

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Cathy knew heat. Where she came from, heat stood back and laughed at you, then shoved a hand down your throat and dried you inside out. It wasn't the weather in this desert town that would get to her. It was sleeping with neighbours just a snore away. She wasn't used to that, but she was ready to give it a go. She wasn't a snob. Didn't think she was a snob. Maybe she was. She'd been schooled in correct grammar and pronunciation, rounding out the ou in you, rather than ya, as in how ya goin mate, but she could adapt. She had Margie to show her how.

'Eyes closed.' Margie was dragging her by the arm, up the front steps and into the house.

Cathy wasn't in a hurry to look, didn't dare. Didn't know if she could handle the rented room, sleeping on a mattress used by people she'd never even met. Be like getting into bed with strangers.

It'd been a long flight to get here. Left home at dawn, caught the twin engine to the coast, wasted time flicking through magazines at the Brisbane airport, then boarded the jet heading west to the centre. She'd forgotten why she'd said yes to packing her bags. Must have run out of reasons for saying no.

'Okay, open them. Open, open.'

Cathy opened her eyes. Purple satin sheets. A double bed with slinky sheets. The bed took up the whole space. It glowed. She blushed. She hated blushing. Why blush at a double bed with satin sheets? She'd ended up sleeping in a single bed back home, but that was by accident, not by choice. Maybe it was the purple. Purple was so out there.

'Lilac,' Margie corrected.

'Lilac.'

'You don't like them, I can tell.'

She swallowed. 'No, I do...I do.'

'You don't.'

'Do.'

She stumbled into the room, dropping everything. All her belongings carefully packed in her shoulderbag scattered. The carpet was threadbare, probably full of dust mites. It had the smell of other lives. She scrambled to gather her hair brush and purse and mints and pocket knife, and the handkerchief her mother had pressed. It was her grandmother's, linen with embroidery, sprigs of lavender. She wouldn't be blowing her nose on it, just keeping the hanky close for the touch of family.

Margie dumped the suitcases on the bed.

Cathy lifted them onto the floor.

'Shit, it's hot.'

Long-haired Margie wasn't bred for short-haired dingo country. Sweat gathered in rivers down her neck, tributaries flowing into a gully of cleavage. She was voluptuous. Cathy envied that, the way the shearer's singlet had more to hold than it could handle. Cut-off jeans rode easily up Margie's thighs. Curvy was confident, shameless, almost pin-up. Cathy looked away, made shy by her own straight up and down. The denim skirt and cotton blouse were conservative, something her mother would wear, too ironed. She pulled at the band that held her tangle of red hair tamed into a ponytail, tried to shake out the neat and tidy.

Margie nicked the mustering hat out of her hand, started fooling round, straddling the suitcase and slapping her rump, letting out a howl like a coyote or a cowgirl. Cathy wasn't a cowgirl or a coyote or anything American Wild West. She wasn't amused, but forced a laugh, trying not to be narky about Margie and her city ways. Trouble was, no one messed with her hat. Margie was messing with her hat, not respecting the sweat and dust worked into the felt. That hat was home. That hat was as much a part of who she was as her name or the tone of her voice.

The re-entry into their friendship was always a rodeo. Margie busted through boundaries, leaving the gates wide open. It was her laugh. It undid things. Cathy tried to emulate Margie's laugh, full of smoke and drink and casual sex, but she didn't have the basic ingredients. Anyway, *emulate* was

one of those words she wouldn't be needing in Alice Springs now she was a townie.

Margie gave the hat back. 'Hey, I'm sorry.'

'Don't have to be.'

'I do. I'm out of control.'

'So? Me too,' Cathy lied.

'No you're not.'

'Am.'

'I forced you to come.'

'Didn't.'

'Did.'

'Not.'

'Did so.'

'So not.'

The silly talk had been a habit since boarding school. If they were in the mood, they could keep it going for the whole of a lazy nothing-to-do day. Cathy relaxed, let it slide about the hat.

Then Margie was hugging, roughing her up, squeezing too hard.

'I wouldn't be here without you, Cees.'

'Me neither. Without you, I mean...didn't mean without me...'

It was the words. Words were slippery gravel. What she wanted to say was thanks to Margie for dragging her away. She needed to get away.

'We're *here*.' Margie was shouting again. '*Can you believe this?*'

Cathy smiled. 'Doesn't have to be national news.'

It was getting used to the loud of Margie. She could strip you naked with talk. Cathy picked up the larger suitcase. A grin snuck out. She nudged Margie out of the way. Margie shoved her back. Then it was on. Tripping up, being stupid, mucking about as if they were arriving back at boarding school, tickling and pinching and poking rude places.

'Any spunks on the plane?'

'No.'

Cathy wanted to take in the room, to get organised, orientate. Margie seemed to have forgotten she wasn't looking for anyone new just yet.

'Not a one?'

'None.'

'*Course* you were looking.'

Cathy clenched her jaw. Margie got the message. She backed off.

'Hey, look at you.'

The compliment in her tone made Cathy look down at her feet, awkward. It was the new shoes, the high heels. Maybe they looked all right. Margie was wearing rubber thongs. Cathy's father called rubber thongs Japanese riding boots. On principle he wouldn't give a job to a bloke that turned up asking for work in Japanese riding boots. Cathy looked up, their eyes met. It had taken courage to get on that plane. The softness in Margie's eyes acknowledged that. Cathy breathed more easily.

Then she was tumbling and falling and crashing. Margie had tackled her onto the bed.

'Feel that bounce, baby.' Margie slithered away across the sheets, thrust her pelvis into the air, banging down hard on the mattress, moaning and rubbing herself.

Cathy wanted to copy, but she was rigid, a wedge stuck in her throat, holding back an underground sea of emotion. The pressure of it ached. If it burst through the flow would scorch the skin off anyone in its way, drown them both. Margie kept going. Cathy gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, lay there being bounced about, waiting for Margie to stop. The bed could break, the legs might fall off, neighbours would hear. Margie's singing drummed in her ears.

'Bounce, baby, bounce ...'

It wasn't the singing. It was the remembering. The rhythm of bed, the smell of him naked, holding her. It was too hard without Dave. There wasn't going to be anyone else. She'd always be on her own. Satin sheets were crap.

She held her breath. She'd read about a woman who'd stuck a plastic bag over her head so long she asphyxiated. She was asphyxiating. Her lungs were burning. The ache wasn't hot anymore. It was cold, jabbing at her heart, slabs of ice groaning in the melt.

She started fighting back, struggling free, clambering off the bed. This wasn't anything to do with neighbours hearing, or the bed falling apart, or even Margie. It was to do with being broken. Broken was private, not for sharing, or

joking about. Cathy didn't need Margie to bring her out of herself. She needed quiet.

'Stop,' she yelled.

She hadn't meant to yell. But she did. Loud. At her friend.

Where she came from, friends were like rain, scarce. A neighbour to talk with had been half an hour's drive away, and then only for conversations about the forecast or the stock market. Margie was a luxury. It was more than her laugh. She made the smell of other people lift, the dirt on the walls fade.

Margie stopped bouncing, was lying there with arms behind her head. Cathy felt selfish, self obsessed. This was Margie's big moment, getting them both here. She had done all this to make her feel welcome.

'Thanks for the sheets.'

It was an apology. Cathy meant it. Didn't matter what they looked like or the colour, they were a present. Margie was good at presents. Cathy was better at remembering birthdays.

'They're a bit over the top.'

'They're perfect.'

They looked at each other again.

'Hey, you made it.' Margie's voice was soft.

'Yep. I did.' Cathy looked up at the ceiling. 'I'm here,' then leant back against the wall. They both smiled with the simple joy of being together.

'Nine o'clock in the morning,' Margie chirped.

'What?'

'I've got you an interview.'

'What for?'

'A barmaid job.'

'Barmaid?'

'Why not?'

'I've never been a barmaid.'

'So? Sarah has.'

'Who's Sarah.'

'Our housemate, she'll give you a lesson. She thinks you might be a bit of a redneck coming from western Queensland, but I told her you weren't like that.'

That took digesting, that they'd been talking about her. She wasn't used to being talked about, or being labelled a redneck.

'Matron did me a favour and phoned the publican,' Margie explained. 'Says he's got tickets on himself, but he's all right. The Australian's the best pub in town. We hang out there.'

We sounded as if they were best friends. Margie'd only been in Alice Springs four days.

Cathy went across to the window, looking through stained lace for neighbours. They must be lined up at the front fence by now, gawking at the noise.

The street was empty. A string of cloth squares hung faded and breathless between the verandah posts. There was some kind of foreign language scrawled on them.

'Prayer flags.' Margie rolled onto her side. 'Tibetan prayer flags, not churchie stuff. They flap in the breeze and say prayers or something, I don't know. Don't worry, I haven't gone religious.'

It'd been a year since they'd seen each other.

'Didn't think you had.'

'Didn't think you *thought* I had.'

Margie had a habit of leaning down hard on words, giving them more weight than they were built to carry. Cathy kept looking through the window. The front garden had been left to sort itself out either side of the cracked path. A lightshade was lolling about. The house faced nowhere in particular, neither the river of sand across the road nor the row of houses opposite, squat to the ground, weary from holding up rooves under the weight of blue.

Margie rolled off the bed. 'I'll run you a bath.'

Cathy didn't want a bath. Not in a shoddy house. Not in the middle of the day. She put the suitcases beneath the window. Then decided they'd be better at the foot of the bed. She shifted them back. They were in the way. She moved them across to the wall and hung her hat on the corner of the door, then on top of the curtain rail. She listened to the sound of water running. Work hats should be by the back door, hanging on hooks.

Margie was calling out how great their housemate was, how she was a riot, how Cathy would love her to bits.

Cathy walked across the hall. The walls of Margie's room were plastered with photos. Full-frame smiles, group hugs about to collapse on the floor as soon as the shutter clicked. Margie had managed to stick her head in just about every one, taking the shots at arm's length.

She was still yabbering on. Cathy wasn't listening. She stared in the mirror over the dresser, checking to see how she was holding together, if any cracks were showing. Freckles still splattered across her face. She'd hoped they might have joined up by now, made her look more mature. As a kid, punishing sunburn had kept her awake at night. The skin between the brown dots turned scarlet, and by morning would bubblewrap into blisters that split and peeled strips off her nose and shoulders. But when the burn faded she was back to what she'd always been, lily white...with freckles. Sun kisses, her mother had called them.

She went back to her room and lay on the purple and closed her eyes. Emotions were like water. Hard to keep a hold of. Cup them in your hand and they'd slip through, making mud puddles at your feet. Water was precious, not for wasting.

The satin was making her sweat. She got up before she drowned in the bed, lifted the fruitcake off the floor. Her mother had wrapped it in grease-proof paper and foil tied with string, then packed it in two plastic bags. In the unfamiliar room, the cake sat like a memory. She held it, smelt the richness of her mother's cooking, thirsty for a cup of tea at a kitchen table.

'Deester, can you do us a favour and get some iceblocks?' Margie called from the bathroom. 'The cold water's boiling.'

She wandered past the door of their housemate's room. It was plastered with stickers. Stop The Drop. Ban Uranium Mining, in black lettering on powdercake yellow. Save The Whales. The black, yellow and red of the Aboriginal flag had Land Rights sloganed across the middle. She was nervous about meeting someone who was doing so much to save the world.

The lounge was strewn with junk sloughed off like old skin from people who'd moved on. She checked the bike with the two flat tyres. The couches had sarongs draped over grungy covers. Ashtrays overflowed and mugs of coffee were growing mould. There was no hook for a hat at the front or back door. No kitchen table. She lifted a dead apple out of the fruit bowl and sat the cake in its

place and thought about wiping the benches. Maybe not all surfaces needed to shine.

She poked her head out the back door. A slab of cement ran the length of the house, cluttered with beanbags and milk crates and boxes. The cyclone wire fence made the place feel like an exercise yard, probably built that high to keep out some mongrel dog from next door. A shopping trolley with a load of boulders was bogged in sand near the gate, car doors chucked against a corner. There were bottles in boxes sagging at the seams, glass conductors from telegraph poles, a bullock skull, torn bits of cloth on totem poles marking out what could have been a vegetable garden before it withered to dust.

She went back inside. The backyard was a project for another day.

The trays of iceblocks were buried in the freezer. She chipped them free. Margie was luxuriating in a bath full to the brim, patches of her face crocodiling the surface, hair spreading like riverweed. One arm flopped over the side. People were careless with water when it didn't affect their livelihood. Cathy tossed the ice in, making sure it landed on bare skin. Splashes retaliated across the room.

'Hop in,' Margie gurgled.

'I'll be right.'

'Tell you what, Cee Cee Dee, we were so lucky to get a room each. Half of Alice is living in the caravan park, no kidding. Doctors, lawyers, social workers, geologists... The place is chockers with ring-ins like us patching up the mess.'

'What mess?'

'Blacks making a mess of themselves, or something or other, I don't know. You ever been in the minority?' She didn't wait for an answer. 'You will be here. Aboriginals everywhere. You should see the hospital. It's a madhouse.'

Margie's hands were waving, splashing water.

'Never know who you're going to meet. It's a hoot. I haven't stopped partying since I got here, so get ready, girl.'

Cathy wasn't thinking about parties.

She slumped on the wet floor, leant back against the tiles. Leaving home was one thing. Arriving somewhere else was a whole other paddock to muster.

CHAPTER 2

He'd arrived in Alice Springs on a Boeing 737 from Melbourne via Adelaide, a stranger in a strange place. He'd needed to get out of Melbourne. It was no more home than Brisbane or Sydney or a dozen other places he'd pulled up in since he left home up north. Alice was the next stop. He was nervous about going bush. Alice Springs was the bush as far as he was concerned. He was from the saltwater, from the coast, not from this no-water outback country.

He had no family out here. Didn't know the people who did. He wasn't sure he could do the job they'd brought him out to do. He knew he could pull off a great set in a club. He could get people up bumping and grinding and crazy in love, or just crazy off their faces, that was easy.

He was a legend in the nightclubs down south, even in his own eyes. Jason Johnstone, JJ the DJ, everyone knew him, karltick. He'd started playing European electronica while others were still cutting their baby teeth on funk. He'd done the Afro thing with his hair, bought some classy threads, practised cool till it fit. First gig, he'd lucked-in with a bloke who owned a pub in the burbs. Two years and he was doing city gigs, Friday nights at Chasers, Sundays at the Chevron.

Fashion changed fast, but. Before he got to be Mr Yesterday he was moving on. His sister up home saw the ad. Morning radio, first Aboriginal radio station in the country. He'd never seen himself in that blackfella scene, but he was ready to claim his heritage. He'd landed the job, now he had to come up with the voice. He wasn't sure how he'd go, working with an audience that wasn't playing up to him in front of the carousel. These were bush Murriss, country people, and he was a no-name out here.

He wasn't born in the city, but he'd grown into it. His home was on the fringe of Cairns, North Queensland. There was no future ahead of him there except beatings from the bullymen, drinking himself stupid to forget, then waking up to the same old same old. He could either leave home or he could die. At eighteen he'd chosen to leave home. He wasn't worrying about changing the world when he left for the airforce. Just worrying about saving his own bony little black dot.

A uniform and armed service was a way out. He took up the offer and served the nation that hadn't recognised his people as citizens of their own country until 1967, and as for equals, well, that was still being worked on.

Family was different. He would die for any one of his family. Before he left home he'd told his younger brother, 'You watch your arse, bro. You need me, you phone me, you get it?'

When he fell out of the airforce, he fell into nightclubs, learning to fly by the seat of his pants, keeping on the move, going back home for holidays, for refills, for Christmas, for Easter, for that fix of family he knew he'd be nothing without. A couple of weeks later, he'd leave again for some place else where he could lose himself in a crowd.

In Alice Springs he was still looking for the crowd. He'd got himself a good job, a flash place to stay, and a new pair of jeans. He had money in his pocket to spend and to keep for when the phone rang.

'How you holdin, bruz?'

'Not bad.'

'Can you slip us some junga? The bloody pension never come through, the pricks. Post im then will ya, bro? Yeah, Gee Pee Oh, Cairns. They know me there.'

'No worries, sis.'...bruz...cuz...

'Love yuz.'

'Love yuz first.'

Calls came in the middle of the night. He cursed them for being so slack. For pissing money up against the wall. For not getting proper jobs or holding down the ones they had. Curse all he liked, he'd never say no to helping out family. What was the point of getting if you can't be giving? He had enough. He ate when he wanted and what he wanted, no rules, no regulations, no tomorrows. If he was hungry for a hunk of steak or fish and chips or a hamburger with the lot, and he had the money in his pocket, then he got it. If he didn't have the money, then he didn't get the feed. In his language it was simple. You got no junga then you got relatives. Out here he had no relatives, so he had to take it carefully. He tucked some junga away each pay day. Hid it places, like the butter compartment in the fridge or the hollow of a toilet roll, to give himself a surprise.

He was watching his own arse. He was the new boy on the block. He assumed Alice Springs was pretty much the usual honky town with redneck attitudes, surrounded by a throng of black nations at each other's throats. He'd heard not to mess with the black brothers out here. They had a reputation for being a wild bunch. There was one main difference between his mob from the coast and this desert mob. The whiteman had raped his mob longer, that was all. Messed with their traditions, their language, their songs and their dances, their stories and everything they'd lived by. That's what blackfellas across the country had in common. They'd been messed with. The differences were everything else. The land, the climate, the culture...

He was wary of these desert people. At the radio station he was ears to the ground, picking up what was going down and who was up who for the rent. Work was friendly, home was some place else. He hadn't been invited round to any blackfella's place. He didn't expect to be. He knew the deal, he had to earn his stripes and he had to keep his eyes off their women. That was fine by him. He preferred white chicks. They let you get away with more. Girls from his mob could see right through you, down to the cardboard patching the holes in your shoes. They knew where you'd been and where you hoped you were going and who you were fooling to get there. With migaloo girls, it was an open horizon. You could invent yourself in front of their eyes and they had no way of knowing which bits were made of clay and which bits were rock solid. Sol-ol, eh? Look out. Jay was building himself up without even trying.

He found the Red Kettle on his first walk up the main street. It could have been the smell of freshly ground coffee, or it could have been his impossibly good instinct for finding a pretty face. The tables and chairs looked as if they'd been pulled together from a garage sale or off the tip. Nothing matched. He'd seen student houses in the city kept cleaner than this place. Made the kitchen in his flat look brand new. They played his kind of music, but. A mix and match, R & B, Madonna, Prince, Bob Marley...and they played it good and loud.

He walked in with a smile on his face, and he got one back from the spunk behind the counter. She went with the furniture, a mismatch of colour and clothes and hair and jewellery. He loved hippy chicks with a political conscience. They came on serious about injustice and racism, and raved at you with their

patchworked version of history put together out of guilt and ignorance, but one roll of a joint and they'd be off their heads, politics flying out the window along with their panties.

'Jay,' he smiled, offering a handshake. He'd straight off have offered her a hug, but the counter stood between them.

'Yeah. Sarah.'

She took his hand and lay her face wide open for the taking.

'What can I do you for?'

He laughed. 'We could begin with a coffee?'

'How d'you like it?'

'Hot.'

'I can make it hot.'

'And milky.'

'All the milk you like. And froth?'

'Lots of froth.'

'With one or two?'

She was cheeky. He could hear his sister digging him in the ribs and chiacking in his ear. 'Good go, bro'.

'I'll go the two,' he said, keeping a handle on his out-of-control.

Her smile was a mouthful. 'Thought you would.'

He became a regular at the Red Kettle. By the third day they were hugging, her breasts pressed against his chest, more front than Myer's. She'd fix him up with a coffee and toasted ham cheese and tomato without him having to order, and at half price. She'd fix him up with whatever else he wanted, free of charge, he was sure of it. She was that kind of jalbu. Loaded up with the nation's sorry history and weighed down with feeling lousy about herself. She was cute. He liked her. Probably even felt sorry for her, if he was concerning himself with other people's hearts. He'd met a lot of people like her. There was a saying amongst his mob: whitefellas that hang out with blackfellas are either missionaries, mercenaries or misfits. Sarah wore the hippy misfit headband. It made her eyes dance. He was happy to flirt and talk shit while she sorted herself out on him. He spent enough time on his own. Time with her was a distraction. He wasn't in a hurry for it to be anything more.

She told him about the theatre she was doing, putting together a show about health to tour the Aboriginal communities. Did he act? He'd done a bit of acting, he said, trying to keep a straight face. It wasn't a lie. He'd been in a telemovie down in Melbourne. He'd hung out in the theatre scene. She was ecstatic. He wasn't about to tell her there was no way he was going out bush. These desert fellas were traditional. They still had their ceremonies. They might steal him away and do things.

He was about the only blackfella who came into the Red Kettle. Even a shabby outfit like this was too flash for most of the mob round here. Once he settled into his flat, he'd invite her over. He was a deadly hunter-gatherer...in the supermarket. Give him an egg, and a bit of bacon if he was feeling rich, and there was no end of what he could do. He could make baked beans taste gourmet. His secret was the amount of butter layered on the hot toast underneath the beans. Food was nothing without atmosphere. Candles, wine glasses, napkins, flowers, mood music. He had his compilation tapes at the ready, fifty of them, from DJing.

Before he left the café, he stepped round the counter and gave her another hug. He'd always been a lover more than a fighter. When in doubt, he came in with the hug. It'd become a practice of his, a way to bridge the gap. As a kid, hugs came easy. He grew up on big-bosomed hugs, and that was just his uncles. Nannas, popeyes, aunties and uncles, cuzs, siss, bros... it was all hugs. Hugs meant being family in a way that squeezed the breath right out of you, same time as praising you up for who you were and what you were going to become. He never thought he was going to be anything. He hoped he'd be alive. Hugs from family he wore like protection, a shield in times when there'd be those wanting to beat the living crap out of him.

When he got game to test the hug beyond the safety of family, it had powerful results. As a DJ in the clubs he didn't find it hard to get brave, hugging. At first he thought it was because he was a drop-dead gorgeous hunk. Then he woke himself up. When people got ripped or boozed or both, his hugs were a life raft to keep sinking ships afloat.

From the nightclubs, he got game to take the hug further. Now, when he was introduced to men, women, young or old, cats or dogs, he'd lay a hug on them. From one hug he could tell a lot about a person. It was his most reliable

weapon. Even the most lost soul rarely resisted one of his hugs, if he was game to give it. Giving hugs was about overcoming fear. His elders had fought with their fists and with everything they had, to stay alive. He knew they were the only reason he was here today. He was carrying on the fight, in his own way, with the Battle of the Hug.

CHAPTER 3

Margie thumped the clock, kicked the sheet away from her ankles, and dragged a pair of undies off the floor. Bugger, she'd slept through the alarm. Matron would crack the shits. Margie had used the stuffed clock excuse already so now she'd have to make something up about the car. She called out. No response. So much for the country girl who never sleeps in. There'd been so much to catch up on that they'd stayed up late drinking champagne. Eventually she'd coaxed a full sentence out of Cathy about how she was feeling, which was pretty much what Margie already knew. Cathy was still wasting her time grieving over the fiancé. If she didn't love the girl, being her friend would be too much like hard work.

Margie rocketed across the hall.

'We're late, we're late. Get moving.'

Cathy sat up as if she'd woken from an accident.

'I'm first shower. Wear my skirt, it's in the cupboard.'

There was a reason country people got up before dawn. They were so bloody slow. Margie'd have to prod her along every step, otherwise it'd be lunchtime and she'd still be folding her pyjamas under the pillow. Margie cut her shower short, grabbed a towel and slip-slopped back to the bedroom. Cathy was standing in the purple glow looking homeless, rubbing her face as if she was still stuck in mid-air.

'Where's the iron?'

'Stuff ironing, we haven't got time.'

'It's creased.' She held up her blouse.

'It'll iron out in the car. Here, shove this on.'

Margie threw a black skirt across the hallway then went to war getting dressed. Wet skin made the uniform stick and the stick made her hot. The hot brought out the sweat, and between the wet and the deodorant she was just one lump of sticky. Damn, her pink knickers were showing through. Too bad, at least the patients would get a kick out of that. Right now, Cathy was her priority. The black skirt looked like a potato sack on her, too big, no shape, it needed a belt. She'd blow the job, looking like that.

'Hurry up. Grab a belt from the door of my cupboard.'

'Which belt?'

'Any belt. And get your blouse.'

Cathy was moaning.

'Just get on. Here, lie on the bed, give me your feet.'

Below the sock line, her feet were lily-white from boots and shorts and working long days in the sun like a man. Margie grabbed the fake tan and slapped it on. She'd painted Cathy's nails last night between champagnes. In the light of day they were lurid but they'd have to do.

'You need a lacy bra.'

Cathy's toes curled under. Margie slapped them straight, then shooed her off the bed to get the blouse.

'And make-up. Heap it on. Pubs are always dim.'

Margie went to wash the tan off her hands.

'Tell him you're experienced, that you've worked in a bar in Gadunga. He won't know where the hell that is.'

Cathy was staring into Margie's mirror.

'Come on, you look gorgeous. I'll do the make-up.'

The blouse was very creased but at least it was well cut and slightly see-through. If there was something more than a sports bra to peek at, it could almost be interesting. They'd have to go shopping as soon as possible.

'Smile. You're a spunk.'

'Not.'

'Stand still a minny.'

Black eyeliner brought out the blue in her eyes. Margie managed to tease a few curls into dangles down her cheek, and the sweet country thing started happening. A lot of men liked that open-faced look of cowsheds and milking at sunrise.

'We don't have time,' Cathy complained.

'That's my excuse, get your own. You need more lipstick.'

Red first, then pink on top, and viola, worked like a treat. The shock of colour made Cathy's face a waifish white, and the freckles added cute. Margie undid the top buttons of the blouse and shoved Cathy's hand away when she tried to do them up again.

'You want the job?'

Cathy clenched her jaw.

'You've got to use what you've got.' Which wasn't much, but Cathy was sensitive about small tits and so she didn't make a joke. Half her luck being small anyway. She should try lugging this load around. 'Time to go.'

Keys. Margie looked on the dresser then beside her bed. Why were they never where she put them?

Cathy followed her into the kitchen. 'Can we put this off?'

Margie turned and gave Cathy a hug and undid the top buttons again and fixed a smudge.

'Now, breathe. We're going, right now, in the car.'

The fruitcake smelt good. A mouthful of homemade and a slug of milk from the carton in the fridge, taking care not to spill any on her uniform, and they were out the door. 'Bring the cake. We'll eat in the car.'

Cathy opened the kitchen drawer and took out a knife. 'How do you pull beers?'

'Not with a knife.' It was time to get her out of here. 'Joke Joyce. Come on.'

Cathy cut a piece of cake. Margie broke off a couple of chunks and rushed out the front.

'Found the keys?'

'They're in the car.'

Margie banged the dash, cursing the airconditioning for blowing up as soon as she got here, sending red dirt spinning into the air and making her sneeze. The car convulsed through first gear. She kept her foot down until it behaved and sped along beside the river, passed a scattering of low-lying houses, then skidded around the corner, down onto the causeway.

'Isn't it shocking?' Margie was staring at the human wreckage lying in the riverbed.

'Yep...'

Surely Cathy could give her more than a yep. Margie didn't know how to react to a place that looked like a war zone in the middle of the lucky country

she'd lived in all her life and thought she knew. Even the river had run dry, leaving these gnarled gums clinging on to islands of sand as if it was Custer's Last Stand. She couldn't stop staring at the ragged bodies and the little kids and the flagons and broken bottles strewn where they'd fallen the night before. If this land was sacred to them, why didn't they clean up after themselves? How could they let their children kick around barefoot with the mangy looking dogs and the campfires still smouldering? Wasn't the joint hot enough as it was?

Cathy wasn't looking. She was watching the road, probably about to make some comment about her driving. The hatchback had looked sporty back in the city but out here it was covered in desert and running like a tractor. Cathy angled the side mirror around, checking herself out. Maybe she was secretly pleased with her new look. Margie could be sure her friend had never gone mustering with lipstick and a cleavage.

Up the other side of the causeway, Margie ran the red on the town's one set of traffic lights. None of the locals took much notice of green turning to red, so she didn't see why she should.

'Anzac Hill.' She pointed to an outcrop of rock with a white pole holding up a national flag she hadn't seen flap once.

'You know, Cees, there must be a ban on mirrors in this town. The place is full of overweight bevans with heat rash.'

Cathy didn't respond. Margie gave up and reached for her make-up in the back seat. Cathy grabbed the wheel and Margie let her steer while she found her mascara and started applying. That was another good thing about having a friend. They were an extra set of hands to keep you on the road.

'She did you a big favour, you know that?'

'I'm sure.'

'You're not listening.'

'Watch the road. I'm listening.'

'What did I say?'

'You were complaining about the ban on mirrors.'

Margie took the steering wheel again.

'I was explaining about Matron. She did us a big favour, asking whatshisface, I've forgotten his name. I mean, given she hasn't met you. I promised her you weren't a complete no-hoper.'

'Thanks.'

Margie swung the car into the curb in front of the Australian and slammed on the brakes. She looked across. Cathy had gone all limp on her as if her confidence was more crumpled than her clothes. If Margie went soft, Cathy'd toss the interview and refuse to get out of the car. They both had an interest in Cees getting a job to pay her share of the rent. Food in Alice was expensive. There was a lot of living to do.

'Put on an act. Remember drama classes. Just breathe and you'll be fine.'

'You sure he said nine?'

'He said nine o'clock.'

'Pubs don't open until ten.'

'That's why he said nine. Knock on the door that says Spinifex Bar. Hey, get out. I'm late.' She gave Cathy a quick hug.

'It's not nine.'

'I started at eight-thirty, and remember, *you're* doing *him* a favour. And keep the buttons undone, kitten.'

Cathy jerked the door open. She was a long stretch from being a kitten in anyone's imagination, but it got her moving. Margie winked, then revved the accelerator, showing off, fishtailing the tyres and tooting and waving. She looked in the rear-vision mirror and saw Cathy standing there, a mix of you're embarrassing me and don't stop, twisted into that half-smile half-grimace of hers that always broke Margie up.

Alice Springs would be good for Cathy. It had been Margie's idea to come but they both needed the getaway. Trainee nursing in Brisbane had given her the shits. She was sick to death of the jacarandas and frangipanis and well-pressed people in their sensible cotton clothes. She'd been months with the one boyfriend who kept making the mistake of saying he loved her. It was clear he wasn't the happy-ever-after. Love had to be harder than that. Besides, he placed his knife and fork the wrong way at the end of the meal.

Late one night, she'd stumbled into a phone box outside the Regatta on the way home after a big night and called Cathy on the cheap rates. Cathy was already up, getting ready for work.

‘Hey, I’m freakin out. I bump into FRs around every street corner. It’s all so been there done that.’

Margie was ready to settle in for a chat but Cathy couldn’t talk, she said her brother was waiting in the ute. Margie hung up. What the hell could there be to do at dawn in the middle of nowhere, for godsake? Couldn’t cows feed themselves?

Leaving Brisbane was more than getting away from boyfriends. No one got sick of having too many boys saying they were head-over-heels. It was her family she needed to get away from, her sister, her dad. And Jean. She’d never called her mum anything other than Jean. Jean was a party animal, an absolute rager, a piss pot, and regarded herself as her daughter’s all-time best-ever friend. When they were together they misbehaved. It took a brave man to husband a woman like Jean, and an even braver one to be Margie’s dad. Margie was proud of being a handful. She’d probably marry a man like her father. Correction, she’d marry someone younger. Joke Joyce. Her dad wasn’t so much a brave man as a quiet one, a suburban doctor who accepted that the purpose of his life was to bring home the dollars so the rest of his family could party. There was a pay-off. He was kept entertained by ‘his girls’, quotation marks made by two fingers in the air. Margie, her mum and her sister all did the quotation marks thing with fingers bent like rabbit ears. Like they all said ‘Joke Joyce’ whenever someone was getting serious.

The competition between the three of them was like ring-a-ring-a-rosy. It got faster and faster until one of them spun out from the pressure of having the most fun or getting in first with the next joke, or who’d done the best clothes shopping, or been invited to the coolest party. When it was Margie’s turn to fall down, she’d lie in bed with her head under the sheet, never wanting to show her ugly face in public ever again.

She’d phoned Cathy again on a dinner break from the hospital.

‘We’ve gotta talk. I’ve had a brilliant idea.’

‘What’re FRs?’ Cathy whispered.

‘Former Roots,’ she shouted. ‘Speak up, for godsake.’

Cathy had started speaking in whispers and half-sentences. It’d been ages since the funeral, must be almost a year. Margie needed to get her out of there.

'What about it?'

'About what?' Cathy asked.

'Who dat, dat says who dat, when I say who dat?'

'Get on.'

'Alice Springs. The Red Centre.'

There was no comment from the other end.

'Come on, Cees, don't make me get nasty. You need to get away more than me. Let's go, let's party.'

Surely it had been a hoax, the Cathy-getting-married thing? That was crazy stuff. So what if Dave was a good catch? So what if he was a spunk with dollars in the bank, a cotton farmer or something? Margie didn't care about him being eight years older, at least he'd know some good moves. But marriage? Commitment? Before your twenty-first birthday party? Give it a rest.

When the accident happened, she had phoned Cathy day and night. Apparently the fiancé had been showing off in his crop-duster, nipping in under the powerline instead of over the top. One wing had clipped the wire and cartwheeled his plane out of the sky, splattering him across a paddock of cotton. She'd called Cathy enough times to slap the patient conscious, digging in deep to clean out wounds that no one else seemed willing to touch.

If it was her, Margie, she would have made a fuss and used it as an excuse to buy an expensive black dress and fascinator and jumped in the grave or something. Death was a bitch like that. It picked on the good people. Cathy was good to the bottom of her stinky old riding boots. She didn't deserve grief.

'It's almost been a year,' Margie reminded her. 'The guy's dead. He ain't coming back.'

'Ten months. That's not a year.'

'Okay, okay, I'm sorry.' Margie softened. 'Come on, sausage, I know it's tough, but look at your brother with a wife and a kid and another one on the way. What is he? Twenty-two?'

He was older than that, probably twenty-four or five, but there was a point to be made and she never let the truth get in the way of winning an argument.

‘Some other bloke’ll come along and get into your pants and want babies, and before you know it you’ll have a string of kids and it’ll be all over red rover, see you later gator, end of story.’

The trouble with Cathy was she had no game plan, not even short-term manoeuvres. She lolled about, taking what came. Plans were what kept you busy. Margie was going to get married, for sure, of course. That was the long-term plan, the big picture. But between then and now was for cramming in trips, careers, career moves, falling in love, lust, broken hearts, change of plans, planning changes, no regrets.

Margie wasn’t short on friends. She had a cluster of girlfriends who changed orbit seasonally, but Cathy was a constant. Cathy was calm. Cathy had a nose for bullshit and Margie valued that.

‘Australia’s the size of Europe and the Middle East jammed together, can you believe that?’

They were back on the phone. Margie was drawing lines in felt pen on a map she’d spread out across her bedroom floor. Cathy was the blue line from Gadungu in outback Queensland to Brisbane, then back out west to Alice Springs. Margie was in red. Brisbane to Alice Springs direct. Cathy was umming and aching on flight details.

‘Let me book it. I’ll book you to Brisbane, then on my flight out. We can travel together.’

Margie planned to load her car on a transport and send it west. No way was she driving all that distance, and she wasn’t landing in the middle of nowhere without wheels.

‘You know, it looks like a twelve-hour drive from Alice Springs to the closest beach. Shit.’

‘There’s waterholes,’ Cathy murmured.

‘I’m talking civilisation, babe. Beach. As in real people.’

In the end, they ran out of time. The job at the Alice Springs District Hospital, advertised in the Courier Mail, was for a trainee nurse to start in January. She had to get on the go, and when Margie’s plane landed, Cathy was still packing back in Gadungu. Some crap about mustering.

Margie took the heat full blast as she stepped down off the plane and walked a stretch of tarmac broad enough to land a supersonic Concorde. They

could have parked her plane a little closer, she cursed, searching for a public phone as soon as she was inside the bundle of bricks that posed as a terminal.

'It's hot. You didn't tell me it'd be this hot.'

'It's a desert.'

'Bummer.'

Champagne had been free on board to compensate for a delay. Pissed plus hot made arriving a messy mix of whoopy doo and dehydration. The place looked like a worksite and there was no one to meet her. The whole thing was a shit plan.

'Hey, get your slack arse out here, girl, I'm waiting.'