



University of
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THE TRICKSTER METHODOLOGY

DESCRIBING THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF FICTION

WRITERS

A thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on a creative writing research investigation that examines creative practice and how it led to a written product (a novel) as well as an exegesis that offers a unique methodology for describing the creative process. The trickster methodology combines elements of practice-led research with trickster qualities (slippery, subversive, disruptive, unstable, creative, destructive, ambiguous) by identifying four qualities that are particularly relevant to creative writers: shapeshifting, play, chance, and order. The theoretical frameworks that underpin this methodology include Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and Sara Ahmed's notion of willfulness. The trickster methodology is distinct from existing research frameworks and models of creativity as it reflects the fluidity of the writing process and the ways in which writers embody that fluidity. In this way, it extends upon our current understanding of practice-led research, offering a model of clearly defined traits that remain malleable and flexible enough for individual use while providing a way to describe the creative process that leads to a written product. This research investigation draws upon a series of interviews conducted with career authors, which were mapped against scholarly materials, as well as my own creative practice, to identify trickster traits within the creative processes of fiction writers, and to identify how creative practitioners can intentionally engage with these qualities as a way to challenge themselves to do or make differently. The creative artefact is the product of this methodology. The creative work and the trickster methodology were developed simultaneously. Insights gained while writing shaped the methodology, and my figurative and metaphorical understanding of the trickster figure informed the narrative. The trickster methodology challenged and changed my creative process, resulting in an innovative novel, which I could not have written prior to this investigation. Together, the two works explore through critical and creative voices and strategies a fresh way to approach and articulate the creative process. This dissertation is a multi-bodied and multivocal trickster whose liminal perspective supports practitioners in exploring the range of possibilities within their creative work while also accounting for the continuing and evolving process that is creativity.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I, Tara East, declare that the PhD thesis entitled The trickster methodology: describing the creative process of fiction writers is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 17/02/2023

Endorsed by:

Dr Nike Sulway
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Student and supervisor's signatures of endorsement are held by the University.

RECOMMENDED ORDER OF READING

There are two movements within this thesis: an exegesis and a creative work. In order to understand the argument established in the former, it is my recommendation that the exegesis be read prior to the creative artefact.

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Writing is a collaborative effort, and I am deeply grateful to a number of people whose generous advice, knowledge, and support assisted me in the completion of this project.

I would like to thank my partner for your unwavering belief in me and this project, and for insisting we celebrate every win, big or small. This dissertation is dedicated to you, the ultimate trickster.

Mum, giving me a book every time I stayed home from school sick was, perhaps, not a great strategy, but now I'm acknowledging you in my dissertation, so it looks like things turned out all right. To my best friend, Samantha Schraag, your consistent encouragement convinced me, again and again, to trust the process and just keep going.

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Adapted excerpts from the creative work have been peer reviewed and published in *SWAMP Journal* and *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I did not mean to become a writer. It crept up on me like a cat. One moment I was alone on the couch; the next I had a companion. When I was eight, bored and waiting at the kitchen table as Mum cooked spaghetti bolognese, I wrote a picture book and thought, *I am going to be a writer*. The next week I was convinced I would go on to become the third member of the band Roxette. Later, my ideal vocation changed to visual art, then drama. An English teacher provided feedback on a short story and asked if I wanted to be a writer. ‘No, I am going to do something health related.’ I went on to get a scholarship to study Pharmacy, then swapped to Journalism, worked at a newspaper, then realised I earned more money waitressing. And yet, writing kept coming back to me, or I kept coming back to it. I dabbled in creative non-fiction, blogging, editing, short stories, and then eventually realised I wanted to write a novel.

I read countless writing-advice books in preparation, but mostly they discussed the same concepts covered in high school: how to create a convincing character, plot, and sense of place—albeit in greater detail. These books provided the nuts and bolts of writing—what makes a story—but they did not tell me *how* to write a book, and they certainly did not tell me how to write *my* book. I did not know how to figure out what my creative process was, or what that even really meant, or what, exactly, I should be trying to do on and around the blank page. What kinds of

questions should I be asking and when? What would I need to do or become in order to write this story? Ten years later (if you can even put a timeline on such things), my process continues to evolve.

The creative process is often portrayed as fickle, mysterious, slippery, and idiosyncratic. It is a practice that those outside the field have attempted to understand by creating formulas, categories, labels, models, and systems—usually through a psychological lens. The scholarship that articulates what the creative process is like for writers from inside their creative practice is only now emerging. While beginners and professional writers understand the basic features of novel writing—we know it when we see it—there is little information about the experience of writing.

This exegesis offers a methodology for creative practice that I have dubbed the trickster methodology. Tricksters and writers share a variety of traits: they are creative, resourceful, responsive, impulsive; they are makers, and destroyers. They exist in the margins, see and do differently, disrupt the status quo, and are rule breakers. The trickster methodology focuses on the four key traits that my research revealed best represent the experience of creative writing: shapeshifting, play, chance, and order. This methodology is unusual in that it was created by a writer, for writers. It is intended to be a practical tool that describes creative writing at various stages, including the strategies that writers use when crafting fiction. Regardless of the writer's chosen genre, work practices, or skill, this methodology enables writers to shape it to suit their own purposes. The development of this methodology has changed my creative practice in exciting and innovative ways. I embrace the messy, spooling, and wandering ways of my creative process, instead of attempting to control them, and my focus has shifted from being goal-driven to process-orientated.

The creative artefact that forms part of this dissertation, *Constant Companions*, was crafted while actively developing this methodology. Concepts found in scholarly materials assisted in building the theoretical underpinnings of the methodology, which then influenced *how* I approached the drafting and revision of the novel, including the creation of trickster characters and writing in a way that was ‘tricksterish’. The insights gained through the writing process, as well as interviews with nine career authors, allowed me to identify the key traits and map out what they meant for writers. This dissertation is a documentation of my evolving experience as a writer and the ways in which my understanding of the creative process continues to unfold and change. The trickster methodology is a flexible framework that supports the creative process which, like the trickster, is unfixed. It acknowledges that a writing practice is constantly in the process of becoming something else in response to the needs of the writer and their work.

The concepts presented are aimed at creative writers, particularly the methodology, though it may also be of interest to critics and creative practitioners across arts disciplines. This methodology offers both a way of better understanding the creative process of fiction writers and a rich description of creating that can assist active writers as they challenge their intuitive process, acknowledge the unpredictable, and create space for play, joy, and risk. The trickster methodology, like tricksters themselves, is not self-contained and autonomous. Just as tricksters draw from the materials at hand to create and embody multiple beings and shapes, this methodology can be combined with other theories, concepts, models, strategies, or tools that a writer is drawn to.

The trickster methodology is not a prescriptive system. It offers a way of creating that can assist a writer in understanding, crafting, and challenging their own

creative process, and, ultimately, *finding their own way*. It is a framework that can assist writers in understanding their identity as a writer and the possibilities that exist within their text.

This project has been led by the question: *How can a metaphorical and figurative understanding of the trickster archetype assist writers?* However, a number of sub-questions have also been explored. How can the intentional embodying of trickster traits enhance a writer's creative practice? How can the trickster methodology be used as a lens for understanding and analysing creative practice? In what ways does the trickster methodology draw upon and extend traditional research practices?

In **Chapter Two: Literature Review**, I provide an overview of existing scholarship on writerly practice, from the early twentieth-century models that tended to conflate creativity with problem solving to contemporary studies that use a psychological framework to describe creative practice. These explanations are mapped against the ways writers themselves describe their experience of the creative process, including intuitive and instinctive writing, the balance between engaging with and then distancing themselves from the world, the importance of joy, and their reflections on writing as an identity. The gap between how scholars outside the field systematise creativity and the way writers experience their craft resulted in the development of the trickster methodology, a model that is clearly definable while malleable enough for individual use.

Chapter Three: The Trickster Methodology outlines the theoretical frameworks that informed the creation of this methodology, specifically Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Ahmed's notion of willfulness, and contemporary articulations of practice-led research. The four key traits that inform the trickster

methodology—shapeshifting, play, chance, and order—are outlined. Clear definitions of each trait are offered, along with explanations of how they present in trickster characters and tales, as well as how they relate to the writing process.

How these traits appeared within the practices of professional writers is addressed in **Chapter Four: Case Study**. This chapter explains how the nine writers who participated in this study were selected, how the interviews were conducted, and the intentions behind the questions asked. Shapeshifting could be seen in the various shifts each writer made as they moved through different stages of writing, each requiring a unique set of skills and an ability to ‘slip’ into the narrative or mind of their character/s. Play can be seen in the vital role of imagination, the importance of joy, and the different strategies each writer used to find new possibilities within their texts. Chance describes the unpredictable insights or occurrences that offered a ‘missing piece’ or highlighted opportunities to strengthen aspects of the narrative. And order refers to the necessity for both chaos and control within a creative practice.

Chapter Five: Reflection has been placed after the creative work for contextual purposes. This chapter documents my own experience throughout this investigation. The focus of this project changed in surprising and significant ways; the trickster methodology has improved and enriched my creative practice. In this chapter, I articulate how shapeshifting, play, chance, and order emerged in intentional and intuitive ways while I was researching and writing my novel, *Constant Companions*, and this exegesis.

Finally, this exegesis provides an understanding of the experience of creative writing by offering a robust model that is replicable, but also flexible enough to suit individual needs. The trickster methodology, unlike existing representations of the

creative process, was formed from inside creative practice. It offers writers and other creative practitioners a model for discovering their own way; to better understand the act of making, the strategies that can enhance their practice, and the language needed to describe it. The trickster methodology offers writers a way to create exciting and innovative fiction, and to have fun while doing it.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most important things you must do to be a writer is that you have to find
your own way.
—Octavia Butler

Don't identify too strongly with your work. Stay fluid behind those black-and-white
words. They are not you.
—Natalie Goldberg

Review of the scholarly material

Research around creativity is interdisciplinary and has been explored through a variety of perspectives, including 'behavioral, clinical, cognitive, developmental, economic, educational, evolutionary, historical, organizational, personality, and social' (Runco 2014, p. xiii). The scholarly research that examines the process of creative writers is comparatively small and largely uses psychological frameworks and quantitative and qualitative data to form either modal accounts or systematic cognitive models to examine how creativity is used as a means of problem solving across a range of fields, from science to the arts. Within the discipline of creative writing, specifically, research into the creative process (beyond as a means for problem solving) is emerging through the publication of postgraduate dissertations and papers.

Creativity as problem solving

In 1926, Graham Wallas produced one of the earliest models used to describe the creative process. Wallas's model identified four key stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Preparation refers to the initial analysis and establishing of a problem. The creator will need to rely on their education, critical skills, and prior problem-solving knowledge; this stage requires conscious effort. During the incubation phase, no conscious effort goes towards solving the problem. They may, however, work on the problem subconsciously as their mind forms 'trains of association' (Wallas 2014, p. 81). The illumination phase takes place when an idea occurs within the conscious mind. This moment could be described as inspiration or a sudden insight. The phase is delicate, easily disturbed, and may not occur if the creator tries to rush the process. The final phase, verification, refers to the evaluation, development, and refinement of ideas. Though the model appears linear, the creator can return to earlier phases throughout their creative process (Dudek & Cote 1994; Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi 1976; Mednick 1962; Wallas 2014). Wallas's acknowledgement of the subconscious was significant and continues to inform our understanding of the problem-solving process (Amabile 1996; Busse & Mansfield 1980; Ochse 1990); however, it is not singularly concerned with the creative process of writers, but focuses instead on creative problem solving and how it appears across science and arts-based disciplines.

During the 1950s, there was a considerable increase in scholarly research on creativity (Wood 2015, p. 8). Donald W. MacKinnon, who led the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) at the University of California, Berkeley, was one among the earliest contemporary researchers investigating the creative process. His study focused on the reflective accounts of creators, the role of

chance, and coincidences that led to problem solving. He even moderated the time spent during various stages of the creative process. Later, MacKinnon showed doubt as to ‘whether creativity is always a matter of problem-solving’ (1978, p. 195): a comment that is counter to much of the literature published, both before and after this study, which identifies problem solving as central to the cognitive processes of creativity (Dewey 1910; Guilford 1956; Wallas 2014).

The description of writing as a process of continuous problem solving remains popular (Perkins 1981; Wertheimer 1959). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s commercially successful book, *Flow* (1990), used in-depth interviews with nine writers to identify and describe a series of basic stages that echo Wallas’s original model (preparation, incubation, illumination, evaluation, and elaboration) and provide the framework for a process that could be described as problem solving (Lubart 2009, p. 157). Discussing creativity in these terms is common in psychological studies, though some do reach beyond this limited view, or at least frame the conversation in a slightly different way. Rather than describing a creative person as someone who is adept at problem-solving, MacKinnon describes them as someone who ‘sees a problem where others do not’ (1978, p. 196). Frank Barron, who studied the creative writers at IPAR, developed his own complex definition of the creative process which acknowledged ‘preconscious or unconscious intentions ... sudden inspiration; temporal and emotional phases [and] self-criticism’ (1968, p. 238). Barron’s investigation did not result in a model for the creative process, as the findings were concerned with the personality of the writer participants and how that could be mapped against the Adjective Check List (ACL), California Psychological Inventory (CPI), and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

Other researchers are more literal and pragmatic when describing how a writer produces a new work, such as Hayes and Flower (1980) who identified three main cognitive stages: (1) planning what to write, (2) generating or drafting text, and (3) editing or revision. Hayes and Nash (1996) also outlined the logistical steps a writer may take, such as setting goals and creating plans for how to achieve them. These models offer a general summary of how a work is made, at least from an external perspective, but they do not acknowledge or include the creative person's internal process.

Writers and creativity

The scholarship continues to see-saw in this way as studies seek to develop clear models for the creative process, while others aim to depict creativity in a way that is more open and experiential. Lubart (2009) describes writing as an incremental process. A writer may begin with a phrase, string of words, or an image, which they develop through drafting and revision into something larger. Rather than having a story occur to them in its entirety, a novel is crafted through small, countless creative insights. The writer is then able to draw connections between snippets of dialogue, description, scene, images, or their own personal experiences—if relevant—as they continue to revise the work, elaborating upon the text as they edit. These stages 'can occur in recursive, nonlinear sequences, at a conscious or unconscious level' (Lubart 2009, p. 158). The writer may also experience bursts of productive creativity when they enter a state of mental flow, which could be described as a 'temporary state of heightened awareness, complete engagement, and concentration' (Lubart 2009, p. 158). Lubart is careful to make a distinction between general writing (journaling, assignments) and creative writing, as well as creative writing and other forms of art-

making. Again, he described creative writing as involving ‘a kind of linguistic problem solving’ as a writer may use ‘certain kinds of thinking’ that are not present in ‘noncreative writing task’, and different cognitive processes may be involved in the writing of a short story compared to a novel (Lubart 2009, p. 161). He acknowledges that the ‘evidence remains limited’, but that if there is a unique quality to the creative writing process, it is most likely related to the ‘sequencing of specific cognitive processes rather than the simple use or nonuse of specific processes’ (Lubart 2009, p. 161). He concludes with the disclaimer that there is ‘probably’ no single structure, model, or series of stages or forms to depict a universal approach to writing. However, it may be possible to identify an individual writer’s unique creative process. Lubart (2009) offers a strong explanation of the writing process, one that is more nuanced and flexible than general cognitive models, but it does not acknowledge the way a creative process can change and evolve.

In her in-depth study into the writing process of five authors, Charlotte Doyle uses ‘theoretical concepts from psychology, phenomenology, and literary theory, to construct a tentative modal account’ of the creative process (1998, p. 29). Doyle interviewed five writers about their practice as part of her research process, and describes the writing process in a way that mirrors Lubart, arguing that creative works begin with a ‘seed incident’—often an event that the writer experienced, heard, or read about—which sparks their imagination and provokes them to explore the idea/scenario further. These incidents were described as being ‘touching, intriguing, puzzling, mysterious, haunting, or overwhelming’ (Doyle 1998, p. 30). Doyle’s (1998) investigation extends upon previous problem-solving models of the creative process, particularly when she describes writers as shifting between the ‘writingrealm’ and the ‘fictionworld’. The writingrealm, refers to the writer’s

withdrawal from their daily life so that they may write; this stage may also include active planning and reflection. The fictionworld refers to the intuitive processes that occur while writing, when narrative decisions and options are improvised in the act of writing. Where Lubart (2009) was unable to identify *precisely* how creative writers differed from other arts practitioners, Doyle states that writers often work in ‘modes of thought-narrative improvisation, a nonreflective mode that typically involves stances in a fictionworld from viewpoints different from one’s own’ (1998, p. 29).

Doyle argues that while some psychologists continue to see the creative process as a sequence of problem-solving processes, the type of problem-solving that occurs in arts practices is more ‘difficult to identify’ than in scientific disciplines (1998, p. 30). Seed incidents act as a catalyst for creative works, but Doyle notes the vital steps that precede the creation of any fictional work, noting that a ‘writer must first make the *decision* to be a writer’ (1998, p. 31). Within her specific case study, for instance, ‘Each had decided to write fiction’ (Doyle 1998, p. 31).

Unfortunately, this vital precursor to writing—when a person claims their creative practice as part of their identity—is not elaborated upon. Doyle does, however, note that creators cultivate the conditions *they* need for *their* creative work to occur (Guber cited in Doyle 1998, p. 31), and Doyle loosely outlines the sequence of events that are the beginning of a creative work (and, perhaps, a creative life). After a writer makes the decision to be a writer, the seed incident is developed in ways that are supportive to that creator’s creative process (this could be environment, method, routine, ritual, etc.). The seed incident becomes an image, a sentence, or a paragraph. Doyle defines fiction as ‘an artistic form in which the imaginary world as it unfolds is created by the words of narrators with a point of view’ (1998, p. 32). For

this reason, it was imperative to the writers interviewed that they find the right narrative voice for their work. The right narrative voice may present itself from the start, or it may be an aspect of the work that emerges through constant and consistent engagement. Interestingly, Doyle found that the right narrative voice had to be discovered before a writer could sustain their ‘residence in the fictionworld’ (1998, p. 32). In a turn that appears slightly contradictory, a writer finds (rather than actively develops) the narrative voice by entering the fictionworld and using their imagination to explore various possibilities. This should be approached in a way that is free from expectation; the writer should be relaxed and work (or play?) in a way that is instinctive and intuitive. As one writer in the study said, ‘You don’t think about it’ (LaChapell cited in Doyle 1998, p. 32).

Writers spoke about the writingrealm in first person; here, they used active markers: I decided/wanted/saw/heard/chose. Their descriptions of their fictionworld were passive, as if the work already existed and they were *experiencing the story* rather than making it. They would express great empathy towards their characters as events unfolded through what Doyle describes as narrative improvisation (instinctive/intuitive writing). In this way, the writers also became observers of their story, as though the works were making themselves. They appeared to lose themselves in writing; their everyday identity softened and metamorphosed into those of their narrators or characters (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The boundaries between writer and character sometimes blurred as the writer embodied their characters to such an extent that they became their characters. Many writers have spoken of the extreme isolation and solitude they need to write (e.g. Garner 2020; Goldberg 2005; Lamott 1994; Powers cited in Berger 2003; Sarton 1973; Wood 2021), but writers within this study found company in the character/s that arose

through writing. This seems particularly important during the drafting stage, but Doyle's study goes beyond the initial exploration of the story as they also examine the revision process. The revision of a narrative is often repetitive, as the writer, who is working in the writingrealm, evaluates the manuscript and draws connections between what emerged in the fictionworld. Despite the small sample size used for this investigation, Doyle's focused findings have allowed for a close and intimate examination of what writing is like, experientially, as a writer moves between two different states (writingrealm and fictionworld, both of which are different from their everyday, conscious experience).

Jane Piirto (2018) closely examined the behaviours and external influences that affect the creative processes of 160 writers. Her extensive investigation resulted in the development of three categories that included a number of key traits: the five core attributes (self-discipline, risk-taking, group trust, tolerance for ambiguity, and openness to experience), the seven Is (inspiration, intuition, insight, imagery, imagination, incubation, and improvisation), as well as general practices, which include solitude, meditation, exercise, the creative process as study, ritual, and the influence of the transpersonal (the mystical mystery).

Piirto's work takes a theoretical approach to creative writing, and she notes that most researchers who have examined the creative process do so through a psychological lens. Piirto, too, occasionally uses this lens, though she is in a unique position as she is also a creative writer, teacher, and academic. The model she created covers a variety of areas, and while creative problem-solving has been heavily researched (Dewey 1910; Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi 1976; Isaksen & Treffinger 1985; Parnes 1967; Wallas 2014), as has the psychology behind creativity (Brandon 1968; Lubart 2009; MacKinnon 1978), she acknowledges that writers

themselves resist this type of rigorous scrutiny for fear that becoming overly aware of their own creative process, or the process of creativity in general, may destroy this mysterious practice (Piiro 2018, p. 90). This wariness extends to writers and visual artists completing PhD and doctoral research, where the intense examination of one's process might, as Sophie Masson states, result in 'freezing it or making it too self-conscious, or "self-reflective"' (2017, sec. 1, para. 4).

The five core attributes that Piiro (2018) identifies relate to qualities that a writer may possess. The seven Is refer to aspects of the creative process (approaches and experiences that occur before or during writing). General practices are, according to Piiro, the behaviours that either directly or indirectly support writing.

Piiro's five core attributes

Self-discipline, as the name suggests, is the writer's ability to treat writing as they would a conventional job: scheduling their time and approaching writing with serious intent. A writer is someone who engages with their creative practice often. *Risk-taking* acknowledges that writing is inherently risky. The publishing industry (fiction, non-fiction, and journalism) has been impacted by new technology, and a writer may be exiled (by their country or family) for sharing their opinion. *Group trust* is the writer's ability to build a community with other writers with whom they share their work, offer and receive advice, and generally support one another. This core attribute focuses specifically on writer-to-writer relationships, rather than professional relationships that a writer may have with literary agents, editors, publishing houses, or readers. *Tolerance of ambiguity* is a concept developed by psychologist Abraham Maslow, who states that 'creativity is correlated with the ability to withstand the lack of structure, the lack of future, lack of predictability, of

control, the tolerance for ambiguity, for planlessness' (1998, p. 239). Interestingly, Piirto found few writers who carefully planned their manuscripts before writing. Though outlining allows writers to solve (some) problems before drafting, most writers approach their manuscript with the intention of discovering their story. The final attribute Piirto describes is an *openness to experience*. This refers to the writer's willingness to read, research, learn, and consider others' perspectives. Writers, according to Piirto, are willing to have new experiences.

Piirto's seven Is

Inspiration is broken into five common subcategories: love, dreams, novel surroundings (travel), and the work of other writers (or creatives). These experiences could be thought of as the sources of the seed incidents that Doyle (1998) identified in her study. *Intuition* is described as a hunch, knowing, or gut feeling; it is the approach to creative work that most writers prefer. *Insight* refers to the sudden and unexpected 'aha!' that a writer may experience; however, insight usually occurs once a writer has made significant progress on a project. It may result in new information about an existing problem, or its solution. *Imagery* is what makes imagination possible. It is the images that a writer has within their mind's eye that their imagination then elaborates upon. *Imagination* 'is a mental faculty whereby one can create concepts or representations of objects not immediately present or seen. There are two types of imagination: reproductive imagination which recreates memory and productive imagination which forms concepts that are derived from objects' (Piirto 2018, p. 107). *Incubation* is when a writer takes a break from their project. While not actively engaged with their project, the writer's subconscious mind continues to work on the story. *Improvisation* could be described as automatic writing, where the writer works with intense concentration and at great speed.

Piirto's general practices

Piirto uses two or three anecdotal statements by key writers to demonstrate how general practices support the writing process. *Solitude* allows the writer to draw their attention inward and focus on creative expression. It is a way for writers to separate themselves from society and culture. *Meditation*, which connects to solitude, allows the writer to shut out the exterior world and reconnect with their inner self. *Exercise*, in particular walking, is the form of movement preferred by writers. A writer may write while walking or use it as a means for *thinking* about their story. Writing is not always sitting in a chair—it is a physical process. The *creative process as study* refers to forms of education a writer may engage in. Piirto, interestingly, focuses only on *higher* education and the study of writing in tertiary institutions (the types of learning that may occur in community groups and through reading fall into different categories; self-motivated learning through writing exercises, and critical thinking, reading, evaluation, and reflection are not included in Piirto's discussion). *Ritual* refers to the steps or behaviours that the writer may perform before or during a writing session. They are idiosyncratic and appear in a variety of ways from reading before writing, scattering nests of notes throughout the house, isolating for the first few days of a first draft, and automatic writing as a means to warm up. *The influence of the transpersonal: the mystical mystery* acknowledges that writing is not a cognitive process performed through a fixed, universal, and repeatable sequence. Most writers in Piirto's study considered writing a mysterious process that they often described using symbolism and metaphorical, figurative language.

Conclusion

Scholarship that defines creativity as continuous problem solving is a limited articulation of the creative process, particularly in relation to creative writing. The modal accounts offered by Doyle (1998) provide a more rounded description with the concepts of the writingrealm and fictionworld but they do not elaborate upon the stages that precede these states. The reasonable sample size of Piirto's (2018) study provides a broad and multifaceted explanation of the writing process, which effectively covers a lot of ground, but the fixed state of these categories and subcategories (which echo early problem-solving models) lack meaningful elaboration and nuance. In many instances, the definitions are somewhat shallow and fail to address the ways these qualities overlap, or whether the five core attributes, seven Is, and general practices might contain multiple characteristics. Some of the scholarly research acknowledges the idiosyncratic nature of writing, but given the nature of traditional research, this is often overridden by the need to provide a concrete model, system, sequence, or other objective and logical description of the writing process. And yet, the anecdotal evidence provided in interviews and the writings of writers frequently affirm the importance of a writer finding their own process, and the possibility that a writing process changes over time and between projects. It is this gap within the literature that this investigation seeks to address.

Review of non-scholarly material

The following section maps the explanations and experiences of writers, in their own words, against the scholarly models and concepts presented in the previous section. Speculative and science fiction writers have been selected because the creative component of this dissertation is a work of speculative fiction; however, the comments made apply to writing broadly, rather than being genre specific. Though the reflections shared are representative of individual experiences, distinct patterns emerge. The quotes presented are not academic in style; instead, their tone remains conversational and accessible, as they are drawn from interviews and books designed for popular markets. As this is a creative writing investigation, it is important that this review includes description of the creative process by writers as well as other researchers.

Wallas model preparation, incubation, illumination, verification

The linear creative process Wallas describes (preparation, incubation, illumination, verification) is not always reflected in studies that focus specifically on creative writers, nor is this how writers themselves describe their process. As Piirto noted, few writers engage with the preparation stage, which could be described as outlining, planning, or other pre-writing activities. Rather, the majority of writers approach their craft with a mindset that is exploratory: discovering the story in the act of writing.

A heavy reliance on instincts and intuition when writing can be described as being actively passive. Being *active* refers to making time and space for writing, but the writer must also show up with an intention and willingness to work on their project. Passivity, as Charlotte Wood describes it, is when a writer allows ideas to

come to them (2021, p. 82). Rather than critically developing a work, the writer allows the narrative to unfold in the act of writing. As Stephen King writes, ‘When I’m asked why I decide to write the sort of thing I do write, I always think the question is more revealing than any answer I could possibly give ... the assumption that the writer controls the material instead of the other way around’ (2000, p. 159). Haruki Murakami has a similar approach, stating, ‘I don’t choose what kind of story it is, or what’s going to happen. I just wait’ (2004, p. 119).

The description of a story taking over, or the writer *giving* themselves over to the story, is a common one. As Ray Bradbury notes, writers should learn to ‘stand aside, forget targets, let the characters, your fingers, body, blood, and heart *do*’ (1994, p. 152). He goes on to cite Wordsworth’s description of ‘a wise passiveness’, noting that rather than relying on their determination or effort to produce a creative work, a writer must trust instead in their subconscious. ‘It is a wise writer who knows their own subconscious. And not only knows it but lets it speak of the world as it and it alone has sensed it and shaped it to its own truth’ (Bradbury 1994, p. 152).

Bradbury outlines three general steps for writing: work, relaxation, and not thinking. When a writer stays with the writing long enough (in session) the work creates its own rhythm, and their body and intuition take over. When cognitive processes recede and intuitive practices come forward, the writer experiences greater relaxation, which causes even less *active* thinking. ‘Which results in *more* relaxation and *more* unthinkingness and greater creativity’ (Bradbury 1994, p. 143). Echoing Piirto’s assertion that insights are gained through hard work, Bradbury argues that a writer must put in the work, potentially creating a lot of bad material for years (through consistent daily practice), if they want to produce something remarkable.

‘The artist must work so hard, so long, that a brain develops and lives, all of itself, in his [sic] fingers’ (Bradbury 1994, p. 145). Wallas’s incubation period reflects the comments shared by many writers who find value in stepping away from a project so that the subconscious mind can work while the conscious mind rests. Bradbury argues the opposite, stating that writers stick with their practice—to stop writing is to ‘tighten up, become nervous and therefore destructive of the creative process’ (1994, p. 146). Bradbury concludes one particular essay on the topic with the suggestion that if a writer tries this method of creativity, they may arrive at a ‘new definition for *Work*. And the word is LOVE’ (1994, p. 153).

This idea is extended by other writers who perceive their story as already existing, complete, in another ethereal space. It is their role as the writer to be a conduit through which the story comes into existence. King has long described novel writing as an archaeological dig; he believes that writers must use the tools of their craft to excavate their story, a piece at a time, until eventually they have lifted the entire skeleton from the earth, stating, ‘I want you to understand that my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves’ (2000, p. 164). Ursula K. Le Guin made similar comments in regard to her work, saying that the story was telling her ‘what to write’ and that it was ‘a voice in the ear’ (cited in Wray 2013, p. 75). Wood is also a proponent of intuitive writing, and yet, her description alludes to greater effort on the writer’s part.

I’ve often compared the early stages of writing a book to the efforts of a sculptor with a lump of clay, gradually working away at it to discover the shape of a book—except that the writer must first invent their clay. And it can’t be any old clay, it must be exactly the right clay for this work, this time (Wood 2021, p. 20).

George Saunders believes that intuitive writing offers a way for the writer to move beyond the obvious or their own laziness. ‘My mind—my everyday mind—is predictable and mundane and reductive. If we sat here and brainstormed story ideas, all of mine would be obvious. So, this way of writing we’re discussing lets me sidestep that predictable, everyday mind, via technique’ (cited in Nugent 2019, p. 82). Alternatively, the author Richard Powers has said that when he is writing, he is trying to *find* the story: ‘Writing is attempting to find a life that does not yet exist’ (cited in Berger 2003, pp. 124-125). For Powers, the story does not exist separate from, or outside of, himself.

Of course, some writers do not recognise the role that intuition has played in their writing process until they are in the revision process. During this stage, a writer may notice a variety of connections within their work; some may have been deliberately created, while others occurred naturally through the writing process (Drabble cited in Wood 2021, p. 29). As Bradbury stated, ‘again and again my stories and my plays teach me, remind me that I must never doubt myself, my gut, my ganglion, or my Ouija subconscious again’ (1994, p. 119). The subconscious does not do all the work; a writer must continue to educate themselves and be engaged with the world, but when this conscious well of inspiration dries up, Bradbury describes the capacity to return to that ‘secret mind’ to see what observations it made when ‘I thought I was sitting this one out’ (1994, p. 119).

Doyle’s writingrealm and fictionworld

Doyle identifies the two distinct states that a writer may shift between when writing (writingrealm and fictionworld, but she does not write directly about the value of the steps that precede it (engaging with the world) or the struggle many writers experience in attempting to enter or remain in the writingrealm.

Writers are generally thought of as introverts, and the isolation typically associated with the craft seen as necessary, though at times unpleasant. ‘I really do believe that most writers start out learning how to cope with isolation and then end up desiring it’ (Powers cited in Berger 2003, p.114). Powers describes the relationship that writers have with the external world as paradoxical. A writer must remove themselves ‘from the world in order to have control over the ways of depicting it’ (Powers cited in Berger 2003, p. 113). According to Powers, being a writer means constantly engaging with this anxious ‘battle between the inside and the outside—the struggle to solve being in the world sufficiently to feel what’s really going on, and being out of the world sufficiently to be able to protect yourself from what’s going on’ (Powers cited in Berger 2003, p. 113). This is a significant insight missing from Doyle’s (1998) argument: how engagement with the exterior world is where a writer may find *some* forms of inspiration¹ that precede the writer’s need to separate themselves from the world. Regardless of the genre a writer works in, they must be aware of current events and global conversations in order to represent, reflect, or otherwise meaningfully engage with these topics and issues, whether indirectly or otherwise. A writer needs to be in the world to represent it; if they shut themselves off too much, they risk their work being irrelevant or impotent (Powers cited in Berger 2003, p. 119).

Writers commonly struggle to strike a balance between being an active participant in their external environment, society, and culture, and their need to be removed from the world in order to write. As Lubart (2009) noted, the creative process is nonlinear. A writer may toggle between engaging with the world (either

¹ See Piirto’s comments regarding inspiration (2018, pp. 101-105) and Doyle’s definition of seed incidents (1998, p. 30).

generally as a citizen, or in order to conduct research) and separating themselves as they enter the writing realm. Being both in the world and separate from it appear to be vital to the creative process; the relationship is both symbiotic and oppositional. An interest in the external world provides the material and inspiration necessary to write, but a writer must also protect themselves—their energy, attention, and time—to ensure that they are able to enter the writing realm and, later, the fiction world. The world provides stimulation and data that the writer carries over into the writing realm so that they have the space to reflect on that information (either consciously or unconsciously) before incorporating it into their creative project.

When lacking inspiration, a writer can quickly turn outward as a way to find inspiration. Engaging with the news, current events, or other stories is a way to quickly refuel the writing. Both Bradbury and Octavia Butler used this strategy to discover their ‘seed incidents’. When engaging with topical issues, Bradbury and Butler reflected on how the events made them feel and asked critical questions of themselves like ‘Do you agree with this or not, and why? Nadine Gordimer articulates this balance between isolation and connection as a ‘double process’, through which writers demonstrate both an ‘excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment ... the tension between standing apart and being fully involved: that is what makes a writer’ (2000, p. 4).

King argues that the threat of ordinary, everyday interruptions and distractions do not much hurt a work in progress, but may actually ‘help it in some ways’ (2000, p. 232). Rather than entirely shutting oneself away from the world by attending writing workshops, retreats, or residencies where the pressure to produce overrides your desire to write, King believes that writing while living your ordinary

life may be just as good, perhaps better. ‘It is, after all, the dab of grit that seeps into an oyster’s shell that makes the pearl, not pearl-making seminars with other oysters’ (2000, p. 232). And yet, King also admits that, to a degree, a writer must be able to separate themselves from the world if they want to deeply engage with their work. ‘Writing is a way to escape the world, and the more you protect yourself from that external noise, the more you’re forced back on your own imagination’ (King 2001, p. 80). Wood, too, makes no distinction between her external daily life and her internal life, though she does consider her imagination a refuge that is separate from the ‘real world’ (2021, p. 3).

The reason a writer must protect themselves from the outside world when actively writing is because writing is not always pleasant. The Australian author Patrick White describes the act of getting words onto the page as having them ‘dragged out, by tongs, a bloody mess, in the small hours’ (cited in Wood 2021, p. 6). This kind of melodramatic and dark description of writing is common, even if irrational. And yet, Wood agrees that ‘at times my writing process has been so full of darkness that descriptions like these are the only ones that come close to the truth’ (2021, p. 7). The writer Janet Burroway offers a similar statement, only she acknowledges the range of emotions that are experienced while writing. The process of writing, she argues, is much the ‘same in every genre: the effort to get myself to the computer, a period of grumpy struggle, despair, the luminous solution that appears in bed or bath, joyful work; repeat; repeat; repeat’ (Burroway cited in Wood 2021, p. 19). Indeed, the ‘luminous solution’ to whatever is not working can only occur if there is sufficient space and time for it to do so. The space and time are created when the writer steps back from the greater world and the distractions that it

offers. As Bradbury says, ‘You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you’ (1994, p. xiii).

Piirto’s five core attributes, seven Is, and general practices

Piirto’s various writings on the topic of creativity (1998, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011) have resulted in a comprehensive description of the creative process. However, the use of emotion as a motivation—in particular, joy—is not mentioned. There is a common, even stereotypical, narrative that aligns creativity with despair and emotional pain, and suggest that these difficult emotions are central to the creation of powerful and honest art. But there are some writers who have spoken about the necessity of joy, even when they are exploring dark or dangerous material. Wood describes dark material as living material: the type of content that lends itself to further development, compared to dead material with which the writer feels no connection. Here, a writer must trust their instincts if they wish to create works that are true and inventive. They must follow projects that contain a particular ‘heat’ or run the risk of repeating what has already been done; it is by following this heat-seeking that truly creative works are able to emerge (Wood 2021, p. 28).

A writer is someone who writes for the fun of it. King shares an anecdote about his son playing the saxophone. Though he played often, he never went beyond the recommended practice time and he never veered from the sheet music. He did not play or mess around with the instrument, never experimented, never took risks. That was when King knew that his son would never be a saxophone player. ‘If there’s no joy in it, it’s just no good’ (2000, p. 150). And yet, King does note that sometimes, the play can start to feel like work:

and for most writers that is the smooch of death. Writing is at its best—always, always, always—when it is a kind of inspired play for the writer. I can write in cold

blood if I have to, but I like it best when it's fresh and almost too hot to handle ... For me, not working is the real work. When I'm writing, it's all the playground, and the worst three hours I ever spent there were still pretty damn good (2000, p. 153).

He goes on to clarify that while writing is not living, this method can bring you back to life if you do it from a place of joy, 'and if you can do it for joy, you can do it forever' (King 2000, p. 249). Bradbury, whose non-fiction essays on the topic contain much enthusiasm, agrees. He writes that 'if you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without fun, you are only half a writer ... For the first thing a writer should be is excited' (1994, p. 4). He believes that if a writer writes with passionate fire, then that joy will be evident within the book, and readers will feel the writerly enthusiasm (Bradbury 1994, p. 7).

Butler speaks about this in relation to journaling, a habit she believes every writer should maintain. When journaling, she encourages the writer to not simply document the events of the day, but instead to record accurately, and without filter, how they *felt*. 'Let yourself overflow with the things that affect you, the things that make you joyous, the things that make you furious, the things that make you jealous; if you can be honest with your journal [about] what you felt and what you care about, you will discover that these are things other people feel and care about' (cited in Rowell 1997, para 6).

Joy can be creative fuel, but it can also be a way of assessing the work during the revision process. When reviewing his work, Saunders reaches a point where he stops responding to open-ended questions and starts receiving distinct 'yes or no' answers to his editorial questions like 'Does this work? Is it interesting? As he continues to develop a work, he receives more 'yeses' than 'noes'. At other times, he plays with the idea of having an internal meter that ranges from N for negative on the

left and P for positive on the right. As he reads, he notices when his enjoyment of the story moves away from P and towards N. When this happens, he knows that the section needs further work and development to lift the joy factor (Saunders 2021, sec. 2, para. 1-3).

The need to write what most interests the writer, rather than writing to a market, is another common theme. ‘Don’t write what you think you should be writing, write what you want to’ (Bradley cited in Wood 2016, p. 63). When Bradley chose to follow the advice that he gives to emerging writers, his relationship to writing changed: ‘it was incredibly liberating’ (Bradley cited in Wood 2016, p. 63). Though his work may not have looked all that different to readers and critics, the process felt different to him: ‘the feelings that were going into the work were more positive, so I think rather than all my doubt and misery going into the work, I felt there was some engagement and fun going into it’ (Bradley cited in Wood 2016, p. 63).

A writing identity

Doyle notes that a writer must make the decision to become a writer before they can begin engaging with their creative work (1998, p. 31). With the exception of this brief mention, there is little discussion in the literature of how the writer perceives themselves within their creative practice.

Many writers perceive themselves as having two identities. This concept is discussed in a variety of ways, but the pattern of compartmentalising aspects of their identity appears to be a common one. For instance, Bradbury states that it is his child self who writes his fiction, not his adult self. When Bradbury felt himself weighed down by the responsibilities of adulthood or heavy with dark thoughts or emotion, a sensation he describes as ‘a long damp November in my soul’, he knew that it was

time to reconnect with or return to his younger self. The one who was filled with ‘multitudinous joys’ and ‘terrible nightmares’. He says, ‘I’m not sure where they leave off and I start. But I’m proud of the tandem team. What else can I do but wish them well, and at the same time acknowledge and wish two other people well?’ (Bradbury 1994, p. 66).

Though being a writer involves dealing often and frequently with rejection, and therefore having thick skin is considered a necessity, Bradley argues that to be ‘an effective writer of fiction’ you need ‘to be someone whose skin is a bit thin’ (cited in Wood 2016, p. 77). In other words, a person who is sensitive and easily able to imagine themselves as someone else or put themselves in someone else’s mind—Bradley’s comment echoes the experiences a writer may have in the fictionworld as they develop empathy for their characters. Bradley uses the example of someone with depression who may disguise their true state by adopting another identity, arguing that this process of compartmentalisation is analogous to the process a writer must use to disassemble their identity and imagine the lives of others. ‘You’re used to this idea that you can be different people and you can think in different ways. So the idea that your identity might not be fixed is in fact a sort of strength’ (Bradley cited in Wood 2016, p. 77). This ability to compartmentalise has not only allowed Bradley to better enter the mind of fictional characters, but to also be more transparent about his own life experiences. As Bradley says, ‘I’ve written about a number of very personal things I find almost impossible to talk about in person, and been completely unfazed by the thought people were reading them out in the world or—and this is even weirder—by talking about them on panels or in front of audiences. It’s like the public me and the writer me can do things the private me can’t’ (cited in Wood 2016, p. 79).

Margaret Atwood writes extensively about this notion of two identities in her book, *Negotiating with the dead* (2002), describing how a writer may ‘split’ herself—in a way that is similar to a double or doppelgänger—into a writing self and a non-writing self. As she explains, ‘the one who walks the dog, eats bran for regularity, takes the car in to be washed, and so forth—and that other, more shadowy and altogether more equivocal personage who shares the same body, and who, when no one is looking, takes it over and uses it to commit the actual writing’ (Atwood 2002, p. 35). Atwood goes on to share anecdotes around the dissociation she experiences from her own writing. Known for often dark, historically influenced speculative fiction, Atwood often reads her work and thinks, ‘who wrote that nasty thing? I’m a kind and cosy person’ (2002, p. 35). This idea appears to work on two levels. While Atwood fails to recognise *herself* in the stories that she writes, she goes on to elaborate that whatever self was present in that moment of writing is different from the self who returns the next day, or who promotes the book years later. ‘That was then, this is now, you [sic] never step twice into the same paragraph, and when I typed out that sentence I wasn’t myself’ (2002, p. 35).

Murakami discusses this split in his identity in a way similar to Bradbury, imagining his writing self as his twin brother, only the writing twin was kidnapped at the age of two and raised in a faraway place and the two never saw each other again. His writing self is him, but not. It is an alternative version; they are the same physiologically, but the environments in which they were raised are different and so they think differently. ‘Every time I write a book I put my feet in different shoes. Because sometimes I am tired of being myself. This way I can escape. It’s a fantasy. If you can’t have a fantasy, what’s the point of writing a book?’ (Murakami cited in Wray 2004, pp. 131-132). Murakami also articulates this split using the simile of a

designer of a video game and a player. He, or at least his solid identity, is in the middle, between the left and right hands, who remain ignorant to the workings of each other.

Atwood acknowledges that this relationship is symbiotic. The writing self, which she refers to as the ‘shadowy double’ (2002, p. 35), is indispensable to the writing process. What is particularly interesting about this idea is how aware authors are of this splitting—including how, at times, the split is intentionally created and then maintained. Writing is not, then, merely a sequence of steps that can be formulated into a universal model for the purpose of *solving problems*; instead, it is a complex and idiosyncratic process, which extends not only to how a writer approaches their craft, but how they perceive themselves in relation to it.

Conclusion

It is important to include an analysis of the anecdotal and reflective accounts writers give of their writing processes. These articulations may not be scholarly in tone or approach the question of how writing works in the same way as traditional scholarly research, but their accounts of their experience are representative of the unique lenses through which writers perceive their creative process. These writerly accounts of the creative process diverge from scholarly accounts in significant ways. Writerly accounts of writing describe it as a more open and fluid process deeply connected to authorial identity. Therefore, it is helpful to articulate a methodology—a way of being as a writer—that has distinct qualities that can be defined, while also providing for a description that is open and fluid so that writers may adapt, use, and shape their process in a way that is supportive of their unique methods, the demands of their

current manuscript, and how both can change in ways that are unpredictable, but necessary for the good of the creative work.

The trickster provides an ideal model for such a description of the creative process, as this archetype has known traits that mirror the creative process. These traits are recognisable, possible to define, and yet contain a wide variety of interpretations and manifestations. The trickster, like writing, is ambiguous. They are a figure capable of adaptation, shifting into whatever shape will best support their intentions. This figure offers an opportunity to construct a way of approaching writing that is both replicable (between disciplines and individuals), due to its clear descriptions, and malleable.

CHAPTER 3: THE TRICKSTER METHODOLOGY

‘Writing is one of the ways I participate in transformation.’
—Toni Cade Bombara

‘In order to write the book you want to write in the end you have to become the
person you need to become to write that book.’
—Junot Diaz

This chapter draws upon Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque, Ahmed’s notion of the willful body, and practice-led research methodology, to develop a unique methodology that I have dubbed the trickster methodology. The trickster methodology acknowledges the many qualities that are identified with the trickster archetype—slippery, subversive, disruptive, unstable, creative, destructive, ambiguous—but chooses to focus on four qualities that are particularly relevant to creative writers: shapeshifting, play, chance, and order. Each of these qualities contain multiple characteristics; for example, play can include trickery, making from the materials at hand, traps, and danger. These four traits also overlap, as a trickster’s shapeshifting ability is a form of play that enables them to disrupt order. Though creativity may be the obvious trait shared, the role of creativity in writing has been well-documented (Amabile 1996; Beghetto & Kaufman 2007; Glăveanu 2014; Plucker & Beghetto 2004, p. 90; Simonton 2013; Sternberg 1999; Weisberg 1993). Therefore, the trickster methodology is primarily concerned with the articulation of lesser known, though nevertheless relevant, traits that tricksters and writers share.

Theoretical frameworks: carnival, willfulness, and practice-led research

Carnival

In his analysis of Rabelais's creative works, Mikhail Bakhtin developed the concept of the carnivalesque, a subversive literary mode in which the 'social hierarchies and power structures' (Marais 2018, p. 1) of medieval culture were temporarily inverted through parody and comedy, which mocked/undermined the culture's 'serious rituals' (1984 p. 4). During carnival, the common hierarchies, laws, roles, ranks, castes, privileges, and norms were removed, allowing all people to become equal and contact, connect, and converse with persons who were otherwise inaccessible. This annual event, which included pageants, processions, and grand feasts, such as the 'feast of fools', placed heavy emphasis on humour through crowning and uncrowning, humiliations, parody, and dress-ups to create a comic secondary life in which the world was turned inside out. Giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals performed at parish feasts and, while a king and queen were elected to preside over (in)formal banquets, these temporary roles served comic purposes and were purely performative with no legitimate power. Carnival was a time when life was 'subject to its laws, that is the laws of its own freedom' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 8).

Bakhtin claims that carnival was 'not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it', that it was a 'utopian ideal' during which the people experienced 'community, freedom, equality, and abundance' (1984, pp. 7-8). And yet, when carnival concluded, the people did not revolt when the extraordinary reverted to the ordinary, and those who played knights, kings, and queens were cast back into their formerly powerless roles. Though Bakhtin portrays the festival as a 'second life', those participating were aware that these roles were nothing more than costumes, and that the promise/portal of carnival contained no lasting or real power. As Hyde confirms,

carnival festivities, despite their ‘bawdiness and filth’ were ‘profoundly conservative. Especially in highly ordered and hierarchical societies, carnival reinforces the status quo because, first of all, it provides the exceptions that prove the rules’ (Hyde 1998, p. 476). The event was carefully controlled, sanctioned, and occurred for a limited amount of time. It presented an opportunity to be seen and heard without the risk of exile. Tricksters, too, are used as vessels for reinforcing the law. Though their antics often make fun of, or show the arbitrary nature of, our systems, when a trickster breaks the rules, the results are not always good. While trickster figures share many similarities with carnival—a mutual love of parody, humour, and subversion—carnivals end, whereas tricksters live forever. And while carnival can only offer a weak simulation of power or a temporary disruption, tricksters can create lasting effects through the enabling tools of play, shapeshifting, and disguise.

Similar to Ahmed’s concept of the willful body, the carnivalesque crowd is not a gathering of individuals, but a group that comes together as a whole, ‘organized *in their own way*’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 25; original emphasis). This collective exists ‘outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 26). The experience is literal and physical, down to the pressing of shoulders and brushing of arms and legs as members of the crowd move through the greater body. As part of the whole, former identifications slip away. Attendees transform their bodies through the aid of costumes and masks. This changing of circumstance allows members of the carnival to become more aware of their material bodies and their greater community. Tricksters also contain multiple beings and possibilities: they are animal, nature, human, divine. For this reason, they have the potential to operate

from a unified, integrated space. Carnival offers a momentary and false change to those without agency; tricksters, on the other hand, are an example of what Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari call ‘becoming’: they are in a constant state of evolution or transition into becoming something else (1998, pp. 235-240). The trickster’s *becoming* is an act of willfulness: a quality that grants this figure the agency to act upon their own desires and needs.

Willfulness

Ahmed defines willfulness as an active choice to go against authority figures. However, her account of this word’s linguistic genealogy reveals, first, the slipperiness of its usage and, secondly, how established, fixed boundaries and structures are actually flexible, fluid, and in a constant state of change. She defines the social will as ‘the social experience of willing or not willing with others’ (Ahmed 2014, p. 56), and presents multiple scenarios where a person may be willfully willing or willfully unwilling. The social will is carried out by the social body, a collective that is ‘full of thinking members’, and while each body part may have a will of their own, their wills are ultimately subservient to the governing will that controls the whole body. Sharing a united will creates order for and among members; conversely, failure to comply with this will puts order at risk, a concept that can be witnessed in many trickster narratives when a trickster disobeys a rule or plays a trick on another and is then punished. In Ahmed’s model, disorder and willfulness are companions that threaten the *whole body*, for those who resist or question the social will are judged as selfish, and members who leave the body risk becoming a trickster who lives ‘in disorder and mischief’ (Pascal cited in Ahmed 2014, p. 99).

Robert Pelton describes tricksters as having an open body, ‘a body that is also the whole social order experience as a transforming passage to cosmic order truly, if

not merely human' (1993, p. 138); as such, tricksters are not confined to a single body or will; instead, they are a representative of the collective, containing multiple voices, bodies, and wills.

Figures who reject the conventional path may opt out of or be exiled from the social body and become what Ahmed describes as a willful wanderer. These figures may be perceived as difficult, or as problems that need to be overcome, solved, or forced into submission. Such persons may choose to leave the social body. In doing so, they must become 'resilient in the face of [this] enormous misfortune' (Sulway 2019, p. 46). Stepping away from the social body, and from what Jean-François Lyotard describes as a grand narrative—an idea that is based on the status quo and that society has used to define itself; for example, Marxism, patriarchy, or religion—the wanderer enters the domain of the 'little narrative', localised stories that demonstrate the diversity of human experience (1984, p. 2). Wanderers are in good company, for tricksters also dwell in the margins; they too are outsiders looking in (Landay 1998, p. 2). From this liminal perspective they are able to observe the world and to offer creative alternatives, possibilities, and potentials. As Joanna Russ states in her manifesto, *How to suppress women's writing*, 'only on the margins does growth occur' (1983, p. 129). Those who exist in the fringes contain valuable (hidden) knowledge; their tales are the 'little narratives' that offer an antidote to accepted grand narratives (Lyotard 1984). The willful wanderer and the trickster are two figures who live their own way.

And yet, Lewis Hyde describes how the trickster has 'no way'; instead, they *make* their way through their imitation of others, which allows them to develop 'a repertoire of ways' (1998, p. 114). It is this multivocality, or multistoriedness, that allows them to move from the margins into society and community, though a

trickster never becomes a *member* of these spaces. To become part of the whole—the social body—you must be willing to surrender your own will to that of the collective. Some subjects are unable to do so as they are ‘yet-to-come’—people such as children, guests, migrants, and strangers. Strangers work well with the trickster as they are ‘bodies out of place’ (Ahmed 2000, p. 78), bodies that we cannot recognise. Wanderers, and those without a way, can be identified as strangers, as they are out of place, ‘not from here’, and their arrival is noticeable ... maybe even criminal. ‘Strangers could be redescribed in terms of the distinction between parts and the whole: bodies that are not part of the whole become bodies that endanger the body’ (Ahmed 2014, p.123). This is a quality shared by both wanderers and tricksters, though tricksters are unique in that sometimes they seek to destroy and destabilise existing structures just because they can. Migrants, too, can only become part of the body, or be considered citizens of the national body (in which diversity is encouraged), if they are willing to assimilate. As Ahmed says: ‘Perhaps the nation can have diversity as its skin (a happy skin of many colours) as long as underneath we beat to the same heart’ (2014, p. 128). Like nations, tricksters also contain multiple bodies and voices that work together towards a common aim: whatever impulse the trickster is acting on. Where the social body carries out the will of the governments and institutions that form its head and heart, a trickster’s will is ambiguous, unstable, and fluid.

Tricksters do not have *a way* and strangers are *not yet part* of the body, but both are wanderers who either exist ‘outside of’ *or* have been rejected, been exiled, or are yet to be accepted as ‘part of’ the social body. A stranger can choose to become a member of the body if they are willing, but tricksters cannot serve a will beyond their own. Ahmed’s stranger may reject the status quo and be cast out (by

themselves or by the body), but tricksters extend and exaggerate this concept; they are strangers who have never been a member of the community. They are not part of the status quo, as they exist in the in-between. Tricksters are strangers who adopt different bodies for their own means, but the strange bodies they inhabit always fail, an occurrence that plays out within the story arc of most trickster narratives in which a trickster enters the story, creates chaos/change, and then writes themselves out (Miura 1982, p. 11). Tricksters differ from wanderers and strangers in that their lack of *a* way enables them to question rules, authority, and systems; however, when their blundering antics end in disaster or chaos, as previously discussed in reference to carnival, the established way is reinforced.

Practice-led research

Practice-led research acknowledges creative practice as a form of research that produces original knowledge outcomes (Candy 2006, pp. 2-3; Krauth and Nash 2018, sec. 2). The trickster methodology draws upon existing descriptions of practice-led research, but it is unique in a variety of ways, as it is a method about method. Practice-led research could be described as an unstable and evolving methodology. Brad Haseman describes practice-led research as a third paradigm, alongside quantitative and qualitative research, which borrows from both but is equivalent to neither (2007, sec. 3). Haseman outlines the relative newness of practice-led research models, but also the competing models of research-led practice and practice-based research (2007, sec. 2, para. 1).² The trickster mirrors and extends

² Research-led practice, according to Smith & Dean, differs slightly from practice-led research, as it draws a clearer connection between scholarly research and creative work (2009, p. 7). Practice-based research, however, refers to knowledge that is 'personally situated', that the research has externalised or systemised, while also 'revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for the critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes' (Barrett 2010, p. 2).

this quality as they both use whatever materials are at hand to create from, or to destroy, the status quo by revealing hidden truths, as well as the arbitrariness of human systems and alternative ways of being, seeing, and doing. The trickster is a temporally indeterminate figure who embodies knowledge of the past while also maintaining a forward perspective. The trickster methodology, like practice-led research, has the capacity to draw from historical knowledge (experience/observation/assessment) while maintaining a predictive, forward-looking, and generative perspective.

The trickster methodology draws upon data that is largely qualitative, interpreting through observation and interrogation to determine how and why phenomena occur (qualitative) rather than how often (quantitative). These processes mirror the evolution of practice-led research, which has evolved from a range of existing methodologies that include and draw on both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Kroll 2009, sec. 4; Ryan 2005, sec. 3). As such, practice-led research is not a singular, stable, or shared methodology, but an array of evolving and idiosyncratic methodologies. Just as the trickster borrows the traits and qualities of others when making their own way, each practitioner must find *their way* within this methodology, though the core focus remains on creative practice as an object and outcome of research, its relevant methods and—in some models—the expression of explicit knowledge outcomes.

The design of my investigation uses a similar tactic. My research into the trickster archetype has informed a component of my creative artefact, *Constant Companions*, while also acting as a metaphor for how I approach my research and writing. Embodying trickster qualities when writing became one method within my creative practice and the trickster methodology a way to articulate why and how this

approach is important or useful. The trickster method/ology forms part of my original contribution to research, as this method about a method adds to and augments existing models of practice-led research.

Practice-led research can be used in a range of ways; as a result, there is no agreed-upon definition or approach (Harper 2011, pp. 10-11). Rather, the strength of practice-led research is its malleability: a practice-led researcher—or what I will now refer to as a trickster practitioner—is able to shape or create a methodology that best supports the needs of their investigation. The trickster methodology therefore integrates aspects of practice-led research with qualities that I have identified as part of the trickster archetype—shapeshifting, play, order, and chance—thereby reanimating the methodology and giving it a new body. This approach gives trickster practitioners the opportunity to embody the trickster’s nature, shifting their perspective from the individual to the collective. This alters their approach to traditional research practices, including critical scholarly reading, data collection and analysis, content research for the creative artefact (e.g. gathering information about a particular location, subject, time, or community), as well as critical and creative writing and thinking.

Tricksters use whatever materials they can access to express, subvert, challenge, create, or destroy the status quo. Tricksters do not aim to express a single truth, for they are multivocal and multibodied (using various methods), but nevertheless have an integrated and recognisable identity.

Like practice-led research, the trickster methodology acknowledges that while the intentions for an investigation may be clear, it is also common for creative research projects to develop and evolve as the trickster practitioner engages with their creative practice and traditional research methods (Haseman 2007, sec. 4). Just

as a trickster's actions and motivation can be difficult to predict, research investigations are ambiguous. A trickster practitioner may develop a plan and a set of intentions prior to beginning their work, but those plans and intentions may change or pivot in response to creative insights, traditional research findings, or problem-solving.

I approached the creative work through a series of exploratory drafts that experiment with a range of strategies for subverting, or making strange (Mannay 2010), the traditional hetero-patriarchal archetype of trickster narratives (Mills 2001, p. 237). These methods are articulated fully in the following chapter, but, in short, include maintaining a critical and creative journal in which I responded to trickster-inspired prompts, interviewing other writers working within this genre, coding the transcripts for trickster traits, research, reading, critical thinking, and writing.

Shapeshifting

Shapeshifting refers to the variety of ways that tricksters change their physical appearance by temporarily adorning or altering their body so they appear to be a different being. Tricksters are known for their shapeshifting abilities, and yet they are traditionally depicted as having a male base form that occasionally shifts to female.³

Lewis Hyde has identified three reasons for these representations (1998, p. 837).

First, well-known trickster characters emerged from patriarchal societies, and by adopting the male form, as Lori Landay points out, the trickster could take advantage

³ In one story, the Winnebago trickster Wakdjunkaga disguised himself as a woman, married a chief's son, and gave birth to three of his children. Loki, too, turned into a mare in heat to distract a stallion that was assisting the building of a wall around Asgard. Again, the disguised trickster mated with the person who was being tricked, and in this case, Loki birthed the eight-legged foal, Slepinir. In another tale, Loki ate the half-cooked heart of a woman, which incited a transformation that allowed him to birth monsters (Hyde 1998 p. 837).

of the power systems that existed within these spaces, using masculinity to increase their mobility and safety while exercising independence. Their unhindered movement through society allows them to make a mockery of the existing political, social, and economic structures as they perform their ridicule in the public sphere (Landay 1998, p. 2), and from privileged positions that they would be unable to occupy if they were embodied as women. Examples of female tricksters do exist in both American and other Indigenous cultures; however, these tales centre around the home and domesticity—women’s spaces (Landay 1998, p. 3). A point underscored by Hyde’s second reason for the dominance of male trickster figures is that stories with female tricksters have might have been ignored. Lastly, according to Hyde, tricksters may articulate a ‘distinction between men and women, so that even in a matriarchal setting this figure would be male’ (1998, p. 837).

Although the ‘base’ gender of most trickster characters is male, they are often depicted as theriomorphic beings who can temporarily become female or an object, or an animate or inanimate body, like an object or non-human body. The decision to change form is the trickster’s own, as they select whatever body will best support their intentions. While the majority of tricksters are male, there are a few female tricksters in traditional folklore and mythology (such as Scheherazade from *A thousand and one nights*), and many more in contemporary narratives (e.g. Catwoman). In Greek mythology, female tricksters were often depicted as embodying an element of the sea or taking the form of the chimaera. However, the chimaera is not a fixed form either; it can shapeshift according to will and need (Warner 1998, p. 245). According to Hyde, the trickster’s shapeshifting nature addresses concerns regarding the real and the unreal in ancient civilisations as it was believed that the physical body represented our inner being (1998, p. 53). The

trickster's ability to shapeshift adds to their ambiguity, slipperiness, and mystery, as it confuses their identity. If the body discloses information about the self, and that body can be changed, then how can we trust or know who the wearer of that skin really is? What would it mean for the individual to move through multiple bodies and not have a true face?

Tricksters do not always change shape *literally*, as disguise also forms part of their trickery. Both physical shapeshifting and disguise are ways to invert a situation or deceive another, and both relate to the concept of physical appearance as an aspect of identity. At one end there is major bodily transformation—which can have huge impacts; see Loki's birth of Sleipnir—and on the other, a simple change of clothes (Hynes 1993b, p. 37).⁴ The trickster's use of disguise reveals the performative nature of identity, echoing Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance, as described in *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (1990). The performative nature of gender is clearly demonstrated within the subculture of drag queens. The playful and ambiguous nature of drag alters the way we see gender identity: is the man simply wearing women's clothes (i.e. a costume), or is his adoption of a feminine persona a representation of his true essence? This loosening of gender identity, as argued by Butler, reveals the instability of sex and gender, as well as their performative nature (1990, pp. 53-55). In the same way that tricksters show that identity is fluid and unstable as they move between different bodies, drag queens show that gender is the result of imitation and reappearance rather than a reflection

⁴ A major shapeshift may look like Hermes who, after stealing Apollo's cattle, transformed himself into mist so that he could slide through a keyhole and swear he had never 'stepped over' the threshold. Similarly, the Navajo Coyote trickster shifted into a dish in one story to obtain food, but in another became a tree to catch birds (Hynes 1993b, p. 37). At the other end of the scale, we have the Tibetan trickster Agu Tompa, who disguised himself in traditional robes before sneaking into a cloister where he made love to all the nuns, his deception only discovered once there was an outbreak of pregnancies. Similarly, the Greek God Pan wore a white sheepskin to conceal his hairy back (and thus his identity) so that he could seduce the moon goddess Selene (Kerényi 1951, p. 175).

of a being's true essence. Drag's overt exaggeration of gender norms is a parody that critiques the limitations of gender; similarly, a trickster's shapeshifting often leads to humorous consequences that underscore the arbitrary relationship between the body and identity. Just as the trickster seeks to destabilise the status quo by proving that many of the systems and structures we have agreed to are *choices*, drag queens push against power structures and the social conformity that maintain gender performance (Butler 1990, pp. 120-121).

Terrie Waddell argues that burlesque theatre creates a transitional space where conventions are subverted and the concept of a fixed body is challenged by women who reveal 'the malleability of identity and gender through play' (2013, p. 106). As provocateurs, burlesque characters (female expressions of trickster energy) playfully present new ways of imagining identity. This manipulation of biology and gender encourages the audience to suspend their disbelief and, in doing so, provokes a re-evaluation of a range of assumptions surrounding sex and gender. However, the gender politics that play out within these performances are not necessarily didactic or the primary objective, as it is with all art, meaning it is often constructed at the whim of the audience. This ability to challenge and then reimagine the societal and cultural assumptions around gender, body, and selfhood is a personification of the trickster's spirit, and here, at least, it is expressed via the female body through the play of burlesque (Waddell, 2013 pp. 104-106).

The trickster's shapeshifting lends itself to a wide range of arts practices, including creative writing. The fluid, influential, and ever-changing nature of this archetype provides both a metaphorical and figurative model for the writing process, the writer as a being, and the novel as a text/object.

Writing is a messy and ever-changing process. A story may change shape in the act of writing, through deep thinking, research, revision, and reflection. The writing process is rarely clear and linear—instead, it is moving and fluid; the writer shifts to whatever stage is needed in order for the project to move forward. For example, writing, then reflection, then revision, then research, more writing, followed by deep thinking, a return to research, reflection, and then revision. Each stage of writing requires a different set of skills, and the writer must be able to shift between these tasks, which may be imaginative or collaborative (or both), as they adapt to the needs of the work; for example, there are specific ways a writer may approach the explorative nature of drafting, which differ from the collaborative process of editing, and their perspective will change when moving from critical reflecting to revision as they consider all the ways the work could be improved, not to mention the different points of focus required for structural editing (plot, character, theme), line editing (fact checking, sentence structure, dialogue), and proofreading (grammar, typos), tasks that are usually completed in collaboration with a professional editor or editors.

The need to shapeshift is doubled when a writer is writing a trickster. Given their ambiguous and unstable nature, getting into a trickster's head can be challenging. The writer could consider what a human character may do in any given situation, or what story beats would benefit the plot, but these concerns do not apply to the trickster. Tricksters are outsiders who are not governed by the rules of any system. It is difficult to get close to a trickster because they are fundamentally mysterious and 'other'. To write a trickster character, it is not enough to complete a character profile or get to *know* the protagonist (or antagonist) through writing exercises; instead, the writer must become the trickster, wear their archetypal skin

as a disguise, and see the story through the trickster's liminal lens by adopting their detachment, curiosity, playfulness, and desire to take action with little forethought for consequence. To write a trickster, you must become a trickster.

The final transformation occurs once a novel is completed. As it is printed, the book changes shape both literally and abstractly. First, it becomes a physical object instead of a digital file. Second, it becomes a gateway to an alternative space and time as readers transform black squiggles on a page to meaning and images in their mind (Iser 1974 p. 276).

Tricksters may change their shape as a way to deceive another, avoid blame for a previous trick, or realise a desire (for sex or food, usually). The trickster is an unpredictable character for this reason, and yet they are highly adaptable.

Shapeshifting may occur in response to something external or because of a random/disruptive event. In this way, shapeshifting is very much about learning. The writing process has a similarly unpredictable nature; the writer is learning how to write their current story or novel in the act of writing it. The writer is not at the whim of the story, and yet the *correct* or *natural* or *logical* or *most thrilling* version of a story can only be unveiled when the writer is engaging with the narrative, whether that be through literal writing or writing-adjacent activities such as research and reflection.

Tricksters are multi-vocal and multi-bodied, a playful integration of various voices, genres, and modes of knowledge. Just as the Native American Trickster Raven slips through the gap between earth and heaven to obtain and then deliver divine knowledge to humans, embracing the trickster methodology allows creative workers to challenge their intuitive processes and reach for something more, to lean

into hidden knowledge, to slip through gaps in time and bring back a glimpse of the ethereal, a story worthy of being made physical.

Play

If tricksters *did* have *a way*, that way would be play. Play refers to the humorous, spontaneous, carefree, and often careless, attitude that governs the trickster's thinking and actions. They are a liminal figure who exists in-between the margins of society and, from this position, they are able to undermine power structures using humour and trickery (Landay 1998 p. 2). While the trickster's humour makes for fun storytelling, these narratives might not have endured if they had not contained significant substance. In some societies, as noted by Hynes and Doty, trickster tales perform the same function as formal moralists in the West. Just as carnival ultimately reinforces the systems it presumes to subvert, tricksters inform citizens about correct behaviours and social roles through their use of play, humour, and mischief.

Sometimes, these moral instructions are signalled via a change in the principal character's speech patterns, which transmit specifically heightened information (Hynes & Doty 1993a, p. 29). Within our own world, how play and humour are perceived differs between cultures. The West, which values and prioritises work while undervaluing and being sceptical of humour, differs from other cultures where, for example, some religious ceremonies cannot begin until all participants (especially strangers, to use Ahmed's concept) have laughed, or some Native American cultures, which consider laughter sacred (Hynes & Doty 1993a, p. 29).

The trickster's ambiguity and instability do not allow for easy definition; they are enigmas whose motivations and actions we cannot access internally and cannot make logical sense of externally. Hynes and Doty coined the term 'metaplay' as a

way to make trickster figures more comprehensible. Metaplay is a type of inverted logic ‘that probes and disassembles the most serious rules of “normal” social behaviour’ (1993a, p. 30), which is why tricksters often disrupt social norms with the intention of creating chaos or to deceive.⁵ The trickster’s playful (and sometimes harmful) dismantling of social norms reveals the arbitrariness of these accepted systems, and yet the mishaps that result from their willful behaviour act as a warning, thereby reinforcing official and unofficial laws (Hynes & Doty 1993a, p. 30). Nevertheless, the way tricksters perceive and interact with the world (their thought processes, or perhaps lack of them) can encourage writers to challenge their processes, which could lead to more innovative storytelling.

And yet, the openness of trickster tales, and this archetype’s inherent slipperiness, create space for multiple interpretations. Hyde agrees with Hynes and Doty, stating that the trickster shows us how to behave, but he also acknowledges the various roles that trickster figures play: from deities that gift stolen knowledge from heaven to humans as a way to make the world more hospitable for them, to creative idiots, wise fools, grey-haired babies, cross-dressers, and speakers of sacred profanities (1998, pp. 8-23).⁶ In many instances, a trickster will embody *all* of these qualities within a story or across multiple stories.⁷ Trickster stories can be described as cautionary tales, or stories that show an alternative perspective, revealing to us that there may be a *different* way of seeing, doing, and being; tricksters are not bound

⁵ In one tale, Eshu dresses in a colourful cap, with a pipe at his neck and a staff over his back. He walks between the property of two farmer friends, who later argue about what Eshu was wearing and in which direction he was walking. The fight leads to blows and later a trial at which Eshu confesses to the trick by adding, ‘sowing dissension is my greatest delight’ (Cosentino 1987, p. 262).

⁶ For example, Hermes shares a method for creating fire and inadvertently shows how cattle can be killed and used for meat, and Coyote shows people how to dress, sing, and shoot an arrow (Hynes 1998, pp. 8-12).

⁷ The south African trickster IKaggen, who belongs to the IXam people, saves maidens from ogres in one story, while in another he flashes women, is gluttonous, and foolishly cuts off and eats his own flesh (Guenther 2002, sec. 2, para. 10).

to a single culture or way; instead, they remain outside the social body, free to move through the communities of the world so that they may subvert and make strange as they see fit (Mannay 2010).

Tricksters can be court-jester-like in their humorous behaviours, but their playful nature can also be presented as having a more relaxed, playful humour. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines play as an ‘exercise or activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation rather than for a *serious or practical purpose*; amusement, entertainment, diversion’ (2022, original emphasis). Often, this is the trickster’s preferred mode of play. While their actions may be carried out with little forethought—tricksters usually think on their toes—their practical uses of the materials at hand are purposeful as they are vital to the performance of their trickery, and the results of a trick can have serious consequences for tricksters and others. While tricksters sometimes wear the mask of subversion to conceal their true purpose as moral reinforcers, a trickster’s laughter—and our laughter at them—draws our awareness to arbitrary systems, including religions and rituals, performative roles, and social norms (among other oppressive or harmful ideologies or behaviours) that we have unquestioningly accepted, sometimes at our own peril.

And yet, what is perhaps this archetype’s greatest trick is the story itself. As Flannery O’Connor said, ‘the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy’ (1980, p. 167). What is a story, if not a trick? Story is meaning, symbol, theme, language, and discourse, disguised within an entertaining romp. This is perhaps why the trickster is the ideal archetype for fiction writers; not only can they illuminate new ways of being, seeing, and doing, but their playful, creative, and imaginative nature undoes the didacticism that underpins accepted writing advice and approaches. Tricksters can be deceitful, complex, and contradictory; so too is the

language within their stories. Readers are entertained by the trickster's foolish and wild ways, but a joke is also being played on the reader who does not realise that through the use of language, the narrator and character known as *trickster* are communicating a 'deeper wisdom about the nature of reality' (Doueih 1993, p. 200). The trickster's power is generated from their liminal space and their in-between-ness, in which they use lies, disguises, and trickery to reveal truth (as do all stories). This mirrors the process undertaken by trickster practitioners, whose creative works embody their research, as Pablo Picasso said: 'we all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth' (1923, p. 315).

Practice-led research acknowledges that practitioners cannot always predict or control how their work develops. Just as Coyote was unable to foresee the shattering of his elk skull, writers cannot predict or control their final product.⁸ By employing trickster methods (shapeshifting, play, chance, and order), trickster practitioners are able to move forward in an exploratory manner that allows answers to be revealed in the act of making; like the trickster, they create using the materials at hand, follow impulses, and form decisions based on the situation presented and their environment. Strategy can be applied in regard to outlining, developing a routine, discipline, conducting research, and drawing connection between the research and the work. Such systems can provide support, but it is the trickster's responsive nature that best illustrates the creative process. Creative practice and research is described by Bacon as a cyclic process where we move between writing, research, and thinking (2017, p. 246), but even this image feels 'linear' in its

⁸ In one Native American tale, Coyote hears a sound coming from inside an elk skull. He looks inside and sees ants, but chooses to make himself small so that he can get a better look. Once inside, he expands to his normal size, only now he cannot remove the elk skull from his own head. Coyote then walks through a nearby village, announcing himself as a holy being who deserves gifts. The villagers drape him with pollen, but the mischievous boy at the end of the line whacks the faux deity over the head with a stick, shattering the skull and revealing Coyote's true face (Radin 1956, p. 33).

repetition, and does not reflect the trickster's ability to move through time and space. Instead, writing can be thought of as a spiral where the writer travels downwards, deeper into the work, as they brainstorm, dabble in research, adjust their notes, narrow their research, assess their direction, pivot, start writing, question their progress, conduct more research, and all the while think and write and explore (Nerburn cited in Windling 2021, para. 1-4).

The trickster's playfulness risks disorder. The randomness of their actions and indifference towards the consequences are not in harmony with the values and structures that underpin academic research. To ensure consistency and limit error, the collection of data is uniform and controlled, a process for analysing the data is established, a concrete conclusion presented, and then a work is published in the form accepted (and expected) by the industry. The trickster methodology offers practitioners a framework, but within that framework there is a multitude of possibilities, which allows for exploration, tangents, and organic development; however, not all of these possibilities are fruitful or efficient, and they may lead to dead ends or 'purposeless wandering' (Chabon 1998, p. 12). Of course, there are stages within academic research when we need to be conscious and ethical. Tricksters can be dangerous, and working with them may undermine our best intentions.

In situations of pure play, no one wins. And while the reversal nature of trickster stories means that they often end with the fool ensnared in their own trap, or their deception revealed, tricksters are unfazed by such results. Foolish prince or wise sage, the trickster's playful spirit is rounded out with unintentional resilience. Just as writers continue day after day, like the archaeologist described by King (2000, p. 164), digging up a relic a piece at a time, the trickster carries on, sometimes

following a strategy with a map in their hand, and sometimes wandering off the path, responding to the whims of their nature and what is happening around them. The trickster methodology creates space for play, strategic or not, where the players may be only ourselves and our projects, or extend to mentors, supervisors, or industry professionals. The trickster methodology acknowledges that play can be unpredictable, dismantling, and even dangerous.

Chance

Chance, as the name implies, refers to events or occurrences that are beyond a trickster's control. Chance is introduced through a trickster's interactions with (dis)order, though it can present itself in any number of ways—accidents, chaos, consequences, contingency, disruption, happenstance, traps, and rebellion (Hynes 1993b; Hyde 1998; Hynes and Doty 1993b; Radin 1956).

As noted earlier in this chapter, there is significant crossover between tricksters and Ahmed's willful wanderer; both move through the world in an exploratory way as they encounter and interact with unexpected people and situations. Their adaptive nature makes them resourceful and intelligent; they are comfortable with uncertainty and even embody this quality for 'no one knows when he'll [sic] show up, or how he'll break in, or what he'll do once he has arrived' (Hyde 1998, p. 246). Hyde makes the case that there are accidents, things that occur by chance, and there are essentials, which are stable and by design. The meeting of accidents and essentials is apparent in the arts, as creative works are informed or influenced by careful planning and control as well as chance. The issue with chance and accidents is that they raise questions about significance. Where a conservative perspective judges coincidences as meaningless, those with a shapeshifting mind

take these occurrences ‘and remake this world out of whatever happens’ (Hyde 1998, p. 256). Stability is threatened by those who behave in dangerous and risky manners, and yet, to live a good life, Martha Nussbaum argues that we must encounter contingencies and experience things beyond our control. To live requires ‘the most delicate balance between order, disorder, control and vulnerability’ (Nussbaum cited in Hyde 1998, p. 272).

Hyde argues that when non-tricksters (order) try to suppress or stop a trickster’s behaviour (disorder), the consequences are rarely favourable; instead, the trickster should be seen as the figurative embodiment of ‘productive chaos’ or creativity (1998, p. 210).⁹ Embracing chance and accidents, and unexpected consequences, are relevant to trickster practitioners in a variety of ways. While tricksters enjoy creating chaos, it is the role of trickster practitioners to bring structure and control to mess. When presenting their findings, for example, a trickster practitioner must create order out of disorder; however, mess and chaos must occur first for new knowledge to be produced. Innovation is expected to occur in a way that is controlled. Tim Brown’s concept of ‘Design thinking’ breaks innovation down into three stages—Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation—with each stage involving specific methods (2008, p. 5). While this concept may be a tidy articulation of the creative process, few innovators actually create following this systematic approach as it does not allow space for complexities or for the mess of creative practice, discovery, and everyday living (Tanggaard and Juelsbo 2016, p. 80).

⁹ When the Gods punish Loki for accidentally killing Baldr, they bind him beneath the earth with chords made from the intestines of one of his children. The fall of Ragnarök is not directly attributed to Loki, but it is heavily implied that the events that follow this trickster’s punishment eventually lead to the end of the world (Hyde 1998, pp. 261-262).

Rather than working systematically to bring an idea or spark of inspiration to life, trickster practitioners engage in continuous experimental and exploratory actions. The work fails and succeeds through various trials that are executed again and again in a manner that could be considered ‘fooling around’ (Glăveanu, Tanggaard & Wegener 2016, p. ix). As Tanggaard says, ‘in everyday life, creativity is more about mess than about methodology’ (2016, p. 81). And yet, the trickster methodology allows, if not encourages, this playful, chaotic, and uncontrollable means of making. Writers do not always create plans or outlines with the intention of following them exactly, as new knowledge is often discovered in the act of writing (Richardson 2005, p. 959) and in everyday living. All trickster practitioners encounter new situations and problems when engaging with their creative practice. Problem solving is one aspect of writing, but the process of discovering creative solutions cannot follow a standardised procedure (Joas & Knôbl 2009, p. 522).

It is vital that trickster practitioners develop their ability to work *with* chaos because they are producing works and new knowledge in a world that is unstable and in a constant state of change. Creative thinking is not simply a mental process or divergent thinking; it grants creatives with agency so that they can respond to unexpected events and, like the trickster, take advantage of their failures to make something new that could not have been predicted or anticipated (Tanggaard 2016, p. 82). Methods and methodologies exist as a way for skilled trickster practitioners to teach *a way* to novice trickster practitioners who are yet to develop *a way*. Beginners find value in instructions, rules, guidelines, and structure, but experts in their field have garnered confidence through years of imitating others and developing a myriad *ways*, allowing them to follow their impulses and intuition, and to respond to their art by using the materials at hand (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, pp. 17-19). This type of

apprenticeship is just *one way* for a novice to become an expert, and, just as the trickster's unpredictable ways can threaten a project, rigid methods can hinder new discoveries if the trickster practitioner is overly fixated on them. Much can be gained from 'paying attention to our everyday processes and problem-solving activities when going about writing and thinking about creativity' (Tanggaard 2016, p. 85).

Working with chaos can mean that the trickster practitioner creates a sense of order within the greater scheme of disorder. This practice makes space for breaking the rules and crossing boundaries (self-imposed or not) and 'is mediated by socio-material affordances: what the situation and problem at hand lend you' (Tanggaard 2016, p. 86). In adopting the trickster's perspective, perhaps the order that exists in chaos or that emerges from chaos could be described as a complex system that is *information rich*—just as life, writing, and research can be reframed as *information rich* (Hayles 1991, p. 6; Webb 2004, sec. 4, para. 4). Further, interacting with and solving complex or unexpected problems develops skills and advantages that cannot be garnered through mild interruptions, 'because out of complexity come emergent phenomena: ways of bending or breaking what appeared to be rock-solid rules, and hence new ways of interacting with, living within, our chaos' (Webb 2004, sec. 5, para. 5). Despite their plans or intentions, trickster practitioners cannot always predict or foresee the consequences of their actions. Where a trickster is *willfully* ignorant of the potential ramifications of some of their actions, a writer cannot know what impact their work will have or how it will be received, no matter how *willing* they are. What happens outside of the writing room and following publication is outside of their control. In finding meaning and significance in chaos, in the mess of art-making, writing, and knowledge production, we must adjust to our surroundings and make things happen, while acknowledging that the results may not align with our

desires; we draw upon the rich information at our hands to form new identities, bodies, and practices so that order and art *can* emerge through the mess.

Order

Order refers to the organisation of subjects (people/objects/ideas) in a particular sequence; tricksters are able to create, uphold, or destroy order. Every map, community, system, rule, and moral belief contains an edge where the trickster can be found, doing what they can to confuse the distinctions between opposites: ‘right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead’ (Hyde 1998, p. 23). Tricksters can cross the boundaries that impose order, but they can also create boundaries, move, loosen, and destroy them and, in doing so, weaken the power of gods, governments, institutions, and other power structures with chaotic results (Hyde 1998, pp. 24-25; Scheub 2012, p. 31).

In some mythological stories, the trickster acts as a messenger between heaven and earth, carrying information from one source to another.¹⁰ Writers are also messengers, as they absorb material (discourse, ideas, experiences), which they then manipulate and present to the social and cultural body in a way that is accessible, relevant, and appealing. For instance, traumatic but important world events can be relayed to children in narrative form, provided they are presented in an appropriate manner for this particular audience. In this way, storytelling can disguise facts in a way that ‘makes explicit our subjectivity in the narration of actual or imaginary events’ (Gildersleeve and Batorowicz 2017, para. 1). Just as the trickster can don disguises and move through spaces in which they would be conceived of as other, writers can shift between communities, including private, public, and professional

¹⁰ For instance, Prometheus stole the knowledge of fire from the gods and delivered it to earth.

spaces, drawing upon the information and knowledge contained within these areas and then transporting it to new locations and populations so that it may be used.

The Native American trickster Raven highlights “‘our problem,’ the basic psychological dilemma of human existence in a changing world’ (Thornton and Thornton 2015, p. 74). But this character is not moral or managerial; instead, they act as a willful wanderer who takes, transforms, and exceeds the rules and boundaries of the universe so that they may gain resources and outcomes that suit their own ends (Thornton and Thornton 2015, p. 74). We recognise this selfish drive: just as Raven’s actions have caused unintended consequences and effects, so too have the willful actions of the social body. Raven pushes against boundaries in a variety of ways, marrying other species, becoming their offspring, and generally challenging the accepted limits set through governing ideas, thoughts, and emotions. Though they may be driven by their own desires, appetites, and aspirations, Raven’s crossing of boundaries shows that even complex, dynamic, and powerful systems are permeable and can be changed (Thornton and Thornton 2015, p. 69).

Tricksters can cross external boundaries perhaps because they have no internal boundaries. As multi-vocal and multi-bodied shapeshifting beings, tricksters contain the collective and reflect us back to ourselves. Trickster stories are comical because of the trickster’s irrational behaviour, which we perceive as different from our own, and yet ‘at the same time ... we understand his [sic] likeness to us’ (Scheub 2012, p. 7). Though writers and tricksters share this quality of crossing boundaries, perhaps writers can also draw on tricksters’ capacity to create, shape, and move boundaries.

In the literal sense, writers must create boundaries within their works so that the narrative maintains a consistent internal logic. Regardless of genre, each book

must contain, be limited by, and obey the rules and laws established within it. But the act of making stands separate to the world of the narrative. The methods that a writer may use in support of their creative practice—researching, thinking, living—may be random, spontaneous, unpredictable and, to a degree, outside of their control. To create works of fiction that extend beyond the limits of conventional storytelling, or a writer’s own limitations, adopting the trickster’s willingness to step over the line can lead to creative innovation. The danger of loosening the self-created boundaries around a creative practice—the belief that there is *one way* to write or to inform the writing—is that a trickster practitioner may lose their way. When order is dismantled, it is possible to get lost; however, it is within this space of chaos that a trickster learns the knowledge that they (or others) need to survive, and perhaps even thrive; as one trickster said when they touched nothingness, ‘[it] filled me with joy’ (Pelton 1993, p. 139). New discoveries lie beyond boundaries, but this rich information is only useful if the writer is able to use it and share it, and to do that, they must be able to find their way home again.

A trickster’s disruption may appear unwelcome and unhelpful, but the longevity and liveliness of institutions and traditions depends on ‘having their boundaries regularly disturbed’ (Hyde 1998, p. 38). The purpose of trickster stories is to show what happens when order is shaken up by disorder, while also demonstrating what is possible within these set boundaries, and what is unacceptable (Turnbull 2000, p. 92). As a liminal figure, the trickster is the literal embodiment of us *and* them, kin *and* other. Their appearance acts as a warning that such boundaries and divisions can be dangerous. In regards to research, the trickster reminds us that academic research and work is about building narratives and it is performative in nature; it is therefore the role of trickster practitioners to disrupt fixed concepts, to

challenge theories, and extend existing frameworks to ensure the health and rigour of the establishment. With creative writing specifically, this new-to-the-academy discipline contains the potential to be chaotic and irrational, to blur with and stand distinct from its sister subject, English Literature (Freiman 2001, para. 1), and other arts and humanities disciplines, stealing what qualities it admires in order to build its own way, disrupting, disturbing, and reforming disciplinary boundaries.

The trickster methodology acknowledges the disorder that lies beneath order, a risky trait that draws our attention to the possibility of failure. Practice-led research recognises creative practice as research, but the trickster methodology explicitly acknowledges that failure is often a part of research investigations. Failure is a point of analysis that encourages a trickster practitioner to adapt and pivot in response to these insights. If a trickster practitioner creates order from disorder when presenting their finding, then these ‘failings’ could be considered a good thing, as they inform the knowledge outcomes.

Conclusion

This chapter specifically focuses on the traits of shapeshifting, play, chance, and order; how these appear figuratively and metaphorically within the existing writing practices of career authors will be explored in the following case study chapter. The trickster methodology provides writers with a way to draw on the trickster’s greatest strengths, using adaptation, change, or the replacement of a system to initiate movement towards a new reality. At a time of major ecological uncertainty, the trickster writer can reopen these systems to their ‘own inward resources of power where imaginative alternatives [can be] glimpsed’ (Hynes 1993a, p. 213).

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY

To err—that is, to wander—is human. And so is the act of making a story out of our purposeless wanderings, as if they mattered, as if they had a beginning, a middle, and an end.
—Lewis Hyde

Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work. I hope your tracks have grown over; I hope birds ate the crumbs; I hope you will toss it all and not look back.
—Annie Dillard

The previous chapter on the trickster methodology uses scholarly materials to describe four key traits shared by tricksters and creative practitioners—in particular, writers. In this chapter, I analyse the creative practice of a range of writers through the lens of the trickster methodology to describe how the traits of shapeshifting, play, chance, and order exist within the creative practice of the fiction writers selected.

Author interviews

As part of this investigation, I conducted interviews with nine speculative fiction authors to gain insight into the creative processes of other practitioners. Ethical clearance to conduct these interviews was granted by the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee considered this project low risk and determined that it fulfilled the requirements outlined by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The conditions of ethics approval stated that neither the participants nor their work could be identified as part of the study,

participants were able to withdraw at any point, and participants should be sent a copy of the interview transcripts with a two-week period to retract or edit any responses as they saw fit. Each author responded to the same set of questions; however, some were asked additional questions about particular creative works.

Participants

Authors of speculative fiction were chosen, as this investigation was initially concerned with the depiction of climate change in fiction. The focus of this project shifted when the outcomes of these interviews and the trickster methodology revealed a description of the creative process that surpassed the intentions (and limitations) of the original research question. Nine established authors agreed to participate in this study. Seven were Australian and two were international. Their writing careers or profiles ranged from a celebrated short story writer yet to debut their first full-length work, to an author with six published novels and an established career as an essayist and mentor. Most of the writers worked in a mixture of forms including essays, non-fiction, short fiction, and novels. Following the conditions of ethics approval for the investigation, the participants will be identified only as A to I.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted over an eight-month period from April 2020 until December 2020. Participants agreed, via email, to a sixty- to ninety-minute virtual interview, long enough to collect a significant volume of data relevant to the scope of this study.

All nine interviews were recorded and transcribed as data for the study. All interviews took place online due to the author's location and the COVID-19

lockdowns occurring across Australia at the time. During a preliminary conversation, we arranged a mutually suitable time, and the interviews were conducted online from our respective homes to create a sense of ease and comfort. Authors were not sent a sample of the questions ahead of time; however, they were briefed on the focus of my investigation and the types of questions they would be asked.

Once all the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, I initially coded the interviews with the intention of developing a series of strategies that other writers could use. Using an approach similar to that of grounded theory, I began with an understanding of the field, but with no definitive research statement or fixed questions (Bryant 2014, p. 119). Instead, I collected the data and then analysed it for patterns with a particular focus on key topics, including creativity, environment, the impact of COVID-19, writing routines/process, research, challenges, motivation, and any other significant statements made. However, this initial coding was not in alignment with other aspects of this investigation. As this research project is using the trickster as a model, the transcripts were subsequently analysed again, this time looking for evidence of trickster strategies or methods. A different series of patterns emerged during this review, which resulted in the development of a new code.

While the writers interviewed were not *intentionally* using trickster traits in their creative pursuits, this investigation identified that these traits often exist within creative practice and these findings contributed to the creation of the trickster methodology. The traits that were identified during this second round of analysis included:

- In-between
- Shapeshifting
- Creative/destructive
- Playful

- Seeing possibilities
- Adaptation
- Random
- Ambiguity

While all of these traits were present, only a few appeared consistently in the process of most of the practitioners: shapeshifting, play, creativity/destructiveness. I also identified two other trickster traits that I had not previously considered: chance and order. Though creativity would be the most obvious trait to explore within a creative writing investigation, as stated in the previous chapter, creativity has already been comprehensively described and analysed by previous researchers. For this reason, I have chosen to analyse the four less-frequently discussed concepts, which draw connections between trickster traits and novel writing. By identifying and describing the four traits that creative writers and tricksters share, the trickster methodology evolved from a theory to a model with a clear, describable structure. The identification of these traits informed the development of my methodology directly as they extended beyond existing practice-led research models through their acknowledgement of the dangerous and unpredictable nature of creativity. Each trait contains its own specific definition and characteristics, but they are also interconnected and overlap, as depicted below.

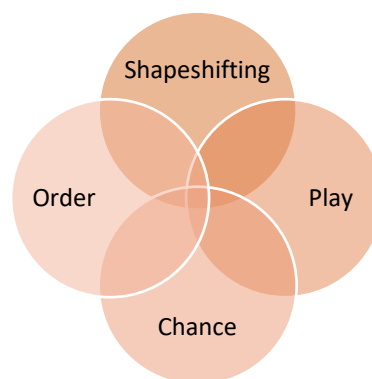


Figure 1. The four traits identified in the trickster methodology.

Trickster traits

Shapeshifting

Shapeshifting refers to the various transformations the writer and their novel can go through over time. When identifying instances of shapeshifting, I was specifically looking for descriptions of change: how the writer moved between different states of being or between different skills, and how the novel metamorphosed from Doyle's 'seed incident' (1998, p. 30) to a completed manuscript. Descriptions of these two instances of shapeshifting were uncovered, along with nuanced reflections I had not previously considered.

As a writer moves through various aspects of writing—content research, critical reading, reflection, and editing (Bacon 2017, p. 246)—the work also changes in a way that is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *becoming*: the creative work is coming more into itself (1998, pp. 235-240). This trait was especially prevalent in the interviews as multiple writers shared how their manuscript changed during the course of its creation as their practice generated, and allowed, new knowledge to be accumulated (Candy 2006, p. 2). Insights, new ideas, and new connections were made as they worked through multiple drafts, which enabled the narrative to develop.

Many of the writers interviewed spoke about story ideas beginning with a 'kernel'—a single image, a premise, or even a title (mirroring Doyle's concept of seed incidents)—that then built upon itself and shifted over time, aided by the writer's imagination, and by drawing upon additional resources such as content research or their own life (B; D; E; F; G; H; I). In most cases, the writers spoke about their creative process in a way that was reminiscent of the cascade effect, except, rather than one change resulting in a series of unintentional consequences, one

insight led to another, which then resulted in an aspect of the story being further developed (narrative arc, plot, character, etc.). This process echoes the trickster's responsive behaviour because the writer and the writing transform to meet the narrative's will and need (Warner 1998, p. 245). By applying these insights to the manuscript, the novel fundamentally changed. As G noted: 'Somewhere along the way I had this idea that it could be about [x] and the moment I did that it became a completely different book.'

When discussing their creative process, many of the authors spoke about their work as though it had a will of its own. Rather than framing the novel's development as the product of a series of creative decisions, they instead spoke about the creative work as though it had agency and was, at least in part, co-creating with the author (A; E; F; G; H). At times, the writer's perception of the manuscript changed, even though the work remained the same. Six months after one author completed their novel, they realised that the work was not finished and that further editing was needed—not to any of its fundamental aspects, but that the book overall could 'work better' (G).

The trickster's disguises can be minor and temporary—a costume that is easily discarded—or extreme: a full body transformation (Hyde 1998, p. 837). This spectrum of shapeshifting also occurs within creative writing. Just as a trickster disguises themselves to gain entry into foreign spaces (Hynes 1993b, p. 37), writers shapeshift into their characters so that they can access their fictional world. Rather than considering the text from the perspective of an outsider, as the trickster does (Landay 1998, p. 2), the writer figuratively inhabits their characters to better understand their emotions, their yearnings and aches, why they are the way they are, and why they think the way they think (A; C; D; E; F; G; H; I). This allowed the

writer to develop greater empathy for their character. Though they may not necessarily choose to spend time with this person in real life, ‘in the story, it’s different’ (H). Writing through multiple points of view also became a quick salve for writer’s block; as one author shared, shifting to a different character’s perspective allowed them to explore a different aspect of the work (E). Conversely, another author stated that their identity as the writer inoculated them from feeling the full depths of their character’s experiences (B), but the majority of the interviewees were able to more fully inhabit their protagonist’s persona and the fictional landscape.

The reverse of this metaphorical embodiment is that some writers became concerned with issues of appropriation. Opinions on this topic varied greatly, from a belief that all humans share the same ‘bedrock’ of emotions (H) to extreme caution (E). Many of the writers believed that writing from perspectives outside of their own—specifically those of marginalised identities—resulted in a more rewarding creative practice and nuanced work. For some, the responsibility attached to such portrayals prompted them to explore less politically heated perspectives, such as those of non-humans and more-than-humans (E; F; G). This is one aspect of the creative process that differs from the shapeshifting processes of tricksters, who change shape without consideration of what that could *mean* for the collective or what harm could occur as a result of bodily change; tricksters, if anything, are amoral (Guenther 2002, sec. 3, para. 1), while most of the writers interviewed for this project understood that writing across identities has moral and ethical implications.

Setting creative challenges and the practice of writing both acted as catalysts for shapeshifting. Every interviewee stated that their primary motivation for writing was to see whether they could transform their imagined story into a publishable book. Some set craft-based challenges focusing on particular weaknesses within their

writing and their desire to ‘learn new ways of writing’ (A; E; H); others were intrigued by the limitations and criticism of their genre, particularly those writing climate change fiction, and wanted to investigate whether there were better ways to depict deep time and large-scale events (D; G; I) or explore the issue indirectly: writing about climate change without writing about climate change (E; F). A few of the interviewees shared that their writing process often acted as a catalyst for producing *new* thoughts, as they depicted ideas and concepts they had never previously considered (B; F; G). In this way, writing was the method that enabled shapeshifting to occur so the writer could accomplish the trickster trait of accessing knowledge to reveal ‘hidden truths’ (Koepping 1985, p. 213; Thornton and Thornton 2015, p. 74). This is an idea that is similar to the principles of practice-led research—research that examines the creative practice to generate new knowledge outcomes (Candy 2006, pp. 2-3; Krauth & Nash 2018, sec. 2).

How writers engage with their work shifts throughout the creative process. The amount of time spent in any particular stage varies greatly as each writer has developed their own creative routine. Months may be dedicated largely to reading and conducting contextual research prior to drafting by some (A B; C; I), while other authors write and research simultaneously (D; E; G). However, the shapeshifting between exploratory drafting and critical analysis also occurs within a single writing session (F). The thoughts stimulated by this analysis, which usually presents as a series of questions that the author asks themselves—what do I find interesting about this? How might I make this more surprising? How could I write this differently?—then guides the revision process or prompts the writer to conduct further content research by referring to existing works that achieve a similar effect or non-fiction material that could inform their world-building or plot (B; D; E; F; G; I). Ultimately,

the trickster's shapeshifting ability provides *a way* for writers to be adaptive and responsive to the creative needs of their work.

Play

Play is a particular attitude or approach a writer has while engaging with their work. In this state of play, a writer is open to the experience of being exploratory and experimental in the narrative. Though they may be working towards an end goal (a novel), it is important that play occur without the pressure of producing outcomes; when writing is driven by joy, as Ray Bradbury preferred, the results are more creative, innovative, and surprising. When coding the transcripts, I was looking for descriptions relating to the generating of ideas (where did stories come from? How did the writer develop them?), unusual or tactile approaches to draft/writing/editing, and generally how they engaged with or created space for their creativity. Evidence of these methods or approaches were identified, along with other forms of imaginative play.

Ideas and guidance were often found when a writer engaged with their imagination by responding to self-created prompts or the science fiction staple: asking *what if ...?* The concerns inherent with this genre (and its subcategories, including speculative and climate change fiction) influenced the types of questions that the writers used to generate ideas around structure, plot, world-building, and characterisation. Some of these questions related to the creative hindrances of the genre: how do you depict the impact on the collective when contemporary novels centre on one, or a few, protagonists? How can complex, global, or ecological issues be scaled down to the local level? How can the connections between ecology, capitalism, and social justice be drawn? (B; D; G; I). Other prompts were more

concerned with narrative components: what will the world look like ten or more years from now? How do catastrophes change who we are? How do non-humans and more-than-humans *really* perceive us? How do you write about an antagonist (e.g. climate change) that is not a physical being? (C; E; F).

At times, this method of questioning, and then responding to these prompts, occurred after a premise or scene was created. Rather than using a prompt to lead the writing, some writers followed their intuition but then used these reflective questions as a guide while they moved deeper into the work (E; F; G). As one writer shared, ‘I’ve said this is how the world works, what does it mean that the world works like this?’(F). In this case, the writer gave themselves permission to begin each section instinctively and then allowed the narrative to progress organically. Though the narrative became increasingly odd, it eventually developed its own internal logic in a way that is reminiscent of the trickster’s inverted logic and metaplay, as discussed in the previous chapter (Hynes & Doty 1993a, p. 30). This improvisational approach allowed the writer to produce a draft that was rich and innovative.

When experiencing creative challenges, some interviewees would ask questions of the work or use self-reflective prompts such as: What do you want to write about? What do you care about? (A; D; E; G). In this way, self-created questions became a tool that solved writer’s block, as the writer was able to narrow the parameters of the narrative and better choose what to include, and exclude, from the manuscript. Self-awareness allowed writers to determine the *type* of story they wanted to tell. Given the real-world impact and consequences of some of their chosen topics (e.g. climate change, classism, social justice), writing fiction about these topics can easily become distressing (for both writer and reader). Crafting a novel that was realistic and plausible in its representation of these issues was

important, but it was not placed above the writer's own sense of enjoyment. Writing still had to be fun (A; D; E; F; G; H).

Some writers found joy in imagining new technologies (A; C; D) or writing through non-human and more-than-human perspectives (A; E; F; G), as this allowed them to engage with imaginative play. Other writers gave themselves permission to imagine positive, or at least best-case, scenarios, when world-building, despite the bleak contemporary world issues that might have inspired the initial premise (F; G; I). Contextual research allowed writers depicting experiences that differed from or went beyond their own, to imagine a *different way* (Hyde 1998, p. 113) if the scene did not work. Sometimes play overlapped with content research; one writer explained that they travelled to their setting's location and spent some time 're-imagining' the landscape. This activity 'became a big part of the research too' (I). All of the writers interviewed, even those whose work could be described as apocalyptic (or pessimistic), described their creative practice as joyful. Part of this enjoyment came from setting creative challenges and writing morally grey, complex, or ambiguous characters. D stated, for example, 'I know they are loathsome characters, but they are fun to write'. Allowing space for play despite the seriousness of their topic brought relief to the writing experience and potentially future reading experiences.

Play was brought into the act of writing through a combination of planning and *pantsing*.¹¹ The main benefit of planning, for those who used this method, was that the writer could develop their idea *enough* that they were confident to begin writing (A; C; I); pantsing was what allowed them to have fun with the story. The

¹¹ Refers to writers who work intuitively rather than with an outline or plan: they write 'by the seat of their pants.'

gaps between what was known and unknown about the story was where writers could play (D; E; F; G H; I). Intentionally subverting tropes, turning stories ‘upside down’ (H), and setting creative challenges allowed writers to explore fresh versions of the already well-explored story structures associated with this genre. One writer shared that when they encountered a particular creative problem—specifically, how to unpack and explore complex systems like capitalism, corruption, and the financial sector—they reframed it as a game for which they had to find a solution (I).

Though play was crucial to each writer’s creative practice, like all traits associated with the trickster, there is potential for embracing play to result in less-than-ideal outcomes (Guenther 2002, sect. 3, para. 14; Hynes & Doty 1993a, p. 30). One writer shared that while their early works were fun to write and fun to read, ‘I don’t think they’re actually that good’ (I). Embedding play in a creative practice does not guarantee a positive outcome, even if it does make the act of making more pleasurable.

Play also contributed to each writer’s creative practice in subtle and sometimes indirect ways. Writers were often able to ‘trick’ themselves into writing by choosing to replace their daily word count goal (e.g. 2000 words) with a smaller, more manageable limit (e.g. 500 words). Though they would often surpass this ‘new minimum’ goal and hit their former target, adjusting this metric decreased the feeling of overwhelm they experienced prior to writing, and their ability to go beyond their small but still challenging goal made them ‘feel good’ (A; H). Similarly, including other activities in their routines, such as daily walks, reading, playing with their children, gardening, or engaging in other creative activities like painting or photography, allowed writers to destress, process their emotions, and engage in creative ideation (A; B; C; D; F). They did not see these activities as separate from

their creative practice, but as necessary pastimes that benefited their writing.

Chance

Chance can refer to the sudden inspirations, coincidences, or insights that occur unexpectedly at any stage of the writing process and that are often outside of the writer's control. Chance was *not* in my initial list of trickster traits when coding these interviews, but the frequency of this pattern and the use of a trickster lens while analysing allowed me to identify it. Elements of chance presented in the creative process when writers identified unintended connections within the work while editing (G; H), experienced new ideas while writing (A; B; E), or had creative insights while not writing (A; F; I).

There is little an author can do to instigate these spontaneous insights beyond simply engaging with the work. Authors spoke about how seemingly random choices, or decisions made solely to move the plot forward, later became (without the author's conscious decision) a powerful metaphor that supported the work's themes (A; E; G). At times, this aspect of the work might be undeveloped, but once recognised, the author could better embed, emphasise, or draw out this component of the narrative. How this presents within the work may be subtle. As one author shared, being overly direct can mean that a work lacks sophistication (G), yet all interviewees agreed that their work benefited from these moments of chance as they made the work more dynamic, complex, and layered, allowing the story to hang together. They also indicated that chance was one of the greatest pleasures of writing. For tricksters, whether benevolent or cruel, play is the primary form of agency and the greatest joy (Pelton 1993, p. 139).

As previously stated, the majority of writers interviewed incorporated planning into their creative practice in some way, despite the fact that their process was largely intuitive. Several authors shared that they believe this element of chance within their work to be especially profound *because* they plan so little and, when they are writing, they try to not control or over-intellectualise what they are writing (D; F; G; H). Tricksters are not strategists, either; they do not make plans or act with a fixed intention. Instead, they make use of the resources available to them when responding to immediate situations, and to create or destroy as they desire within the moment (Hynes & Steele 1993, p. 164). As one author said, 'I don't think very much when I'm writing, I just write' (G). It is only later, during the editing process, when they read the work as a whole, that they are able to see how a plot point within the middle of the book echoes a conversation at the start, or how the ending mirrors the beginning. Several writers shared that some of the most interesting components of their stories were the ones that surfaced apparently on their own, in a way that was organic and uncontrollable. As one author said, 'It's really chance stuff' (G).

Chance is outside of a writer's control, and yet, the writers identified ways to *invite* chance into their creative practice. Engaging in activities that were disconnected from writing, activities that allowed the writer to relax, reflect, wonder, or daydream increased the likelihood of these creative insights or ideas (A; C; D; E; F). Writers shared how engaging in these non-writing activities made it more likely that moments of chance would occur; however, they could not be *actively seeking insight*. Instead, they had to be fully present with the alternative activity. As one writer shared, 'Those walks on the beach are often the most productive work I do in the day because I am deliberately setting out to distance myself from it, and it's often during that time' (A) that the great insights, connections, or ideas occur.

Like play, chance is largely a positive experience; however, it too can involve risk. As one writer shared, choosing to write a complex and challenging ending, which they perceived to be progressive, held the potential to be misinterpreted and seen as nihilistic (F). Ultimately, how a reader responds to a story is a matter of chance.

Order

Order and its counterpart, disorder, can refer to the minutiae of a writing routine as well as how a text is assembled over time from an open exploration of possible ideas to the gradual refinement of a story into a shape that is presentable and consumable for others. When analysing the interviews, I was looking for examples of how writers thought about or challenged the strengths and limitations of their genre, their own process, and the work itself. The most obvious and prevalent way that order appeared was through the adherence to, manipulation of, or deviation from genre expectations. Every writer interviewed drew upon multiple genres to construct a hybrid text by using tropes associated with unique combinations of horror, speculative fiction, historical fiction, thriller, literary realism, and paranormal narratives. Rather than confining their narrative to the limitations of any one genre, they selected aspects from a range of genres that, when combined, would enable their story to move forward or that would support the needs of the narrative. However, several authors shared that the conventions of contemporary fiction provided an inadequate framework for the crafting of their narratives (E; D; G; I). Examining the structures of traditional forms such as Greek plays and mythologies allowed some of the writers to stretch the boundaries of their narrative structure so they could better depict wide-scale impacts on local, regional, national, and global levels (D; I).

Just as play and chance increase risk, order brings its own chaos in the form of traps. Tricksters are notorious for being ensnared by their deceptions, but in the case of writing, several interviewees shared that although they prefer to write intuitively, doing so occasionally leads them to dead ends, writers block, or plot holes. Author F shared that when they reach the mid-point of a narrative (short story or novel) they ‘freak out because I don’t know where it should be going or what should be happening’. The cost of relinquishing order, in this instance, could include having to delete or rewrite whole chapters, changing a manuscript’s structure, or even abandoning the work entirely. However, choosing to work without an outline may have been a subconscious but semi-deliberate way to invite in these late ‘problems’ as it allows space for them to emerge and an opportunity for the writer to question the work and the decisions they have made: would the narrative benefit from being shaped in a different way? This experience mirrors Webb’s reframing of complex problems as being ‘information rich’ (2004, sec. 4, para. 4).

Like the trickster, writers moved between creating order, disrupting order, and upholding order (Hyde 1998, pp. 24-25; Scheub 2012, p. 31). This presented within the interviewees’ practices through their reliance on cognitive tools, such as planning and outlining, or through maintaining a consistent creative routine and practice (A; B; F; G; H; I). Trickster traits such as play and chance allowed this order to be disrupted as new creative insights were generated by considering the work from a different perspective, allowing space for intuitive writing, or disengaging from the work for short periods of time. In one intriguing example, a writer relinquished order during the drafting process so that ‘there were no boundaries between me and the work’ (G). This caused the narrative to become deeply personal as they embedded much of their personal character, reflections, traumas, and background into the text.

When writers wrote intuitively, the boundaries between themselves and their creative work blurred, and ‘chance’ moments increased. Conversely, upholding order occurred for different writers at different stages. One way it presented was during the editing process, as writers disassembled drafts before reconfiguring the events into a sequence that best supported their narrative. For others, order was created through maintaining a regular practice despite personal and public changes.

Conclusion

The initial focus intention of the author interviews was to identify and articulate a series of strategies that other authors could use during the development of their creative works. Instead, four specific traits that exist within the creative practice of fiction writers and that are parallel to characteristics commonly associated with the trickster archetype were identified. These four traits then contributed to the creation of the trickster methodology. In this chapter I have described each strategy, drawing on insights and experiences found in the interviews. I have focused on the way shapeshifting, play, chance, and order present within these idiosyncratic creative practices. Importantly, none of these strategies are truly discrete—they cannot be separated out from other elements of the writer’s practice. Indeed, even non-writing activities—the business of life—are described here as central to a thriving creative practice. In the next chapter, I examine how these same traits were both inherent and *intentionally* used throughout this research project.

CREATIVE WORK: CONSTANT COMPANIONS

Keone and Sissy
2025

In Rogathella, there are no wrong turns. Take a left or right at any of the stalky, polished ghost gums or scarlet bottlebrushes that occupy almost every street corner and you eventually wind up at your destination.

The mental fog that had lingered throughout Keone's double shift lifted the moment she clocked off and tossed her apron on the passenger-side seat. In the wake of a hangover, only exhaustion remained.

More than half a day had passed since she'd left Brooke's house, and though she'd only been there once, she knew exactly where to go. Campbell Street was a long line of fibro houses that opened onto arid bush, but Brooke's place was the one with a green lawn. With three hundred and ten days of sunshine a year, the town was stripped of colour. Buildings, sidewalks, plastic playground equipment, even cars—all were bleached and bleak.

The bush was different.

Keone had expected the town and the surrounding land to be flat, and while there were many open, barren plains on the drive to the town, the closer she got to Rogathella the more textured and varied the land became. The highway curled around outcrops of rugged burnt-orange rocks, and rises swooped and folded over one another. The pearlescent gums and their grey-green leaves stood in brilliant contrast to the dry, vibrant soil, proving that life can thrive regardless of circumstances. A cloudless sky offered no protection, no nourishing rain or decent waves. But there was no surfing in the Simpson Desert—no surfing for Keone, no matter where she lived.

‘You’re a witch,’ Keone had announced the previous night as she knelt and brushed a hand over the thick lawn. The soil in her own yard was so loose locals called it *bull dust*. ‘Your grass is green-green.’

‘We put in a bore last spring,’ Brooke explained, as if Rogathella had seasons. ‘So we’re exempt from the water restrictions.’

‘You’re sort of exempt,’ Miley corrected, leaning heavily against the stair’s railing.

‘Are you rich?’ Keone asked, as she took in the small verandah of the renovated worker’s cottage, its cobalt blue paint and white trim. The large windows on both sides of the front door looked like eyes, the effect enhanced by the light of several vintage lamps that stood sentry in the living room. With the curtains pulled back, you could see all the way in. Keone had never been rich, not even when she’d won the world series and scored sponsorships with *Roxy* and *Quicksilver*. But there had been a time when she didn’t need to worry about money—and that was the next best thing.

Brooke’s smile widened. Years from now, they’d collectively refer to it as her Teflon grin. ‘We’re not *rich*; we just have a fancy house. Inheritance.’

It was too late in the night and much too early in their friendship for Keone to ask who’d croaked.

Keone flicked on her indicator and pulled up behind a beige Gemini parked on the curb. *Must be Miley’s*, Keone thought. Her suspicions proved correct as she crossed the lawn and a tall redhead opened the front door.

‘Afternoon, soldier.’ Miley waved, causing her wooden bracelets to bang together. A flashback from last night: Keone telling Miley that she looked like a high school art teacher.

‘Close.’ She’d laughed. ‘I’m a forklift driver. I *used* to paint though.’

The near past and present merged as Keone paused at the bottom of the verandah steps, beside the recently pruned hedge of mock oranges. ‘You call in sick today?’ she asked, noticing Miley’s blue shorts, which looked suspiciously like pyjama bottoms.

‘Absolutely,’ Miley said, then her face softened. ‘How did your first shift go? It must have been a doozy.’

‘I’ve had better days.’ Keone stepped onto the verandah proper, eyes drifting past Miley to three crates stacked side by side in the entryway. The first was the size

of a chest freezer, the next was moderate, similar to a microwave, and the last was no bigger than a tissue box. The company's logo, Constant Companions, was stamped on every side.

'Jesus! Have they been in there all day?' Keone did a poor job of hiding her disgust.

Brooke's voice echoed from a room at the back of the house. 'No! They haven't been activated yet! I'm not an animal.'

Miley turned to Keone; a shy grin brightened her eyes. 'Bet she got a panther.'

Before Keone could comment, Brooke pushed open the screen door. Her blonde hair was perfectly blow dried, the ends skimming the shoulders of the white blouse that hung loosely over her pale cropped jeans. She looked immaculate. The small puff around her grey eyes was the only giveaway that she was just as hungover as her returning guests. 'Come on, then! You must be *dying* to know what you got!'

The screen door closed behind her as she barked an order at her husband, Anewa, to help them open the crates.

'Panther? That's not the right fit. A lion, *maybe*.' Keone murmured, instantly regretting it, but Miley only laughed.

Brooke stood among the crates, her fingers tracing the raw pine as if her will alone could open them.

A door closed at the back of the house and, a moment later, a tall man wearing a black shirt and a necklace made from orange shells entered. He could stand toe-to-toe with Miley, except his solid frame, sweeping forehead, and thick, ropey locks gave the illusion of being much larger.

'Hey, Keone.' Anewa greeted her with a nod, a crowbar held loose in one hand. 'Ready for me to open 'em, *meri*?' There was an edge to his voice that hadn't been there the night before. Brooke had insisted that she put the order on her credit card; perhaps Anewa wasn't as excited about Brooke's impromptu purchase as she was.

'Thanks, babe.' Brooke stepped back as Anewa wedged the bar beneath the lip of the biggest crate, the one with her name on it. The wood cracked as he pried the lid open, loosening one side and then another.

Keone recalled the soft female voice-over from the YouTube ad.

Are you lonely and looking for a companion? The disembodied voice had asked as the camera zoomed in on a blonde woman—who looked surprisingly similar to Brooke—patting a jet-black wolf.

‘Oh, come on, we just want to watch the trailer,’ Miley had said, failing to hide her frustration.

Keone reached to hit the skip button when the image change to a teenage boy playing with a pet lizard. *Studies show that close bonds with animals extend and improve the quality of our lives. Pets can enrich our days, bringing solace and comfort in good times and bad; theirs is a type of love we don’t experience in any other relationship. We share our homes and lives with our animals, yet much of their internal nature remains a mystery to us, no matter how well we think we know them. If animals could talk, what would they say?*

Though the company had existed for a year or so, Keone had never met a Constant Companion in real life. The cost and ongoing ethical debates seemed to be the largish barriers to purchase—that, and the embarrassing criticism that animal companions were essentially adult versions of *Furbies*.

Constant Companion has dissolved these barriers. Now, you can speak to your animal companion the way you would a spouse, family member, or friend. Complete our online questionnaire today and we will send you the perfect Constant Companion to complement your unique personality.

‘What does that mean?’ Brooke had asked the computer screen as the shot changed, revealing the face behind the voice: a young, attractively nondescript woman in a blue blazer, her dark hair falling in waves down her back.

A pet can make you feel less alone, but a Constant Companion offers so much more. If you think dogs are man’s best friend, then you haven’t met a Constant Companion. Constant Companions have a clarified purpose: to love and support their human companions. Don’t hesitate, don’t delay. Visit constantcompanions.com to complete your order and receive your ideal companion within twenty-four hours of payment. You’ll be glad you did.

It had taken them each an hour to complete the online questionnaire. Above the submission button on the final page, applicants could tick a box allowing the company to access their digital health records. Alternatively, they could book a blood test appointment with the nearest participating medical centre. For convenience, all three women had ticked option number one.

Anewa grunted as he pumped down on the crowbar; the wood splintered and cracked in resistance. The first crate was huge. Keone wondered how wide the Constant Companion catalogue was. Did it include large animals like deer, elephants seals, and horses? What about buffaloes, giraffes, and anacondas? If your totem was a moose or an emu, would they send you that animal or exchange it for a species more compatible with domestic living?

Anewa slid the crowbar free, removed the loosened lid, and peered inside. His eyes widened. ‘Holy fuck.’ He gripped the bar so tight that the muscles in his arm jumped.

‘What?’ Brooke asked, but Anewa only shook his head as he reluctantly moved aside.

Brooke’s legs shook as she edged closer. An audible gasp. She grinned her trademark coathanger smile, though the edges wavered slightly, as she leaned into the box. Something clicked, and she hurriedly stepped back.

A moment later, the furry head of a large grey wolf emerged over the lip of the crate. Its amber eyes assessed each of them in turn. Without warning, it leapt from the box and ambled towards Brooke. Its nails clicked on the polished wood.

‘Twinkle toes,’ Brooke murmured, her eyes wide with fear or wonder. ‘Hello.’

The wolf bumped her hand with its nose and sat beside her as though it were taking its usual seat at the table. Brooke’s eyes didn’t budge, though she did lift her hand to cradle it against her chest.

Gooseflesh broke out over Keone’s skin. Part of her wanted to run out the front door, but the other was fixed to the spot. She’d never seen a wolf before. There were no apex predators on Hawai’i; there weren’t even snakes. A wolf is just a dog, she tried to tell herself, and this one has been made for humans. But it was the height she found most disconcerting, and the way it lowered its elegant head, keen and assessing.

‘Jesus,’ Miley shook her head and then examined the medium-sized box with her name on it. Her expression was one part curious and one part terrified. Keone reluctantly peeled her gaze away from the wolf as Anewa slipped his crowbar beneath the lid and gently eased it open. The wood whined until its top flopped back onto the floor.

Miley squatted beside the open box. ‘Wow.’ Her voice sounded relieved. She hovered for a moment, then pulled out a long black leather glove. ‘There’s a button,’ she said, almost to herself. She reached back inside; again, there was a click. She hopped back with a small yelp at the same time that a mob of speckled brown and beige feathers and canary yellow feet soared into the air—but the bird was no canary. Its wingspan was the length of Keone’s arms.

Everyone pressed against the wall as the bird circled the room, though it was too high to collide with any of them. Its small, sharp head shifted between angles, before landing on Miley’s outstretched and gloved arm.

‘Oh my god,’ she said, losing her balance for a moment. ‘You really can talk! This is unreal.’ Her voice was full of awe as she extended a soft hand. ‘May I?’ Then she stroked the hawk’s back. The bird ruffled its feathers in response. ‘I’ve never seen your kind before.’

‘You’re still not,’ Anewa said, beneath his breath, ‘because *that* is not a hawk.’

Standing beside him, Keone was the only one who heard the comment. She was about to say, *Well, it’s not an eagle*, when she suddenly understood his meaning.

Anewa picked up the final box. He eyed the crowbar in his hand but tossed it aside. Instead, he pried open the small box with his hands, peered inside, and huffed before passing the box to Keone. Images of small, terrifying creatures—tarantulas, snakes, scorpions—flashed through her mind. She steadied her breath before looking inside. A small red button gleamed beside the inanimate form of a slim white rat. Its thin pink ears and tail were almost translucent.

‘Click the button,’ Brooke added needlessly.

Keone pressed the button. A tiny bright spark lit the box, and the rodent convulsed. Its whiskers twitched. Its tail flicked. Slowly, it hobbled to the side of the wooden box, revealing the small metal sheet it had been lying on. It scratched up the side of the container until it was standing on its hind legs. Its impossibly small paws rested on the open edge. Its nose tested the air. Then two jet-black beads met Keone’s watching gaze.

Hi Keone. I’m Sissy.

‘Holy fuck,’ Keone nearly dropped the box as she echoed Anewa’s earlier sentiment. ‘Did you guys hear that?’ She looked up at the rest of the room.

‘No,’ Brooke shook her head. ‘Only you can hear your Companion. They must have recognised us from our profile photos.’

‘Who knows what they do with that information,’ Anewa mumbled.

‘It’s hardly that bad.’ Brooke lowered her hand and tentatively stroked the giant wolf beside her. ‘Her name is Ote.’

Miley laughed. ‘Your wolf’s name is Ote? Weird.’

Brooke shrugged. ‘That’s what she told me. Let me guess, your bird’s name is Wind? Or maybe it’s Wing, or Thunder?’

‘Nope. Her name is Vasilisa,’ Miley said. ‘I guess that’s pretty weird, too.’

‘I got a rat,’ Keone said. ‘How much should I read into that?’ She meant it as a joke, but disappointment leaked into her voice. Until this moment, her expectations had been invisible to her. She hadn’t realised how much she’d anticipated an animal that would *truly* reflect her ideal self: a turtle, a crab—something that depended on the ocean.

‘What’s the rat’s name?’ Miley asked.

‘Sissy.’ Keone blushed. ‘Sissy the rat. Does this mean I’m untrustworthy and people perceive me as a pest?’

Miley ran a finger down the unflinching bird’s beak. ‘That, and you really like cheese.’

Anewa chuckled as he picked up the discarded lids and tossed them into the crates. ‘*Meri*, are they coming back for these?’ he asked, but Keone missed the answer as Sissy scampered out of the crate to perch on the back of her wrist. The rat’s tiny claws bit lightly into her skin like a dog playing. Its small, fine whiskers tickled the equally fine hairs on her arm.

I’m starving. Sissy announced. *I’d eat anything.* Keone looked up, but Miley and Brooke were preoccupied. Miley was stroking the hawk’s head and cooing quietly while Brooke had dropped to the floor beside her wolf, hands buried in that thick fur. Its long pink tongue flopped from its mouth as it panted with pleasure. Apparently, Brooke’s and Miley’s initial caution had vanished.

‘Brooke, is there anything I could give ... Sissy? She’s hungry.’ Speaking the companion’s name aloud only made her feel more childish. *Sissy. The talking rat.* Shame warmed her cheeks.

Brooke reluctantly tore her eyes from the wolf. ‘Absolutely. In fact, Ote is hungry too. There’ll be something in the fridge.’ Brooke stood, and Ote’s tail

wagged as she nosed her master's hand again, then tottered dutifully after her into the kitchen.

A moment later, the rest of the strange parade followed.

Brooke opened the fridge, pulled out two packets of mince, and placed them on the bench. 'I reckon Ote will eat one of these all by herself,' she said, slicing the plastic open with a pair of scissors. She slid the meat onto a plate before placing it at the creature's feet. The wolf needed no further invitation, gobbling up the offering in seconds. Brooke sliced open the second packet, placed a small handful onto a plate, and passed it to Miley. She placed a teaspoonful onto a floral cake plate, which she set at the end of the bench. 'There you go, Sissy,' she said. 'I'll have to tell Anewa that he won't be cooking bolognese for dinner.'

Miley plucked a morsel of mince from the plate and tossed it into the air. Vasilisa launched from her perch on Miley's arm, soared through the kitchen, and snatched up the meat before it came close to landing on the ground.

'Wow,' Keone murmured, momentarily caught up in the beauty of the animal's flight. Her gaze flitted between the wolf and the hawk. They were mysterious and majestic animals. She still wasn't sure why she'd wound up with a rat.

Keone, the food! Sissy's plea whispered inside Keone's head. She gently scooped up the white rat and placed her on the bench. The rodent scurried across the tiles, which were as pale as her own fur, and attacked her dinner with enthusiasm. *More, more, Keone.*

Keone scooped another teaspoon of mince out of the packet and dropped it onto the plate. 'You sure do eat a lot.'

Vasilisa was back on Miley's gloved hand, her dark eyes shifting between Sissy's and Ote's plates. 'Brooke, can you throw another piece?'

Brooke, who was in the middle of giving Ote some extras, tossed another medallion into the air.

Don't worry, Sissy said as she munched away, what I lack in wings I make up for with my many other sterling qualities. I am your ideal companion.

'I didn't say anything.'

You didn't have to. This disappointment is painted all over your face.

An unsettling sensation stirred in Keone's chest. 'Sorry,' she whispered. 'I wasn't trying to hurt you.'

Our first official tiff as companions! Oh, of course I forgive you, Keone. Especially if you keep feeding me. Food is the very best way to celebrate, don't you think? I'm so lucky to have you as my companion.

Keone plopped another piece of meat onto the plate, uncertain if this was a healthy amount for the rat to eat. 'You don't have to refer to me as your companion. Keone is fine.'

Sissy glanced up; her tiny jaw nibbled at the raw meat with alarming speed. Her pronounced trumpet ears dropped slightly. *Oh. Okay. Names are very important, aren't they? They contain power. Keone means homeland, and Sissy is a version of Cecilia, which means blind, but I can see just fine—don't worry. I won't ever call you my companion out loud again, but can I still think of you that way?*

'Sure, do whatever you want.'

And you can call me Sissy. Her ears perked up. *Or your Companion. Or, hey, what if we came up with secret names that only you and I know?*

'No,' Keone said.

The initial excitement of opening the boxes was fading and her weariness had returned. Experimentally, she stroked Sissy's back as she ate, surprised by how soft the fur was, while intrusive thoughts of disease and fleas quickened Keone's desire to wash her hands. Looking up, she saw that Miley and Brooke were preoccupied with their new familiars.

The species of your companion reflected your nature—that and the programming that ensured they complemented your lifestyle, tastes, energy, tendencies, and ... essence. Keone's gaze flicked from Brooke to Miley. She knew neither of them well enough to say whether their animal companions suited them better than any other species. Despite the previous night's drunken bonding session, they were still strangers—at least they were to her, and she was to them. Standing in Brooke's alarmingly pristine kitchen, Keone realised how out of place she was, dressed in her filthy uniform. Keone dug her car keys out of her pocket, gathered up her companion and said a quick goodbye before slipping out the back door.

Keone had no established route home, but she vaguely recalled the way Anewa had gone the night before. Fortunately, in her inebriated state, she'd only needed to rattle

off the street name and number. Like Brooke and Miley, Anewa had lived in Rogathella his whole life—he knew exactly where to go.

It was after six, but the light was still good (one of the few perks of summer) when she pulled into her gravel driveway to park beneath the awning. Living remote ought to be cheap, and to a degree it was (see: total lack of galleries, museums, trendy cafes, exhibitions, shows, and events), but rentals were expensive, and this little shack was the best Keone could afford on her own. Having revisited Brooke's house while sober, she swore to never extend an invitation to either of her new friends. Maybe she should try to grow some grass, but she dismissed the idea as quickly as it appeared—she refused to settle down in a town whose air smelt of sulphur instead of salt. Right now, though, it was the lingering stench of milk, food scraps, and oil (the signature scents of hospitality work) that felt unbearable. 'I need a shower; I stink of hard, boring work,' she croaked.

I think you smell great, Sissy said, her head emerging from the folds of Keone's discarded apron on the passenger seat.

'You're a rat, so that doesn't count.'

Through the windscreen, she took in her new rental: a beach shack without a beach. The weatherboard's azure paint was flaking, nearly every flyscreen contained a hole, one of the porch steps was loose, and the railing even more so. The stilts were an echo of her childhood home, and though they *supposedly* made the house cooler in summer, she wasn't sure if the benefits outweighed the cost, as the unsealed floorboard meant that she could see between the gaps and straight through to the raw earth below. Fortunately, the afternoon sun was more forgiving than the harsher light of midday. Rustic charm was a stretch, something that could only have been applied if the porch offered a sea view, and yet, at dusk, the shack edged towards that description, or at least to its implication: simple, unsophisticated.

Keone gathered up her things, hesitating only slightly as she picked up the stained apron that now harboured a rat. She skipped over the faulty porch step, unlocked the front door, and was greeted with the same interior she'd left that morning: boxes, boxes, boxes. Now that she was hungover, tired, and hungry, the sight of those boxes was an insufferable burden. She slid her backpack onto the unintentionally retro lime-green bench, scooped Sissy out of her apron, and set her on the counter. 'I wouldn't normally allow a rat onto my bench, but I'm going to assume that you're pretty clean for a rodent.'

The cleanest. The rat's whiskers twitched as she ambled along the bench, licking up tiny morsels of salt, pepper, and toast crumbs. *Who are Brooke and Miley? I didn't learn about them in your questionnaire and there are no photos or mentions of them on your social media accounts.*

Keone's skin prickled at the mention of the questionnaire. She shouldn't have hit that red button; she should have given the box back to Anewa and said thank you to Brooke for last night before telling them to send the rat back for a refund. *Shit*, she thought, *two grand. I can't spend two grand on a talking rat!* What made it worse was that she *hadn't* spent that money, Brooke had, and now she owed a stranger the first two weeks of her wages. 'That's how you learn about your companions, then? You look us up online?'

The rat sniggered. *Computers aren't made for rodents.*

'You didn't answer my question.'

It's part of how I was designed. The people at the facility used your questionnaire, online user data, and digital health records when they made me. I still have my hard-wired traits, but unlike a natural mouse, I have a clarity of purpose.

'Which is?'

To love and be of service to you.

A knot formed in Keone's stomach. Service. Servitude. Despite the public criticism, she hadn't, until that moment, fully comprehended the implications of companions. Was this just a repeat of the darker dynamics of human history: slavery, bondage, people as property, only made acceptable because companions were neither human nor animal?

'You have free will though, right? You are yourself? You're not my...'*Slave.* But Keone couldn't bring herself to say the word aloud.

I am your companion and you are mine. We're family now, and I want to help you live a long, happy life.

'You're allowed to want things too.'

But I do want things, Keone; I want to help you. I think it is honourable to be of service. It makes me happy. That and chocolate cake. Now it's your turn to answer my question, which you still haven't, I might add.

'What question?'

Who are Brooke and Miley? How did you meet?

‘Sorry, I guess.’ Keone undid her hair tie and scrubbed her head, causing her tight curls to puff up into a wiry, dark cloud. ‘I met Brooke yesterday. She came into the restaurant to interview me about being the new manager, then she invited me to trivia night at the hotel—’

Did you win?

Keone could still taste the five-spice-dusted chips they’d shared, though she was sure she’d eaten most of them, starved after her first day working at the Rogathella Hotel.

‘I’ve never played trivia before,’ she had said, examining the flyer in front of her.

‘Ha! Don’t worry, we don’t *actually* play,’ Brooke topped up their wine glasses and dumped the bottle of chardonnay back in the ice bucket. ‘Well, okay, sometimes we do, but usually we just come along for the atmosphere and a catch-up.’

Keone cocked an eyebrow. ‘You come to trivia night for the *atmosphere*?’

Miley grinned, amused by their own absurdity. ‘Sometimes it’s nice to just feel like *something* is happening and maybe you’re a part of it.’

‘But you don’t play?’

Brooke snorted. ‘Have you ever played trivia? It’s disgustingly dull.’

‘Brooke says you just moved here? Um, what made you do that?’ Miley took a sip of her wine and Keone followed suit. She was a terrible liar; no point in fabricating something totally false. Instead, she went with a half-truth. ‘I was working at the hotel’s branch on the coast and a promotion came up here. The money was good, so I figured why not?’

‘It’s just you then?’

‘Just me.’

Miley surveyed the room and leaned a little closer. ‘If you’ve got your fingers crossed for a miner, I wouldn’t bother. If they’re not married already there’s probably a reason why.’

‘Lucky I’m not looking for a man,’ Keone said. ‘I’m not looking for anyone right now.’

‘Good.’ Miley laughed. ‘Cos I don’t know any decent women either—other than our fine Brooke here—but unfortunately, she’s straight and married.’

‘But in a totally un-boring way,’ Brooke said, snagging a chip from the bowl.

‘Kids?’ Keone asked, immediately embarrassed by the intrusive question.

Brooke leaned back in her seat, grinning. ‘Soon.’

Their conversation that night had been refreshing: free from the baggage of Keone’s injury, her lost career, and mangled relationships. Brooke and Miley weren’t walking on eggshells; they were being themselves—or, at least, as much as anyone can be themselves when talking to a stranger.

‘We didn’t win,’ she replied to Sissy’s question as she opened the fridge, pulled out a loaf of bread, some ham, and a tub of butter, and she went about the business of making an unremarkable sandwich, popping a soda for good measure.

I’m thirsty too. Sissy scurried towards the tap.

For a moment, Keone was surprised that the rat knew what the tap was for, then she shook her head. Of course, the rat would understand the purpose and intention of a tap; constant companions were domestic creatures. ‘Hold on.’ She ducked around the opened but unpacked boxes that littered the kitchen floor until she found a tiny saucer, upon which she shredded a portion of ham while she munched on her own sandwich.

Do you like them? I like them. Brooke is very generous with her tasty food, and Miley has a great laugh. We should invite them over. All of us companions together for a great big party!

Keone smiled. ‘How can you like someone so much that you only just met?’

You don’t like them?

‘They’re friendly, kind, funny—’

The embodiment of goodness.

‘But I’ve only just met them. They’re different to my other friends. I’m not sure how much we have in common.’ Miley had confessed last night that she could count how many times she’d seen the ocean.

You have us in common.

‘What’s that?’

Companions, silly.

‘Right.’ A shade of guilt crossed as she considered the thirty-day refund. ‘Anyway, where do you like to sleep? Do you need a cage or something?’ Sissy wasn’t a pet—that much was clear—but Keone didn’t want the rat to feel insecure or unsafe.

Do you?

Keone snorted. ‘Too late. Have you seen this house?’ She sipped her soda, eyes scanning the endless bounty of unopened boxes. She had a lot of stuff for someone who owned nothing. ‘I can’t do this anymore,’ she said, taking another bite of her humble dinner. It had already been a terrible day, she thought; may as well continue the theme. She set her empty plate on the counter and approached the nearest open box.

The next four hours passed in a blur as Keone unpacked boxes of clothes, sheets, towels, and her pathetically slim collection of kitchen items. She’d brought a few personal things with her. There were framed photos, knick-knacks, three huge jars of seashells that she’d collected over the years—one shell for every beach visited. Maybe she *could* count how many times she’d seen the ocean—only it would take half a day. Together, these mementoes filled one half of a display shelf in the living room.

When the boxes were finally unpacked, she flattened them and slid them onto the exposed beams in the shed. It had felt good to organise her things, only now the long, narrow rectangle that was her house felt empty. No art, cushions, or rugs to personalise the living room; on the other side of the wall, the kitchen’s benches contained only a kettle and toaster; down the connecting hallway was a bathroom that held the bare essentials; and beside it was a single bedroom. It was the smallest room in the house, though it held the most furniture: a plain bed, chipped side tables, dresser, and worn chair. Anyone could walk into this house and know nothing about the owner. She’d never been one for decorating. Her life pre-accident had consisted of training and trips, so there had been little time for (and little interest in) home decorating. For years, the ocean had been her home; it was where she’d spent most of her time: training, competing, socialising, and networking. She’d claimed that space for herself; it was where she felt the most confident, capable, and commanding, the only place in the world where the low hum of her turbulent thoughts dissipated as her focus shifted outwards to her body, the board, and the swell beneath them.

I’m tired, Sissy said. *Where is my bed?* She had tried to convince Keone to leave a few boxes out as a type of obstacle course; now she was left with no choice but to design her own by weaving between chair legs and zigzagging across the floor.

‘You’re very demanding.’

Sissy climbed up onto her companion's foot. *It's late. You should go to bed too.*

Keone checked her watch. It was after ten, and now that she'd stopped, the fatigue she'd been fighting all day seemed to double. Nothing sounded quite as good as bed. She scooped up the rat, suppressing the small revulsion she felt as the sharp edges of Sissy's nails pressed into her palm, and ambled down the hall on aching legs. Flicking on the lamp, she emptied the top drawer of the bedside table—was it only yesterday that she'd filled it?—and stuffed it with random scarves and unused socks.

'One bed for one very spoiled rat.'

Sissy clawed at the fabrics in an attempt to perfect the arrangement. *Please don't refer to me as a rat; I am so much more than a rat.*

'Sorry,' she said, her mind returning to their earlier conversation. Sissy clearly *was* so much more than a rat, even if she had the body of one. 'You're not going to shit in there, are you? Should I put out some newspaper?'

I'm perfectly capable of controlling my bowels. Thanks.

Keone heaved herself off the side of the bed, showered quickly, and then returned a moment later to slip between the sheets. She'd just dipped beneath the edge of sleep when Sissy spoke again.

This purple scarf is the best scarf, so worn, so soft. Your girlfriend wore it the day you won the WSL championship. You're so pretty when you cry.

Keone jolted back into her body. She'd lost count of how many times she'd watched that twelve-second reel online. Her stepping off the stage after accepting the bar-fridge-sized trophy, shaking hands smearing the tears across her cheeks, Leiko peppering her with kisses, screaming, laughing. A purple-and-blue scarf decorated her neck.

'I don't have—look, just be quiet, okay? I need to sleep.' She buried her head deeper into the pillow, consciously willing her rigid muscles to relax. Determination leads to success, but it rarely leads to sleep. She thought surfing was like sleep, the way you ceased to exist. Years ago, a mate in Hawai'i had bragged about how much he liked catching zees, said it was like being dead but without the commitment. In Keone's opinion, oblivion was underrated; the nothingness that could be found on a wave or in a dreamless sleep brought a type of relief she'd not experienced anywhere else. Waves were gifts caused by storms at sea that had happened days before they

reached the shore. She had no access to those waves now—not in real time, and not in a dreamless sleep.

But Keone had *some* control over the situation, and she was determined: someday she would return to the water.

Keone woke with a start in the morning, tired hands tracing the lengths of her arms. She'd expected her skin to be tacky with the residue of saltwater, but they weren't. Every night she dreamt of catching perfect barrels, of how her fingers would drag through the inner wet wall, shooting out before the tunnel could close in on her. In waking, the emotional high of the dream evaporated, leaving behind the residue of disappointment. A part of her relished this nightly imagining, as it alleviated the deeper longing she spent most days smothering. Snippets of familiar faces blazed behind her retinas, and she flung the bedcovers back in an effort to separate herself from the memories of a former life: professional success, Leiko, having a powerful, pain-free body. The problem with time-bending dreams is that they end, and the dreamer is snapped back to the present they were attempting to escape. Every morning, Keone was exiled from the potential of her past, banished to the uncertain wilds of her future.

The blue hue of early morning light slipped beneath the blinds; dawn wasn't far away. She wriggled her fingers and rolled her ankles as best she could, warming the sleep-stiffened limbs, knowing her routine morning exercises awaited.

You're awake early. Sissy stirred in the drawer beside her.

'I need to move.' Keone untangled herself from the churned-up sheets and slid out of bed. Her back and hips hummed with a dull, familiar ache as she slipped a t-shirt over her singlet, careful to keep her back turned away from the rodent and her questions. She knew the pain would ease once she completed her exercises, though that didn't make waking any easier. That was the gift of refusing to renew her prescriptions or only take over-the-counter painkillers when absolutely necessary.

It's bad this morning?

'It's bad every morning.' Keone rolled out her yoga mat and moved through the exercises designed to rebuild her core without straining the rods and screws that fused her L5-S1. No more sit-ups, crunches, leg raises, or flutter kicks. Ever. Now,

she was restricted to Pilates-inspired movements that focused on activating her pelvis while stretching her arms and legs.

Sissy perched on the edge of the drawer and watched intently; her obsidian eyes bored into Keone: flat, black, impossible to read.

Your sleep will improve, I'm sure of it. What can I do to help? I'm a great listener, and talking about your problems could be an easy solution. Also, what's for breakfast?

Keone shuffled around on the mat, facing the opposite direction, determined to pretend the rat wasn't there.

A week passed, and her dreams did not improve. Keone leaned over the kitchen sink to splash her face, hoping the frigid water would help expel the agitation of another terrible sleep caught in the halfway space between nothingness and wakefulness. It had been three months already. How long could this go on? Scrubbing her face with the end of a tea towel, she stared out the kitchen window into the dimly lit yard that was a cluster of soft shadows and formless shapes. Daylight wouldn't break for at least another thirty or forty minutes.

A quick prickling sensation crept along the inside of her foot. Sissy.

'Did I wake you?' Keone looked down at the puff of white fur nestled against her instep: a perilous position for a rat. How easy it would be for Keone to roll her foot, or to lift it and bring it down again in a quick stamp.

Awake? I barely slept. You were very restless last night; I was waiting for you to topple out of the bed, the way you were swishing from side to side.

Keone shrugged. 'Couldn't get comfortable.' Today was her first day off in a week, making the early morning start particularly bitter. Knowing there was no chance of returning to sleep, she filled the kettle. According to the microwave, the town pool wouldn't open for another thirty minutes. It was warm in the kitchen, but a chill passed over Keone regardless. She promised herself today was the day: she'd get back in the pool. The irony that swimming was one of the few exercises she could still do was not lost on her.

'Are you hungry?' The question was entirely for show. Sissy was always hungry.

I could eat.

Keone tried not to roll her eyes as she gathered the rat up, poured some seeds and nuts on a dish, and set both down onto the bench. Sissy found it wildly distasteful to eat on the floor.

Keone made herself an instant coffee, nose wrinkling at the taste, and promised herself she could buy a decent one after as a reward. Five dollars for a latte was insane, and while she preferred the flavour of percolated coffee, the café culture on the coast had rubbed off on her and she enjoyed feeling as though she were part of a community. And the ritual of that routine was nothing to be messed with. The only thing she had to do right now was dig out her swimsuit, a towel, and a few gold coins. The idea of getting dressed, crossing wet concrete, and plunging into morning-fresh water sparked a mixture of excitement and apprehension. She knew well enough that it was best not to think about these things too heavily. There was only one way to resolve fear and uncertainty: action. She opened the pantry and dug out an old tote bag from the collection shoved into the bottom shelf as she tried to remember where she'd stashed her swimsuit. She was sure she'd seen it just the other day while unpacking.

Where are we going?

'I'm going for a swim. You're staying here.' Keone swigged another mouthful of coffee before dumping the remains in the sink. The water would finish the task of waking her up.

I bet I'd be a good swimmer; we should go together.

'No,' Keone sprinkled some extra seeds onto the plate and pushed a chair against the counter so the rat could jump down when she was ready. 'I need to be alone.' She turned and left the room in search of her swimsuit before the rat could offer any further protests.

Three cars were in the lot when she arrived; the sun had finally broken the horizon. It was 6 a.m. Her Sunny Coast friends, Becky and James, would be heading out in their wetsuits, boards waxed, powdered sand squeaking beneath their feet as they ambled down to the water. Keone pushed the thought aside even as her fingers itched to text them. If she *was* there—which she wasn't—she'd be parked up on the beach anyway.

Summer mornings in Rogathella weren't cool; the sun had only just risen, but the air was already tepid. She was used to heat, but the desert lacked the moisture she was accustomed to. And then there were the flies. As though they'd been waiting, a gang of them swarmed the moment her foot hit asphalt. She'd learnt quickly that it was better to put up with their sticky feet on her back (a trade-off that made her feel like she was livestock) than to swat them and have the buzzing menace turn their attention to her nose, ears, and mouth.

'Five dollars,' the teenage boy behind the open counter informed her when she approached the kiosk.

Keone quirked her eyebrow; public pools in Honolulu were free. 'That seems like a lot.'

The kid shrugged. *Pay or don't pay, lady, it's no snot out of my nose.*

Keone slid the coins across the counter, mentally waving farewell to her congratulatory latte. Her expenses had been slashed by relocating to the middle of nowhere, but she was still working to a budget. Five dollars could buy an avocado (sometimes two), three hours of parking, or a scratchie. Corrective back surgery wasn't cheap. Every coin saved drew her that fraction closer to the dream that was her former life. She gave the kid a nod and passed through the turnstile. A calamity of white plastic chairs and tables surrounded a kiddies' pool just beyond the entryway; behind it was the standard twenty-five-metre lap pool, and to the right was a water playground complete with swivelling spray guns, plastic platforms, raining archways, and a giant bucket that presumably filled with water. As Brooke had explained the other night over drinks, the children's playground had been drained following the latest water restrictions. For now, however, the twenty-five-metre pool was still full and currently occupied by only three people.

Keone crossed the pathway and set her things down on the bottom step of the decrepit wooden bleachers. On the Sunny Coast, she'd hide her car keys inside a cleaned-out bottle of sunscreen, but here people left their keys on full display—beside their wallets! Keone didn't feel quite that comfortable, tucking her valuables into the rumpled towel inside the tote bag. A small sense of security.

Lane seven was free, so Keone took her position beside the starting block. Her preference for diving in headfirst was now an impossibility; instead, she was torn between lowering herself into the deep end or entering via the steps in the shallow end. Going slowly had never been her style. She willed herself to lift her leg,

curl her foot away from the wet concrete, raise her knee skyward, and drop in off the edge. None of these things happened. These simple micro-movements had transformed into herculean efforts. Her heartbeat picked up pace, and the echoing memory of searing pain pulsed the length of her spine, inspiring a wordless knowing that something was very, very wrong.

Are you okay?

Keone jolted at the sound of Sissy's voice in her head. 'What are you doing here?' she hissed at the white rat that had clambered up onto the starting block beside her. 'How did you get here?' For one ludicrous moment, she wondered if companions could teleport.

Sissy's whiskers twitched in a way Keone took to mean she was amused.

Your tote bag, obviously. It really wasn't difficult.

'Well ... get back in there; you're distracting me.'

From standing beside a pool, terrified to get in?

Keone's jaw tightened. The rat might not have telepathic powers, but her ability to perceive Keone's inner thoughts and feelings was unnerving.

'I need to be alone right now.'

Sissy didn't move. *You don't swim in pools.*

'What?' Keone barked, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

You didn't swim in pools before—

'I broke my back?' She rolled her shoulders at the mention of the injury.

Persistence, determination, and masochism had earned her a top-ten ranking; mindset is everything, except if you have a debilitating injury. These qualities had helped as she'd weaned herself off painkillers and suffered the torture of rehab, but they could not deliver her old body.

That's true, but what I was going to say is that you swam in oceans. This pool won't do. You need to swim in natural water—a lake! That's what we need!

Keone stole a glance at the stagnant pool, cheeks warming at the idea that anyone could listen in on her end of the conversation. Fortunately, the other swimmers were too preoccupied with their morning exercise to care about the strange woman standing next to the starting blocks, speaking to a rat. She doubted Sissy's theory, yet she was relieved by the opportunity it presented: a sliver of time, the pushing back of an important task. Here was an excuse to move away from the pool and all it represented. One foot stepped back off the platform; the other

remained planted. Would another location really be any different? She had to try. If she couldn't get back into the water, there was little point in following through with more surgery or remaining in this lucrative but dull town, exiled from the remaining scraps of her dream life.

Keone took the highway north out of town. The landscape was full of disparities: rocks containing every shade of clay, orange, and brown, and silvery spinifex so sharp it could spike you through your jeans. Luminous gums that sprouted leaves whose eucalyptus scent was strongest at dawn. It was so different from Hawai'i. The land there was a folding blanket of lush spinach green, white sand, and grey volcanic rock. She'd texted Miley before leaving the pool, after a quick Google search had overwhelmed her with options and conflicting opinions. It hadn't rained once since Keone had arrived and, according to customers at the hotel, not for a good long while before that. Miley had replied immediately, and Keone had never been so thankful that Miley's companion, Vasilisa, was also an early riser—dawn being an excellent time for hunting. Besides the town dam, which Keone felt was a little too public, only one other place still had water: Jila Creek. Miley had offered to show her the way, but Keone didn't need an audience. It was bad enough that the rat was present. Instead, Keone had promised to stop by for a cuppa after.

Keone turned left at the speed sign, as per Miley's directions, clenching her teeth as she hit dirt, hoping this was the right track and that her four-cylinder would be enough to carry her all the way through the bush. She cut around a few ditches—some carved so deep into the earth she could see the soil's layers—and passed a random dust-coloured cow that had likely escaped from a nearby property. Eventually the trees parted, and the track transformed into a clearing.

Where home felt cool, dense, and rich with life, this place was dry, often sparse, and still. The morning would have been silent if not for the squeaky-door-squawk of cockatoos and the whining *fwak fwak* of Australian ravens. Both rang straight through the low plateaus, along with the laughing kookaburra that had quickly become her favourite. She replied to their thrilling call with an involuntary smile every time she heard them.

From the highway, the bush had looked near impenetrable, but as she navigated the winding track it was easier to see the gaps between trees that made

vehicle access and camping possible. Unsurprisingly, the waterhole was low, its content the colour of the surrounding soil. The only thing that differentiated water from bank was the ghostly reflection of the clouds and thin canopy on its surface. Despite the lack of water, there was a pleasant grey green to many of the plants around the area. She could confidently identify only two, as Brooke had had them in a vase on the kitchen bench: wattle, with its puffy yellow flowers, and the literally named bottlebrush.

In the fifteen minutes it had taken to drive out to Jila Creek, Keone's personal resolve and the irritation and anger sparked by Sissy's appearance had weakened, leaving her exhausted—and the day had only begun.

'This is ridiculous. We should just go home.' Cool shame passed through her chest, leaving her disgusted by her own lack of conviction. She sounded like a five-year-old looking for permission. When Sissy failed to respond, Keone rolled back her shoulders. 'Are you coming in too or staying here?'

What kind of question is that?

Keone extended her hand, and Sissy scurried aboard.

It was cooler than it had been at the pool. The brown watering hole was surrounded by a sparse tree line of gidgees, ghost gums, and dry grass. To the far left was an awning that covered a weather-beaten picnic table and barbeque. When she'd stepped out of the car, she'd nearly landed in the ashy remains of a previous camper's fire. The waterhole was backed by a ten-metre rugged rock wall in various shades of clay and ochre, and to the right was a sweeping rise with a well-trodden path that led to the top. An established tree with a rope looped over one of its branches hung out over the edge. Keone stepped back, edging closer to the car, her breath thin and reedy. She'd paddled over surfaces of unknown depths and ridden twenty-foot waves, but now she braced against the *idea* of a ten-metre drop.

Damn this new body and how much everything had changed.

Are you going to jump?

Keone peeled her eyes away from the rope. As always, Sissy's flat eyes gave nothing away.

'No.'

Are you going to get in?

'Probably.'

Today?

‘Hold on, my arm is falling asleep.’ She passed Sissy from one hand to the other, cradling her a little closer. Not for the first time, she was grateful for her companion’s nimble, lightweight body.

Oh, put me down. I want to smell it.

‘Smell what?’ She sniffed the air and caught the burnt caramel of wattle, the sharp mint of eucalyptus, and the earthy scent of the riverbank.

You see— I mean smell—how glorious it all is!

Keone lowered the rat to the ground and watched as Sissy’s soft white form scurried over the dry debris near the river. Keone flicked off her flipflops and took a step forward. The crisp, sharp edges of the dry grass, leaves, and twigs did not give way as she crossed the clearing but bit into the underside of her foot. A small tingle danced across her lower back as she neared the water’s edge, her breath shallow, quick.

Sissy entered the water before her, sending a small ripple that died out as quickly as it began. *If I were you, I’d build a dam and catch all the fish.* Sissy’s body bobbed, her head barely above the waterline as she swam further out. *Come here, fish, swim into my trap! We could eat fish forever then, Keone, and never go hungry.*

Keone clenched her hands into fists, jaw tight with the effort to stay present and not run away. She wouldn’t leave; she couldn’t move forward, either.

Sissy left a trail of ripples in her wake; the fur on her back had gathered together like wet lashes. Keone scrubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

I’ve never swum in the open before. Actually, I’ve never swum. I can see why you love it so much. Do you know, I sink every time I stop? Bit exhausting moving my legs all the time. It’s made me rather hungry. Shame we couldn’t build that dam. I’ve never eaten fish before.

Keone’s gaze drifted out to the middle of the water. It was so still, so unmoving: such lifeless water. What good could come from entering it? She jolted as wet fur brushed against her ankle.

Put your feet in. Sissy clambered up onto Keone’s foot. *Go on; I’m right here. I’ll make sure none of those nasty fish get you.*

‘I don’t—’ Keone choked on the words, her throat thick.

Rubbish. Look at these feet; they’ve been walking for years; you know exactly what to do.

Fear gave way to shame, but Keone did as Sissy said. She curled her left foot up from the muddy bank, then let it slowly disappear beneath the water's surface: toes, ball, arch, heel. Then Sissy disappeared. The next foot followed, so Keone was ankle-deep in the murky water. Sissy popped up a metre away. *Do it again! Do it again! Come on, Keone, get that butt in here.*

Keone moved forward, noting the water's weak resistance, how quickly it gave way to her movements. When the water was above her knees, she plonked down quickly, the cool of the water stealing her breath, surrounding her most vulnerable places. Sissy paddled towards her and scampered up onto Keone's bent knee.

Not to speak too soon, but I dare say that was a success. And wouldn't you know it, nothing bad happened.

Keone nodded woodenly.

They'd had a few hours to spare one day back home, and she'd followed Leiko down to the beach. The trail was dense; everything was dense there—a perfect breeding ground for mozzies. They came out onto white powder, vacant in the harsh hours of midday. Walking beneath the shade of shrubs and trees that separated the beach from the rest of the world, Leiko discovered a conus shell. Keone pressed it against her ear. She'd said it was the sound of her heart, but Keone knew it was the sound of her own blood pretending to be something else. Now, all Keone could hear was the unquiet silence of the watering hole. Far from lifeless, it was the source on which everything else depended.

Put your head under; it's such a wonderful feeling.

Keone slammed back into her body, the wet rat balanced on her knee, fingers and toes pruned now that they'd been left to steep.

'I remember.' Keone inhaled and rolled her spine down into the water until the surface closed overhead, disrupting her vision, consuming her entirely, and holding her in place. She was charged with this new body, but at last here, hidden below the false sky, she found the support she needed.

She broke the surface with a gasp, grinning with her efforts.

Let's go further out. Sissy bounced off Keone's knee and into the water. When she was halfway out, Keone called her name and then quickly ducked below the surface.

Keone? Keone? Sissy's little pink paws stirred the water as she spun around.

Keone's lungs started burning as she slipped beneath the rat, but she knew she could hold on a little longer. Sissy started back towards the bank, her tiny legs cycling through the muddied water.

She'd give the rat her fish.

Imagining herself sprouting fins and scales, a puckered mouth, and goggling eyes—a proper river demon—Keone rose to the surface and caught the rat by her tail.

'Got you.' Keone tugged to emphasise her point before releasing her hold.

It's you! Sissy paddled towards her companion and scampered up onto her shoulder.

'It is.'

I thought you were someone else.

'Good.' Keone pushed forward, her hands enlarged and made indistinct as they glided beneath the surface like wings.

I think we should stay a little longer. We might catch some fish.

'I don't think there are any fish left.' Keone recalled an article she'd read online—one of many—about how constant companions were created, in part, to reduce the poaching of exotic animals. When asked whether the company had been successful in this regard, the CEO had replied that it was too early to know for sure, but they remained hopeful. Catfish and goby could hardly be considered exotic, though. No, the lack of fish here was the result of good old ignorance and *she'll be right* attitudes.

Sissy bounced back into the water. *Maybe, but it's best to be sure.*

Keone turned out onto the highway, feeling simultaneously renewed and exhausted, triumphant and destroyed. Back in the clearing, she'd considered texting Miley to cancel her visit. The water had cracked her open and healed her,; and she wasn't entirely sure that she wanted to be around other people just yet.

Choose the bigger life, Sissy said, perched on the console, nibbling on a scatter of seeds Keone had dug out from her bag.

When they pulled into Miley's garage fifteen minutes later, the redhead was bent over the open bonnet of her badly aging Hilux.

‘What’s wrong?’ Keone said as she leaned against the side of the ute. ‘Do you need a wrench or some pliers? I don’t know how to use them, but I know what they look like.’

Vasilisa, who was perched on the back of a plastic outdoor chair, ruffled her feathers and locked her sharp eyes onto the white rat, whose tail was curled around Keone’s neck.

She looks at me the same way I look at bread, and I don’t like it.

Miley pulled back the reservoir cap and tipped the bottle of washer fluid into the container. ‘Sissy is our guest, Vas, behave yourself,’ Miley said, responding to a conversation Keone was only half privy to. ‘It’s nothing that serious; I’m just sick of not having a clean windscreen.’

Keone eyed the too-still hawk. ‘How’s that going? Being companions, I mean.’

‘It’s been strange, surprising. I’m so used to being alone, but I’m sure I’ll get used to it. That sounds awful. She’s not getting under my skin or anything and she’s not the biggest talker, but it’s different to have someone to look after. So, you found the waterhole?’

Keone self-consciously reached up and touched the tips of her still-wet hair; in an hour it would be more frizz than curl. ‘Yeah.’

Miley checked her watch. ‘I’m guessing you need a coffee then; I’ll put the jug on. You can head around the back if you like. I’ll be just a minute.’

Still rattled from the morning’s efforts, Keone nodded while attempting to raise her enthusiasm for an instant coffee.

Vasilisa, who was still glaring at Sissy, leaned forward, wings braced, neck extended; Keone’s right hand instinctively shot up to cover her left shoulder and the rat that precariously balanced there. Vasilisa launched headfirst off her perch. The ends of a wing brushed against Keone’s shoulder as she passed before disappearing through the door connecting the garage to the house.

‘Sorry. Vas wouldn’t *actually* hurt Sissy. It just takes her a second to override the impulse. Can you close the roller door before coming in?’ Miley called back, following Vasilisa.

‘No problems,’ Keone replied while making a mental note to be careful around the hawk in future. She edged around the front of the car to close the hood Miley had left open, and it shut with a metallic snap. As she turned to go out the way

she had come in, she noticed a wide, lumpy mass covered by a white sheet in the corner.

What's that?

'Dunno. Picture frames, maybe?'

Keone glanced back over her shoulder to check that they were still alone. She flushed, knowing that what she was about to do couldn't be described as anything but snooping. Hooking a finger beneath the edge of the sheet, she gently lifted it up and back to reveal a stack of ten canvases; her breath snagged in her throat. The outward-facing painting depicted an elegant woman lying regally beside a lake; while one hand clutched a bouquet of wildflowers to her chest, the other supported her head. Her eyes were cast up as though in search of divine guidance, and the fabric of her gown skimmed her lithe form to gather in a pool by her feet. The background was a forest, an *enchanted* forest, with the specks of fireflies and curling paths that disappeared into invisible depths hinting at adventure. Keone had only seen artwork this good in museums or textbooks; she'd never seen this style of art executed by a modern (living!) hand. She herself did not have an eye for art. In fact, she found most modern art—especially abstract art—confusing and meaningless. But she looked at this painting with the stunning woman, her pearly skin and the meticulous detail with which the canvas had been constructed, and she heard the echo, felt it hum over her bones. A sense of familiarity, of being spoken to, seen.

She knew Miley wanted to be an artist; what she hadn't realised was that Miley *was* an artist. Yet another thing they had in common: the burden of unused talent.

She pulled the first canvas forward to examine the one behind it. This painting had two female subjects dressed in draping gowns and flower crowns. One poured water into a fountain while the other picked berries from a nearby bush. Keone slowly went through the canvases, taking her time to study each one properly.

'So, you found my secret?'

Keone's throat closed with fright. 'Sorry,' she said, voice strained. 'I wasn't ... going through your things ... I was just closing the hood, and I saw the sheet and ...' She leaned the stack back against the wall with great care. 'These are too good for a garage. I had no idea *you* were so good.'

Miley came over and pulled the covering sheet over the paintings. She did not look at them. ‘I painted them a long time ago. They didn’t sell. Maybe I was good back then, but it doesn’t matter. I don’t even know if I can paint like that anymore.’

‘You should try,’ Keone encouraged her. ‘Seriously, what the heck are you doing driving a forklift when you can do this?’ She waved a hand over the concealed works.

‘Driving a forklift is reliable. I get paid every week, and it’s easy.’

Keone nodded, reluctantly. She had similar reasons for taking the job at the restaurant, but she hadn’t given up on her dream; she was just experiencing a minor setback, one that she had no control over. She would still be surfing if not for the accident. Miley’s situation was entirely different: she was sitting on a mountain of talent and *choosing* not to use it. The one quality Keone could not tolerate was apathy—in herself or in others.

‘So, drive a forklift during the day and let art be your side hustle. Not painting must be killing you.’ It didn’t take an artist’s eye to see how much work had gone into those paintings. Individually, they were beautiful, but they also embodied years of dedicated practice. She couldn’t fathom how long it had taken Miley to get that good.

Miley closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. The silence filled with the low rumble of a kettle reaching full boil.

‘You can do both,’ Keone pressed.

‘I just don’t know if I can handle the disappointment. Rogathella is not my target audience, apparently. I put on my own show a few years ago, hired the foyer at the civic centre and published ads in the newspaper, radio, and online. *So* many people came. Strangers, friends of my parents, my schoolteachers, and even kids I went to high school with, though admittedly, I hardly recognised most of them. Everyone wanted to look, and everyone complimented me on a job well done, but I didn’t sell a single painting.’

Instead of pointing out the weakness in that argument, Keone said, ‘I’ll buy one. Right now. How much?’

‘No,’ Miley cut the air with her hand. ‘I don’t need a pity sale, and you can’t afford one anyway. You’ve just moved here, and you’ve just started a new job.’

And I bought a talking rat that cost twice what I paid for my car. ‘That’s not your problem, it’s mine, and don’t pretend to know my motivations. I will buy one of

your paintings because I need to. The only valuable thing I've ever owned was a board. I'm not into ... *pretty* things, but that painting there is mine.' *I need it because I want to feel something when I walk into that beachless-beach-shack.*

Miley folded her arms, considering. 'How about we cut a deal? There's an art gallery in New York that loans pieces out for a week so buyers can see if they will suit their home. Take whatever piece you want, and if you *still* want to buy it a week from now, you can.'

Take the first one! Sissy pawed Keone's shoulder, clenching and releasing, leaning so far forwards Keone thought she was about to topple over.

'Deal,' Keone said as she flicked back the sheet and separated the first painting from the series. Miley barely looked at it.

Resting on the ground, the painting came to Keone's hip and was as wide as a door. The two women carried the work out of the still-open garage door.

'How's your back?' Miley asked as they slid the painting into the back of the car.

Keone flinched, temporarily losing her grip on the painting so that it flopped onto the carpeted boot. 'Not bad,' she replied warily. 'When did I tell you about my back?'

'First night we met,' Miley stepped back, staring at the rear of the car for a moment. 'You said you had a bad one, that it's easily put out.'

'I don't remember,' Keone said, not meeting Miley's eye.

She doesn't know? Sissy's tail flicked. *You should tell her! Keone, friends tell friends their secrets.*

'My knee gives me trouble sometimes, so I gave up running a few years back. Sucks.'

Slacker. Keone nodded woodenly and forced a smile.

Miley's eye flicked to Keone, then away. 'How do you have your coffee again? I forget.'

Keone woke with the memory of wet hair and salted skin. She had thought her recent breakthrough at the watering hole would put an end to these dreams, but their frequency and intensity hadn't faltered. *This has to stop*, she thought. These time slips into her past made staying in the present all the more difficult; she didn't need

to be reminded of what she had lost. Instead, what she needed, what she wanted, was for those memories to retreat like a hermit into its shell. The shell would still be there, it would still be visible, but its nipping contents would be tucked away. She could not afford to wallow. She had to earn money, get the damn surgery, and return to her former life.

The alarm hadn't gone off yet, but the blue haze of dawn was brightening the room. She reached for her cell phone, checked the time, and deactivated the alarm. These late outback sunrises were something to get used to. During summer, the sun rose here at a similar time to Honolulu, but on the coast she'd quickly adapted to hitting the beach before five.

She rolled out of bed while taking careful inventory of her back. It was still tense but a vast improvement on the day before. Sissy stood up on her hind legs and sniffed the air. Her black eyes were two wormholes that gave nothing away and pulled everything in.

You didn't sleep well last night.

'I need coffee. Badly.' She held out her hand, and Sissy climbed onto the outstretched palm. Keone stood up, paused, waited for her lower back to react and, when no protest came, took her first step towards the door.

In the kitchen, she flicked on the coffee pot she had set up the night before, pausing briefly to thank past Keone for her foresight. Meanwhile, Sissy performed her own ritual of scavenging for crumbs along the kitchen counter-top. The pot hissed and spluttered as Keone popped two pieces of fresh bread into the toaster and shredded a third piece onto a dinner plate. Sissy immediately took the bait and scrambled up onto the dish. Instead of diving in as she usually did, she sniffed the fluffy loaf, her tiny pink ears relaxing against her head in a way that suggested she was pleased. Even though Keone had the luxury of *asking* Sissy how she was feeling, she'd found herself researching animal behaviour anyway. She knew well enough that the body knew things the mind did not. The toaster popped and she smeared the bread with peanut butter. Balancing the two plates and the rat in one hand, and her coffee in the other, she walked into the living room and set the breakfast down on the small round table pressed against the wall.

She'd forgotten all about Miley's painting until she was sitting looking at it. She took a bite of the creamy and crunchy toast—nothing like her usual training breakfast of protein, wholegrains, and fat—and leaned back into her chair. The

painting was large, classic, old-worldly, all the things that Keone was not. It ought to look out of place in her unremarkable shack. Instead, it looked as if it had always been there: hanging on the wall above the wooden table with its collapsible sides.

You dreamt about the ocean last night.

Sissy's comment pulled Keone's gaze from the work. 'Yes.' She hoped her clipped tone would close the conversation, but Sissy didn't always catch the subtler cues of human behaviour, or maybe she chose to ignore them.

Why are you dreaming so much of the beach? Do you miss it?

Obviously, Keone thought.

She considered stating the facts: yes, she missed the beach. She had moved to Rogathella to get *away* from the version of her life that centred on surfing; she needed to make money for this new plan to work. She said none of this, though, as the hermit threatened to creep from its shell. She looked at Miley's painting, tried to lose herself in the ethereal scene, but the deep-seated connection she'd felt only yesterday had shallowed overnight. Taking a different tactic, she relaxed her vision and searched the painting for clues about her new friend. Miley didn't come across as especially feminine or someone preoccupied by beauty, at least not in the vain sense, but the delicate folds of the nymph's green foam dress, her soft, tumbling dark hair and her open, wondrous expression communicated something different: only a person who appreciated beauty could paint a portrait like this.

Keone softened into her chair. Her back hurt less this morning, but the undercurrent of pain was still there: a constant reminder of her new reality. Pushing through her personal fear yesterday had been a victory for Keone, who didn't know who she was without water; she'd never been religious, and yet the wonderment, awe, and oneness she felt every time she neared the ocean was not dissimilar to descriptions of encounters with the divine. But the truth was that it would take a long time to save the money for surgery. And, even if the operation went well, it was impossible to know what level of mobility she'd have. Yes, there had been pro-surfers in their mid-thirties, but their careers had been consistent; they hadn't returned from forced retirement. Would she be the exception to this rule? She wanted to be, badly, but the odds were not in her favour. These fears, which had been circling in her periphery for the past few months, were, at times, fuelled by her desires—she had so much left to prove—but this morning they were a smoke signal, warning her to take a different direction. The facts were undeniable. Professional

surfing careers belonged to fit, uninjured, and mobile people. She could not reasonably expect to resume her surfing career after her accident. The need to shove the thought away was overwhelming, but yesterday's episode had revealed what Keone did not want to see: her life had changed. This fact unlocked a series of bodily reactions: her chest fell, dragging her heart behind it, and she finally released her white-knuckle grip.

She exhaled. Her breath slightly shaky.

Are you okay? Sissy ran over the table and rested her two pink paws on Keone's hand.

Keone flinched, having forgotten that she was not alone. 'No ... yes ... I don't know.'

The rat started vibrating.

'What are you doing? Are you ... *purring?*' Keone looked at her companion with watery eyes.

Sorry. The rodent stopped. *I can't purr. I was grinding my teeth. I think perhaps, Keone, that it is time we come up with a new goal.*

'I thought you couldn't read my mind.'

Why bother when you display it so clearly on your face?

Keone dragged the back of her hand over her eyes, sniffed. 'Maybe we do, but not right now.'

That's okay. We have time.

'Do we?' Keone eyed the last piece of toast, but she was no longer hungry. 'You can finish that. I have to start getting ready for work. Split shift today.'

Sissy released her hold, and Keone stood up, noting how her lower back had tightened while sitting. She considered taking another painkiller because, if there was one thing she'd learnt over the last few years, it was that it was better to stop the pain before it started.

There are some lessons you only have to learn once.

The breakfast shift passed in the usual manner. Keone spent her break between the lunch and dinner shifts ignoring Sissy's probing questions and her general desire to fix everything *immediately*.

When Keone pulled into a centre park opposite the hotel later that day, she had a preview of the shift to come: the restaurant was packed. Taking in the mess hall before her, Keone stopped to appreciate these final moments of calm. She checked the collar of her shirt as she walked in, adjusted it, and shifted the puff of her hair to ensure that the base of her neck was fully concealed.

‘Hey,’ Keone said to the evening’s bartender, Jessica, as she stepped behind the service counter. The only good thing about a full restaurant was that it spared you the dull tasks of dusting shelves, polishing wine glasses, and topping up table-talkers with sugar, salt, and pepper, or marrying ketchup bottles—not that she had to do that here.

‘It’s going to be nuts tonight,’ Jessica replied, setting a wine bucket on the counter before leaning over to scratch Sissy, who was perched on Keone’s shoulder.

‘I can’t wait until I’ve got enough cash to get one of these myself. A miner came in earlier with a pygmy-possum that was nearly as cute as Sissy.’

She really is my favourite. Besides you, of course. The rat’s whiskers twitched with enthusiasm.

‘Ah-huh,’ Keone murmured as she grabbed a docket book and pen from beneath the register and slipped on her apron. She’d hidden Sissy in her handbag during her first few weeks at the restaurant, but, as it turned out, the other staff and customers loved her. Keone initially hated the attention, cringed at the idea of being seen as an eccentric weirdo—being American made her an oddity; she didn’t *also* need to be the chick with a rat companion—and yet she had to admit that Sissy’s presence made for more pleasant shifts. Better tips, too: an unusual phenomenon in this country.

The scent of freshly poured espresso made her realise how badly she needed a do-over coffee; the cup of instant she’d had earlier that day really had been the pits and, from the look of things, it was going to be a long night. She should put in an order for an actual customer before taking care of herself. She stepped out from behind the bar and surveyed the floor. She was about to approach a table of five when a couple walked through the doors. Seeing that the welcome counter was empty, Keone quickly crossed the restaurant to greet the incoming guests.

‘Hello, how can I help you?’

The woman's hair swept back from her smooth brown face, revealing a slight widow's peak and pronounced cheekbones that framed green-grey eyes, eyes that widened and fixed on Sissy.

'This is just my companion,' Keone explained, sensing the woman's discomfort. The trend of constant companions hadn't taken off in the town yet, though Keone had seen the occasional one. 'She's very clean.'

'We had a booking for Chance.' The man ignored her comments, and Keone peeled her gaze from the woman to the list of bookings.

'Gillian Chance?' Keone looked up to see the woman's expression had soured further; her mouth pinched, chin lifted, making her appear older than she really was.

'We have to go,' the woman—Gillian—said curtly, tugging her husband's arm.

A loud gasp came from behind them, and Keone turned in time to see a heavy-set, middle-aged man clutch his chest, his face screwed tight and red with agony. All those years of first aid training came back to Keone in a rush. 'Call an ambulance!' she shouted at Jessica as she crossed the floor to the bar.

'I'm on it,' Gillian said, her attention reverting to the phone for a moment before she asked, 'What's the address here?'

The hospital was only five blocks away, and the ambulance arrived within minutes. It was only after the paramedics had left through the front doors—the man clutched between them on a stretcher—that Keone looked for the couple to thank them, but they were already gone.

The next hour was a blur as Keone tried and failed to settle back into the dinner shift.

She'd just finished reseating a table for four when Jessica appeared beside her.

'Can you go take an order from table seventeen? They asked for you specifically.'

Thinking it might be Miley, or Brooke and Anewa, Keone was surprised to see that the table was occupied by a single woman with dark hair. She sat with her back towards the counter, perusing the menu, with a glass of barely touched red resting by her drumming fingernails.

Keone pulled out her docket book and headed for the target. ‘Sorry to interrupt, but are you ready to order, or do you need a little more time with the menu?’ she asked, eyes fixed to her apron as she fished out her pen.

‘Oney?’ That smooth, heavy voice.

Keone looked up and froze, her mind momentarily going blank.

It’s her! Sissy nestled into her companion’s neck. *Wow, she’s even taller than Miley!*

The woman set down her menu and smiled. ‘How are you?’

Keone scrambled to make sense of what was happening. ‘What are you doing here?’ The question came out more astonished than appalled.

‘Hello to you, too. I was in town and I heard this was the best place for dinner. And lunch. Breakfast.’ She leaned forward, her eyes flicked across the room then back to Keone. ‘Not that there’s a lot to choose from.’

Keone shook her head. She hadn’t seen Leiko in two years, and yet she looked the same: copper skin, thick arched eyebrows, round nose, thin upper lip, and a slightly cleft chin. But Leiko wasn’t supposed to be *here*. She was supposed to be in Hawai’i. Keone pocketed the docket book, her initial shock giving way to a full-blown anxiety attack: tight chest, clammy palms, the desperate need to escape.

Leiko’s confident veneer cracked, slightly, and she leaned back into the booth. ‘Sorry. I realise that it must be a shock to see me again ... here.’ She waved absently at the room.

‘Yes.’ Keone was tempted to sit down; she felt like she *needed* to sit down, but that would be a mistake. ‘I’m at work,’ Keone said, but what she meant was *get out*.

‘I didn’t think you’d speak to me if I showed up at your house. Plus, I have no idea where you live.’

Oh, quick, invite her over, Keone. She could be our first real visitor!

Keone ignored Sissy’s chattering while simultaneously cursing updating her employment info online. ‘I have nothing to say.’

Keone? What are you doing?

She was about to walk away and get another waiter, though that would only solve half the problem—the idea of being in the same room as Leiko for a minute longer than necessary made her skin prickle with rage, but then Leiko stood up. Keone had forgotten *how* tall she was.

‘It’s okay, babe. I’ll go. I can see that I’ve rattled you something fierce.’

Something fierce, she still says that.

‘I’ll come back later ...’ Then, seeing the guarded look on Keone’s face, she amended. ‘Right ... well, reach out if you want to talk. I’m here for a few days.’

Keone gave a half nod as a sharp ding rang from the kitchen; she turned around, without another word, and headed in the opposite direction. She promised herself she would not look back, but she did. The woman who’d been her partner for four years walked out the doors and stood on the corner, preparing to cross the street. The sun was far from set—a typical outback summer—the temperature still in the high thirties even at this time of day. Leiko’s waist-long hair flicked as she glanced to her right, and then left, right; she’d always worn it that way, never been one to tie it back, whatever the weather. Keone closed her eyes and took a deep breath, sure that the vision would disappear when she opened them. Instead, she watched as Leiko unlocked her rental and slid into the driver’s seat. She briefly wondered whether Leiko was staying in the Rogathella Hotel, then she shoved the thought aside. She couldn’t afford to get sucked into Leiko’s drama. She needed to focus on herself, just as she had before, and take the night one table at a time.

Keone unclipped the straps of her swag and rolled the mattress out as Brooke mumbled about how she should have followed Anewa’s advice and packed insect repellent. She slapped her arm with an open hand, presumably to swat a mosquito, or to emphasise the point. They’d set their campsite up ten metres from the water’s edge, a prime location; it was a Friday night and yet they’d been fortunate enough to get the place to themselves. Ote disappeared into the bush, sniffing and snorting and peeing on anything that didn’t move: an impulse that frustrated her companion while making everyone else laugh.

‘Should I start a fire?’ Miley asked. ‘Kinda weird to think I’m the only member of my family that’s still here. We used to come out here sometimes when I was a kid and it was always my job to get the fire going. I think I remember how.’

No, Keone, the sky! That’s the best bit.

‘Not yet,’ Keone echoed Sissy’s thoughts. ‘Be nice to look at the stars for a bit.’

The crisp crunching of leaves resonated through the dying light, but when Keone swivelled to see who'd snuck up on them sans vehicle, she squealed with delight.

'What?' Miley shot to attention, a branch intended for the fire ready in her hand.

Keone crouched down, eyes intent on the shifting shadow. 'Quiet.'

Wow! Sissy scurried closer. Look at our visitor! All red-faced with a stolen golden necklace!

The creature bobbed forward on prehistoric legs, flicking leaves and debris in its wake. Sissy was right: the coal-grey beak gave way to the delicate red flesh of the bird's face, which led to a dripping yellow collar that separated its bold mug from the dramatic jet-black fan that was its tail.

'Oh, for Pete's sake, Keone, it's just a bloody bush turkey. No, Ote, you can't chase it.' Brooke opened her camp chair and plonked it on the ground with exaggerated disdain. 'Get a grip, both of you.'

'It's amazing; look at those feathers! See her strutting right into camp?'

'Because people feed it,' Miley said, flicking a potato chip in its direction, though the bird ignored it.

I wish my coat came with a necklace.

'We could always buy you a collar. Something with rhinestones and a little leash to train you with.'

I'm not the one in need of etiquette school, grossière fille.

Brooke slung herself into the camp chair. 'I'm not entirely sure I had to *actually* go camping to write about it. I've never ridden a horse or placed a bet at the TAB, but I can still cover the rodeo.'

Vasilisa cut through the clearing, coming to a stop on the branch Miley had dumped by the unlit but ready fire.

'She find anything good?' Keone asked as a way to change the subject. She never did have much time for whining, especially when it was about the person getting exactly what it was they wanted.

'Yup, says she found a rat,' Miley said with pride that quickly morphed into horror as she turned to Keone and mouthed a silent apology.

I'm hungry, Sissy said, having grown bored in her attempt to make a nest in the rumpled sheets of her companion's swag. Keone flipped open her backpack and

pulled out a packet of nori sheets. Sissy had become obsessed with the idea of eating fish since their last visit to the creek, but Keone couldn't afford to buy real fish and couldn't stand the smell of anything that came in a can. 'It's flattened fish,' she'd told Sissy the first time she gave it to her.

I like this flattened fish. The black seaweed shimmered as the rat tore into the shredded pieces.

The sun had just passed below the horizon, though she knew that the light would last after sunset for a good while longer, so Keone dug a bottle of beer from the esky to help pass the time. 'Anyone else want a drink?' A question they answered in the affirmative. She tossed a bottle to Miley then Brooke.

She tore another nori sheet into stamp-sized papers for Sissy before taking to her camp chair, where she leaned so far back that her head was craned skywards. It felt so good to be off her feet. The last week of shifts had been endless, and the knowledge that Leiko was in town had done little to improve things. They hadn't spoken since the day in the hotel, and Keone had no intention of changing that. Leiko had sent her private messages online, but Keone hadn't replied. And yet, she couldn't ignore the small thrill that shot through her solar plexus every time a new message came in, and she was even more disturbed by how often she found herself rereading them. She had to admit that Leiko sounded sincerely sorry, and Sissy agreed, but Keone wasn't really sure if that was enough. And the idea that she *owed* Leiko something after all this time only pricked old feelings of resentment. Sensing a downward spiral, Keone resolved to snuff out all thoughts of Leiko and forced her attention to the changing sky and the silence of the creek. Maybe she should move out here? Leave the beach-less shack, quit her job, and live in the wilderness like a true nomad, as her ancestors had, in a way that her body was designed for. But the metal cages, screws, and rods in her back told a different story. She did not have an organic body, and there was no returning to the past.

When the remains of the day finally slipped into darkness, revealing the sky's shadow self, the women tilted their faces, the silence of the clearing peppered with comments and the occasional gesture, though a detail seen by one could never be noticed by another. For Keone, there was no blinking orange star, even though Miley pointed to it, and Brooke failed to see the cluster of four, despite Keone's detailed explanation of its exact location. When Keone's stomach started to grumble loudly, Miley got to the business of starting the fire. Being the best cook, Brooke was in

charge of food. So distracted by stars and food preparation, they nearly missed the rising. The foliage around the creek was denser than Keone thought, denser than it looked during the day, when it seemed there was vast space between the trees, but the moon's yellow orb wasn't in view until it crested the gums.

'Wow.' Brooke sat back on her heels, pausing as she assembled the platter.

Miley, who was easily three beers in, and had been stroking Ote's head for several minutes, let out a loud and warbling howl. When the wolf joined in, so did Keone and Brooke. Their cries only ended when laughter took over.

After dinner, they switched from beer to wine. Keone could sense this was not the wisest decision, but after she emptied her final beer, she had little choice. She bent over sloppily as she flipped open the esky to retrieve the bottle, letting a small gasp escape from her lips as her hand instinctively flew up to rub the base of her spine.

'You okay?' Brooke stood up. 'You didn't put your back out, did you?'

'Bit late for that,' Keone said, slowly stretching up, twisting side to side, checking tentatively. She exhaled slowly, relieved that nothing had pinched. Miley and Brooke exchanged a confused look.

'I've noticed that you ... move a little differently. Like, always,' Brooke prodded.

'I dream about waves every night—and walking without pain,' Keone replied, unconsciously adjusting the back collar of her shirt. The confession slipped through her drunken haze, and she didn't care to retract it; she couldn't even remember why she hadn't wanted to share this. 'I have a steel rod in my spine.'

'Shit. I just thought you had amazing posture. What happened?' Brooke asked.

'Fell off the back of a pick-up. It was so ... ordinary. I landed wrong, broke my back. I had a few surgeries, including one for the metal rod in my spine, and then bye-bye surfing career.'

'Wait,' Miley pressed a fingertip to her brow, 'you had a surfing *career*? Like, you were a professional surfer?'

'Yes.' Keone took another sip of her drink and wished she'd kept quiet. It felt nice to crack the door on her past, but she wasn't ready to swing it wide open.

'Do you miss Hawai'i?' Miley asked in an attempt to change the subject. 'That's where you're from, right?'

‘Mostly the people. My family still lives there. Everyone’s just more chill, you know? I mean, it’s home. I *feel* at home there.’

‘Why did you leave?’ Brooke asked.

Keone thought about the dusty yard at her new rental, the beach shack that wasn’t by the beach, and her decision to take the promotion to restaurant manager. ‘A bunch of Aussies came over for this comp, and I thought they were great. They said I should stay with them when I came for the Quicksilver Pro on the Gold Coast. I did. It didn’t take long to realise how much cheaper Australia was than Hawai’i. Their roommate bailed, so I got a visa and stayed.’ She shrugged.

‘Sure, I get that, but why come *here*?’ Brooke asked as though choosing to live in Rogathella was unimaginable, which to her it probably was.

Keone’s head whirled from the beer and the honesty. She *really* should have stayed quiet. ‘I left the coast because ... I didn’t want to be constantly reminded of everything I’d lost. I didn’t want to see the ocean every day, or hear my friends comparing sessions, techniques, or sponsorship contracts ... and then Leiko left because she just needed to go home *so badly* and cos she thought we needed a break, and now I don’t even know what’s going on.’

‘Who’s Leiko?’ Brooke and Miley said in unison.

Keone leaned back on her heels, jaw working to form words that never came.

‘Maybe that’s a story for another night.’ Brooke opened the esky and topped up Keone’s already full glass. ‘But I, for one, am glad that you made the *terrible* decision to move here, and I’m even more glad that I can call you a friend.’

The line was too Hallmark for Keone’s liking, but she smiled despite herself, stepping forward to clink her glass against Brooke’s and then Miley’s.

‘Cheers.’ She raised the glass, head swirling as she took another sip of citrusy wine. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Sissy hurrying past the fire, heading for the water. Her white fur looked out of place against the brilliant soil. Maybe that was their connection; this wasn’t Keone’s country either. The creek was not her creek, and she couldn’t identify half the plants that surrounded it. The rules and laws of this land had never been explained to her—would she understand them even if a caretaker were to whisper them right into her ear? This new body knew only limitations, but maybe it hadn’t forgotten everything. The idea morphed into an instant decision. ‘I’m going for a swim.’ Keone set her drink down on the esky’s lid.

She caught a glimmer of Brooke's confusion, but she was already gone, bouncing around Miley's camp chair and into the darkness on the other side of the fire's light.

'Wait,' Miley said. The creak of a camp chair, the snap of a twig. It's too dark, Keone.'

Her name jagged on the air, and Keone pushed forward. She shrugged off her shirt, not even caring if they saw her back; her determination renewed as she picked up her pace, jogging down the slight incline that led to the water's edge. She bristled at the sharpness of the debris beneath her feet, but carried on. At the same time that her bare foot hit wet, hard earth, a hand came down on her shoulder and she spun in surprise, lost her balance and fell sideways until her hip and shoulder scrapped against the hardened soil, knocking the breath from her lung.

'Fuck,' Miley was crouching beside her in an instant. 'You okay? Shit. Brooke, get a torch!' she called back over her shoulder.

Keone blinked hard, the impact of her fall momentarily clearing her head. As the initial shock eased, a web of pain spread over the side of her hip, rattling her tailbone. On her shoulder, she could feel the sting of shallow cuts as oxygen and dirt bit into exposed skin.

Keone! Sissy bounced over a tuft of grass. *That was so loud. Are you hurt?*

Harsh light cut across the scene, and Keone winced.

'Shit,' Brooke said, angling the torch's light away from Keone's face. 'Are you okay?'

Keone lifted a hand to wave them off, but Miley misinterpreted the gesture, taking Keone's hand in her own and lifting it.

A hot sharp pain sparked over Keone's lower back. 'Stop!' She ripped her hand free of Miley's clasp and planted it firmly on the ground for support.

'We need to get you to a hospital.' Brooke's voice was shrill as she took a step back. 'I'll get the car, bring it closer.'

'I'm fine.' Keone stuffed those two words with all the conviction she didn't feel.

You are not okay; let them help you. Sissy's wet nose pressed into Keone's wrist. *Because I can't.*

'Bullshit,' Miley said. 'We're taking you to the hospital, and don't even bother arguing.'

The rumble of a car engine interrupted all other sounds. Brooke drove the car between the trees, branches scraping against metal as she passed. Keone winced.

At least Brooke had the sense to use fog lights instead of headlights.

Getting off the ground and into the car wasn't easy, but when Keone flopped onto the back seat, muscles easing against the support of stuffed leather, she thought she'd pass out from relief. Despite Miley's warning, she continued to assure both Miley and Brooke that she was fine; she hadn't fallen onto her back. She just needed to go home, take some painkillers, and rest. Brooke jumped out of the car and marched back to the campsite.

'Leave it,' Miley called out. 'We'll come back for it later.'

'I'm just putting the fire out.' Brooke's reply was cut short by a sudden splash and hiss as the golden glow was extinguished.

What were you thinking? Sissy sat on top of the shirt Miley had awkwardly tucked around Keone before slamming the car door. *You know you shouldn't run.*

Keone closed her eyes, though she wasn't tired. If there was one thing she knew for sure, it was how effectively pain kept sleep at bay. She focused on the throbbing in her back—made easier as the car bounced over uneven turf—to stay present, to stay with this current pain, and not to give in to the memories it was invoking. There were some days that should only be lived once.

Keone's phone pinged, and she checked the screen. A text message from Brooke: *Hey, just arrived at the hotel, and one of the guys said you're off sick? You okay? Need me to bring you anything?*

Keone quickly typed back. *Yup, I'm fine, thanks though.* She'd thought a couple of days at home after an overnighter at the Base would be all she needed. Apparently, she and the doc had been wrong. The fall had caused no major damage, but the nasty purple bruise on her hip and shoulder told a different story, one of embarrassment and drunken antics.

A line of blinking dots indicated that the conversation wasn't over. *Miley and I will be over soon.*

Keone looked down at her questionable pyjamas: faded shorts and an oversized band t-shirt. She couldn't imagine what her hair must look like. She raked her fingers through the knotted front ends. It had been a year since she'd last been in

the ocean, so some of its original softness had returned, but the tight curls would always feel more coarse than silky. Considering the state of herself and the shack, she was about to text back, *Don't bother*, but she didn't. She needed to start living in this house, and this body, no matter what anybody thought.

She snatched one of the spare pillows off the bed and popped it beneath her head. It was like being back in hospital. She shuddered at the thought, but nothing—*nothing*—was as mind-numbingly boring as being confined to a hospital bed. At least this time she wasn't waiting around for Leiko to show up. And yet, in those boring moments of lying and *resting*, when her will weakened a little, she considered texting Leiko. She compromised by rereading Leiko's messages, though she was careful to restrict it to just the two: *Still in town* and *I'm sorry*. Her fingers were hot with all the possible responses she could send, but she closed the app without replying. She had enough problems already.

The thing about pain is that when you're experiencing it, it's difficult to think or talk about anything else, but Keone quickly discovered that these topics held little depth. After her initial surgery last year, the doctors and her parents, who had flown over from Hawai'i, listened intently as she described the sensations she was feeling and where they landed on a scale from one to ten, but that was where it ended. The facts were the facts. She'd likely experience different levels of pain for the rest of her life. There was no grey, no nuance, no different way to frame the truth of her new body: screws and rods had been fused into her L5-S1. Her surfing career was over. There was an expensive elective surgery she could undergo to improve mobility, but there was no guarantee that she'd regain her former agility. And if she were to re-injure her spine, the consequences ranged from further surgery to a life on wheels.

And that is what Keone had been thinking as she lay sideways beside a waterhole, drunk, in the dark, her feet a metre from the water's edge.

Perhaps Sissy was right; it was time for a new dream.

The rat in question was currently resting against Keone's chest. Sensing that the last round of painkillers had finally taken effect, Keone took Sissy in her hands and gingerly sat up. A light cramp rippled along her lower back and then faded. She set some pillows up behind her and eased into them. Flicking on the bedside lamp, she picked up her latest read: a speculative novel about a middle-aged woman and her animals post-apocalypse. The premise was not that intriguing, but Keone soon found the resilience of the main protagonist comforting. Sissy's tiny body was curled

up like an ammonite beside her. The rodent was quiet, tucked deeply within herself, but her physical presence was only a small comfort in the otherwise empty house. Slowly, the room, the pain, and the residue of regret melted away as Keone allowed the text on the page to carry her into a new space filled with other people's pains and problems. It was a relief to experience an alternative life where she had no responsibility to solve anything.

Half an hour later, there was a knock on the front door.

Keone jolted at the sound and clenched her teeth, anticipating another backbreaking cramp, but none came. The painkillers had worked, yet she knew from experience that she needed to be tender with herself. She eased herself from the bed, her movements displacing the sleeping Sissy, and planted her feet on the ground. The pain had eased while she was sitting supported in bed, but now that she was standing, the tension in her lower back returned, and she chided herself for the thousandth time in four days. She took a step forward, which ignited a pinched nerve, making her eyes water. The front door was so very far away. *You're such an idiot.*

Another knock on the door.

Who's that? Sissy flicked her head, eyes blinking to life.

'Miley and Brooke,' Keone croaked, then called out, 'I'm coming!'

She edged forward and reached the bedroom door, where a discarded nightgown hung from the knob. Could she get it on without inspiring another cramp, without crying out in pain? Did she care enough to try? She unhooked the garment and, threading her arms through its sleeves, waited. The resulting muscle contractions were no worse than what she had already experienced. The distance between her bedroom and the front door was a wartime beach filled with buried mines: one wrong step and she'd be in a world of pain.

'Keone,' Brooke's voice carried through the house, 'are you okay?'

She'd shuffled halfway along the hall. 'Yeah, no. Nearly there.'

Sissy wobbled up the hallway beside her companion. *As much as I like guests, is now really the best time? You're supposed to be resting. I vote that we only let them in if they have gifts or food.*

'You have a generous spirit,' Keone murmured, resisting the desire to press a hand into her lower back as if she was elderly or heavily pregnant.

A few moments later, she opened the front door and winced. The midmorning sun, which hung in the cloudless sky, was very bright.

‘Still in your PJs.’ Brooke edged into the living room, eyes darting from the lumpy couch to the small breakfast table and Miley’s painting, which hung above it. All judgements about the ramshackle house were carefully concealed behind that Teflon smile. ‘Did we wake you?’

Brooke was dressed in white jeans and a light blue shirt that made her look clean, crisp, and fresh. Keone drew her robe closed and thought about the dishes in the kitchen, the unvacuumed floors, and the rat that had climbed up onto her foot. Perhaps she should have sent that text.

Miley lingered on the landing. Her eyes scanned Keone from the top of her knotted hair to the tips of her holey socks. ‘Do you need some help?’ Vasilisa, whose talons were presently buried in the flaking balcony railing, squawked.

‘Where’s Ote?’ Keone asked. The reality of allowing Brooke and Miley to see her like this was shameful, equal to the indignity of the accident that had led to her present condition. The idea of asking them to help her get dressed or brush her hair was humiliating. Yet, she knew that staying in the crumpled clothes she’d slept in would only make her feel worse.

As though the question had summoned her, Ote slunk around Miley’s legs and through the front door. The giant wolf paused in the living room, sniffed the armchair, and then climbed up on top of it. Keone didn’t have the energy to protest. Besides, Brooke’s wolf would be the cleanest in the southern hemisphere.

‘How are you going with being a companion? I’ve never asked,’ Keone said, which was only a half lie, as she’d never asked *Brooke*. The question did a good job of diverting attention away from her injury, but Keone was genuinely interested in hearing the answer.

‘Anewa’s still getting used to her, but I love it. It’s nice to have someone to talk to, someone who’s always interested in what you have to say.’ Brooke scratched behind Ote’s ear, her silver bangles clicking against each other.

Miley glanced over her shoulder at Vasilisa; Keone noted that she didn’t have her glove on.

‘I took her to work for the first time yesterday,’ Miley said. ‘Vasilisa spent most of the day flying around the depot or perched on the roof of my forklift. I thought maybe the fellas would give me some flack, but mostly they were just curious. She really loves art and music, but ... of course she would.’

Keone didn't need her friend to elaborate: the companions were designed for each of them. And while she might never know *exactly* why she'd been given a rat, she couldn't help but think that Sissy symbolised a new beginning for her. If nothing else, her size and weight complemented Keone's changed body, and the little rodent was determined—but was that a hard-wired trait or something borrowed from Keone?

'Your back's still giving you trouble.' Brooke's eyes narrowed. 'And don't bother saying you're fine. You don't look fine.'

Keone hadn't moved from her position beside the door since she'd opened it. Neither had Miley. 'You can come in.' She gestured to the living room.

Miley smiled and crossed the threshold as Vasilisa launched from the railing, cut through the doorway, and landed on the back of a kitchen chair. 'Maybe, Vas,' Miley said as she stroked the hawk's back. 'Do you need to go back to the hospital? Or a chiropractor or physio? I don't know if any are open on a Sunday ...'

'No more hospitals—I'm fine. It's not that bad today.' Keone dared to shake her head. 'I just need to rest and do my exercises.'

'Well, the least we can do is help you get dressed and make you a coffee,' Brooke said, assessing Keone more closely. 'You look like you could use it.'

Keone's cheeks reddened, but she accepted the offer. She was a grown woman, a former top-ten professional surfer; she'd moved countries, survived a severe accident and rehabilitation—but the idea of having two other adult women *help* her get dressed was a challenge she'd yet to overcome.

Ote snorted and went to jump off the couch. 'Stay there,' Brooke said. 'I'll be fine.'

Keone led the way. She shuffled down the hall to the bedroom, convinced she'd succeeded in concealing her discomfort until Miley slipped a supportive hand beneath her elbow. The room was still dark when they entered, so Brooke flung open the curtains. She surveyed the room as though mentally rearranging the furnishing into a more appealing aesthetic. Her brow scrunched, then she shook her head and returned to the matter at hand. 'I'll make the bed. Miley, you find something for her to wear.'

Brooke turned her back, and Miley rolled her eyes as she opened the cupboard. 'What do *you* want to wear?' She raked her hands over the hanging clothing.

‘The yellow dress.’ Keone pointed to an item at the end of the rack. She didn’t ordinarily wear dresses, and when she did, they felt like a costume, as though she were wearing someone else’s skin, or at least the idea of it, and yet it was difficult to pinpoint who was the fool in this deception. For now, the choice of the dress was obvious: one item rather than two. She thanked the powers that be that she’d gone to bed with a bralette on.

Brooke set Sissy down on the ground, flicked the covers back over the bed and rearranged the pillows. ‘Alright,’ she brushed her hands as though dusting them. ‘Let’s get those shorts off.’

‘About time you asked.’ The joke only made her feel more uncomfortable. She grabbed the corner of the vanity for support. ‘Okay, then.’ Brooke circled the bed and shimmied Keone’s pyjama bottoms all the way down to the ground.

Keone sucked in a mouthful of air and lifted one foot, then the other as she stepped out of the dropped pants.

‘Can you lift your arms?’ Brooke asked, neatly folding the shorts and placing them on the edge of the bed.

Keone hesitated, her fingers tracing the long hem of her oversized shirt.

It’s okay. Sissy pressed her two front paws onto her companion’s foot and stretched upwards, determined to make eye contact. *Miley is freakishly tall, and Brooke only pretends to be shallow.*

‘She’s not *that* tall,’ Keone replied.

Miley’s brows drew together briefly, then relaxed. ‘Would you rather do the rest by yourself?’

‘Don’t think I can. Pretty sure I can lift my arms, though. Thanks.’

Brooke took one side and Miley the other as they gently lifted the baggy shirt. Keone raised her arms and braced herself for a protesting cramp. None came, and yet the threat was there. She knew that if she twisted to the left or right a new spark of pain would be ignited. In union, Brooke and Miley pulled the shirt up and off. Keone’s shoulders stiffened, waiting for the obvious question: *What is that?* But it never came. Instead, Brooke folded up the faded old shirt as if it was worth something and placed it on top of Keone’s shorts while Miley unhooked the dress straps from the coathanger.

‘Are you right to lift your arms again?’

Keone nodded, perplexed by their nonchalance at the red scar that ran the full length of her back.

‘Maybe she should sit,’ Brooke looked around the room and spotted the wooden chair in the corner. ‘Getting a dress on is more difficult than taking it off.’

‘Talking about your first time?’ Miley winked.

‘You’re hilarious, and no. I was wearing cropped jeans, thanks very much.’

Instead of asking Keone to walk to it, Brooke picked up the timber chair and swung it through the air as if it was made from plastic.

The same action would have caused Keone to drop to the ground in withering cramps.

She wanted to cross her arms and cover her exposed torso, but she was terrified to move more than necessary. The sooner she got dressed the better. ‘Can you ... help me sit down?’

‘Of course.’ Miley grabbed one elbow, Brooke the other, and together they guided Keone’s hands and arms and lowered the dress over her head until it pooled around her hips.

‘Raise you up a bit,’ Brooke indicated to Miley, and they both lifted Keone off the seat enough to enable Miley to push the skirt of the dress down. They lowered Keone back onto the seat. She bit against the resulting spasm and took a few deep breaths. Had they noticed her damp underarms, the hair curling at the nape of her neck, and how it met the tip of her welded flesh?

‘Where’s your brush?’ Miley asked.

You look weird, Sissy announced, scurrying around the legs of the chair. *And uncomfortable.*

‘I don’t wear dresses,’ she said to the rat, but Brooke was the one who replied, ‘Well, it suits you.’

In the hunt for a brush, Miley disappeared into the bathroom and reappeared a moment later with a wide-toothed comb along with a bundle of bobby pins and a hair tie.

‘I’ve never brushed curly hair before,’ Miley said. Her own poker-straight locks were pulled into a braid that finished halfway down her back.

‘You’re polite. Just do what you can; it will be fine.’

Miley began timidly teasing the ends out with her fingers before eventually picking up the comb and working through the hair in sections. Slowly, her

confidence grew, and Keone's eye closed involuntarily with pleasure. When it was detangled, Miley pulled the hair up into a high ponytail, looped the ends through the band to create a bun, and secured it. It was a task Keone would have expected Brooke to do, but was genuinely surprised by Miley's competence.

'Want a hand getting up?' Brooke asked.

Keone raised her arms, and Miley and Brooke once again supported her elbows as they lifted her onto her feet. She did feel a lot better now that she was dressed, but the painkillers were wearing off, and her energy was quickly draining. What she wanted most was to lie down, read, or slip into oblivion—if she was lucky. Instead, she asked, 'Would you like a cup of coffee? Tea? Beer?' She took a hobbling step towards the bedroom door.

'I'm all coffee-ed out.' Brooke dismissed the offer with a flick of her hand. 'Seriously, I couldn't even look at the stuff, and I'd probably knock someone out just by breathing in their general direction.'

Miley pulled a tin of mints out of her back pocket, flicked the lid open and tossed a green tablet to Brooke. 'Fix yourself up, love, we're in public,' she added with a mocking ocker accent, before she turned her attention to Keone. 'Do you need to do anything today, or do you want to get out of the house? I don't really like the idea of just leaving you here ... by yourself ... in pain.'

By myself, Keone thought, and shook her head. 'I'm fine. This is not the first time I've put my back out. Plus, I called in sick to work, so I probably shouldn't leave the house.' Then she added, reluctantly, 'And Sissy's here. I'll be fine.'

The rodent twitched her ears, practically beaming with pride.

'I *am* fine. I feel better, actually, but I do need to rest.' She hadn't meant it as a hint, but Brooke took it that way.

'We'll leave you to it then, but if you do get bored later or if you need some help, get hungry, whatever, *please* text me.'

'Ditto,' Miley added.

Keone nodded, relieved to be alone, and yet sorry to see them go. 'I will.'

Miley smiled, opening the door just in time for Vasilisa to fly back through it; a moment later, Ote followed.

When they were gone, Keone slowly eased herself down onto the couch, pausing briefly to consider whether or not she'd be able to get herself up again. *What do you want to do now?* Sissy asked, climbing up the side of the couch onto the

armrest. Keone twirled her phone in her hands a few times, considering. If she could handle being dressed by strangers who were no longer strangers, maybe she could handle this, too. She opened her messages, typed out her home address, and hit send.

‘Now, we wait.’

Miley clicked the save button and then zoomed out to better assess the work. The latest commission was far from thrilling, but she needed the money. The studio was stuffed with the smooth song of strings and a single, mournful soprano: Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, Vasilisa's request that morning, but now the hawk was nowhere to be seen. Out the open window, she saw Vasilisa teetering on a branch, intently watching the ground for signs of an early breakfast. *Good luck*, she thought and turned back to the painting. It was a portrait of a woman and her pet cockatoo—an *actual* cockatoo, not a constant companion. Without intending to, Miley had become known for animal portraits. It amazed her that anyone could afford, or even desire, such an indulgent purchase, but here was the evidence. On bad days, she questioned the trajectory her career had taken and whether it was any less soul-destroying than forklift driving, then she told herself to shut up and get back to it. She was painting for a living; who cared about the subject or the medium?

Her client had emailed her the reference image and completed forms a month ago. Uninspired by the assignment, Miley had performed her usual trick of doubling her rate. Unfortunately, the woman sent through the deposit almost immediately. The roof needed to be retiled, the tanks needed replacing, and the price of rabbit had gone up. *Some people are so rich all they have is money*, Miley thought. *And a self-portrait with their pet cockatoo.*

The client requested that the piece be refined, elegant, and majestic. Miley had decided to go with a simple structure: the woman standing in an untamed field surrounded by wildflowers, a wooden fence in the distance, with idyllic cumulus clouds resting in the pale sky overhead. Not that you'd find anything like that around here, but if you travelled east a few hours you might. In a pinch, she could say that the field was inspired by the uninterrupted plains on the other side of Julia Creek,

minus the flowers. While Australian, the client hadn't specified what type of background she wanted—Daintree, ranges, hinterlands, arid bushlands—so Miley used her artistic licence to be entirely generic.

The film Miley had created played on. The woman turned to her left and raised her arm in a manner that Miley knew well. The skirt of her green dress rippled with a caressing breeze and, from the left side of the screen, a white cockatoo entered in full flight, its angel wings flapping as it hovered above its owner's extended arm (for a beat) before settling onto her wrist. Everything looked in order on the screen, but 3D animated paintings always did. Miley switched on the main projector and clicked the play button again. The centre of the studio transformed into an open field, and Miley was no longer alone. She withdrew her tortoiseshell glasses from her breast pocket and stepped towards the woman in the green dress. Up close, she could see the details in the folding of the skirt, the rougher strokes of the wild grass.

Something was off, something about the face. The tonal layering was convincing; it looked like real skin. 'What are you missing?' Miley asked the mute woman who was raising her arm. On impulse, Miley dashed back to the computer and hit the rotate button until the entire hologram hung upside down. That was when Miley spotted it. 'You're missing a bloody eyebrow!' She hit the pause button, zoomed in, and picked up her digital brush, solving the problem with a few short, delicate strokes. She flipped the image the right way round, clicked the play button, and stepped back into the centre of the room. She watched four full loops before deciding that the piece was truly done. Returning to the computer, she picked up the digital brush and added two tiny initials to the bottom left-hand corner, then saved the file and backed it up to three separate locations. Done.

Miley leaned back in her chair, exhaled. Outside, Vasilisa cried, and Miley's eyes followed the sound just in time to see the hawk soar through the window. Without thought, Miley slipped her leather glove onto her left hand and stretched out her arm. Vasilisa's glossy talons dug into the thick material.

'Good girl,' Miley cooed, stroking the back of the hawk's head. She withdrew a small parcel of wrapped meat from her pocket and gave it to the creature.

Now is a bad time for hunting.

'Winter usually is.' Miley looked out across the five-acre property: her first and only serious purchase. She bought the dilapidated farm back in May, three

months ago, because, firstly, she could afford it and, secondly, she thought Vasilisa would be more comfortable living here than in the centre of town. Miley had assumed there'd be a plentiful supply of bugs, mice, rats, rabbits, and other small marsupials for the hawk to hunt, but they'd have to wait until spring to find out.

They'd both grown tired of living in the city. Rogathella had expanded thanks to a new open-cut mine, resulting in the development of a new, bigger, better shopping centre and four additional suburbs. It was still a small town, especially by city standards, but there was a difference between living in a townhouse on the main drag and a property ten minutes from the outskirts. Miley hadn't realised how badly she'd needed the space and silence. As her commission business grew, the need to be free from the input of other minds and lives had become vital. Vasilisa had agreed. The real estate agent had told her that the ghost gums surrounding the property were home to pink galahs and kookaburras, but Miley hadn't seen one in the whole time she had been there. Vasilisa did not pine for other creatures, but Miley missed the sound of the native birds twittering, screaming, and laughing as the sun rose. And, if she were honest, she also missed people. She hadn't realised what a comfort it was to have neighbours, to simply see other people, even if you didn't talk to them, even if you didn't particularly like them. There was a security in knowing that someone was there. Out here in the bush, she was on her own. On her first night, she'd woken with chilling fear at a knock in the bedroom, only to realise it was her heart thumping in her ears. She was ten minutes from town, ten minutes from help, from Brooke's front door and Keone's bookshop. Under the wrong circumstances, ten minutes could be an awfully long time.

'I need coffee.' Miley switched off the computer monitor.

Navigating around boxes of paint, sheets, and tools, Miley exited the studio, crossed the short expanse of dying lawn—if the summers were dry, winter was worse—and returned to the main house. Her home was as chaotic as her workspace. Though the clutter was always there, Miley only noticed it when she had guests, as if the clutter materialised the moment there was a knock on the door. She flicked on the kettle, pressing her thin, cool fingers against its sides, and looked out across the back of the property. Here, she was treated to a life-stopping view of the folding mountains. Admittedly, the view was at its best in the early morning and dusk when the light was its softest; at noon, it was impossible to ignore the thinning grass and tree line.

Vasilisa gnawed a strap on the glove. *Will you work today?*

‘I think I’ve paid my rent already, don’t you?’ She’d been awake since 3 a.m., determined to finish the blasted painting, though she wouldn’t send it *just* yet. When a customer received their order too soon after purchase, they assumed the job had been rushed. Best to leave it another week and guarantee a positive reaction.

What should we do?

Miley had been wondering that herself. She sipped her coffee, knowing it would only fuel her restless, kinetic need to do *something*. Without warning, she set the mug down. ‘We’re going out.’

Grabbing a cap and scarf off the side stand, she stepped out through the sliding screen door and locked it behind her—best to be safe. Her hiking boots were on the other side of the verandah’s bar—the only bench in the house not buried beneath a layer of household scum. She pulled on the boots, fetched her walking stick, and passed through the low gate. It had been months since she’d last flown. Business was good; she’d never been so busy. The downside of owning a business, though, was that she rarely escaped the studio; she loved making art, loved getting paid for it, but she also knew how important it was to stay inspired and not let the heel of productivity grind her creative spirit into dust. An artist needs solitude and white space just as much as they need time for the craft. The past month had been hectic; whatever free time she had was reserved for sleep—another virtuous fundamental.

The walk to the top of the hill was steep and uneven. It took a good thirty minutes, but Miley ate it up, having maintained her fitness through online aerobics classes and an alarm schedule that went off every forty-five minutes, reminding her to stand up, stretch, and move her body.

Then her foot slipped. ‘Crap.’ She quickly wedged her walking stick between a rock and a clump of spinifex to correct herself. The stick was technically unnecessary, a tiny bit eccentric, but in moments like this it was useful. Using it for support, she lifted the ankle, rotated it carefully and waited for a white-hot poker of pain. None came. ‘Off you go,’ she addressed the bird on her gloved hand; the walk uphill would be easier without the extra burden.

Needing no further invitation, Vasilisa launched into the air. The curves of her wings mirrored the pockets of twisting landscape that added variety to the view. This place was not just one thing. Hours of flat plains lay in the north-west while the

land to the east and south-east was more varied. Tough soil, exposed rock that rose from the earth with such vicious angles it looked torn, winding highways, rises, white spikey grass, and waterfalls when they were lucky enough to get rain. *I would race you, but a competition is not fun if you are certain of the outcome.*

Miley laughed openly. ‘Yes, Vasilisa, you would win.’ She was thirty-nine years old. The day before, she’d removed a single grey hair from her brush. The strand had been *nearly* invisible when mixed with her strawberry-blonde hair, just not as invisible as Miley would have liked.

Righting herself on the path, she drove the stick into the earth and paid closer consideration to her steps. The clumps of grass that sputtered from between rocks were dead, but their collapsed fingers masked the uneven ground beneath, making the trek that much more cumbersome. To the right was a depression: a dried-out riverbed lined with cracked mud, thanks to the two-day storm last month. When she’d first bought the property, the creek had been full enough to dip her feet in. The ghost gums carried on, though, so that if Miley rose early enough, she could catch their sharp, medicinal scent in the morning air. She turned away from the valley and sniffed. If she wanted to avoid breaking her ankle, she had better concentrate.

She heard the hawk cry, but when she looked up there was nothing except the sky. Hawks were famous for their ability to vanish, and Vasilisa was no exception.

When Miley finally reached the top of the mountain, she stopped long enough to take a steadying breath and allow her body to recuperate. The tip was treeless and, though the crisp morning air lingered, the sun was directly above her; sweat dampened her lips and she regretted not bringing a water bottle. She pressed forward and took her usual seat on a choppy outcrop of orange rock. Fortunately, there was one ledge smooth enough for sitting.

This was the feature, along with the separate stone granny flat that had Miley signing the dotted line. She looked out over the long uninterrupted view. The rich and textured land churned directly beneath her and ran out to the smooth line of the horizon. Miley took another deep breath and, when she exhaled, her shoulders loosened. Yes, the walk was a perfect way to celebrate.

She scanned the horizon for Vasilisa and, after a few moments, spotted a moving speck in the distance. She could call for her, but she wasn’t in the habit of summoning Vasilisa; the hawk would come back in her own time and Miley would get her turn.

When they glided over creeks, watering holes, plains, and thick and thin bushlands, Miley experienced time through the part of Vasilisa's mind that was wild and alone. She was aware of the wind, temperature, and precipitation; the sound of nearly invisible, resilient creatures making a life in harsh conditions; the way her stomach tightened with hunger, and life narrowed to stacked moments free of consequence. Then Vasilisa's trained eye would spot movement below and the race for survival would begin.

Miley loved flying, but she didn't want to be a bird.

She knew Vasilisa better than anyone, having moved through the sky in her skin, and yet, there was a space inside Vasilisa that remained foreign, mysterious, and entirely her own. Vasilisa was partly human, but she was also a hawk. Her species—her body—created a gap between them that merging could resolve.

Miley swallowed against her dry throat and tried to think about something other than water. The sun prickled her skin, and she closed her eyes. Years ago, this sensory reaction would have been a warning, her body telling her that she was burning, but now, thanks to Vasilisa's frequent need to be outdoors, Miley barely ever got burnt. She liked to pretend that the light was passing through her and out the other side, heating the rock beneath her. For the past few weeks she had toyed with the idea of moving the studio outside (mornings were chilly, but the afternoons pleasant). It would certainly help her vision, but so far she had remained where she was, caught in the habit and convenience of her already-established studio: one that she had only recently finished setting up, having turned the granny flat into her private workspace.

Vasilisa screeched as she landed on the edge of the boulder. *Do you ever wonder what you look like?*

'Sorry?' Miley asked.

I would like to know what I look like when I fly.

'Oh.' Personally, Miley was happiest when she hadn't looked in a mirror for days. She was about to describe Vasilisa's elegance when inspiration struck. She held up her hands so her thumbs crossed while her fingers pressed together. 'Look here at the rock. That's what you look like when you fly.' Miley swayed her hands over the rough rock so that their shadow dipped and weaved, a reasonable depiction of a bird in flight, transforming the rock into a miniature gorge.

That is me?

‘Yes,’ Miley said, pleased by the pleasure in Vasilisa’s tone.

Are you ready to fly?

Miley nodded. ‘Yes, and you?’

I am always ready.

It had been terrifying and thrilling the first time she’d flown, but since then she’d become more comfortable with the practice. Though she had to admit that it had been quite some time since their last adventure. She pushed back her shoulders and prepared for the merging: she pressed her feet firmly into the ground, briefly imagined her spine firmly fused like Keone’s, straight and strong as metal—she didn’t want to topple over like last time. It was a miracle she hadn’t chipped a tooth! The hawk spread her wings and settled on the edge of the stone. Miley relaxed her eyes, allowing them to become unfocused as she looked in Vasilisa’s direction. A moment later, she was staring back at herself. She briefly registered the suggestion of a smile and the tiny lines around her eyes before Vasilisa flapped her wings, launching off the rock and into open air.

It was a little like being a passenger in a car, Miley had thought the first time they’d merged. Vasilisa soared above the scattering rises and then took a quick dive into a gully. If they had been in a helicopter, Miley’s stomach would have flipped, but Vasilisa was well seasoned—a confident flyer; her stomach was cast iron. Together, they flitted calmly through the thinning trees by the empty river and cut between its banks before skimming up the side of another rise and hovering, once again, above the extended view. Vasilisa kept her eyes on the horizon and Miley was struck by the vastness of the land; its dry soil was overlaid with pearly gums and hardened gidgees. Despite attempts to increase Rogathella’s population this past decade, the town had only expanded by ten thousand. The land had changed in that time, but not strictly due to development. The glimmer of sadness that always settled over her heart whenever she was in nature found her again, and she wondered if her human eyes were starting to water. They soared, dipped, and twirled for another fifteen minutes until Vasilisa had her fill of bugs: Miley’s least favourite part. After, when they were back at the house, she would brush her teeth in an attempt to remove her memory of those brittle wings and crunchy legs.

When they finally returned to Miley’s waiting vessel, her consciousness dropped back into her body as though her spirit was governed by gravity.

It always took a few moments to, once again, feel comfortable in her skin. She'd developed a small ritual to help: wiggling her toes and fingers, then tapping her whole body with her hands. When the nausea finally passed, she picked up her walking stick and began the descent back to the homestead. As it was, she could feel the tight puckering of her face and knew that she hadn't totally escaped the sun's wrath. Vasilisa coasted through the air beside her, quiet as usual. The hawk liked their flights together well enough, but she too had to adjust to the loneliness of a mind that was once again her own.

Back at the house, Miley surrendered. In a matter of minutes, she and Vasilisa were back in the studio. Miley switched the monitor back on and clicked play on the video, just in case she had missed something else. With fresh eyes, she could see that the painting was indeed done, but it wasn't complete. It *needed* something. 'What do you want?' she asked the living artwork.

You should have asked earlier, Vasilisa squawked. A bow. That is what is missing. A thin red bow around that birdie's neck would make him look smart but also as if he is not to be taken seriously.

Miley chuckled and flicked her hand to suggest that it was Vasilisa's comment that shouldn't be taken seriously. Then she paused, wondered, tilted her head to the side and imagined what it would look like to have a delicate ruby ribbon tied around those pure white feathers. It *could* add a sense of whimsy. The painting was majestic, totally unaware of its absurdity: two qualities that did not mix well. Suddenly, the work seemed ridiculous and self-indulgent: a biblical rendition of a filthy-rich woman and her bird. Though Vasilisa had not commented on the subject directly, a rare event indeed, Miley had sensed her companion's unease. There was a space that existed between this woman and her bird, a space that Miley and Vasilisa would never know or understand. Miley wouldn't trade Vasilisa for anything—she truly was the most loyal of companions—but she did wonder what it would be like to have an animal you couldn't communicate with. What it would be like to establish trust and love through actions and emotions rather than words. Would it be a trust hard-earned, or would it depend upon the creature? Both owner and animal must go through the *getting-to-know-you* stage together but, ultimately, most owners want to love their pets and have their pets love them. Perhaps it was the animal who held the greater power. If they rejected their owner, there seemed to be little a human could do to convince the creature to reconsider.

Yes: a red ribbon would do just fine. Having made her decision, Miley returned to the screen. It only took a few minutes and, once it was done, Miley was smiling. It was always a risk to meddle with a piece after the signature was added; fortunately, these digital paintings were more forgiving than her preferred oil on canvas. If this were an *actual* painting, and if she had made this change and not liked it, correcting the red ribbon on a white bird would have been a nightmare. Satisfied with a job well done, she decided to treat herself—*again*—by having lunch out. She checked the time; it was just after one. If she called Brooke now, she might be able to arrange something before her friend got caught up in the afternoon rush.

The subtlety of the morning light was changing—brightening—and Miley knew she didn't have much time until it transformed completely. Keone shuffled on the seat and grunted as her left arm, which was holding up Vasilisa, quivered. 'How much longer?' she asked.

'Just a few more photos,' Miley said, trying to capture the image from a different position.

'I've heard that before.' Brooke snorted from the other side of the room, where she was flicking through art magazines. 'They did a good job on this article.' She stabbed the glossy page that featured Miley's headshot alongside some stills from her installations. 'I think they've done you justice.'

'Thanks.' Miley's eyes were trained on the camera screen in her hands. 'I hate it.'

I am bored. Vasilisa spread her wings.

'Wait. Don't move, Vasilisa, that's great.' She snapped the photograph, struck by how regal Vasilisa looked.

They'd wrapped a bedsheet around Keone like a toga and ripped a tea towel in half to cover her eyes like a blindfold. Sissy sat curled in her right hand, and in her left she held Vasilisa high above her shoulder. 'Why can't I hold Sissy up?' she asked when they first set up the pose. 'It would be a lot kinder to my biceps.'

'Because Vasilisa is bigger. The composition would look all wrong if the smaller animal were higher.' She wondered if what she said was true or if she was disguising her biases in art theory. 'But if it's too uncomfortable, you'll let me know,

right? And then we can try the other way,' she added carefully between snaps. Keone hated special treatment.

'I'm fine. It's just my arm.'

'She's right,' Brooke backed her up. 'It would look strange to hold them the other way. Always happy to jump in if you need.'

I am famished.

'Nearly done, Vasilisa, then I'll give you something to eat.'

Keone stiffened, drawing the hand that held Sissy closer to her body. 'It's okay, Sissy,' she murmured.

Miley's brow furrowed. Apparently, some things can't be forgotten—but, god—*that* had happened five years ago. And Vasilisa had apologised, and Sissy was fine, so what was the big deal?

The light changed as if flicked by a switch, and the golden light of morning disappeared in an instant. 'We're done.' Miley put the camera down, admitting defeat. She'd snapped more than a hundred pictures that morning; there was bound to be something in there she could use. Between her commission work and moving out to the property, Miley couldn't remember the last time she'd made art for art's sake. She hoped she'd get a chance to do something with the images soon.

'Finally.' Keone dropped her arm as Vasilisa launched forward and slipped through one of the studio's many open windows.

Keone shuffled in her seat.

'Let me give you a hand.' Miley rushed to help her friend.

'I got it.' Keone set Sissy down and unwound her blindfold, rubbing her left bicep rigorously. 'How much does Vasilisa weigh? Ten kilos?'

Miley snorted. 'Hardly. She's barely a kilo!'

Keone's eyes narrowed, disbelieving.

'You should see Val Cruz, get a proper massage,' Brooke said. 'She's be bled dry by legal fees right now thanks to that idiot husband of hers.'

'That name sounds familiar,' Miley said.

'It should; we did all twelve years of school with her.'

'We did?'

'Wasn't her husband a physio?' Keone added, pulling the conversation back on track. She wiggled the makeshift toga around in an attempt to loosen it.

‘Yup, but he got arrested for his involvement with an animal trafficking ring. Hold on, Keo, let me help you with that.’ Brooke crossed the room before she could refuse. ‘He and a couple of local pig hunters have been poaching native animals and sending them to smugglers in Sydney. He was so quiet at school; do you remember, Miley?’

‘I literally have no idea who you’re talking about.’

‘Beandon Cruz? He had a companion, actually, a bird that was bigger than Vasilisa, though they looked kind of similar.’

Miley shrugged.

‘They sat next to you at the triplets’ touch finals last year!’ Brooke said, appalled. ‘Jesus, no wonder you can’t get out, Keone. Miley just about stitched you into this thing.’ Brooke ripped a long stream of tape off the back of the toga; bulldog clips hit the ground and bounced across the floor as the makeshift dress unravelled. ‘All done, my dear.’

‘Thanks,’ Keone said simply, turning her attention to relocating her clothes.

‘What do you need a hand with now? I’d make an excellent muse, you know.’ Brooke beamed.

Miley laughed. ‘The light’s too harsh now, but you could help by putting the props away.’

Brooke looked less than pleased by this activity, but she hauled a large plastic bin into the centre of the room and started gathering up the various costumes draped over the stools, tables, and easels that filled the studio. A moment later, Ote trotted in through the open door and nudged Brooke’s leg. ‘Hey girl, find anything interesting?’ she asked, though her voice sounded uninterested. If the wolf *had* come across something, the rest of them would never know.

Miley picked up a bowler hat and tossed it into the plastic tub. ‘You okay?’ she asked; Brooke was acting more highly strung than usual.

‘Just a bit distracted, I guess.’

‘No updates on Gillian Chance?’ Miley asked, knowing that if Brooke had heard anything, she would have told them already, or they would have read about it on *The Gist*, her latest in a stream of online journalism projects following the closure of the local paper.

‘Nothing.’

‘What’s it been now? One week? Two?’ Keone stepped into her jeans.

‘Ten days. Cops have been questioning her husband and her colleagues. No sign of forced entry. They think it was probably someone she knew.’

‘My money is on the husband,’ Keone said.

‘So far they have nothing to tie her disappearance to him.’ Brooke shrugged. ‘I don’t think this is something we’re going to have an immediate answer for.’

Keone picked up the sheet she’d been wearing and dropped it in the plastic bin; Miley sealed the lid with the palm of her hand and slid the box back into its place under the table.

‘Anyone for a cup of tea?’ she asked.

‘I’m in.’ Keone collected Sissy off her shoulder and placed her on Ote’s back. Miley felt a tinge of jealousy seeing the two of them together. Ote and Sissy got along great, despite their biological differences, despite not being able to communicate with one another. Why couldn’t Vasilisa do that? Then she felt a twinge of embarrassment. Hawks and wolves weren’t *supposed* to be friends. Was it really fair of her to have that expectation?

She closed the studio’s steel door, and they crossed the lawn in the direction of the main house. It was the biggest home Miley had ever lived in, with its open kitchen, dining and lounge area from which the master bedroom was an offshoot. Miley and Vasilisa had nested comfortably into that end of the house; the rest remained largely unused. It was physically and psychologically sectioned off by French doors (though they were never closed), which led to a corridor flanked by a second living space Miley referred to as the library—that was where she’d set up her bookshelf, though the room was missing one essential element: somewhere to sit—and the other three bedrooms, laundry, and main bathroom. Although it was in the bush, the previous owner had renovated it with a beach theme: the kitchen bench was deep blue, the cabinets yellow, and the feature tiles on the splashbacks in both bathrooms had hand-painted seashells on them. It was a big home filled with creaks and groans at the rise and fall of the sun, but today, Miley was happy to see it filled with the sounds of other living beings.

Brooke and Keone were walking in front of her. Brooke was talking about the school award Harlow had been given, and Keone was pretending to care, when Miley caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and swivelled just in time to see the long, sleek black body of a snake slither through the sticks of grass towards them.

‘Shit!’ Keone jumped back, hand instinctively grabbing Brooke’s arm.

Miley skirted them both and leapt onto the raised patio, eyes scanning her possessions for anything that could be turned into a weapon—a shovel, rake, or broom—but none materialised among the plastic outdoor setting and potted plants. Brooke ran backwards, shouting at Ote and Sissy to get behind her as Keone crouched in the weedy garden bed, quickly loosened a random rock from the soil, and threw it at the snake. She missed, but the thump of the fist-sized rock startled it, and the snake changed direction, disappearing into the long grass behind the wooden fence that separated the homestead from its acreage.

‘You guys okay?’ Miley asked.

‘Yup,’ Keone rubbed her back. ‘Damn, that was close.’

‘You missed,’ Miley said, picking up the rock before tossing it back into the garden bed.

‘I meant to. If one of your neighbours saw ... or if somebody found the body ... put it this way, I got better things to spend my money on.’

‘Your back okay?’ Miley said, dusting off her hands.

Keone waved her off.

‘This is ridiculous.’ Miley and Keone turned towards Brooke, whose arms were crossed over her chest. ‘Look at that dry grass—you can’t just leave it there. No wonder a bloody snake has come out of it. Don’t you understand how much of a fire risk it will be come summer?’

The grass had grown rapidly thanks to the freak storm last month but died soon after when their normal, dry sunny days returned. Miley shrugged, though her face grew hot because the truth was she didn’t know. ‘I’ll call ... someone. I’ll get someone around to take care of it.’

But Brooke could not be shaken off so easily. ‘You’re living on a property now, Miley. You have to start acting like it. Trust me; you don’t want to spend all your money hiring other people to maintain this place for you. That grass needs to be cleared away, the paddock down the front needs a good tidy up, too—and this?’ She pointed to the empty garden beds. ‘You’re sitting on a gold mine! Look at all this space and soil, and you’re doing nothing with it; you’ve just wasted our best growing season.’

Miley was struck dumb. She looked to Keone for back up, but the curling hook of her friend’s lip suggested that she’d find no support there. Miley hesitated,

unsure how to proceed. 'I'll figure it out.' She wasn't going to admit it to Brooke, not now anyway, but one of her neighbours, a man named Jasper, had had words with her about the grass. There was nothing pleasing about being told off, but it was a small comfort to know that even out here, where whole acres separated you from your neighbour, in this place where you didn't *have* to see someone if you didn't want to, people could still know your business.

They went inside for a cup of tea. By the time Keone and Brooke left, the weirdness of their encounter with the snake had eased.

Standing at the top of her sloping driveway, Miley waved them off. Their vehicles trailed down the dirt track and disappeared from view behind a wall of scrub and gums. Five acres. A rare responsibility. The driveway pressed against the property line. There was a sweeping decline to the front left of the property that bottomed out at a flat plain with a small dam in its centre. Years ago, or so the realtor had told her, the dam had been home to yabbies. The homestead squatted on a shelf three-quarters of the way up the hill. The rear fence nestled against a rise that led to Miley and Vasilisa's favourite spot. From there, Miley could see the entire street of properties. Though the rise behind her blocked early morning light, the western-facing property provided a spectacular, uninterrupted view of the sunset. It was beautiful, and it was all hers, but the longer she looked, the more difficult it became to deny the reality of her situation.

She had no idea what she was doing.

She hadn't grown up on a farm. None of her friends had, either. The feeling Miley had been suppressing for three months burst forward: total inadequacy. She thought about her parents, now retired on the Sunshine Coast, and how easy that life must be: living in an apartment, afternoon walks on the beach, popping down to the local grocer to buy a few vegetables for dinner. It was a simple life—one that Miley would never have.

Vasilisa circled overhead, a moving black blimp against the brilliant midday sky. No, they would never live in an apartment by the beach: Vasilisa struggled with confined spaces and had become increasingly intolerant of other humans. At times, Miley worried that Keone and Brooke might no longer be able to visit, but because Vasilisa had known them for so long, her tolerance was higher, and as long as they came out here, Vasilisa could leave whenever the company became too much—

hunting was an ideal excuse and a task that could not be finished quickly. Prey was hard to find these days.

Miley wiped the thin film of sweat from her forehead and stepped back into the slip of shade cast by the house. Vasilisa was still tracing circles in the sky, but with the quick approach of early afternoon, Miley knew she wouldn't stay out in the beating heat for long.

It was early morning when Miley crossed the lawn with an arms full of freshly chopped wood and added the latest additions to the already-growing stack beside the studio. The grass was still dewy, a shade of green slowly returning thanks to her twice-a-week sprinkle: the most she could do with the latest restrictions. She dusted off her hands, grateful that yet another day had passed without encountering a spider—once was enough—as her first instinct was always to obliterate them with the heel of her hand or foot, but you couldn't go about doing that anymore. Spotting a spider was a minor miracle.

The sky had lightened, but the sun was yet to climb over the rise. She hoped that she would complete the morning chores before the sun rose enough to become uncomfortably warm. Vasilisa was in the front paddock, as usual, scanning the lawn in the hope of finding something to eat. Miley had mowed yesterday, so there was a chance she'd churned up a few insects, but Vasilisa's first preference would *always* be meat. Up next: more wood chopping. She leaned against the studio, giving in to laziness. A month ago, she would have only been waking up now, rolling out of bed for a cup of tea. Daydreaming about the portrait she would work on that day. She'd kept up this new routine for about a month, but it hadn't become a habit yet. What was she saying? It took thirty days to make a new habit and three days to break one.

She hauled herself off the studio wall and dragged her feet along the almost living grass as she returned to the waiting logs. She'd paid the neighbour Jasper fifty bucks to come over and chainsaw down the few trees that needed to go. Miley had been worried initially. 'Are you sure you're allowed to cut down those trees?'

'Not really supposed to,' Jasper had said, crouching over the chainsaw to plug the battery into his portable charger. He lived in an unwavering state of ease, or so Miley had witnessed in their brief interactions together. He was a farmer who seemed to be fashioned from the soil he tended: a study of browns, with sunburned

skin, straight dark brows, and dusky hair that was trimmed neatly behind his ears and hidden beneath an Akubra hat. The moons of his nails and the fine creases of his hands were permanently marked with dirt. ‘If we were in north-east Queensland, you wouldn’t dare. But no one *really* cares what you get up to out here.’

Not yet, at least, she’d thought.

She’d just picked up the axe when a voice called through the morning, ‘Hello to the house!’

She dropped the axe to her side. *Speak of the devil.* ‘Hey, Jasper.’ She waved at the hatted outline on the other side of the fence. ‘You finish this chopping for me, and I’ll make you breakfast,’ she said, only half-joking. It wasn’t much of a trade; she was a terrible cook. He flicked open the gate and strolled towards the chopping block. He was a farmer, without a doubt, but he always looked tidy in his thick denim jeans—real denim, not the thin imitation stuff you found in chain stores—and the buttoned-up, faded green flannel shirt tucked into his pants. ‘How about I *help* you with the chopping, and I cook breakfast.’

‘Deal.’ She handed over the axe. ‘You start?’

He chuckled. He had been the one to complain about the overgrown grass and the fire danger it posed, not only to her home, but those surrounding it; she’d suspected that he’d be willing to lend a hand, and she was right. He set the first chunk of wood on the block and swung, cleanly splitting the wood right down the centre. Vasilisa appeared, as she so often did, suddenly and without warning.

‘Find anything?’ she asked.

Jasper looked up for a moment, saw the bird and realised the question was not directed at him.

A grasshopper. A cricket. Do we have any chicken carcasses left?

‘There’s a bit of liver. How hungry are you?’ It was the last bit of liver in the fridge. She needed to place another order but had put it off until she’d been paid for her latest commission. Unfortunately, she’d underestimated how much equipment she’d need for the farm. People had been happy to lend her things at first, but their initial hospitality had quickly soured into resentment, and she felt uncomfortable knowing that she was causing additional wear and tear on their equipment. She hadn’t realised how much it would dip into her savings: the connection of a trickle feed, a ride-on mower and a chainsaw had been the most expensive purchases so far. She’d taken on some extra commission work, knowing that the roof needed retiling

and the dam in the front paddock needed redigging—what she was supposed to do about *that* she had no idea—but the constant juggling of farm chores against her increased workload was exhausting and, she feared, unsustainable.

I'm famished. Ote's probably tearing apart a rib fillet right now.

'We'll figure something out,' Miley said.

'Vasilisa didn't find much, huh?' Jasper said, putting another log onto the block and passing Miley the axe. She'd learnt quickly that there was no getting out of your share of the work with Jasper; the man did not tolerate sluggishness.

She took the axe, planted her feet on the earth, and swung. She'd been on a good roll earlier, cutting each log of eucalyptus right down the middle, but this time the axe snagged halfway, two inches from the centre. 'Damn it.' She pressed the palm of one hand on top of the block while the other worked the axe free. 'I thought it would be easier to feed her out here.'

Jasper shrugged. 'Game is hard to find.'

'*Hard* to find, but I didn't think it would be impossible. How do poachers find anything out here?' The question was somewhat rhetorical. Poaching native animals to sell on the black market still happened, but the gig wasn't as easy as it used to be, and the consequences of getting caught were very real: massive fines or jail time. Miley wiggled the axe free of its hold and hovered the blade above the wood's centre. Tentatively, she drew it back over her head, practising the swing before committing to it, then she brought the axe down with double the force, and the wood split neatly in two.

'Maybe they're better hunters than Vasilisa,' Jasper said, knowing full well that the hawk heard and understood all.

Vasilisa flicked her head but made no reply for there was little point: Miley would never insult a man who was helping her for free.

'That's not the problem,' Miley said, handing him the axe.

He nodded to the garden beds in front of them, crowded with pesticide-resistant weeds. 'You could grow a garden.'

Miley released a short, sharp exhale. 'Brooke said something similar a couple of weeks ago, but Vasilisa needs protein, not lettuce, and I've never been a gardener.'

Jasper shook his head and placed a fresh block of wood on the chopping block. 'You can grow a decent variety, especially in winter. Spring's decent enough,

but summer? She's pretty limited. The vegetables would be for you, but what the vegetables bring would be for Vasilisa.'

'I'm not following.' Miley folded her arms over her chest, sensing that she was about to be lectured.

'Vegetables mean insects, and insects bring other animals, maybe a few little marsupials for your friend here.' He pointed the axe at Vasilisa; the hawk's eyes sharpened like blades.

'Is that ... allowed?'

'Growing a vegetable garden? Of course.'

'Vasilisa killing on private property.'

Jasper eyed the pile of wood that they'd illegally cut—technically speaking. 'Like I said, might be different if we were closer to the city or the coast. If there were cameras out here, or drones, I wouldn't recommend it, but for now, at least, you don't have to worry about that. Besides, you won't be attracting anything notable. If she decided to take down a joey or kookaburra—then you'd be in trouble, but insects? No one's gonna care about that. You bought this property to be on the land, yeah? So be on the land.' He swung his axe and split the log clean down the middle.

It was midmorning by the time they'd finished their breakfast, the wood taking longer than Miley had expected, making her doubly thankful for Jasper's help. After stacking it neatly in the shed, she saw him off at the gate. Her shoulders ached and, for a moment, Miley worried over whether or not she'd be able to work that day.

She unlocked the door to her studio and pushed open all the windows. Though it was still relatively early, she could tell that it was going to be a warm day; spring had come. Vasilisa flew in through the open door, looking plump and pleased from her liver breakfast, and settled on her perch in the corner. *I do not like him.*

'You don't like anyone,' Miley countered.

That is not true. I like you just fine.

'High praise.' Miley snorted, swirled her mouse so that the computer came to life. Deciding to procrastinate a little longer, she opened her email and was surprised to see that there was one from Brooke. That was unusual. Intrigued, Miley clicked on the subject title, *Pretty please*. The note was straightforward and to the point, hinting at the busy day happening on the other end.

Hey love,

The kids' teacher asked me to ask you whether you'd be willing to come in and teach a couple of art classes. Paid, of course. \$250 a day. Three days. Dates flexible. What ya think?

Brooke.

Miley didn't hesitate. Teaching a primary school art class was easy money, but she couldn't afford to give up three days of higher-paying work to do it. She'd been trimming costs wherever she could. The property's two tanks were *ancient* but still in working order, and she wasn't in the habit of fixing what wasn't broken. However, both needed cleaning, rates were due, and she needed to purchase a water pump along with hoses and nozzles; then there was this whole garden project. Who knew how much that would cost. She'd already taken on four new clients for the month; her workload was full. She fired off a quick *thanks, but no thanks* reply and returned to her inbox.

An unopened email from Laura Winter, a senior committee member for The Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards, had arrived earlier that morning. Miley opened the note, wondering what changes they were requesting now. She'd been commissioned to create several 3D digital portraits featuring some of the biggest names in the business. The holographic images would play during their arrival at the awards ceremony, with a *very* good chance of being televised around the world. It was a big deal, and they'd already changed the list of stars to be recreated three times as guests became available or unavailable. Laura *had* sent a new list with minor updates, mostly regarding actors who'd changed the style or cut of their hair, but it was her closing sentence that made Miley's stomach turn. *Can't wait to see the finished files on Friday.*

'Friday,' Miley said, brow pulling together in confusion. 'But that's in five days.' She opened her weekly calendar and checked the deadline. The completed works weren't due for another two weeks.

She knew from experience never to fire back a hasty email without first checking the facts. Trawling through her inbox, she found the original email request. If her stomach was cold before, now it was freezing. Laura was right. The completed pieces were due in five days.

'Oh my god.' Miley sat back in her chair, momentarily paralysed with fear. The farm was a mess, the studio was a mess, she was a mess, but she'd never missed a deadline; she never wrote dates down wrong; she never made mistakes like *this*.

She looked out the window at the tangled shrubs that needed trimming, the collapsing clothesline, the timber that still needed to be cut beyond the fence. She could not afford to miss this deadline, having already allocated the funds to repairs on the house and supplies for the business, but she couldn't possibly meet it, either. Even if she were to ignore the demands of the property for the next five days—while working day and night—there was no way she could complete two dozen 3D portraits in five days. Dread crept over her shoulders. She'd have to give the money back. She dropped her head in her hands. It wasn't just the money; it was her reputation, her pride. She could not become known as an artist incapable of meeting a deadline. She refused to become a cliché.

Noticing her obvious distress, Vasilisa had come closer, landing on the pile of papers on the desk. Ordinarily, Miley would have scolded her, told her to be careful, but the displacement of receipts paled in comparison to Laura's email.

You seem upset. Vasilisa crab-walked closer to the screen; she found it uncomfortable to read, but she was capable of it. *Ah, I see.*

'I'm going to have to give the money back.' Miley raised her head. The shame of sending such a reply was only slightly eased by the knowledge that at least she hadn't spent the money yet.

'There's no way I can complete it in time. Even if I worked straight through, which is impossible.'

Vasilisa flicked her head and preened the feathers on her chest. *We could merge. You could work on the sketches and primary drawings during the day, and I could do the digitisation at night.*

Miley shook her head. 'Wait, what do you mean?'

Did I stutter? Let me put it another way: you do the work you need to during the day, and then, when you fall asleep at night, I can take over.

'No.' Miley shook her head, her whole body recoiling from the idea of her body being used in that way. 'That's out of the question; I can't do that—absolutely not.' She cut the air with the blade of her hand. 'I will figure something else out.'

Do we not need the money?

'We do, but you know the rules, Vasilisa. I appreciate your offer to help, but I will find another way.' Miley clicked the reply button, fingers trembling over the keyboard as she wished, for just a moment, that she was half as good with words as she was with images.

The sun was just above the rise when Miley shut off the hose, leaving the ride-on mower to dry in the early light. Grass, straw, and dust blanketed her skin, the inside of her nose, mouth, and ears. An uncomfortable mix when combined with dry morning air. How could another week have possibly passed? She could have sworn it was just yesterday that she'd mowed. Her whole body ached, but it was hard to tell why: slashing grass or crouching over a desk, cleaning gutters or seven hours drafting sketches? The idea of putting in another full day in the studio felt impossible. Gargantuan. Beyond the scope of reason.

It had been a month since she'd returned the money and informed Laura Winter that she would not be able to meet the deadline. She could not bring herself to be fully transparent, to say that she had *written down the wrong date*. Instead, she had cited the incredibly vague and infuriating excuse of 'unforeseen circumstances', which made her sound like a teenage girl who'd gotten her period and was trying to get out of swim class.

She peeled off her sweaty, dusty yard clothes, set the bathroom timer, and turned on the shower. There was that smell again. A sour, slightly foul scent that disappeared the second you went to inhale a little deeper, elusive as a cat. She'd have to ask Vasilisa if she could smell it, though birds of prey were better known for their keen eyesight than sense of smell. Still, perhaps the scent would not evade her in quite the same way as it did Miley.

She stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel from the rack, and dried herself off. She'd been hoping the smell would right itself, that this would not be some other problem that she would have to deal with. After dressing quickly in a thin skirt and a sleeveless white blouse, she left the bedroom and went into the kitchen to fill a glass of water. She inhaled deeply as the water gushed out of the tap. The scent catching in her nose then disappearing. Yes, something was definitely off. She stuck her nose into the glass, three sharp sniffs, but now there was nothing. She held the glass to her lips and took a tentative sip. It tasted fine. It ought to; the filter installed beneath the kitchen sink had cost a couple of grand.

Vasilisa flew in through the window. *Art time?* she asked, excitement brimming in her voice. Art-making was one of the few times Vasilisa ever became excited.

‘Not yet. I just need to check something.’

She stepped out the back door and grabbed the ladder that had been leaning against the house for over a week because she’d never found the enthusiasm to return it to the shed. She positioned it beside the water tank, which she hadn’t inspected since the trickle feed had been installed a few weeks ago. Reaching the top of her ladder, Miley froze. Part of the lid had perished, leaving a gaping hole in the top of the tank. She slid what remained of the lid aside, while assuring herself that such a small component wouldn’t be too expensive to replace, and peered inside, but all she could see was inky water.

‘Vasilisa!’ she called.

The bird flew to her side and landed on the rim of the tank.

‘Can you look inside the tank; I can’t see anything.’

The hawk edged towards the plate-sized hole and peered in. *You are right. There is something in there.*

‘Great,’ Miley stepped back down the ladder, grabbed the water leaf rake that was also resting beside the house, climbed back up and slipped it through the hole and into the water. She skimmed the surface until she felt the edge of the net bump against something solid. She angled the pole, scooped up the suspicious substance, and lifted the net back out. Her stomach lurched at the rotting stench as she threw the pole and the congealed mess inside it onto the lawn. The snake was half decomposed, more jelly than flesh. Her body writhed in response to the smell, and to knowing she’d been showering and drinking soiled water for the last few weeks.

‘Christ!’ She gagged, climbing down the ladder and edging around the mass of slippery, stinking flesh. She pulled her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans and moved over to the side of the house so that she was downwind from the snake. She could not shower or continue to drink that water but was unsure what, exactly, she should do next. After some deliberation, she searched for a plumber and called the first business listed.

‘Hello, Ray Glenson’s Plumbing. Tasha speaking.’

‘Hi Tasha, my name is Miley and I’m calling because ... well ... I found a dead snake in my water tank this morning ...’ she trailed off, hoping that Tasha would draw the obvious conclusion and leap into action, but she did not. ‘And I was wondering ... you know ... if you guys deal with these types of situations.’ Miley

felt her blush deepen. Was there no end to this humiliation? No bottom to her inadequacy?

‘The snake was in the tank?’

‘Yes,’

‘Not caught in the trickle feed or pipes in the kitchen?’

Miley wondered how on earth a snake could become coiled up in the plumbing beneath the sink and decided it was better not to ask, lest she add that to the list of potential horrors experienced on a property.

‘No, no, like I said, it was in the tank itself. I’ve fished it out now, but it was quite ... it’s been dead for a while, and I’m not interested in drinking—’

‘Yes, of course,’ Tasha said, suddenly impatient. ‘We can’t help you with that. You’ll have to call a *water* supplier and speak with them.’

‘Right,’ Miley said, wondering if there was a way to prod out additional information. Was there a particular service she needed to ask for? A name for this thing that had happened? But she was unwilling to shame herself further, even if it would prevent future embarrassment. Her education had to happen eventually.

Miley hung up and looked for her nearest rainwater tank supplier. Again, she hit the first number listed. This time, she spoke with an older, gruffer man who sounded as if he was in the middle of a very difficult and unpleasant task. She explained the situation again, feeling slightly less embarrassed in the retelling. The tankman huffed out a reply that the tank would need to be emptied, cleaned, and refilled.

It broke Miley’s heart to think of all that precious collected water going to waste. ‘Could we just ... add some purification tablets to the water?’ she asked, though even as she said it, the idea of continuing to shower and drink the contaminated water made her gag. Maybe she could mask the water with cordial, boil the water on the stove, and do old-school bird baths until the next bout of rain came, but the tank man didn’t even entertain the idea.

‘Nope. Trust me, lady, you don’t want to be drinking that stuff. Might make you sick.’

A small wave of relief coursed through her. It was one less decision she would have to make. ‘Can you send me a quote?’

‘Can do. What’s the size of your tank?’

‘Ten thousand, I think.’

‘It’ll cost five hundred for the emptying and cleaning, plus one thousand and fifty for the refill. Unfortunately, I can’t deliver a volume that large on such short notice. But we could drop off three thousand litres today. What’s your address, love? I can send one of the lads around this afternoon to get the job started.’

‘Eighty Ochre Ave.’

‘That’s Mike and Michelle Oswald’s place, isn’t it? Didn’t they have two tanks on the property?’

‘That’s the one. The second tank is by the dam in the front paddock.’

‘Did Mikey replace them before you bought the place? Last time I was out there, I was stunned that they were still standing.’

‘Same tanks.’ Miley cringed, imagining her bank account drained.

‘It’s up to you what you want to do, love, but I wouldn’t be wasting money on a clean and refill. Save your coin and buy some new tanks. In the meantime, you can switch the tanks over and use the soiled water for your garden.’

Miley wanted to tell him that she didn’t have a garden, despite the suggestions of her friends. ‘How much does that cost? Switching the tanks, I mean.’

The phone went silent for a moment, then the tank man broke into a dry laugh that became a series of coughs. ‘Nothing, love.’ He sniffed and cleared his throat. ‘There’s a mechanism that allows you to switch between the tanks. The one down in the paddock has a pump that will take the water back up to your house. How about I pop over this afternoon and show you how it works.’

Miley signed with relief. ‘That’s the best offer I’ve had all day.’

The tank specialist wouldn’t arrive until after lunch; that meant half a day without water. The responsible thing would be to go into town, buy some drinking water, and then come back and get into work. She was grateful to have been spared the cost of a clean and refill, but replacing the tanks was now a major priority. She marched to the studio, flung open the door, and swirled the computer monitor to life. Part of her longed to go back outside, to lose herself in the demands of some other physical activity, to not worry about the tank, the cost, the four portraits she was commissioned to do—how simple mowing the lawn or cutting down a tree felt in comparison!—but the other part of her wanted to get in the car and just keep on driving.

Neither was an option.

The one thing she needed more than water was money, and there was only one way she would get that.

She heard Vasilisa fly in a moment later, though she didn't bother to turn or acknowledge her companion. She checked her schedule and looked at the nearest deadline. She'd been commissioned to create a portrait of a young couple and their two German shepherds. The task was easy enough. Maybe if she completed the job earlier than expected, she could shoot them through the invoice. If they paid it quickly, it would nearly be enough to cover the tank man's bill, and near enough was certainly good enough—the gap could be filled by pulling some funds from her emergency savings. She went back to the original email, scanned the message, the photographs, and opened her favourite program to see how much progress she'd made. Unfortunately, she had wildly overestimated how much she'd done. She hadn't even uploaded a full sketch. Instead, the slim file contained only an outline for *one* possible composition. Maybe she was getting this job confused with another. She shook her head, tried to calm down, to focus on her breath. How had this happened? How had she allowed this to happen?

They are coming today, are they not? Vasilisa asked behind her.

Miley grunted in the affirmative.

There is nothing you can do to get that money in the next five hours. At least no job that you would be proud of.

'I don't want to put it on my credit card,' Miley said, knowing how easy it would be and how easily she could revert to the habit of only making the minimum payments.

I see no other option.

She closed her eyes, knowing that Vasilisa was right, but some part of her refused to admit it.

'That bloody snake,' she said again. If only she'd cut the grass sooner, not been so hopeless, maybe she could have prevented this from happening.

Take that little teaching job at the primary school, the one that blonde offered.

'You know what her name is, Vasilisa.'

It would be quicker than commission work. Quick money is good money.

Miley shook her head. 'Not enough money, and I don't have time.'

You could ask Keone for a loan. Leiko did sell her real estate business last month.

‘I will not be asking Keone for a loan. They need that money more than I do.’

Good. I am glad that you have made a decision. Now you get to choose not to be lazy. You gave up the award ceremony; you have plenty of time, and this is a short-term solution, Miley. It is money that you can earn quickly and easily—no cutting corners or ruining your reputation by producing mediocre art.

Miley ran a finger over her lips, thinking. ‘Maybe.’

And if you are worried about money, then I can help. We can go ahead with our original plan.

‘Our plan?’ She looked up, perplexed.

You work during the day, and I finish up the tasks at night, as you sleep.

Miley bristled and turned away from the hawk to look out the window. She remained unconvinced about building a garden. Looking out into the backyard, all she saw was work. The garden beds needed to be weeded and filled with plants; some sort of shade cloth would need to be installed, and then she’d have to learn how to take care of everything. She’d need to purchase additional equipment; the ride-on mower was due for a service, and now the mid-list task of replacing the water tanks had become a top priority. All these tasks took time, and they all needed her hands, in one way or another, to complete them. It was too much for one person. When would the art be made? She’d taken on more jobs than she could handle, and a lifestyle she wasn’t prepared for. Buying this property was like getting married, only to have your beloved diagnosed with terminal cancer the very next day, the demands on your time tripling overnight.

‘We’ll give it a try for one week.’ She held up a finger. Even as she consented to Vasilisa’s suggestion, Miley’s trepidation remained. She trusted Vasilisa, but the hawk’s eagerness only heightened her unease. They were companions. They lived their lives beside one another, shared almost everything. They’d already crossed one boundary—Miley was unsure if other companions had the same consciousness-sharing ability she and Vasilisa had—and yet, lending *her* body to her companion *was* different from borrowing Vasilisa’s body. She didn’t like to think what doors this venture might open, or the potential it held to change everything between them. Only, she could think of no better solution. There was no one else she could appeal to for help. Vasilisa wasn’t foolish, Miley reassured

herself, and she did love to paint. What this opportunity was really asking of her was to have a little more confidence. She and Vasilisa were different, and here was their chance to take advantage of that fact.

‘One week and we’ll know whether this works—for *both* of us.’

Your confidence in me is humbling.

Miley snorted, despite herself. The laughter briefly lifting her heavy thoughts.

It was early evening when Miley and Vasilisa returned from another failed hunting trip. The light was failing, forcing Miley to be vigilant with her footing as she made her way over the uneven trail that cut up the low rise behind her property. She’d held Vasilisa on her arm for a bit, but now she needed her full concentration, lest she roll or break an ankle.

‘Can you fly the rest of the way?’ Miley asked unnecessarily. Of course, she knew well enough that Vasilisa could fly the rest of the way—they’d spent entire days flying together back when life had been less busy. She felt a small pang in her chest; a quiet longing for those days when hunting had been easy and exciting, not an expedition that failed before even beginning. Vasilisa launched forward, hugging the ground as she swooped over the rise. As she neared the house, Miley could make out Jasper’s familiar silhouette against the dying sun; he stood in his usual spot, leaning up against the low fence, though she’d told him on more than one occasion that he was welcome to pull up a seat in the house if she wasn’t home (she *never* locked the door). He’d never acted on the offer.

‘Hello,’ she called out.

Jasper’s shadow waved in reply.

‘How’re things?’ he asked as she neared the fence. ‘Catch anything?’

Miley shook her head, released a heavy sigh. ‘Nothing.’ It took her a moment to find her breath. Though she considered herself fit—much fitter since she’d started tending the land—a good hike could still leave her breathless. She clicked her tongue, and Vasilisa took off from the fence panel. A moment later, her talons were biting into the leathery glove on Miley’s raised hand.

I am hungry, Vasilisa said.

‘I know, lucky there’s some rabbit in the deep freezer.’ She made it sound like that was an easy feat, as if it were no big deal, as if rabbit would always be there. ‘Hunting hasn’t improved,’ Miley said.

Jasper shrugged. ‘Animals have been scarcer. I’ve noticed a drop-off in the last four years—fewer rabbits, which has been a good thing for me, not such a good thing for Vasilisa.’ He always said Vasilisa’s name sceptically, as if he wasn’t quite sure he’d gotten it right. When Miley first went to Jasper’s home to ask for his help, she’d taken Vasilisa with her. He’d known straightaway that Vasilisa was a companion. No one living on a property outside of Rogathella could afford to buy a natural hawk. He’d been nervous, eyes narrowing, arms folding over his chest; he’d taken a small step back as though these gestures would go unnoticed, forgetting that Miley was an artist, an observer. ‘This is Vasilisa,’ she’d said, hoping an introduction would help him warm to her.

He’d simply nodded. ‘I had one of those once.’

The statement had hung in the air, a half story, a complete sentence that hinted at so much more, but what came next, Miley didn’t know. Jasper kept the middle and end to himself.

Now as they stood at the fence, Jasper waved his arm over the darkening land. ‘I notice you’ve done nothing about that garden we spoke about,’ Jasper said, waving his arm over the darkening land. ‘What’s stopping you? You got the space. Mind you, the soil quality here is crap; you’ll have to put a little effort into that before you have a hope in hell of growing anything.’

Miley took a deep breath. Building a garden had been yet another item on her list. An item she shuffled to the bottom whenever it got too close to the top. Her time was stretched tighter than a drum skin, her brain and body weary from all the new skills she’d learnt; adding another task to that list was unfathomable. Unfortunately, none of these reasons would convince Jasper.

‘No. No garden. Now, what are you cooking for dinner?’

‘What’s that about?’ Jasper’s eyes narrowed, chin lifted.

‘What’s what about?’

‘This “no” thing. You don’t want to save money by growing your food, attracting kill for Vasilisa, or making use of this resource at your fingertips?’

‘I heard what you had to say and I’ll consider it, but I’m not a farmer and I have no interest in becoming one.’

‘Probably shouldn’t have bought a farm then. Besides, you’ve been doing alright so far.’ He slipped his hands into his pockets as he surveyed the weed-filled corner of the yard. ‘A garden ain’t much more work than what you’re already doing. You might enjoy it.’

Jasper’s attempts at persuasion only solidified Miley’s resistance. She would not build a garden simply because a neighbour wanted her to, but she also very much liked Jasper and was grateful for the assistance he had given her. Instead of telling him off, she said, ‘I’m tired. Can we just drop this?’

‘Sure. You going to stop complaining about not finding any game for Vasilisa?’

Miley had turned to slide the back door open and paused mid-motion, a spark of shock caught in her throat. ‘Excuse me?’ The question whistled through her lips, though it lacked heat; she was too surprised to add any real venom to it.

‘You moved out here to make life easier on yourself—in one way—and I reckon you need to commit to it.’

‘Good for you.’ Miley straightened as she crossed the threshold and flicked on the light. ‘I can see you’ve put a lot of thought into this, but I don’t know how to do any of those things, and I don’t have the time to learn,’ she said, betraying her earlier commitment to not playing the *I’m-busy* card. Jasper didn’t interpret it that way. Instead, he took it as an invitation.

Crossing the room in a number of strides, Jasper grabbed a scrap of paper off the heap of paperwork that covered Miley’s dining table, turned it over, and pulled a pen from his breast pocket. ‘You already have a couple of garden beds set out, not that you’d know it, since the only thing you’re growing at the moment is weeds.’ Though the drought had *reduced* them, even without rain, even with scorching sun, the weeds remained.

Vasilisa flew off her companion’s arm and landed on her perch in the kitchen. She was quieter than usual, but Miley knew she was listening intently to every word the farmer said. Ignoring Jasper’s remark, Miley strode into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and plucked a morsel of meat from a prepared container. The chunk was slightly larger than a golf ball. It would be enough to get Vasilisa started and, hopefully, she wouldn’t need any more.

‘Course, we’d need to fix the soil first, but if we start now it would all be ready to go by the last month of spring.’

‘November isn’t what it used to be.’

‘No,’ Jasper sighed. ‘But we can work around that.’

The tight coil in Miley’s chest loosened slightly at the plural: *we*. Though he’d ignored her blatant no, at least he’d heard the rest: that she was unwilling to figure this out on her own.

‘You’ll need a few more garden beds though. If you’re going to do two, you may as well do six.’

Miley had never really followed this type of logic but nodded anyway. How could the work of six garden beds *almost* equal the work of two?

‘Eggplants, chillies, basil, and capsicums are easy to grow and hardy enough to survive our summers. It ain’t much, but enough to get you started and, once you get the hang of it, come April next year we can start planting lettuce, corn, beets, kale, carrots and beans.’

‘Would that stuff really grow here?’ she asked, even as she knew that Jasper himself had an established garden and business that supplied produce to nearby stations, properties, and weekend markets. Though, admittedly, he supplemented the deliveries with products from the coast whenever his own yield was thin.

‘You’d be surprised what you can grow now. Enough shade and water—they’re the big ones—and some food ... the technology has come a long way. It’s not like when we were kids.’ Jasper hadn’t grown up in Rogathella, but an even smaller and hotter mining town ninety minutes north. ‘The garden would provide for you and Vasilisa: produce for yourself—more than you could eat—plus the insects and animals it would attract for Vasilisa.’

‘You mentioned that last time,’ Miley said. She looked at the sketch he’d drawn. He’d outlined the two reasonably large garden beds that squatted to the side of her studio; behind them he’d added four more so that the northern corner of the yard contained a cluster of garden beds: three pairs of two laid out in succession.

‘We’ll have to clear all this’—her finger traipsed over the imagined garden bed—‘to make room. Take out those struggling palm trees and mock oranges.’

‘They’re not doing anything for you anyway,’ he said.

Miley looked at the crude drawing, listened to Jasper describe how they’d add a blend of vegetables, herbs, and flowers to each garden bed and what they would need to add to the soil first to improve it. It would not be a quick project. They’d have to clear the land, make the garden beds, improve the soil, plant the

crops, and then continue to tend them. ‘That sounds like a lot of work,’ she said. She blushed, hating that the comment made her sound lazy, while also remembering the limitations of her schedule: the extra commission work she’d taken on and the daily chores that already demanded too much of her time.

When would she possibly do this?

Could Jasper afford to help her? He was far from an idle man himself.

‘It is an investment of time up-front,’ Jasper said. ‘But once it’s all set up, the time involved will be significantly less.’

‘Sounds expensive.’

‘Again, up-front, but remember that you’ll eventually be growing your own food, maybe even enough for those two friends of yours.’

‘Brooke and Keone.’

‘And food for Vasilisa. How much does she eat a week?’ He asked the question as though the hawk wasn’t in the room.

‘She needs a decent chunk of meat every two or three days.’

Vasilisa hadn’t missed the vague description. *Speaking of which, I would like another one of those decent chunks. That last scrap barely touched the edges.*

Jasper nodded. It wasn’t like he could guarantee that the garden would draw animals. ‘I’ve got some leftover seeds. The rest we can get from the library.’

‘No.’ Miley cut the air with her palm. ‘I’m not reading *gardening books*.’

‘Good, cos I’m not asking you to; I was saying we’ll check what seeds are on the pinboard.’

‘I’m not following.’

Jasper dragged an open hand over his face, but he was smiling. ‘It’s a seed network, Miley. Whenever someone’s got some spares, they pop them in a bag along with some almost-legible instructions and they pin them up on the board.’

Miley exhaled. ‘Why are we talking about seeds when I don’t even have a garden bed?’

‘You have garden beds; they’re just buried beneath a metre of weeds.’ He pulled a small notebook out of his pocket and started making some notes, though Miley couldn’t imagine what they were about. ‘We can start on the beds this week. I’ll bring my tools around and we’ll start tidying her up.’ This was something Miley did appreciate about Jasper; he never came over to do stuff *for* her but *with* her.

‘Sounds good,’ Miley said, dusting off her hands. ‘Would you like to stay for dinner? I have almost nothing and I’d be happy to cook it for you.’

‘Ah,’ Jasper replied. ‘Almost nothing is my favourite meal. Love to.’

Miley’s face warmed at that last phrase. She hoped he missed it as she crossed into the kitchen and pulled out a cutting board. ‘Do you want a beer?’ she called over the raised breakfast bar. When no response came, she glanced up. Jasper was watching Vasilisa, his eyes soft yet keen. Miley was about to ask again, then paused, suddenly curious. *What the hell happened to his companion?*

Miley sat crouched on top of a worn-out skirt-turned-gardening blanket, her fingers wrapped tightly around an unwelcome weed that stuck out at an awkward angle between the lawn and the flat planks that edged her garden beds. She tugged on the wicked plant several times before it gave up the fight; its shredding cry when she ripped it from the earth sounded like a cave collapsing, just on a smaller scale. The weeds were innumerable. The polytunnel she and Jasper had erected a few months ago, as well as the quickly spreading nasturtiums and mulch, had helped the soil retain its moisture. Two acts that ensured a good environment for the plants she was intentionally cultivating and those she was not. She checked the time on her smart watch; another hour until she was due at the school. Plenty of time to pull out a few more weeds. It would be far too hot to do it later, even beneath the protection of the polythene—the afternoon heat of summer was unbearable—plus, it was a surprisingly satisfying task.

Vasilisa watched from above, perched on the top of a pole. Her irritation at having found nothing during her dawn flight showed in the flick of her head and sullen silence. Still, she was happier out here with the endless sky above her than she would be inside, limited to her perch, with a lump of cold, old meat gripped in her talons. Miley picked up the ragged skirt and shuffled further up the garden bed to a spot where a prong of clover was popping up next to a capsicum bush. It had taken a solid week of work to clear this corner of the yard, and another few days to build the garden beds, fill them with soil, lace them with fertiliser, water, and the mineral tablets the owner of the nursery had slid across the counter after Miley had paid, having insisted on accompanying Jasper on the errand. She had enjoyed that first day of planting seeds, and later seeing them sprout into tiny, neat rows of tiny, neat

leaves. Along with capsicums, chillies, basil, and eggplants, Jasper had also suggested she plant marigolds, borage, cosmos, and lavender for the insects, and nasturtium for ground cover.

It was the one corner of the property that was orderly, intentional, and arranged, but as the plants had grown and established themselves, they'd started to stretch and mingle together. The summer crop was still going well, but autumn was only a few weeks away. Soon, it would be cabbages pressed against cauliflowers. The eggplant was still looking good, shooting up proud and tall from the centre of the bed. The long, wavy leaves provided shade for the plants beneath it. She'd already started adding the herbs to salads, giving what excess vegetables she could to Brooke and Keone. Standing back, looking out over the garden beds, you could tell it was a vegetable garden. Pride swelled in her chest.

When will we leave? Vasilisa asked, stretching her wings against the sun.

'Soon,' Miley answered, tossing the clover onto the small pile of pulled weeds. She was determined to stay on top of her weeding; she knew how easy it would be to put off this task, but that was a slippery slope. She'd invested too much—an entire season!—to let the garden go to waste, no matter how much she resented the demands it made on her time. She dusted her hands and stood up. 'Right, we should probably start getting ready.' She loosened the fingers of her gloves and wriggled them off. A deep throaty groan cut through the air, and Miley froze and looked up at Vasilisa, but the hawk was still there, head tilted to the side.

'Was that you?' she asked.

No.

Miley scanned the garden and waited, until eventually she was rewarded; the rhythmic *rock-rock* vibrated through the air. She followed the throaty vibration, stepping gingerly between the garden beds until she eventually found its source. Crouching down, careful to keep her knees from touching the still-wet soil, she parted the leaves with her fingers.

'Are you the one making all that noise?' she asked the small green frog. 'How could such a small creature have such a robust voice?'

What is it? Vasilisa cut beneath the sail to land on the thick frame enclosing the bean trellis.

'It's a rok-rok,' Miley said, the wonder heavy in her voice.

I think that maybe you are lying to me.

Miley laughed. ‘Anewa and the triplets call them rok-roks, but yes, you caught me. It’s a frog.’ She sat on her backside, no longer caring about the wet soil. Her eyes welled up. When was the last time she’d seen a frog? Years, maybe?

The fact that *she* had cleared this land and made a garden bed, grown crops, and regularly tended to them had already made this whole venture a success. A month in, she’d spotted a grasshopper, then the butterflies had come. Hell, she’d even considered signing up for one of those free beehives the government was handing out. All of these wins were miracles, but this one *felt* different. An unquestionable sign that she’d done the right thing, that she *was* doing the right thing, that all this time and effort were worth it.

‘This is going to work,’ Miley said, a smile breaking across her face. She hadn’t realised until that moment how afraid she’d been to dream. To create a garden that produced food for herself was a result she was perfectly happy to live with, but now ... the frog croaked again. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and took a quick snap before the frog leapt into the tangled net of the bean vine. She sent the photo to Jasper, followed by twenty or so exclamation points. He wouldn’t see it until later, when he returned to the house for lunch, but it felt good to share this victory with him.

You look very pleased with yourself.

‘I am,’ Miley affirmed.

I cannot eat frogs ... I do not think I can eat frogs ...

‘Do you want to eat it?’

No.

‘Good.’ Miley stood up, wiping the tears from beneath her eyes. She really did have to get dressed and get going, but she was hesitant to walk away, lest the frog vanish as quickly as it had appeared. ‘One day, soon maybe, this garden *will* attract something for you, Vasilisa. Until then, we just need to be patient.’

I do not like being patient.

‘No truer words have ever been spoken.’ She surveyed the garden beds Jasper and she had created, blood rushing to her cheeks. Then she was somewhere else. A vision peeling open in her mind of a young woman laying her cheek against wet morning soil, a hat cast to the ground by her side, a thicket of plants rising around her as if she’d fallen into them, a band of wildflowers covering her eyes. There was no time for inspiration, but the image held too much heat for her to ignore it. It had

been a long time since she'd last felt the touch of the muse; she was surprised she recognised it.

Miley rushed through the still-open door of the studio, grabbed a scrap of paper from the pile on her desk, a pencil from the holder, and dashed out the idea in a series of quick, rough strokes. What her art needed was this, she thought: more nature, more landscape, a person pressed against the wild instead of standing beside or on top of it. Then the memory of Keone dressed as Lady Justice sprang to mind; what a contrast that would be, to lay the unforgiving hand of justice over the ambiguous will of nature. She tossed the pencil aside and ran back into the house, leaving her heart behind to continue with the idea while her body went about showering and dressing, carrying out the responsibilities that would *hopefully* pay for the time and space to create. It was still early, but the dream of future art had already filled her with a sense of satisfaction.

At the bottom of the driveway, she paused long enough to reach through the car's open window to check the letterbox. An envelope addressed to the previous owners, a leaflet listing preparations for fire season, a council newsletter. She tossed the junk mail onto the passenger-side floor as she peeled out of the drive, and her mind returned to the sketch on her desk.

An hour later, Miley was standing in front of a class filled with seven-year-olds, enthusiastically describing how fun art-making could be (as though children were unaware of that fact). She asked the students to scream out the pictures they liked drawing best. Animals! Cartoons! Houses! Then they called out some of their favourite toys and the tools they'd most like to use. Crayons! Paints! Pencils! Felt-tip pens! Padlets! It was reassuring to see how little the artistic process had changed, even if some of the mediums had.

Once the weapons of choice had been distributed, the children set to the task of constructing their masterpieces. Vasilisa looked on from her perch in the corner of the classroom. She was a big hit; the children had never seen a hawk. A few lucky students had their own companions: there was a strawberry-blonde girl and her blue butterfly—Miley had *never* seen a butterfly companion before!—a boy with black glasses and his canary, and twin boys with their Siamese cats. The room was silent except for the scratching of pens on paper as she circled the room. Several children

who didn't have companions had chosen to use Vasilisa as their subject. Still jubilant from the discovery of the frog, she looked up at the hawk and winked, but Vasilisa's focus was on the sealed windows that lined the exterior wall. If the bird was experiencing any agitation at being inside, she hid it well.

With the children settled, Miley took her seat at the front and pulled out a sheet of paper and pencil for herself. She looked around for inspiration. Brooke was at the back of the room setting a questionable example by sitting on top of an unoccupied table. It was rare to see her friend like this, keeping to herself in a room full of people. Brooke tended to be the centre of attention, always in the middle of things, even though her job often required her to be an impartial observer of others. Miley smiled at the small miracle and began to outline her friend by breaking her body into a series of circles and lines. She'd taken the job because she needed the money, but she'd only agreed to lead the workshop once Brooke had promised to be there too, saying that it would be much easier to have a personal escort on the day so that Miley didn't have to fret about finding the administration office, classroom, or toilets. 'Instead,' Miley said, 'I can focus on keeping all those tiny humans interested and engaged.' But all these things were only half-truths. Entertaining twenty small children would be akin to reading her diary to a packed auditorium, naked, with her parents in the audience. Or so she'd thought.

Ote sat regally beside Brooke's swinging legs, her eyes trained on Brooke's triplets: Eli, Bonnie, and Harlow, who were all sitting in the back row. Whether Ote's protectiveness was part of her animal nature or an extension of her love for Brooke, Miley did not know. She wondered how that relationship would change once the kids got their companions, an event that would no doubt happen sooner rather than later. Maybe Ote would be even happier; wolves were pack animals, after all. It wouldn't be the life she'd have had if she were a natural animal, but perhaps it would be close enough. Vasilisa was different. She had warmed to Brooke and Keone slowly, but she wouldn't mourn them if they were no longer in Miley's life. Vasilisa's indifference had troubled Miley in the beginning, but she had decided it was unfair to expect her companion's affections to perfectly mirror her own. Vasilisa was a hawk, after all, and as she had explained, her need for solitude was a hard-wired trait.

Miley finished the drawing, pleased that she'd succeeded in capturing Brooke's likeness in such a simple sketch. She folded the piece of paper in half,

intent on slipping it into Brooke's purse, but when she was halfway across the room, she was appalled to realise that she'd completed yet another human-animal portrait. She could have drawn anything, but that had been her first instinct. Nausea rolled through her stomach. *Get a grip*, she chided herself. *You drew them because they were here in the room, and Brooke is your oldest friend. It doesn't mean anything.* She crumpled the page and dumped it in the recycling bin as she circled the room once more, murmuring words of encouragement as she passed each child, willing herself to be absorbed by this teaching role. She paused briefly by the young girl with the butterfly. It was such an unusual companion. Miley knew well enough that *all* companions drew a reasonable amount of attention. The opportunity for onlookers to psychoanalyse a person based on their companion's species was a pleasure impossible to deny, and Miley could think of no better mind game to distract herself with. The girl with the butterfly—was she light and carefree, or did she live in the present moment and enjoy the small things in life? The butterfly would have been biologically altered to complement its companion's human lifespan. Still, it would have retained some of its innate traits.

Miley looked up at Vasilisa. Their pairing had perplexed her. Yes, one could make the generic argument that she was an artist and a free spirit, but over the years she had learnt a lot about hawks and, correspondingly, Vasilisa herself. Hawks were mysterious predators that could vanish—dramatically—mid-flight. The hyperbolic description had emerged again and again from the owners of real hawks in the memoirs written before endangerment. Miley herself didn't think that she was particularly mysterious, but the practice of making art was. Perhaps that was the link between them. She glanced at the clock and decided to give the students a few more minutes to complete the task; each was lost in a world of their own making. Miley chuckled. Perhaps an art class—as opposed to maths—was a blessed relief.

She glanced back at Brooke, but her friend was distracted, head down, typing on her phone with one hand while stroking Ote's head with the other. *Their* matching was obvious. Bold, clever, family-driven. To think of these stereotypical qualities made Miley blush. She was slightly ashamed by the lazy application of these labels to her friend, who was also wonderfully complex. *We're all walking contradictions*, she thought, *mash-ups of history, culture, trauma, and desire.* Yet she could not deny that Brooke and Ote made a perfect pair: they were regal, loyal to the bone, and skilled hunters who often snagged their prey.

Miley clapped her hands together. 'Time's up. Who'd like to come to the front of the class and show their drawing?'

Everyone's hand shot up, except for the twins. *Confident, independent, and no need for external validation.* Miley thought. *Just like a cat.*

'See, that wasn't so bad,' Brooke said as they walked down the front steps and towards the parking lot. 'Can't believe I let you brush me off for so long. You're great with kids. Want to babysit?'

'Not my fault they close school down for summer, and the triplets aren't babies.'

'I asked you in *September*.'

Miley shrugged.

'Want me to hook you up with some of the other schools in the district? You could be very busy by the end of first term.'

Miley was tempted. The class had cost her a morning in the studio, but the two-hour gig was easier than she'd expected. In fact, it was the easiest money she'd made all year. Still, she was seasoned enough to know that saying *yes* to one thing was saying *no* to another, and she didn't want to be an art teacher. She wanted to be an artist.

'I'll think it over,' she said. 'I need to see if I can fit it around my current workload. I've taken on a few extra commissions.'

Brooke peered down her nose.

'I'm not saying no,' Miley laughed, 'but I've got other deadlines I need to consider.'

Brooke's face turned to stone as she folded her arms.

'I'll let you know by the end of the week.'

'Great.' Brooke pressed her thumb to the car door handle. A three-toned beep followed and the door opened. 'Want to do lunch? My shout.'

They were halfway to the café when Brooke asked, not for the first time, 'You ever think about giving the kid thing a go now? You've an established career, a home; it's not too late.' The suggestion appeared casual, but Miley could hear the underlying excitement in her friend's voice.

One hand hung loose by her side, the other, gloved, was held up slightly to keep Vasilisa steady. The change in the hawk was almost imperceptible. The tilt of her head shifted slightly as she moved from dreamily watching out the window to keenly paying attention.

Years ago, Miley had worried that she would one day become jealous of Brooke and her brood, but she never had. Her artistic life and domestic companionship with Vasilisa satiated her hunger for purpose and connection. Romantic partners had come and gone over the years, and though she hadn't closed the door on the possibility of love, she also knew the depth of freedom that exists as part of solitude. Yes, it was true that solitude's sister, loneliness, sat dormant in the farmhouse, but she'd never succeeded in getting a rise out of Miley. Instead, she seemed to occupy herself, doing whatever it is loneliness does. The benefits of spinsterhood, a noun that made Miley's toes curl, far outweighed its drawbacks: celibacy, unending self-reliance, no one to fix the toaster.

Then there was Jasper. A noticeable chink in the chain of repetitive days. He'd been coming over more often, even when they had no plan to work on the garden. Popping over for spontaneous dinners, sometimes with a bottle of wine or home-made rum. He'd stayed once, twice, now half a dozen times; it was nice; he was nice. But Miley saw the subtle way the town and land had changed in the last few years, saw how different the triplets' childhood was from her own. She liked her life just fine as it was, but she worried over what lay ahead. Not only for herself but for those who would come after. Then there was Vasilisa; such a huge decision would affect her too, and if Miley were being honest with herself, she wasn't sure how the hawk would fit into a conventional family system. She wasn't Ote.

She shook her head, stroked Vasilisa's back. 'I'll leave the breeding and rearing of soccer teams to you.'

Brooke snorted. 'Three kids aren't enough for a soccer team.'

'Never really was that much into sport.' Miley reached up to stroke the back of Vasilisa's head. The hawk flinched at the touch and chirped in alarm. 'Sorry,' Miley whispered.

Vasilisa's yellow-rimmed eyes flicked away. *You startled me, that is all.*

Miley had just stepped out of her studio when Jasper called out his usual greeting. ‘Hello to the house!’

Miley waved over her shoulder with her free hand while her other held Vasilisa. ‘What do you want for dinner?’ Miley asked Vasilisa as she opened the outdoor fridge nestled behind the bar on the patio. ‘Liver or chicken?’

‘I brought silverbeet,’ Jasper said, holding up a bunch of luscious leaves. She was still struggling to get through the silverbeet he’d gifted her last week but said nothing in case it wiped the sheen of triumph off his face.

Anything besides silverbeet, Vasilisa said.

‘Consider it done.’ Miley turned to her neighbour, co-gardener, regular dinner guest, and bedfellow. ‘And what do you plan on doing with that?’

‘Well’—he fingered the rubbery leaves—‘I was thinking of cooking it and then eating it.’

‘Sounds elaborate, wouldn’t want to do something simpler?’

Your flirtation embarrasses me.

Miley ignored the hawk’s comment and led the way indoors.

Jasper needed little invitation when it came to preparing their dinners; he was well used to her kitchen. Miley softened her hand and Vasilisa flew to her perch, ready to receive her feast. Miley unwrapped the parcel of mince and divided it into three smaller portions that she dotted along the end of the perch so that Vasilisa could eat them when she pleased. She’d lost the taste for meat herself, it had been that long since she’d eaten it, but the habit of feeding the hawk kept her from becoming repulsed by the idea. And yet, last year at a dinner party when Brooke had brought several expensive cuts of grass-fed steak from a property out at Roma, Miley had been embarrassed by the party’s efforts. Most of the dinner guests had focused on their vegetables and salads while sneaking bits of the prime rib-eye to Ote or the other carnivorous companions. The meat, which had no doubt been of fine quality, tasted leathery, heavy, bland, and foreign to their palates. This year, Brooke had spent her cash on wine instead—a culinary accompaniment that, reportedly, would only be around for another fifteen years.

Miley filled their water glasses, and the pair chatted lightly until Jasper informed her that dinner was only five minutes away. She sorted the papers on the dining table into rough piles and pushed them aside to make room for their plates. With mitts, Jasper lowered the pie onto the table. He called it a pie, even

though it wasn't encased in pastry. Instead, the contents had been scraped into a lasagne dish and topped with toasted breadcrumbs.

'Creamy spinach pie!' he announced.

I do not understand how you can possibly eat that, Vasilisa chirped as she snagged the second clump of meat into her beak.

'It's easy when you didn't have to cook it,' Miley replied.

She held up her plate and Jasper filled it with a steaming mess of soft spinach and cheesy not-cheese sauce. Dairy was another food group she was no longer used to. She stabbed the long, thin green slivers and twirled her fork as though she were eating pasta, then blew on it before closing the deal. 'Oh my god.' She closed her eyes. Food was one of life's few, true pleasures. 'The man can cook.'

Jasper chuckled, scooping up a mouthful and chewing thoughtfully. 'You know, you could save me a walk.'

Miley quirked an eyebrow, unsure if she had heard him right, then felt a pang of guilt. 'I'm sorry. I suppose it's become a bit of a habit, hasn't it? I'm quite happy for *you* to cook me dinner at *your* house,' she said playfully. 'That ought to save you the walk.'

His lip lifted into a half-smile, but his eyes were trained on his plate, as though it was his dinner that had answered him. Miley sat back in her chair, giving him her full attention. He was rarely self-conscious.

'I was thinking, you know, this arrangement of ours has been going on for a few months now—'

'Five.' Miley smiled. 'Five glorious months of someone else's cooking.'

'A daily pleasure.' Jasper grinned, then paused for a beat, fingers rubbing the cuff of his sleeve. 'Perhaps it's time that I move in? It makes more sense, what with your studio set up the way that it is.'

Miley's eyes widened. She hadn't realised that their easy arrangement formed part of a road map, and that Jasper had followed it to a particular conclusion while she had wandered off without a compass. The heat from the spinach grew in her mouth, and she swallowed hard, wincing as she struggled to get the mouthful down. 'You would sell your home?' she asked, voice strained from the caught spinach.

'No.' Now it was Jasper's turn to look horrified. 'It's my income, the gardens are established, and then there are my workers to think about—I can't go putting

them out of a job. Plus, my stuff would never fit in here.’ He waved to the room around him. ‘You’re quite the packrat, aren’t you?’

‘So ... wait, I don’t understand.’ Miley put her fork down on the table.

Jasper did the same. He was leaning forward, hand lifted as if about to make a point, when a shadow fell over his face. Quickly, his eyes shifted from her to the kitchen behind him. He stood up abruptly. ‘Something is burning. Can you smell that?’ He marched into the kitchen, but the stovetop was off. Miley sniffed the air. Yes, there it was, the distinctive scent of smoke.

Smells like a fire.

Miley blushed. She hadn’t *forgotten* that Vasilisa was in the room. She was embarrassed that she hadn’t been able to prepare the hawk for Jasper’s suggestion, that he would ask her if he could move in rather than allowing her to make the offer when she was ready. Perhaps she had led him to believe that she would say *yes* to such a suggestion. She worried briefly that Vasilisa might think she and Jasper were having these kinds of big, important life discussions behind her back.

‘Smells like a fire,’ Jasper said as he slid open the glass door and stepped onto the side verandah.

Miley’s eyes passed over Vasilisa’s as she slid on the leather glove and raised her arm. A moment later, the hawk’s prehistoric feet landed with a thump on her wrist.

Miley followed Jasper outside, zipping up the front of her hoodie. The homestead sat on the lip of a ridge so that the bottom portion of the property sloped down to a dam and lifted up on the other side of the street. Beyond the bitumen that divided Ochre Avenue, above the treetops of her cross-the-way neighbours, over the flat, dry scrub, was the horizon. It was after dark. At this time of year, the sky was usually clear, stuffed with an infinity of winking stars and satellites, but tonight it was a blaze of orange laced with billowing smoke.

Jasper patted the pockets of his jeans. ‘Bugger. Left my phone at home.’ His voice was gruff. ‘Can you pull up the Queensland Fire app?’

‘The what?’ Miley asked while pulling the phone out of her hoodie’s pocket.

Jasper shook his head and held out his hand.

Chagrined, Miley passed it over.

Jasper's thumbs, which looked dirty even when clean, swiped and tapped away at the screen until he handed it back to her a moment later. 'It's so simple even I can use it, so you've got no excuse, love.'

Miley checked her screen, which displayed a map of Rogathella, a blue dot that indicated her location, and the cartoon image of a firefighter's helmet. When she clicked on it, a tab with additional information regarding the fire's location, alert level, and a button to call triple zero appeared. What caught her attention was the fire's status: out of control. Miley cleared her throat. 'So this is how I keep track of the fire? Look for updates?'

Jasper nodded, though his gaze was directed out, across the yard, towards his property—even though, according to the little red hat, the fire was kilometres away. 'They did a letterbox drop last week. I meant to ask if you'd seen it. Meant to check if you'd come up with a plan or got an evaluation.'

Miley recalled the leaflet she'd tossed onto the floor of her car as she returned her attention to the app, clicking the various icons to check what other information they delivered. 'Looks like we don't need to evacuate yet.'

Considering, Jasper's eyes narrowed. Then he nodded as if he'd come to a decision. 'Best get back inside and finish this dinner while it's still hot; I'll talk you through what we need to do.'

Wet rolled blankets needed to be placed beneath every closed window and door. Jasper was relieved to learn that the fire extinguisher and blanket, mounted outside the kitchen, had been checked prior to Miley buying the property. She'd need to put together a basic emergency kit, make sure her car keys were at hand, and frequently check the app for updates. While Miley was relieved that their earlier conversation had not been revived, the fire had put them both on edge, and Jasper's instructions weren't helping. When he made moves to clean up, Miley assured him that she would be fine on her own if he wanted to go home; she'd caught him looking out the northern window that faced his property several times.

'You sure you'll be okay?'

'You bet.'

His face dropped with relief. 'I'll be back as soon as I can.'

Miley nodded but offered no further comment. He'd be back, or he wouldn't. In the meantime, she had her things to organise.

After he left, Miley filled the sink and dumped their dirty plates into the foamy water. They'd closed all the windows and doors of both the house and the studio before finishing their dinner, but she still needed to lay out the towels and blankets. Opening the linen cupboard, she pulled out a myriad of winter blankets, scratchy beach towels, and doona inserts. The business of soaking and dispersing them around the house took longer than expected. Miley ducked into the guestroom to peer out the window every few minutes. She was checking for activity, signs of panic, people fleeing, yet every time she went to the window, she saw nothing unusual but the orange glow and hazy smoke. The quality of the light had changed inside, despite the wet blankets and towels, and she squinted against the glare. She assured herself that the studio was safe; its stone walls and steel door offered a peace of mind that the old timber homestead could not. Still, she'd taken care to line its large windows with the thickest blankets she owned. Deciding against frequently checking her phone, she opened her laptop, brought up the rural fire service website, and clicked the audio updates option so that she would be alerted if or when the situation changed. Her home had never been under threat of fire before, and though Jasper had told her to do so, she felt neurotic as she pulled her suitcase out of the back closet, lined the bottom with original copies of her personal information, and then dumped clothes on top of them. Her fretting was interrupted by a knock at the door, and, surprised that Jasper had returned so quickly, she called out, 'Come in!'

It is not Jasper. Jasper only knocks twice.

Miley rolled her eyes and stepped into the living room to find a firefighter, in uniform, standing on the other side of her sliding back door.

'I'm sorry,' Miley said, noticing the woman's irritation at having been kept waiting.

'No problem,' she said, though clearly it was a problem. 'Just a routine doorknock to let residents know that there is no call to evacuate yet. The fire department is controlling the blaze, but make sure you keep your radio on and check for updates online as often as possible.'

Miley nodded and said she was doing just that, which made her feel like a schoolgirl looking for the teacher's praise.

'Stay safe,' the fire called over her shoulder as she made her way back to the cruiser.

I want to go check it out.

Miley's brow furrowed. 'I don't think so, Vasilisa. It's not safe. What if you get hurt, how would I find you?'

What if we go together?

Miley felt a small thrill at the suggestion. Between taking care of the homestead and working on her art, she and Vasilisa had had little opportunity to go flying together. While Vasilisa had slipped into human form almost every night, Miley had not experienced the freedom of flight in months. The muffled murmuring of the rural service updates repeated on a loop from her laptop. Her suitcase lay open on the bed. The timing couldn't be worse. And yet. 'Okay, but we will have to be quick just in case anything changes.'

Vasilisa chirped in agreement.

Miley slid open the window above the kitchen sink and pulled out two dining chairs. Vasilisa clung to the back of one while Miley took her position on the other. Her heart was sprightly with anticipation. Merging in such a state would be impossible; she softened her eyes and took several deep breaths to calm her body. She continued the cycle for a few breaths before mentally reaching for Vasilisa. The rest was effortless, like one bowl being upended into another.

The world looked so different through Vasilisa's eyes.

It was dark outside, and Miley knew that if she were in human form, she wouldn't be able to make out the details of the trees below, notice the lack of moisture in the air, or comprehend Vasilisa's predatory desire for death—a need that made her human mind uneasy. They soared over the property, the air laced with smoke, and Miley told Vasilisa not to get too close lest they suffocate in the fumes. From here, though, the scent was pleasant and no stronger than a campsite fire.

When they passed over the rural properties and reached the bush proper, Vasilisa's eyes scanned the land below them. A sudden movement caught her attention, and, for a moment, Miley felt her heart leap. *An animal*, she thought, feeling Vasilisa's stomach grumble in response. Her feet clutched with the anticipation of securing her kill; she'd been feasting on lifeless, cold, bloodless flesh for too long. Vasilisa swooped, narrowly passing between gum leaves and bleached white branches, her sharp eyes ensuring that they could cut through the entangled plant matter unscathed. As they neared the prey, Miley's disappointment doubled as it mingled with Vasilisa's. The shadow was not that of an animal but a human. Some poor soul—a woman, Miley thought, from the silhouette's shape—whose camping

trip had been cut short. Miley could see no fire, tent, or equipment. For a moment, she wished she could help the woman; Vasilisa echoed the sentiment, but the hawk's body was incapable of doing so. Instead, she cut up again, weaving through the twisted growth until they reached open air.

There was a sharp tap on her cheek. The bush raced below them. Then that strange impact came again.

Can you feel that? she asked the hawk.

Miley felt her heart jump and, when her human eyes opened again, she was looking not at the swirl of orange flames and grey smoke but Jasper's solid brown eyes. His arms encircled her, but there was something off about the angle, the way her head dipped back while he hung overhead. They were on the ground, she realised, her legs splayed out before her while Jasper cradled the rest of her body in his lap.

'Christ, Miley, are you okay?' Gentle fingers raked through her hair, but his brow was furrowed in concern.

'Why are we on the floor?' she asked, getting hold of her faculties, eyes scanning the room. 'Where's Vasilisa?' She pushed against Jasper's chest for leverage while he tried to keep her in place.

'Careful, don't get up too soon. You might have a concussion. What happened?'

Vasilisa was nowhere to be seen. She hoped her sudden disappearance hadn't startled the hawk. Visions of Vasilisa spooked and falling into flames filled her mind. She pushed the idea aside. Vasilisa was a good flyer, she assured herself; that would never happen.

Jasper asked her a question, but she missed it.

'What did you say? And where is Vasilisa? Why didn't she come and get me?'

She'd never told Jasper what she and Vasilisa could do. The idea was too strange, and Miley knew how it would sound: crazy, delusional, or like child's play. Jasper's relationship with companions was conflicted at best. She couldn't bear to have him analyse this trading of bodies, use it as evidence against them. 'I must have fainted,' Miley said, rubbing her head for emphasis, though it really was sore. Sitting in the chair had been a mistake. She should have propped herself up on the couch or lain on the bed. At least then she could have pretended that she'd just fallen asleep.

The stink of smoke was still heavy in the air, nudging at her memory until the recent emergency came flooding back. ‘Have there been any changes? Do we have to evacuate?’ She coughed.

‘No ... not yet.’ Jasper’s lip pressed into a hard line. ‘Why didn’t Vasilisa come and get me?’

An onset of coughs delayed her answer, made her eyes water. ‘*You* can’t talk to Vasilisa; you can’t understand her,’ she wheezed. ‘Let me go, please. I want to get up.’

She hadn’t had an asthma attack since primary school, yet the chalky taste of her childhood inhaler filled her mouth. She coughed again into her fist. What happens to birds that inhale smoke?

Jasper hesitated then released his hold. She’d barely gotten to her feet before he continued. ‘I can’t understand her, and that’s how it should be, but I don’t need to *talk* to her. If Vasilisa had come to my home, I would have known something was wrong. I would have come straight away. Those companions ... they can’t be trusted.’

Miley shook her head, scanned her brain for some way to smooth this over and get him out of here. She needed to find Vasilisa. ‘Maybe she did come to get you, and that’s why she isn’t here now. Please, Jasper, my head hurts. Can we talk about this later?’

‘No, we will talk about it now. It’s not normal, you living up here with that bird. You’ve isolated yourself. It isn’t healthy for you to spend all your time in such solitude.’

Miley cleared her throat. ‘You live alone. Hawks *are* solitary, and she is *my* companion. How do you know that solitude isn’t exactly what I need?’

‘Because humans are social animals. Companions aren’t *real* animals; they’re made to suit us. Vasilisa isn’t a *pet*. She is a product you bought and paid for to serve a need. You’re not equals.’

‘What happened between you and your companion?’

‘That’s not what this is about.’

‘I’d say that is exactly what this is about. Why do you hate companions so much?’

‘That’s enough, Miley.’ Jasper didn’t raise his voice, but the finality in his response was stronger than a shout.

‘You should go.’ Miley folded her arms.

He stood up in one swift motion, but instead of leaving via the back door, he went and sat on the couch. ‘Not with that fire around.’ He stretched out along its full length, then tipped his broad-brimmed hat over his eyes. ‘Keep the radio on, though firies will probably come banging on the door if things get worse.’

Miley was about to ask where his stuff was, but she decided not to care. She was itching to march out the door, get in her car, and go on a hunt for Vasilisa, but reason assured her that her efforts would be futile. She had never bothered to have the hawk microchipped; why would she? They were almost always together. She just needed to be patient; Vasilisa would return soon.

Miley returned to her bedroom, firmly closing the door behind her. The room was dark, but she could still see the orange glow through the open western window. She was about to scold herself for forgetting to close it when a movement caught her eye.

‘Vasilisa!’ Relief coursed through her at the sight of her companion.

You did not tell him. Vasilisa said, edging along her perch.

‘Not tonight.’

Maybe not ever.

‘Maybe.’ Miley stroked Vasilisa’s head, her sudden relief now dimming to reveal the fatigue beneath it. ‘I’m dead on my feet.’

Terrible expression. I will stay awake and let you know if something happens.

‘Thanks,’ Miley said as she crawled into the bed, the bitter taste of endings heavy on her tongue.

She woke some hours later to a bang followed by muffled voices. She hadn’t had a chance to throw back the covers before a knock came on her bedroom door. A moment later, it opened.

‘Time to go,’ Jasper said, standing in the doorway. Spying the closed suitcase on the bedroom floor, he grabbed it with one hand and carried it out into the hallway.

‘Can I get dressed?’ Miley asked, fumbling over the words.

‘No time. That was the firies. We need to go—now.’

Miley slipped on a heavy jacket, then her glove, as Vasilisa leapt from one perch to the next. Miley stepped outside just in time to see Jasper putting her suitcase

into his car. She hadn't even realised it was there, the boot already loaded with two duffel bags.

'Going to my mate's place. Pete. You'll like him.'

'No,' Miley said. 'I'd prefer to stay with Keone.' She should have said Brooke. That would have made more sense. Keone had never fully forgiven Vasilisa for attacking Sissy, though the rat had been clever enough to avoid capture ever since. The boot was still open, Jasper's hand on the handle of her suitcase. He shook his head before hauling it back out. 'Suit yourself.'

Miley nodded, uncertain how to navigate this new dynamic.

'I'll let you know if I hear anything come morning.'

'And I you,' Miley said, following his lead. She thanked her past self for slipping her car keys into her pants pocket as she made her way towards the shed. She didn't hear Jasper start his engine until after she'd loaded the suitcase into the tray. She set Vasilisa down on the shoulder of the front seat. Her eyes passed over the dismissed leaflet on the passenger-side floor before she hauled open the roller door.

Miley followed him down the driveway, her headlights off, perturbed that he'd waited for her, but as they neared town, he took the last left before the city's limit while she continued on to the new estate. 2 a.m. She'd sent Keone a text, being too tired to call, knowing both efforts would be pointless, as her friend's phone was likely on silent. There was no way to warn her, and while she knew rationally that Keone and Leiko would be happy to help, she was embarrassed by the drama of her situation. She turned into the town's newest suburb, lit only by streetlights; all the semi-identical homes seemed to nestle together in communal darkness. Miley got out of the car and approached the door. She knocked, loudly, several times, before stepping back and waiting. She briefly recalled a scene from *A Clockwork Orange* where an innocent homeowner answered a knock at the door after dark; she hoped Keone would only open her door in the middle of the night once and never again. And yet, compromised spine and short frame notwithstanding, Keone's steely expression would make any felon think twice before messing with her. Miley released a sigh of relief; she'd definitely come to the right place: Keone's unflappable level-headedness would act as a counter to Miley's racing pulse and spiralling thoughts.

‘You must be on your best behaviour,’ Miley said. She was fully awake now, but weariness bit at the edges, both from her fight with Jasper and the overall stress of the evening.

She knocked again.

It was Leiko who answered. ‘Miley?’ she said, eyes wide as she took in Miley’s state of dress, the suitcase by her feet, and the hawk in her hand. Leiko’s companion, a chameleon called Philippa, sat perched on her shoulder. She was usually a pale shade of yellow, but tonight, in response to the chilled air, she was deep pine green. ‘What’s wrong? What happened? Do you need a drink?’ She grabbed Miley’s suitcase and ushered her in.

‘There’s a fire,’ Miley said. ‘Don’t know if you’ve heard ... the police came and asked me to evacuate. Is it okay that I’m here?’

Leiko dismissed the question with a wave of her hand. ‘Jesus, a fire? You sure you don’t want that drink?’

Keone fumbled out into the hallway, her brown curls wild around her head, a fluffy blue robe flung over her shoulders, though it hung open to reveal the mismatched flannelette pyjamas beneath.

‘Miley?’ Her eyes blinked to alertness. ‘What’s going on?’

‘There’s a fire near her house,’ Leiko answered. ‘Get the gin, babe. Or would you like something different? We don’t have any red.’

‘Whatever, I don’t know.’ Miley flopped onto the couch, resting the hand that held Vasilisa on the arm of the sofa.

Leiko sat beside her with Philippa on her shoulder. The chameleon’s tone slowly changed colour until it was a similar shade to Leiko’s warm brown hair. She did this often, especially when Vasilisa was near, even though the hawk had never attacked *her*. It was true that birds of prey ate lizards, but Miley had been careful to keep that fact to herself. Still, the chameleon’s attempts at camouflage made Miley wonder what was said about Vas when they weren’t around. A moment later, Keone returned with the gin and three glasses.

‘You don’t have to do this; you both have to work in the morning. Please, go back to bed. We can talk later,’ Miley said.

‘I run a bookstore,’ Keone snorted. ‘If ever there was a job more conducive to a hangover ...’

‘Speaking from experience?’ Leiko cocked an eyebrow, pouring a nip into the glasses. ‘Do you need to call anyone? Your mum maybe? I’m happy to do it if you’re a bit rattled. And the house! Is there anything you need? We can drive out there if you think we have time,’ she said, contradicting the offer by passing Miley a drink.

Miley shook her head as she imagined her mum and dad, asleep in their beach apartment on the coast. ‘I’ll call them in the morning. Mum’s a bit of a worrier and Dad will ask a million questions, want a full report. I’m just not up for that.’ Her thoughts turned to the studio full of equipment, but those screens and wires had not been made for quick dismantling. They were heavy, cumbersome, complicated. She was grateful that all her files automatically saved to an online database, but it was only a small comfort. In centuries past, physical drawings would be destroyed by fires. It was devastating to think of the hours, weeks, months—years!—of work that could be undone in mere minutes. It still astounded her how long it took to make something and how quickly it could be erased.

‘I think,’ she said, hesitating, disgusted by the smallness of her fear in comparison to all that was happening, ‘Jasper and I ... might be over.’ She wasn’t entirely sure that that was the right way to say it. She wasn’t really sure what they *were* to each other. What they *felt*. Not love, not yet, maybe never, but Jasper had been wanted company.

‘What happened?’ Keone sat on the couch beside her. Sissy had been perched on her shoulder, but having spotted Vasilisa, she skittled down her companion’s arm, jumped off the cushion, and then hid beneath the seat.

Miley took a sip of the gin, which, without a mixer, tasted like the liquids she kept beneath the kitchen sink. She wasn’t much of a drinker, not on her best days, but today was far from ordinary so she took another sip: bitter, sharp, and dry. Visions of her home going up in flames tugged at her shirt sleeve and she curled her hand harder around the glass. ‘A firie came to the door and told us we needed to evacuate, that the blaze was out of control. I have no idea if the house is under threat, or if it’s just a safety measure.’

Leiko squeezed Miley’s knee. ‘I think Oney was referring to Jasper ...’

‘Oh.’ Miley took another sip of her drink. Like Jasper, neither Keone nor Leiko knew about her and Vasilisa’s ability to merge consciousness. Would it make more sense if she told them, or only create new problems? It took her only a moment

to decide against it. ‘He doesn’t like companions,’ Miley said, choosing a half-truth. ‘We fought tonight, and he said that companions aren’t natural and that he should know because he used to have one.’ She snorted. ‘Like his negative experience trumps my positive one.’

‘That’s it?’ Leiko asked, not unkindly.

Miley nodded, yet the simplicity of the admission brought heat to her cheeks. It didn’t sound like much, but in the moment, the fight had been alive with things unsaid, expectations unmet.

‘Look at Anewa, he doesn’t understand companions, but he and Brooke are great together,’ Leiko said.

‘What exactly did he say?’ Keone pressed.

That Vasilisa is a product, and we aren’t equals. But Miley had given Vasilisa what she needed: fresh game, a remote home, and access to the body that she coveted. Sure, they were on Miley’s terms, but boundaries were a part of every relationship.

Miley shook her head. ‘Oh, what does it matter? I don’t want to talk about him.’ She set the glass down on the coffee table, the numbing effect of the alcohol only irritating her further. Her circumstance was different from Brooke’s, who’d been with Anewa forever. Their relationship was far less fragile, and while Anewa was slightly suspicious of companions, while he didn’t *understand* them, didn’t get the appeal, he wasn’t disgusted by them.

‘All I can think about is the house,’ she said, betraying herself. Her body ached all over and, while she longed for sleep, the adrenaline from the night’s events had left her wired and restless. ‘You two should go to bed. There’s nothing to be done now but wait.’

Leiko and Keone exchanged a glance. Then Leiko disappeared, returning a moment later with pillows and thick blankets.

‘Thank you.’ Miley took the offerings and placed them beside her on the couch. ‘Is it okay if Vasilisa stays inside? I can put her out if you’d rather.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Leiko said. ‘Of course she can stay inside.’

‘We sleep with the door closed anyway.’ Keone shrugged, her mouth lifted in a half-grin, acknowledging the slight.

The couple stumbled down the hall. Sissy shot out from under the couch the second her companion disappeared from view. Miley opened the blinds, switched off

the light. It was a relief to be in the dark, yet she still wanted to see. She topped up her unfinished gin and then threw the lot down, hoping it would help her sleep.

‘We’ll be okay. Whatever happens. We’ll figure it out.’

The only constant in life is change.

‘And maybe companions.’ But the line felt more sad than funny. ‘Night, Vasilisa.’

Miley woke with a start in the early hours of the morning. The light coming through the window was blue and untainted. Thankfully, the window looked out to the east, not the west, where the fire had been blazing. She grabbed her phone off the coffee table to check the time. While she hadn’t slept for long, she was astounded that she’d slept at all; maybe she was a bigger lightweight than she’d thought. The rural fire services website was still open on her phone, so she clicked the refresh button. The update was clear: the fire had reached her suburb. She waited to feel something—despair, grief, panic—but nothing came; her mind couldn’t manifest a single sentence despite the myriad visions that had plagued her before sleep. Instead, she felt oddly relieved at not having to worry anymore, because the worst had happened. She slowly pulled back the covers, careful not to make a sound as her bare feet made contact with the icy floorboards and she winced. The house, Vasilisa included, was still asleep. Carefully, she slipped on a pair of socks, padded through the living room, the kitchen, and out the back door onto the deck. The western sky was a watery red.

Miley was not allowed to return home for another three days. Three days of emailing clients on her phone. Apologising. Re-scheduling. Pacing the living room once Keone and Leiko left for work, half grateful that she worked for herself and that she had nowhere to be, and half hating the fact that there was nothing to distract her. She called her parents, teeth gritted as she flushed with ignorance during her father’s interrogation and attempted to soothe her mother’s fretting. She considered calling her brother, but he’d only think she was calling to ask for money, which he’d be more than happy to lend her under a slew of conditions, including the eternal right to hold it over her head until one of them eventually carked it. No, she wouldn’t call Ty. Her parents could fill him in during their weekly Sunday night dinner.

On day two, post-fire, she spent twenty minutes staring at a painting hanging in the hallway—her painting—the one Keone had bought from her ten years ago. Fifteen years had passed since the gallery show at the local civic centre, yet the brown-haired nymph remained unchanged. How long had it been since she had put paintbrush to canvas? She could see the thick strokes, recall the slowness of working with oil paint, how long it took to dry, how a stroke could transform a painting for better or for worse, the dance between intuitive painting and careful decision-making. There was no undo button. The process was slow and difficult, yet nothing compared to that tactile experience of working *with* Wonder, of touching Art. Stepping back, Miley grabbed a pen and a wad of blank paper from the office nook where Leiko did her bookwork. She returned to the dining room and spent the rest of the afternoon drawing Vasilisa, the view through the window opposite her, and the objects and artefacts that decorated her friends' home. She was a little rusty at first—these days her sketches were light and airy, undetailed—but by the time Leiko and Keone returned home, she could feel the presence of that old skill resurrected.

Three days later, Vasilisa and Miley returned home. She saw the damage before they hit the end of the driveway. Brooke was driving, and Keone was in the back with Ote and Sissy, giving Miley and Vasilisa a front-row seat to view the dystopian nightmare. Later, she'd replay the memory: the way her gasp had sounded like something out of a movie and not at all like the kind of sound real people make in real life; the way her fingers had trembled over her open mouth; Vasilisa flicking her head as she released a short, sharp cry.

She was the first out of the car, the first to stand before the charred remains of her home. The stench of burnt wet wool blankets was unbearable. The two guest rooms, the main bath, and the open entertainment room had been incinerated; a carpet of blackened tinder, coal, and soot covered the foundation. An invasive thought slipped through a crack in her shock: *we never used that section anyway*. Though some of the frames remained, the house had been destroyed in the process of being saved.

She felt Keone and Brooke behind her, and heard Brooke telling Ote, illogically, to be careful because the coals could still be hot. Meanwhile, Miley was chilled to the bone. Vasilisa flew up onto a supporting beam that had somehow

survived and flapped her wings in agitation. She was a mottled mix of brown and cream, colours that appeared warm and vibrant against the black death at Miley's feet.

Unhindered by the walls that held her shelter together, or the windows and doors she'd closed only at night before, Miley passed over the graveyard of her home and stopped before her studio.

'Small blessings.' Though she knew there was nothing small about it.

Everything was in perfect order. If this were a photograph, you'd have no idea what destruction lay behind the photographer. Then Miley looked to her right, and the air rushed from her lungs. Her garden was gone. The tangle of branches with their masses of differently shaped leaves in various hues of green, and the spattering of colourful flowers that had poked through the short canopy—marigolds, lavender, pansies—had all become unrecognisable. The year's best harvest, a bounty of nourishing winter vegetables, now lay in ash.

Miley swallowed, throat dry, as she stood witness to the transformational power of horror.

Vasilisa swooped. Miley didn't even feel her arm lift, but when her eyes followed the sound of Vasilisa's beating wings, she saw that the hawk was now resting on the width of her forearm.

It is beautiful.

The door screeched as Miley opened it, and when she stepped into the studio, her feet landed in a pool of ice water. The laminated floor was now a shallow lake. Miley squeezed her eyes shut in an effort to stop their misting. When she'd gathered herself enough to open them again, Vasilisa had joined her. From this angle, as long as Miley kept her gaze away from the floor, it could have been any other ordinary day. It was only when she looked through the window that faced her former garden bed that she knew it was not. At least the studio was intact, she thought. At least the equipment wouldn't need replacing. At least there'd be no massive delays. She did not have to wait for the studio to be restructured or the equipment replaced. At least her insurance wouldn't go through the roof (though that only happened to people who *had* insurance). She glanced out the window and saw Keone and Brooke chatting; neither of them would be so foolish. She couldn't begin to calculate the cost

of the house repairs and pushed the thought aside. There would be plenty of time to stress about that later.

She approached the desk in the centre of the room. The water swished beneath her feet, slipped through the cracks in her boots, and wet her toes; gooseflesh rippled up her legs. She hadn't checked her work plan in over two weeks, as she'd been too preoccupied with the land clearing that supposedly would have prevented this fire. There was a broom in the corner, a mop as well. She ought to begin the clean-up; instead, she opened the laptop that, thanks to Miley's general forgetfulness, hadn't been plugged into its charger. She swirled her finger on the touch pad. *At least something is alive*, she thought. An alert opened when she clicked on her calendar, stating that two commission pieces were due the next day. She'd already contacted those clients, explained the circumstances of her situation, and the fact that there would be a delay, but she wasn't sure where the projects were up to. She'd completed the initial sketches, uploaded them to the computer, and explained to Vasilisa what needed to happen next.

Do not worry about that. You have already contacted your clients. They understand.

'I'm not working,' Miley said. 'But I do want to be a little less vague in my emails. I want to reassure them that the job will be completed, maybe even give them a new deadline.'

Miley, you need not worry about this now. Turn off the computer.

Miley looked over her shoulder, the corner of her lip lifting into a small smile. 'You do take good care of me, don't you?' She swivelled back to the monitor, opened the file containing her works in progress, and clicked on the project she'd uploaded two weeks earlier for Vasilisa to finish. The program opened, but the uploaded files were unchanged, and the project only contained her original, preliminary sketches. Nothing had been done. Miley's stomach dropped. 'Vasilisa! Have you not been saving your work?' She flicked around, and the bird edged further away, along her perch.

What do you mean?

'This,' Miley stabbed at the monitor with her finger. 'No changes have been made to the Carmichael piece. I showed you how to save and back-up files. *Please* don't tell me you forgot.'

I never forget.

Miley leaned back in her chair. ‘Then where is it? Where are the files?’

Vasilisa started picking at her feet. Her head sawing as she scraped her hard beak against harder nails.

‘Vasilisa?’ The tone was unfamiliar to them both. A note of warning. A hint of edge.

I did work, just not on those files.

Miley’s mind went momentarily blank as she tried to decipher what Vasilisa was saying. ‘What do you mean?’ she tried to ask as calmly as possible. ‘If you haven’t been working on these files, what have you been doing?’

I did not enjoy working on the computer. It removed me from the creative experience. I wanted to feel the making in my hands, not witness the computer giving shape to our ideas.

Miley balked at the personal pronoun. These works were *hers*. The clients had emailed her. She’d completed the sketches, created careful instructions for how the pieces were to be completed; Vasilisa may have use of her body, but it was *her* hands that did the making. Her rage became a snake, coiling and tightening around the argument, even while she sensed the weaknesses in her position, the way she had allowed the boundaries to become blurred.

‘Vasilisa ...’ she hissed, unsure whether she’d be able to finish the thought. Vasilisa flew across the studio, and, for a moment, Miley thought she was about to fly out the door to escape her guilt, but she landed instead on the top of the art-supply cupboard.

There is a shoebox in the back corner of the middle shelf. Open it.

Miley lifted herself on wooden legs, the room reduced to the blue metal cupboard and a cappuccino-coloured hawk that rested on top of it. She rolled the two block handles outwards, heard the clunk of a lock undone, swung the doors out, and leaned forward so that her eyes were level with the middle shelf. There was the shoebox. She recalled sliding it in there the first day she’d set up the studio all those months ago. It was a seldom used box that housed cheap coloured pencils and random cables that didn’t seem to connect with anything—yet she was hesitant to throw them out. She dragged the box towards her; it was lighter than she expected. She looked up at Vasilisa, but the hawk’s gaze was directed at the window that looked out over the low rise the house rested against; the grass there was also singing.

She flipped open the lid. The image on top was of a woman and a fox. Miley's breath caught in her throat. The style was similar to her early paintings: a modern take on the neoclassic style. But what was more concerning was that the image was one stolen from her mind. It was an idea for a drawing she had had some months ago, but never done anything with because there hadn't been the time. She had promised herself that she would do something with it eventually, when things slowed down, but they never did. In the corner of the painting, nestled among the leaves, was the shadow of a hawk. Her fingers trembled as she lifted the torn paper to examine the multiple drawings beneath it. The next one was a charcoal drawing, also a portrait. This one appeared to be a study in hair swept up into a Victorian style. The face was alluded to with undefined strokes and lacked detail, but the hair had been rendered with such attention that Miley felt as if she could reach out and touch it. Next was a graphite drawing, a man with his head angled to the sky, lost in thought. Jasper. Her hands trembled as she picked up the next scrap of paper: Keone dressed as Lady Justice, one hand holding Vasilisa high in the air while the other held Sissy lower, near her hip. The background was a densely packed forest, dark and forlorn, serious and unwelcoming. It was exactly what Miley would have done.

'You did these?' she whispered, horror not yet finding its way to her voice.

Vasilisa preened her plumage. *Who else?*

'They're good,' Miley said, tightly. She flicked through the images more quickly now, frantic to discover what else had been stolen from her mind. Some of the sketches were of ideas she had held for a long time but never put down on paper, while several others were foreign, entirely new to her. So many of her ideas had been formed by her hand, only she hadn't been present for the making of them. Blood pumped hot in her ears, drowning out the whispers that nothing had been stolen or lost, that she had bigger problems to worry about; Vasilisa would never *intentionally* hurt her.

'These *are* good,' she repeated, voice strained with the effort to keep her wildness in. 'But it doesn't change anything. You haven't completed the commission pieces, which means we won't get paid. I *trusted* you to do this, Vasilisa, and instead, you did some *pretty pictures*. What am I supposed to do with this?' She rattled the box for emphasis.

Vasilisa ignored the question. *You told them there was a fire; they are expecting a delay. What better excuse is there than our house burned down?*

Vasilisa's insistence that this wasn't a big deal, that no one would mind, that her actions didn't have any meaningful consequences, acted like kindling to Miley's rage. She knew Vasilisa, knew that they didn't always see eye to eye, that the hawk at times had a different world view to her, but right now she had no patience for that difference. Instead, she slammed the cupboard closed and snapped the handles into place, locking their art away and storming out of the studio. She knew Vasilisa would eventually follow.

Outside, Keone and Brooke lingered among the remains, their faces carefully composed.

'Let's go,' Miley said.

Brooke nodded, pulling her car key from her pocket. Her eyes scanned Miley's empty hands. 'You didn't need to get anything else while you're here? I'm sure we can fit some of your equipment in the boot. I can call Anewa and get him to bring a second car out.'

Miley thought of the shoebox and the incomplete commission work on the computer. She shook her head, tearing off her beanie. Her skin was hot; her heart clenched. 'It's fine.'

Vasilisa let out a screech behind her, and Miley's arm lifted out of habit. The hawk landed on her forearm, and for the first time in a long time, Miley felt the true weight of her companion.

Vasilisa's wings turned air into leverage as she cut through the sky and disappeared in the space of two heartbeats. Miley lowered her arm. It was good to be out in the bush. She hadn't realised how accustomed she'd become to the sight of open land, the quiet of the property, the feel of soil beneath her hands. She was so grateful to Keone and Leiko for taking her in, but the past few days living in the city had been jarring. Leiko had suggested that they go for a bushwalk, and Miley had agreed immediately, wondering why she hadn't thought of it first.

It was relief in more ways than one. Here in the bush, she could release Vasilisa to the air, taking the tension that hung between them with her. They'd hardly spoken in days. Where Miley couldn't unwind her anger, Vasilisa couldn't understand why Miley was so angry.

‘Jesus, would you look at that!’ Leiko was leading the way as they dodged spinifex and jagged ant hills. She pointed to the murky watering hole just ahead of them. A line of ghost gums cast enough shade on the water to prevent it from warming, but Miley had never been much of a swimmer, least of all in winter.

‘You go ahead,’ she said.

Keone, who was very much a swimmer regardless of the season, nodded. ‘I’ll pass too, babe.’

Leiko looked back at her wife with the ghost of a smile, before turning to close the distance between herself and the promise of cool water.

‘Does Philippa like swimming?’ Miley said, watching as Leiko, with her chameleon companion on her shoulder, dipped her toes in the water. Her initial bravery wilting into hesitation.

‘She doesn’t mind it.’ Keone asked without preamble, ‘So, what’s going on with you and Vasilisa?’

Miley released a heavy sigh. She’d been proud of the fact that she’d managed to avoid this topic for the past few days. She saw little point in lying, and now that Keone had asked so directly, she found that she *wanted* to talk about it. ‘Have you and Sissy ever fought?’

Keone glanced at the white rat on her shoulder, scooped her up, and examined her as if for the first time. ‘We don’t always agree, if that’s what you mean. She can be pretty bossy.’

Miley shook her head. ‘No, I mean like a proper fight. Like ...’ she swallowed hard, throat thick with tension. ‘Like you can’t stand to look at them. I mean, has Sissy ever really *hurt* you?’

Keone was silent for a moment. Clearly, this was not at all the conversation she had been expecting. ‘No. She has never *hurt* me. She’s challenged me, pushed me, and offered different ideas and opinions. She’s *annoyed* me at times.’ She ran a finger over the rat, but Sissy had turned her head away. Whatever she said in reply, Miley would never know, but a smile broke out on Keone’s face. ‘So what happened? It’s not like Vasilisa started the fire?’

The question sounded like an accusation, and Miley hated to feel as though she needed to justify herself. She’d never heard of anyone else swapping bodies with their companion, and Keone, Leiko, and Brooke had never mentioned any special abilities; were they all keeping the same secret, or was Miley the only one? Was their

body-hopping a malfunction, a characteristic unique to their circumstances, or something else? She eyed Leiko in the water, raised her eyes to the sky, and made her decision.

‘Want to take a seat?’ She gestured to a clump of large tawny rocks beneath a gum tree.

Keone nodded, scooting back on the nearest one and lifting her legs up so they were in front of her.

Miley was surprised to find that a secret that big, and an experience that personal, could be explained in just a few short sharp sentences. When she finished, Keone was quiet for a long time. The only sound was Leiko diving and splashing around in the dark water.

Keone held Sissy in her hand. Miley would have given anything to know what either of them was thinking.

‘Can you and Sissy ...’ Miley started, though she already knew the answer.

Keone shook her head. ‘How do you think it’s affected you? Hopping into each other’s bodies like that?’

Miley exhaled, relieved that Keone believed the unbelievable enough to not demand proof. While Miley had asked herself this same question, she’d yet to find an answer. She shrugged, head tilted to the sky.

Then her phone started buzzing in her pocket, and she pulled it out: a message from Jasper. *Saw the damage. You okay?* She slid the phone back into her pocket. She promised herself she’d reply later, already knowing that she wouldn’t.

The second time Miley returned to her house, she was alone; Keone and Leiko were at work, and Brooke was busy preparing for a big interview.

The idea of being alone in Keone and Leiko’s house all day had been too much. She couldn’t spend another day checking her email and wallowing in self-pity. It was shameful, but, eventually, she told Keone and Leiko that she didn’t have home insurance—an admission made only because they kept asking if she’d lodged a claim yet. Admittedly, Leiko had simply shrugged and made some comment about how it probably wouldn’t have been worth it anyway. They’d helped her make a list of action steps, including the businesses she’d need to call to organise quotes, and while

the act of making the list had helped lift her from the apathy of despair, she couldn't bring herself to call a single number.

She stood amid the blackened rubble of the less-used section of her house. How rarely she went down this end. She'd stored a few things in the cupboards of the spare rooms and, on occasion, Keone and Leiko, or Brooke and Ote, stayed over, but for the most part, this portion of the house remained empty.

She thought about the insects and the frog that her garden had attracted—how many other animals would have perished in that fire? It turned her stomach to think of it. Winter was a bad time to be without shelter.

I want to see what the rest of the street looks like, Vasilisa announced with outstretched wings, and then she was gone. A hawk in flight was elegant, graceful, and, for the briefest of moments, Miley was consumed by the desperate urge to trade places permanently. Vasilisa could live inside her coveted human form and Miley could fly away—free of the complications she'd created.

She knelt to pick up a chunk of burnt wood then tossed it onto the equally blackened grass. She picked up another piece and then another, flinging the debris over her shoulder onto a growing pile. She wasn't sure what good this practice was doing: moving the ruins of the house from there to there, but it was the only activity she could handle. After a few minutes, she risked a glance at the studio, but it was too soon; she couldn't bring herself to go in there, so appalled she was by the events that had transpired in her former sanctuary. The sight of it only deepened her misery. Since finding the shoebox filled with pages of her ideas executed by another, making art had become impossible. Being here, with her hand blackened by burnt wood, the studio untouched and filled with waiting equipment, knowing all the projects that were waiting there in need of finishing—all conspired to renew the rage simmering beneath her skin. As though her anger was a beacon, Vasilisa's shadow passed overhead. Miley did not raise her arm, so Vasilisa was forced to find purchase along the edge of a collapsed wall.

You are still mad.

Miley lifted another charred chunk of her home and tossed it onto the newer pile. It would be warmer soon, but for now, her fingers ached against the cooler air and the effort of relocating her home.

Why are you still mad? We can make the house again. The garden. You told Keone that your clients were going to pay on time anyway because they want to support you. See? Nothing is wrong.

‘Everything is wrong!’ The words tore from her throat. ‘You are so *ungrateful* for everything I’ve done for you.’ She waved a hand over the destroyed section of the homestead. ‘Look at this big empty house. All these extra rooms we never used because I never met anyone—never had kids! I moved out here because you didn’t like the city. I have only a handful of friends because you don’t like people. I make art that I hate but that pays the bills so I can pay for this house, the maintenance of this land, your food—and then you have the nerve to take my ideas and make them your own. After everything I have done for you—’ Miley choked on the sentence, cheeks lit with rage, and yet it felt so good and so right to scream. So unlike her.

Vasilisa was quiet and, for a moment, Miley could *feel* the hawk’s shock and confusion at her companion’s outburst.

Gratitude is not the measure of my love. I do not give you my wings for you to be grateful. I give them to you so you can be free—because you asked me.

Miley’s lips pursed. ‘Fuck you, Vasilisa, you don’t get to win this one.’

She stomped over the pile of rubble, only her foot slipped, bringing her down onto her knees. Then adrenaline forced her onto her feet, and she passed over the scorched grass where the fence had once stood. She pulled the car keys out of her pocket, opened and closed the door, could feel Vasilisa’s horror as she started the car, slammed it into reverse, and then sped down the highway.

She didn’t need to look out the window to know that Vasilisa was following.

The sun was starting to set when Miley pulled into Keone and Leiko’s driveway. The couple was already home, so Miley sat in the car for a few moments, gathering herself, preparing to go in—to get it together and not be such a raw, raging mess. When she opened the car door, Vasilisa was already there, waiting on the branch of a mock fig in the front yard. She said nothing as Miley crossed the lawn, and Miley ignored her in return as she opened and closed the door behind her.

‘Hi,’ Miley called, knowing she couldn’t slip into the guest room unnoticed—they would have heard the car.

Keone and Leiko called their hellos from the kitchen. Miley noted her blackened palms, a mismatch with the crisp white walls of the new estate house. ‘I’ll be in in a minute. I’m just going to have a shower.’

In the bathroom, she noted the puffiness of her eyes and blotched cheeks. She couldn’t recall crying during the drive home, but her reflection told a different story. Disruptive thoughts consumed her as she stepped into the shower. Could she give up Vasilisa? What would life be like without her? Maybe she *should* contact Constant Companions and tell them about their body-swapping. You never know, maybe others had experienced it, and there was a way to reverse it. They could fix Vasilisa. Surely it wasn’t natural for a companion to be so obsessed with the idea of becoming human. Though her mind entertained these thoughts, she knew they weren’t viable options. She would not give up Vasilisa or reveal their secret to anyone else. It was bad enough that Keone knew (and presumably Leiko). She knew that *some* of her indignation was unsound, and that the decisions she’d made were her own. And yet, she could not let it go, not this time.

She was clean, but far from restored, when she left the bathroom. Keone and Leiko were in the kitchen, the latter making meatless spaghetti while Keone sat at the counter, scribbling something in a notebook. Their companions were there, each of them sitting on top of a saucer, nibbling at seeds and chunks of bread.

‘Hi,’ Miley said again, sliding onto the seat, noticing the glass of red wine by Keone’s side. ‘Any chance I could get one of those?’

Keone looked up from her notes and shrugged. ‘You’d have to speak to the chef. Chef?’ She called out, unnecessarily loudly. ‘You reckon you could get this here lady a glass?’

‘I’m busy,’ Leiko said over her shoulder, continuing the game.

Keone shrugged. ‘Guess it’s up to me then.’

‘I can get it.’ Miley retrieved a glass from the cabinet.

‘Vasilisa out hunting? You can bring her in, you know. I’m sure we’ve got something in the fridge we can give her.’

Miley’s hand was steady as she emptied the bottle into her glass, but she could feel the thin veneer of her pretence crack. ‘No, she—’

‘There she is,’ Leiko said. ‘On the railing out the back.’ When Miley made no move to open the door, Keone slid off her seat to do it instead.

‘No, stop, it’s okay,’ Miley held up a hand. Keone and Leiko exchanged a glance. ‘I need to talk to her. Privately,’ the last word sounded so melodramatic that she had to take a swig of her wine, which was also melodramatic, but it was the only assistance at hand.

She stepped through the back door, shivering against the change of temperature as she approached the railing, leaned heavily against it, and waited.

What did you think of my drawings? Vasilisa asked.

‘Excuse me?’

Could you see it? Could you feel my excitement on the page? Painting them was ... I have never felt anything like that, like I was exiled from ... from everything.

‘Vasilisa,’ Miley started, then the sentence fell away. ‘What you did really hurt me. And I don’t mean not finishing the commission work—well, not just that—but you ... drew my ideas.’

They are not all your ideas.

‘I know.’

Do you not like them?

‘They’re fine. They’re good, but that’s not the point.’

You thought they were good? Vasilisa said, pleased.

‘Vasilisa, are you listening to me? You hurt my feelings.’

The hawk was silent, head tilted to the side. *How could I hurt you when I would never hurt myself?*

‘Don’t be dismissive.’

When can we go home?

Miley huffed. ‘Probably never. I don’t know that I can afford the repairs.’ She cut an eye towards the hawk, wondering if she’d pick up the hint. She did not.

What are we going to do about that?

‘What?’ Miley gagged on her wine.

I do not want to move back into town. You do not want to move back into town. So, we need to repair the house. How are we going to do that?

The notion of returning to town made Miley’s skin crawl. She couldn’t imagine moving back there. She glanced inside; Leiko and Keone were murmuring to each other over the counter. How nice it must be to have someone to murmur to. Her eyes passed over the hallway where her painting hung, waiting and unchanged.

‘I may have an idea.’ It was always best to act whenever inspiration struck. Miley hauled open the sliding glass door. ‘Keone?’

Her friend spun around, brows raised.

‘How do you feel about selling that painting? And by selling, I mean donating.’

After a little back and forth and some clarification, Keone agreed. As Leiko slid the gilded frame off its hook, the woman with a steel spine snivelled. The quiver of Keone’s lips was so brief Miley nearly missed it.

Within thirty minutes, she’d sold the entire collection of paintings to a German client and her natural poodle, Cozy. Miley read the confirmation of payment email three times before closing her phone and leaning back into one of the plastic garden chairs that dotted the back deck. Keone had lit the fire pit and refilled their glasses in celebration; she’d even tossed the hawk a lump of chicken she’d dug up from the back freezer. Vasilisa sawed at the meat as though it were her last meal.

‘Thank you.’ Miley squeezed Keone’s arm, mindful of Sissy’s tail.

‘It’s been sitting in the freezer for months, no big deal.’

‘She means the painting.’ Leiko snorted, stirring the fire.

Keone reached up and patted Miley’s hand. ‘I look forward to seeing her replacement. After the rebuild, of course.’ Her mouth hooked into a smile.

Though it had been days since she’d last touched the earth, Miley was certain that she could feel the soil beneath her fingers. She could feel the heat of the homestead, how it was waiting for her and Vasilisa’s return. Another step, wings beating, and they’d both rise up to greet it.

The crowd inside Mostly Books was so good Brooke thought she'd arrived late. She stepped through the rusty red French doors, hooked back in welcome, and into the shop proper. The bookshop was the size of a double carport. Only instead of vehicles it housed ideas, alternative worlds, and the articulation of your innermost secret thoughts and feelings that were so secret and inner you didn't even know you had them until there they were, staring out at you from the page.

Brooke stepped around a kid in his twenties who she recognised as Larry and Pat Olsen's son; decent singing voice, he was the front man for two of the town's five *good-enough-to-hire-for-a-wedding-or-pub-gig* bands. He was dressed in all black and perusing the rotating rack of 'staff picks'; the collar of his shirt hung loose to reveal an elaborate spider tattoo that covered the side of his neck. A fierce choice, Brooke observed, perhaps a tribute to his companion. He took a step back, failing to notice her, and Ote growled at the pending assault.

'Woah.' He held his hands up like a caught bank robber. 'Sorry, Mrs Sasala, I didn't see you there.'

Brooke waved away the apology while noticing the live scorpion that clung to the front of Eric's—yes, that was his name—button-up t-shirt: not a spider, then, just a tragically bad tattoo.

Ote licked her chops, pleased to have startled him. She'd never attacked anyone, human or companion, but they didn't know that, and she relished their uncertainty.

'She's harmless, promise,' Brooke said, unnecessarily. He himself had a companion; he ought to know well enough that he'd have to do a lot more than tread on her toes to get a rise out of Ote, but logic flees quickly when standing in close proximity to an angry wolf, companion or otherwise.

‘Okay, you’ve had your fun.’ She nudged Ote’s head, directing her away from the startled singer and towards a short, mobile shelf stuffed with DIY horticulture and domestic ‘how to’ books.

She thought she’d arrived early enough to assist Keone and Leiko with the set-up. The author talk wasn’t scheduled to start for another thirty minutes, but the pull of complimentary wine and plant-based platters, circulated by the nervous looking junior staff, had drawn an early crowd. As usual, Brooke recognised everyone in the crowd, but so did everyone else. The local market interested in bookish events was small; consequently, it was the same twenty-odd people who could be bothered to buy tickets and show up each month. Keone, whose haggard expression suggested that the night’s event couldn’t end soon enough, was trapped behind the counter serving a middle-aged woman dressed in a maroon long-sleeve shirt and black slacks. She was commenting on the latest winner of the Helen Garner Prize for Fiction, but her opinions sounded eerily similar to those published on a literary site Brooke had visited earlier that day. She was about to swoop in and rescue Keone when Bonnie walked past with a tray of red-wine glasses. Thankfully, she paused long enough for Brooke to take one. ‘Better get one for your dad, too.’

‘Dad hates wine.’

‘Oh, right. I keep forgetting.’ Brooke set the second glass down on a nearby shelf. ‘Better just keep that one for later then.’

Bonnie rolled her eyes before sashaying around a central bookshelf to greet a cluster of incoming patrons; her companion, a white, blue-eyed wolf called Congo, sat perched on a chair behind the counter, watching her intently.

Brooke marvelled at the cleverness of time and how it had transformed her precious baby girl into a bar wench without her ever having noticed. Bonnie had reached that ambiguous stage between adolescence and womanhood when pinpointing her exact age had become difficult. She’d pulled her umber brown hair back into a tight bun, showcasing her features: bronze eyes and brows, narrow chin, and cool pink lips. Hers was a soft beauty that pleased and terrified Brooke.

Ote licked the back of Brooke’s hand and snickered.

‘Stop it,’ she said firmly and wiped the back of her hand against her pants.

Then Ote’s ears perked up.

‘What?’ Brooke followed the wolf’s gaze and nearly dropped her glass. A tall man wearing cargo pants and a faded black t-shirt was perusing the new-release

section; his companion—a dingo—stood loyally by his side. Brooke tried to recall the last time she'd seen a dingo, only to realise she'd never seen one. A guttural snarl rumbled through Ote's chest.

'Yes, very funny, now quit it.' Brooke stepped in front of Ote to block her view. The wolf released a displeased whine.

Killjoy.

'You've been talking to the kids too much.'

Rubbish. It's they who talk to me.

Brooke glanced over her shoulder to see the man turn and nearly dropped her drink for the second time that night. She hadn't seen Jasper in years, but there was no mistaking him. Same sun-darkened skin, dark eyes, and face constructed of straight lines: straight nose, brows, cheek and jaw created the illusion of rigidity, but when animated, his face was warm and open. She smiled then wondered if that was the appropriate reaction. Should she have pretended not to recognise him? He replied with a no-fuss grin that faded when his eyes drifted to Ote.

A hand landed on her shoulder. 'When did you sneak in?' Miley's eyes flitted to the other side of the room, widening slightly at the sight of her ex, who she then acknowledged with a small wave. He inclined his head in a friendly manner before continuing to peruse the bookshelf.

'You never mentioned that Jasper was a reader.' Brooke directed the question at her friend, though her eyes were trained on Ote, who'd continued to yip and whimper, her tail swaying with pent-up energy. 'Play or prey?' But the wolf ignored her companion, reserving her full attention for the mysterious canine on the other side of the room.

Before Miley could reply to Brooke's comment, Anewa stepped into their circle, and Ote released yet another grumble.

'What's the matter *dok meri*?' Anewa brushed his calloused hand over the wolf's head, momentarily breaking her trance. The shell necklace he wore every day slipped free of his collar as he leaned forward so that the tiny orange shells dangled loosely in the air. They were worthless here, but that necklace could pay for the building of a hut back in Bougainville, or so his father, Anewa Senior, had often reminded them. Not that it mattered; after the last war that followed independence, their feet would never touch the white sand of Bougainville again.

‘No idea; she won’t answer me. Do you mind taking her outside for a minute? Just until we start?’

Anewa pushed out his bottom as he considered this request. The laugh lines that began at the edges of his nose reached past his mouth to his smooth round jaw. They’d deepened in recent years, but his short, wide eyes remained clear, hopeful. The ropey locks that had once passed his shoulders were gone, revealing a sweeping forehead that exposed his consistently collected and peaceful nature.

‘Okay, think I left some betel nut and lime in the console.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Brooke said with pretend scorn. She didn’t understand why Anewa enjoyed it so much; the mild relaxant that resulted from the chemical reaction between the nut’s flesh and crushed seashells, in her opinion, wasn’t worth the bouts of sweating, or the reddened teeth.

Anewa laughed as he turned from his wife to cut through the crowd, ‘Come, *dok*.’ Ote remained fixed in place. It was only when Brooke tapped her backside and told her to go that her companion at last listened.

With a snort of disapproval, the wolf threaded through the bookshop and out its front doors.

‘What was that about?’ Miley asked, idly picking up the biography of a recently disgraced politician.

‘No idea.’ Brooke shrugged. ‘I see there are biographies on the latest winner of the Archibald Prize.’ She nudged the tall redhead playfully. ‘Congratulations, by the way.’

The delicate creases of Miley’s eyes fanned as she smiled. ‘Thank you.’

‘Has it helped with exposure?’

‘What?’ Miley’s brow creased as she glanced out the front window to the darkening street.

‘The prize. I know it’s only been a week, but have your inquiries increased?’ Brooke pressed. The traffic on her website, *The Gist*, had been in a precarious state for years, but now it had taken a solid nosedive following the latest legislation around mobile phone use. Her mother’s passive-aggressive comments about how hard it was to make it as a writer—*Oh, but you’ll be fine, darling, I’m sure of it*—underscored every ‘unsubscribed’ notification that pinged in Brooke’s browser. In accordance with the report published by the Organisation of Economic Technologies and Development, the daily limit of five hours had now been reduced to three.

Ironically, the article and video Brooke published last month, which explained the forthcoming changes, had performed better than any in the previous quarter, garnering almost double the number of unique clicks, linkbacks, and video responses. She'd *nearly* made enough money to cover their utilities and Congo's latest vet bill: a cut paw, which in the scale of things, was *relatively* cheap.

She wasn't the only one affected by the changes. Online business moguls, digital entrepreneurs, and some of their consumers were outraged, claiming that the drop in usage was a human rights violation. Others were concerned that the guidelines would ignite another economic crisis. Some, mostly activists, were relieved that the anecdotal evidence and scientific data of the previous two decades were finally being acknowledged. Brooke sat somewhere in the middle; she ran a virtual business, and less time online equalled less traffic, fewer clicks, and less money. A trickle-on effect she literally could not afford.

'It has,' Miley replied, eyes narrowing. 'My traffic doubled overnight, but I don't expect that to last. There'll be another winner next year. Is everything okay?'

'Oh, yeah, fine,' Brooke lied. 'You know how it is, though, always trying to expand, grow.'

'I guess. Are you thinking of nominating *The Gist* or *Rogathella Essential* for something?'

'You're hilarious. *Best Country Gossip Rag in Australia.*' Brooke shook her head. 'You know, I can't even be bothered to nominate *The Gist* for something—too much paperwork, plus, there're no guarantees. The best boost is a good story.'

Miley was still staring out through the shopfront, and Brooke followed her gaze. 'Where's Vasilisa?'

'Outside hunting. Too small in here; too many people.'

Brooke found Miley and Vasilisa's independence startling; their affection for one another was obvious, but the hawk's need for solitude had increased in recent years. Brooke looked around Mostly Books with new eyes; she supposed that if *she* were a hawk, she would find the confines of the room stifling. She watched Keone, standing behind the counter, answering customers' questions. All those years ago she'd been offended by her pairing with the rat, but like the scorpion on the young man's neck, Sissy had become a tattoo: an ever-present, permanent mark that Keone wore upon her shoulder.

‘Have you read the book?’ Brooke took a sip of her wine and leaned against the shelf.

Miley shook her head. ‘She’s smart, too smart for me. I don’t always find her fiction that ... accessible. You?’

‘Keone sent me a copy to help me with the article. I’m about forty pages in.’

‘And?’

Brooke wrinkled her nose. ‘Not for you, but that Audrey Kawasaki bio is—this one right here.’ She indicated a forward-facing book whose cover image was a stylised illustration of an androgynous figure surrounded by a school of fish.

Miley turned around and pulled the book off the shelf, flitted through its glossy printed pages. ‘I’ve loved her stuff for years,’ she murmured, pausing on an image of a Japanese girl with a giant stork standing behind her, its wings expanded like an angel.

Keone stepped out from behind the counter and ran a hand through her short curly hair. ‘Welcome, everyone, and thank you for coming. We’ll get started in just a minute, so please take a seat, grab another drink, and make yourselves comfortable.’ Her eyes lightened, spotting Miley and Brooke. She gave a quick nod of acknowledgement before disappearing through a staff-only door at the back of the store. Brooke opened her tote bag, pulled out her phone, and took a few quick, candid photos: one of the staff setting up the projector, another of Bonnie circling the room, desperately trying to get rid of the few remaining drinks on her tray, and several wide-angle shots of the seated crowd. She’d need permission before publishing them, even for *Rogathella Essential*, a local digital magazine she put together once a month. It was always good to have a few filler stories to plump up a skinny run sheet, and the next edition was looking awfully skinny.

‘I’ll save us some seats in the back,’ Miley said, shuffling off towards the row of chairs.

Brooke wove around the stacks to convince the straggling groups to take a seat and pose for photographs. Finally satisfied, she slipped the phone into the front pocket of her jeans and pulled out her electronic notepad. The lights overhead suddenly dimmed and Brooke, along with the remaining crowd still standing, shuffled towards her seat.

Miley lifted her handbag off the seat next to her and Brooke sat down. A moment later, Anewa and Ote appeared beside her, all traces of territorial anxiety now gone. The lights turned off and Keone stepped out onto the small platform.

‘Thanks, everyone, for coming tonight. I am thrilled to welcome our guest speaker, whose latest fantasy novel, *Situation: Flux*, has become an international bestseller. Please join me in welcoming our guest, Aliyah Chol.’

There was a small round of applause as the previously blank screen at the back of the stage shimmered and the animated face of a woman in her mid-forties appeared. She wore a floating white shirt that complemented her almond skin and dark, wiry hair, and when she smiled, Brooke understood why the press loved her so much. Chol had a magnetic quality; it was clear that she was made to be seen *and* heard—no doubt *that* had been a helping hand in becoming an international bestseller.

Though the author’s bio would be easy enough to find online later, Brooke jotted down the key points anyway. Aliyah Chol. Forty-five, married, mother of four. Undergrad at UQ, Brisbane, PhD in Creative Writing from Monash University. Author of more than ten novels. Multiple Aurealis Award winner and recipient of the 2042 Australian Literary Society Gold Medal.

The next hour passed in a matter of minutes as Brooke recorded comments that would later become pull-out quotes and lively anecdotes that could add colour to the piece. Already the story was taking shape in her mind.

Initially, she saw the piece as a brief recount of the evening’s discussion, but when Chol started talking about the fictional world-building process and her socialist views, Brooke felt the scope of the conversation widen.

‘Obviously, reading is a subjective experience, and I’d never want to cloud a reader’s interpretation of the work. I can say that I was intrigued by the idea that we, as humans, but in particular humans in positions of power, have created these clever systems to increase production, and thereby wealth and power, but we’re not clever enough to fix the problems caused by these systems. And further than that: those in positions of power refuse to believe that a problem even exists.’

‘And how does that play out in the novel?’

‘I wanted to write about a civilisation whose previous systems had crumbled and whose people were now forced to find a new way. Of course, this is not a *new* idea, but what I wanted to experiment with was the idea of community in a novel.’

The protagonist at the beginning acts as an entry point, if you will, but then I challenge readers' expectations by introducing and moving through the community so that we can see the ripple effect of these collapsing systems and how no *one* system—no one economy, education, health, or politics system—is ever going to meet everybody's needs, but we can create systems that are inclusive and best for the majority.'

'Your characters come up with some interesting models. Where did those ideas come from? What was the inspiration behind them?'

'Most are inspired by things happening right now in fringe groups and rogue professionals working in niche fields, particularly in regards to conservation and earth science, but I'm also fascinated by how this sense of responsibility has trickled through to both large *and* private businesses, with increasing numbers now operating with a TBL.'

'What's a TBL?'

'My apologies, a TBL refers to a triple bottom line, meaning a for-profit business that operates in ways that are socially and environmentally conscious and who donates a percentage of their profits to research teams, organisations, or charities dedicated to resolving issues in these sectors. It's *this* idea that formed the base of the economic system in my novel.'

Brooke jolted and her electric pen drew a squiggle down the side of the page on her padlet. In the same way that Ote's ears would flick forward and stand alert whenever something piqued her interest, Brooke leaned forward in her chair. Listening to Aliyah speak *about* her novel was more interesting than reading it, but then again, Brooke had never been one for science fiction. It was the concept of a triple-bottom-line business that caught her attention. She was proud of New Wave Media and she'd worked hard to build the business up, but *The Gist* remained an unstable and unreliable stream of income. Some months were good, but many weren't. Boot-strapping had been romantic and thrilling in the beginning; now it was a constant, wearying grind. Hard work can become boring when you do it for long enough. She'd written and read more articles than she cared to consider about the depletion of soil quality, melting ice, air pollution, and extinction, and it hurt her heart to think of the triplets and all the ways their lives would be so much harder than hers. Ote had noticed things too: how the scent of the seasons had changed, plants

flowered and shed earlier or later than normal, and long droughts were shattered by short, intense bursts of rain that lead to flooding and ruin.

New Wave Media couldn't afford to give away a percentage of its profits. Brooke didn't need to speak to her accountant to know that, after covering their overheads, paying her small, international team (see: cheap labour), and Eli, there was little left. But maybe *this* was the element she had been missing? A way to justify the hours spent building up the company and the thrashing fears that woke her in the night. Editing a piece about yet another farmer who'd boarded up their property due to rising temperatures and insurance costs, only to go home and help the triplets fill out their university admissions forms, created a dissonance that multiple glasses of wine could not repair—which was possibly a good thing, as scientists had predicted that vino would only be available on the shelves for another fifteen years.

Aliyah continued to speak for another hour on the development of the novel and the years of research and thought that went into creating it. After Aliyah had answered audience questions—though several were longwinded comments—Keone thanked her for her generosity and announced that pre-signed copies of *Situation: Flux* were available at the front counter.

'I think my arse is asleep.' Miley stood up, her tall frame popping and cracking with the action.

Anewa stretched too, his long legs reaching out beneath the seat in front of him as he released a loud yawn. Ote, who had been lying comfortably on the floor, came up onto all fours, growling at anyone who drew too near her pack.

'I'll *kam bek*,' Anewa said, eyes scanning the room. 'Need to check how long Bon-Bon is going be—*pikinini*'s lost her key again, she tell you that?'

Brooke shook her head in disbelief. They'd replaced the lost key twice already; their daughter's nonchalance towards her personal effects was impressive. Anewa stepped around Ote as the wolf shook her coat out and made his way to the service counter, where Bonnie had just appeared with a stack of Aliyah Chol's books.

Brooke hit the save button on her notes and closed the pad's screen. She could already see the story coming together; her mind shuffled and spread out those scribbled notes as though they were a jumble of cards within which she would

eventually find a common thread, an obvious structure. By the time they returned to the car, the lead would already be written.

Keone and Leiko had originally invited them to grab a drink after the event, but looking at the considerable crowd that had gathered, it was unlikely they'd be finished anytime soon.

'I'm going to head off.' Miley planted a kiss on each of Brooke's cheeks.

'No, stay. Come on; don't go.' Brooke grabbed her friend's hand. 'We've barely had a chance to catch up.'

'Sorry, Brooke, but I'm knackered and I've got a full day tomorrow. Maybe we can make a plan for the weekend?'

'I'll hold you to it.'

Miley nodded in agreement and gave Brooke a quick hug before exiting through the green door out onto the street.

Brooke gathered up the last of her things and edged closer to the door, stepping out of the way of the crowd that had gathered around the front counter and spread out in small clusters around the shop.

Jasper, who'd yet to make his escape, crab-walked along the now-empty rows of seats, one hand loosely holding a rope that was looped through his companion's collar. Brooke had never put a collar on Ote—it had never been necessary—though she could see how, at times, that old-fashioned hierarchy *could* make things easier, at least for her. Still, Brooke was surprised to see Jasper with a companion: Vasilisa was the reason he and Miley had split sheets. Like Anewa, Jasper was opposed to companions, though according to Miley he'd owned one at *some* point, and here he was again with another! Maybe his first companion had been a bad match. No system is perfect; just because a companion was made for you didn't guarantee that things would work out. Re-companioning existed for a reason. As it turned out, owning a companion was not for everyone.

Ote's ears flattened against her skull and she pressed herself into Brooke as Jasper and the dingo approached.

'What's gotten into you?' Brooke murmured to her companion.

Can't help it. Ote replied. *He makes me feel nervous.*

Brooke didn't have a chance to ask who the wolf was referring to. 'Hey Jasper, how are you?' she asked.

‘Good, good.’ His tanned hand reached out and he patted the back of Ote’s head. Her guarded expression softened as she melted into his open hand; the pleasure of friendly contact was as difficult to override as her earlier instinct to protect kin against all potential threats.

‘What’s your companion’s name?’

Jasper flinched but recovered so quickly that Brooke wondered if she’d seen the reaction at all. ‘Lou-Lou.’

‘Terrifying.’

Jasper laughed.

‘Sorry about Ote. She usually loves other companions. I don’t know what’s gotten into her tonight, and she isn’t illuminating the situation.’

Ote snorted, short and sharp, but this time her displeasure was directed at Brooke.

I’d tell you if I knew.

The dingo stepped forward, ears pricked, before skirting around to sniff Ote’s rear. Ote baulked and jumped to the side, then she, too, sniffed the air but from a more cautious distance. Then she stepped a little closer to the dingo. Jasper’s hand tightened around the makeshift leash. Brooke was about to say *don’t worry, everything is fine*; it was a well-known fact that companions rarely attacked one another, but *rarely* was not *never*.

Ote pushed her head back. *She smells different.*

‘What do you mean?’ Brooke asked. She could feel her smile wavering.

Like blood.

Brooke’s brow furrowed. She looked at Jasper, but his eyes quickly fluttered away and scanned the room. Mistaking her confusion for hidden knowledge, he said, ‘Okay, look, Lou-Lou is not a companion.’

Brooke’s eyes widened, and Ote stepped forward with renewed interest. It had been years since she’d met a natural, and the ones she had were all domesticated; she couldn’t recall when she’d last seen a wild animal.

‘How did you ... I thought they were all gone ...’ and then she whispered, ‘Isn’t that illegal?’

‘Very.’ Jasper’s voice dropped. ‘I was out fixing fence posts when I found her. Broken leg. Starving. She nearly bit my hand off at first. She calmed down once she figured I wasn’t going to hurt her.’

‘How long have you ... are you going to ...’ Brooke had so many questions that she didn’t know where to start.

Jasper laughed, but it sounded more nervous than genuine. ‘Off the record?’

Now it was Brooke’s turn to laugh, dry and shocked, but she had to admit that while her curiosity had been trying to process what Jasper was saying, her inner journalist had been busy mapping out a feature piece. With a nod of her head, the idea was extinguished.

‘I mended her leg, put her in the shed, fed her, and kept my distance as much as possible. She recovered, I opened the shed door, she ran out, and I thought that’d be the end of it.’

Brooke eyed the dingo, who was still investigating Ote. ‘Obviously not.’

‘No. I came out the next morning and she’d curled up next to the fence. Guess it’s easier to get food at a homestead than it is to find stuff in the wild.’

Brooke nodded. Miley had chewed her ear off with complaints about the lack of fresh game for Vasilisa.

‘It’s right to call her my companion, at least for now. I made a bed for her inside, but I always leave the back door open, so she’s free to go. When I get up every morning, I half expect to find her gone, but every morning she’s there like the sun. She spends the whole day following me around too. I don’t know that I’m particularly interesting company, but she doesn’t seem to like being alone. At least not anymore.’

‘You sure I can’t turn this into a story?’ Brooke pressed. ‘It would make a hell of a feature piece. I could keep you anonymous, of course.’

‘Nope: no feature piece. You know she’s an endangered animal, and I’m not going to risk getting *that* fine or worse. I’ve wondered if that’s why she’s hung around. Maybe there’s no pack for her to go back to. Anyway, don’t go thinking that I don’t feel conflicted about this whole business; I doubt what I’m doing is the right thing. Should probably send her to a facility, reservation, or whatever you call them places, but to think of her in a lab where some ten-year-old scientists harvest her DNA so they can breed a bunch of premium house slaves in the name of conservation ... I can’t do it.’

Now it was Brooke’s turn to flinch.

‘Sorry,’ Jasper said, his hand toying with the loose end of Lou-Lou’s lead.

‘It’s okay,’ she replied, not because she approved, but because it was the polite thing to say.

‘Don’t write about this, alright? Or tell anyone ... I’m sure you’ll tell Miley, but—’

‘She can keep a secret. Promise.’ There was little point in pretending that she wouldn’t relay this conversation. ‘Jasper, what happened between you and your companion?’

Jasper’s gaze drifted past her. ‘It’s just *wrong*, Brooke. I don’t know how else to say it. It made me sick to look at her and to see how much she loved me, and how I’d done nothing to deserve it. It isn’t real, even if *they* think it is.’ He dipped his head and stepped out onto the street. ‘I have to go. It was good seeing you.’

‘You too,’ Brooke stammered. She leaned against the doorframe and watched as Lou-Lou trotted down the street and jumped into the passenger side of Jasper’s ute. It was like witnessing a ghost perform a magic trick.

Then a hand came down on her shoulder. ‘They’re gonna keep Bon-Bon, for now. Keone will drop her home,’ Anewa explained.

Brooke nodded woodenly, her eyes glued to the empty parking space where Jasper’s ute had been.

‘You okay? Did the *gaiman dok* piss on the stacks?’ he whispered, covertly peering over his shoulder at the bookshelf behind them. Ote replied with a brief snort.

‘Sorry. No.’ Brooke shook her head. ‘I’m just tired. Come on, let’s go home.’

Brooke woke to a hot westerly breeze that had covered the AstroTurf on the back lawn in debris and crisp, brown leaves. Usually, Brooke enjoyed her morning routine of sipping coffee while sweeping the lawn, but this morning she’d woken with the deep abdominal cramps that marked day three of her period, and all she wanted to do was lie in bed with a hot water bottle and painkillers while pretending that nobody needed her and nothing needed to be done. She hadn’t woken when Anewa scrambled out of bed to go for his run, which was a minor miracle as he was not a stealth man. She really must have been tired. The sun had woken her, but the luxury of an empty bed inspired her to burrowed deeper into the nest of sheets.

You slept late, Ote said accusingly. The wolf had abandoned her bed in the corner to stare out the sliding glass door that led to a private balcony and the yard beyond it. *I need to pee.*

Brooke flicked the sheets back with a huff, mentally overriding the clenching in her stomach, and opened the bedroom door; sweeping the lawn was one thing, cleaning up wolf piss was another. Ote shot out into the hall and raced down the stairs. A moment later came the click and swing of the dog door in the kitchen. Standing up was the opposite of what her body wanted (see: foetal position), but the two things that would bring relief at this moment, coffee and Advil, could only be obtained if she left the bedroom. Looping her arms through a summer robe, she stepped out into the hallway and carefully closed the door behind her, else she give in to the temptation of the unmade bed. She passed Bonnie outside the bathroom. Her daughter nodded in acknowledgement as her red wolf companion, Congo, trailed behind her; neither of them was good in the morning.

Outside, the sunlight did little to warm her mood. She sipped at the coffee she could barely remember making, popped two pills, and picked up the broom propped beside the front door. She'd just started sweeping when Ote emerged from a scatter of lemon-and-scarlet bottlebrushes, the few that were hearty enough to survive the more recent summers.

Breakfast? Ote asked.

'It will have to wait, or you can go harass Bonnie. Maybe she will feed you.'

Ote let out an exaggerated yawn. *I'll wait. Bonnie's a bit light-handed when it comes to breakfast.*

Brooke rested her coffee on the verandah railing as she began what felt like the world's most arduous task: sweeping, while trying to recall why she'd ever enjoyed this activity. After she had accumulated a small pile, it was clear that her period cramps were not going to subside and that this was a much better job for one of the triplets, maybe Harlow—who no doubt was still asleep in bed. Surely he could sweep the AstroTurf today; free room and board in exchange for fifteen minutes of labour was a strikingly good deal. Brooke had just sat on the verandah's top stair and reclaimed her coffee when Zander came tearing around the side of the house. The wolf bounded up the stairs, his hot breath mingling with the coffee's steam as he passed her, and made a bee-line for the water dish, which he emptied in a matter of seconds.

‘Looks like you missed out on a good run today,’ Brooke said to her companion.

Ote replied by gnawing at some irritation on her side. She’d go with the boys sometimes, but often she’d wait for Brooke to wake up first. It put her on edge to be away from her companion for too long, and Brooke admitted that she felt much the same.

A moment later, Eli came jogging into the yard, followed by Anewa.

‘Morning,’ Brooke waved, instantly regretting the action as it stirred the dull ache in her pelvis. The cramps now morphing into nausea.

‘Morning, babe,’ Anewa replied, panting, while sweat beaded on his forehead.

‘Good run?’ She directed the question to both her husband and son.

Eli walked up the steps on skinny legs and planted himself beside her; he sat with his elbows on his knees—he was all arms and legs—so that his hands dangled openly in the air. His tawny brown skin glowed from his morning exertions, as did the constant tinge of pink beneath his cheeks. ‘Scary more like it. We thought we’d lost Zander.’

‘What?’

‘He disappeared. Dad and I were running up heart-break hill,’ an unofficial name the family had given the choppy rises and hills behind their home. ‘I looked over my shoulder, and he was gone. I thought maybe he’d gone for a piss, so we kept going, only he never showed up. I doubled back and found him—well off the path—sniffing a half-dead tree like a relapsed coke fiend.’

Brooke raised an eyebrow. ‘What would you know about snorting coke?’

‘Nothing.’ Eli shrugged, rotating his hands to expose his empty palms: the picture of innocence.

‘Great, let’s keep it that way.’ Brooke could see the headline now: *Sasala son drug addict*. Eli had been helping, unofficially, with the business since he was sixteen: sourcing photos, prepping copy for advertisers, and other small administrative tasks. Writing, editing, and publishing articles for *The Gist* and *Rogathella Essential* had become too much for one person, but she couldn’t afford to give up either. Fortunately, Brooke had no qualms about exploiting her son and putting him to work, but when they had booked a new advertiser at the start of the year, she could finally afford to pay him a part-time wage. He wasn’t especially

inspired by the role. She suspected that it was just a job for him, but as long as he didn't go stuffing anything else up his nose, he might eventually get a scent for the news.

'So, anyway, Zander said another wolf had been through there. Did you take Ote out this morning?'

'No, I didn't, but Zander would recognise Ote's scent.' Brooke's mind flashed back to the formerly wild dingo, Lou-Lou, standing in the bookshop. How many more were out there? How much longer would they survive?

'Must have been someone else then.' Eli looked to the dirt track that connected their backyard to the bush beyond. Their house was on the outskirts of the suburb, and no rear neighbours meant easy access to the various unofficial walking trails and motorbike tracks. They weren't private property; anyone in town could use them, and most did, as they could create various combinations from the many looping and intersecting tracks—better than the single footpath that run up the lookout.

Anewa marched up the steps, his skin still glistening from his morning run. 'Pancakes for breakfast?'

'If you're cooking,' Eli bit the line right out of his mother's mouth.

Brooke agreed with a grin. The only dish she was capable of putting together that morning was cereal. 'Maybe you should have a shower first. I'm not crazy about sweat in my pancake batter.'

Brooke had thirty minutes before her morning meeting with the team. The latest edition of *Rogathella Essential* was scheduled to go out the following day, and while the write-up about the recent book event filled it out some, the issue remained slim. Part of her had been relieved when the *Rogathella Gazette* folded fifteen years ago. She had thought her days of scrounging around for non-existent stories were over. And, honestly, it was ridiculous that the town had ever had a daily paper anyway, but then local businesses, public figures, clubs, and even residents expressed a need for *something* to take the *Gazette's* place. Couldn't she fill the gap with a little periodical? Being the foolish people-pleaser that she was, she'd said yes.

She had a decent number of subscribers, enough to pay for the service and hosting of the monthly newsletter, enough to justify the effort, but it would never be more than a passion project.

It had been at least two weeks since she'd last checked in at the police station; maybe they had a few story crumbs they could blow her way. Sinking into the leather seat behind her desk, she picked up her mobile phone, hit the recording app, and called the station. Her preferred contact, Constable Jones, answered on the second ring.

'What do you want, Sasala?' he asked without preamble.

'Hello to you, too.' Brooke grabbed a pen from the holder and a brown paper pad out of habit. 'Got anything good for me? Oh, I'm recording, by the way.' She hesitated, chalking up the cost of the stationery items made redundant by the app on her phone; she ought to save them for a worthier cause, but the moment passed in the space of three words.

'Remember Gillian Chance?'

Brooke's breathing hitched. 'You found the body?' She scratched *Gillian = murdered* onto the pad followed by a smiley face.

'Ha! Well, technically.' There was an edge to the constable's laugh. 'Brooke, she is *alive*.'

Brooke dropped the pen into her lap. 'No. Way. How is that possible? It's been—'

'Ten years.'

'Okay, start at the beginning. What happened? Where did you find her? When?'

'Off the record?'

'Fine, give me a sec.' She turned the phone around and hit the stop button, pausing long enough to decide that this *was* a story worthy of ink and paper. 'I switched off the recorder. So, tell me, what the heck is going on?'

'So, it's like this: she was found walking along the Bruce Highway—right outside town!—at dawn this morning. Where has she been? I have no idea. Who took her? I don't know that, either.'

'Have you seen her? What was she wearing?' Brooke picked up the pen again.

‘Only got a glimpse of her as they were loading her into an ambulance—she had a pretty serious leg injury. She was in a grubby dress, maybe a nightgown? Kinda hard to tell.’

‘Jesus. What kind of sicko ...’

‘Yeah, I know.’

Brooke reimagined the scene but with Bonnie as the star: back door wide open, kids still in their rooms, the husband *allegedly* asleep until he woke up to an empty bed. Fast forward an hour and officers arrived. Heavy boots stomping down the hallways, sharp eyes surveying the yard, the kitchen, the bedroom: no sign of struggle, car in the garage, no missing keys, clothes, or cash. Brooke shuddered, cleared her throat, then remembered she was still on the line. ‘I’ll call you in a few hours for an update.’

She hung up before Jones could reply and wondered, briefly, who it was *he* was thinking about. *Gillian Chance back from the dead*. The headline would scream *sensationalised clickbait*, but who cared as long as it worked? Her mind powered into overdrive, shuffling around what she could remember of the case and overlaying it with imagined photographs of Gillian, gaunt and shell-shocked. They’d publish the piece as a feature article on the homepage while burying all other news stories beneath the fold. She shook her head, displacing the heartless reporter hat. At times, she was sure there was a split in her brain: one half belonged to an ambitious publisher—the worse the news, the better the story—the other half belonged to the pack. She was their leader, wife, and mother. The image of Bonnie walking barefoot along a highway, clothed in a filthy, shredded dress, made the issue of Eli’s often inappropriate workplace attire seem insignificant.

Brooke looked around her office. It was beautiful, of course; she’d designed it. The three giant bookcases were filled with her favourite hardbacks—collectors’ items—which were organised by colour to create a literary rainbow; the wallpaper was a dusty purple, the furniture dark and warm, and a long, curved computer screen ran the length of her desk and ended near a huge vase of white lilies. The house’s interior and exterior were lined with enough security cameras to make Ray Bradbury blush. Their installation had limited all marital R&R to the bedroom. Admittedly, this was a small sacrifice; the triplets had put an end to all spontaneous kitchen sex years ago.

Thinking of the kids, Brooke mentally pushed her to-do list to the side and went to check on Harlow, who hadn't yet come down for breakfast.

His bedroom door was open a sliver, so it was no great invasion to push it back while simultaneously knocking. Frances lay sprawled across the rug; knowing a sucker when she saw one, she whimpered once, rolled onto her back, and lifted her top paw in invitation. Brooke didn't need a translator to interpret this gesture. She knelt down, knees cracking, and ruffled the wolf's grey-and-tawny-orange fur. Frances was so like her son: soft, affectionate, warm.

'Hey, Mum.' Harlow wandered out of his ensuite, straightening his shirt. His hair hung in short, dark, curly ringlets just like his father's. He'd inherited Anewa's height and glowing complexion, too, but from Brooke he'd received his ambition.

'Morning. Don't you have class today?'

'Yeah, but it got cancelled. Gonna head into campus anyway, need to get out of the house for a bit.' He gathered up his devices and slid them into the gaping mouth of his backpack.

'I won't hold you up. Bon and Congo are going into the store today. Why don't you get them to give you and Frances a lift?'

'Sounds good.' Harlow kissed her on the cheek as he passed into the hallway. 'Okay, gotta go.'

Frances flipped up onto all fours and bounded down the stairs behind him. Brooke lingered in the empty room. She ran her fingers over the polished glass desk. The books and papers had been organised into neat stacks, the pens capped and returned to their holder. She sank onto the made bed, complete with hospital corners. For several months, she'd done her best to ignore the unwelcomed thought. And yet, here, at last, in her son's orderly room, it found her: *when will they leave me?* The triplets had graduated a year ago. She was lucky they'd chosen to stay this long, that rent was so expensive, that it would take a little while for them to create their space in the world, but eventually, the pack would break up. It was inevitable. It was unhealthy to wish otherwise. She'd read somewhere, long ago, that you had to prepare your children to leave you.

Ote appeared in the doorway. *My heart, it is so good to see you taking time for yourself. I'm sure the team will soon realise today's meeting is cancelled. Shall we go out for a run?*

‘Crap!’ Brooke hauled herself up off the bed and returned to the office, Ote trailing behind her.

I suppose we could go later.

‘Soon, I promise,’ Brooke said as she settled back into her chair, opened the team’s Turning Pro Channel and signed in. Despite being several minutes late, she was the first to log on; a moment later, Eli’s face popped up on the screen. Today’s awful shirt of choice was black with the image of a decaying bull’s skull on its front. She was about to ask him to change when Olina and Iromi logged on. *You win this time*, Brooke thought.

They moved through their usual itinerary, each sharing their updates on the stories they’d upload for tomorrow’s publication, then Olina shared the latest analytics—which of their stories were performing and which weren’t—and Iromi pitched three ideas that could fill out the line-up for the day after next. Once their round-up was completed, Brooke swung in with her scoop.

‘I don’t have any real details yet, but a local woman who went missing ten years ago, Gillian Chance, was found this morning. I don’t know *when* I will have more information, but if I can get the police department to talk to me sooner rather than later, we could cover the story in *Rogathella Essential*. Locals will be dying to know what happened to her. It’ll be enough to keep the rumour mill turning for the rest of the year! Depending on what I get out of the cops, we could run a parallel article in *The Gist*.’

‘I think I remember that,’ said Eli. ‘I would have been nine when she went missing. Does that mean her husband didn’t do it?’

‘The husband’s always guilty,’ Iromi said, her voice accompanied by the sound of café music and the background chatter of her usual lunchtime spot in Delhi.

‘I don’t know.’ Brooke shrugged. ‘But it’s only a matter of time until we find out. Okay, sounds like we’ve got a lot on, so I think it’s about time we got to it. Olina, can you send me the copy for the article on the riots in South-East Asia asap? I want to run it tomorrow.’

‘Okay, but I need to get a few more quotes first,’ she replied in her rushed yet rounded Vietnamese accent.

‘No problems. Eli, can you hang back for a minute?’

Her son nodded as Iromi and Olina said a quick farewell and logged off.

‘What’s up, Mum?’

‘When you wrap up your articles for today, I want you to spend some time finding all the initial reports that were published when Gillian first went missing. I want everything, plus I need to know what happened to her husband and kids. Where did they move to? What are they doing now? Anything you can find would be helpful.’

‘Sure thing, Mum.’

‘And Eli?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Don’t ever wear that shirt to a meeting again.’

It was mid-afternoon, the team had filed their stories, and Brooke needed a little afternoon pick-me-up to get her through the next hour of sub-edits. Gillian Chance had been top of her mind all day, and while Brooke’s fingers had itched to pick up the phone and call Constable Jones every hour since they’d last spoken, she resisted. The cops needed time to do their job, and she had a hefty to-do list of her own that needed attention. And yet, it had been six hours since they’d last spoken ... Brooke pulled out her phone and dialled the station.

‘What?’ His gruff voice filled her ear.

‘Bad shift?’ she asked, flipping off the jug mid-boil; near enough was good enough.

‘Not the worst, but not the best,’ he sighed. ‘I’m assuming you’re after an update?’

‘You bet ya. Is Gillian at the station or the hospital? What happened?’

Jones sighed again. ‘Still in hospital. The leg injury was pretty severe; she was all cut up.’

‘Jesus.’ Brooke imagined Gillian breaking a window, crawling over its jagged glass, outrunning dusty, rabid dogs, and scrambling over a chain-link fence to freedom: a cliché montage worthy of a thousand clicks.

‘Right?’

‘But what did she *say*? What’s the story? Has she been questioned?’ Brooke pressed.

‘Barely. Far as I know, Chance has spent the day with doctors and psychs. Detective Ashen was the initial investigator way back when, so she’s staked her

claim on this one. She's sweating bullets, practically set up camp outside Gillian's room, waiting to get the green light from doctors so that she can question her. The sooner we talk to her, the sooner we can get that psycho prick.'

Brooke didn't want to point out that it was probably already too late. It had been, what, nine hours since Gillian returned to town? Her escape would have happened well before then. If there was a psycho killer, he would have shut up shop quick and disappeared into the bush. A small shudder rippled up her spine at the idea that he'd gotten away and might never be caught—adding yet another dark tale to the Outback Killers genre.

'Anyone else know about this yet?' she asked. She needed to be the first person to publish; losing the scoop to another news outlet would be disastrous.

'Not as far as I know, but it's only a matter of time until word gets out. Junior nurses, medical interns—hell—another patient could recognise her.'

'How long will the hospital keep her?' She knew it was a dumb question, but sometimes dumb questions led to useful answers.

Jones snorted. 'I don't know, Sasala, how long does it take to recover from ten years of being held captive and abused?'

'So, you're thinking more than twenty-four hours?'

The line went dead.

The next day, Eli sent an email with over fifteen attachments, and Brooke read every one of them. Plus, the additional info embedded within the email itself, including links to all of the family members' social media accounts. Gillian's husband and kids had made a new life for themselves in Cairns. The kids, now in their late teens, looked remarkably un-traumatised. Or at least, that's how they seemed in the smiling photos on various online accounts.

Fortunately, Gillian's parents still lived in town. Brooke had seen them sharing a quiet dinner at the Rogathella Hotel's Bar and Grill just last month. Eli's research confirmed a few other facts that Brooke had also known: Gillian hadn't grown up here. Her parents had moved to Rogathella in the mid-nineties, presumably during the mining boom, and Gillian had followed them in 2014. Perhaps she'd come to town to assist her aging parents? Maybe she was also chasing mining money, though Rogathella was going through a downturn that year. The cost of housing had

dipped, jobs were harder to come by, fly-in fly-out work had reduced, but, of course, people came and went all the time.

Though Brooke knew many people in town, it didn't mean that she knew where everyone lived. She'd asked Constable Jones for Gillian's parent's address, knowing there was no way he'd give it to her, and she was right. But Eli had found that, too. Sometimes it frightened Brooke what that kid was able to dig up.

In-person interviews were rare these days, and it had been a decade since Brooke had last done a cold doorknock, but there wasn't that much to it. You get through it the same way you get through any other challenge: don't think about it, just do it. It was early morning, but not too early to knock on a stranger's door. Brooke picked up her handbag and threw in her phone, pad, and pen.

Ten minutes later, she and Ote were sitting outside 62 Oak Street. The bravado she'd felt in the safety of her office had now turned to jelly. She recalled reading a social media post that inspired hundreds of comments from local concerned residents; Gillian's disappearance had, understandably, caused widespread alarm in the community. Women stopped going out at night—even in groups—and for a while they no longer walked or caught cabs alone. School girls left their bikes in garages to gather dust, and doors were locked even when everyone was home. The local locksmiths profited, experiencing a boom in sales and services. Brooke recalled her hesitation when Bonnie had asked to go to a primary school graduation party—it had astounded her that someone was even *throwing* a graduation party.

Turn on the aircon, please; if we're going to delay the inevitable we should at least be comfortable.

Brooke popped open her car door to let in a little air. She pulled down the sun visor and checked her hair and make-up, even though both were freshly done. The grooming had failed to conceal the puffiness of her eyes. She'd tossed and turned most of the night as her mind bounced from thought to thought. The pressure to get today's interview right was immense. First, Brooke *had* to secure the story; publishing Gillian's account would give Brooke's site a gigantic boost. Second, Gillian was a victim. The last thing Brooke wanted to do was slip up and say something that would offend Gillian or cause the interview to come to a halt. The only problem was that Brooke had no idea *what* had happened to her; preparing to interview a victim with an unknown level of trauma only compounded Brooke's anxiety. Her sleep had been restless; her turbulent mind raced with questions that

could not be answered in the dark of her bedroom: What had happened to Gillian? What violations—what violence did she experience? Was it wise for her to be speaking to a journalist? What if Brooke asked something that triggered Gillian into a downward spiral? What if she had a mental breakdown? Shouldn't Gillian be speaking to a therapist? Shouldn't she have *years* of therapy before speaking to the media—if ever? Would Brooke be liable if anything went wrong during or preceding the interview?

Are you ready, my heart? Ote asked, though her eyes were trained on the house beyond the low chain-link fence.

'No. Yes.' Brooke puffed out her cheeks. 'Alright, let's go.'

She was a journalist, her job was to get the story, and that was why she was here. The public had a right to know. *Do they?* her inner mother asked. *Think of the traffic. You have professional—and personal—obligations to uphold.* Her questions would be strategic, sensitive, and mindful, but she would still ask them. She would get her story; it was her responsibility to ask the questions that everyone wanted answers to.

Need a pep talk?

'No.' She took a deep breath and stepped out of the car. Ote followed, jumping over the driver's seat and out the door behind her. Michael and Bernice Morgan lived in a typical Rogathella house: rendered walls, small, pale, and raised on stilts. The grass was dry and mostly dead, but the garden beds seemed well tended. Reaching back into the car, Brooke grabbed her handbag, and checked again that her electronic notepad, pen, and mobile phone were all there. She noticed that her hands were shaking slightly; interviewing Gillian could change everything.

I'll be there with you.

'That will be up to the Morgans.' Brooke crossed the dusty yard, up the small steps that led to the verandah, and knocked on the sliding glass door. They were home; she could hear movement behind the glass, but the curtain that was pulled across the front door suggested, understandably, that they didn't want guests.

Hushed voices mumbled behind the wall, and a curtain that covered a small round window on the other end of the verandah drew back and then quickly closed again. Brooke considered saying something but decided to wait it out instead. The Morgans had lived here for five decades. They were subscribers to *Rogathella Essential* (Brooke had checked earlier that morning); they knew who she was—her

face was on the newsletter's header. Another moment passed and the curtain that concealed the house beyond it swished aside as the glass door opened.

'Good morning, Brooke.' Mrs Morgan was wearing a blue dress speckled with white flowers. Her curly grey hair was still damp and smelling of shampoo. Her lipstick was pale pink. Brooke took a mental picture of these small details; it's the details that can make a story really pop.

'Good morning, Bernice. I assume you know why I am here.'

'Yes, but I'm afraid you've wasted your time, dear. I don't want Gillian speaking to the press, and she doesn't want to speak to them either.' She started sliding the glass door closed. Brooke grabbed it.

'Mrs Morgan, Bernice—can I call you that? Great. Bernice, Gillian's disappearance has haunted this town for a decade. Trust me, no one will present her story with more respect and reverence than me.' *Let me in, please, God, say yes to this interview.* Brooke pleaded with her eyes, then braced herself as Bernice's own turned cold.

'The answer is no.'

'Bernice,' Brook began, split between motherly admiration and her own agenda, 'I can appreciate that you and Gillian want to be left alone, but I won't be the last journalist to knock on your door. There's only one way for this nightmare to end, and that's for Gillian to share her story. It will be headline news for a day, and by Wednesday they'll be back to talking about fuel prices and how this is the hottest summer on record. So, what do you say?'

Her breath caught in her throat. A woman dressed in a loose-fitting smock appeared behind Mrs Morgan. *Gillian.* Brooke recognised her instantly from the photograph that every media and news outlet in the nation had used. Missing persons' photos always had a particularly haunting quality to them: grainy headshots of the victim facing the camera and smiling, though the smile didn't reach their eyes, with their head tilted just so. Sometimes she'd see photos of herself, or even one of the triplets, that would spark the irrational thought: *that's a missing person photo.* It had been ten years since Gillian's disappearance, but physically she'd changed very little. Her olive skin had darkened, her thick black hair was now streaked with grey, sunspots dotted her arms, and the flesh around her mouth and jaw had loosened slightly. Brooke was disappointed to see that she was not pale or thin and that her wrists and ankles weren't bruised or marked by restraints.

‘Hi Gillian,’ Brooke said. I don’t know if you know me, but my name is Brooke Sasala. Would you be willing to sit down with me and answer a few questions?’

The uncertainty didn’t leave her eyes, but she did step forward. Ote’s tail started swaying at the prospect of an easy win. The movement caught Gillian’s eyes and she raised her hand as if warding off an attack. ‘No questions. Go away, and take that *thing* with you.’

The bristles on the back of Brooke’s neck stood up. She suppressed the instinctive desire to defend Ote. Without needing instruction from her companion, Ote turned around, trotted down the stairs, and made herself comfortable beneath the skeletal shade of a dying raintree. Irony.

‘Please, Gillian,’ Brooke began, hoping she sounded sincere. ‘This isn’t about me. Your story is an important one; it’s a story that could change people’s lives. It could *save* people’s lives. I’m not here to make a spectacle out of your experience, I’m here so that you can be a voice for the voiceless.’

Bernice glanced back over her shoulder, sharing a silent exchange with her daughter. Gillian nodded, once.

‘Are you *sure*?’ Bernice asked.

Again, Gillian nodded. ‘But the non-wolf stays outside.’

‘Roger.’ Brooke mouthed a silent apology to Ote and stepped into the house.

The Morgans lived in a simple kit home that looked little bigger than two shipping containers welded together. The front room was a combined open kitchen, dining, and lounge area with a four-person table at its centre. An older man occupied one of the seats, and a tablet lay flat on the place setting before him. Brooke’s stomach tightened. He was reading an article she’d published on *The Gist* yesterday. Since he was outside her target audience, Brooke was unsure if he was an outlier or conducting research.

‘Hello,’ she said warily, receiving a gruff humph in reply.

‘This is my husband, Michael.’ Bernice gestured towards the man, as if Brooke needed clarification.

Brooke scanned the rest of the house, looking for the ideal location, before settling on the living space. Couches: perfect. Comfortable, casual, like they were two old friends catching up after losing touch. Without bothering to wait for an invitation, Brooke plunked herself down on the beige three-seater. She glanced up at

her star source, whose loose floral dress was similar to her mother's. *It probably is her mother's*, she thought sadly. Looking at Gillian was strange, like seeing a one-time celebrity. That face had become a common sight in the weeks following her abduction, appearing on noticeboards, online community pages, television, and, of course, Brooke's own website. She'd never seen Gillian in person before she disappeared and she never expected to see her after—and yet, here they were, time and expectation defying all odds.

Gillian lingered beside her father for a moment, as if still deciding whether this was a good idea. She did not look like a woman who had been held captive for longer than most rape sentences. She was wary, certainly, and obviously uncomfortable, but she wasn't *broken*. Brooke dropped the assumption that Gillian was a generic woman in a crime movie; she was an actual person. Brooke was about to invite her over to the couch, as though this was her house, her couch, when Bernice asked if anyone would like a cup of tea.

Thank God. 'That would be lovely,' Brooke spoke for the room. *No point in playing coy*, she thought, as she pulled out the electronic notepad from her handbag. 'Would you like to take a seat?' she asked while trying to ignore the dampness of her palms and the way her mind was hopping from one question to the next. Where should she begin? What would be a good warm-up question? How do you *lean* into a discussion about violence, sexual abuse, and trauma?

Thankfully, Gillian's father spoke up first. 'I hear rain's on the way tonight.'

'I hadn't heard that,' Brooke replied, 'but we sure need it: the dam is precariously low.' Her mind split back to an exposition piece she'd posted in last month's newsletter about the town's revolt against further water restrictions despite the fact that the mine was responsible for draining seventy percent of the dam. She cast the now-ancient article aside: it couldn't help her now.

'There we go.' Bernice plonked an inspired smoko tray down on the coffee table. Though the gesture was hospitable, the slight flare of her nostrils, sucked in cheeks, and pursed lips told a different story. Brooke noted that she hadn't been asked whether she preferred her tea white or black, or if she took sugar, but after taking in the full spread that Bernice had already laid out on the coffee table—a creamer filled with milk, a porcelain bowl of sugar and a plate of home-made cookies whose centres had fallen in—these questions of preferences became

unnecessary. Nervousness rattled in her chest. She'd expected today to be heart-breaking and uncomfortable, not fragile, guarded, edgy.

Gillian crossed the room and took a seat at the opposite end of the couch.

'Thanks, Bernice.' Brooke poured herself tea in an effort to appear at ease. To think that she was about to conduct the interview of her career on a perfectly normal day, in an unremarkable house, over a cup of tea, was surreal. There were no flashing lights, no designer furnishings, television executives, or audience members. In fact, few people knew that this conversation was even taking place.

She's still a person, her inner, better self said. *A person who's ready to tell her story*. The anxiety that had been choking Brooke since the moment she'd awoken that morning eased, and her chest opened up with the first real breath she'd taken all day.

'I'm a bit nervous,' she said. Somehow the admission expelled the worry.

Gillian sipped her tea, the edges of her mouth hinting at a withheld smile.

Brooke pulled her tape recorder towards Gillian and hit the record button. Overwhelmed by her own expectations, Brooke returned to basics with the advice she'd first received from her former editor at *The Rogathella Star*: the best place to start is usually at the beginning. 'Gillian, can you tell me a little bit about your life before June 2035?'

Gillian's face went momentarily blank, but after some gentle coaxing, she slowly shared fragments from her past. Her voice was detached as she spoke about her work, family, and the minutiae of normal life, and yet, the sound of it relaxed the tension that had previously filled the room. When Mr Morgan's shoulders finally dropped and Mrs Morgan made moves to clean up the refreshments, Brooke steered the conversation towards its greater purpose.

'Now, if it's okay with you, I'd like to go back to the night of your abduction. I know this may be difficult, but can you please walk me through what happened that night?'

'I put the babies to sleep ...' Gillian began, then paused as her eyes glazed over.

'Go on.' Brooke leaned forward with the intention of placing her hand on the woman's knee, then thought better of it.

'I don't really see how this is important.'

'Details are everything.'

‘I don’t *actually* remember, but I used to have a routine: empty the kitchen bin, clean the litter tray, put the dishes away, those sorts of things. I would have had a shower, taken off my make-up, and refilled the kettle for the morning—all that stuff you used to do before bed.’

Brooke smiled. ‘Sounds familiar. What happened next?’

‘My husband would have been asleep; he always went to bed early. I *do* remember that he was snoring, and I couldn’t get to sleep and I started thinking.’

‘Thinking about what?’

‘Probably what to cook for dinner the next night, whether I had a clean uniform for the next day. If I had enough staff to cover night shift—I used to worry about that stuff. There were bigger questions, too, like what am I doing?’ She took a cautious sip of her tea, and her nose wrinkled with displeasure. When she set the cup back on the table, her sleeve lifted to reveal a bandage around her right biceps. Constable Jones had said she had a leg injury, and never mentioned anything about an arm, but Brooke couldn’t confirm the former, as Gillian’s dress fell well past her ankles.

Brooke scribbled Gillian’s comments onto her padlet, thinking she’d hit the journalistic jackpot: *tortured and articulate*.

‘I used to make James and Alex breakfast, cut the crust off their school sandwiches—how strange is that?—and I’d make Marcus his coffee. Then I’d go to work at the hospital. When I got home, I’d make dinner and do all those things I mentioned before: garbage, cat tray, dishes. Life was a revolving door of repeated but never completed tasks.’

Gillian shook her head. ‘I was lying in bed, Marcus was a chainsaw beside me, and I imagined myself getting out of bed, going to the back door, walking out, and not stopping.’

‘We had a cat, and it never seemed to be riddled with anxiety about how to be a cat. I do remember thinking’—she turned towards Bernice, who was hovering beside her husband—‘how, despite my best efforts, I’d wound up doing the exact same thing as my mother and my grandmother.’ Gillian reached for a glass of water, but rather than drink it, she held it between her hands. ‘Before I moved here, I worked for the Australian Wildlife Conservation Society, and I’d also been a scientist for Neo-Earth technologies, did you know that?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Brooke lied. Eli had included that titbit in his email. ‘I’d like to come back to that, but first I need to get something straight. Gillian, are you telling me that you left your home on the night of June 27, 2035 *voluntarily*?’ She kept her eyes on the tablet in her lap, hoping to conceal any hint of alarm.

‘I am; I did. I couldn’t find what I needed while living that life.’

You abandoned your family because of your cat? There is no psychopath? You’ve been alive and well this whole time? Brooke suppressed the judgemental thoughts before they could manifest on her face. It wasn’t the first time an interviewee had thrown her a curveball. The story might still be salvageable, but she’d only know once she’d gotten the whole story. ‘Let me see if I understand: you left your family to find yourself?’

‘I left *society*. I couldn’t find out who I was while living in that system. The only way I could figure that out was if I left.’

‘But ... how have you been surviving?’ Brooke tried to imagine sleeping on the ground instead of a bed—she couldn’t.

‘It’s been harder lately. The drought has meant that many riverbeds and creeks have run dry. No rain means plants die, there are fewer insects, fewer animals ... though they’ve been dwindling for a while. The heat is exhausting at times, and then when we do get rain it’s too much: the soil is so dry it can’t absorb the rain, and you get run-off and floods. You go from seeking shelter as a way to get a little shade to finding somewhere to dry off.’

Brooke couldn’t hear any remorse in Gillian’s words. When she’d spoken about her family, it had been as if she was recounting a movie she’d seen a long time ago, not her own life. Now that she was talking about her experiences in the bush, she all but lit up. She had willfully abandoned her children and husband. She had let her husband become a suspect and her child grow up without their mother, and for what? To become queen of the outback?

‘So, where have you been these past ten years?’

‘I didn’t exactly have a map. When I walked out of town that night, I passed the German Club and I just keep walking. I’d find a watering hole and stay until I felt the need to move on.’

‘Right.’ Brooke’s reply hung in the air. It sent her mind into a boggle, imagining the husband being grilled in a police station while Gillian wandered

through the bush. ‘Did you see the search parties?’ There had been search parties, hadn’t there? Surely? ‘Did you try to evade them?’

‘If there were search parties, I never saw them. I don’t think you understand how big it is out there. It’s not that hard to disappear.’

‘Have you ... spoken to the police since you got back into town?’ If she had, it would have been nice for Jones to give Brooke the heads-up. The only silver lining of this bungled-up story was that they hadn’t advertised it, or even flagged the fact that Brooke was sitting down to interview the star of one of the nation’s most intriguing mysteries; no one was expecting this story except her team. But *this* was not *that* story. Brooke doubted her ability to salvage it, if she even wanted to. Gillian’s return was supposed to be the scoop of the decade, but now all Brooke had was another article about a married mother’s sojourn to enlightenment, a story about a woman who had willfully opted out of adult life regardless of the consequences. Admittedly, the interview might generate some conversation, but the story would only be of interest to the immediate community. *This* story would not boost traffic or revenue, or entice new advertisers.

Of course, if Brooke did go ahead and publish an interview, Gillian would be crucified. While much of what Gillian said made sense, theoretically, and Brooke was sure that many people could identify with the feelings of suffocation Gillian spoke of, few people would actually act on them and even fewer would *approve* of her actions. If the story was picked up by one of the bigger papers in the city, or a national broadcast, it was not the type of story that would linger in people’s minds. It was a story that people would gossip about for a week or two before forgetting about it entirely. A story about a woman taken from her home and held captive for ten years was a story worthy of national attention and sympathy. The horror of such an experience deserved to be printed on the homepage of every major online news website in the nation. The true version of Gillian’s story was not.

Brooke took another sip of her tea, hand shaking, and resolved to finish the interview as best she could. In light of this confession, her opinion of Gillian had been transformed and she wondered, cynically, if the woman had only agreed to the interview *because* she knew there was no story.

There was no rapist, sadist, masochist, or sicko; Gillian had not experienced psychological trauma or physical abuse since the night of her disappearance, at least not in the way that Brooke had expected. The woman’s mental health was

questionable, but in light of this confession, Brooke chose to speak frankly. ‘Gillian, if you left Rogathella ten years ago for ... whatever reason, why did you come back?’

She raised her chin slightly. ‘If I’d had the choice, I wouldn’t have.’ She cast a glance at her parents. Brooke couldn’t even imagine what conversations had passed between them in the last few days. ‘I was injured.’ She indicated the bandage wrapped around her arm.

‘What happened?’ Brooke gripped her pen, always at the ready.

‘I was attacked,’ Gillian said simply. ‘You said at the door that my story could help people. I don’t know about that, but people do need to know what’s happening with those companions.’

‘What do you mean?’ Brooke glanced to her side, only to remember that Ote was outside, panting beneath a tree in the front yard.

‘I was attacked by a companion.’

‘What?’ Brooke’s head pulled back. ‘That’s impossible. A companion would never attack a human.’

‘No, it’s not impossible. They’re *unlikely* to attack their human companions because they’re biologically engineered to love them, but there is nothing in their design to stop them from attacking a human.’

‘I think you must be mistaken. How do you know that it was a companion that attacked you?’

A look of exhaustion passed over Gillian’s face. ‘I’ve forgotten how tedious conversations can be,’ she murmured to herself. ‘One, because I’ve lived in the bush for ten years. I *know* what sorts of animals live there. Two, because wolves have never existed in Australia, and three, because companions are fundamentally different to wild animals. They’re not scared of humans.’

‘You’re saying a wolf companion attacked you?’

‘Yes.’

‘But ... why would a companion be out in the bush? Where was its owner?’

Gillian shrugged. ‘It didn’t look like it had an owner. At least not anymore. Its fur was matted; it was skinny. It attacked me during the night while I was sleeping.’

Brooke pressed a finger between her brows. ‘So, if you hadn’t been attacked by what was *supposedly* a companion, you wouldn’t be here now. You’d still be in the bush?’

‘Probably.’

‘Did you ... make a home?’

Gillian shook her head. ‘No, I roamed so that I could move with the seasons, though these days there’re usually only two seasons: hot and slightly less hot. You can’t stay put in any place too long anyway, because you start to use up resources and animals become too familiar with you; they start avoiding the area.’

‘What are your plans now? Are you going to return to the bush? Stay in Rogathella?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe I’ll stay here for a little bit, but not for long. I guess that depends on this story.’

‘What do you mean?’ Brooke’s fingers itched to grab her pen, but she remained frozen, afraid that any sudden movements might break the spell cast over this absurd conversation.

‘I don’t know if this companion was a one-off, but I doubt it. History would indicate that if there is one, there are usually many, cos, let’s be honest, we aren’t exactly shy when it comes to introducing new species and mucking up ecosystems. Also, the people at the hospital treated me like I was broken; they imagined that all of these horrible things had happened to me. The types of things that happen to women and children when they’re taken from their homes, but maybe people could gain something from this story, once they learn that I left because I wanted to and that I haven’t been locked up against my will but living in the bush by myself, sleeping beneath the stars, swimming in waterholes, and listening to the ruffle of eucalyptus trees at dusk. The psychs at the hospital seemed to understand, though they were also a little bit baffled and didn’t know what to say to me. I’m not a fool; I know most people will think I’m terrible because they gave me their unearned sympathy.’

Brooke turned towards Gillian’s parents. Their shame was obvious, but they’d stood by their daughter, knowing that Gillian’s story going public would impact on their lives as well.

Brooke shifted her attention back to Gillian. ‘Do you care?’

‘About what?’ Gillian asked.

‘What people think of you?’

‘I care about some people.’ Her gaze strayed to her parents. ‘But maybe I do have something to say. It’s fundamentally wrong, what Constant Companions are doing. When they bought out Neo-Earth Technologies and used *our* DNA samples to make those ... *things*—’ She shook her head. ‘You ask why I left. I should be asking you why you stay.’

Brooke slipped her padlet into her handbag and stood up. ‘Thank you so much for your time today, Gillian. I really appreciate it.’

‘That’s it?’ Gillian asked, her face guarded.

Brooke glanced at the Morgans and then their daughter. ‘Do you want this story published?’

Gillian shrugged. ‘I suppose. I doubt it will change anything, but maybe it could create a crack so that people might see a little differently.’

Brooke drummed her fingers on the strap of her handbag. ‘I’ll speak with my team. I’m sure you can appreciate that this is not the story I was expecting. I won’t make any promises, but I’ll be in touch.’

‘Maybe is a polite way of saying no.’

Brooke smiled, but rather than replying she turned to Bernice and Michael. ‘Thanks for letting me into your home. I’ll show myself out.’

The sun had shifted, and Ote had moved to a sliver of shade cast by an awning near the open garage.

Finally, she said, coming up onto all fours.

‘You have an inbuilt cooling system. Stop making a fuss.’ Brooke dug her key out and hit the button. In the car, she turned the aircon up full-bore.

You don’t seem happy, Ote said from the passenger seat.

A wave of dizziness came over Brooke, and she leaned forward, soaking up the cool. ‘Been here all my life; you’d think I’d be used to these summers. And no, I’m not happy.’

Want me to bite somebody?

‘That would be the opposite of helpful.’

What happened?

‘I’ll tell you at home, once I’ve poured a gin.’

Talk to the team; they’ll guide you.

‘I need a minute.’ Brooke leaned back into the chair. Maybe it was sitting on the Morgans’ couch or just sitting too much in general, but a dull ache had begun in her lower back. She’d need to take something for it as soon as she got home, stop the cramping before it progressed to the level of spasms, like last time.

‘Ready?’ She addressed the wolf beside her.

Always.

Brooke wasn’t sure what it was about the homestead, but she relished her Saturday afternoon visits. If Miley hadn’t offered excess vegetables to her and Keone, Brooke doubted she’d see her friends as often as she did. Life was just too complicated.

Brooke parked at the top of the drive beside Keone’s car. It was midsummer; the warm, long days had pushed their catch-ups back so late that they often met in the hour before twilight. Brooke had never failed to be amazed by Miley’s garden. What had once been a mass of weeds was now six large garden beds, each with an assortment of vegetables, herbs, and flowers. A small hive of native bees assisted with pollination, and once a year Miley was able to harvest a small jar of the most delicious honey Brooke had ever tasted, one that held notes of lavender and somehow invoked the colour of cornflower blue.

Even at this hour, Miley wore faded denim jeans, a loose button-up shirt, and a large-brimmed hat that flopped as she tiptoed awkwardly around the rows of greenery plucking out weeds. Vasilisa had been circling overhead but swooped down and landed on the corner of an empty trellis, the spring beans having died off two months earlier.

Brooke used to worry about Miley living up here alone, but now she couldn’t imagine Miley living anywhere else. She’d grown into the land with every planting season; its influence had crossed over into her art and the way she conducted herself. Brooke had joked that Miley was the most angst-less artist in the world, to which her friend had replied, *Or the most tired.*

Ote got out of the car after Brooke and followed her through the front gate. The wolf had come to love this weekly routine. While she never ventured far, she did enjoy snaking back and forth over the small incline behind Miley’s back fence, sitting beneath the shade of trees and, later, running through the garden and playfully snapping at flies and, bravely, the odd bee.

‘Heya!’ Miley waved as they approached the garden bed, and Brooke returned the gesture to her and Keone, who sat on the edge of the patio, her bare feet pressed into the *real* grass. Sissy, who was scurrying madly through the garden bed, became a flashing light among the densely packed leaves. *How curious*, Brooke noted, *that most of nature chooses to be green.*

‘Beetroots ready this week. Finally.’ Miley pulled a punnet out from the soil and held it up triumphantly, as though it were a fresh kill, the velvet purple balls still kissed by the earth.

‘Good, that should mix things up a little.’ Brooke crossed the western patio to where Keone was removing caterpillars off the silverbeet. ‘Got any good recipes?’ she asked Miley.

‘Haha.’ Twice, Miley had served dishes in which beetroot was the star component, and twice they’d been hard as rocks. Miley tossed the beets onto the grass near Keone, but it was Brooke who picked them up and carried them over to the spigot to rinse. ‘Where’s Leiko?’

Keone looked up from her task. ‘Got a migraine, decided to stay at home. Looks like it was my turn to leave this time.’

Brooke sidestepped the dig; she liked Leiko. ‘Not too bad, I hope?’

‘Just a bad night’s sleep; she’ll be fine.’

Brooke nodded, then turned on the tap and quickly rinsed off as much of the surface dirt as she could. Dirt-flecked water gathered in the metal drain, and Brooke kicked off her shoes to revel in its cool dampness. What water had Gillian been drinking and bathing in these last ten years? How did she avoid getting sick? Had she missed hot showers, running water, toilets?

‘I interviewed Gillian Chance the other day,’ Brooke began. She’d told Keone and Miley that the formerly missing woman had returned, but nothing else. She preferred to keep her stories to herself, at least until she knew the true shape of them.

‘Really? You got an *interview*?’ Miley looked up from her position in front of the empty bean trellis. ‘That poor woman. I can’t even imagine what she must have gone through.’

Brooke turned off the tap and laid the beets on the concrete to dry. ‘Don’t be. She wasn’t abducted.’

‘What?’ Keone and Miley said in unison.

‘She voluntarily walked out of the house; she abandoned her kids; she’s been living in the bush for ten years.’

Miley plonked down on the garden’s stone edging. ‘Wow. Jesus.’

‘What did she *say*?’ Keone asked, abandoning the bundle of green leaves she’d been working on.

‘Some bullshit about how she needed to find herself and how she couldn’t do that while being an active, contributing member of society.’ Brooke exhaled. ‘How could she walk out on her kids like that? Jesus, how do you *let* your husband become a suspect in *your* murder? Would it have killed her to leave a note?’

‘Maybe her husband was a shit husband.’ Keone shrugged. ‘Not the most radical of ideas. We can’t all be married to Anewa.’

Brooke rolled her eyes. ‘If he was so lousy she could have just divorced him. Look, I could probably get past that—*maybe*—but it’s the kids. Jesus, she let her kids think that she was dead, and not just that, but that she’d died *badly*. What horrific details they must have imagined. I don’t think I can publish this story.’

‘Brooke! Are you serious?’ The lines between Keone’s brows were so deep they looked like cuts. ‘This story is huge! It’s *better*.’

‘I can’t promote a narrative about a mother abandoning her kids. It’s a spectacle, trash, not real journalism.’

Miley snorted. ‘Journalism *is* spectacle, and Keone’s right: this story is better. People will be dying to know what prompted her to leave and how she’s been living.’ Miley looked out across her property. ‘I can’t imagine it was easy; she must be pretty tough.’

‘You can’t seriously be admiring her.’ Brooke bit back the need to point out that neither Miley nor Keone had kids; they didn’t understand what it was like to love someone so completely, so fiercely. Instead, she said, ‘I could never give up my kids, no matter how bad it got.’

Miley stood up, hands on her hips. ‘Maybe you’ve forgotten, Brooke, but I remember getting an incoherent phone call when the triplets must have been two, maybe three. You and Anewa had a massive fight and you walked out, drove to some motel three hours away.’

Heat blazed a trail along Brooke’s spine; there was nothing she hated more than having something thrown back in her face. ‘That’s different. I didn’t *leave*

them—I just needed a break! I hadn't slept in *years*; I had barely any maternity leave after the kids were born, and I was totally burnt out. Fried.'

'Maybe Gillian was, too, and maybe she didn't have access to the support she needed to stay. And maybe Gillian is just a different person altogether. Staying may have been the right thing for you—'

'Of course it was.'

'But it may not have been for Gillian.'

Brooke shook her head. 'I get what you're staying, but I don't agree.'

'And you don't have to.' Miley, always the peacemaker. 'But it is a helluva story. Don't give it up just because you don't *approve*. Just think of all the traffic your site will get.'

'I'll think about it,' Brooke said. She wasn't used to being scolded by Miley. When she needed an impartial opinion, it was Keone she went to, but becoming self-sufficient had developed Miley's confidence and trust in herself. She'd always been accepting of others, only now she followed her words of comfort with a counterpoint.

Miley hauled herself off the stone, stepped over to another garden bed, and resumed foraging. She always did the picking, as she had an eye for when a veggie needed another few days and when it was good for eating. Keone, too, returned to her task of checking the greens for insects.

'You staying for dinner tonight?' Miley called out while inspecting the cherry tomatoes.

'Not tonight.' Brooke hesitated. 'I gave the kids a night off during the week, and they said they'd make it up to me tonight.'

'What're they cooking?' Keone looked up, face open and calm.

'Something with beets, I guess.'

The sky was streaked with purple-and-pink light when Ote and Brooke headed to their car. Keone had decided to stay for dinner, which meant that she'd be cooking, so she was busy slicing carrots in the kitchen when Miley followed Brooke out to the car. Brooke slid her produce box onto the back seat and then opened the passenger side for Ote. Looking out over the street, she turned to Miley. 'Does Jasper still live down the road?'

'Yeah,' Miley answered, a note of confusion in her voice. 'Why? You going to write a story on him?'

‘You never know,’ Brooke replied, still sore that he refused to be interviewed. A feature article about a farmer and his natural dingo would pay for the roof to be retiled. ‘I was just wondering after we saw him at the bookshop the other night.’

‘I see him every now and then. We exchange crops about once a month: a bunch of greens for a pumpkin. Occasionally he gives me an egg with a chook in it for Vasilisa.’

‘That’s kind.’

Miley shrugged. ‘Not like he’s going to eat it. Not yet anyway.’

Brooke smiled. ‘You ever wonder—’

‘Not anymore.’

This car smells like earth and wet leaves, Ote said from the passenger-side seat. *I like it.*

‘I don’t,’ Brooke said, pulling into the garage while simultaneously rolling down the window. The door opened and Anewa’s familiar face popped in. He was still in his high-vis work clothes, but for once his face was clean.

‘Want me to get that?’ he asked, stepping around the car. ‘Kids might be able to use some of it tonight.’

‘Yes, and hopefully,’ Brooke said as she slid out of the car with Ote following her. They stepped aside so Anewa could collect this week’s harvest from the backseat.

‘God, that smells good,’ he said, heaving the produce box into his arms. Ote nudged her companion’s hand, but Brooke ignored Ote’s tiny victory.

‘Well, I’m glad to see the kids haven’t burnt the house down yet.’

‘There’s still time,’ Anewa said in his best-worst French accent while waggling his eyebrows. He kissed her as he passed on his way back to the kitchen, lips tasting of beer.

It was her decision to come home, yet the disappointment of missing out on dinner with Keone and Miley remained. Life had become more complicated—and she lazier—as time got on, and while she knew that they did not need to be in constant contact for their friendships to survive, she also knew how easy it would be to let things slide. How quickly weeks turned into months. She hated to think of

friendship as another item in need of scheduling, but sometimes that was the only way to ensure she made time for the things that were important to her. For Brooke, the pack included Anewa and the kids, as well as Keone, Sissy, Leiko, Philippa, Miley and Vasilisa. Not all loves and not all losses were equal—she knew this, but her life *was* better with them.

The scent of buttery garlic and onion filled the kitchen with a promise of good things to come. Brooke's mouth watered with anticipation. An afternoon spent leisurely washing vegetables had made her irrationally hungry but also proud. Anewa's wage would easily cover their food bills. Though she might not be able to *buy* groceries with the money she earned, she took pleasure in knowing that she had found another way to provide for her family. Admittedly, through Miley's generosity.

Anewa slid the box onto the counter and pulled a stool up to the kitchen island in front of Harlow, who was busy slicing up capsicum that, two hours ago, had been hanging on a vine. Bonnie was standing in front of the stovetop, back to the room, stirring the sizzling, popping saucepans, while Eli busied himself examining and then putting away the latest bounty.

'What's on the menu tonight?' Anewa asked, picking up his beer and rolling it between his hands.

'Tacos,' Bonnie replied over her shoulder. 'We're using up what was left over from last week.'

Harlow passed Bonnie the board of sliced capsicum; she scraped the green and red strips into the pan; Eli, thinking no one was watching, held a fistful of coriander to his nose, his eyelids drooping as he inhaled the almost-citrus aroma. A wave of fierce love washed over Brooke. As if sensing her sentimentality, Ote shifted closer, dipped her head, and butted it against her companion's open hand.

'Oh, would you like a pat, would you?' She scratched the playful instigator behind the ears without waiting for a reply.

Ote's tongue fell from the side of her mouth as she panted with obvious pleasure. Against the wall opposite them, Frances, Zander, and Congo lay sprawled along the specialty 'dog bench' Anewa had installed a few years ago.

'Smells like a den in here.' She directed the comment towards her children's companions.

Congo's ears perked up and he barked. Unlike Bonnie, he was very talkative. At times, Brooke would have done anything to know *exactly* what he said, rather than relying on Bonnie's translations, and to know what his voice sounded like. When she'd asked Bonnie, her daughter replied, 'Kind of like me, but not the me on an audio recording, the me in my head.' An impressive description that answered the question specifically while failing to improve understanding.

Brooke pointed to the beer in Anewa's hand. 'You got one of those for me?'

He winked. 'Anything for the *kwin* of the pack.'

Brooke rolled her eyes but thanked him when he pressed a cold beer into her hand. 'Let's have them on the verandah; if I'm not cooking then I don't want to be in the kitchen.'

Anewa opened the back door and Ote slipped out, followed quickly by Congo, Zander, and Frances. Brooke ran a hand down the length of Anewa's arm as she stepped out onto the back deck. The sun was completely set now, and though there would be little for the wolves to hunt, Brooke knew how much they enjoyed being outside at night. Admittedly, she was much the same; it was by far the coolest part of the day. Ote had bolted down the steps and into the yard, the rest of the pack following her as they all sniffed the ground excitedly and then began playing with one another. To someone else, it would have looked as if they were fighting, bouncing on top of one another, yipping and jumping in the air, but their ears were pricked forward with playful alertness, not flat against their heads in warning, and their tails swayed side to side with excitement instead of sticking straight out like lances.

Anewa sat on the top step and watched the ruckus. Brooke took her place beside him and, as she did, he reached an arm out to pull her close. They were silent, contentedly watching the performance. Anewa had never wanted a companion. He hadn't *warmed* towards the wolves; instead, his attitude was more of high tolerance. He didn't love them, but he knew that Brooke and the kids did, even though his opinions on them hadn't changed. He'd never asked Brooke to give up Ote—though he had asked, on many occasions, for her to explain exactly *why* she wanted one—and he hadn't banned the kids from getting them when they were ten, the last in their class. Still, it couldn't be easy living in a house with beings you did not love, or even like, but tolerated for the sake of others.

'Have you ever thought of leaving us?' Brooke asked.

Anewa jolted. ‘What’s this, *meri*?’

Brooke sat back so she could look up into his face. She knew the answer, or at least she thought she did, and she hoped her husband knew *her* well enough to not prove her wrong. And yet, she also wanted him to be honest, to trust that what he said was true. ‘Me, the publications, the kids, four wolves—it’s a lot. Things are smooth-ish now, but they haven’t always been that way. Did you ever think of leaving when I got Ote, or when the kids were young and everything felt so *impossible*, or when we agreed to buy them companions, and you became the odd one out? You’re a man whose family shares their secrets with someone else. Did you ever think: *I can’t do this anymore?*’

Anewa sat back and leaned against the post. It was dark, but Brooke could still make out the features of his face: flat nose, round chin, hooded eyes shadowed by night. He didn’t answer straightaway, so she knew he was taking her seriously.

The wolves continued to yip in the yard. A slight breeze stirred the leaves, and their rustling sounded almost like rain. Nature imitating nature.

‘Not in any way that mattered. Sometimes you think about how life could have turned out this way or that, but I like my life. Sometimes ...’ he hesitated, and Brooke felt her eyes widen as if preparing for a blow. ‘I wonder if *having* kids was right. Their lives will be harder than ours; things are changing all the time.’

‘Things are always changing.’

‘I can’t imagine us without them, but is that selfish, Ookie, to want them here with me?’

Brooke leaned back against him; it felt like decades since he’d last used that pet name. ‘I worry about that too.’

‘And what about you?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘You ever thought about leaving us?’

In the imagined reel of *Gillian’s Great Escape*, Brooke replaced the star with herself. What would it have been like to wake in the night, slip out the back door, and disappear into the bush?

She shook her head. ‘I’ve never regretted having the kids, though I know what you mean about their lives being harder. I don’t think it was a mistake to have them.’ Now it was her turn to hesitate, and she felt Anewa stiffen beside her. ‘There have been moments, especially when the kids were younger, when I was

overwhelmed and so, so tired and angry. Even now I have days when I imagine what it would be like to just pack up and leave ... Admittedly, that's more to do with work.' She fumbled with the effort of concentrating a life of feelings and reflections into tidy, coherent sentences. 'When the kitchen sink is full of dirty dishes, the laundry basket is vomiting clothes, and there're a million other things I would rather be doing than dealing with all that—sometimes, then, I imagine leaving—but I would never actually do it. I could never leave the kids.' She put the now-empty beer bottle beside her and squeezed Anewa's knee. 'And I want you with me, too. Even when it's hard.'

'Asking the kids to clean up after themselves would be less dramatic,' Anewa finished his beer and set it down beside his wife's.

'Yes, but one *does* get sick of asking.'

They fell quiet. The pack had calmed down: Frances was sitting in the middle of the lawn, her eyes scanning the faux hedges, while the other wolves sniffed the ground and explored the familiar terrain of the backyard. Ote trotted across the lawn, stopping at the bottom step.

I'm hungry.

'You've already eaten.'

I have?

'You had a carrot at Miley's place.'

That doesn't count.

'Everything counts.'

You tease me.

'Only sometimes.'

I can wait if you and Anewa ...

'Will you survive another few minutes?'

Without comment, Ote turned and went to join the rest of the pack.

'Go on, feed her. It's okay.'

She shook her head. 'No, just a few more minutes. I think you're right, though, this version of our lives has turned out pretty good.'

He squeezed her against him. 'That *meri* really got under your skin, didn't she? You going to run the article on her?'

Brooke shook her head. 'No. I just ... can't.'

'It's a big story.'

She shrugged. 'I'll find another.'

From the middle of the lawn, Ote swivelled her head. Her eye reflected the light from the house behind them. A small whine hummed in her throat.

'Alright, hint taken.' She slapped Anewa's knee and stood up; Ote bounded up the stairs after her companion as they stepped into the house together.

Mining other sites for news stories wasn't the best way to find inspiration, but sometimes you have no other choice. Brooke cycled through the usual trusted publications. She'd been burnt once before using an article as the basis for an op-piece, only to have a reader point out that her argument was fundamentally flawed. It was becoming increasingly difficult to find impartial news sources. In fact, she wasn't even sure she knew what that meant anymore. She had ten minutes until the team's morning meeting. Her padlet lay open on the desk beside her, and her electric pen was in hand, ready to jot down any news items that she could add her own spin to for *The Gist*, or could find a local angle on for *Rogathella Essential*. She'd made a few notes on a socialist rally in the States that got out of hand, and a sister protest that had been held in Melbourne, though few details were provided about that. Another article about increasing asthma rates in children could be interesting. She made a note for Eli to follow up on that one to see if it was a world-wide trend or just an Australian one. Locals had been talking about the impact of the mine on residents' health since the eighties. It wouldn't be hard to massage that piece into an article that Rogathella readers would be interested in.

She clicked over to a different news site, one run by a semi-local reporter in Townsville. Brooke's head hit the back of her seat. The photo that took up the greater part of the left-hand side of her screen was a split image. On the left was the original missing person's photo and, on the right, the face of the woman she'd interviewed last week. *Mother abandons kids to live in the bush*. It was a full feature. Brooke shot upright as her eyes moved to the stats displayed beneath the headline:

Views: 5,639. Comments: 2,667.

She clicked on the headline and checked the release time. Published four hours ago.

'Fuck.' It came out in a whisper, but on the other side of the room Ote's ears perked up. 'No.' She scrolled through the comments, which were a mixture of

admiration, shock, disapproval, and disgust. Sympathetic comments had been left by women who claimed they could relate; some were humorous, and many more were generic—clearly created by bots.

‘Fuck.’ Brooke struck the keyboard with an open hand.

Ote pounced out of her bed in the corner. *What is it, my heart?*

‘She took the story to someone else.’ As though the words had invoked it, a spiral of irrational possessiveness coursed through her. This was *her* story. She’d done the interview. How *dare* Gillian take the story to someone else?

Her phone pinged. A message from Eli. *Where are you?*

‘Shit.’ Brooke closed the web browser Ote had been perusing. The wolf wasn’t the best at reading, preferring to be read to, but had seen the picture and read the headline. Edging closer, Ote rested her head on her companion’s lap. Brooke knew the gesture was intended to be comforting, but it only irritated her. ‘Not now.’

Ote lifted her head, ears pressed back with concern. *The world is full of stories. You’ll find another.*

Brooke shook her head as she hit the logon button. Instantly, the team’s faces appeared on the screen.

‘Sorry, I’m late.’ She could feel the redness in her cheeks, hear the edge in her voice as the imaginary money she *could* have earned tallied in her mind.

‘Are you okay?’ Olina asked, slightly out of breath. Her video shook as she filmed herself; a background of thin bushes and tree trunks moved past her as she walked.

‘Yes, I ...’ but already her indignation started to diffuse, changed shape, morphed into shame. ‘I was just on *The Morning Star News* website and they’ve run a feature on Gillian. Nearly six thousand hits, and it only went up this morning.’

The team—Olina, Iromi, and Eli—was quiet, but the words *I told you so* emanated through each of their cameras.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, colourless and lame.

‘Chai, ma’am?’ the disembodied voice of a waitress said as a pot, cup, and saucer crossed Iromi’s screen.

‘Thank you, could you bring me some more water, please? Look, boss, you thought you were making the right decision,’ Iromi said in a way that insinuated that Brooke was the *only* one who had. ‘You didn’t know she would go to another journo. Didn’t you say you had to convince her to do the interview?’

‘I did.’

‘So, what changed?’ Olina asked, breath heavy with effort.

‘Where are you? What are you doing?’ Brooke asked.

‘Missed my walk this morning,’ she replied with a shrug. ‘So I’m getting it in now.’

Brooke shook her head. ‘What’s done is done, can’t do anything about it now. Eli, can you give us an update on analytics?’

Ignoring his mother’s question, Eli responded, ‘Why don’t you write a book about her?’

Brooke’s eyes narrowed. ‘A book?’

‘You’ve been banging on for years about a book. Maybe this is it. You’ve interviewed her once already—though, you probably have to suck it up and apologise for not running the story—and I bet she’s got heaps of great anecdotes, and people seem kind of interested, so why not?’

Brooke nodded woodenly. A book.

Iromi cleared her throat. ‘Sorry, Brooke, I’ve got a call with a source in thirty minutes, and I want to eat my lunch before then. Can I run through my pitches?’

Brooke nodded. ‘Yes, please, sorry Iromi. What do you have for us?’

Grovelling was not Brooke’s strong suit. Neither was apologising. Knowing she’d have to do both of these things in the next five minutes made her stomach turn.

It won’t be that hard to talk to her, it just seems like it, Ote said.

They were parked out the front of the Morgans’ home. Brooke had wondered if the street would be lined with reporters, people from city outlets and interstate publications, but those days were over. Who had the budget to send a journo anywhere, especially when a phone call or virtual meeting could provide you with all the story you needed to pump out a 500-word article?

‘I don’t know why you didn’t stay at home; it’s not like I can take you in with me. You know what she thinks of companions.’

Ote’s right ear flicked, her version of a shrug. *I’m here for moral support, and to make sure that you actually go in there and do what you said you were going to do and not disappear up to Miley’s place or Keone’s shop and come back this afternoon and say Gillian didn’t want to talk to you.*

‘You know me so well.’

As well as I know myself.

Brooke swung the door open and stepped out of the car. Her legs ached; how long had they been sitting there?

You know where to find me. Ote trotted over to the one green plant in the whole street, a native bottlebrush, and crawled beneath the low-lying branches to lie in the dappled light.

Brooke grabbed her handbag from the back seat. The corner of the padlet was sticking out, so she quickly tucked it a little further in. Gillian wasn’t a fool, but still, it would be nice to warm her up a little before she asked for a favour.

She caught a whiff of smoke as she crossed the front lawn. It was lunchtime, yes, but she couldn’t imagine anything worse than standing in front of a barbeque at this time of day. Brooke went up the three steps that led to the sliding front door and knocked, but there was no answer. From the backyard, she heard the clink of metal and the whoosh of rushing water. She leaned over the railing beside the front door and peered over the green Colorbond fence into the yard beyond it. Gillian was sitting beneath the shade of an African fig. She was cross-legged on a rug, which covered the dead grass, and to her side there was a small, controlled fire surrounded with rocks. She held a stick speared with hacked-up chunks of zucchini and capsicum in the open flame. Brooke considered calling out, but Gillian would have known that someone was there, would have heard her knocking. You don’t spend ten years in isolation because you enjoy receiving visitors. Back down the verandah steps, Brooke flicked open the latch on the fence, not bothering to wait for an invitation, and let herself in.

‘That’s considered trespassing,’ Gillian said, eyes on the flames.

‘I’m surprised you believe in property rights.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Can I sit?’ Brooke gestured to the rug.

‘Couldn’t stop you from coming in the yard, probably can’t stop you from doing that either.’

‘Probably not.’ Brooke sat down on the rug. Despite her semi-regular yoga practice, she could feel the twinge in her knees as she crossed her legs. ‘I see you’ve been speaking with Claire at *The Morning Star News*. The piece was ... not bad.’

Gillian stared into the flames.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t run the article. I’m sorry that I wasted your time with the interview and that you thought you needed to go elsewhere.’

‘I don’t care about the article. It makes little difference to me who publishes it.’ Gillian pulled the stick back and blew on the charred vegetables.

‘Alright.’ Brooke looped her handbag off her arm and placed it beside her.

‘I’d forgotten what it was like, what people were like. I thought I hadn’t, but I had.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You said my story could help people. Maybe it can; I don’t know. You said you wanted my story, but when it wasn’t what you expected, you dropped it. It was uncomfortable, inconvenient. You didn’t like what I had to say, so you decided not to write it.’

‘But Claire *did* like what you had to say?’

Gillian slipped a chunk of charred vegetable off the stick and bit into it.

‘Can’t remember the last time I ate zucchini.’

‘What have you been eating?’

‘Why? You want to write about it?’ Gillian looked at her for the first time.

It was as close to an opening as Brooke was likely to get. ‘I do, actually.’ She unzipped her handbag and pulled out the tablet. ‘I really am sorry. I made a mistake, but I think there is more we could do together. I’d like to write a book about you, if you’ll let me.’

‘You didn’t want to write an article about me. Why would you want to write a book?’

‘Because I read your piece in *The Morning Star*, and it was good, but I could see that it wasn’t telling the whole story.’

Gillian frowned, returned to her lunch. ‘I don’t know about that.’

‘We could write it together; it could be a collaboration. I was thinking it could be part memoir, part manual. We could splice moments from your life and anecdotes from your time in the bush—you must have so many—with practical advice about how to survive in the wild.’

‘Why would people want that?’

‘You told me yourself how difficult it was becoming to live off the land, and maybe things won’t come to that ... but life in towns and cities hasn’t been easy either. And if things get worse, the information in older bush-skills books won’t be

much help to us, not now. Nothing breeds knowledge like experience, and you have ten years on everyone else.'

'I really don't know that a *book* is the best way to go about this.'

'It's a start. So, what do you say?'

Gillian rested her now-empty stick beside her. Waves of heat wafted from the flames in front of them. Brooke could feel the perspiration on the top of her lips, and the dampness beneath her arms. Gillian, however, sat with her legs bent, level with her chest, elbows resting on her knees. She wasn't sweating at all.

'Okay, we'll write a book together. Technically, you'll do the writing, and I'll tell you what I know, what I think people should know.'

'Shake on it?' Brooke stretched out her hand.

Gillian hesitated, eyes narrowing. 'You'll either do it or you won't. Shaking hands will make little difference in the matter.' She picked up her stick and carefully slid a slice of wrinkled capsicum onto it. 'Hungry?'

Brooke had never been busier. Though she never became comfortable with Gillian's decision to leave her family, she was surprised by how much she enjoyed conducting research for the book. In fact, she'd forgotten what it was like to spend *time* on a piece. These days, the bulk of her writing was a weekly column for *The Gist*. She rarely conducted interviews. As the boss, her days were filled up with meetings, admin, and editing stories submitted by her team and writers on retainer. The in-depth, in-person interviews she conducted over many weeks as part of her research felt strangely indulgent. Gillian's parents had been warm and helpful; her ex-husband refused to comment—unsurprisingly; and her eldest son was willing, though admittedly he had few memories of his mother. His lack of useful material was unaided by being a nineteen-year-old introvert, but beggars can't be choosers. Brooke had forgotten about the power of the 'writer' label, the doors that it could open. Every cold email she sent to scientists and home innovators with public profiles had been answered. No discernible shape had emerged from all the material that she'd gathered, but she was relishing the gathering.

In the midst of all this, she'd also been working on a piece about wild constant companions. Sitting at her computer, she swivelled her mouse and clicked open the shared file her contract editor had been working on. Her most recent email

ended with the brief praise, *fascinating*, above her signature. Brooke scrolled through the article to give it a final once-over before making it live. The window beside the desk was open, letting in the slight cool of the morning, which was a novelty, as she'd usually have the fan on and the aircon pumping. It was early and the door to her office was ajar. A moment later, she could hear Ote's paws clicking on the hardwood floors as she came up the stairs and entered the room, still panting from her run.

'Has Anewa fed you?' she asked, eyes glued to the screen.

'He has,' her husband answered from the doorway.

It's true, Ote confirmed. And he was even more generous than you.

'I've got competition, do I?' Brooke smiled, then turned her attention to her husband. 'You left early this morning. Bad sleep?'

'Yeah, couldn't get comfortable, figured I'd take the comps for a run.'

Brooke hated this abbreviation, but the vision of a man racing through the mountains with four wolves on his tail never failed to amuse her. 'The others went with you?'

'Nah, Congo stayed with Bonnie.' Anewa leaned against the doorframe.

'Is everything okay?' Brooke's fingers itched to return to the article, finish the proofreading, and hit publish.

'I found some of your notes last night.' The statement sounded like an accusation, though Brooke wasn't sure why.

'What notes?' She leaned back in her chair, confused.

'The interview with Dr Zach Gregor is pretty impressive. You left the transcript open on your padlet in the kitchen.'

'It's for the book on Gillian and, well, a bit for this piece.' She nodded towards the computer. 'About the companions that ... I still don't know what to call them ... went rogue, escaped...'

'A bit like Gillian.'

Brooke smiled. 'You could say that.'

Anewa stepped into the office. 'Would you like me to read it?'

Back when she'd initially started *The Gist* and *Rogathella Essential*, before he'd been promoted to superintendent and become too busy, back before she'd created a team, Anewa had proofed Brooke's articles and newsletters. He wasn't an editor, writer, or grammarian, but he did pick up an embarrassing number of

inconsistencies, typos, and awkward phrases. Knowing the piece had already been proofed, but not wanting to turn away the kindness of his offer, or his (these days rare) desire to be involved, and maybe because she was feeling just a tad nostalgic herself, she rolled back her chair and let him take a seat.

He pulled a set of wireframe glasses out of his shirt pocket and collapsed into the chair. It felt strange to have him in her office, but nice all the same. Robbed of her job, Brooke hunkered down on the floor beside Ote's bed.

'He didn't offer much of a conclusion about why some companions aren't compatible with their humans,' Anewa said, referring to the transcript rather than the article he'd offered to check.

Brooke shrugged. 'Probably just comes down to mathematics. If I write a thousand articles, they're not all going to be good. Maybe some companions have a glitch.'

Anewa tilted his head in a way that suggested he was unconvinced. 'That's different, though. The companions are biologically engineered. They're machines; your work is art.'

Brooke overlooked the well-worn dig by focusing on Anewa's generous description of her work. 'There're always some faults, no matter how perfect a production line.'

Ote whimpered beside her. *I am not a product.*

'Not for me.' Brooke brushed her hand through the wolf's soft fur. 'Maybe it's got something to do with the human's personality. A rebellious streak, an intense desire for adventure or freedom? Maybe that's why some of them leave.'

'Has Ote ever talked to you about that?' Anewa clicked a button, and for a moment, Brooke feared he'd changed something, then he leaned back in the chair and faced her.

Brooke quirked an eyebrow at the wolf in question.

Ote rolled onto her side and lifted a paw, tail thumping.

'No,' Brooke said as she rubbed the wolf's belly. Knowing how Anewa felt about companions, she didn't like the direction this conversation was taking. She didn't have time to repeat their decade-old argument.

'Are they happy here with us?' Anewa murmured.

Brooke's brow pulled down. 'Of course.' Even as she said it, her mind flitted back to Jasper and his dingo, Lou-Lou, and Ote's fascination with that other creature's wildness.

I'm happy right now, Ote said, stretching her arms and legs to their full extent, as though she was flying.

'I should probably finish this piece.' Brooke stood and brushed the fur off her hands.

'Looks good to me, can't see anything wrong with it.'

She kissed him briefly, nose wrinkling against the pungent pepper of his sweat. 'You stink of man, go take a shower.'

He chuckled and kissed her again, with playful force, before disappearing into the hallway. Brooke grabbed a reusable cloth from the desk drawer and quickly ran it over her leather seat to remove any remaining sweat. Sitting down, she quickly scanned the piece, added some tags, ticked which ads she'd prefer to run, added the SEO keywords, and hit *publish*. She expected to feel a small rush, since it was her first true journalistic piece in who knows how long. Instead, her to-do list tugged at her sleeve, reminding her of its ever-present existence.

It was nearly nine when Brooke pulled out of the driveway. She'd hoped to leave earlier, knowing they were in for another hot day, only it had taken longer than expected to fill the extra water bottles Gillian had told her to pack. Ote was in the back seat, her head lolling out the window, enjoying the breeze when Brooke hit the accelerator.

It's like running really fast while staying totally still.

The first few times they'd gone out there, Ote had stayed at home, and though Gillian still showed her mistrust for the wolf, she tolerated her presence after Brooke had assured her, repeatedly, that she'd had Ote for twenty years and that there were few beings she knew better. Ote wasn't dangerous.

Gillian was waiting on the top step. She waved briefly before she clambered down and crossed the lawn. Her hair was pulled back from her high forehead with a bandanna; a loose t-shirt, shorts that ended above the knee, and bare feet completed the outfit. She looked more comfortable than she had when Brooke had first met her, dressed in a pale, delicate dress. She opened the car door and gingerly got into the

seat. Gillian believed that car drives were something to be tolerated, not enjoyed. She'd become accustomed to walking, thanks to her time in the bush, and while it was nice to give her much-abused feet a rest, driving was no longer her preferred method of travel.

Gillian had directed them to several different locations over the last few weeks; today they would visit a new spot. About thirty minutes out of town, they took a left-hand turn onto a dirt track, crossing a playa. Eventually, they pulled up at a site whose palette was various shades of black, auburn, clay, and deep brown. They could smell the lingering scent of smoke before they opened their doors.

The landscape here was row after row of skinny burnt trees, their bark now charcoal, their leaves dried and turned to crisps. Brooke imagined biting into one, crunchy as a kale chip. 'How long ago?' she asked.

'You can still feel the heat,' Gillian was crouched over a pile of debris, hands outstretched. 'Maybe a day or two.'

'Is it safe?' Brooke asked. 'Should we pick another location?'

Gillian shook her head. 'It will be fine. Might be able to point out some different things this way.'

Ote leapt over the centre console, out the still-open car door, and dashed towards a bush that she immediately pissed on.

Brooke popped the boot and pulled out her supplies: large hat, water bottle, pop-up dog bowl that she could attach to her belt, notepad and pen. She had tried to take notes on the padlet, but typing on the screen in daylight was cumbersome, as she had to balance the tablet on her knees while shielding the screen from the sun with one hand and writing with the other. Technology wasn't made for nature.

'Alright, let's go.' She snapped the boot shut, and Ote took off as though the sound was a gun at a starting line. Despite having already been for a run that morning, Ote bounded over the land as if she'd never been taken for a walk in her life, skidding to a halt and doubling back whenever a tantalising scent caught her attention.

'This way.' Gillian pointed through the blackened trees that resembled prison bars.

They walked together in silence. Brooke hadn't read any reports on the fire, and this one looked bad. If a sliver of green remained, she couldn't find it. The back of her neck prickled to think how close to town the fire had come. Property owners

would have been hit first. The thought of Miley's garden going up in flames, again, turned her mouth dry.

'Was this one of your favourite spots?' Brooke asked, distracting herself.

Gillian shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

They crossed a gentle rise. The vegetation that had surrounded this area was dry and cracked underfoot. How could the trees be this dense, this populous, and yet the ground so dry and lifeless? Before the fire, this location would have been shady, with occasional beefwood trees and gidgees snuggling together, their sparse branches allowing enough dappled light for the vegetation below to receive the sunshine it needed without being burnt by noon's heat. Ote was several metres ahead, nose to the ground, inspecting everything. As they began their ascent of the low rise, a dull ache pulsed in Brooke's calves. When they reached the top, Gillian stopped, hands on her hips. She wasn't an especially happy person, but in the bush she was transformed. She held a flattened hand over her eyes to block out the sun, and pointed to a river that cut through the valley.

'This is it,' she said, nodding towards a huge bundle of debris a hundred metres back from the creek. At first, Brooke thought the mass must have washed up after a storm, that it had been left behind when the water receded, but it was too far back for that. It wasn't until they descended the rise and approached the chaos of sticks that she realised what it was.

'You lived here?' she said, surveying the area with fresh eyes.

The leaves and debris that covered the western wall of the triangular hut had been transformed by the fire into a smattering of ash. Brooke had no idea how the entire hut hadn't gone up in smoke.

'How long?' she asked, taking in the area around them.

'In this location? Maybe three or four months. Once I find a river or stream, I try to stay put for as long as I can, but never too long.'

'Why?'

'Animals start to associate you with this waterhole, this place. They start to hang back. They don't come down to the water for a drink or closer to the bushes and shrubs for food. Firstly, I know how precious water is, and it makes me feel'—she hesitated for a moment—'uncomfortable to think they are missing out on what they need. But also, you know how the animals are dwindling? Seeing a kangaroo or wallaby is a minor miracle. It's been four years since I saw anything bigger: camel,

wild pig, emu, or deer. You're more likely to see rabbits and bush turkeys. Anyway, all I'm saying is that animals are hard to come by. When I walk, I almost never see them. Near a waterhole, I'll see at least one every week or two. But the longer I stay, the less frequently they appear. Animals talk, you know.'

Brooke smirked. 'I do.'

Gillian shook her head. 'You don't.'

Brooke swallowed the reply that pricked at the end of her tongue. She crouched down into the ramshackle hut. There was an assortment of tools bundled in the corner furthest from the damaged side: a wooden spoon, a rough chopping block, and a hollowed-out chunk that she could only assume was a bowl. On the ground, beside it, was a bed made from leaves.

'Why do you do this?' Brooke asked.

Gillian stuck her head in the entrance to understand what *this* meant. 'You can't sleep directly on the ground at night. You'll freeze.'

Brooke suppressed the need to fan her shirt; it was nearing midday and the temperature was at least forty degrees, though the app on her phone said it felt like forty-three. 'Even in summer?'

Gillian mashed her lips together. 'You probably wouldn't *freeze* in summer, but you'd be uncomfortable. You'd be surprised how quickly you can get a shiver up in the early hours of the morning.'

'Is this the last place you lived before coming back?'

'You mean before I was attacked by a companion? It is.'

Ote knew to keep her distance during these expeditions. Still, Brooke felt the need to protect her, to cover her ears from these words. She heard a rustling behind the debris hut and, through its wall of sticks and leaves, she saw Ote's grey coat as she rummaged around the burnt matter encircling the camp. *I'm fine*, Ote said, locking eyes with her companion. *Queen Jane amuses me.*

Queen Jane. Ote's pet name for the new addition to their pack.

Brooke ducked her head as she hobbled out of the hut. 'What's today's lesson? Are you going to show me how to build one of these?' She indicated the standing frame behind her. She could only imagine how much work went into constructing one, and she'd be lying if she said that she was looking forward to the activity. Thankfully, Gillian shook her head. 'After that fire, there won't be enough leaves to build anything worthwhile.'

Gillian pulled a small cloth from her pocket. ‘Today, I’ll show you how to get water, and maybe point out some edible plants ... if there’re any left.’

Brooke looked past Gillian’s shoulder, towards the stream behind her. If today’s lesson was about getting water, it was going to be a short one.

‘You okay, Ote?’ she called out, and the creature came around the side of the hut to sit on her haunches. Gillian had said that she rarely saw animals here, but this was also where she had been attacked. Who knew where that supposed companion was now.

What?

‘Don’t go too far, okay?’

Ote scuttled off to a nearby cluster of leafless trees whose trunks cast a bar of shadows across the ashen ground.

Over the course of the next hour, Brooke learnt how to collect water from unlikely places, pressing Gillian’s cloth into the crevice between two large rocks, protected from the sun by a rocky overhang, and then wringing what was soaked up into the makeshift bowl from the hut. With the same cloth, they sifted water from the stream into a battered pot that Gillian had stolen from a ‘grey nomad’ couple who’d nestled their caravan beside a series of connected streams—a water junction, as Gillian had described it—and made camp. This pot had replaced her original pot, that one she had stolen from a grazier while he slept alongside his cattle. ‘Probably out there protecting his lot from poachers; never would have occurred to him that someone might take his pot.’

‘What else did you steal?’ Brooke scooted back from the flames that Gillian was slowly feeding in preparation for boiling the water.

‘A good knife. That’s how I carved that bowl and spoon. I needed it for hunting. A few bits of rope. A few plastic bags.’

‘What did you need plastic bags for?’

The fire crackled and Gillian placed the short grid over it (another stolen object) followed by the pot of water. ‘To collect water. Whenever I left one water source to find another, I never knew how long it would take me. I would put the plastic bag around the branch of a eucalyptus tree, one that had a nice sunny position, and the next day it would have a handful or two of water in it.’

The water started to boil, and though Brooke’s thirst seemed to have gone unquenched since the moment they’d arrived, the idea of drinking boiled water on a

boiling hot day was unappealing. As if reading her mind, Gillian added, 'It will be cool by the time we've had some lunch.'

'I didn't bring anything,' Brooke said. She cast an eye towards Ote, who, left to her own devices, had grown bored and was skirting the edge of the stream, tail swishing in a playful manner that suggested the three-hour drive home would smell like wet dog.

Gillian stood up and pulled a handful of yellow tubular flowers and small, hairy, green, sausage-shaped fruits from her pocket. 'Mix this with the bulrush'—she indicated the water reeds with their flowers that clustered around the edge of the stream—'and you'll have a half-decent lunch.'

Brooke didn't believe her, but before she could protest, an almighty splash erupted from the stream beside them.

Ote's head popped up from beneath the water. Her wet fur was slicked back over her scalp and flattened beneath her jaw, shrinking her face and altering her appearance considerably in a way that reminded Brooke of the day Anewa had shaved off his locks and she couldn't look at him for a week without saying, *You don't look like yourself.*

Brooke stood up and dusted off her shorts. 'I'll get the grass then.'

Gillian's eyes narrowed. 'You might want a swim before lunch.'

Brooke shook her head. 'Not much for swimming.'

'But you do like to be clean.' Gillian pointed to Brooke's crotch. 'And I bet you don't want that all over your car seat.'

Brooke checked her cargo shorts. A wet, red patch spread between her legs. 'Shit,' she said, knowing the stain would not come out easily. 'I thought I wasn't due for another week.'

Gillian shrugged. 'I'm surprised you still get them.'

'I'm only forty-eight.' Her cheeks flamed.

Queen Jane lowered her eyes and returned to the task of shredding flowers in the cooling water.

Ote emerged from the lake and shook herself with enthusiasm; the water droplets splattered the backs of Brooke's legs. 'Don't imagine you have a tampon with you.' The comment was pure jest as Brooke made her way down to the lake. 'I have a couple of rags in the hut.'

Brooke shuddered as she kicked off her sneakers and thumbed her socks off her heels. She would not, under any circumstances, borrow Queen Jane's sanitary napkins.

It had been three days since Brooke's biopsy. She hadn't mentioned the unexpected bleed or the check-up to Anewa. She didn't have to; he'd been at work when she'd made the appointment. She did, however, tell Ote that she had a dentist's appointment—companions weren't allowed in dental surgeries. You never knew if they'd have a reaction to the sound of a drill or nip the dentist's ankle for causing pain to their companion. She didn't want to receive the results, and she didn't want to conduct her follow-up appointment at home, but she didn't want to be totally alone, either, which was why she asked Keone if she could use her office to take the call. Keone: the only person in the world who had any inkling that something was ... off. She'd left the bookstore early and offered to pick Brooke up on the way. An offer that Brooke declined. Keone was intensely private, another reason Brooke had asked her for the favour. She was unlikely to ask any probing questions, but car drives, like long walks, enticed people into deeper conversation than usual.

'You sure you don't need anything?' Keone stood in the doorway of her home office, hesitant to leave her friend. 'It's only a matter of time until Sissy asks me for a snack, so I'm happy to bring something in for you.'

Brooke clutched the mug of peppermint tea Keone had made for her and shook her head. 'I have everything I need, thank you.'

Keone's smile didn't reach her eyes. 'Come find me when you're done then,' she said, closing the door behind her.

Her office wasn't like Brooke's. It was small and dark, and the window faced a brick wall, which allowed in minimal light. The desk was short and bare. She checked the drawers for a notepad but, finding none, pulled out her padlet. It had a lock screen, she assured herself; anything she wrote down would be safe and secure. The doctor had sent a link to her email, and when she opened the chat there was nothing for her to look at except her own image projection on the screen. She looked tired, the light in the room doing nothing for her complexion. It seemed that she had aged ten years in a matter of two days, with hollowed eyes, gaunt cheeks, loose neck.

She'd seen a dozen loose Mostly Books bookmarks in one of the drawers. She retrieved one, folded it in half and used it to cover the laptop's camera.

The initial consultation was mortifying, not just for its invasiveness but because it had highlighted Brooke's incompetence.

'Have your periods been especially painful?' the gynaecologist had asked from her side of the desk.

Brooke wasn't sure how to answer that question. Her periods had always been painful, so she shrugged. 'Not especially.'

'Have you been bleeding more frequently?'

'No?' Brooke said, hating how her voice trailed up at the end as if she didn't know her own body.

'Have your periods been heavier, lasting longer than usual?'

She nodded. 'The last four have gone for ten days. And yes, heavier.'

'Pain during or bleeding after intercourse?'

'Yes.' Brooke's cheeks burned. Not at the intimacy of the question, but at how foolish she sounded, how answering these questions one after another made it obvious that *something was wrong*.

If the doctor held any judgement, she didn't show it. They'd scheduled a biopsy, which was unpleasant but not painful. Today, Brooke would receive the results.

'Brooke, are you there?' Dr Fischer's voice trickled through the computer's speakers.

'Yes, I am. How are you?' *How are you? Jesus.*

'I'm good. I can't see you, though. Do you have your camera off?'

'Oh.' Brooke blushed while removing the folded bookmark from the screen. 'Sorry about that.'

'No problem. I'm going to cut right to the chase, Brooke. We got your results back and, I'm sorry, but you have stage four cervical cancer.'

Brooke nodded and waited for the impact of the news to hit her. She felt nothing—not numb, just nothing; it was as if the doctor had said, *I like toast with strawberry jam*. 'What happens now?' She waited for the doc to rattle off a list of treatments starting with chemo and radiation—all that money poured into cancer research, and these remained her only options. Brooke filed away a possible op-ed on

cancer research and alternative treatments when Dr Fischer interrupted her mid-thought.

‘I’m sorry, Brooke, but there is no treatment.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Patients with cancer as developed as yours can live as long as nine months.’

‘Nine? *Can?*’

‘The average is three.’ The doctor folded her hands in front of her. ‘Some make it to six.’

‘Some.’

‘Do you have anyone there with you, Brooke, or is there someone you can call? I’m happy to have my staff call someone on your behalf if you’d like.’

Brooke shook her head. ‘That won’t be necessary, I’m at a friend’s house.’

‘Good,’ Dr Fischer said, looking genuinely pleased. She said something about follow-up appointments and additional tests, but Brooke had already tuned her out. For one, irrational moment, she felt a wave of profound relief: no more getting older. No more work. No more profit margins. No more counting calories. No more worrying about debt, website traffic, scheduling, climate change, corrupt politics, or what to cook for dinner. The good doctor said she’d email through some information and Brooke gave a stiff nod, knowing she’d never open it or read it. If she only had three, maybe six, months to live, she wasn’t going to waste a single second of her remaining reading time on a medical pdf. ‘Guess I’m never going to read *The Odyssey* or *Anna Karenina*.’ There’s a gap in the market, she thought, *Classic Literature Summaries for People Who Will Die Before Reaching the Acknowledgements Page*. She looked up at the computer monitor and was met again by her own reflection. When had the doctor logged off?

Brooke called Anewa from a park bench near their home: *don’t bring Ote*. The request piqued his interest with a hint of concern, but he made no further inquiry. He arrived soon after, and that was one of the best things about Rogathella, even after all this time; it never took longer than two radio songs to get anywhere. He sat on the park bench beside her, the sunlight picking up the streaks of wiry grey hair that grew from his temples.

‘You’ve never gone bald.’ She touched the strands that framed his broad face.

‘What’s going on, Brooke?’ Anewa asked, not unkindly, but clearly not interested in playing this game.

She told him then about her increasingly painful periods, unexpected bleeds, the doctor’s visit, the tests, the diagnosis, the three-maybe-six-month prognosis.

‘We’ll get a second opinion. Run more tests. *Meri belong mi.*’ Anewa’s calloused hand squeezed hers. ‘Bullshit there isn’t any treatment.’

‘I don’t know how to tell the kids.’

‘Together.’ Anewa’s gaze drifted to an empty playground. ‘You’ve probably interviewed someone who could coach us through the rest.’

Her laugh was a dry bark. ‘There is, actually, but I’m not ready to tell the kids yet. I want to tell Ote first.’ She felt Anewa flinch. She knew what he thought, knew that the familial hierarchy in his head was different from the one in hers. ‘It will be easier to tell Ote. Less emotional, less ...’ She ran a finger along the cuff of her sleeve. ‘She just accepts things better.’

Anewa nodded. And for a moment, she wondered if he was surprised that she’d told *him* first, the strange badge of honour of being the first one to know. They sat in mutual silence for a while, shoulders touching, backs pressed against the bench, the shade shifting as the sun rolled through the sky. The park was empty, the AstroTurf evergreen, the fake trees a still life of nostalgic gardening.

‘We should go,’ Anewa said after a while. ‘It will be getting late soon, and the kids will be wondering what we’re doing.’

Brooke shrugged; they’d know soon enough.

Ote was lying with her head on her paws at the top of the stairs when they pulled into the garage. She bounded across the lawn and was at the passenger-side door before Brooke even stuck her foot out.

You’re back, Ote said.

‘I am. Want to go for a walk?’ She glanced at Anewa, but his back was to her, halfway across the lawn.

Ote’s tail stopped swaying. *I always want to go for a walk.*

They followed the dirt path that ran behind the house and stopped at a series of rocks that were protected by the shadow of ghost gums and the rise above them.

‘I lied,’ Brooke said, taking a seat. ‘I met with a doctor today and they told me some bad news. I have cervical cancer, and I don’t have long to live.’

Ote, who was sitting on her haunches, moved forward to lay her head on Brooke’s lap. *Are you in pain, my heart?*

‘It will be easier to lie if you don’t ask any more questions.’

Will it become more painful?

Brooke shrugged, embarrassed again at her own ignorance. ‘Probably.’

Are you afraid?

She hadn’t been, but Ote’s directness stirred a queasiness in her stomach.

‘Yes.’

The vacuum cleaner scares me.

Brooke laughed. ‘I know.’

Ambulances, too.

‘I know that as well.’

How can I help?

‘You can call my mother for me.’ Her conflicted relationship with Rita had worsened since her father could no longer act as a buffer between them. His absence filled every conversation. ‘What will I say if she offers to fly up and see me?’

If you accept that you don’t know how someone will behave, then they can never surprise you.

‘Or disappoint you.’ Brooke stroked Ote’s head. Twenty years had passed, but Ote was still as nimble as on the day Brooke got her. Companions had extended life expectancies that matched their human counterparts’. Male companions lived until seventy-one, females until seventy-five. Ote would live for another twenty-seven years. *She’ll live longer without me than with me.* Brooke’s vision blurred. It was only now that she realised why she had told Ote before the children. Harlow, Eli, and Bonnie would be fine; they’d have to live the rest of their lives without their mother, but that was expected. Natural, even if it was arriving decades too early. They were grown; they had Anewa. The stitches that held them to her had loosened by inches with every passing year, giving them space to breathe and grow, to become themselves. She wasn’t their world anymore. Had she ever been?

‘Ote, what do you want to do when I go? We could see if Anewa could become your companion?’ The idea sounded even worse when she said it was allowed.

Ote lifted her head. *I don't want to be re-companied.*

'Okay. The kids won't be leaving anytime soon, so that won't change, but eventually they will leave, and it is important to me that I know who you'd like to go with. Eli, Harlow, or Bonnie?' She'd never heard of a person having two companions, but she supposed in this instance they wouldn't. Ote wouldn't be sent back to Constant Companions so that her nature could be readjusted to match one of the kids, a notion that made Brooke's skin crawl; instead, she'd be almost like a dog, unable to speak to anyone. But Ote wasn't a dog or a wolf. She was a creature designed for *human* companionship, for communication; if she weren't re-companied to *someone*, she'd be doomed to the isolation of her own mind.

I don't want to stay at the house after you're gone.

Brooke tried to catch the wolf's train of thought. 'Would you rather go live with Miley or Keone? I know how well you and Sissy get along.' Her chest tightened at the thought of telling them; Keone would be her usual stoic self; her backbone was made of stuff harder than any metal, but Miley...

Ote's gaze drifted beyond Brooke's shoulder. *I'd like to be rewilded, like Gillian, like the wolves that you wrote about.*

'Wolf,' Brooke corrected, unable to hide the horror and shock from her face. 'I really don't know if that's an option, Ote; I don't know if that's possible, or how it would even work.'

That wolf did.

'We don't actually *know* if it was a companion. We're just going off what Gillian said. Ote, you've never lived in the wild. You're not made for the wild, and I hate the idea of anything bad happening to you. Do you understand? Imagine if the situation was reversed.'

But you would never leave. You would never want to be rewilded.

It wasn't meant as an insult, but it stung anyway.

I am a wolf. My body was made for the wild. The rest I can learn.

'From whom? We can't exactly interview a real wolf.'

I am real. And there is plenty we could learn from Gillian. She knows about animals and what they do in the wild, and there're all those scientists you've been interviewing for the book. I'm sure there are others who would help.

'I don't know.' Brooke tried to calculate how much time this endeavour would consume: interviews, training, testing. The minutes of her life had tripled in

value, and, selfishly, she was unconvinced that this was how she wanted to spend her time. ‘How long have you been thinking about this?’

Ote held her gaze. *I’ve always wondered what it would be like to live as a member of a real pack.*

‘You are the member of a real pack,’ Brooke said fiercely.

It’s not the same. My survival is dependent on you, not Frances, Congo, or Zander. Anewa doesn’t even like us, let alone love us.

‘I can’t talk about this right now. I need to focus on the kids; Anewa and I are telling them tonight.’

Ote dipped her head in defeat and trotted back down the path to the house. Brooke wiped a hand across her forehead, dispersing the thin film of sweat. She could hear conversation drifting out the kitchen window: Anewa’s baritone and Bonnie’s lighter lilt. Despite being raised in Australia, the triplets had all caught a sprinkle of their father’s accent. Brooke pressed her hands against the rock beneath her, tethering herself to the earth and her own body; she willed time to stop so that she might slip a few stolen minutes into her pocket.

The blue light of the computer screen lit the entire office. It was nearly midnight, and the rest of the house was asleep. Somehow, Brooke had managed to sneak past Ote’s bed without waking her. Or perhaps the wolf had simply ignored her. Grief piled on top of her like a stack of blankets on a hot day, heavy and immobilising. The first layer was when she received her diagnosis. The second was telling Anewa. The third was learning that Ote wanted to be rewilded. The fourth was seeing the kid’s faces change as words turned into meaning and they realised that the future was no longer what it used to be.

Any one of these events could inspire sleeplessness. While she was eager to have the stain of this day behind her and her body was desperate for rest, her racing mind made that impossible. She opened a new tab on the computer and typed into the search engine: *free companions*. What came up was a slew of online ads from people looking to rehome their companions and info sheets on why you shouldn’t accept a companion that hasn’t been properly rehomed. *Companions aren’t like domestic animals. They can’t be gifted to a different home without first being aligned with*

their new companion. Failure to do so will lead to dissatisfaction for both human and animal companions.

Brooke returned to the search engine and typed in: *companions returned to the wild*. The search yielded countless results, but only a handful were useful. A news report from the UK stated that companions who had escaped or been released—the two terms used interchangeably throughout the article—had become commonplace in Iceland. However, conservation groups and environmental scientists were strongly against this practice and encouraged people to keep their companions in at night. If they sensed that their animal counterparts were unhappy, they should contact Constant Companions immediately. A table at the bottom of the website's page titled *Liked this?* displayed four similar news articles, one of which was an interview with a scientist who worked for a conservation organisation in Canada. Apparently, forest rangers in several provinces and territories had noticed an uptick in some predatory species and a decrease in the population of small mammals and birds. At the same time, a series of reported companion thefts had taken place, but police couldn't make any connection between the missing companions and the increase in predators. Their human companions were all of different economic standing. Few had bothered with tracking devices because their companions were always with them and, frankly, theft was uncommon and illogical, as no one outside of Constant Companions was able to re-companion an animal. It wasn't until a ranger in Alberta spotted a doe with a diamante collar and, later, made wary friends with a barn owl—a species that only lived in extreme southern Ontario and British Columbia—that a pattern emerged. Some experts were concerned about escapee companions. An introduced predatory species could negatively impact existing endangered species. Herbivore companions could consume the food sources that native species depended on for survival—sources that were becoming increasingly difficult for species to find given the widespread droughts and frequent fires. Others argued that the number of companions in the wild was minimal and, because they couldn't breed, their impact was also minimal. Conservationists, however, pushed back against this apathy by explaining that native ecosystems were too delicate for these unnecessary and avoidable strains, and while some of the impacts of companions would disappear with their deaths, ecosystems might not be able to recover from their effects.

Brooke returned to the search engine and added *positive stories* to the start of her search bar, but the results were largely the same. She closed the tab and leaned back in her seat. Part of her was relieved: she didn't have to worry about Ote dying of starvation or thirst, getting trapped by a wildfire, or being taken out by another animal. While her trips with Gillian had a certain appeal, a freeing of the chains from ordinary life, she couldn't understand why Ote wanted to live like that. She was both saddened and relieved to think that, in the morning, she would have to tell Ote it wasn't possible.

You going to give up that easily? The wolf inside her asked. She didn't have much time left—it was true—and she'd already decided against reading Tolstoy. The kids and her work as a journalist formed part of her legacy; maybe *this* could be part of her body of work. A farewell art project. Ote wanted to be rewilded, and apparently she wasn't the only companion who desired independence. Freedom. Perhaps there was a way for companions to live in the wild without causing damage. *Or, the thought struck hot and quick, what if Constant Companions are part of the solution?*

Cameras were positioned around the clearing. The PR representatives from Constant Companions and New Found Publishing chatted, heads bent over their phones, as they compared their speeches. They stood by a giant vase of native flowers that would have cost a week's wages, and a book stand that displayed the striking blue-and-yellow cover of *Critters: Rewilding Human and Animal Companions*. Getting Constant Companions to come on board for the launch and as a sponsor of the *Critters* program that was linked to the book hadn't been easy. Gillian would have preferred to do it without them, but when Brooke asked if Gillian was willing to stick around and finish what they started, the woman of the bush admitted defeat. That didn't mean she liked it. Even now she stood on the other side of the clearing, alone, arms folded across her chest protectively. If they wanted to avoid future lawsuits, they needed Constant Companions' support, and their platform; though Brooke had followers, readers, and an established professional network, her audience was nothing compared to that of the juggernaut whose products now lived in seven out of ten homes. To reach the people who most needed the information contained in their book and program, they needed Constant Companions. Thanks to Brooke's article,

Constant Companions also needed a way to defuse the growing criticism of the company. Creating a product that contributed to the extinction of endangered species was not good PR.

Across the clearing was a red-skinned man, Bryant, whose hooked nose was a prominent feature. He was sitting in the dirt, the cuts in his jeans splitting further as he bent his knees. Beside him was an eastern grey kangaroo known as Wilson—the companion whose release they'd be streaming around the world in just a few minutes. Brooke needn't guess what Bryant was feeling; it was written all over his face: eyes downcast, lips pressed together, shoulders slumped. A man defeated, rejected, a failure. This was a day Brooke would never experience; she felt a small glimmer of shame at the relief that knowledge brought her. She'd never have to see Ote leave her, because she'd be the one to leave.

Lou-Lou was tethered to the bull bar of Jasper's four-wheel drive; her earlier proximity to Wilson had made everyone nervous. The dingo's true identity remained a secret, even after Jasper came on board as a consultant for the book and program. Lou-Lou's perplexing behaviour was being explained away as traits of her species: cautiously curious, aloof, mildly unpredictable ... Jasper was perched on his bonnet talking to Miley, whose oversized hat concealed much of her face.

He is a nice man. Ote nuzzled Brooke's hand. *Maybe this will bring them back together.*

'Maybe,' Brooke agreed, though she very much doubted it. A shadow swooped across the gathering, and Brooke looked up just in time to see Vasilisa's outline. Vasilisa had been given the task of following Wilson's departure and reporting back to the group once he'd reached his first location: a transition spot with water access and vegetation, where he could remain until he felt confident about travelling deeper into the bush. Keone and Leiko sat atop their eskies, Sissy and Philippa loyally perched on their respective shoulders. Neither had understood when she'd first explained to them that Ote too wanted to be rewilded, or later that Ote's wish was shared by other companions. Watching them now, Brooke could see why. Philippa and Sissy were so much a part of their companions, but the four of them also made sense *collectively*. They were a group; they belonged to each other.

The PR representative from Constant Companions, Danielle, called out to the group, 'We're about to start. Everyone ready?'

There were murmurs and nods among the group.

Standing there, five months post-diagnosis, Brooke finally accepted that the bulk of the work was done. At least for her and Gillian.

Brooke scratched Ote's ear. 'Come on,' she said. They shuffled over the bull dust to stand beside the vase of native flowers. A moment later Gillian joined her.

The cameraman, organised and paid for by Constant Companions, counted down with his fingers: five, four, three, two, one.

'Welcome, and thank you for joining us for the release of *Critters: Rewilding Human and Animal Companions*. I'm here with co-authors, Gillian Chance and Brooke Sasala. Gillian once worked for the company formerly known as Australian Wildlife Conservation Society as a DNA specialist and scientist, but she is more widely known for the bushcraft skills she developed living in the outback for ten years. Brooke Sasala is the creator and CEO of *The Gist*, a digital news empire that receives over fifty thousand unique clicks a day. So, Gillian, we'll start with you. What was the inspiration behind writing this book?'

'Brooke came to me with the idea,' Gillian began. They'd rehearsed so many versions of this story, Brooke couldn't quite recall which one they'd agreed to. 'I never planned on writing a book or on returning from the bush, but after an encounter with a companion,' Gillian said, having been forbidden by Danielle from using the word attacked, 'I knew that there had to be more wild companions out there. I've seen the way things have changed over the last ten years; the ecosystems have changed irrevocably; we've lost hundreds of native species. If the natural world is going to survive—in its altered form or in some other form we can't yet imagine—companions might be our only hope. But companions are not natives. If companions want to live in the wild, they need to be shown how to do so properly.'

For the next fifteen minutes, Brooke and Gillian tag-teamed questions, then Danielle invited Craig to speak on behalf of Constant Companions.

'Thank you, Danielle, Gillian, and Brooke. I'll keep this brief. As part of our conservation efforts, Constant Companions have committed to using our technologies for the greater good of Australia's ecology. In 2038, we collected DNA from the last remaining Tasmania Devils in captivity. This DNA will form part of our rewilding program as we introduce Tasmania Devils to mainland Australia. Like the successful reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone Park several decades ago, our de-extinction and translocation of Tasmania Devils could create a trophic cascade that will ultimately improve soil quality, reduce bushfires, and contribute to the

establishment of a more diverse and sustainable ecology. This is the first program of its kind. It will run in conjunction with our commitment to support the rewilding of constant companions via our courses and training programs. Thank you.'

Craig closed his phone and stepped back so that Danielle could return to the microphone. 'To celebrate the release of *Critters*, and Constant Companions' conservation commitment, today, we will be releasing into the wild our very first graduate from the rewilding program: Wilson.'

Miley, who was watching the live stream on her phone, waved her left hand emphatically, stabbing the air with her thumb. Brooke tilted her head in confusion until Miley silently mouthed the words *three million views*.

At the mention of Wilson's name, Jasper slid from his bonnet and approached the waiting kangaroo. He nodded to Bryant, who came to his feet in a flash, but then stood fixed to the spot. As though they'd rehearsed it, because they had, Wilson bounded towards a small parting in the trees at the top of the clearing, with Jasper following him. Bryant watched, eyes glistening. When Wilson paused just before the tree line and looked back over his sloping shoulder, Bryant gave his companion one final nod. When Brooke looked back to the tree line, the animal was gone.

She tilted her head back and pretended to search the sky for Vasilisa while willing her eyes to dry. Again, she felt a sickening sense of gratitude that she'd been spared this experience. As if she'd seen through the ruse, Ote nudged Brooke's hand with the tip of her wet nose and rubbed her face along Brooke's forearm.

Brooke scratched Ote's head as her eyes searched the crowd for Anewa. She spotted him beneath the shade of a thinning eucalyptus. Their eyes met. She hadn't known that her look had been accusatory until his eyes tightened defensively. Dying was an uncomfortable business that shrunk the importance of everything that surrounded it. When she'd told him about Ote's request to be rewilded, he'd nodded and changed the topic. The rebuff had hurt, but what was more maddening was that she didn't actually *know* what he thought. Then again, perhaps his muted reaction had been intentional; maybe he had believed that whatever he said or did would be scrutinised, picked apart, somehow made negative. Brooke couldn't promise that he wasn't right. About the book and the course, however, he'd been vocal—and appalled—when she first explained the ventures: how dare she steal that time from him and the kids? Someone else could do it, anyone else. But, Brooke had insisted, things that can be done whenever by whoever are usual done by no one, never.

Jasper stepped between them, breaking their gaze, and patted Ote, absent-mindedly, ‘Holding up okay?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

Lou-Lou, newly released from the bull bar, trotted over and nosed Ote in the ribs, enticing her to play. Their interactions had evolved over the last several weeks, whether through Ote’s training or simple familiarity, Brooke wasn’t sure. But the wolf *did* pay close attention to Lou-Lou, watching her, observing her, mimicking her, turning her head sharply as though she too had sensed a disturbance, her body pulled taut into heightened awareness.

‘You don’t have to *become* a wild animal. You can still be yourself,’ Brooke had assured her. ‘You just need to know how to survive.’

Maybe learning how to survive is becoming an animal.

Miley appeared, a wide grin spread across her face as she tucked an arm around Brooke’s waist, pulling her close. Her finger pressed into Brooke’s ribs; though she’d never been fat, she’d never been this skinny, either. Her appetite had diminished considerably. The hollowed expression on her children’s faces as she pushed food around on her plate had stolen the joy out of eating, making their evening meals another performative task where she pretended to be fine, and everyone pretended to believe her.

‘Over three million views,’ Miley said. She looked at Jasper and he looked back. ‘Seems more people are interested in this than we initially thought.’

Brooke took a ragged breath. The animal once known as Wilson was gone, yet her eyes remained fixed on the gap where the creature had slipped through.

There’d been heated debate about whether to track Wilson’s progress, but since he was the first companion to be rewilded—and coverage of the story would be extensive—the training team had surgically implanted a device in his abdomen. Wilson knew that he could return at any time if surviving in the bush was too difficult, if he became lonely, realised he didn’t want to be wild, or sustained an injury. And if no movement was registered within a twelve-hour period, the team would use a drone to check on him.

A shadow passed over the clearing, and Miley stretched out her gloved hand. Vasilisa landed on it with a dull thud. ‘She says he’s made it to the ridge,’ Miley said, pulling a sliver of meat from her pocket and feeding it to the bird, ‘just like we planned.’

On the other side of the glade, Bryant had reclaimed his position on the ground, his left hand mindlessly flicking a ring of keys around his index finger: chink, chink, chink.

Lou-Lou's ears pricked at the sound, and a moment later her body followed.

'I'll let the lad know,' Jasper said with a nod, trailing after his dingo.

Miley wiped her glistening fingers on the edge of her shirt before reaching out for Brooke again, though it was Ote that she addressed. 'Still want to do this, girl?' Knowing she'd never hear Ote's response made the asking playful, even though the question was not.

Ote's eyes tracked Bryant as he got to his feet, dusted himself off, and made his way back to his vehicle. When Ote didn't reply, Brooke was about to ask Miley's question again, but then the wolf's ears twitched.

I must know these hidden parts of myself, the ones wrapped in clouds.

Brooke smoothed her hand over the crown of Ote's head; the wolf's ears flattened in response. 'She's certain.'

A week later, Miley dropped Brooke home to an empty house. Anewa was working a day shift at the mine, Bonnie was at the bookstore, Harlow was at the library, and Eli was ... well, who knew where he was.

'Call me after?' Miley asked. 'And send me a photo of it tonight. I want to see how it's healing.'

'I'll tell you everything, and thanks again. I was *so* out of my element with all this.' She waved to the cling wrap on her upper arm. 'I could have really botched it up.'

Miley waved the pleasantries away and Vasilisa squawked from the backseat in a tone that seemed to emphasise her companion's dismissal. 'Honestly, it took five minutes; *anyone* could have done it.'

Brooke waved Miley off as she departed, surprised by how well Miley had held herself together that day. Neither of them had cried, not once.

When Brooke entered the house, the only one there to welcome her was Ote, but the greeting lacked its usual warmth. Though she'd outlived her initial prognosis, her body had become a house whose walls were thinned and weakened by white ants. Weight loss, lethargy, and losing control over one's bowels were reason enough

to stay home. So, when Brooke had announced earlier that day that she was going into town alone, the wolf had flattened her ears in preparation for an argument that never got off the ground. 'I'll be gone for an hour, two at the most. If you give me a hard time about this, I'll feed Frances your dinner.'

She found Ote lying across the sofa. She would have heard her come in but had chosen not to come out to greet her. Brooke leaned in the doorway watching Ote studiously ignore her. Brooke felt a quick flicker of pleasure knowing that in just a few moments, when she revealed to her companion where she had been and what she'd been doing, the wolf would feel foolish.

'Still sulking I see. Miss me that much, huh?' Brooke crossed the room, nudging Ote's backside with the back of her hand until, eventually, the wolf made room beside her. They sat together for a moment, the hurt companion and the smug companion. Brooke knew she'd be the first to break the silence, but not just yet. She wanted a moment to take in the house this way; it was rarely quiet. Here on this ordinary Thursday morning, her mind bent time, and she caught a glimpse of what the house would be like once she was gone and the kids had moved out. A big, empty house left to a man with a big, needful heart. *He'll probably find someone*, the thought prickled through her false compassion. A good, kind, selfless partner would want that for their mate. No point holding a torch for someone who can't come back. Perhaps that's why she hadn't fought harder to keep Ote with the family, to convince her to stay. Ote didn't want another companion; what bigger compliment was there than that? To have someone confirm that you are irreplaceable.

A tickling sensation had started on her right arm. She could feel wetness beneath the sleeve of her shirt; she ached to have a shower and wash away the remnants of petroleum, but she'd need to wait another hour or two at least.

'Did you miss me?' she asked again, brushing her hand along Ote's back and scratching her rump.

I don't understand. I could have gone with you. I can go anywhere with you.

Like anyone else, Ote could be wild or wise; sometimes her comprehension reminded Brooke of when the triplets were little: how easily hurt they were when their needs were not met. She understood that in Ote's mind her hurt was justified: Brooke didn't have much time, but she knew that neither of them wanted to spend that time feeling sulky or miserable.

‘I have a surprise for you.’ Brooke pushed herself off the couch and crouched beside her companion. Slowly, she lifted the sleeve of her yellow shirt.

‘Miley did the outline, but I had to go to a parlour to get it done. The artist said companion tattoos have become *very* popular.’ Cling wrap circled the top of her arm, but beneath its glossy surface was the unmistakable shape of a paw print. ‘You can go everywhere with me now.’

Ote sniffed the glistening skin. *As if I would be anywhere else.*

Brooke pulled back before the wolf could run her rough tongue over the wound; even though it was protected by the wrap; even though she knew this fear of infection was irrational given the circumstances.

‘I reckon we should go for a walk,’ she said, although she was tired and it was the wrong time of day; it was too hot to walk in the early afternoon. Before Ote could answer, Brooke stood up with false enthusiasm and took a step. She stumbled. Confusion and a small bell of alarm rang through the fog in her head as she took another step, her feet moving heavily through invisible snow. When was the last time she’d seen snow, she wondered as she lost her balance and the ground came up to meet her.

Brooke had never cared for hospitals; she didn’t much care for this one. She’d woken in a private room and been given strict instructions to rest, which was ludicrous given that *someone*, be it a doctor, nurse, intern, cleaner, or kitchen staff member, came into the room every fifteen minutes to do *something*. When she woke, it was explained to her that she had collapsed at home and that hospital staff would notify her family to tell them she was awake and coherent. When Brooke asked when she could go home, the two nurses exchanged an awkward look over her bed. The shorter one shook her head.

Brooke’s chest expanded with a sudden intake of breath. ‘Oh,’ was all she managed to say.

The next few hours passed in minutes. Brooke was unsure if this was because of the morphine, the distraction of prodding staff, or dipping in and out of consciousness. When the triplets and Anewa arrived just before dinner, she’d never been so grateful for the company of familiar faces. Anewa’s eyes were red-rimmed, welted. Brooke tore her gaze from him to focus on the children, her own eyes

misting as renewed, hopeless panic swelled in her chest. This was actually happening, and she couldn't stop it.

'Hey, Mum,' Eli clasped her hand and squeezed it, a gesture that eliminated all hope of keeping her eyes dry.

Bonnie leaned over the bed and hugged her Mum's shoulders, holding on for so long Brooke felt the crick in her neck tighten and grow hot. She stayed put. Anewa's hand cupped her shoulder, Harlow's circled her ankle. The members of her pack surrounded her and, for a moment, Brooke thought she'd never felt so protected. She hated to ask, to break the spell of this brief magic, but was spared the effort when Bonnie released her. 'We asked if we could bring in Ote, and they said no at first—'

'But then one of the senior nurses,' Harlow cut her off, 'like, I guess she's the senior nurse because she is *a lot* older than all the nurses and she *looked* like someone who is in charge—'

'By which he means angry,' Eli finished his brother's sentence.

'You mean Mrs Wessels?' Brooke asked, even though she knew that was exactly who they meant.

'She said that if we come super early in the morning—while the nurses are busy with changeover—we could, maybe, like, sneak Ote in.'

'You're going to *sneak* a wolf into a hospital?' Brooke rolled her eyes, but she hoped her scepticism wouldn't discourage them. She needed to know that she'd see Ote again.

'Yup.' Anewa squeezed her shoulder. 'I'll put a couple of fifties in my pocket, just in case.'

'You can't bribe hospital staff,' Brooke said with false scorn as she reached up and clasped his hand, welding them together. 'And besides, I know most of them, just tell them who you are.'

'They're nurses, Mum, not nuns.' Eli rolled his eyes theatrically.

When their laughter trailed off, Brooke's pack exchanged glances.

'What?' Her stomach tightened.

'Well ...' Eli began.

'The thing is,' Bonnie picked up.

'The companions.' Harlow plucked at his collar. 'They want to go with Ote.'

‘You mean *come* with Ote? Here?’ Brooke looked up at Anewa for confirmation; he shook his head without further elaboration.

‘Frances says they all want to be rewilded. They don’t want Ote to be alone, they don’t want ...’ Bonnie stopped, cleared her throat. ‘They’ve all thought about what it would be like ... out there.’

‘Zander says they love us,’ Harlow piped up defensively, ‘and they never thought living in the wild would be possible, but now that they know it is—’

‘Congo keeps badgering me about it, and he’s stopped sleeping at night. He just paces around our room and stares out the window. It’s driving me nuts!’ Eli said, sounding more scared than angry. ‘I don’t *want* him to leave, but I can’t make him stay if he wants to go. It’s not like he’s my ...’

‘Possession? Property?’ Brooke whispered, her cheeks burning. ‘That’s kind of what they are, though, aren’t they? Even if they do love us and we love them.’

The kids nodded in agreement; Anewa stiffened beside her.

‘Do you think Gillian might show them how?’ Harlow asked.

Bonnie added, ‘Maybe Jasper, too?’

‘I’m sure they’d be happy to,’ Brooke said. ‘And Ote has just about finished her training, so she can help as well.’ Her chest swelled with pride as she imagined Ote as the pack’s alpha. She knew the pain her children would feel at losing their companions, but she couldn’t ignore the relief that flooded her system knowing that Ote wouldn’t be alone.

Epilogue: 2055

The wolf crept down the hill, silent as falling feathers. Learning to be invisible was a trick after all those years of living as a constant presence. Being needed had been a type of freedom: freedom from choice. The pack and the land offered a different kind of freedom, one that was void of promise. They'd lost one of the betas to a snake bite four winters ago, and their alpha female well before then. The wolf thought of Her sometimes. Often. Always. But survival offered its own sense of purpose. The tracks behind the home were the same. Even if the plants had grown in size, disappeared into the earth, or dispersed. How often had the wolf followed these prescribed, familiar routes? How strange it had been to have one's direction so tightly controlled; now the wolf could create her own way.

The lights were still on in the house, though the sun had set some time ago. The wolf circled the spiked grass that populated these hills to stop by a shedding tree. Careful. No need to get closer. Through the window she could see that, from the original pack, the biggest male was still the biggest. Only his fur had thinned and paled to reveal the smooth dark dome of his skull. The ghost of a pale hand ran over it, pausing to rest on his shoulder, and the wolf nearly caught Her scent. The cubs were even thicker than last year. One had a cub of their own now. A small bundle cradled to their chest. No smell could compare. The wolf stepped forward. Ears pricked. The wind stirred her fur, reminding her of how that ghost hand had ruffled her chest. How sometimes, it still did.

The pack was waiting on the other side of the rise as they always did, always would, for this visit had become ritual. The wolf watched for a time. Long enough for the great light in the sky to shift, but when the first pack left the room to ascend the stairs, the wolf knew it was time to leave. Night was for hunting, and though the

game had improved, so had her competition. And yet the wolf lingered, watched as someone drew a curtain closed. She crept closer, and sniffed the air, but the scent of that pack remained a memory, just like She did. A rustle stirred in her ear—some foolish animal giving themselves away, and the wolf was gone.

CHAPTER 5: REFLECTION

‘Writing quote (noun): A peculiar saying capable of shaming writers into writing.’
—Anonymous

‘We never sit anything out. We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.’
—Ray Bradbury

This chapter maps how the trickster traits of shapeshifting, play, chance, and order appeared within my own research and writing processes. As previously mentioned within the methodology and case study chapters, these four key traits are distinct, yet they overlap and can be combined to varying degrees. For this reason, particular activities or experiences may be referred to within two or more sections. The purpose of this chapter is to articulate how the qualities that surfaced within the author interviews can be intentionally actioned within a creative process so that a practitioner may integrate their approaches, become aware of and then better harness trickster qualities within their practice, and challenge themselves to do or make differently.

Shapeshifting

Shapeshifting presented in a number of ways while making the creative artefact as I moved back and forth through various stages of writing (content research, critical reading, thinking, drafting, editing), navigated the symbiotic relationship between researcher and writer, wrote through the perspective of the main characters, and then

evaluated that content through a trickster lens. Shapeshifting can be seen within the artefact itself as it, too, changed shape over time.

Each stage of the writing process had a particular focus and demanded a certain set of skills. For instance, while I was familiarising myself with the chosen areas of research (for the first three years of this investigation, these were human-animal relations, ecofeminism, the trickster, and climate change [see below]), I was also writing the zero draft, and yet these respective activities had different modes and approaches. Reading scholarly material required logical and rhetorical skills, and the analysing of fictional exemplars involved critically examining the creative choices made by other writers. In familiarising myself with my chosen research areas and retroactively deconstructing existing literary works, I was able to draw connections within and between these two groups of texts. Though a discussion of the fictional exemplars analysed and considered during this research project have not been included (as this would have deviated from the focus of the investigation), the insights gained through this process shaped and informed decisions related to the creative artefact.

Creating the zero draft of the creative work was also an active process, but far more intuitive. Though these activities eventually connected—the ideas evident within the scholarly and fictional literature informed the content of the creative artefact, and *how* that artefact was made became the knowledge outcomes of this investigation—initially I treated them as separate activities. Within the writing process itself, thinking and planning required me to engage with my imagination and draw upon the scholarly research for support; the act of writing then enabled me to embody the characters, with the intention of presenting their perspectives as authentically as possible.

The focus of this project transformed dramatically during the research process. The trickster methodology was originally created to aid writers of anthropogenic fiction who wanted to challenge the limitation of their genre. The four areas of research (ecofeminism, human-animal relations, climate change, and the trickster archetype) remained consistent throughout this project and shaped the environmental concerns of the novel, but once I began working on the exegesis, it was evident that the trickster methodology extended beyond these initial intentions to provide a broader description of the creative writing process.

One of the greatest creative challenges with this project was the inclusion of trickster characters, portrayed by the Constant Companion animals. Tricksters, by their nature, are elusive and mysterious. Prior to this investigation, I used a simple template to situate each character within the story and determine some fundamental characteristics. These templates mapped out, in brief, each character's background, their role (not in the story, but in relation to other characters or social groups, e.g. protector, interrogator, intellectual, sceptic, clown), motivation, strengths, and weaknesses. These protagonists often changed throughout the writing and revision process as they developed organically or as it became evident that certain events or responses were required to move the narrative forward. The slippery and unstable nature of tricksters made writing such characters difficult, particularly because they operated in a way that was in conflict with my familiar, pre-existing creative processes, particularly my need to understand, know, and emotionally connect with my characters prior to beginning the drafting process. I overcame this by rereading the scholarly material about the trickster, and creating a character template that would assist me in better understanding how the constant companions would work. This included identifying the key traits of each species (rat, hawk, and wolf),

identifying a famous trickster from literature/mythology to use as a model, and then giving each companion a list of weaknesses, strengths, and secrets based on their species and famous precursor. Though this process was somewhat analytic, it allowed me to better imagine how the animal companions would react to their human companions and their environment, and it provided a way for me to access the trickster's mindset so that I could write dialogue and behaviours that were in alignment with this archetype. The companions became more convincing, entertaining, lively, and believable once I understood them enough to embody them while writing.

Shapeshifting occurred broadly throughout the investigation, but it could also appear within the span of a single writing session. For instance, after writing a scene, I would conduct a light line-level edit; then, using what I had learnt of the trickster, I would try to adopt the trickster's way of seeing and responding. I would examine the day's work and ask, 'How might a trickster write this scene? If a trickster was telling this story, what might they say or do next?' Rather than using the rationale of a traditional research practitioner to deduce the next logical event or to determine how a character *should* respond, I adopted the mindset of a trickster practitioner as I tried to imagine alternative ways to present or structure the story I was writing. Asking open-ended questions such as, 'How might this scene work if the opposite happened? How might I write this scene differently?' assisted in opening up the narrative and allowing new possibilities to enter. The construction of an outline was supportive as it gave me the confidence to begin writing, but given that I was developing a methodology based on the trickster archetype, it felt important that my creative process, and the narrative, not become *too fixed, too fast*. Shapeshifting into my trickster character, and adopting a trickster's perspective when reviewing the work,

allowed me to remain open to new possibilities and insights that would not have occurred if the initial concepts and outlines had been strictly followed. For instance, Sissy sneaking into Keone's backpack when she went to the town pool, which then led to Keone confronting her fear of swimming; Vasilisa's desire to see the bushfire, which instigated Miley and Jasper's breakup; or Ote's desire to be rewilded, a declaration which reveals the novel's theme, were all creative decisions that were prompted by trickster questions. These three events are key moments within their respective sections, and none appeared in the initial outline. Though this method of questioning assisted me in staying open to possibilities, eventually the range of possibilities narrowed as creative decisions were made about the theme, character arcs, setting, and plot.

Throughout this investigation, the novel changed shape dramatically twice. Both shifts occurred after implementing a major structural edit, the latter of which involved the creation of a new outline that was developed using the trickster methodology. Shapeshifting occurred in a variety of ways during this stage as I applied concepts from the scholarly material to world-building, imagined how characters might react to one another and the environment, responded to prompts such as 'What if x happened?', evaluated my skill level as a writer (what was I capable of writing), and reflected on what type of story I *wanted* to write—all while remaining in touch with my current understanding of narrative structure. By writing a creative artefact while simultaneously developing a methodology, I became acutely aware of my own creative process and how it was changing. Shapeshifting (as with the following traits) is a part of creative practice, but once I had identified, defined, and understood the trait, I was able to intentionally engage with it and use it as a tool to support me in improving and developing the creative work.

Play

Play, for creative writing, is the one activity that every practitioner must engage with in their practice. Theoretical frameworks, concepts, and the application of rigorous methodologies support research practitioners in meeting the requirements of academic research investigations, but the idea, premise, or creative challenge that initiates a project is the product of imagination—an important component for the trickster practitioner. And, in the case of writing, it is often a response to the open-ended question, ‘What if?’ Play presented during this investigation through active engagement with my imagination both on and off the page. This included the completion of a zero draft, the purpose of which was to freely imagine the possible trajectories of the three main storylines and the setting. I also engaged with writing exercises as a way to clarify character profiles and explore the possibilities of world-building. What I discovered through these activities informed the novel’s outline. Play also informed the reflective journal and the ways I processed the data collected from the author interviews.

Graeme Harper argues that writing is itself a form of research because new knowledge and insights occur in the act of making (2011, p. 11). Play does not necessarily mean an abandonment of all order (though it can), and in the case of this investigation, play complemented, augmented, or extended the creative practice. The exploratory zero draft, as the name suggests, was the result of play as I chose to write intuitively, allowing the story to unfold organically. Though the initial chosen areas of research—tricksters, human-animal relations, climate change fiction, and ecofeminism—informed the context and direction of the narrative, they did not hinder the creative process; instead, these limitations provided the content (materials)

and container (space) needed to create. Adopting a playful approach gave me the space to imagine and consider a wide range of options while creating the zero draft. The intention at this stage was to become immersed in the work rather than work towards an external, quantifiable goal, such as word count or time spent writing. The exploratory draft was mostly concerned with plot and character development, and, in an effort to challenge my own creative limitations, the prompt I frequently returned to was ‘How can I make this stranger?’ One consequence of not setting limits on the direction of the zero draft—on being open to play and chance, was that upon completion there was little evidence of climate change (an earlier area of research) or the trickster in the zero draft.

Play assisted in remedying this as I mapped out ecological predictions for the next forty years against how other climate change writers depicted the future of our world. This information was arranged on notecards, which prompted me to consider what changes might be plausible in my fictionalised world, given the current scientific evidence. They also prompted me to consider how I could represent these changes in ways that differed (in big or small ways) from other novels. These types of imaginative exercises resulted in an array of ideas that were each considered and followed to their conclusion. Some of these thoughts related to world-building (e.g. if agricultural practices change in an effort to reduce CO₂ emissions, or because farmers can no longer afford to pay their increased insurance costs, or because land management has become near impossible with rising temperatures, how might that affect personal dietary choices or other options?) and others to character development (e.g. what would happen if Ote died? Why does Vasilisa want to be human? How does Sissy convince Keone to trust her?).

The inclusion of trickster qualities was intentional, too, but that did not detract from the work's playful nature. This particular aspect of the work did not occur until very late in the writing process. Though the trickster was a constant presence while drafting, it was not until the story and setting were firmly established (order created) that I was able to critically evaluate the entire manuscript and identify opportunities (events or exchanges of dialogue) to insert 'tricksterish' moments. Using the reversals, deceptions, foolishness, and boundary-crossing behaviours that so often appear in trickster tales (Hyde 1998), I was able to tweak particular scenes so that either constant companion (human or animal) acted more like a trickster. In particular, I wanted to make sure that each of the POV characters—Keone, Miley, and Brooke—had trickster moments so that they and their non-human companions could be considered somewhat equal (at least in terms of trickery) and none a blatant victim to the other.

This is the one area of play that remained highly structured and rational, as most other forms of play presented as tangible activities. When exploring and evaluating the ideas I had for the novel, I used note cards stuck to my office wall as a way to map out the potential features of the world and how it might change over time, as well as the multiple character arcs I was considering; I then used mind maps to determine the novel's overall theme, and diagrams and drawings as a way to see how all the activities I carry out within my life (teaching, leisure, exercise, socialising, domestic tasks) informed my writing practice, and to clarify how constant companions differed from 'normal' animals. By taking these ideas and presenting them in a visual format, I was able to see at a glance all of the options that were available. This process was generative as it provoked me to create options and

ideas that I may not have discovered using other methods for developing the work, and it made it easier to select the option that contained the richest possibilities.

Play also applied to the way I recorded my entries in the reflective journal. Admittedly, the entries were more consistent during the zero draft and became increasingly sporadic as the artefact developed. Perhaps this form of reflection (long-form writing) was a more useful strategy at the beginning of the creative process, as I was trying to clarify the ideas I was having about the work and the direction of the investigation, and less helpful during the structural editing phase, when I needed to explore multiple storylines and options in a way that was loose and imaginative. Here, tangible activities such as using notecards, mind maps, and drawings were the most useful. The initial entries in my reflective journal were predominantly concerned with the quality of the writing and the content of the narrative. They became a place to document how the draft was progressing in terms of word count, but I soon realised how repetitive many of the entries were. At the suggestion of my supervisor, we considered how play might disrupt this pattern, and the idea of a prompt jar that contained reflective questions, some of which were inspired by the trickster, was created. Introducing this aspect of randomness and play into the reflective journal guided my responses and caused me to consider aspects of writing that I would not have reflected on if I had written the entries intuitively. After I adopted the idea of a prompt jar, the content of the entries broadened as I identified positive aspects of the work, interrogated my process, and reflected on how other writers and programs were informing my writing.

The final way that play appeared within this investigation was through the analysis of the author interviews. After carefully reading the transcripts, I imagined how the reflections, ideas, or attitudes of each author might be presented within a

short story, and what type of constant companion each writer might have. Writing these short stories became a way to create an artefact that embodied the data, while also offering a playful way to explore the content of each interview. In another experiment, I selected comments across multiple transcripts to create cento poems that highlighted, emphasised, or drew connections between disparate aspects from the interviews; I also wove together multiple author responses so that it appeared as though they were in conversation with one another (rather than myself). Though the transcripts were eventually analysed using the conventional approach of thematic coding as a way to identify patterns, the above methods provided a way to include play and creative writing into this evaluative process. Through these playful interactions with the interviews, I became highly familiar with the content of the interviews, the nuances of each conversation, and ways in which the different responses aligned, overlapped, or complemented each other, which later allowed me to quickly and easily identify the four most prevalent trickster traits of shapeshifting, play, order, and chance.

Chance

Chance refers to the unintended connections that can surface or become apparent within a work during editing/revision, and creative insights that occur on and off the page. For this investigation, the most significant element of chance was the inclusion of the trickster as an area of research. I was only in the first few weeks of my investigation when I presented a paper at the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia (GANZA) conference. Gerry Turcotte, the keynote speaker, opened the conference with a paper on the trickster. Prior to this presentation, I was unaware of this character archetype; however, the initial outline of my creative artefact included

an antagonist that was non-human. Following the advice of my associate supervisor, I had already begun familiarising myself with the literature around human-animal relations. In the same way that the trickster uses whatever materials are at hand in order to create, I took what I had learnt about human-animal hierarchy and the trickster figure, and combined them with the concept of a non-human character. This is how I developed the idea of constant companions—the speculative aspect around which the entire creative artefact was developed. This is a conceit, it could be argued, that arose entirely by chance, or through a series or cascade of chances.

The formation of the narrative's structure occurred in a similar way. The timeline of the initial exploratory drafts was linear and chronological, but then I read David Mitchell's *The bone clocks* (2014). Mitchell's narrative spans fifty-nine years (1984-2043) and has a fractured structure, constituting several novellas that have considerable time jumps between each section. I had already been considering alternative ways to structure my own narrative, and though the content of Mitchell's novel had no impact on my own, its narrative structure did. Choosing to present the narrative in this way immediately established tension, as the time gaps between the three sections caused the previously familiar setting and protagonists to momentarily become strange at the beginning of each new section. Presenting the story in this way, along with the rotating viewpoint, is itself tricksterish, as it bends and manipulates time and controls what knowledge is presented and withheld.

As mentioned in the methodology and method chapters, chance most frequently arises as part of the creative process when a writer does not appear to be directly engaging with their creative practice. During this investigation, creative insights and connections often occurred during walks, particularly long hikes in wild nature. Sometimes I was intentionally trying to figure out specific details about the artefact

or develop the methodology, while at other times my mind was allowed to wander. One of the biggest creative breakthroughs followed a four-hour Harley Davidson ride to the Bunya Mountains. The day had been put aside for rest and play: a rare opportunity to spend time with family. Though I had not intended to work on the novel, I was in the midst of the first major structural edit. Free from ordinary distractions (including conversation—given our mode of travel), I allowed myself to consider all the possible directions the novel could go in, and the ways in which the landscape and relationships might change over time. At the end of the trip, four hours of thinking was consolidated into a two-minute voice recording. Though the three creative decisions I made about world-building that day do not appear in the final draft, the character arcs of the six protagonists do.

Order

Order can be created, destroyed, or upheld depending on the needs of the narrative and the practitioner's own sense of creative fulfilment. It relates to the use or subversion of genre tropes, writing routines, tactics or habits, critical reflection, and editing. Through my reading of the scholarly materials and fictional exemplars, I became aware of the tropes, tone, and features of the genre I was writing in. And yet, these qualities only presented lightly within the initial exploratory draft of my creative artefact. I had anticipated that my content research would influence the narrative more directly, but this intuitive draft failed to deeply engage with the intended thematic concerns (i.e. climate change), and it did not subvert the tropes I had identified within existing works in this genre; instead, it was more concerned with documenting the overall plot points (or potential plot points). In this way, the exploratory draft was about ignoring order as I embraced a trickster's defining trait

of having *no way* (Hyde 1998, p. 114). Rather than writing towards the features expected of the genre, I allowed the story to unfold.

Establishing and upholding order became a significant concern during subsequent drafts. Creative research investigations require that the creative artefact have clear connections to the traditional research that the practitioner has conducted as well as the argument and outcomes presented within the exegetical component (Biggs 2003, para. 12); for this reason, the story had to have particular features. In *Constant Companions*, implementing a thirty-year time span allowed for the depiction of changing landscapes; creating the conceit of companions provided a way to represent human-animal exchanges that extend beyond our current understanding, and the female cast of protagonists (human and non) enabled the subversion and making strange (Mannay 2010) of the traditional hetero-patriarchal archetype of trickster narratives (Hyde 1998, p. 837). Deliberately creating art that had a defined purpose and intention could be perceived as limiting, un-playful, or as a creative hindrance if the practitioner valued the disorder of spontaneity and intuitive practice above the order of curation and craft, but establishing expectations for the work resulted in a final version that was more complex, nuanced, and sophisticated than the exploratory zero draft. When considered through the lens of shapeshifting, the two drafts are unrecognisable.

Order was upheld within the creative practice in two ways: firstly, through the creation of an outline that contained all the qualities listed above and, secondly, through maintaining a consistent writing routine. As previously mentioned, the work went through two major structural revisions, and while the initial outline was, occasionally, restrictive—perhaps because the work was still in early development when it was created—the second outline was invaluable to the revision process. In

this way, both disorder and order were necessary elements of the creative process. Early drafts of the narrative allowed for creative exploration where alternative directions, events, consequences, and structures could be developed, scrutinised, adopted, or abandoned. The early drafting reflected disorder and embodied a consideration of, or openness to, all the ways this story *could* be told; order was imposed gradually, as the limitless possibilities contained in the work slowly narrowed. Order was imposed as decisions were made about the structure, characterisation, and narrative arc that would best support the intentions of this investigation and my own creative curiosity.

In the same way that tricksters take advantage of what is available to them, I also sought out external sources that might inform my own creative practice. This included participating in digital community programs such as National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), an at-home writing retreat, and virtual writing groups. Each of these activities influenced my writing routine in multiple ways, whether I was aiming for a particular word goal every day for a month, evaluating how to make my home environment a productive and creatively supportive space, or challenging my preference to write alone. Some of these experiments were more successful than others. For instance, completing NaNoWriMo assisted in making writing a priority for one month (though the content of what was written varied in quality). Becoming more aware of the structure around my writing and environment led to the creation of a brief five-step process that was very supportive in shifting into a creative work mode. And participating in three different writing groups confirmed that—regardless of who was present—I am more creative, focused, and at

ease when I do not have to switch back and forth between an internal and external way of being.¹²

Throughout this research investigation, I was also heavily influenced by the reflections, routines, and advice of other writers. Reading and listening to author interviews caused me to reconsider my own approach to writing (experimenting with both discovery writing and outlining), granted ‘behind the scenes’ access to the creative practice of others (in particular, the thought processes that are involved in ambitious books), contributed to my understanding of craft (hearing authors explain why they made particular choices), or reflected back to me conflicting ideas about how books are made. This process is messy and controlled, difficult and easy; there is no one way to write, but there are writing rules, tropes, and expectations we often work towards. Engaging with these external activities and witnessing the reflections of other authors provided another way for me to disrupt my self-created order or reinforce it.

Conclusion

In identifying the key traits that became part of the trickster methodology, I was able to challenge, evaluate, or change my creative practice in a number of ways. By recognising that shapeshifting was a core aspect of writing, I was able to intentionally use this trait to strengthen the creative work by moving between a state of deep immersion to imagining myself as a trickster character, to evaluating the work through the lens of a trickster. Play provided a framework for exploring all the structures and shapes the creative work could have been, while also offering an

¹² I moved between these groups, as I initially believed that writing in a group environment would work *if* I found the ‘right’ group—a group that gathered with the intention of writing rather than socialising.

alternative way of analysing data. Chance influenced the investigation in big and dramatic ways, as it is the reason the trickster became a key area of research. Order allowed me to consider all the different ways the novel could be written, and interrogate my writing routine and approaches. In the following and final chapter, I provide a summary of this investigation as a whole, the literature that informed the development of the research question, the innovative outcomes that resulted—particularly the trickster methodology: what it is and how it appears in the practice of working writers—as well as exciting opportunities for future research and development.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

‘Should the god of the artist be Apollo the Classicist, with his beautiful formality, or Mercury, the mischief-maker, trickster, and thief?’
—Margaret Atwood

‘Beware of advice—even this.’
—Carl Sandburg

Writers are intrigued by the creative process of other writers. The popularity of ‘The Art of Fiction’ in *The Paris Review*, writing festivals, author podcasts, and writing memoirs, along with the enduring popularity of the interview question: how do you write? are evidence of that fact. Despite Ralph Fletcher’s comment that the secret to writing is that there is no secret (2000, p. 4), this conversation continues as readers and writers seek greater understanding of the mysterious and idiosyncratic processes behind creative practice. My fascination with the creative process (my own and that of others) manifested in a writing advice blog and YouTube channel that I have maintained for the past seven and three years respectively, an interest that has now progressed into the completion of a doctorate on the same topic. Between my existing curiosity about the creative process and my research into the trickster archetype, it is not surprising that the intention of this investigation transformed from an interest in the trickster as a model for writing innovative climate change fiction to the development of *The trickster methodology: describing the creative process of fiction writers*.

Prior to this investigation, my relationship with my creative process was somewhat fraught. The tactics I used in other areas of my life to increase efficiency and productivity did not ‘work’ when applied to my creative projects. It is possible to write a book by following a detailed outline, critically editing it, and then submitting it for publication, but this fixed approach did not produce the type of stories I wanted to write, nor did it lead to the *experience* of writing that I want to have. I begrudgingly accepted that my creative process was a messy, unfurling act, but this approach too has shifted as a result of this project; rather than mere *acceptance*, I have come to celebrate—even advocate for—the transformative, playful, dangerous, collaborative, and wandering nature of my creative process.

This experience of creativity was not always reflected in the scholarly research I examined, as many relied on a psychological lens that limited and simplified this nuanced and idiosyncratic practice to mere problem-solving. Such studies investigated creativity generally; few were concerned with the specific processes of creative writers. Through choosing to conduct and critically analyse in-depth interviews with nine established authors, and closely examine my own creative process, I was able to identify several common patterns, which led to the articulation of the trickster methodology. The trickster figure was eventually identified as a model for describing the creative process of fiction writers, as this archetype contains a myriad of slippery and often contradicting traits. They are creators, destroyers, stable, unstable, subversive, disruptive, reinforcers, ambiguous, clever, foolish, cruel, and benevolent—nouns and adjectives that could easily be applied to the experiences and products of creativity. There are obvious qualities that writers and tricksters share, such as creativity, but this investigation was concerned with the lesser-known traits of shapeshifting, including play, chance, and order.

The emergence of a methodology

Early cognitive models that were examined included Graham Wallas's four key stages of creativity: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (2014); however, it ultimately reduced creativity to a process of problem-solving. Donald W MacKinnon extended these early cognitive findings by stating that creativity could not always be reduced in this way, since creative people were more likely to *see* a problem where others did not (1978, p. 195), but again the relationship between creativity and problem-solving was emphasised.

The issue of conflating creativity with problem-solving continues to be prevalent in the scholarly literature analysed, though contemporary scholars such as Todd Lubart, Charlotte Doyle, and Jane Piirto provide more nuanced and elaborate discussions of the creative process, particularly as it relates to fiction writers. Lubart's definition of creativity includes problem-solving, but he acknowledges that creativity is idiosyncratic and therefore impossible to represent using a single universal model (2009, p. 161). Doyle's close examination of creative writing illustrates the cognitive processes a writer may experience as they shift between the writingrealm and fictionworld (1998, p. 29), but there is little discussion of what precedes creativity (particularly in relation to identity). While Piirto's explanation of creativity reflects its complexity through the broad number of categories presented, it ultimately lacks meaningful elaboration and nuance (Piirto 2018, p. 89-121).

The trickster methodology emerged as a response to these diverse, often psychological, views of the creative process. It is similar to these early cognitive models in that it describes particular aspects of the creative process; however, it elaborates upon these simplified stages by offering a methodology that is more reflective of the complexity of the creative process and flexible in usage. It extends

these early models as it is informed by the findings gathered from interviews with other creative writers, as well as contemplations about my own practice, and reflects what many working writers already know and some contemporary research now suggests: that a writer must find *their own way*.

One possible risk that was identified when developing a model for wide application was that its components might be too general to be meaningful, but the four traits I identified and elaborated on in this study appeared repeatedly within the existing practice of active and experienced writers. Though the sample size is small, these nine writers were selected with the intention of providing a diverse study, as they are at various stages of their creative careers, are both national and international, and are of different ages, identifications, and lifestyles. The interviews were transcribed and coded using a system that focused on creative practice (e.g. routine, research, motivation, etc.); however, I soon realised that many of the common approaches the authors described mirrored trickster characters and their tales. The transcriptions were then recoded using commonly described trickster traits. The four that appeared repeatedly were shapeshifting, play, chance, and order. This investigation does not suggest that the writers were intentionally using trickster traits, but that they already exist, and frequently occur, within creative practice. These four traits were then mapped against my own creative practice to determine how, and in what ways, these strategies influenced and informed my writing process. The identification of these traits in the author interviews and then within my own practice informed the development of the trickster methodology.

Shapeshifting

The scholarly material describes the trickster's shapeshifting ability as a choice to temporarily alter their physical appearance through disguise or bodily transformation (Hyde 1998 p. 37; Warner 1998, p. 245). Within the creative practice of the writers interviewed, shapeshifting appeared in a variety of ways, including: 1) the range of skills they could choose to employ when crafting a novel, such as thinking, drafting, editing etc., and 2) how the choices—conscious or intuitive—that writers made to move between these processes were driven by a variety of impulses, such as the stage of development of the creative work, what aspects of their craft the writer was seeking to improve, and perceived or actual threats to the writer's process.

Shapeshifting was also reflected in the development of the manuscripts themselves, which several writers described as a process of transformation: a small idea that eventually became a completed novel. The use of their imagination allowed some writers to shapeshift into the minds and lives of their characters, and several spoke of the rapid shifting that occurred when they critically analysed their narrative in real time as they wrote, while pausing to question the work.

These examples of shapeshifting were also identified within my own creative practice, but there were some instances that were unique to this investigation.

Shapeshifting provided a way to describe how I navigated the symbiotic relationship between researcher and writer, evaluated the content of the novel and the interviews through a trickster lens, and wrote trickster characters whose behaviour differed from the type of characters I ordinarily write. Tricksters are enigmas, and the strategies I usually employ when actively constructing a character were not conducive to this project. Closely reviewing the scholarly information about the trickster, as well as trickster stories, informed my understanding so that I could better access this

archetype by developing a customised template that later allowed me to imagine the cognitive process and impulses these characters could have. Evaluating the creative work through a trickster’s lens allowed me to challenge the work in a way that differed from my ordinary approach. Rather than critically analysing it from a writerly or editorial perspective, I considered open-ended questions such as ‘How might a trickster write this scene? What if the opposite happened? How might I write this scene differently?’ This approach improved my ability to see new possibilities within the story and to disrupt the logical story beats that I had personally come, consciously and subconsciously, to expect of a narrative—that is, to ask, ‘What *should* happen next? This stopped the narrative from become *too fixed, too fast*, as it extended the amount of time I would usually give myself to consider the various possibilities of a particular project, and opened up the possible pathways the narrative might take.

Play

Play refers to the comical, carefree, and careless way that tricksters move through the world (Landay 1998, p. 2); it is rarely carried out with forethought, as tricksters respond spontaneously to whatever is happening around them. The most common way that play presented itself in the practice of the writers interviewed was through the imagination, as many of the writers sought answers to self-created prompts or ‘what if?’ style questions. Even those writers who were exploring dark or difficult topics commented on the importance of writing being enjoyable or joyful, a sentiment that was also reflected in the experience of some writers cited within the literature review. Within my own practice, too, I have observed that when writing stops being joyful, writing stops.

An aspect of play has always existed within my creative process, as imagination was fundamental to the development of any idea/premise into a completed story, but in many ways my resistance to potential failure meant that I continued to rely on outlining, a strict routine, and discipline to safeguard my creative practice. While these strategies can provide structure and a sense of control and certainty, this investigation highlighted how vital play is to the creative process. Play, in this sense, refers to the way a writer engages with their creative work, approaching it openly and allowing space for disruption, delay, and changes to occur, rather than attempting to predict or control the creative process. The creative artefact benefited from creating more space for play as it enabled me to respond spontaneously to the work during the act of making, and it allowed room for seemingly inefficient wandering, risk-taking, exploration, and even failure. What could be perceived as a potential 'error' later became the catalyst for more innovative ideas and storytelling.

Imagination and curiosity were the primary ways that play influenced this investigation. As a research practitioner, generating ideas, and the creative challenge of identifying and then developing an original argument, required imagination. The creative work also benefited from responding to 'what if?' style questions and writing prompts, as well as the completion of an exploratory zero draft. These strategies created opportunities to playfully interrogate the way I approached the story and its development by questioning why I made particular decisions or used certain methods, and pausing to consider what other options were available or possible. Play also informed the analysis and coding of the author interviews as I drew upon the ideas contained within the transcripts to create a series of short stories and cento poems that allowed me to see, assess, and present this data in a new way.

Chance

Within scholarly material and trickster tales, chance refers to the events and occurrences that are outside of a trickster's control. Chance can present itself as accidents, chaos, consequence, contingency, disruption, happenstance, traps, and rebellion (Hyde 1998; Hynes & Doty 1993b; Pelton 1993; Radin 1956). Some of the writers interviewed described the unintended connections that existed in their work as matters of 'chance'. Chance often occurred when the writer was revising their work and they *happened* to notice a repeated pattern, symbol, image, or idea they had not intentionally introduced into the story. By recognising the potential of these chance moments to add nuance or depth to the novel, the writer was able to further develop this aspect of the work in later drafts. Several writers also shared the sudden, unplanned creative insights or solutions that appeared while they were either drafting or revising. This information often materialised while the writer was engaged in an activity other than writing, and it usually provided a 'missing piece' that assisted in the development of the narrative. The interviewees who spoke about these chance experiences described them as one of the greatest pleasures of writing.

Chance did not occur often within this investigation (such is the nature of chance), but when it did arise its impact was significant. For instance, the inclusion of the trickster as an organising image or idea for this investigation occurred because I happened to attend a conference presentation on this archetype. Initially, I had intended to include the trickster as an antagonist within the creative work, but as my understanding of this figure developed, I recognised that the trickster provided a way to clearly describe the creative process of fiction writing. Chance also appeared as sudden creative insights, including potential solutions, or new ideas and possibilities, and these usually appeared when I was engaged in an activity other than writing (e.g.

walking in nature) or during the course of simple, everyday living (Glăveanu V, & Tanggaard L 2016, p. 85).

Order

Order refers to the organisation of subjects (people/objects/ideas) in a particular sequence. Tricksters have a contradictory relationship to order as they are boundary crossers who can create, move, loosen, or destroy order. All the writers interviewed preferred to work without an outline (order), but doing so often resulted in ‘problems’ later (disorder). Many found that creating consistent routines and outlines made writing easier and more productive, but sometimes eliminating this order could lead to more interesting results: work that was more personal, challenging, or innovative. The choice to write without an outline may have been a somewhat deliberate way to allow these late ‘problems’ to arise, and with them, an opportunity to interrogate the work at a deeper level. Are the creative choices they made supportive to the narrative? Would the narrative benefit from being shaped in a different way?

Disorder and order were used with this investigation as I shifted between loose explorations as a way to gather ideas, themes, potential directions, and arguments before organising them in a form that was presentable to an audience. Similarly, the exploratory zero draft did not adhere to the tropes and features expected of the genre in which I intended to write (climate change fiction); instead, it was primarily concerned with character development and mapping out significant story beats. The early drafts of the novel were disorderly as they allowed space for constant interrogation of the various iterations of the premise I was exploring. Order was eventually created as decisions about the structure, characterisation, and

narrative arc were made. Disorder provided a way to challenge my assumptions and thoughts about the scholarly material and my creative practice, while order allowed me to identify the intent of this investigation, to present the findings in a way that is meaningful and useful, and to complete a work of fiction that embodies and reflects the interests of this investigation.

Future areas of research

The trickster methodology offers a model that includes clearly defined traits that can be replicated and shaped for a variety of original projects. The malleability of these traits allows for broad usage between individuals and across disciplines. This investigation has been primarily concerned with the creative process of fiction writers, which led to the identification of four trickster traits that writers employ within their practice, and the development of the trickster methodology, a framework that extends and augments practice-led research. The research process also led to the creation of a wholly original creative work, *Constant Companions*.

While the findings of this research investigation are exciting and innovative, the project has also identified scope for future research. The trickster methodology was developed as a way to describe the creative process of fiction writers, but the methodology could also be used as a *guide* for the making of a creative artefact as it provides various methods that would support a research practitioner through all stages of making (including ideation, exploration, the resolving of creative blocks, and revision). Further, this methodology was specifically concerned with the discipline of creative writing, and yet its principles could be applied to a variety of arts practices, as the traits are highly malleable and customisable. In addition, the trickster methodology identified that writers shapeshift as they *become* whatever the

narrative requires (drafter, content researcher, willful wanderer, trickster, editor, etc.), and presented the trickster as a useful figure for conceptualising the fluidity of this identity, as writers inhabit and employ various ‘faces’ throughout the creative process. Therefore, it could be illuminating to consider the ways that the notion of a writer’s sense and understanding of themselves, that sense of the self-as-writer, informs the creative process.

Conclusion

This research project has produced a methodology for creative practice. The trickster methodology is distinct from existing research frameworks and models of creativity as it does not focus on a single process or a hierarchy of processes, but reflects the fluidity the of writing process and the ways in which writers embody that fluidity, moving between and among states or traits as and when needed, but also in response to the work itself as it evolves. The trickster methodology acknowledges that the creative process is not wholly within the writer’s control, and while a work can benefit from this, apparent failures (blocks, dead ends, stalled projects) can be considered meaningful stages of the process as they allow the writer to re-evaluate creative decisions, reassess the intentions of the work, and consider alternative directions (among other beneficial insights). Creative writing can be an intuitive and instinctive process; it is not always approached in ways that are clearly definable or linear. Even if a writer prefers to work in a way that is methodical, controlled, and planned, a structured explanation of creativity (as, for example, a discrete series of problem-solving events) does not adequately account for the challenges or insights that can occur while writing. The trickster methodology accounts for the range of ways in which a writer may approach their work and provides a way of articulating

the idiosyncratic and evolving process of creativity, which can lead to a written product, while also extending our current understanding of creativity by providing a new way to articulate and describe this process. In short, the trickster methodology offers a description of the creative process that is reflective of all fiction writers, universally, and without exception.

Just tricking.

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