeling — I didn't know myself. I took the steps to the first floor two at a time and ran down the hall to the now familiar green door. Room 119. I flung myself on the bed and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

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It was dark outside when I woke up. I was thirsty and confused and I had no idea how long I'd been sleeping.

'Kirrali?'

In the darkness, a shape moved towards me. I jumped up, fear shooting through me but the light clicked on and there was Kirk, smiling.

'What are you doing here? I'm not allowed any male visitors, especially after dark.'

‘I was worried about you. I came up to see if you were okay but you were already asleep. You really should lock your door, anyone could wander in off the streets.’

‘Yeah, like you, wild man with dreadlocks. How did you know what room I was in?’

‘Easy. They always reserve the end rooms on each floor for the Koori students. Erin’s on the ground floor, Room 19, so I knew you had to be in 119.’

I stared at him. ‘So that’s why I scored a room through the housing office. Because I was *Aboriginal.* I thought I was just lucky and all the time I was getting special treatment.’

‘Kirrali, do you know how hard it is to get a room in one of these colleges? Dude, that’s why you had a big A on your key ring — A for Aboriginal.’

‘Well, you said I was naïve. Now I realise I know nothing about how the real world works.’

Kirk moved closer and took my hand. ‘You said you weren’t allowed any male visitors. I’m not *any* old fella, am I?’ He looked into my eyes and I was captivated once again by their green glow, even in the low light from the 40-watt bulb.

‘I guess not,’ I said, feeling my insides melt into mush. I opened up the bed covers and Kirk slipped in beside me. His skin was warm. We held each other for a long time, talking in whispers about nothing and everything. We kissed and touched each other’s face. Later, cradled in his arms, I fell into a restful sleep.

When I woke at dawn, Kirk was already gone. I lay staring up at the ghosts of past water leaks on the cream ceiling. So this was what Martina meant when she said she ‘fell’ for Robbie. Every time my thoughts turned to Kirk my stomach would start skydiving — that sensation of weightlessness you sometimes feel in a fast-falling lift. I hoped I was in for a soft landing and that I wouldn’t have to go through what Martina was experiencing.

During the night, Kirk and I had talked about why she’d seemed on the verge of a nervous breakdown when we’d gone over to see her.

‘I suppose it’s cool for me to tell you,’ he said.

I gave him ‘that look’ which he already recognised as ‘that look’.

‘Okay, Robbie has a problem with the horses. With gambling in general, actually. He’s down at the racetrack a lot — they don’t have that much to do in the daytime, the players — and at night there’s the trots. Greyhounds. Interstate races. You name it, he’ll bet on it. It got to the point where he was being hassled by some heavies ’cos he’d run up these huge debts.’

‘Wow. I thought he might be having an affair or something. Or maybe he was drinking.’

‘He doesn’t drink. Not every blackfella does you know. But some of the players do get into trouble. The nightclubs and pubs give the players free drinks ’cos where the players go, chicks will follow, and where there are girls, guys put a lot of money on the bar. But then drunk whitefellas think it’s macho to pick a fight with a footy player. Like a badge of honour. My cousin plays for Essendon so I see it when we go out.’

What could I do to help Martina? How could I help her when I was such a hopeless case myself? How come I was such a good student but a complete klutz at everything else?

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Dear Mum and Dad
Haven’t had a chance to write and thank you for coming to my rescue when I got mixed up in that Tribune *fiasco. Thanks for being such great parents. Speaking of parents — I hope this isn’t a shock but I’ve made an appointment with an Aboriginal agency that reunites adopted and fostered children and their birth families. I know you’ve always been supportive of me and Beatrice finding our biological families so I guess this won’t come as a surprise. I have no idea if I will want to meet my parents if they can be traced but I am taking the first step. No matter what, I will always be grateful to you for all the love you have given me. Don’t let the others know yet — it might come to nothing.*
Love Kirrali
PS Martina’s going through a rough patch — maybe you could get her mum to visit her without mentioning she’s in trouble.

I felt awful dobbing her in but Martina’s parents had a right to know that she needed help. That’s what parents were for, wasn’t it?

Eleven

My appointment at Koori Family Connect was at 9am. I was whisked in to meet Rosie. Her face was as soft as risen dough but she pulled no punches.

‘My preliminary search of our records from what you told me over the phone didn’t throw up anyone who is likely to be your biological parent. It may be that they haven’t been willing to be in contact with you.’

She could have let me down more gently, I thought.

‘Of course there are gaps in the records. It was probably a closed adoption, as most were at that time. That means your original birth certificate with the names of your biological parents was sealed. You might also have been born in another state and brought to Victoria so your parents could be looking for you in your home state. There are many scenarios in the area of family separation. It’s seldom straightforward and I don’t want you to have false expectations or you may be hugely disappointed. Some people build up a picture of their birth parents and they get a real shock when the reality doesn’t match their expectations.’

‘I don’t have any expectations,’ I replied.

Rosie looked at me over the top of her gold-rimmed glasses with a look of mild amusement. She pulled out a folder and started to fire off the questions. Date of birth, place of birth, age when adopted, adoption agency … Some questions I could answer, others I had no idea about. After the first page, Rosie excused herself and I was left alone with my thoughts.

I had told no one — except my parents — I had made this appointment and even up until the last minute I wasn’t sure that I would keep it. Part of my brain — the logical, one-step-at-a-time part — told me that I wasn’t prepared for the upheaval this could cause me. After all, I was in the first year of a hard academic course — a year when as many as twenty per cent of the students fell by the wayside. The other part of my brain — the impetuous, spontaneous part — told me the time was right and that everything in the past few months had led me towards this step. Meeting Erin, Martina’s marriage, my relationship with Kirk, Erin’s shocking experience with her sister — these people had come into my life for a

reason. They were all preparing me for the inevitability of making contact with my Aboriginal family. I was eighteen years old. I was an adult. I could handle it.

But could I? Rosie's words rattled me. I thought I didn't have expectations about my parents. It wasn't like I had invented a whole persona for them, not like Beatrice. Before she got to meet her biological mother, she used to play an imaginary game where her real mum was a 'fairy godmother' called Judy. She could grant magic wishes and was always there when Beatrice was anxious or afraid. Judy became part of our family — she even had her own place set at the dinner table and if Mum forgot to make a space for her in the car, there would be trouble. But that was Beatrice. I didn't need any substitute fantasies. I was content with reality — I *knew* I had the best parents in the world.

When Rosie returned, we continued our question and answer session. I was amazed at how few details I knew about myself. The phone rang and while Rosie talked, I was left once more to ponder the repercussions of coming here.

'Sorry about that,' Rosie said, putting down the phone. 'I normally don't take calls during interviews but I had contacted a colleague in Sydney. I had a hunch that your family might be from around Bourke in NSW. She said she would check her files.'

'But how can you tell where I come from?' I asked her in amazement.

She picked up my hand and squeezed it softly. Hers was warm and soft and plump. Mine felt like a cold wet fish.

'Love, I've been doing this a long time. I suppose I have come across most of the family groups in the south-eastern part of the country. It's family resemblance, Kirrali, as simple as that. I have women coming in who are a dead spit of their aunties, or even grandmothers. Or the boys will have a mannerism that's just like their father's. If you know the families, sometimes you can pick who the child belongs to just like that.'

'An old woman at a wedding I went to said I looked like a Smith from Bree. But I couldn't find 'Bree' on the map.'

'Bree is short for Brewarrina, near Bourke in New South Wales. Anyway, we'll see,' she said non-committedly.

When we'd finished, it was close to midday. I was starving. Rosie asked if I wanted to join her and the rest of the staff for lunch in the staffroom. I hesitated and then took the plunge.

Boy, what a spread. Rosie explained that they wanted to set a healthy eating example to their staff and to the community. So they put on lunch each day for a small cost. There were crusty bread rolls, cold meats, green salads, tabouleh and coleslaw, gourmet pizzas, fruit salad, tubs of yogurt, freshly squeezed orange juice and a fruit platter. I piled up my plate.

Rosie introduced me to the other staff and one or two people who I took to be clients. It was easy to pick the clients — they were the ones with the shy and wary expressions. I found myself chatting to a guy who I guessed was a few years older than me. Jai was relaxed and friendly.

'You obviously work here,' I ventured.

'Yep. Been here three years now — one as a volunteer and two since I graduated as a social worker.'

'What made you do voluntary work here?' I asked, making small talk.

'This place changed my life. True! Even though I was studying, I had no purpose. I was lying around all day out of it. Stealing stuff. I wasn't talking to my foster parents. Didn't have any reason to live. I was ready to knock myself off.'

He was talking in such a matter-of-fact way that it was hard to believe this confident, good-looking guy had ever been someone spiralling out of control.

'So what happened?' I asked, curious to hear what had caused the change in him.

'I was headed for jail — minor possession charge — but my social worker pleaded my case and got me community service instead. Two hundred hours. At first I was pissed off. She organised for me to work here. First few months, I was slack as. Didn't turn up. Didn't care. Then one day Rosie asked me if I was from Hillston. I'd never even heard of the place. She said she thought she knew who my family was and that she could track them down for me.'

Jai took a long gulp of orange juice. I could see Rosie signalling that it was time for me to go back to her office but I was keen to hear the rest of Jai's story.

'So did she?'

He smiled. The receptionist, a woman in her forties, was making her way towards him. I assumed she was about to pass on a message but instead she leant her head on his shoulder and he put his arms around her in a warm

embrace. I wondered if Jai was that friendly to all his co-workers or whether he had a thing about older women.

‘Is Jai telling you how Rosie did her best bit of detective work to discover that I was his mum? We’d been working alongside each other for three months and didn’t even know.’

My mouth fell open and I watched, feeling a strange pang of envy, Jai kiss his mum on the forehead.

‘Meeting Doreen was the best thing that could have happened to me,’ Jai continued. ‘She’s fantastic and we get along so well. I’ve been living with her ever since.’

So much for the older woman scenario. I thanked him for telling me his story and hurried back to Rosie’s office. A happy ending — I hoped my story would work out as well.

Rosie was on the phone, frowning. I sat down quietly in the chair opposite. I couldn’t help but listen and even though I could only hear one side of the conversation, I could tell that she wasn’t thrilled.

‘Hmmm,’ murmured Rosie as she put down the phone. ‘Kirrali, are you sure you have your date of birth right? Sometimes records get mislaid or mistakes are made during the adoption process. If I were you, I’d check with your adoptive mother.’

‘You mean my *mother*,’ I corrected her. ‘And yes, of course that date of birth is correct. My mum has a copy of all our birth certificates.’

‘‘Well, then we’ve already hit a brick wall. The first search we do is by birth date. The next search is by geographic area and nothing is coming up there either. Look, double-check with your mother to see if she knows your biological parents’ surnames. In the meantime, all we can do is keep looking.’

She peered at me over her glasses, her face softening into a smile. ‘Cheer up. It’s only day one. This process takes time. In most cases, we manage to connect people to at least some members of their family. That’s the easy bit. It’s reconciling after so many years that’s the tricky part. Anyway, I’ll talk to you more about that next week when you come back.’

‘You will ring me if you find out something sooner?’

She nodded and I reluctantly left her office. Now that I had embarked on this quest, I wanted something to happen straight away.

Doreen smiled at me reassuringly as I made my appointment for the following week. ‘It’s not an easy thing, searching for family. Believe me, I

know. I worked here for years and yet I was too traumatised to look for my own son. Take heart, Kirrali.'

The heavy door of the building creaked behind me and I blinked as I walked into the bright sunlight. I wandered along the bluestone alleyways past garages and backyards of terrace houses. There were yards dotted with swing sets and clothes lines, tool sheds and dog kennels. Some had unkempt grass worn down by dogs running circuits along the fence line. I swung into the main street, taking in the terraces' neat front gardens, so different from the private spaces out the back.

I walked along a path edging a park with grass so green it didn't look real. It was mid-winter and the magnolias were in bloom. Bees were industriously making the most of the cherry tree's pendulous flowers. A magpie swooped away two swallows that were daring to venture too close to its territory. On the path, I sidestepped around a dead mouse. Ants were at work turning it into dust. At the park's rotunda, a bride posed in front of a photographer. A posse of bridesmaids in apricot organza stood to one side, giggling at the bride who was having trouble keeping her veil in place in the breeze.

Life, death, birds, bees, ants, and a wedding. And love. No, no, no, I thought. What I needed was an education, not to fall for some guy. I headed to the university library for some well overdue research. I had two essays and an assignment due.

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I made it to one lecture that afternoon — slipping into my usual spot at the back of the hall next to Amber — but my mind was far from the topic being discussed.

God, what was happening to me? I'd only been in the city for six months but my life was being turned upside down. I had always imagined myself to be so studious, so disciplined. I don't know whether it was to prove something to myself or to someone else. But, at this rate, I was more likely to finish in the bottom three in my class than the top three.

Outside the lecture room, Amber and I stood discussing whether or not we had time for a muffin at the student café. I had a shift at the cinema and she had a job at a city department store. While we were chatting, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see Adam standing there.

'Hi, Kirrali.'

‘Hi,’ I replied.

‘Listen, I’m sorry about the last time we, um, went out.’

‘Well, we weren’t exactly out together, we were just in the same group of people.’ I was still angry that he hadn’t given me a lift home from the Fiddler’s Arms that night.

‘Yeah, I should have offered to drive you home ... it’s just that, I was afraid that ... look, I like you Kirrali. It’s kind of difficult, it’s my father ... he’s more …’

‘Racist, Adam? Is that the word you’re searching for? Let me ask you something? Are you going to do what your father dictates all your life? It’s just black skin, Adam. Cut me open and you’ll see that I’m no different from anyone else. Anyway, I don’t need this at the moment.’

I turned back to Amber, grabbed her by the arm and pulled her in the direction of the café. I needed sugar and I needed it now. I snuck a look behind me. Adam was still standing where I had left him.

‘You heartbreaker, Kirrali,’ said Amber with amusement.

‘Well, without even knowing it, he broke mine at high school so now we’re even. Come on, I’ll shout you a cup of Earl Grey and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Amber liked tea as much as I did.

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Because the college had a policy of not accepting calls unless it was an emergency, I freaked out when I got home after work and found a note under my door asking me to ring home. It was 11pm but I knew that Mum and Dad wouldn’t go to bed until I had rung them back.

‘Hello?’ Mum’s voice sounded trembly and my heart did a somersault.

‘It’s me. Mum, what’s wrong?’

‘Kirrali, we have some sad news. It’s Finn. He died in his sleep this afternoon.’

My dog. He wasn’t really mine, he was the family dog. Before we adopted him, he was a bit chewed up and skinny. But he was a happy dog and from the minute we brought him home, Finn and I were inseparable. I loved him more than any stuffed toy or bride doll that my parents could have given me. If I went to the fish and chip shop, Finn would come too. If I went to the swimming pool, he would wait outside the high wire fence patiently until I came out. He used to sneakily follow me to primary school

too and all the kids would pat him (and share their peanut butter sandwiches with him). He slept on my bed and would lick my face in the morning as a kind of wake-up call. And now he had gone. I started to cry.

‘Kirrali, we are so sorry. At least he went in his sleep — he didn’t suffer.’ Mum tried to console me but she was sniffing back tears too.

‘I just wished I could have said goodbye.’

‘I know, love. But his last few months hadn’t been all that comfortable. Some days his arthritis made it a struggle for him to even get out of his basket.’

‘I’ll catch a bus home on Saturday. Please don’t bury him straight away, Mum.’

‘I don’t know, love ... Dad was planning to put him next to the vegie patch in the morning.’

‘I’ll be home by lunchtime. Please let me be there, Mum.’

‘Well, all right then. Are you sure you need to come home? Don’t you have assignments due?’

‘This is more important. I’ll see you on Saturday. I need to go, my change is running …’ *Click.* I was disconnected.

I climbed up the stairs, heavy of heart. I couldn’t even be bothered changing out of my uniform and I slipped under the covers. I lay there a long time, not sleeping, just thinking of Finn.

In the end, I never did make it back home because all this other stuff happened which threw me completely out of whack. It started with Erin being bored and ended with me going back to Family Connect.

Twelve

I appreciated Erin but she did have a habit of attaching herself to me when I was comfortable doing my own thing. I had to write an essay on a current event for my law and media unit, and was telling Erin about it over breakfast as I flicked through the morning newspaper looking for inspiration.

‘You were part of a current event.’

‘You mean the shooting? I guess I was.’

‘You could write an exposé on how the media gets it wrong. Especially with Aboriginal issues.’

It was a good idea but I was scanning the Law Court timetable for a better one when something caught my eye.

‘That’s a coincidence — Mavis Berry’s inquest begins today. At the Coroner’s Court.’

‘It’s a sign. We have to go,’ she exclaimed.

‘We?’

‘I don’t have classes today. I was just going to clean my room and stuff. This will be far more interesting. And it relates to my course. Kind of.’

So that’s how Erin and I came to be sitting in an almost empty Coroner’s Court.

‘Poor Mavis,’ I said, looking around. ‘There’s hardly anyone here.’

‘Yes, where are the media now?’ said Erin, a little bitterly.

I had never been in a Coroner’s Court. It didn’t have the grandeur of an old-fashioned courtroom with carved timber docks like you see on television. It was more like a tutorial room at uni, with rows of desks in light coloured timber. We took a seat at the back and I got out my yellow pad. Since my interview with the lawyer at the Koori Legal Resource, I was in the habit of taking notes.

The first person in the dock was the manager of the boarding house where Mavis had lived for the past three years. He said that Mavis had generally been quiet and didn’t cause trouble. He said that most of the residents had ‘issues’ and occasionally there would be conflict but yelling

and screaming was usually as far as it went. He described how some residents went on benders and while Mavis was a drinker, she did it behind closed doors. On that day, he had heard her screaming and went out to see what the problem was. She was accusing another resident of stealing her belongings.

So that's why she was armed with a screwdriver, to defend her stuff, I thought. Poor thing.

The coroner asked what happened next.

'I called the cops. She wouldn't pipe down,' the manager said. 'Nothin' else ya can do.'

'He doesn't seem too remorseful,' I whispered to Erin.

'These places are halfway houses. When they closed the mental institutions a few years back, people ended up at boarding houses or on the streets. He would have seen it all. Daily.'

The next person called up was a social worker, carrying a file as thick as one of my law books. Her name was Vanessa. She was young and obviously a bit nervous but she spoke clearly and in a considered way. The coroner asked Vanessa about Mavis Berry's upbringing. That's when it got spooky.

Mavis was thirty years old, born in 1955. Vanessa mentioned the name of the hospital and a country town. Erin leant forward.

'That's the year my sister was born. That's the hospital.'

She clutched my arm, hard.

'Maybe lots of babies were born there,' I whispered.

'Yes, especially to Aboriginal mothers. There's a big Aboriginal population in that town … and on the town fringes. But still ...'

The coroner then asked the social worker to summarise Mavis's childhood.

'According to the records, her mother's name was Meryl.'

Erin was digging her nails into my forearm. 'That's my Mum's name. Oh, Kirrali. My heart is beating so fast.'

The social worker described how baby Mavis was taken from her very young mother and fostered into a white family. Although the details were sketchy, they were a supposedly a lovely family, quite devoted.

'Unfortunately, the foster mother died when Mavis was three and the father couldn't cope with his own grief and manage the two foster children, Mavis and a boy called Robert. The kids went back into the system and were split up.'

The coroner asked, ‘Is that usual?’

‘Unfortunately, yes. For many children it is. Others are lucky and get the one family. We love those foster parents. Kids have a good outcome with them. But for Mavis, she was moved from home to home.’

‘How many placements in total?’

‘The records indicate that she had about twelve placements, some short term and others longer but none were for more than two years.’

‘Anything else that might be relevant?’ the coroner asked.

‘She might have been abused, it wasn’t clear. Some of the records are missing but there is one entry in the caseworker’s notes that seemed to suggest some kind of abuse, perhaps of a sexual nature. It appears that she was a rebellious kid who was drinking and out of control by the time she was fourteen. She stopped going to school. By sixteen, she was living on the streets, in and out of boarding houses in the company of older men. Within a few years, she was experiencing mental health issues.’

The coroner asked if the caseworker had tried to reconnect Mavis with her birth family.

‘I don’t believe so,’ she said, skimming through the file. ‘The last record states that Mavis does not talk about her birth family and quotes her as saying, “They’re better off without me”. Mavis was about to turn eighteen and from then she had to fend for herself.’

The social worker stepped down from the witness box and the coroner called a recess.

Hearing that story, I realised it could have been mine. But I couldn’t think about that right now. Erin was freaking out. She was breathing heavily and looked distressed. Everyone else had filed out from the courtroom. The court orderly noticed that she was in trouble and asked if she needed assistance.

Was she asthmatic or diabetic? Did he need to call an ambulance? Erin shook her head. We helped her outside to the fresh air.

The social worker was having a cigarette and I asked Erin if she wanted to talk to her. We approached her together and Erin asked if she could find out more about Mavis, explaining the similarity between her story and her older sister’s. As they talked, the dates, names, places and events all lined up.

‘Mavis Berry has to be my sister.’

The social worker agreed. It was a devastating moment. The social worker put her arms around Erin's shoulder.

'I can't believe it. She was living two suburbs away from me. I can't believe that the police killed her before we had the chance to meet her. This will break my mum's heart all over again.'

She just stood there, tears falling. Erin was crying for Mavis, she was crying for her family, she was crying for herself. She was crying for the whole damn lot of us. The whole sorry, damn, hurt, fucked-up lot of us.

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I rushed into the cinema, late, gabbling to Margaret about the buses being gridlocked because of an accident but she cut me short.

'I know about Erin. More bloody family business.' But Margaret's grumble didn't have the usual conviction to it. 'Pity about her sister getting whacked and all.'

'Whacked?' I didn't comprehend.

'Don't you watch any cop shows? Getting shot? Now get to work. You have to work twice as hard, 'cos sister girl ain't here.'

I'd been promoted so I put my uniform on and made my way over to the box office. Queuing up to buy tickets was a crowd of excited teenyboppers. Tonight was the opening night of a film starring Audria, the latest seventeen-year-old singing sensation. We were showing it on two screens to cope with the demand. The lines didn't stop until well after I thought those twelve-year-olds should be in bed but at least it didn't give me any time to dwell on Erin and Mavis.

Shift over and Margaret did me a favour. Usually we have to count our own till to make sure the cash balanced with the number of tickets sold. Tonight she offered to do it for me. I was more than a bit amazed.

'And tell Erin, I'm sorry. For what it's worth …' Margaret added as she shooed me off.

Erin was right. Her bark was worse than her bite.

I raced home, wanting to see Erin, but Kirk was sitting on the college steps waiting for me. I rushed towards him and we hugged.

'Have you seen Erin? Is she okay?'

'Not really. She's gone back home for a bit.'

'What about you?' I felt shy. I really wanted to talk to him but the cold steps at 10.30pm were an uninviting place for an intense conversation. I

decided to sneak him into my room even though I knew I would get kicked out if we were caught. Tonight I needed him. Stuff the rules.

Kirk snuck out at 5am. He kissed my neck and whispered goodbye. I fell back into a deep sleep and when I woke up, I was in a determined mood. I couldn’t wait until my next appointment at Koori Family Connect. I would go in again today. I couldn’t bear the thought of putting it off — it being too late — for whatever reason.

Thirteen

I didn't have any lectures that morning so I went straight down to Koori Family Connect. Doreen wasn't at reception and I made my way down to Rosie's office. Just outside her door, which was open a little, I paused when I heard her talking. You know when you hear your own name, how it cuts through the white noise? I couldn't help it — I had to listen.

' ... could *she* be Kirrali Lewis's mother? It's a bit strange that it's the only lead we've got. I know there's a Taylor family down Gippsland way but I don't know of a Cherie Taylor amongst them, do you Doreen?'

'Like I said, the only Cherie Taylor I know is the one that works down at the Advancement Centre. You know her, eh, Rosie?'

Rosie laughed. 'We could follow that lead but ...' She laughed again.

'Kirrali might have more information when she comes in next. Otherwise, it's a matter of waiting for another piece of the jigsaw to fall into place.'

'I hope the girl's patient then.'

No, I'm not. I turned and walked back down the hallway and out of the building. Cherie Taylor. I had all I needed to know. Cherie Taylor who works at the Koori Advancement Centre. I remembered seeing a pamphlet on it when I was at the Koori Legal Resource.

I burst from the dingy office into the radiance of a perfect morning, my heart racing, and caught a tram back to uni. What now? I scrawled down a plan of action on the back of one of my cinema pay slips.

Find out where the Koori Advancement Centre is — ask Kirk or Erin. Find out about Cherie Taylor. Was she my mother?

I crossed out 'was' and wrote 'is'. I couldn't think of anything else to add.

Now that there was a real possibility of meeting my mother, other questions began ricocheting around my mind. There was my biological dad, who was he? Jai had worked with his mother for three months and didn't have an inkling that they were related. That must have been surreal. I

couldn’t imagine that happening to me — and I didn’t know many Aboriginal people so it was unlikely that I was related to any of them. But what if I was related to Erin? That would mean I was related to Kirk. What if he was my uncle or cousin? I’d slept with him. Shit. I’d heard of that kind of thing happening — a couple in England got married and then found out they were brother and sister who had been separated at birth. And there were a lot less of us Aboriginal people than English people, so maybe the chances of that kind of thing happening were higher.

Why hadn’t I considered this before? I had to know the truth. In a panic, I jumped off the tram at the next stop. Uni would have to wait. I would try and find the Centre instead.

I looked around for a phone box and spied one at the next corner. When I got there, there was no phone book. Typical. I ran up the road looking for another phone box. Instead, I saw another tram rattling its way towards me. I lengthened my stride into a sprint and beat it to the next stop. I rode the tram to the next set of shops where I found another couple of phone booths. Thankfully, one was empty and it had a phone directory.

Koori Advancement Centre. Maybe it was listed under Aboriginal something. Eureka, to use an old expression of my dad’s. Koori Advancement Centre. Beck Street. By tram, it was only minutes away from where I was standing.

I pondered my options. I could go over, just check this Cherie Taylor out from a distance. See if she was the right age. Rosie had laughed — maybe she was like seventy or something and couldn’t possibly be my mother. I promised myself that’s all I would do, sneak a look. A sneak preview, like the film trailers at the cinema. That way I could prepare myself and then go back to see Rosie and organise to meet her through the proper channels. Having a look wouldn’t hurt. I’d make sure she didn’t see me so she wouldn’t know later that I’d been spying on her.

A tram pulled up and I climbed on board in a trance. I got off at Beck Street. The Koori Advancement Centre building was easy to recognise on the corner, Aboriginal flag flying. It was a big building, like a factory, with a striking mural painted along one side. Kooris in chains. A traditional hunter with his spear. A family being massacred, a row of guns pointed at their heads.

My legs were shaking as I approached the entrance. I paused and took a deep breath. I thought about Mum, not for the first time that day. How could

my birth mother ever live up to the mum I'd always known? I remember when I was about five and I became fascinated by Mum's necklace — it had a small silver cross set with a diamond.

'Pretty isn't it, Kirrali?' she said, unclasping it to give me a closer look. 'It was given to me by my mother.'

I touched the sparkly stone in it. A real diamond.

'Would you like it?' she asked softly.

I nodded just a tiny bit. Gifts were modest in our house, on account of there being five kids. Bea hadn't been adopted then. She put the necklace around my neck where it hung almost to my belly button. Later, in my teens, I reflected that it should have been passed on to one of her biological daughters, Rochelle, the oldest perhaps, but Mum made no such distinction. We were all equal in her eyes. I've worn that cross every day since. I touched it now, reassured by all the love it represented.

In my recent musings about my birth mother, I had imagined her as a big jolly kind of woman with a heaving bosom wearing a floral dress. Now, as I walked towards the reception desk, I laughed at my inner vision. That was *Mum*. This one would probably be skinny and flat-chested.

Oh God, who cared what she looked like, as long as she was nice. The stress of it all was making me go mad. Anyway, it wasn't as if I was going to talk to her — heaven forbid! A sneak preview, just like at the cinema.

The woman at reception was a thin scowling Koori woman. Oh hell.

'Yes?' she said suspiciously. I gulped.

'I'm wondering if Cherie Taylor is here,' I croaked, hoping I wasn't standing in front of her.

'In there. Hanging an exhibition.' She pointed her lips in the direction of a door at the end of a dark corridor. A few metres is a long way when your life is about to crack open like a coconut.

The door swung open easily and light flooded in from the high windows. Dazzling white walls were half-hung with an assortment of paintings. Multi-coloured dots leapt out of their black backgrounds. A sombre painting showed an image of an Aboriginal man swinging from a noose. Another featured loose brushstrokes representing a crow in full flight, its wings outspread.

Two women were standing either side of a huge abstract painting — a collision of stars in swirls of colour against a night sky — trying to

manoeuvre it up onto the wall and laughing as it missed the hook again and again.

I tried not to stare at the Aboriginal woman. It was hard to tell how old she was. She had big generous hips, shining wavy brown hair — not frizzy like mine — and a sweet face. She let out a booming laugh that made her calves wobble. Not a grump like the woman at reception.

Finally, the painting hung in place. The other woman stood back looking at it from all angles, while the Aboriginal woman headed towards me, picking up a packet of cigarettes off the floor on the way. I should have made a discreet exit. But everything fell away. I stood there, immobile.

When she saw me, her face broke into a smile that went right up to her eyes. ‘Yeah, bub?’ she asked kindly.

Bub. She called me ‘bub’.

‘You’re my mother …?’ It was half statement, half question. Her reaction was unexpected. She burst out laughing. ‘I don’t think so. I’m only thirty-two, bub. You do the maths.’

‘But aren’t you Cherie Taylor?’

She stared at me — it could have been for five seconds but it felt like an hour. My heart was thumping wildly. She turned slowly towards the other woman, who was still adjusting the painting they’d just hung. She nodded in her direction and kept walking.

My head seemed to explode in a dazzling white fog. I couldn’t stop myself. I took a step towards the other woman. The white woman.

‘Cherie Taylor?’

‘Yes?’

‘*You’re* Cherie Taylor?’

‘Yes.’

I searched her face for something — recognition, a dawning sense of relief, acknowledgement. Joy would have been too much to expect but all I saw was a look of fear. That’s when I knew for sure that she was my mother.

PART TWO

Cherie

– 1985 AND FLASHBACK TO THE 60s

Fourteen

She didn’t have to say anything else. I knew who she was. She was the child I had given birth to eighteen years earlier. The child I’d signed away. Now she was a young woman standing before me. ‘Let’s go somewhere,’ I said quietly.

I turned and walked out the door, assuming that she would follow me. Somehow my trembling legs got me outside to the car park but she wasn’t behind me. I waited but she didn’t appear. I knew I should go back inside but I couldn’t. So I unchained my bike and pedalled home.

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I should explain who I am. Cherie Taylor. I am five-foot-eight (I pre-date metric when it comes to height). I have sort-of-blonde hair, green eyes and a too-big mouth. I don’t wear make-up and I like wearing cotton. I vote for the Nuclear Disarmament Party. I’ve never owned a house so I’ve never had a mortgage. I’m allergic to the suburbs — you know, two cars, 2.4 kids, the open-plan entertaining area, the parents’ retreat. I always wondered, why have kids if you need to retreat from them?

I live in the inner city in a cute little apartment, just big enough for one human and one cat. After growing up in the suburbs, I wouldn’t live anywhere else. I have a degree in Community Development and I work in arts administration. I’ve never been married. I have no children. Or that’s what I’ve told every one for the past eighteen years. No one has cause to disbelieve me since I am known for my brutal honesty.

For the last fifteen years or so, I have volunteered a couple of days a week at the Koori Advancement Centre, an organisation set up to assist Aboriginal people.

It’s not always easy being a white woman working in a Koori environment. Some Koori people, not all, are suspicious of my motives. I too, would be suspicious of the dominant race after two hundred years of suffering and racism. You want to help — and that’s exactly what Koori people don’t want and don’t usually need — so it can be frustrating on both

sides. But I've often found that once a Koori person trusts you, you have a friend for life. And there are other reasons why I work at the Centre. The most important one just walked into my life.

When I first started volunteering, Barbara, a young woman who was working in the front office, didn't say a word to me for six months. Every morning she'd nod to me and that was it. Then one day, back in 1972, we were at a rally supporting the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Not many white people were marching for Aboriginal rights in those days and a television reporter came up to me wanting some pithy statement for the news. I told him to talk to the people that counted and I thrust Barbara towards him. She made a superb statement and it was on the news that night.

After that things were different between us. It wasn't being on TV that made Barbara warm to me. It was that she could trust me not to speak on her behalf.

Since then Barbara and I have grown closer and closer, to the point where I could say she was one of my best friends. She's loyal, she's funny and we trust each other. Best friend, huh! I trusted her but not enough to tell her about my illegitimate Koori child.

The message on the answering machine was succinct, as Barbara's communications always were. 'You didn't tell me. You're full of shit.' Beep beep beep.

She was right. I was full of the most stinking, slimy, frightening shit. I pulled the blanket up over my head. There was nothing else to do but wallow in it.

Slam. Clock radio off. Bloody Simon and Garfunkel songs about restless dreams and walking alone. What would they know about real heartache? I never did like their clever, cloying lyrics. Give me ska any day. It was ska that started this whole damn thing.

It was 1966, the summer that I turned eighteen. I had just left school and I was bored waiting for my course to start at secretarial college. Suburban life was safe and predictable and had to be escaped. So every chance I had, I'd catch the train to the city. Sometimes I'd wait for hours if a train had been cancelled — the train tracks buckled a lot that hot summer — but anything was better than hanging around at home. I'd tell my mother I was going to the city library to study and do some preparation for the course. And I did study — other people and other lives.

The cicadas would be chirping away and I'd have my backpack swung over my shoulder. In it was the makings of my alter ego — denim cut-off jeans with frayed edges, stripy T-shirt,

loopy earrings and beads. The kind of clothes my mother wouldn't let me leave the house wearing.

When the train did finally arrive, I'd sit in the carriage behind the driver because I thought it was safer, put my feet up and get out a book — was it *To Kill a Mockingbird*? I can't remember.

At the city station, I would head for the toilets and paint over my ordinariness with kohl, rouge and mascara. Then I'd take a deep breath and walk over to the Boundary Pub. Inside, the pub's windows were blacked out and even at 4 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon it would be mellow inside. My nose would catch the drift of clove cigarettes and once I adjusted to the gloom, the bright clothes of the crowd would illuminate the room.

It was the kind of place where you'd be on hugging terms with everybody by the end of the night. All kinds of people went there. Uni students, old bikie guys with long grey beards and people from countries I was ashamed to admit I'd never heard of, like my gorgeous friend Mary who was from Ghana. And Aboriginal guys and girls.

I chose the Boundary for the house band — very imaginatively called The House Band. They were cool, no faking, and were the only band playing ska in the city. The band members were a multicultural microcosm — lead singer from Ghana, bass guitarist from France, Australian lead guitarist, another Aussie who played trumpet and harmonica, saxophonist from South Africa, while the percussionist was from the USA. The story went that they had met at a cheap lodging house in London, started jamming, and had been persuaded to come to Australia by Ben, the lead guitarist. In the two years that they'd been playing at the Boundary, they'd built up a loyal following. Most of them were either married or in the process of marrying Australians so they could stay in the country. In the meantime, they were getting by on working visas.

We were all — band and audience alike — outcasts or outsiders. I found the 'burbs stifling in their formula around what was right and wrong, the emphasis on appearances, on what other people thought. The Boundary was a different world. I could be 'me'. That's why I headed there almost every Saturday afternoon during that hot summer nearly twenty years ago. And that's where I first met Charley.

He was angry and a little bit drunk. Not the best way to start. Maybe it was the expression of that anger that attracted me. In my parents' house, anger was suppressed. You didn't even swear out loud if you hit your thumb with a hammer. Everything had to be 'nice'. But here, in this darkened pub, weaving his way through the crowd, talking loudly to all, was this gorgeous black man. I was so ignorant I wasn't even sure he was Aboriginal. By the time he'd made his way around to my side of the bar, I'd watched him clasp hands with nearly all of the black men in the room in a show of solidarity. It seemed like he was on hugging terms with many of the woman too. When he made his way towards me, I smiled shyly and hoped that I would also be on the receiving end of one of those hugs. He came right up to me and I could see the red, yellow and black beads around his neck and his long, thick eyelashes. He put his finger on the tip of my nose.

'Go home, white girl,' he slurred.

I laughed, thinking it was a joke. 'Go home? But the band's still playing.' I flushed red when the true meaning of his words sunk in.

He stared at me poker-faced for a few seconds. Then he burst into laughter — a hyena's cackle that made heads turn even in the noisy pub — and he walked away, laughing and shaking his head. I sipped my Bacardi and Coke slowly, trying to appear unrattled. Who was

I kidding? When the band had finished their song, I made my way to the ladies. I felt like the whole place had witnessed my humiliation. I touched up my lip gloss and left.

The experience put me off the Boundary for weeks — this had been my haven, the place where I thought I belonged. The incident also sparked some heavy-duty soul-searching. I'd figured he was Aboriginal — no one else would say 'go home' with such authority. I'd never met any Aboriginal people before then. Did they all feel that way about white people?

I hit the town library and borrowed some books on Aboriginal culture but, even to my ignorant eye, they seemed hopelessly out of date. One Saturday, I went into the city and visited the State Library to browse among the shelves and shelves of books. Over the next few weekends, I went back and read anything I could find. Finally I managed to glean a superficial understanding on some of the ways Aboriginal people had been wronged by colonisation. I guess that was the start of my involvement in Aboriginal causes. All because of an angry young man, whose name I didn't even know.

A few weeks later, I summoned up the courage to go back to the Boundary. The House Band was chillin' but I couldn't relax and enjoy myself. I was on alert for his presence the whole evening. As the night wore on, it looked like he wasn't going to show and I was disappointed. Somehow there was something I wanted to prove to this man. I needed him to know that all white people weren't the enemy. Was there more to it? Probably. He was attractive in a way that was not just about his looks. It was his energy and passion. He was different.

At the end of the night, I was leaving to catch the train home and was saying goodbye to Mary when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

'You still here? Haven't you gone back home yet?' His voice was curious, not malicious like the last time we had met.

'Where would my home be? My descendants came from England and Ireland but that was five generations ago. Haven't I earned the right to call Australia home yet?' I replied boldly.

'My descendants have been here for 40,000 years. When you've been around for that long you can call Gondwanaland home.'

'Oh, Charley, give the girl a break,' said Mary, exasperated. 'You don't talk to me that way and I've only been in the country five minutes.'

She smiled at him and I was struck again by her gentle nature.

'Just teaching the white girl a little black history, that's all,' Charley retorted.

'Well, be kind enough to teach her in your taxi. She's going to miss her train otherwise,' Mary said.

'Fruit, that's right.' I said, looking at my watch. I had ten minutes to catch the last train home and the station was a mile away. All hell would break loose if I missed it. My parents only let me go out one night a week and if I missed my curfew, they'd ground me for a month.

'Could you, please? The only problem is that I only have $4 left.' I looked at him apologetically.

'Like hell! I've just finished my shift.'

He looked away, avoiding Mary's gaze. She patted him on the shoulder. 'Charley Jackson.'

So that was his name.

'Okay, okay. Lucky I come from a matriarchal tribe. Used to being bossed around by women. You can owe me the fare — $5 and one country. That's what you owe me, white girl.'

But he wore the hint of a smile and when he screeched to a halt in the station car park with a minute to spare, he leant over and kissed me, catching me off guard. 'I'll see you

around since you don’t go away that easily.’

I could only nod. I was dazed and fascinated and confused. My brain had turned to blancmange and my legs to jelly. Somehow I wobbled up the ramp to the platform and caught my train home.

Fifteen

I woke up ravenous. I'd had nothing to eat the night before. Toast. Vegemite. I still hadn't cried. I never had. I didn't cry when the labour pains made my body feel like it was being ripped open or when they put the cold hard forceps inside me and pulled her out. I didn't cry when they took her away and I barely got a glimpse of her, slippery with whitish muck, her hair dark and wet and pasted down, her darling little face screwed up. She didn't cry either. I didn't cry when I signed the papers that separated us for life. I didn't cry on the first anniversary of her birthday, or the second, or the third. But I had always made a silent toast to her and wished her the best of lives, wherever she was.

I wondered how *my daughter* — no, I said to myself, I can't call her that, I have to *earn* having a daughter — *the person I gave birth to.* I wondered how she had managed to find me. I didn't even know her name. My only hope was that she had left her details behind at the Centre. Friday was my next rostered volunteer day and although I felt ill at the prospect of facing my workmates, I knew I had no choice. If I wanted to reach her, I had to swallow my shame. I hopped on my trusty bicycle and pedalled as hard as I could, weaving in and out of the traffic. Parking my bike in the rack, I thought twice about removing my bike helmet. Maybe I would need it.

Barbara was behind the reception desk sorting through a stack of mail.

'Hi,' I ventured.

She grunted back at me. 'Didn't think we'd see you. Thought you might have other things to do. Here, you can do this.'

She handed me the pile of mail and turned and stomped into her office. While she didn't actually slam the door in my face, I got the picture. I decided to put my head down and concentrate on the job at hand. The phone rang for Barbara and it was urgent. I put the call through to her office but she didn't pick up so I knocked and poked my head around the door. She had her back to me.

'Barbara? The call on line two. Henry's in a spot of bother and needs to talk to you.' There was no response. I went over and was shocked to see

that she was crying.

‘Oh Barbara, what is it? Can I help?’ I knelt down beside her chair.

‘You? You’re the problem. I don’t understand you. You’ve bloody worked here for years. You’ve seen what the policies of separating families have done to our community and yet you’ve had this daughter that you’ve bloody well pretended didn’t exist. Why?’

‘You have to earn the right to use the word “daughter” — and I haven’t.’

‘Don’t give me that crap. She is your daughter and you’d better start acting like a proper mother and get your skinny white arse into action. The poor girl’s scurried off home with her tail between her legs. She’s had the biggest shock of her life. She came looking to find her black mother and she got you. Poor thing. No wonder she freaked out.’

Barbara started to laugh and then I started to laugh too. And then I cried. For the first time in eighteen years, I wept for the baby I had given away. Or who was taken from me, as I had begun to see it. Barbara just sat and waited. Finally when my tears had subsided, we talked some more. But Barbara became evasive when I asked if *she* — I couldn’t bring myself to say ‘my daughter’ — had left a contact number.

‘She either did or she didn’t,’ I said steadily.

‘Well, she didn’t really ...’ Barbara said.

‘This is me you’re talking to and this is my child we’re talking about.’ By now I was getting hot under the collar.

‘Don’t you get like that with me. She didn’t leave her phone number but I know how to contact her. I’ll check with her first. That’s the way it’s done around here, remember? We protect her rights, not yours.’

The irony of the situation. I’d worked at the Centre for so long but suddenly I was the outsider. As a non-Indigenous person, it had taken me years to work out how I could contribute without upsetting the applecart. Once at a funding meeting, a government worker asked one of the blackfella staff a question and I rushed in and answered for him. It took me ages to realise that if I’d waited he would have collected his thoughts and answered himself. I thought I was leaping to his defence but instead I was making it worse. It took a few false starts before I worked that one out. But now all my good work had evaporated, due to one monumental stuff-up. If I hadn’t thought that my situation would have any bearing on my work as a volunteer, I was wrong.

‘The committee had a meeting this morning,’ Barbara said. ‘You know how the Koori grapevine works. They all know about your daughter and you giving her up. Now some of them want you out of here. They don’t think it’s right that you should be working here.’

I sat down on the floor next to her, stunned. I hadn’t thought that this, a private matter, would have any bearing on my work as a volunteer. But in Koori circles, the personal was also the political — there was no separation.

‘I didn’t think you could be sacked from a voluntary position,’ I said. ‘What do you think? Do you think I should go?’

‘Actually, Cherie, you might not want to work here anymore. Given the hostility …’ She wiped her cheeks and blew her nose loudly, which altered the mood somewhat. Swinging her chair around, she noticed the flashing light on her phone. ‘Crikey. Henry. I forgot him!’

I had no choice. I packed my belongings into a cardboard box, tucked it under my arm, and moved my name to ‘out’ on the staff board. I gave Barbara a quick wave and walked out into the dazzling sunshine, the steel door of the Centre clanging shut behind me. Somehow I knew my life was being turned upside down.

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The following week I turned up at my part-time job as an arts administrator as if nothing had happened.

‘How was your weekend?’ Elise, my co-worker at the Art House, loved to ease into the week with a chat over a plunger coffee.

There is a lot I could have said. But I didn’t.

‘Oh, quiet, for a change. How was yours? How was your son’s twenty-first?’

That was all the encouragement she needed. She gushed on but I wasn’t listening. I was thinking about fifth birthdays, sixteenth birthdays and eighteenth birthdays — how I’d never got to play my part as a proud mother. I had already missed eighteen of those special days.

The day passed. I’m sure I looked like my usual organised self but inside I was in turmoil. My mind see-sawed from absolute joy at the possibilities of a mother–daughter relationship to utter despair at the slim chance of a happy outcome.

By the time I got home, I was exhausted. I checked the answering machine the minute I stepped inside the door. Heart pounding, I replayed

the messages. My mother — reminding me it had been nearly a month since I had visited her and Dad. The plumber, returning my call — he'd be around in the next few days. Sure. That was it. Disappointment mingled with relief, a nauseating water–oil combination if ever there was one. I sprawled on my bed and fell asleep, only to be woken, sometime later, by the phone.

'Hello?' I yawned.

'You took so long.'

'I fell asleep and I thought I was dreaming that the phone was ringing. Who is it?' I stifled another yawn.

'It's Kirrali.'

'Who?'

'Kirrali Lewis,' she paused. 'Your biological daughter.'

It was as if all my nerve endings had been jump-started. 'I'm so sorry. I wasn't expecting you to ring. I mean I hoped you would but I couldn't be sure that you would. And so soon. Hell, I didn't mean that — it's not too soon. And I didn't even know your name. What am I saying? Sorry, sorry. It's not meant to happen like this.' I fell back onto the bed.

'Well, the woman at Family Connect said there was no such thing as the perfect reunion. She said that there was always some drama associated with them. She also told me off for not waiting until she had contacted you to smooth the way. So it's my fault really,' she laughed nervously.

'I wouldn't say it's your fault.' I didn't know what else to say.

'Is it okay I've rung you? They were going to do it but since the horse had bolted, so to speak, they just wished me all the best.'

'I've been hoping you would, to give me another chance,' I said. 'Would you? Would you give me a chance to make it up to you?' My eyes welled with tears of unfulfilled longing.

She was silent for a long time.

'Look, I'm not sure what you want from me,' she finally said. 'I thought I knew what I wanted from you, to know a bit more about my family, my culture, where I'm from. But everything's changed now.'

'You mean because I'm not Aboriginal? Not who you expected me to be?'

'Yes.'

It felt like she was slipping away. I had to say something, quickly. 'I might still be able to give you some of the answers that you're looking for.

We could meet ...’

‘I’m not sure about that. I rang to ask if you could send me any documents. About my birth. Who my birth father is and stuff. I am sorry. I thought I was ready for all this but ...’

‘I don’t know whether you can ever be ready for something as big as this. I know I’m not and yet I’ve been half expecting this moment for a long time.’

The truth of that statement shocked me. I had tried to suppress all thoughts about my daughter but over the years I’d developed the habit of searching the faces of Koori girls, looking for a family likeness, her father’s eyes. If I saw a girl around the right age who I didn’t know, I would ask about her family background. It was easy enough to do. It’s natural to ask Koori people where they’re from and who their families are. As I watched my friends’ children grow up, my inner yearning to meet her became stronger.

‘I suppose you have a right to know a bit about me, too,’ Kirrali said, slowly. ‘But what I want right now is some answers.’

‘I can give you answers but not over the phone.’

We agreed to meet but not for another week as she was busy at uni. When I asked her what course she was doing, she ignored my question. I didn’t push it — at least I would be seeing her soon. And I’d better prepare myself to talk about stuff I had never talked about before.

Sixteen

After the taxi ride and that first kiss, Charley and I got to know each other — rapidly. At first we hung out in his taxi behind the pub — him talking about politics and justice, and me earnestly listening. Then we would kiss, nothing more. Within a few weeks our relationship evolved. We fell into a pattern — I would go to the Boundary Pub on a Saturday afternoon, like I always did, and hang around with the usual crowd. A little later, Charley would arrive and spend about an hour or so with his mates. We wouldn't talk to one another. Then he would leave, seemingly to return to his shift driving taxis. Instead, I would leave too and we would rendezvous in the dark car park, zooming away to his small flat nearby. I am not sure why there was so much secrecy but that was the way he wanted it. I just wanted him.

Saturday nights were precious. From the first time we slammed the door shut at his flat, it was full-on. Up until then I had resisted the persistent, fumbling attempts by local boys at parties but with Charley it was different. I was the one who threw myself at him.

We'd make love. Is that what it was? Afterwards, we would lie around, dashing from the hot sheets to the kitchenette to toast stale bread under the griller, racing back to bed, only to dot the sheets with scratchy crumbs. He took a photo of me once with a Polaroid camera and I tried, unsuccessfully, to snatch it off him as I was obviously naked under the blanket.

When I was with Charley, I was deliriously happy but I was careful not to show it. I knew the only way I could be with him was by appearing as if I didn't care. At 10.48pm he would drop me off at the station. I'd catch the train home and he would go back to his night shift driving taxis. He didn't ring me, he never asked for my phone number and he didn't once come to my flat after I'd moved out of home. I couldn't ring him as he didn't have the phone on at his flat.

We weren't a couple — we didn't eat out together or stroll down the street hand in hand. We just had our secret Saturday night trysts. Nearly twenty years later, I can still recall the sensation of lying next to him and the heat radiating from his skin like a brick wall after a hot day.

So my daughter's name was Kirrali. It was a pretty name. It suited her. I wondered who had named her — I wasn't given that opportunity. When I first realised I was pregnant, I was in shock. Part of me was terrified but at the same time I would lie in bed at night and fantasise about the names I might call her. I was convinced I was carrying a girl. Somehow I knew. I imagined Charley coming to me and laying his curly head upon my swelling tummy and us lying there tossing around names like any other expectant parents. In these daydreams, his usually abrupt manner towards me would soften. I imagined us setting up home far from suburban finger pointing. We would live together in his flat, a second-hand baby's bassinet crammed in beside our bed. We wouldn't have much but we would be rich in love and the sharing of cultures. In my dreams ...

Instead of meeting up at the Boundary, I had arranged to meet Charley at his flat on the pretence that I'd made him a devil's food cake. I had whipped up the cake that morning

while my parents were out shopping and had carefully carried it in Mum's Tupperware container in my bag, first on the train and then walking.

Later we were lying around, tucking into our second big slice of cake, when Charley suddenly got up and walked over to the window. I got up, too, and we stood there and watched a tabby cat trying to knock over a bin in the car park.

'So, Charley, I gotta tell you something.'

'Me too. I need to tell you something.' He spoke so quietly, almost a whisper. 'You make it hard though. The cake, your body …'

My heart started up like a Victa lawn-mower. 'Say it.'

'It's a mistake. Us.'

'I don't understand. Why?'

'Just because. I can't explain it.'

'You? Mr Opinion, who is never short of a comment. You can't explain to me why you think we are a mistake. Maybe I made the mistake. For trusting you.'

'Trust? Since when have us fellas ever let you lot down? While you have lied to us, taken our land and children and language away, not paid us wages for honest work …'

'We are not talking about black–white relations. We're talking about one man and one woman. Not everything is political, Charley.'

'It is to me.' He put his hands on both sides of my face and angled it so I couldn't help but look him in the eyes. A tear slid down my cheek and on to my breast.

'Goodbye, beautiful.' Charley released his hold and the warmth from his hands instantly disappeared.

He grabbed his taxi keys and left. I sat amongst the frayed cushions on the floor of his dingy flat, too stunned to move. Perhaps I was hoping he'd return, do a U-turn. But of course he didn't.

How could I have told him that I was pregnant? It would have been a pathetic thing to do, to sucker on to a man who obviously didn't want me. To use the pregnancy as a glue, as a bond between us. To even think that the pressure to 'do the right thing' would manipulate him into staying with me, perhaps even marrying me. This was Charley and no amount of social pressure would sway him. I knew that. Perhaps that's why I didn't tell him. And why I didn't fight to keep the baby. I felt powerless. And I knew he didn't love me. I gathered my things — leaving behind my mother's precious Tupperware container — and never went back.

Charley was radical, argumentative, stubborn, opinionated and every other synonym of difficult but he made me laugh. His skin was strangely silky despite the taut muscles beneath the surface. His eyes were both deep set and deep in colour, like black holes that sucked up the light. Impenetrable, really. I don't think I ever got a glimpse of his soul, what he felt. He was either silent and inscrutable or a ranting figure spouting rhetoric.

By the time I told my mother, she had already guessed something was up. One weekend, I was sprawled on my bedroom floor flicking through one of her British homemaker magazines when she came in and sat down at the end of the bed.

'How far gone are you?' she asked in an even voice.

'Fifteen, sixteen weeks.'

'You've left it too late. You'll have to have it adopted.'

Too late for what? An abortion? I'd never do that to my baby, to Charley's child. Never.

She handed me a piece of paper. Sisters of Mercy Hostel, Old Devenish Rd, Cooma, NSW. I was being sent interstate where no one would witness my disgrace.

‘They have a hostel there for unmarried mothers.’

I wasn’t surprised. I’d had a lifetime to get used to the fact that my mother knew everything and organised everything.

She paused at the door, ‘Cherie, I know it’s hard but you will get over it. I wish you had come to see me earlier.’

I didn’t realise I had come to see her, I thought to myself. But I didn’t correct her. My mother had given me instructions on how to deal with my situation without mentioning ‘pregnant’ or more importantly ‘baby’ once. As for the word ‘father’ as in ‘father of my unborn child’ well, I knew that would never be mentioned. By her or by me.

December, 1966. I hopped on a bus to the Sisters of Mercy Hostel, as Mum had arranged. I was seven and a half months pregnant and had only just started showing. Luckily cheesecloth tops were all the rage and I could hide my tummy quite easily. I don’t even think anyone noticed at college — it was exam time and lots of girls had ballooned from stress eating. Anyway, I wasn’t the kind of girl who attracted rumours. I was known as a ‘goodie-goodie’.

Christmas Day was miserable. My mother had sent me a small parcel of food — mince pies and sweets that I shared with the other girls — but otherwise I kept to myself. I felt terribly sad and alone.

For four weeks, I languished in that cold, laughterless home for unmarried mothers. Then on 23 January 1967, after a fourteen-hour silent labour, I gave birth to my baby girl. In the brief moments that I saw her, I thought of her as my beautiful brown-skinned cherub. Then they took her away from me.

The next day, the nuns pressured me to sign her over for adoption. I was on my own. I was exhausted but I promised myself I would get her back. The nuns wouldn’t let me see her and I was too weak to walk to the nursery on my own. By the time I was strong enough to get myself out of bed, my baby daughter was gone.

Four days after the birth, I left that place. I shuffled onto the bus carrying my small travel bag without the one item I’d bought for my baby — a tiny little yellow jumpsuit with chickens embroidered on it.

I spent the next few weeks holed up at home — stuffing cabbage leaves down too-small bras to relieve the agony of my milk-engorged breasts. I would sleep during the day or go down to the lounge room to watch mindless shows on television.

My mother, of course, was firm and not very sympathetic. She steered the conversation towards my studies, made me hang out the washing and expected me to cook dinner on the days that she was working. She did bring me a cup of tea in bed at seven o’clock each morning — I guess that was her way of showing she cared.

It was a different era then. Things were swept under the carpet and there was no room for emotion.

Feeling sorry for yourself was especially frowned upon. Squeezing into my jeans, I started back in my second year of secretarial college as if nothing had happened.

Seventeen

Charley. How was I going to tell him? Would he be angry or glad we had created a child together and that she had been born without me telling him? I was fooling myself — there was no way Charley would be happy to find out that he had a child who was ‘tainted’ with gubba blood. The best I could hope for was that he’d be furious at me but not take it out on Kirrali. I was used to Charley being furious. So was the world.

How I was going to tell him wasn’t my only problem. Finding him would be just as hard. Charley didn’t stay in the one place for long. He went where he was most needed. His mother’s people came from the north-west of the state so he was often up there, fighting causes, visiting the Elders and listening to their stories, advocating on their behalf, helping kids out who were in trouble, visiting blokes he knew in prison. Sometimes he was up in outback NSW, around Bourke, where his father’s mob came from, and sometimes he was back in the city lobbying politicians, getting his defiant face in the paper with matching angry words.

I remember bumping into him once, years ago, at the airport. He’d just got back from six months on Fraser Island ‘teaching gubbas about bush tucker and survival’. I laughed, wondering what a city boy like Charley knew about bush tucker and hunting, but not for the first time, I’d underestimated him.

A year later, I got an invite to the launch of a book that he’d written on the topic. A very upmarket affair it was — bunya nuts and quandong tarts instead of the usual cheese and biscuits. Of course, I bought a copy and even made him sign it. *To my tea bag, keep jiggling, Charley*, it read. Private joke. To Charley I never really belonged at the protests and marches. I wasn’t ‘agitating’ since I wasn’t the one who had been wronged. I was merely ‘jiggling’ — a ‘moral tea bag’. I suppose he was also inferring that my brand of crusade was a watered-down substitute for the real thing. I accepted his criticisms, even agreeing with him. How could I possibly understand what it was like for him and other Kooris? Those I knew still had to fight a daily battle to be treated like everyone else.

I actually bought two copies of *Bunya Tucker* and hid one away in a box with photos, newspaper articles and other links to Charley. Like a bowerbird that is attracted to blue coloured items — pegs, wrappers, stones, trinkets — I collected anything that mentioned him. I even had his taxi identification card that I'd nicked from his taxi when I first started seeing him.

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When I rang my mother and told her that I had something important to tell her and Dad, we agreed I'd go over for dinner the following evening.

On the train, I had time to reflect on what I wanted to say. I was hoping that Kirrali was going to be part of my life and I needed to let them know that. More specifically, I needed to tell them that their only granddaughter — my older brother and his wife had two boys — was Koori.

When I walked in the door, Mum was arranging a bowl of camellias. The table was set with a lace cloth and crystal wine glasses and tapered pink candles the same shade of pink as the camellias. Anyone else might have thought it was a special occasion but this was my mother's nightly ritual. We sat down to roast leg of lamb and four vegetables while Dad poured each of us a glass of semillon.

I cleared my throat to speak, 'I need to tell you something.'

'Let's say grace first.'

Dad dropped his head like a well-trained dog at Mum's words. I felt the usual rise of anger at my mother's level of control over the household and almost felt a small kernel of satisfaction that I was going to drop this bombshell on her. Grace over, my mother indicated that I could begin.

'The daughter I adopted out eighteen years ago … of course you won't have forgotten about that … well, she's contacted me.'

My lips began to quiver. My news wasn't coming out as confidently as I wanted it to. 'She wants to know about her background. She wants to find out about her father but she may also want to meet her biological grandparents. In the future.'

Mum looked at Dad. Her face crumpled and she burst into tears. Although the child in me had hoped for a reaction to crack my mother's usual poker face, I didn't expect weeping. Nor Dad's words.

'We've been waiting for this. The last few years or so, when it seemed that you might not marry and have a family, your mother and I began to talk

about the past. For the first time in many years, we talked about the adoption of your baby. You must understand, when we grew up you just didn't have a child out of wedlock. You either got married in a hurry — a shotgun marriage they called it — or you gave up the baby. There wasn't a choice.' He paused to sip at his wine. His voice was unsteady.

Mum took up the story, 'You remember Wendy down the road? Her daughter Lucy had a baby when she was just nineteen. Well, now she's married to a very nice man and they have two more children of their own. A blended family, they call it.'

'Let me go on, Nancy,' my father said, admonishing her lightly. 'Nineteen years ago, when you were, well, pregnant, we couldn't imagine that any man would take you on after giving birth to some other man's child. We figured the fellow, the father of your child, wasn't going to marry you as we'd never even heard you mention his name, let alone met him. We didn't know what to think. So we thought adoption was best for both you and the child, the baby being unwanted and all.'

'Unwanted?'

'Not planned. We didn't know whether it was some awkward situation you found yourself in. We thought adoption would give you more of a normal future and the child would have a stable family. A loving family, like you had been brought up in. That's what we wanted.'

'I thought it was the shame of me being an unmarried mother,' I said slowly. 'And what your friends would have said.'

'Back then, we thought it was about what was best for you. But since we got talking about it, we realised that maybe we hadn't made the right decision. I mean, you would have coped. You were young but not much younger than your mother was when she had your brother.'

Dad smiled at Mum, perhaps in his mind's eye catching a glimpse of the young woman that she once was.

'It shouldn't have been your decision to make,' I pointed out.

'We thought you would come to us and insist that you keep the baby,' my mother said. 'We were steeling ourselves for that.'

'But I didn't know that.'

'You were so young. You were in your first year at college. You had the rest of your life ahead of you. We didn't want you to be burdened with a baby.'

'She was my daughter.'

We sat in silence. Each of us lost in our own version of what might have been.

‘She’s obviously a young woman now. Can you tell us something about her?’ my father asked, breaking the spell of ‘what ifs?’

I told them what little I knew: that Kirrali was smart, that she seemed nice, that she was at university, but I stopped there. I omitted one fact about her. When it came to the crunch, I couldn’t bring myself to tell them that their granddaughter was Koori.

Eighteen

Kirrali finally rang and organised a time and place for us to meet. A Brunswick Street café, somewhere public and neutral — just like they recommend for a first date. I had taken an annual leave day off work although I could have justified taking a sickie, my stomach was churning so much.

By 2pm I was dressed, even though we weren't meeting until later in the afternoon. I had changed my outfit three times, from jeans to a long skirt and handkerchief-top and back to khaki pants and singlet. While it felt like I was going for an interview, I didn't want to look like I was. On the other hand, I didn't want to look too casual as though I didn't care about the significance of the occasion.

The café was a brisk walk from my flat through the back streets. It was the most glorious of spring days. The sky was the colour of turquoise and the front gardens were fresh with lime green buds bursting with optimism. I loved inner city landscapes — from three storey terraces trimmed with wedding cake lacework, to tiny worker's cottages with striped tin roofs and modern glass and concrete warehouse conversions. I didn't miss owning a car. Well, I *hardly* ever missed owning a car.

The sudden downpour was like a jug of water being poured from the sky. I ducked into a doorway. What happened to the sunshine? Where was a taxi when you needed one? They all zoomed by and I carried on walking. Another shower sent pedestrians hurrying for cover — except for me. I had gone from being early to late and I was anxious as all hell. She might think that I was standing her up.

Dripping wet, I stepped into the café. Its fashionably gloomy interior meant I had trouble adjusting my eyes. I scanned the room. There she was, at a table at the back, reading a book.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' I said, trying not to drip on her.

'You can't help the weather,' she replied. 'Did you have trouble parking?'

'I walked. I don't have a car,' I explained.

‘Why not?’

‘Everyone driving their own cars, clogging up the roads, needing more and more freeways ... you know, environmental reasons,’ I searched her face for some hint of agreement but she just stared blankly back at me.

‘I can’t wait to get my own car.’

The waiter came up and took our order which filled a few awkward moments. She ordered Earl Grey tea, and I ordered a strong macchiato and two macadamia nut brownies.

‘You don’t drink coffee? I thought all students drank coffee,’ I ventured.

‘Well, they don’t,’ she said. ‘By the way, my friend Martina is coming but she’s running late.’

‘Oh, is she usually late?’ It was a stupid question but I was scrambling.

‘No,’ she said scornfully.

We both looked up as the front door bell of the café tinkled. But it was just a lady with a pram. There was more silence, except for the espresso machine frothing and spitting in the background. I wasn’t game to say anything in case I made another faux pas.

The waiter brought our drinks and the brownies. At least she ate chocolate — we had that much in common. We nibbled away. I badly wanted to look at her, to study her face, but I didn’t think I could get away with it.

Kirrali fiddled with the crumbs on her plate, arranging them in a line. Finally she spoke.

‘Look, I don’t need another mother.’

‘Wow. There’s an opening line.’

‘I’m sure you’re a nice person and all of that but I’ve already got the best mother in the world. I just want to find out who my father is. That’s all I need from you.’

Blunt, just like her father.

‘I can’t just tell you, because ...’

‘Because why?’ she demanded.

‘Because he doesn’t know about you,’ I said.

‘Oh.’ I could see that she hadn’t considered that possibility.

‘I’ll talk to him first and then get back to you,’ I suggested. ‘Was there anything else you wanted to know?’ I hoped she would be interested in me, even just a little bit.

‘You said you could give me some answers,’ she said.

‘I’ll try but I can’t give you his details without warning him first.’

Her reply was barely audible. ‘Warning him?’

I dared to sneak a look at her, only to see her brushing away a tear. I wanted to comfort her but instead I looked away. It felt like at any moment she could walk out and I’d never see her again.

‘Look, I wouldn’t dream of trying to take your mother’s place,’ I said. ‘I’m just, well, grateful that you are alive and healthy and you look so *beautiful* and I’m feeling things just looking at you that I’ve never felt before. I’m happy and yet I’m in a state of shock.

It’s confusing.’ I looked at her pleadingly. Please, grant me a little mercy …

She sighed, ‘Yeah, well it is confusing. I suppose as much for you as it is for me. It’s just that ...’

Kirrali paused and I snuck another look at her. She had her father’s long thick eyelashes.

‘Go on,’ I said.

‘It’s just that ... I’ve never had much interest in my Koori heritage but recently I’ve wanted to find out more and I just thought I’d find this family and that would make me part of the Koori community. But instead I discover I’ve got a *white* mother when I already have one of those.’

Her words spurted out like tomato sauce from a bottle.

‘Hell. Here I was bracing myself to explain why I gave you up as a baby but instead I have to defend myself for being *white*. I’m sorry but there’s nothing I can do about that one. There’s been times in my life I’ve wished I was Koori if that’s any consolation.’

I thought back to when Charley rejected me. Many times I’d wondered if we might have had a chance if I had been part of his community.

She looked at me scornfully, ‘No one ever wants to be Koori.’

‘Koooreee. It’s usually gubbas who say it like that.’ I laughed, but she didn’t. Too late, I realised that I’d upset her.

‘Gubbas?’

‘I’m sorry.’ I pleaded with her.

Suddenly the door swung open, the bell tinkling furiously. It was a welcome distraction from the disaster that was us getting to know one another. A girl with scarlet hair, dripping wet, flew in like a small whirly-whirly. Her white dress clung to her, wet from the downpour. She sashayed over to our table.

‘Kirrali, I ran all the way. I had to be here for you.’

She eased into the spare seat at the table. A waitress came over with a towel and fussed over her like a royal baby.

‘Long black, please. I will *die* if I don’t get a coffee!’

Kirrali rolled her eyes. The waitress bustled away. I wondered if she was an actress — Martina, not the waitress.

Martina turned her blue-eyed gaze to me, ‘Wow. You’re so young. My mother is ancient compared to you! How old were you when you had Kirrali?’

She was very direct. I glanced over at Kirrali to see how she was reacting to this line of questioning. But her expression was unreadable.

‘Ah, I was nearly nineteen.’

‘Wow. That’s our age. Imagine *you* having a baby, Kirrali, at our age?’

Kirrali shook her head.

‘I’m really keen to have babies,’ Martina added.

‘Maybe Kirrali doesn’t want to talk about this now.’

Quick as a flash, Martina retorted, ‘Oh, Kirrali never wants to talk about anything uncomfortable.’

Kirrali scowled. At least it wasn’t at me.

‘Well, this is special. Or maybe not?’ Martina said, looking from my face to Kirrali’s. She burst out laughing. I think Kirrali kicked her under the table.

‘You two are quite different, aren’t you?’ I observed.

Kirrali managed a wan smile. ‘Opposites attract?’

‘So is her father the opposite of you?’ Martina asked, opening up her eyes innocently.

I tried not to be distracted by Martina and I turned to Kirrali. I chose my words carefully.

‘If you want to be part of a Koori community, you can be. I can introduce you to plenty of people, that’s not a problem. But you know, you are already part of the Koori community simply because you are Koori.’

‘Even if I can’t pronounce it properly?’ she challenged me.

‘That was thoughtless. And I’m sorry. Look, there is no one “Koori community”. It’s not a homogenous group of people. Things are just as fractured and complex, if not more so, for Kooris as for anyone.’

Kirrali held her cup of tea with both hands and let out a nervous laugh.

‘As for your father, I know how important it is for you to meet him. It’s too complicated to go into right now but I’ll do my best. Look, I still don’t know anything about you, about your life. I’d really love to get to know you better. Would you like to come over to my house sometime so we could talk?’

I could see her wrestling with her inner conflict.

I added, ‘I don’t even know what course you are studying.’

‘Come on Kirrali, throw her a crumb,’ urged Martina.

Kirrali shushed her. ‘Cherie? Can I call you that?’

I nodded.

‘I get that you want to get to know me better. But I need to meet my father first.’

I nodded. All this would have to be on her terms.

She hesitated. ‘And I’m a law student.’

I smiled at her, grateful for that one piece of information. The two girls got up to leave and I tried to pay the bill but Kirrali insisted she pay for theirs. I didn’t want to push it — I’d vowed to take one step at a time. I couldn’t expect an instant relationship. I followed them out of the café.

Kirrali paused on the footpath.

‘Cherie, I’m sorry I said that stuff to you about not wanting a white mother. I’m pretty tactless at times.’

How thrilling to get an apology!

‘Me too, Kirrali, me too. As you have experienced.’

Kirrali gave me a slight smile and my gut did a somersault. She shook my hand and walked off with Martina who hooked her arm in hers. I watched them until they disappeared around the corner.

The sun was now shining and there was no hint of rain. My euphoria at having being on the receiving line of that one half smile was dampened by the thought of speaking to Charley and telling him what I had done.

Nineteen

When I was younger, I could never imagine myself grown up, married, with children. Around the age of sixteen, all my girlfriends started partnering up. They'd go steady for six months, then one would get a friendship ring — much admired by the others who would then put the hard word on their boyfriends to get them one.

I was never part of this scene. I don't know how they viewed me but I saw most of the boys at school as immature and macho. They'd stretch the truth about their conquests and they called you names if you didn't sleep with them and names if you did. It was okay for boys to sleep around but if a girl made out with a guy, she'd be a mole. I hated the hypocrisy of it all.

So after the friendship ring came the engagement ring. I lost track of the number of engagement parties I went to, although by the second year of college, the invitations had fizzled out. I was living away from home and so my contact with old school friends was limited to second-hand news about births and marriages.

The last wedding of the old crowd was Jill's and my invitation came out of the blue. Jill and I had been close once but we hadn't spoken in a while. I was in my early twenties, working in the city as a production assistant for a small publishing company and had started doing the odd volunteer day at the Centre. There I had met Jarrah, a Koori guy from up around Shepparton. Jarrah was one of life's gentle souls, as laid-back as a lizard on a hot rock.

Outside the church, my old school gang stood in a huddle, sneaking sly looks at us and giggling. At the reception my 'friend' Susan, who was sitting next to Jarrah, turned her chair slightly away from him making conversation impossible unless he felt inclined to chat to her back.

There was one curious moment in the whole shemozzle though. An old fellow, white-haired and bent, who I think was Jill's grandfather, shuffled over and eased himself into the seat next to Jarrah. They talked for maybe half an hour. I couldn't hear a thing over the band's drum rolls and guitar solos — this was the sixties — but when the old man got up to leave, he shook Jarrah's hand with both of his. I couldn't help notice that they both had tears in their eyes.

'What was that all about?' I asked.

'That old bloke used to be a policeman in a country town. He said he remembers going out of town where the blackfellas camped in their humpies and all the kids running away when they pulled up in the police car. He and his partner found three kids and took them away. He said he wasn't sure why they took the kids, just that there'd been complaints about them being neglected. He reckons they looked happy enough — they were just skinny fit kids, that's all. But they'd been given their orders so they did what they were told. He said it was just the mothers there and they were all yelling. The men were away working, catching rabbits or picking vegetables, shearing, whatever they could do to earn a living. The mothers were crying, the kids were crying. He thought that the kids were sent to an institution somewhere in Melbourne, a church-run thing, or that's what they were told.'

Jarrah paused, his voice breaking up.

‘Anyway, he remembers a woman coming down to the police station every day for weeks, demanding that her ten-year-old son be brought back. He said that after the first time she came, he couldn’t go home to his wife and kids because he felt so bad. He went to the pub and got pissed instead. He started drinking heavily after that so he quit being a policeman and began digging irrigation channels. Said he’s never forgotten that woman, her dignity and perseverance. He even remembered her name. Layla Smith.’

Jarrah stared out towards the dance floor. For a minute we both gazed at the people dancing, who were by this stage fuelled up by free grog, gyrating and generally making fools of themselves. A group of blokes were taking turns trying to remove Jill’s garter belt with their teeth and urging each other on with loud whoops. Jarrah’s story was a million miles away from this reality. With immense sorrow in his voice, more than I’ve ever heard in anyone’s, Jarrah finished telling his story.

‘Layla Smith was my grandmother. The boy was my father. He was put in a children’s home in Melbourne, miles from all his family. He didn’t get to see any of them again until he was eighteen. My dad got beaten in that children’s home. He was a wonderful man but he was tough as nails. He couldn’t show any affection. That old man tore my family apart, or he at least played a role in it ‘cos he was just following orders. When I told him my story, he asked me if I could forgive him.’

‘Oh my God. Did you?’

‘Well, I couldn’t forgive him on behalf of the rest of my family. I don’t have that right. But for myself, I could.’

‘But how?’

‘If you stay bitter, then you carry that around every day and it stuffs you up. That old fella has suffered too. Not as much as my mob but at least he was courageous enough to come up to me and admit his part in it. He realises what they did was wrong. He isn’t clinging to this misguided idea that they were doing it for the right reasons.’

Jarrah sat there, dealing with this reminder of his family’s sad history. I gave him a hug and went to the toilet to compose myself. I didn’t want any of my old school friends to see me crying.

Jennifer, a tall redhead I had vaguely known from school, was in the bathroom reapplying her make-up. She leant towards me conspiratorially.

‘Tell me, Cherie, is it true what they say about black men?’

She pouted in the mirror as she applied a slash of red lipstick. I was disgusted but I smiled in what I hoped was an enigmatic way and walked out.

I went out with Jarrah for two years but I couldn’t bring myself to move in with him and that was the beginning of the end.

My parents were relieved. Although they were polite to him, I could tell they hadn’t taken to him. I am positive the only reason they had to dislike him was that he was Aboriginal. My parents were racist in that middle-class pseudo-tolerant way I was to recognise often. Sure, send a donation over to the poor starving Africans but tut-tut if an African family moves into the street — property values will fall.

The closest I ever came to getting married was in my late twenties. I’d been on my own for a few years, except for the odd relationship. But nothing serious. Then I met Michael. Within weeks of meeting at a friend’s barbecue, we were inseparable. Things just clicked between us. We were both vegetarians, both loved French movies and both loved cycling. He lived alone, like me, with his Siamese cat. And he was fully house-trained — Michael, not the cat. By that, I meant I didn’t have to play the little wifey picking up his socks. My parents liked him and his parents loved me.

Then one weekend in autumn, we went away to a guesthouse in the foothills of the snow country. When we arrived, the air-brushed blue sky was darkening to denim. Smoke from

the fire was curling from the chimney and you could smell the earthy rotting leaves. Underfoot, the plane tree leaves crackled and crunched.

That night, sipping port and sitting on an over-stuffed couch beside the fire, the conversation moved to the subject of kid's names. Previously we had skirted around the issue of getting married. Now the electricity between us was palpable.

'I like names that remind me of nature. Like Brooke and Skye and Lily,' I declared.

'What if it's a boy?' he teased. 'You could call him Rock.'

'Like Rock Hudson, the actor? No way. What about Moss?'

'Too soft and squishy. How about River?'

'No one would call their kid River! It has to be a strong name. The name of a tree? Oak. Or Forrest.'

'I've got it. Gum. Or Pine,' he offered, suppressing a grin. 'Pine Sanders. That has a ring to it.'

We broke about laughing.

'I'm serious,' I insisted. 'I'm sure we can think of a great name for a boy.'

'Okay. The names of trees. Elm. No. Poplar. No. Ash. What about Ash? Or Jarrah? Hey, didn't you go out with a guy called Jarrah?'

'Yeah, he was a Yorta Yorta man.'

Michael knew I worked at the Centre but I hadn't mentioned that Jarrah was Aboriginal. It just hadn't come up.

'So he was a big black man then?' he mimicked standing on one leg, spear in hand. I threw a cushion at him and he toppled over onto the couch, laughing.

'Actually he was more of a caramel colour,' I retorted.

'Imagine if you'd had a child with him. What if it was a throwback?' he said.

I stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

'You know. It might have reverted to looking really Aboriginal. Flat nose, afro hair, that kind of thing.'

'Well, she or he, would have been beautiful then,' I said lightly but my stomach had that heavy feeling. 'And anyway, not all Aboriginal people have flat noses.'

'You know what I mean,' he said.

I did know what he meant. 'What? That you're racist …'

'For God's sake, I am not racist.'

We argued on and on like this for about two hours. The more he tried to defend himself, the bigger the hole he dug.

At one stage the argument went off on a tangent and he declared that 'Aboriginal people hardly invented the wheel, did they?' It was at that point I couldn't take it any longer.

'I would like to go home please.'

'We're meant to be having a romantic weekend.'

Michael couldn't understand why I was upset and that was it for me. With those few comments I no longer felt like sharing my weekend, let alone the rest of my life, with him. We left the next morning and drove back to the city in silence.

We saw each other once or twice after we got back but it was never the same. The phone calls got less frequent and then they stopped. A year later, I heard he'd married a girl called Josephine.

There were other relationships but somehow no one was quite right for me. Or maybe I wasn't quite right for them. My parents gave up inquiring after my 'dates' and stopped dropping hints that they would like grandchildren. Of course their granddaughter, the baby that they had forced me to give up, was never mentioned.

Twenty

My address book had several entries for Charley. Charley at his aunty's place. Charley at the Aboriginal Land Council. Charley at the local council where he worked as a community liaison officer. The last entry was the most recent — Charley at home. The prefix was familiar — it was in the same neighbourhood as the Centre.

I rang the number after rehearsing what I wanted to say. He needed to know it was important but I didn't want to spill it over the phone. This news needed to be given face-to-face.

The phone kept ringing. Maybe he was away. I was just about to hang up when it was answered.

'Hello,' said a sleepy, young female voice. I could tell that she was gorgeous just by the way she uttered that one word. I wondered who she was.

'Oh, I might have the wrong number. I'm after Charley Jackson.'

'You've got the right number but he's out. Can I pass on a message?'

'Who's this?'

'Leila.'

Leila who? 'Could you ask him to ring Cherie Taylor please.'

'Who?' She yawned.

I told her again and asked her to write down my phone number, even though I hoped he still had it. Charley and I had worked together on community projects at various times. As co-workers, our relationship had always been cordial — distant but cordial. And that's all we would ever be. A girl could always dream but dreams seldom come true.

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Every time the phone rang, I hoped it was Kirrali. This time when I answered, there was a slight pause …

'I was wondering if you had told my father about me yet?'

'He's a difficult man to track down. I mean, I've left messages all over the place, not that he's unreliable. It's just that he could be anywhere, he

leaves town often. Would we be able to meet again?'

Seconds ticked over until she said, 'Okay. The same place. Friday morning. I don't have lectures then. How about 10.30?'

I thanked her but she just said goodbye and hung up.

At least I scored another meeting. Small victory.

I was a little early this time. It was a crisp morning and the sun was struggling to weave its way through the clouds. Inside the café, the smell of freshly baked muffins permeated the air. Right on time, Kirrali walked through the door. I was a bit dismayed to see Martina again. She seemed nice but it would make it harder for Kirrali and me to get to know one another. Maybe that was the idea.

There was silence between us — we were strangers — so I tried to make small talk. I started with Martina, the easier nut to crack.

'Are you a student too?'

'Martina has just, um, left uni,' Kirrali answered on behalf of her friend.

'She means dropped out. I did this crazy thing. I met someone and I threw it all in and got married,' Martina laughed at herself.

'He's Aboriginal. He's a big hunky footballer,' said Kirrali.

'That's not why I married him.'

'Sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like that.'

So even they rubbed each other up the wrong way — it wasn't just me. Luckily the waitress rescued us by taking our orders. When she had gone, I tried another approach.

'I thought you might want to know a bit about my … your biological family.'

Kirrali nodded so I sketched out my upbringing. I had even brought a few photos — me as a pale, blonde child, my arm around the family dog, Muff; my brother James as a teenager and at his wedding; his children as toddlers eating birthday cake; and my parents, when they were first married and had just moved into their first home; and more recently, all dressed up for their wedding anniversary. Kirrali poured over the photos without saying anything.

Martina was the one asking all the questions — where had I grown up, what school I had gone to, did I get along with my brother? Kirrali paused at the picture of me and Muff.

'Do you have a dog?' I asked her.

‘My dog, Finn, was all scruffy like him but more apricot-coloured. He died recently.’

‘I’m sorry.’

She gave me a wan smile, then picked up the photo of my parents taken the year before. My mother was resplendent in mauve.

‘I’d like to meet them sometime. I don’t have any living grandparents anymore. I mean, like with my adoptive parents.’

I was surprised, ‘Sure. Of course you can. I’ll organise it.’

I wanted to ask about her adoptive family but she looked at her watch and stood up.

‘Look, sorry, I have to go. I have a lecture in half an hour. I’m just going to go to the …’

‘… jiliwa,’ said Martina and I simultaneously. We looked at each other and laughed. Kirrali looked a bit annoyed and then headed to the restroom.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Martina said. ‘Did you ever think that you made a mistake?’

‘Having Kirrali? No. Adopting her out? Yes.’

‘I meant getting involved with her father. I mean, I don’t know what your relationship was like.’

‘Oh, so you’re not talking about Kirrali.’

‘No … maybe I just threw myself at Robbie because he was, you know, different, exotic.’

‘Exotic? He’s quite the opposite actually. You doubt your love for your husband?’ I probed her gently.

‘Not at all. I have friends who say how “brave” I am. What’s that about? For having an Aboriginal husband? Then there’s others who think I have hit some kind of jackpot, mainly ’cos he’s a footballer. It’s depressing.’

‘You sound like me twenty years ago. Although I didn’t have that much self-awareness.’

‘See, I met him and I just felt like I belonged with him. Like I was home for the first time in my life.’

‘Yes, but a home requires looking after. You can’t just build it, move in and that’s it.’

‘I guess you’re right. I hadn’t thought of it like that.’

Kirrali came back and stood over the table, waiting for Martina. ‘I will get to know who my father is, won’t I? It’s my right to know.’

‘I am not trying to keep anything from you, I promise.’

‘You could at least tell me his name.’

‘Look what happened the last time you got hold of someone’s name — you scared the pants off both of us.’

‘You don’t trust me.’ Kirrali looked deeply offended.

‘She doesn’t know you well enough to know if she can trust you,’ Martina laughed. ‘But you can trust Kirrali,’ she said to me. ‘She’s sensible. I’m the crazy one.’

‘Your father’s name is Charley.’

‘Charley ...’

They turned to leave but then Martina turned back and gave me an impulsive kiss on the cheek.

‘Thanks,’ she said.

I smiled back at her, my eyes just a bit misted over.

As they left, I heard Kirrali say to Martina, ‘What was that all about?’ I didn’t hear her answer but Kirrali did pause and flash me a curious look before they both disappeared out the door.

Twenty-one

I rang Mum and Dad and we agreed that I would bring Kirrali home to meet them the following weekend. I hadn't told them that she was Koori. The thought of their reaction made me feel ill. But they were about to find out and I was about to be judged for something I had done nineteen years ago — I'd fallen in love with a man of the 'wrong' race. I knew they wouldn't be deliberately rude. But even on the way there, I felt guilty for potentially putting Kirrali in an awkward situation.

I met Kirrali at the station at the arranged time on Sunday morning. She was with a young Koori guy who had the most amazing green eyes and a warm, shy smile. I liked him on sight.

'Cherie, this is Kirk.'

I shook his hand. 'Good to meet you, Kirk. Have I met you before? What's your surname?'

Kirrali rolled her eyes.

Kirk kissed her good-naturedly. 'You'll get used to it, Kirrali.'

He turned to me.

'The surname's Anderson and I'm from up Gippsland way. Gunnai Kurnai people.'

'Any relation to Luke Anderson?'

'Cousin. His dad Henry is my dad's oldest brother,' he smiled.

'Cool. I've met him a few times. Fantastic bloke,' I smiled back at him. 'Well, we'd better catch that train, Kirrali. Are you coming too, Kirk?' I half-hoped he would. There might be safety in numbers.

'Nah. Just came to see her off and wish her well.'

They embraced and I averted my eyes. Seeing them together made me realise it had been a long time since I had felt that way about someone.

We boarded our train, and watched Kirk waving and pulling faces as we pulled out of the station. With Kirrali's attention on Kirk, I used the opportunity to look at her. Initially I had thought she was quite tall but it was her slim waist and narrow shoulders that gave her that look. Really she was about my height. Her face was an unusual amalgam of features. Her

beautiful almond shaped eyes were deep, like Charley's. Her mouth was wide — that was from my side of the family, I thought with a small rush of parental pleasure. Her cheekbones were high and her chin was a little pointy, giving her face a heart-shaped look. Gorgeous teeth too, of which I was envious. She looked cute in a short red velvet skirt, black tights, black boots and black and white striped long-sleeved T-shirt. Her hair was braided and a jaunty red, black and yellow beret completed the look. Kirrali turned to catch me staring at her.

'I like the hat,' I said quickly.

'Kirk made it for me,' she said proudly, showing me the intricate way it had been woven.

'He must be very clever.'

'He is. He's an actor who used to be a law student. Kirk reckons there's other ways to be sharp than just book clever.'

From this, I gathered Kirrali was 'book clever' so I asked about her studies. Then she asked about my work and seemed curious about my volunteer work at the Centre. Thankfully she didn't ask about her father. I still hadn't heard back from Charley and was starting to feel anxious. Maybe he was on the road again. I glanced out the window and realised with a start we were pulling into the station. When I was younger, the train journey seemed to stretch forever.

'It's a short walk,' I said as we set off, past the shopping strip — video shop, newsagent, hot bread bakery, two takeaway bars, a fish and chip shop and a lawnmower repair shop. Nothing much had changed except the addition of the video shop since I had flown the coup eighteen years back.

We turned into a side street with row after row of neat weatherboard houses, the gardens showing the benefits of their retired owners' keen attention.

'You're nervous, aren't you?' she said.

'Yes, I am,' I admitted. 'Aren't you?'

'Not really,' she answered.

I paused beside a low brick wall, a place where I had lingered many times as a child. I had always been fascinated by the garden beyond the wall. The fountains and birdbaths and grottoes had been painstakingly constructed from river pebbles and seashells, creating a mosaic-like effect. Dotted around this wonderland were gnomes and fairies and concrete frogs holding up umbrellas. It was the kind of tableau that children are fascinated

by, although I had never seen a child there and the fierce looking owner didn't invite closer inspection. There was even an Aboriginal figurine, one leg folded and propped up with a spear. I hadn't paid much attention to that as a child but now it made me feel uncomfortable. All the other figurines were fantasy creatures but the one human figure was reduced to a cliché.

'It's probably this place,' I said, pointing to the neat houses. 'It's too anal for me.'

Kirrali laughed, 'I know what you mean. Even the leaves fall in neat piles.'

An old feeling slipped over me as we trod the familiar path to my parents' house. The feeling of being suppressed and smothered by people's expectations still affected me. I had been so under the thumb of those pressures, of not being in control of my own destiny, that I had given in to my parents' — no, my mother's — wishes, to give up my baby without a whimper of protest. But now it was the spring of 1985 — a different era. Maybe it was time I broke free. I dragged my thoughts from the past back to the present.

I turned to Kirrali, 'Look, I don't know what kind of welcome you'll get. I just want to warn you ... your grandparents are pretty conservative.'

'I gathered that. After all, you're radical and each generation rebels against the previous one, doesn't it? I was always the most conservative in my class at school.'

I smiled in spite of the heavy feeling in my gut. 'But now you're not. You've been to the dark side.'

Kirrali laughed. 'C'mon. Let's get it over and done with. They can hardly make too much of a fuss, can they?'

But she was wrong about that.

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It wasn't that my parents were unkind. They were kind. If a neighbour had an accident, say a broken arm or a crook back, Mum would be the first one to turn up with a casserole and a homemade fruitcake. She did volunteer duty with Meals on Wheels and she knitted toys for the Red Cross street stalls. Dad would chop wood for the old dear next door and he was always up on her roof fixing loose tiles or running the mower over her nature strip. But they were old-fashioned. Jeans were ironed with a seam up the middle of the leg. Hair had to be neat and tidy — even if you were at home alone.

Tracksuit pants were frowned upon — they were for sports only. You only wore thongs at the beach. Now none of this sounds like crimes against humanity but their conservatism showed in other, less clement ways. They voted conservatively and believed that there should be no single mother's pension. Living together out of marriage was wrong and homosexuality was unnatural.

As a teenager, I clashed with their views again and again. Eventually I learned that I could not beat their dry brand of logic or influence their opinions, so I gave up. I was a cardboard cut-out around them, never revealing my true feelings and beliefs.

Later, when I starting working at the Centre, I could sense their disapproval. Nothing critical was ever said but it wasn't hard to glean they were opposed, if not to the Centre itself, then to me working there. So was it any wonder I had never told them my child was Koori? It was something that was easier avoided. But it couldn't be avoided any longer. The tectonic plates of their lives were about to shift.

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We turned the corner and there was my parents' home, the home where I presume I had been conceived although I wouldn't have dreamt to ask. It was one of the oldest homes in the neighbourhood. The sweeping gravel driveway lead to a timber Victorian house painted a crisp white, its wide verandah edged with a tracery of lacework. It was as neat as a pin, as always. The only changes made to it over the years were the curtains in the front room — the venetian blinds had been replaced just as they were becoming trendy again.

The only other thing that varied were the colours in the flowerbed — this spring they had gone for lemon and apricot shades. The house looked the way it always did — except this time, strung up from the lacework, was a sign the width of the verandah.

WELCOME HOME, KIRRALI

My parents and my brother and his family were standing under the sign. When my mother saw us, she ran, arms outstretched. Kirrali had stopped at the end of the driveway while I had kept walking, drawn to the sign. My mother dashed past me and scooped Kirrali up in her arms. Dad came and put his arm around my shoulder. James and Helen, and their kids Jack and

Kyle, held back while the reunion scene, like something from a movie, played out on the driveway.

I was dumbfounded. I looked at the sign and then at my parents, who were now both crushing Kirrali in bear hugs. *I* hadn't even hugged her yet and I had given birth to her. I looked at the sign again. Then it clicked. It was painted in red, black and yellow. It had to be intentional.

They knew Kirrali was Koori and it didn't matter. Looking at the tears streaming down my mother's face, I knew that it mattered not one bit. It was *me*, not them, who got the biggest shock of her life.

All that day I felt like I was outside myself looking in. Here I was, a thirty-seven-year-old woman, who was confused about whether she was meant to act the part of 'mother' or 'daughter'. There was this young woman who was meeting her biological grandparents for the first time — the prodigal granddaughter. There was James, the older brother, and Helen, the sister-in-law with her fake smile. There were the granddaughter's biological cousins, who, after initially bursting into tears — their mother claimed they were 'shy' — were already beginning to reassert their status as the 'real' grandchildren. In other words, they were demanding attention.

But the star of the show was the matriarch, a woman one year shy of her sixtieth birthday. She charmed and she fussed and she talked non-stop. She acted as if Kirrali had been on a long trip and was overjoyed at her safe return. In all my speculations, when I had envisaged what my mother would do and say when she saw Kirrali, I never imagined a scene like this. My parents' welcome was everything that I could have wanted but didn't dare expect. So why did I feel confused and cheated?

I'd always considered myself to be a fairly switched on sort of woman but I sure sulked that day. I felt like I was eighteen again. Not that anyone noticed — all the attention was on Kirrali. We sat down to a formal Sunday lunch and Mum had outdone herself. There was smoked salmon for entree, followed by roast pork with all the trimmings and macaroni cheese for me, the vegetarian. There was wine and champagne and freshly squeezed orange juice in case Kirrali didn't drink alcohol. The flowers matched the tablecloth that matched the shade of my mother's dress that matched the centrepiece. It made me feel nauseous and my appetite failed me. Kirrali ate like a horse.

'Another serving, Kirrali?' urged Mum. 'More apple sauce? Another potato?'

‘They are delicious, Mrs Taylor,’ said Kirrali tentatively.

My mother beamed, ‘Kirrali, please, call me Nancy. We understand you’re doing a law degree at university. Alistair was a law clerk when he was younger.’

‘I would have liked to study law but Nancy swept me off my feet and before I knew it I had a family to provide for. So I gave up the idea and the years of study and began working as a design draftsman. Not that I’m complaining. It was a good way to earn a living but not as exciting as the cut and thrust of the law. What area are you interested in, Kirrali?’

‘Well, I thought it was corporate law but maybe international law offers more scope for travel. I’m not sure. I still have a long way to go and my interests seem to be changing all the time.’ She gave a little smile at this and I wondered what was behind it.

‘Yes, travel while you’re young, Kirrali. Before you get tied down with babies,’ said my mother and then she blushed as she realised what she had said.

I had never been ‘tied down’ by a baby. I had never travelled either. I wondered whether I should point that out but the conversation had already moved on.

‘Kirrali says that she likes old houses, Nancy. Perhaps I can take her on a tour and then we might make room for that pavlova of yours,’ said Dad.

‘Can we come too, can we, can we?’ The boys were clamouring for Kirrali’s attention, climbing over her.

‘Sure,’ smiled Kirrali, and so off they went, leaving me to clear the dishes with Helen, while my mother fussed over dessert. My mother frequently reminded me that Helen was a lovely person but I found her annoying. I could never quite work out if she was really ignorant or just pretending.

‘So, Cherie, how amazing it must be to suddenly have a daughter. I envy you missing out on the nappy stage, let alone the sleepless nights when they’re teething,’ she sniggered.

‘Sure, I haven’t missed too much sleep over my child,’ I said, but the sarcasm zoomed right past her.

‘Is she going to move in with you? That would take a bit of adjusting, eh? No more men over to stay.’

‘I think you overestimate my social life, Helen. But a single girl’s life must seem like heaven to a mother of two active boys. Why don’t you sit

down and rest?' My voice was saccharine sweet.

Helen's face crumbled a little but she wasn't out of ammunition. 'I'm fine. But, Cherie, I must say you've timed this all very well. Aborigines are the flavour of the month at the moment. Aboriginal athletes — that tennis player's very popular — why there's even an Aborigine on the *Flying Doctors!'*

'An Aboriginal on television? And he's not playing the bad guy? How amazing. It's only taken two hundred years of massacres, oppression and what generally amounts to genocide. I'm really glad that Aboriginal people are finally having their fifteen minutes of fame!' I slammed the dishwasher shut and stomped out of the room.

I sat stewing in the lounge room — flicking through one of those imported women's magazines full of European royalty — until the others returned. As they drifted back in, Helen threw me a superior look and we resumed our places at the table for the pavlova.

As soon as the dessert bowls were cleared, I announced that Kirrali and I needed to get going. Mum protested and Dad urged us to stay longer but the truth was I couldn't face another minute there.

It was raining and so Dad insisted in driving us into the city. I chose to sit in the back while Kirrali sat up front and talked with my father. Something about sitting in the padded comfort of the back seat made me feel very small. I turned towards the steamed-up window and my tears slid down on to the plush velour. My father and my daughter didn't notice. Daughter. Before I'd had the chance to establish any kind of relationship with Kirrali, she'd been hijacked by my parents. Part of me knew that I was being childish but I couldn't let the feelings go.

They dropped me off, without even bothering to get out of the car, although Kirrali did thank me for taking her to meet her grandparents. I gave her a weak smile but it was hard to keep up the pretence. I dashed through the rain to my apartment building and from behind the glass security door, I watched the red lights of the car disappear down the street. Bad weather all round.

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After the 'prodigal granddaughter' lunch, I had one nagging question. How did my parents know Kirrali was Koori? My mind went into overdrive with conspiracy theories. They had hired a private detective to investigate her.

No, worse, they had hired a detective way back when I was seeing Charley so they knew whom I'd been pregnant to. They knew he was my lover and they'd paid him off. The truth was much more surprising.

I went over to see Dad on a Tuesday night when I knew Mum would be out playing bridge. He was a little surprised to see me turn up without notice. We did the usual niceties, how unseasonably warm it had been the last few days, asking about each other's health — he had a few twinges — before I got down to the business of my visit.

'Dad, I've been wondering how you knew Kirrali was Aboriginal?'

'Ahhh, that …' He turned from me and started fossicking around in the bureau drawer. 'I don't know where she keeps it.'

He flicked through a small photo album and pulled out a photograph. It was of a baby, brown-skinned and fat-cheeked, dressed in a lemon jumpsuit embroidered with little chickens and a white knitted lacy jacket. I stared at the photo. My heart was racing.

'I don't understand. How did you get this?' I searched his face.

'It was your mother. She asked the nurses at the home to send us a photo of the baby. Your mother knitted that jacket. Of course, she wasn't sure if it would be a girl or a boy.'

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't stop staring at the photo. She was so beautiful.

'I never had a photo of her, my baby. You had one all along.' My eyes pooled with tears.

Dad turned back to the bureau and pulled out a parcel wrapped in brown paper with string. It was my mother's old-fashioned way of wrapping. He handed it to me and I reached for the scissors, carefully cutting the string so it could be reused, just as I had been taught.

'She was going to give you this but I don't think she'd mind if I gave it to you now.'

It was the baby photo, enlarged, in a carved wooden frame. It was like all those photos I'd seen sitting on the desks of my colleagues at the Art House. Except this was a photo of *my* baby, the baby who grew up to be Kirrali Lewis. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

'Don't be too hard on your mother,' Dad said quietly. 'She always hoped you might want to talk about the baby. All these years, she wanted to say something.'

I shook my head in disbelief. ‘She never once showed me she cared. When I came home from that horrible place, nothing was said. I was just expected to get on with it. Why didn’t she say anything?’

‘She felt it wasn’t her place. She was waiting for a signal from you. It was painful for her too, Cherie. Knowing there was a granddaughter out there. Wondering. You never forget, you know. You would know all about that.’

‘Yes. I do …’ I wrapped my arms around him and for the first time since I was a little girl, I cried in my father’s arms.

‘We’re so sorry, Cherie. It’s a sad business. For everyone. But now we need to make amends. It’s not too late.’

It wasn’t too late. But what I had to do wouldn’t be easy. I needed to forgive.

Twenty-two

I finally caught up with Charley at a book launch at the Koori Legal Resource. I'd sent the message around the traps that I needed to speak with him but as usual he hadn't got back to me. I knew I'd catch up with him eventually. The circles in which we moved were too small for us to avoid each other indefinitely. The book was on Aboriginal activism in the seventies, the halcyon days of grassroots black politics. Charley gave a clever and funny speech about the events of the time — the sit-ins at universities, the Tent Embassy in Canberra, land rights marches. You name it and Charley had been there — stirring, rallying the troops, waving the flag, pumping his fist in the air. After the speeches, the crowd surged towards the drinks and nibbles and I wove my way across the room towards him.

The brief hug only hinted at our previous intimacy. Our relationship was a classic love–hate — well if not hate, indifference. I loved him and he didn't care about me. After all, I was a white person. It was amazing that we had managed a truce long enough to get me pregnant.

'How ya going?' he asked, barely looking at me.

I, on the other hand, devoured the sight of him. He looked just the same — although he was thinner and seemed a little tired, but didn't we all? Plus he'd shaved his head, which suited him. He looked like a warrior. He was a warrior.

'Well, I've had a few things on my mind,' I said. 'Actually that's what I wanted to talk to you about. You got my message? That I had something to discuss with you? I left it with Leila. She answered your phone.' I searched his face for a response. I was hoping he'd tell me who Leila was.

'Something to discuss … That's whitefella talk for trouble, isn't it?'

Before I got the chance to reply, a reporter came up and said she wanted a comment from 'Mr Opinion'. Mr Opinion ... that took me back. Charley had been looking after himself since living on the streets at the age of fourteen. He was a born leader, yet in those days he could barely write his own name. Even I hadn't known that when he was driving taxis at night, he

was ‘edumacating’ himself during the day. Much later he did a degree in politics. Charley was still my hero and yet no one had ever hurt me so much.

Finally the reporter pranced off, with a flirtatious laugh trailing her exit. Charley still had it.

‘So, white girl. What did you need to talk to me about?’

‘White girl. You haven’t called me that for years.’

I could have added ‘since we were lovers’. Tears sprang from my eyes. Now that the drought had broken, I found myself crying at anything. Charley looked at me in such a way that if I didn’t know better, I would have thought he was concerned. He took my arm and led me outside where it was cooler and quieter. I steeled myself.

‘Speaking of nineteen years ago ... Charley, you know how we …’

He nodded.

‘There’s something I didn’t tell you …’ I paused, breathing heavily. We had made the most beautiful love together, way back then. Passionate, free, gentle but I couldn’t talk to him about feelings, not then, not now.

‘You had a baby, our baby,’ he said softly. ‘It’s been doing the rounds. “Did ya hear about that white woman at the Centre who had a Koori baby and had it adopted out?” The maths was easy. You, me and baby makes three.’

I searched his face for a clue as to how he was feeling. But I couldn’t work out Charley’s emotions.

‘You know there’s no secrets in this community. They were speculating about who the father was. All sorts of names were flying about.’

‘Like?’

‘Like almost every straight blackfella around and a few that aren’t … everyone except for me.’

He started to laugh and I was relieved. I never knew how Charley was going to react. His outbursts were legendary.

‘No secrets in the community? You and I were a secret, then and now,’ I said. ‘If the scumbag journalists had got hold of this they would’ve had a field day. Gubba-hating radical blackfella with bloody Snow White as the mother of his child. Not good for your image.’

He reacted angrily. ‘You think that’s what it was about? My image? I didn’t give a stuff about my image. You don’t understand. Us blackfellas, we’re dying out. We’re being watered down by you lot,’ his voice dropped

an octave. ‘To have a full-on relationship with you would have been disloyal to my sense of who I was as an Aboriginal man. It was just a moment of bloody weakness on my part. I had a duty to find a Koori woman to have children with.’

With Charley it was always the political, never the personal. ‘You could have seen it as a kind of reverse colonisation.’

He laughed, and then said something unexpected.

‘Hey, I’m sorry,’ he said softly. ‘I shouldn’t have had a go at you. None of that is your fault. That stuff I said, I don’t believe it anymore. But that’s how I thought back then.’

I stared at him. In all my years of knowing him, I’d never heard him apologise for anything.

He grinned at me. ‘Mellowing in my old age, aren’t I, white girl?’

‘I don’t suppose you’d mellow enough to call me by my real name,’ I retorted.

Charley stared off into space for a minute, eyes glazed, and again I wasn’t sure if it was a joke. But then he snapped back. ‘Yeah, what’s your name again?’

He was straight-faced but at least this time I knew that he was joking.

‘Sorry, memory loss. Old age. Okay, Cherie Taylor. A daughter, eh? Wow, that’s deadly. Bet she’s good lookin’, eh. What’s her name?

‘Kirrali. Kirrali Lewis.’

‘Kirrali … sweet. When I heard those rumours about you ... I was hoping.’

‘You were?’ I was astounded.

‘Of course. So does she know that I’m her father?’

‘Not yet. I thought it was best if I spoke to you first.’ I hesitated. ‘I didn’t know how you’d react to the idea of having a child. With me.’

He looked at me hard, as if he was on the verge of telling me something. Then he waved it away and started fidgeting.

‘Life’s too short for me to crack it about a decision you made, rightly or wrongly, eighteen, nineteen years ago. I’m keen to meet her. If she wants to meet me, of course,’ he added.

‘She does.’

‘Great.’

All this talk was making Charley restless and I could see he was keen to get back inside with the rest of the mob. I grabbed his arm as he started to

move away.

‘Thanks, Charley. You don’t know what this means.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he interrupted, as usual impatient with any conversation of an intimate nature. ‘Get her to call me soon, okay? Real soon. I mean it.’

The rest of the evening was spent chatting and laughing with old mates. Every now and then I would catch myself glancing over at Charley working the other side of the room. Who said you can’t teach old dogs new tricks? I was shedding tears and Charley was being empathetic.

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The next day I woke early. I had to force myself to wait until 8.30 to ring Kirrali’s college. I asked the floor supervisor, a young woman called Luda, to pass on a message to her straight away. When I still hadn’t heard back from her by mid-morning, I rang again. Luda said that Kirrali had probably gone home for the weekend, and no, she wasn’t permitted to give out her home phone number. I’m her mother, I wanted to say, but of course I didn’t. I considered ringing all the Lewis’s in the phone book but I didn’t even know where her parents lived. I’d just have to wait until Monday before I could let her know that I’d made contact with Charley.

I wandered around the streets window-shopping all morning, oblivious to what I was looking at, and then on the way home, I called into my local café. I was sipping a strong black coffee, without really tasting it, when Elise, my workmate from the Art House, walked in.

‘When I couldn’t catch you at home, I thought I’d send out a search party. Do you realise you stood me up?’

I grimaced, remembering we’d talked about seeing the film *Desperately Seeking Susan*. We’d both wanted to see if Madonna could act. But that arrangement was made before Kirrali came back into my life.

‘I completely forgot! I am sorry. It’s just that I’ve got so much on my mind at the moment.’

She sighed. ‘Work troubles, men troubles or mother troubles?’

I smiled. All those issues that previously would have loomed high on my list to whinge about now seemed less important.

‘Actually, mother troubles. But not my mother.’

Elise looked at me, puzzled.

‘I can’t think of an easy way to say this. I had a baby, eighteen years ago. I gave her up for adoption and now she has found me.’

I scanned Elise's face for her response. Please don't judge me harshly, I thought. Please don't make this harder than it already is.

'You ... have … a child? That's, well, that's great, isn't it?'

'Yes it is ... It *is* great, isn't it? You're right. You know, I've never, ever celebrated that fact that I have a daughter. Wow. I have a daughter!' My voice rose almost to a shout. 'This calls for champagne.'

Elise gave me a hug and over a bottle of the French stuff, I told her the whole story. I was on a high and the only sobering thought was that maybe Kirrali didn't feel the same way about me as I was beginning to feel about her.

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My Sunday morning sleep-in was ruined by a phone call. An insistent phone call.

'Have you told our daughter about me?'

'Well, hello to you too and how are you?' I replied, my voice tinged with sarcasm.

'I'm not bad but I think you should bring Kirrali over to meet me. Today if you can. I'm at St John's Hospital, Ward 9 North.'

He hung up. I was stunned. Charley in hospital? I sat on the balcony where I'd taken the call. The view from my window was especially pretty that day. My apartment was high up and I could see across the rooftops to the church spires and the canopies of the trees. Things always looked different from up here.

My fingers trembled as I dialled the college. I would have to see if they had Kirrali's parents' number. But when Luda answered the phone and I said it was urgent, Kirrali was summoned. It seemed she hadn't gone away after all. I told her to meet me outside the college in half an hour. My brother had left his car with me while he was out of town so for once I was able to pick her up. I ran out of my apartment but not before grabbing a pile of handkerchiefs. Something told me I might need them.

Outside the college, Kirrali was waiting expectantly. She jumped into the car.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what's going on. I don't know whether he's had an accident or what. He sounded okay ...'

'I'm so scared. I'm excited but terrified. I can't believe I'm going to meet him.'

She was looking at this event from a very different perspective to me, I realised. I was worried about Charley while she was excited to be meeting her father for the first time. I knew I had to concentrate on the latter. I gave her a potted history as we drove.

‘Your father’s name is Charley Jackson. We met a long time ago, obviously, and we were together for about six months.’ Six months and eight days, to be precise. ‘Anyway, I felt very strongly for him but ... how do I put this? You’ll understand when you meet him. He’s something of an activist.’

‘You’re starting to freak me out.’

‘He never knew about you, that I had got pregnant. But he was really happy to hear that you existed.’

We had arrived at the hospital and were making our way to the ninth floor. I wasn’t sure if I had given Kirrali enough background to prepare her for Charley.

‘Look, Charley can be a bit abrupt. If he gives you a hard time, please don’t take it personally. He does that to everyone. Are you ready?’

Kirrali looked nervous but she nodded and took a deep breath. The door swung open without a sound. Charley was lying on the bed. His eyes were closed and various tubes were attached to the back of his hand. My heart went cold.

Kirrali stepped back into the corridor. She was breathing heavily. I hoped she wasn’t going to faint.

‘Charley always made me go a little wonky in the legs too,’ I said ruefully.

‘He can’t be my father,’ she whispered. ‘He’s Uncle Jacko.’

‘Yes, Charley does get called Uncle Jacko. So?’

‘Kirk pointed him out to me one night at the pub. He’s Kirk’s hero but I was too scared to meet him. Oh my God. He’s my father?’

‘Yes.’

‘I can’t do it.’

‘Yes, you can. Come on, Kirrali, you’ve waited a long time for this. Actually, so have I.’

She took another deep breath and walked back through the door.

PART THREE

Kirrali Cherie Charley

– 1985

Twenty-three

I stepped through the door. Terrified. Charley's eyes flickered open and he wriggled to get himself to an upright position.

'About bloody time too,' he said. 'Kirrali, my daughter. I am so glad to meet you. So glad.'

Charley started to cry, his flow of tears punctuated by loud, searing coughs. Without even thinking, I sat on the bed and held his hand. It was large and warm. At some point Cherie must have left the room but I hardly noticed. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him. I could see me in his face.

'I suppose Cherie has told you that I'm your old man. Well …'

He coughed again — a wracking eruption — and everything seemed to go still. I had that sensation once before when I was in a car accident. Martina was driving. It was just after she'd got her licence and she spun out of control on a wet corner — the car fishtailed across the road. Everything happened in slow motion and it felt like the whole world was holding its breath until we were back on the right side of the road, safe.

'Daught, I wanna know all about ya.'

'I want to know about you, too,' I said shyly.

Charley didn't muck around. He told me he had a problem with his ticker — 'cardio' something, something to do with his heart muscle being enlarged. It sounded serious but he seemed so calm. I didn't know what to say. I just sat there holding his hand. My head was spinning. But then he shook those thoughts off and he began to tell me about his life, talking up his passion for the Essendon football team. He told me about the work he'd been involved in over the years but he mostly made a big joke of it all.

I told him about Kirk and how he'd pointed Charley out to me at the pub but that I was too scared to meet him.

'To think. That's crazy. I wish Kirk had introduced us,' Charley said. 'I would have known you for a bit longer.'

I felt a pang for all the time we'd missed out on. I pushed away my thoughts. He wanted to know about me. I told him about my studies and where I grew up, my family. Charley had lots of questions but I didn't feel

like I was being interrogated or that there were right or wrong answers. And there were large patches of surprising silence between the two of us. Easy silences, not awkward ones. And to think I was scared of meeting this man.

A woman came in pushing a meal trolley and gave Charley his dinner on a tray. Charley teased her, which she enjoyed. She bustled out, a smile on her face. He looked at the food under the stainless steel lids but he made no attempt to eat it.

After a while, Cherie popped her head around the door and he waved her in. I could see her eyes were red-rimmed.

'Isn't she fantastic?' he said admiringly, patting my hand.

I felt a swell of pride. He liked me. But you know that old saying, 'pride goeth before a fall'.

'But the girl knows *nothing.* Absolutely nothing.'

Hang on a minute, I thought. I'm a law student. I'm not just doing any arty farty course. Did he have any idea how hard it was?

But Charley wasn't finished.

'How can a kid of yours and mine be so politically naive? She's full of book learning. It's all up there and not here.' He tapped his head first and then his heart.

Geez, I hadn't realised that he had been psychoanalysing me with his innocent questions.

He beckoned Cherie closer. 'You need to introduce her around. Get her to meet a few Elders.'

I need to know about being Aboriginal from Charley, not her, I thought.

'When you get better you can teach her,' Cherie protested. 'Woman, haven't they told you? I'm dying. Don't try to pretend I'm not. Kirrali understands, don't you, love?'

I felt a sickening swirl of emotions and hollowness at his words but also a kind of pride that he felt I understood what was happening to him. I nodded numbly.

'I've as much chance of pulling through as I have of becoming prime minister,' he chuckled.

'I'd like to see that,' Cherie said. 'Except us white fellas would all be run out of the country.'

'What about me? Would I be run out?' I asked.

'For fuck's sake, girl. You're my bloody daughter. Of course not. You might talk like a gubba but that's nothing we can't fix. I'll introduce you to

your mob and they'll teach you a thing or two. I've, ah, so far kept it under my hat that I'm sick so you've been my only visitors. But I have to tell them pretty soon.' He sighed. 'It's all the wailing that I can't stand when someone dies.'

I shook my head. Meeting my real dad and hearing him talk about his impending death — all on the one day — was too much.

The nurse came in and asked if we could leave while she took Charley's vital signs.

'They're all right. They're family,' he said, winking at me.

A few weeks earlier, I was shocked to find out that Cherie was my mother. Until a couple of days ago, Charley didn't know I existed. This was a family? It was surreal. I started to laugh and Charley joined in. Cherie burst into tears. The nurse looked at us as if we were mad.

✖ ✖ ✖

I buzzed on the security door just after 9pm and bounced up the stairs to Cherie's apartment. She'd left me with Charley and had given me the money for a taxi back to her place. Before she had even closed the door, I was bubbling over with everything he'd told me. I followed her into the kitchen where she was cooking spaghetti.

'He told me what my totem was and it's a brolga. And he tried to explain who my relatives were but there were too many of them. I asked him if he'd draw me a family tree but he said that was a kind of 'white' thing to do. He told me about moieties. I didn't understand the difference between them and totems. But he explained it really easily. You see, your moiety is your skin family while your totem is …'

'I know what they are, Kirrali,' Cherie interrupted me. 'I've been hanging around Koori people for a long time.'

'Oh,' I said, feeling a bit put out. 'Why don't they teach this stuff in school? How come it has taken me this long to find out about it?'

Cherie sighed. 'When I was your age, I started reading books to try and find an alternative view of history. At school, hardly anyone studied Australian history because they thought it was daggy. American history was considered much more exciting. Even if you did study Australian history, it was limited to the last two hundred years. Nothing much has changed.'

'I learnt more in one afternoon with Charley than I ever did at school. It's like he said, all my learning is book learning. He has a way of making it

come to life.’

Life. I saw Cherie wince at that word. She served up the pasta and some green stuff called pesto — I’d only ever had spaghetti bolognaise — and poured us each a glass of white wine. She steered me towards the dining table, a serious look on her face. I sat down and a sleek cat leapt up onto my knee and started kneading my thighs. ‘I didn’t know you had a cat,’ I said.

‘There’s a lot you don’t know about me,’ she replied lightly. ‘His name is Mungi. It means “lightning” — you’ll understand if you have chicken on your plate. Not that he gets that very often. Anyway, while you were with Charley, I talked to his doctor.’

‘And?’

‘Did Charley tell you what was wrong with him?’

‘He just said that he’d been sick for a while with that cardio thing.’

‘It’s called cardiomyopathy. Do you know what that is?’

‘I’m a law student, not a med student.’

‘It means his heart muscles are enlarged. Dangerously so.’

‘I thought he might have lung cancer — with all that coughing.’

‘He has picked up pneumonia which is why he’s in hospital.

Pneumonia can be treated with antibiotics but the heart disease won’t go away. He needs a heart transplant. Look, let’s take some time to have a proper talk about it.’

I shot her a dirty look. ‘Are you trying to freak me out? I have just met him. Let me process one thing at a time.’

‘I’m sorry … of course.’

Except she couldn’t let it go.

‘I don’t think he has much time ...’ Cherie hesitated.

‘Like he said — Charley is dying.’ I was shocked at how matter-of-factly I said the words and how calm I felt.

‘But if he got a transplant … But he’s stubborn. He’s resisting.’ Cherie looked at me pleadingly.

‘He must have his reasons for not wanting a transplant. I don’t know. He said death is a part of life. He doesn’t have a problem with it. The way he explained it, it all seems so natural.’

‘Kirrali, you’ve only just met Charley. You don’t have such a big stake in him.’

I couldn’t believe what she had just said. Under the table, I clenched my fists and relaxed them, and clenched them again until I could speak.

‘That is a ridiculous thing to say.’

‘I know …,’ she wailed. ‘I’m an idiot. I’m sorry.’

Cherie started to cry and I got up and patted her shoulder. Here was I, the child, comforting her, the mother. Strangely, I didn’t feel sad. I was exhilarated, while Cherie, I could tell, was falling apart.

‘But I don’t want him to die. It’s not fair. It’s just not fair,’ Cherie sobbed. ‘He’s too young. He’s a one-off. There’s no one like him.’

My arms crept around her. She rested her tear-soaked face on my shoulder. I was holding her … for the first time. My biological mother who had given birth to me and given me up. She, who had kept me a secret. She, who had never looked for me. She, who I couldn’t forgive but who needed someone to hold her.

Cherie drove me home and most of the trip was spent in silence, each of us caught up in our own thoughts. When she pulled over outside the uni, she forgot to turn the indicator off. It clicked on and off, on and off, on and off, and as each car whooshed past, the old car trembled. I opened the door and Cherie leaned across.

‘Kirrali, will you at least talk to Charley about a heart transplant? Please.’ She was almost begging me.

‘Of course I will,’ I replied. But I wished I didn’t feel so caught in the middle. Why did it have to be me?

Twenty-four

So much had happened since I had moved to the city. I was living independently for the first time, studying law, working at the cinema, getting to know Kirk and forming a friendship with Erin. I had discovered both of my biological parents, my biological maternal grandparents, an aunty, an uncle and two cousins. I had been bashed by racist thugs and I had been misquoted in the newspaper. No wonder I was freaking out.

Thinking Kirk and I might be related had been one of the biggest spin-outs. Now that I knew I was a 'Jackson', I desperately needed to see him and tell him about Charley. I dialled Kirk's number and was a bit miffed when he didn't answer. I left a message but he didn't call back that night or the next day. I didn't sit around waiting for his call though. I had other family duties. I had already told Mum and Dad all about meeting Cherie and my grandparents. Now I needed to tell them about Charley …

> *Dear Mum and Dad*
> *I need to tell you about Charley, my Aboriginal biological father.*
> *But I want to do it face to face. I'll come up to see you, okay?*
> *All my love, Kirrali*

I don't know why I needed to tell them Charley was Aboriginal. He had to be, of course.

✘ ✘ ✘

Uni. When I'd begun, all my dreams, the sense of who I was and who I would become, were tied to my university results. Now, just a few months down the track, my results were dismal. My essays were overdue with points off for every day late. I'd been skipping lectures and relying on Amber's notes and I could tell our friendship was wearing thin. Even my attendance at tutorials was erratic.

One day, I was rushing to the library when I bumped into Adam. I probably looked slightly crazy. I had let my hair grow and it had sprung into

a mini afro.

‘Where have you been?’ he asked, not hiding his curiosity. ‘I was looking forward to a few debates with you in class. But you’ve been a no-show.’

‘I’m dealing with stuff.’

Honestly, Adam was the last guy in the world who I would choose to pour my heart out to, but one hour, three cups of tea and a shared chocolate doughnut later, I had told him everything. Even a little bit about Kirk and me.

‘You are one hell of a good listener,’ I said, finally winding up.

He laughed, ‘Only because you’re so fascinating. Honestly, my life is so boring. My family is so boring. What they want of me is so boring. I’m thinking of quitting.’

‘Quitting what — your family? That might be a bit difficult.’

‘No, law.’

I groaned. Not another one. ‘Damn it, Adam. It’s hard to get into law. You’ll make a great lawyer and then you can work in a completely non-boring way … unless of course you want to run away to join the circus.’

Adam laughed. ‘I’ll think about it,’ he said. ‘The circus, that is. But Kirrali, I’ve been thinking. You’ve got to spend time with your dad. If you want, I’ll be your study buddy. I’ll copy my summaries and we can discuss them. Then we’ll do revision every couple of nights. And before you say, why would I do that, just hear me out. It’ll keep me motivated, knowing that you’re relying on me to help get you through. Otherwise, I might as well start learning to walk a tightrope.’

He was looking at me with such pure, I don’t know, *enthusiasm*. I gave him a hug. That was my answer. I’d let him help me — Ms Fiercely Independent. I was realising I couldn’t always stand alone and that it was good to let people help.

When I got home, there was a letter from Dad. It was the best letter I had ever received.

Dear Kirrali
You could never disappoint me. And we look forward to hearing about your ‘other’ dad.
Love Pa

✘ ✘ ✘

The next time I went to see Charley, I went on my own and I arrived at the hospital just as visiting hours were beginning. I burst into Charley's room, not wanting to miss a moment of our time together. He was lying there, completely still, eyes open but staring. I actually thought he was dead. Then he sighed.

'Hey …'

I crept in and sat in the visitor's chair.

'Hang on while I take a slash.'

I wasn't sure if I should help him but I figured his pride would not take kindly to the offer so I tried to appear nonchalant while he manoeuvred himself off the bed and staggered over to the bathroom.

I looked around. At least he had a private room. No flower arrangements — maybe that was a bit sissy for a bloke like Charley. And only one card. I peeked inside and began to read the note — *You Ratbag Charley …* — when I was startled by the sound of someone entering the room. I turned and came face-to-face with a big woman wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt.

'Oh,' she said, when she saw me.

Was there something wrong with me being there? I sat down on my usual seat beside the bed. Well, 'usual' since my first visit.

'I'm Noreen Jones. And you are?' she asked.

Who am I? As in, who am I in relation to Charley? 'I'm Kirrali Lewis.'

She eased down on the end of the bed, puffing from the exertion. 'From up Echuca way? Maybe we're related then, eh, girl? Where you from?'

'I'm from … doesn't matter. Lewis is my adoptive parents' name.'

'That's all right, my girl, we might still be related.'

A silent laugh overtook her body like a building at the mercy of an earthquake. No leaf on her tropical print shirt was left unshaken. Then a young guy entered the room. He was big, he was shy and he didn't make eye contact. Noreen made the introductions.

'This here is Kirrali. This here is my son, Ahmed. Don't worry 'bout the name, he's as Koori as me or you.'

I felt a little rush — I had been included. I was one of the mob. Ahmed was followed by an older boy who slipped into the room.

'And this is his other brother, Jamal. This is Kirrali, from "it doesn't matter".' Another laugh.

I suddenly felt claustrophobic. Where was Charley? He had been in the bathroom for ages. Maybe I should leave. I eyed the door but my escape

route was blocked. Here I was, in a small hospital room, surrounded by a group of loud blackfellas in even louder shirts who I may or may not be related to.

‘Having a party without me?’ Charley demanded from the door of the bathroom.

‘God, Uncle, did ya spill half ya guts in there?’ the younger boy asked.

I was taken aback — the man was chronically ill — but Charley laughed it off.

‘Crap hospital tucker. Now if Sammy’d bring in some of that delish Afghani tucker. Where is he anyway?’

Just then, a tall thin man walked through the door. This must be Sammy, the boys’ father, and he must be Afghani. He immediately produced a clay pot, whisked off the lid and the room was filled with a truly appetising scent. Bread appeared and they swooped on the food like a flock of seagulls. I was offered some but I declined and just sat quietly. They were all so intent on eating that I felt superfluous. So I made my getaway, pausing at the door to give Charley a small wave but he was oblivious.

I walked down the corridor leaving behind the sounds of their laughter and them all talking over the top of one another. It made me sad. Charley hadn’t even introduced me. If they were his family — the young fella had called him Uncle, after all — then they were mine too. Maybe I was an embarrassment.

I pressed the lift button. There was a holler down the corridor. I turned to see Charley standing at the door to his room, yelling at me. Suddenly he swayed. I bolted back towards him but the boys appeared and caught him on either side. They carried him back into the room and I followed.

Charley was back on the bed. ‘Don’t you go disappearing on me, girl.’ He could barely talk. ‘You should be shame, nicking off on ya old man when he wants to introduce you round.’

‘Old man?’ Ahmed exclaimed. ‘Unc, you sly dog!’

‘This is Kirrali. My daught.’

They all turned and stared at me. I could feel myself blushing.

‘Actually, when you look close, she’s the dead spit, brother,’ said Noreen.

‘On the outside, maybe,’ said Charley, who had gained a bit of wind. ‘On the inside, she’s been brainwashed.’

I couldn’t let that go unchallenged. ‘But I haven’t. My adoptive parents would never do that. They’re white but they were always wanting me to

watch TV shows like *Women of the Sun* and they gave me *Boney* books to read. But I wasn't interested. I guess I just wanted to fit in.'

Charley's face contorted and he erupted into laughter. 'My daughter. Wants to fit in. Ha, ha. The joke's on me.'

They all laughed and I felt like complete shit. I held back the tears and was about to bolt again.

'Charley, give the girl a break. She'd be in shock, poor love, findin' out you're her old man,' chastised Noreen. 'Don't worry, love, he's the biggest stirrer around. I'm your Aunty Noreen, love. Good ta meet ya.'

She gave me a hug and I felt better, safe even. They all gave me a hug, even the boys.

'Aunty, as in related, or Aunty as in Elder?' I ventured.

'You're my niece, girl. I'm his big sister.' She turned to Charley. 'See she knows something. She knows about Elders.'

'She'll know a lot more before the week is over. Here, daught, pull up ya chair and I'll tell you all about our mob.'

'Got a spare couple of days?' laughed Noreen.

'Weeks.' suggested Sammy. 'I'm still learning and we've been married twenty-two years.'

'I've got as long as it takes,' I replied.

'That's all very well and good,' Charley said. 'But promise me you won't neglect your studies, Kirrali. Our community desperately needs Aboriginal lawyers. We've only just started to fight for our rights.'

How could I tell Charley I was interested in corporate law? I settled down beside him and he began to yarn about the Jackson family. Aunty and the cousins threw in a few stories of their own. Charley talked all about the political events and battles — war stories — while Noreen's stories were about the family, who had what kids, where they lived and what they were doing. The cousins just had cheeky stories of who'd been caught doing what. My gut was sore from laughing. If I included all the second cousins, I had fifty-one cousins.

Twenty-five

I was kind of stuck without transport as the uni and the hospital were on different sides of the city. Cherie still had her brother's car so when she agreed to pick me up each afternoon and take me to see Charley, how could I say no? The downside was that Cherie was beginning to get on my nerves. She was always bugging me about Charley's health and passing on bottles of vitamins that she thought he should take. I'd give them to Charley and he'd literally chuck them in the bottom drawer of his bedside cabinet.

One day, after some polite questions about my studies — yes, they were going fine — she got on to her favourite topic.

'Did you talk to Charley about the transplant?'

I had to tell her straight. 'He doesn't want to have a transplant.' 'Why not — this hospital is one of the best in the world for transplants.'

'It's Charley's choice.' What could I say?

'But he needs to think of his loved ones. We don't want to see him die prematurely. I'm sure you don't.'

I felt like she was trying to emotionally blackmail me. 'Cherie, he doesn't want one.'

'But it might give him more time,' she whined. 'He's not worried about getting a white heart, or something like that?'

I couldn't believe the gall of her. 'Don't be ridiculous. Charley doesn't believe a heart's white or black. It's nothing like that.'

'Oh …'

I almost felt like I was explaining Charley's wishes to a child.

'He's just accepted it. He say's it's his time.'

Her voice began to crack up again.

'But I don't want him to die. It's not fair. It's just not fair. Why does this happen to me?'

I looked at Cherie in amazement. 'Actually, it's Charley who is dying — not you.'

I was fuming and I sat with my arms folded across my chest. Cherie pulled into the hospital car park and as soon as she had parked, I got out and

slammed the door. I had just met my biological father and he was amazing. But my biological mother was becoming a pain in the arse. Why her? Why did Cherie Taylor have to be my frigging mother?

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I got home just on dusk and Kirk was waiting out the front of the college.

‘Hi stranger,’ he said, and I went a little gooey.

‘Well, hello stranger to you.’

‘Why haven’t you …’

‘Why didn’t you …’

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

‘You go,’ I said to Kirk.

‘I left so many messages but you didn’t call back. Every night in my hotel room, I sat waiting by the phone.’ Kirk pulled a cute sad face.

‘Hotel room? What messages?’

‘Lisa? Leeda?’

‘Luda. Now I get it.’

Just at that moment, the very same Luda was walking up the steps towards us.

‘Her,’ I muttered under my breath.

‘No guests, remember,’ said Luda. I could feel myself tensing up as she walked past.

Kirk, reading my mind, put his hand on my arm to stop me as I stepped towards her.

‘Come on, it’s not worth it,’ said Kirk.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me back down the steps. It turned out that he had been called away to Sydney on an acting job. It was the first time he’d been on such a big stage and my initial hurt at not hearing from him soon gave way to pride.

We caught a tram into town for spicy noodles and once Kirk had finished telling me all his news, it was my turn. When I told Kirk who my father was, he was almost speechless. Charley had been one of his heroes for as long as he could remember. It was so good to talk and so great that he understood what I was going through. And later, so good to kiss him.

✘ ✘ ✘

The hospital discharged Charley a few days later. His health had plateaued and the pneumonia was under control. He'd been pacing the corridors of the hospital like a caged animal anyway. Cherie worried about him going home to his bachelor pad but Charley scoffed at her, saying he'd been fending for himself all of his life and that, anyway, he was on a first name basis with the pizza delivery man. This didn't seem like a recovery plan that maximised his wellbeing. At least on this, Cherie and I agreed.

Cherie organised to take him home and Charley invited me to come. I was curious to see where and how he lived. When we arrived at the hospital, Charley was already packed and sitting on the edge of his bed like an eager boy waiting for his first trip on a steam train. I noticed he'd thrown the get-well cards in the bin. Of course, he noticed that I noticed.

'It was nice that they wrote but I don't need to keep them to know how they feel about me.'

When Charley went to the bathroom, I retrieved the cards and slipped them in my backpack. He didn't need them but I did.

The nurse came to take his temperature before he could be discharged. 'Best of luck, Charley,' she said. She leant forward and gave him a hug.

I smiled. He really did leave an impression on everyone he met.

Charley's flat was small and dark but cosy and neat. There was an old scrubbed pine table in the kitchen and a plastic set of kitsch flour and sugar containers on the shelves. The rugs in the lounge room were faded, but beautiful, Turkish kilims. The lounge suite was vintage Danish style. Charley joked that he found all his furniture on the street.

He was so much more relaxed in his own home, even if he was now surrounded by bottles of tablets.

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The next day I went back and dragged Kirk along. It was amusing to see him and Charley act in a blokey way with one another when neither of them did that around me. They talked football and politics and then they really got started.

'Anyway, what happened to your study, young fella? So much promise — then what? Couldn't ya handle it?'

'Nah, wasn't that. I thought I'd become a hot-shot actor. Seemed like a good move for a bloke with a face like mine.'

‘What a load of crap. We need lawyers. You prancing around on a stage lookin’ pretty isn’t going to change a thing.’

‘Charley.’ I was offended even if Kirk was pissing himself laughing.

‘Anyway, you’ve got one here.’ Kirk put his arm around me.

‘Her? She’s no good. She wants to be a wanky business corporate lawyer or some rubbish.’

‘Charley.’ Now I was really offended.

‘We need black faces on our stages and screens too, Uncle Jacko. Not just in courtrooms and clinics. We can tell our stories our way. I was thinking about developing a one-hander.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A one-man show about a radical black activist.’

‘Who’d wanna see crap like that?’

‘Me,’ I said, struggling to get a word in.

‘Jesus! Kirrali, better get one of them corporate gigs after all.

You’ll be supporting him.’

‘Times are changing, Unc. Our stories are changing things. We’re edumacating them fellas but doing it our way.’

‘Not fast enough, Kirk.’

While we were talking about acting, Kirk told us that Margaret from the cinema was finally having her stand-up comedy debut at a local pub. She wanted us to go for moral support and Kirk suggested Charley come too. I warned him that Margaret was crazy but he was unfazed. We made arrangements to meet up on the night and then I noticed that Charley was looking really tired all of a sudden. I told him we had to go, I had study to do.

‘Yeah, go on you two, get out of here. I’ve had enough of your ugly mugs and crazy dreams for one day.’ But he shook Kirk’s hand and he kissed me on the cheek, his rough bristles digging into my skin.

Twenty-six

I did my best to fit everything in — visiting Charley, Kirk, study, work — but I was still behind in my studies and I was worried I was going to fail my torts exam. Amber was urging me to apply for special consideration but I couldn't bring myself to do that. I wanted good grades without special treatment. That much I was still clinging to.

One evening, I was settling down with Adam's notes and tucking into a bag of salt and vinegar chips when there was a knock at the door. Luda, stood there, clearly annoyed.

'There's a phone call for you — you know personal calls are only for emergencies.'

'Maybe it is an emergency.'

'Maybe it's not.'

I ran down to the foyer and grabbed the phone. Luda had got me worried. Every phone call made me anxious lately.

'Hello?'

'It's me.' It was Cherie.

'Is something wrong?'

'It's fine. Everything's fine. Charley's fine. I'm fine.'

'Okay, well this phone is meant for emergency calls only.'

'Oh.'

There was silence.

'Hello?'

'It's just that … now that Charley's back home, I haven't seen you.' The whine in her voice came across loud and clear. It got my back up.

'I'm busy, Cherie. I'm behind in my course. I have a job. Then there's my family — the Lewis's — I hardly even get to see them. And I visit Charley whenever I can.'

'Yes. He said you visit nearly every day. I thought transportation was an issue.'

I chose to ignore that last comment. 'So that doesn't leave time for anything else,' I said.

‘Like me, you mean? Your biological mother?’

I lost it. ‘You’ve got a cheek,’ I screamed down the phone. ‘When in the last eighteen years did you ever try to find me? Did you once wonder what I was doing? If I was all right? If I was loved?’

I slammed down the phone. Then I jumped when Luda stepped forward to use it. I couldn’t help my sarcasm. ‘It’s only for emergencies.’

‘Ha, ha,’ she said with a sneer.

I stomped back upstairs and sat at my desk. I stared blankly at the pile of half-written essays, textbook chapters I was meant to précis and statutes I had to learn. So I did what I had to do. I grabbed Shonky the teddy, hopped into bed and pulled the doona over my head.

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The pub where Margaret was doing her comedy debut was smoky, dim and the carpet was sticky. It was a Friday night and we scored ourselves a table just off to one side of the stage. The place was almost empty. As for the acts, well, luckily each one was only ten minutes long. Then it was Margaret’s turn. I was right to worry. She soon spotted me and Kirk. She waved and we sheepishly waved back. It was the first time I’d seen her out of her cinema uniform.

‘I’m just wavin’ at me little co-worker there. Smile, Kira, else they won’t see you in the dark.’

I was shrinking inside but Charley was pissing himself laughing. She spotted him and made a beeline over to us.

‘And she’s with her darkie friends. So who are you, handsome?’

‘Charley.’

‘Charley. Charles. Named after bonny Prince Charley, no doubt. But much better lookin’ on account of not bein’ inbred. Yes, you are tall, *dark* and handsome. Where have ya been all my life?’

‘Around. Where have you been?’ Charley seemed to be enjoying himself.

‘Around. Tell me, handsome ...’ she manoeuvred her tall ample frame onto his lap, squirming around suggestively.

The audience tittered, unsure whether they should be appalled or delighted.

‘What do you call an Aborigine in a snow storm?’

I nearly died of shame.

Charley replied, as quick as a flash, ‘A lamington?’

‘Boom, boom.’ She high-fived him. ‘All right then. Beginner’s luck. What about … why are aspirins white?’

‘Ah, because they work?’

I threw my hands over my face in humiliation.

‘Hey, Charley, you and I should be a duo. Black and white-on?’

‘No thanks. I won’t be around.’

‘Why’s that, handsome? Skipping the country? Gotta go check on your Swiss bank account?’

‘I’m dying. Unless you can incorporate that into the routine.’

‘Dying? What of? Black plague? Black fever? Black …’

This was too much. I stood up. ‘Stop! It’s not funny.’

‘Sweetie, hang around and I’ll have a go at everyone else too. Even me — a six-foot dyke with feet like a yeti.’

But I was already running out of the bar. Outside, I leant my head against the wall. A moment later, Kirk’s arms were around me. He held me tight, saying nothing, just letting me cry. And cry. And cry. After about five minutes, Charley and Margaret came out.

‘Sorry, I had to finish my routine. You only get one slot,’ said Margaret. ‘It’s like I have Tourette’s, isn’t it? I just say the things that other people think. The stuff just comes out.’

‘Well, I wasn’t offended,’ Charley added. ‘I thought you were deadly.’

‘Deadly?’

‘Good,’ the three of us said simultaneously.

‘Yeah, I reckon I did all right,’ said Margaret. ‘Nothin’ got thrown at me. Except a phone number from the cutey in the front row.’

I was feeling better but also a bit embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry I spoiled your routine,’ I said. ‘I am such a wuss. My life has been full on lately.’

‘I’ll say. Discovering Cherie was your mum and I’m your old man would freak anyone out,’ Charley said.

‘Having me as your boss,’ added Margaret.

‘And wondering if you were related to your boyfriend,’ added Kirk. ‘That’s scary.’

‘How did you know that?’

‘Koori grapevine,’ said Charley but he sounded a bit odd. Slurry.

‘And if it makes you feel better, I incorporated your walk-out into my routine. Got some good laughs, actually, at your expense.’

‘Yeah, she was on f- f- f-’ Mid sentence, mid word, Charley went silent.

We stared at him. He was sweating and holding his chest, and then his eyes glazed over. They rolled back and he collapsed sideways. I screamed. Blood was trickling out of his ear. Kirk ran to call an ambulance while Margaret placed Charley in the recovery position. A couple of people wandered past.

‘Had a few too many schooners, eh, mate?’ the bloke said.

‘Fuck off,’ replied Margaret. ‘He’s having a heart attack.’

‘Oh, oh, sorry, mate,’ said the guy, slinking off.

Margaret took control and started CPR. She worked on Charley until the ambulance arrived. By the time the paramedics took over, Charley had come to. I was effusive in my thanks to Margaret but she brushed it off.

‘Can you tell me your full name, mate?’ one of the ambos asked Charley.

I started to answer but the ambo held his hand up to stop me. Charley looked bewildered.

‘Can you remember what happened, mate?’

He shook his head. ‘She was funny,’ he pointed to Margaret, which made us laugh.

‘Do you know what day it is?’

‘It’s Friday isn’t it?’

‘Have you had a drink tonight?’

‘No,’ I practically yelled. ‘He’s stopped drinking. He’s got a heart condition.’

Charley shushed me. ‘It’s okay. It’s his — whatchamacallit — job.’

‘No drinks? Okay, that’s good. Yarndi?’

Charley shook his head. ‘Long time ago. Back in the dark ages.’

‘That’s good, mate. Now we need to take you to hospital.’

‘I just got discharged.’

‘Sorry, mate. You’ll need follow up.’

Charley was taken to hospital, with me travelling in the back of the ambulance with him. So much for the fun night out. But thank goodness for Margaret. And to think, I once vowed I would never forgive her.

Twenty-seven

I visited Charley most nights. The word was out that he was sick and a steady stream of well-wishers, family members, footy players and more came to pay their respects. I met oodles of Uncles and Aunties — some of them were even related. Michael Jackson from the pub was a second cousin. I met a few old timers and loads of young fellas, nephews and nieces. There were community people and community leaders.

One day, he had a visitor who looked vaguely familiar. Charley introduced him to me as ‘Frank’ and then I made myself scarce for a bit. When I came back they were still talking — about Aboriginal affairs, policies and stuff — and Frank was hanging off Charley’s every word. The conversation turned to Essendon’s chances in the finals, with Frank betting him $50 that they wouldn’t make it to the top four. They shook hands with me as their witness. Charley now looked tired and Frank said goodbye, giving him a quick hug. When he left, I swear I saw tears in his eyes.

‘Who was that?’ I asked, curious.

‘That’s Frank, the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. If you’re going into politics, girl, you better know your allies and your adversaries.’

My mouth fell open.

Charley laughed, and then he coughed and spluttered. ‘He’s just a bloke, Kirrali. But it was decent of him to make the time. Especially as I’ve had a go at him more times that you’ve had hot dinners.’ He allowed himself a smile. ‘All’s fair in love and war. All’s fair, eh?’

‘And who said I was going into politics anyway?’ I demanded.

‘To be Aboriginal is to be political. You’re born into it. Can’t fight it.’

‘Kirk said something like that to me once. I hadn’t believed him.’

‘You’ll be right. Cherie’ll guide ya. Listen to her. She usually gets it right. How are you two getting along anyway?’

I really did try to fudge the truth. But how could I?

‘She annoys me.’

He laughed, ‘Get past that and she’s terrific.’

At that moment, Cherie stuck her head around the door. I felt a rush of embarrassment. I'd just been canning the woman.

'Who's terrific?'

'Why you, of course,' Charley said smoothly.

'Of course I am! But no, who's terrific?'

'Cherie — we were talking about you. Kirrali was just saying she finds you annoying and I agreed but that you were also terrific.'

I nearly died. Cherie just stared at me and then — unexpectedly — laughed. Her laughter set Charley off laughing again.

'Yeah, I know I am,' Cherie replied. 'But guess what? She's inherited that trait.' She pointed at me. 'You're annoying too.'

I suppose I was. My brothers and sisters had been saying it for years but I thought it was just because they were my siblings. I was at least as annoying as Cherie and probably just as much of a drama queen. That made me think. I had been so caught up in my own life I hadn't taken much time to think about my family or my friends. I hadn't even spoken to Erin since she discovered that Mavis had been her sister. I didn't have her phone number but Kirk had given me her parents' address so while Cherie and Charley were talking, I sat down and wrote her a short note.

> *Dear Erin*
> *I'm missing you. Breakfast at the College isn't the same. Actually there is no brekkie without you — the new guy doesn't offer the same level of service. I am really sorry about Mavis, I hope you are okay. Erin, I have met my father. And you were the one who inspired me to find my biological family.*
> *Your friend, Kirrali*

✖ ✖ ✖

The next day when I went to see Charley, he was engrossed in a conversation with a tall, distinguished-looking Aboriginal man. Charley patted the bed and I quietly propped up beside him.

'You see, Charley, the lad's just not settling down. You know how these boys are, bros,' the man said. 'Launched out of his small town, into the big smoke, big bucks to spend, big expectations on his shoulders and lots of attention.'

'Not always the right kind of attention,' added Charley.

I wondered who they were talking about.

‘The girls go for a lad like him. Up and coming. High profile.’

Were they talking about an activist, a current affairs host or a track and field star? Probably a footballer.

‘The wrong girls. White girls from the right side of the track who like to be a bit rebellious. White girls who think it’s cool to get into bed with a star ruckman.’

Yep, a footballer.

‘Yeah well, one of them got her claws into him and got a ring on her finger, quick smart. Used the old pregnancy routine, I heard.’

Gosh, they could be talking about Martina and Robbie.

‘They mess with the lads’ heads. All of a sudden, these boys from the bush are driving European sports cars and wearing bloody Pierre Cardin suits and thinkin’ they’re Gary Ablett’s best friend.’ The man had worked himself up into quite a rage.

And Charley seemed revved up about it too. ‘They don’t catch up with their families — no more tossing the footy around with the young cousins, teachin’ them a thing or too,’ he said. ‘And, bros, have you noticed that them girls are always blonde? They’re turning our lads into bloody coconuts.’

‘Yeah, well, this one’s a redhead but otherwise you’re spot on, brother.’

They *were* talking about Martina. I couldn’t believe my ears.

‘Course I’m right, brother. You need to have a yarn to them lads, show ’em these girls are just gold-diggers who have no respect for their culture.’

‘No!’

The look of shock on Charley’s face was priceless. ‘Kirrali?’

‘Are you talking about Robbie Jonus? If so, you’re also talking about his wife, Martina, who happens to be my best friend. You couldn’t have got it more wrong. She is not turning him into anything. Whatever he’s doing, he’s doing by himself. She doesn’t know what happened to the guy she married and she wishes that the Robbie she fell in love with would come back. But he’s too busy getting free drinks at nightclubs. So please don’t character assassinate someone you’ve never met.’

Charley turned to his mate with just the hint of a smile. ‘Ken, I’d like you to meet my daughter.’

With that, Charley started chuckling. Ken followed.

‘By crikey — like father, like daughter. The apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree.’

My temper was still up and I gave Charley what Mum used to call the ‘evil eye’. Charley wasn’t fazed at all — he just pulled me across into a bear hug. It felt great.

‘Maybe I should be asking a different member of the family for help with the lad. Maybe daught here should be growling Robbie, to get him back on track.’ Ken looked at me.

‘What’s growling? And what’s a coconut?’ I had to ask.

The two men just laughed. There was so much I didn’t know.

✖ ✖ ✖

The talk about Robbie had stirred up more guilty feelings about my friends. It had been ages since I had seen Martina, yet she had supported me when I first met up with Cherie. I resolved to catch up with her on the weekend.

On Saturday arvo, I shut my textbooks. I bought a rainbow-coloured candle at the health food shop, hopped on a tram and rocked up to her townhouse. There was a ‘To Let’ sign on the fence. I stared at it, thinking I must have the wrong place. I poked around the letterbox, which was overflowing with junk mail, and found a letter addressed to Robbie Jonus. Where were they?

I wandered home, wracking my brain for a way to contact her or Robbie. Of course — Martina’s parents.

Martina’s mum was pleased to hear from me and tried to tell me all the news but I cut her short as I was calling from a pay phone and my coins were about to run out. She told me that Martina had just moved in with an aunty and gave me her phone number. Martina was living with an aunty? The same one she was bunking with when she was a student? Did that mean her and Robbie had broken up? I hoped not.

I rang the aunty’s number. No one picked up so I left a message on the answering machine.

I sat there, the afternoon sun turning everything peachy, and I thought again about all the people I’d pushed aside lately — Martina, my parents, my brothers and sisters, even Kirk and Erin — people I cared about and who loved me.

A year ago I didn’t know one Aboriginal person but now I could include quite a few in my close circle of friends. Before I had just been scared.

Deep down I was fearful that there would be something shameful lurking there — a father in prison or a drug-addicted mother. I was frightened of my own Aboriginality, fuelled by all the negative stories in the media. I was racist. My parents weren't, and Martina wasn't, but I was. What an idiot I had been. I thought I was so clever, so superior. But I was just a lost, scared girl.

I left more messages for Martina but in the end it was Charley who solved the problem of finding her. I had snuck in a visit before work and was venting my frustration when he grabbed a bit of paper and wrote down an address. He told me that the aunty was Aunty Jenny but that's all he would say. After uni the next day, I took a train out to the western suburbs and fronted up to the address. The house was a plain weatherboard, a little tired but tidy. I knocked on the door. I could hear laughter inside.

A small but solid Aboriginal woman answered. 'Yes?'

'I'm a friend of Martina's.'

'Oh?'

'And Charley said it would be okay.'

'Charley Jackson? Why the hell didn't you say so?' She bundled me inside and shook my hand vigorously.

'Martina's in her room. Second door on the left. Go through.'

I negotiated the tiny kitchen which was filled with muscular young men. Despite their amazing physiques, they looked shy and I felt shy because I had no idea who they were.

I knocked on Martina's door and there was a muffled 'come in'. When I went in, she was lying face down on the bed.

'Martina. What's wrong?'

She turned over and I could see she'd just been listening to her Walkman. 'Kirrali. Wow, long time no hear …'

'I rang. You didn't get my messages?'

'Are you kidding me? Can you imagine how many girls ring here? A house with five VFL footy players, it would be like a hotel with a revolving door. Aunty screens all the calls so most of the messages get deleted, pronto. Unless of course she knows the caller.'

'Five footballers live here? The house looks so small.'

'It is. It's three bedrooms plus a bungalow out the back. A couple of the fellas share a room.'

'But they must be earning big bucks. Why do they live here?'

I looked around. Martina and Robbie had obviously ditched their furniture but they still managed to squeeze in a stereo, TV, clothes, a towering stack of tapes and videos and sporting gear. I was puzzled. Maybe Robbie had gambled away all their money. Maybe they were bankrupt. Martina could see I was confused.

‘Don’t look so worried. We’re renting out the townhouse for a couple of years. It’s better for Robbie and great for me.’

I must have looked doubtful and Martina just laughed. She made room on the bed and I squished in amongst the cushions.

‘I mean it. Aunty is the best. She runs a tight ship. Robbie has to be home at a certain time. If he’s late, there are consequences. Everybody else indulges Robbie. He gets freebies wherever he goes and he gets picked up for red carpet events in a limo. But Aunty makes him pull his weight. She’s full-on scary. Robbie has chores — there’s even a dishwashing roster — and she growls him if he doesn’t do them.’

‘Growls? That’s what Charley says.’

Martina burst out laughing. ‘It’s blackfella talk. Sometimes I feel more Koori than you, Kirrali.’

Her words slashed like a stingray’s barb. She’d said something similar to me the first day of uni. I swallowed down my hurt. I was here to see if Martina was okay.

‘Anyway, who’s Charley?’ Martina asked.

I told Martina all about meeting my father and the rest of the family. I couldn’t believe it when she told me she already knew Charley and would often see him at footy events. We chatted just like old times.

Martina had more stories about Aunty’s legendary temper and how the boys were scared of her, even though she was a good thirty centimetres shorter than any of them. She also confided that Robbie had made good progress with his gambling problem. I was so glad to see the sadness that had enveloped her was disappearing.

Martina urged me to stay. ‘Aunty won’t mind — she does this loaves and fishes thing that makes any dish feed whoever is in the house.’ But I had to go. I had study to do and I was a long way from home.

She walked me to the door. ‘Can you thank Charley for me? From the two of us?’

‘Charley? What for?’ I asked.

‘For organising for us to stay with Aunty. Robbie said it was his idea.’

‘Oh yeah, of course,’ I replied.

The sly dog. He hadn’t told me he’d been working behind the scenes. There was still so much I didn’t know, or understand, about Charley and the way he operated. So much to learn …

Twenty-eight

At the hospital, there wasn't much more they could do for Charley other than ensure he was comfortable. He refused to go into palliative care so Cherie and I took him home. We settled him in and were having a cup of tea when I felt his eyes on me.

'What's on your mind?' Charley asked.

Seeing Cherie and Charley physically close, but knowing they were so different, had made me wonder how they'd got together in the first place.

'Umm, where did you two meet? I actually don't know the story. Was it in school?'

'Ha! I left school at fourteen. Chased out by low expectations,' said Charley.

'That was in the sixties,' added Cherie. 'Today you would have got a scholarship.'

Charley pursed his lips in Cherie's direction as if to say, go ahead, tell her.

So Cherie told the story of how they met at the Boundary Pub and how he gave her a hard time 'cos of her white ignorance but how they eventually got together, and how they met up at his tiny flat each Saturday ... and how, perhaps inevitably, he broke it off.

They were both caught up in their own thoughts as if something had been uncovered, dusty and yellowed, after years of being hidden away.

'I am sorry. I didn't really love you,' Charley said.

'Wow. Thanks for that.'

'But I didn't really not love you either.'

Cherie just stared at him.

'It's like I wouldn't let myself feel anything. True to my word, I have never been involved with a white girl since.'

'What? That's racist,' I blurted out.

'Yep.'

'He had to do what he had to do,' Cherie said.

'Don't defend him.' For once I was on her side.

‘I’m not.’ A note of bitterness flavoured Cherie’s words. Or was it wistfulness? ‘You did what worked for you.’

He shook his head, ‘But it didn’t work for me. All the relationships that followed were nuts. I’m not saying Koori women are crazy but put us together, throw in politics, family issues, extended family issues, fighting for causes impossible to win, seven days a week, our door always open to anyone — it’s like a powder keg. It wasn’t their fault. They were good women. Of course they all wanted kids and I couldn’t deliver on that one, for some reason. They all left me, went off and had five kids with some other mad bastard. Now I’m ‘Uncle’ to them young ’uns. Leila’s the daughter of one of my exes if you’ve been wondering where she fits in. So, you, Kirrali, are a miracle.’

‘A miracle? I am?’ This made me happy. I wondered how I would have felt to have biological brothers and sisters though. Or half-siblings. But that wasn’t really an Aboriginal thing. I never heard Koori people say half-brother, or stepmother, or biological mother.

‘Anyway, you would have driven each other crazy,’ I said.

‘Yes. Crazy brave. I am sorry, Cherie.’

It felt like my simple question had awakened a sleeping beast.

‘You really did break my heart.’

‘I get that. I am sorry. Lots of sorrys today. Who said it was the hardest word?’

‘The government. Do you think they will ever say sorry for the things they have done? Taking the children away?’ Cherie asked.

‘Pah. Not likely. Not in my lifetime anyway.’

I felt a pang. Was Cherie right — should he have had the transplant? I wasn’t so sure anymore. I wanted to scream at him, ‘What about me? Don’t leave me.’ But instead I said, ‘There’s still so much you could accomplish.’

‘Any other million dollar questions? Fire away,’ Charley said.

There was something else that I had been wondering about. ‘Why were you alone at the pub that night Kirk pointed you out to me? I thought you looked so lonely. It stuck in my mind.’

‘I do remember that night. I’d just got my results back from the hospital so I went to do what I always do — drown my sorrows in beer and arguments. I was questioning what my life was about. I had no wife, no kids. Who knew you were only two metres away?’

I didn’t know what to say.

‘It’s been a very full life. You have made a difference in so many ways,’ Cherie said quietly.

‘Save that for the obituary,’ Charley said, with a laugh. ‘It’s okay. I’m happy.’

He smiled at the two of us. He looked tired.

‘You need a rest,’ I suggested.

‘Yeah.’

He made his way gingerly to the bedroom, then paused. ‘Cherie? I need a favour.’

‘I can do it,’ I cried.

But Charley shook his head and Cherie followed him into the bedroom. As the door clicked shut behind them, I heard him say, ‘Lie with me’.

I wasn’t ready to leave so I fiddled around in the kitchen and put on a load of washing. When Cherie came out a little later, her eyes were shiny with tears but she looked kind of calmer than usual. Happy even.

‘He’s scared. He just needed to be held. I guess we all do. Kirrali, I am going to move in here for a while, to look after him.’

Was she was just weaselling her way in with him when he was too sick to fight her off? I barged into Charley’s room.

‘Hey! Knock first,’ he said crossly.

‘Sorry. Charley, I can move in. It doesn’t have to be her.’

He laughed. ‘I might be on death’s doorstep but I still control my own destiny, daught. I asked Cherie to stay.’

‘But why? I could look after you.’

‘You’re a law student. That’s a big thing. Do you know that we only have a handful of Aboriginal lawyers in this country? This is the eighties. That’s shameful. Did you know that Bob Bellear was our first law graduate and that wasn’t until 1978? That’s practically the day before yesterday. We need Aboriginal lawyers. Lots of ’em. So we need you to study and do well.’

I felt sick at the thought of having all those hopes heaped upon me. And the terror must have shown on my face.

‘Kirrali, just do your best. Whatever that is. You don’t have to live up to my expectations. God knows, I haven’t. And I’ve had a lot more time on this planet than you have.’

‘I could still stay here and help you out. I want to.’

‘I know but I want Cherie to. We’ve known each other a long time. And there’s things she can do that I couldn’t ask of my daught.’

‘Yuck.’ I couldn’t help myself.

‘Whoa there. I meant wiping my moom when things get really bad.’

I’d heard that word before, that time at the pub with Kirk and his mates. But I had no idea what it meant. Nose?

‘Moom?’

‘Bum.’

‘Does that have anything to do with the word ‘moomba’?’

‘Well, the story goes that a couple of Elders had been asked to name this Melbourne festival. You know, they wanted a nice traditional Aboriginal name, a feel-good name. And those fellas, being cheeky buggers, suggested “moomba”. They said it meant “coming together in celebration” but instead it meant “up your bum”. How’s that for payback?’

He chuckled. I began to laugh. So that’s what they were carrying on about in the pub.

‘Are you sure about Cherie staying?’

‘I am. But you could do one thing for me.’

‘Yes,’ I said eagerly.

‘I’d like to meet your family,’ he said.

‘You would?’ I asked.

‘Yep. Will you bring them to see me?’

‘Here?’

‘Where else?’ he said, amused. ‘This is my home.’

I said that I would organise it as soon as possible. He made me promise.

Twenty-nine

I had been putting off introducing my parents to Cherie so I was relieved when she had to work the afternoon they came to visit Charley. It was simpler this way.

Dad, Mum, Beatrice and Michael filed in to meet Charley one by one, each stopping to shake his hand. I think my parents were a bit emotional but they didn't want to show it. It was awkward for a moment because Charley had one of his coughing fits, just like the first time I met him.

'Come in, come in. My casa, your casa,' said Charley.

Mum held up a big tangly bunch of flowers.

'For me?' Charley said.

'Picked from my own garden.'

She moved closer to show him the flowers. Brilliant orange kangaroo paws, pale yellow hakeas and long spidery scarlet grevilleas intermingled with the silver discs of a round leafed gum. Charley plucked a gum leaf, crushed it in his fingers and inhaled, closing his eyes.

'You like the old natives, do ya?' he asked Mum, with a twinkle.

'I wouldn't grow anything else. They attract the birds,' replied Mum seriously.

'Well, this old native doesn't. Not anymore, anyway.'

Mum blushed as prettily as the grevillea.

'Just gammon. I'm an old stirrer from way back. Kirrali tell you that?'

My little sister, Beatrice, approached Charley, wide-eyed. 'Are you an acrotavist?' she said. 'You know, like in the circus?'

Charley didn't skip a beat. 'Well, I sometimes feel like I'm flying through the air hoping that someone will catch me at the other end,' he said, equally seriously.

My dad intervened. 'I think she meant activist. Sorry, we were talking about you on the way here.'

'Same thing, eh? We do outlandish things with no safety net,' Charley guffawed.

He pointed me in the direction of the cupboard and told me to get out his juggling balls. Charley was full of surprises. Giving Beatrice his full attention, he juggled three balls, first in a loop and then in a pattern with one ball going higher. He added another ball so there was an arc of colour and movement. Bea was mesmerised. Charley caught two balls in each hand and with a flourish he presented them to her.

‘For you, Madame.’

We all laughed as Beatrice squealed with happiness. She turned to Mum, ‘Can I?’

Mum looked at Charley, who nodded.

‘I won’t be needing them,’ he said softly, and I felt a drift of sadness slip into the room.

Charley lightened the mood. ‘Tell me about this daughter of yours. I can’t get any sense out of her, she just babbles nonsense.’

‘Ours. Daughter of ours,’ Mum said softly. Charley smiled.

‘Well,’ said Dad. ‘Where do you want us to start?’

‘How about at the beginning?’ Charley handed Dad a beer and beckoned him over to the couch.

‘Oh, no,’ I groaned. ‘Dad, please don’t. No stories. Not the one about the lost dogs’ home.’

I realised I’d called my dad ‘Dad’ in front of Charley. I blushed. No one noticed except for Charley, who mouthed, ‘It’s okay’. I marvelled at how easily he read me, how he understood what I was thinking.

‘Kirrali, make you and your mum a cuppa and bring out the cake. It’s a wattleseed and lemon cake, my speciality.’

Charley baked? When I walked back from the kitchen carrying the cake in an old Tupperware container, he had a thoughtful look on his face.

‘That old container, it’s Cherie’s. Make sure she gets it,’ he said.

I nodded, unsure of the significance, but the cake was delicious. I ate two pieces smothered in thick cream while I listened to Mum and Dad tell stories about every daggy thing I did as a kid. There were lots of laughs and a few poignant moments, like when Mum recounted the day she gave me the spangled cross. I hadn’t known it was an important day for her too.

Dad and Charley chatted about music — they both loved reggae. Dad was envious of Charley’s extensive record collection — you can’t buy records when you have six kids, he said. Michael was fascinated by Charley’s sporting memorabilia. Charley had photos with all the top

Aboriginal sports people and political leaders. Some of whom I now even recognised.

When Beatrice shyly asked Charley to juggle again, he started off doing a spectacular loop but then each ball crashed to the floor. We all laughed, thinking it was part of his act but then I saw his right hand was limp and he looked confused. I panicked, thinking it was a heart attack, but again Charley read me and shook his head. He was okay, just tired.

Mum exclaimed that they'd been there for hours and surely Charley needed some rest. She had brought along a casserole, of course, and Dad had put together an album with all my childhood photos.

Dad went to shake Charley's hand and Charley held on.

'It must be strange for you to meet me but it's been an honour to meet the parents who raised her up. I just want to thank you so much for growing her up, for caring for her and showing her love. She is blessed to have you as a family and I want you to know that, from me.'

Dad's eyes glistened. 'We're proud to have brought her up. We love her so very much.'

'Our daughter,' said Charley as he put his arm around my shoulder. 'She's a bit of a dill but I don't blame that on you. It's genetic.'

He squeezed me tightly and I knew he was joking.

I put the casserole on a low heat and said goodnight. I walked down the drive between my parents, my arms around each of them. We were going out for dinner, a rare night in town for all of us.

'He's a wonderful man,' Mum said.

'I know.'

I paused, not sure how to say what I was thinking. 'You don't mind that I love him, do you?'

'Kirrali, the more people you love and who love you, the richer your life will be. We just want you to be happy,' Dad said.

'We're not threatened if that's what you mean, darling. We will always be your parents,' Mum added.

'I'll always be your sister,' Beatrice added. 'Can I play with your Barbies?' She was definitely one to seize an opportunity.

'You can have my Barbies but only if you don't cut their hair or use shoe polish on them. Not everyone has brown skin, you know.' I was referring to an earlier incident.

'I know that,' she said. 'Only special people like you and Uncle Charley.'

I looked at my family. I loved them. I was so lucky. I did feel a pang of guilt about Cherie though. I should be nicer. I would be, I promised.

Thirty

Out of the blue I got a follow-up letter from the Koori Legal Resource to say — surprise — the police had made no progress in finding the men who had bashed me and Kirk. Another file for the too-hard pile. I appreciated that they had kept me in the loop though.

I was flat out with exams and essays and I only had the chance to talk to Charley briefly. Cherie was looking after him so I thought I'd give them some space. I was looking forward to the uni holidays when we would have more time to hang out together.

Adam had lived up to his word. He still gave me his photocopied notes from the lectures I missed and we caught up every few nights to revise. He was so smart.

✘ ✘ ✘

Finally all of my assessments were handed in, and after my last exam I gave myself the luxury of one long sleep-in to recover. I figured Charley wouldn't mind me being a little late. Rushing out the door, I bumped into Erin, who I still hadn't seen since the inquest.

'Erin! What a surprise. It's so great to see you.'

'Kirrali. Sis, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

'You poor thing …'

'Me?' I was puzzled at how concerned she looked. 'How are you? I never got to say how cut up I was about your sister.'

'I got your note. Thanks. But Kirrali, about your dad, I'm really, really sorry.'

'Thanks.' She had heard he was dying, from Kirk I guess.

'It's so unfair, Kirrali. Is there is anything I can do?'

'I'm going to see him now. Why don't you come too?'

'Come with you? Now?' She looked confused. Then she froze in anguish. 'Oh my God.'

Suddenly I realised this whole scenario was wrong.

‘What’s going on?’

Just then the phone in the foyer started ringing.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t know …’

‘Didn’t know what? Tell me!’

‘My friend works at the hospital. You know how the Koori grapevine works.’

The phone was still ringing and no one was answering it.

‘Will someone answer that fucking phone?’

A student scurried out of her room and took the call. I stared at Erin.

‘What?’

Her head fell in shame. ‘He was rushed in during the night.’

The girl who answered the phone called out, ‘It’s for you.’

I didn’t even know her name.

I picked up the phone and croaked, ‘Hello’. It was Cherie.

‘Kirrali, it’s Cherie. I’m so …’

‘It’s okay,’ I said into the receiver. ‘I know.’

Erin was beside me, her arms around me. It was like we were fused together in a furnace of pain. Charley was dead.

✖ ✖ ✖

It was the night before the funeral. I had been asked to put a few words together but was struggling to write anything that made sense. I felt like a fraud. A coconut. Who was I to talk about Charley?

There was a knock on my door. Cherie. She was standing there awkwardly, holding a box. I invited her in. She hadn’t been in my room before but she didn’t look around. Her eyes were fixed on the box she was holding. I sat on the edge of my bed and she took the only chair by the desk.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

I nodded, then shook my head. ‘You?’

‘Same. I’ve been meaning to give you this.’

She handed me the box and I opened the lid. There was a bundle of newspaper clippings, some of them as dry and yellow as autumn leaves. Charley in his twenties with a huge afro, one hand raised in a triumphant fist and the other pulled around his back as a grim-faced cop handcuffed him. Next I pulled out a book called *Bush Tucker*. Author, Charley Jackson.

There were more newspaper clippings — editorials about health and land rights with photos of Charley, sometimes sporting a headband in our

Aboriginal colours. As the clippings got more recent, his hairdo shrunk but his moustache got more luxuriant to the point where it was like Tom Selleck's in *Magnum P.I.*

Cherie pointed to one. 'The Springbok tour. We both got arrested.'

'What was that?'

'Oh, a tour by the South African rugby union team. We were calling for a boycott because of the apartheid policies in South Africa. Not that things were any better in Australia. Thousands marched. There were smoke bombs going off everywhere. The good old days.' She smiled wistfully.

One clip, out of chronological order, showed an impossibly young and good-looking Charley in front of what looked like an election day booth. The poster read, 'Say Yes'.

'What's that?'

'That's the Referendum. 1967.'

'It was mentioned in one of my lectures and everyone turned and looked at me. I didn't know much about it. Only that Aboriginal people weren't allowed to vote previously, yeah?'

'Not exactly. It meant that Aboriginal people were under federal legislation for the first time and not legislated for willy-nilly by the states. For the first time, you mob were counted in the census.'

'Wow. And Charley helped with the campaign?'

'He was pretty young but he cut his teeth on that campaign. So many people worked hard on it. Pastor Doug Nicholls. Faith Bandler. It was amazing, the most successful Referendum ever, with ninety per cent of people voting 'Yes'. Before then Aboriginal people had no rights to move around without permission, own property or even look after their children. In some places you weren't even allowed to marry who you wanted. White men were not able to marry the Aboriginal mothers of their children. And vice versa.'

'That was the year I was born. Was that why you two …'

'No, it had nothing to do with that. Charley didn't follow rules anyway. He just said we were a mistake.'

'Does that mean I was a mistake, too?' A surge of anger shot through me.

'Of course not. How could you say that?' She looked so sad my anger went in a puff. She had lost him too. And she had lost me. Perhaps it wasn't all her fault, me being given up.

'I'm sorry.'

‘That’s okay. It’s been hard all round. I’ve been angry at my mother too. Anyway, he left you this.’ She handed me an envelope. It was thick, like a wedding invitation and the words on the front were written in a beautiful calligraphy style.

‘He asked if you could read it, you know, after … And there’s more. Charley asked me to give you these. To help you understand him.’

Cherie reached into her bag and pulled out half a dozen dog-eared notebooks.

‘His diaries. Maybe you could think about turning them into a book. You know, some time when this is over.’

She got up to leave.

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Maybe we could work on the book together?’

I stepped towards her and gave her a hug. I could feel her trembling.

‘I’m sorry, Cherie.’

‘I know. Me too. Get some rest.’

But I spent the evening reading Charley’s diaries. The story of my father’s life. And through his stories, I finally began to understand my mother’s love for him.

Thirty-one

I woke up feeling good, even though I had only had a few hours sleep. This was going to be one of the most important days of my life. It wasn't about me. It was a day to honour *him*, a person who was a stranger a few weeks before and who now occupied a place in my soul, kind of like when a song takes over your brain. You can't escape from it or unforget it. It's just there. That's how I felt about Charley. His essence would always be there in me, unchangeable, inescapable.

I chose my clothes with care — red skirt, black tights and a grey shirt with dots of yellow through it. I didn't want to look like the Aboriginal flag but I did want to look colourful. I wanted to look joyful. Kirk arrived wearing a bright red shirt and hugged me without saying a word. I thanked my lucky stars I had met him and that he was so patient with me.

Cherie had offered to pick us up. We were going to be okay. We had our differences but they were insignificant compared to what we had in common — our love and respect for Charley.

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The Koori Advancement Centre was filled with the scent of eucalyptus leaves — big bundles of them were at each entrance and everyone was encouraged to take a branch. Just weeks before, I had come here to catch a glimpse of my biological mother. Now I was back, attending my father's funeral service. It was overwhelming. So was the crowd. Cherie whispered to me that she'd never seen so many people packed in. Almost everyone wore a piece of red clothing — there were lots of footy scarves. It seemed more like a giant reunion — families, Elders, people hugging each other, clustering in groups. Kirk pointed out a few politicians from both sides of the fence. Kids ran around playing. Charley would have loved that.

There were so many people that I knew. Everyone I had met so far in my year of 'big education', not at uni but in my life. I caught a glimpse of Rosie and Doreen from Koori Family Connect and even the lawyer from

the Koori Legal Resource and the politician dude. Charley's sister, Noreen, bustled over with the two boys sheepishly in tow.

'Kirrali, daught …' She pulled me into her warmth and floral perfume.

The boys were next. 'Sorry, cuz.' Small words but they meant a lot. I had never been called 'cuz' before.

I caught a glimpse of Martina's flaming hair on the other side of the room. She was with Robbie and Aunty Jenny. There were other football players too, not that I knew who they were but Kirk did.

I could see my family arriving up the steps and I waved them over. Rochelle, Tray and Tarquin never got the chance to meet Charley but I know they would have loved him. Bea ran up and gave me a big hug. As my family made their way through the crowd, Cherie said she was nervous about meeting my mother but I reassured her that it would be fine. When I introduced the two of them, it was a surreal feeling. Mum opened her arms and Cherie fell into them as if they were old friends. Without even thinking, I put my arms around the two of them and we group hugged. Wow. I had two incredible mothers and two magnificent fathers.

Then Erin appeared in front of me, a look of anguish on her face. 'Kirrali, will you ever forgive me?'

'Erin. It's okay. There was no good way to find out.'

Her relief was palpable. As she held me, her hair cascaded like a breaking wave around both of us. It smelt like apple.

'Your beautiful hair.'

'I was going to chop it all off. As my punishment.'

'What? No, never. And Erin?'

'Yes?'

'Stay my friend. I need you now, more than ever. Remember, that day when you said I could make up my own mind? Well, I have.'

Erin's smile was like the sun coming out after a spring storm.

A recording of Bob Marley's *Get up, stand up* began to play and we took our places up the front — Kirk on one side, Cherie on the other, my parents next to Cherie.

To begin the ceremony, an Elder did a moving Welcome to Country. Then Aunty Noreen got up to say a few words. At first she was overcome but once she composed herself she spoke of how proud she was of Charley, her only brother. Next came the CEO of the Centre. He talked of Charley's political work over almost thirty years while a slideshow played as a

backdrop. Charley was at all the milestone moments — the rallies, the protests, standing on the steps of parliament, state and federal. As each slide appeared, there were excited murmurings as people recognised the occasion or themselves. Everyone busted out laughing at Charley's huge 1970s afro and flared cords. The slideshow was a beautiful tribute to his public life. I was in awe. Then I was called up.

A hush fell over the crowd, a stillness. My heart was beating so loud it sounded like a metronome. All eyes turned in my direction. Even the children seemed to stop wriggling. It was the dead eye of the storm. I took a deep breath …

'A lot of you are wondering who the hell I am to read the eulogy of a man who played such an important role in the Koori community. Well, I'm proud to say, I'm Charley Jackson's daughter.'

A murmur passed over the crowd.

'Yes, it's natural to be surprised. I think Charley was too when he found out about me just a few weeks ago.'

Another murmur, followed by a chuckle.

'You know, I'd often heard that real life is stranger than fiction yet I'd never experienced anything so strange as discovering my biological parents for the first time. It has made me very proud to meet them both and to get to know them. However, I could never have imagined that within just a few weeks I would be standing here honouring the life of Charley.'

My voice wavered but I was determined not to slip up.

'I would also never have presumed to deliver this eulogy, especially as I knew my father for such a short time. But he asked me to do it and how could I refuse him? Has anyone ever refused Charley?'

The crowd responded, 'No.'

'So why did he ask me? He said anyone else would, as he put it, "Bullshit on about bullshit".'

The audience laughed at this, hearing Charley in the words.

'Charley told me that all that stuff about reconciliation and land rights was bullshit too. He said what was important was family. Of course, Charley didn't even know he had a daughter until recently. Unless there are other Charley surprises out there. I understand he was a bit of a devil.'

Again the audience laughed — thank God. Charley had made me promise I wouldn't be too sombre.

‘What I don’t know about Charley would fill a book, or six. Luckily my, um, mother … just gave me his diaries. Six of them.’

‘But, Charley, if you are listening, I have to disagree with you. It’s not bullshit. You devoted your life to those causes. You have made a difference in so many Aboriginal people’s lives. And caused a bit of grief for the gubbas along the way, I gather. But even they love you — the brave ones, the ones who care to listen, the ones whose heart’s burn with a desire for equality. If it wasn’t for you, our country wouldn’t be the way it is today. So Dad, Charley, I’m going to take up where you left off. Like the Bob Marley song — *Get Up, Stand Up* — I’m going to do all I can to be ...’

Once again, my voice faltered. I fixed a picture of my father, serene and at peace, in my mind. He was okay with this so I had to be too.

‘I’m going to do all I can to be … a card-carrying Koori. Like Charley, my father.’

I stepped away from the podium before remembering something.

‘Oh, by the way, Charley asked that you all join him in a prayer ... for Essendon to win the Grand Final on Saturday.’

The crowd broke up laughing, some of them through tears. That’s just the way Charley would have liked it.

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After the funeral, back in my room after Kirk had left — I needed some space and was exhausted — I slipped into bed clutching the letter from Charley. On the back of the envelope was a PS: *Don’t forget to collect that $50 Frank owes me for Essendon finishing in the top four.* I laughed. Charley!

I tore open the envelope. First, there was a faded Polaroid photo of a young pretty blonde with a blanket draped over her shoulders, looking radiant with love. I peered closely. Cherie. Wow. He had kept the photo all that time. Next, a beautiful mottled grey feather, which I took to be a brolga feather. Lastly, the letter.

> *Yaama Kirrali*
> *Maybe you are hoping for some words of wisdom from your old man. Sorry, I’m going to disappoint you on that one. At the funeral they will probably make out I’m some kind of hero. I’m not, far from it. Ask Cherie. Ask anyone. Also, I am not much of a*

writer (despite the books and the diaries) as I prefer to hear the sound of my own voice or so it's been said. You — you can't believe how much joy you have brought to my life in these last few weeks, knowing you even exist. You are on a journey to discover who you are and where you belong but becoming yourself is not a destination. It never ends. I would have loved to see what you might achieve and perhaps to see you become a mother too. But it's not about anyone else's expectations — even mine. Your achievements need to be about being true to you and having good relationships with the people you care about. You be you. That's as wise I can be.

I'm not a sentimental person but you are truly a miracle and have made these last weeks the most important of my life.

Thank you.

With eternal love

Charley, your dad

Cherie's postscript

It's about ten months since we lost Charley … Kirrali moved in with me a little while back. I joke that she's still receiving subsidised housing. She doesn't find that amusing as she's saving to go to an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory as a volunteer. Her end-of-year marks weren't great — in fact she nearly failed — but being the stubborn girl she is (I tell her she gets that from her father but she disagrees) she refused to ask for special consideration. This year she's back hard at the books and is doing brilliantly. It appears she doesn't want to do international law any more. No one was more surprised than her.

Between the books and the cinema, where she's been promoted to weekend supervisor, she doesn't have much time and she spends a bit of that sleeping as uni students do ... oh, and helping out at the university Koori Club. She's quite the political animal now.

What else? Kirrali doesn't see much of Kirk but it's not by choice. He's fun and we both adore him — so does my mother, strangely enough. It's because he's landed himself a permanent role in a TV series. The downside is that it takes him out of town. My phone bill is huge as a result.

Erin is still struggling a bit so she's moved home to be with her family. We both hope she'll come back and finish her studies. Kirrali's other friend, Martina, now has twin baby girls. They are so cute. Her hubby is doing really well, although he's had a few injuries. He's mentoring some of the Aboriginal boys who come down to the city to play VFL. I think he is doing okay as far as the gambling goes. But Kirrali doesn't talk about it much.

I have taken up volunteering on a greening project. We plant indigenous plants on remnant land. Kirrali declares that I am still fixated on the 'natives'. Plants are easier than people.

I visit her mum and dad regularly (Kirrali calls me Cherie and I'm fine with that). They show me photos and tell me stories. I bought Kirrali a new dog but he lives with them. It's a small black mutt, built like a brick, with a big head, bouncy, a bit slobbery. Kirrali called him Chazza because he's very obedient and never barks ... she's got an ironic streak (which I tell her she gets from me, but she disagrees). We're getting on fine.

PS Margaret has a regular spot as a stand-up comedian at a gay bar. We sometimes go there. She sends the audience up something chronic — and they think she's *hilarious.*

Kirrali's post-postscript

Reader — please ignore all of Mum Cherie's ramblings (she doesn't know I call her that), especially the ones to do with any genetic claims she might have over my better traits … I mean, c'mon, you couldn't find two people who are less alike than me and her.

The only other thing to mention is that we both miss Charley terribly. Hey, at least we have that in common.

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