

Chapter 1. A Moment of Reflection

1956

I'm back on the dairy farm surrounded by images of the old timber house, rows of privet trees and three huge pines. Around one hundred cows and calves roam around on the five-hundred-acre farm along with horses, dogs, cats and well-bred pigs ready for breeding and the market place. I can feel my body stretched out on the grey lino floor in the kitchen with the round wooden table and green Laminex cupboard where Mum is washing the dishes in the sink. Long curly hair tied in a bun and an hand sewn apron over her brown knee length dress is her daily outfit, changed only when she helps milk the cows morning and afternoon. I remember her lovely green eyes and lovely olive skin. She was always working. Washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning, milking cows. Dad, tall and going bald, didn't talk much and was always outside somewhere working on the fences or potato and corn crops. They never seemed to have fun together. I never saw them kissing.

"Mum, one day I'm going to see the mysterious places across the ocean."

"Really? And what do you think you will find there that is not here?"

"Love," I reply with a smug look.

She laughs and shakes her head from side to side.

"Love eh? You are seven today. You think you know about love? You think that's where love is?"

"Maybe."

"Go out and play. What a dreamer..." She trails off as she throws another piece of wood into the kitchen fire.

2014

Why was my mother always right about my choices in life? I have lived the dream, but not all dreams have happy endings. There are the dreams that drag on and on with no solution in sight, or the ones where I open my eyes and realise that something was sad and difficult but seems to be resolved, or worst of all, the dreams that turn into nightmares where I just wake up in total shock.

My mind flashes everywhere. I parasail off a mountain in Norway and wonder where I will land, and this moment is no different.

I am back in Australia, but who am I now and where will I finally land? What I do know is, that wherever it is, I will not land with a man. Seems like I am not cut out for everlasting love.

I'm seven today! No party. No special cake for Katie Williams.

I spread my body out on the warm green summer grass in the paddock between our weatherboard iron roof farmhouse and the cow bails. Flat on my back with arms outstretched, I look up into that wide blue Australian sky, trying to find heaven.

Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? Am I alive or am I dreaming?

I pinch the skin on my scrawny little arm. Yep, I'm alive.

I know about new life because my sister Rosalie, Rosie for short, has just been born. Not planned, my mother says, whatever that means.

And I know about death, because my cousin Henry was killed in an accident three weeks ago. Hit by a drunk driver as he cycled home Saturday night after the movies with his wife. Just married they were... well... until last week. Mum answered the telephone at about midnight and started to scream and cry. I had only seen Mum cry once before that night. But no one can tell me where we go when we die.

The silence and my thoughts are broken by the screech of three black cockatoos.

That means three days of rain coming up according to Dad.

My eyes leave the sky and come to rest on the leaves at the top of the old red gum tree where the dull blue green tapered tips dance silent in the summer breeze.

I am by myself, but I never feel like I am alone.

Old Black Mick barks and frightens me out of my daydream. "Bloody mongrel," I smile and think to myself. That's what Dad says.

I sit up and look west towards the green hills and see a herd of cattle coming towards me. Then I hear the crack of a whip and a distinguished whistle that tells me that it's Barney the cattle drover. He moves the herd up the hill towards me with his blue heeler cattle dogs, and as I cuddle Mick the mongrel the thought hits me,

Oh, God no, it's branding day—the worst thing I can think of on my birthday.

"Go on. Get home Kate, if you don't wanta help. No point sitting on the bloody fence crying.

Go home to Mum, and make yourself useful in the kitchen," says Dad as he eyes me sideways from beneath his akubra hat.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard that. It was part of our ongoing

relationship where he was the farmer and I was the animal activist. I don't want to make the cows stand with one leg tied back as they are milked. I don't want to hit the calves on the head with the wooden stick when they drink one third of the bucket of milk so there is enough to go around, and I don't like branding day.

It all begins with the herding of the cows and heifers.

"Bring em up Mick," yells Dad. "Get behind ém. Gorn!"

Mick sets out in his usual half-hearted manner.

"Gorn, you bloody mongrel."

He doesn't spring like a border collie nor does he go like a poodle. He is somewhere in between. He heads in the direction of the cattle and takes a wide swing. He looks effective but he isn't, because these cows know only too well that Mick is a bit of a silly mongrel who likes to think he is king, who thinks he injects fear just by his presence. The cows know better, and he has to come right up to them and snap at them before they move. Meanwhile Dad just calls out to him to "git behind."

None of it makes sense to me as I think it is almost easier to just take a walk and bring them up and save Dad's voice box.

After about fifteen minutes the cows amble towards the home paddock as Mick plods along behind. His pink tongue hangs out as though he has run twenty miles. Dad joins Mick on the last of the walk to the branding yard and pats him on the head as though he has won a marathon.

Mum says Mick is as useless as tits on a bull, and I hear her tell Dad that if he wants her to get the cows in on Saturdays when he is late home from betting on the horses at the den in town, then he had better get her a real dog, and she doesn't smile when she says it.

A small hot fire surrounded by stones to hold in the heat, pounds into the branding iron with the initials HW. A couple of the farmers close by, Fred and Gus, have come to help on this smelly annual occasion. Gus sits on the fence and shakes his head over his new automatic Valiant he bought the day before.

"Can you bloody believe it?" he says, with raised eyebrows and a grin.

"What actually happened, mate?" asks Dad.

I sit on the fence and listen to Gus.

"Well, mate," he says, shaking his head. "I've been changing gears me whole flamin' life, and I forgot there are no gears in me new valiant, and. I put me foot flat on the accelerator and bang, it went into the end

wall of the car shed. Lifted the whole flamin' wall." The three of them laugh, while Dad gives Gus a pat on the back. We always get a pat on the back when we do something really special, so I guess Dad thinks he is pretty smart even though it seems like a disaster. Gus' two teenage sons, Bruce and Gary, aren't here today.

Pity, I think, they are always so funny!

The last time I saw them they were doing a cattle count of Barney's roundup at their farm. I watched all the cattle push and bellow and with a loud crash they all took off down the hill towards the creek.

The boys laughed as Barney says "Aw, bugga it, let's go and have a cuppa," in that funny, croaky, raspy voice of his. "We'll find 'em again later."

No matter how much I hate brand and ear mark day, I still go to the yards and sit on the rails to watch, entertained by Barney and all the men as they work and laugh at the same time. There isn't anything else to do so it is a sort of sad entertainment. Tilly is here. She doesn't say anything. She just sits and watches as they take the first young cow and sting her rump with the hot brand. The stench of burnt hair and flesh wafts into my nostrils and I heave. I close my eyes and put my hands over them to stop my tears.

"Got the ear marker, mate?" yells Dad to Gus.

"Yeah, ready to chop," says Gus, showing a missing tooth as he clips into the ear of the heifer. "Number one done!" he calls out, "Eighty-five to go."

That clip of the marker through the ear must be painful I think as I watch red blood drip after the crunch of the sharp clipper. One is enough for me. I slide down over the other two rails and look up at my sister, Matilda.

"Come on Tilly. Let's go ridin'."

"Riding." Repeats Tilly. "You know that ya not allowed to say ridin'. It's got a G on the end. ING 'saying,' remember. That's what they tell us at school."

"Are you comING?" I asked.

"Na. I wanta watch. What's wrong with you? I dare you to stay here and watch! You can't do anything tough."

"I can so," I reply as I try to think of what to say next if the conversation continues.

"Like what?" says Tilly

Yep, she continues.

She looks straight at me. "Like trap rabbits? There are too many rabbits. Mum and Dad say the rabbits are gunna be poisoned with stuff

that makes them shake and shiver and they die slow. Better to trap them don't you think?" I feel sick inside. I turn and walk away from the bellow of cows and cry of calves, the dust and dirt on the soles of my feet a reminder of the freedom I have, compared to animals.

There is no love on this farm.

"Go on. I dare you!" she calls out as I head home past the dried out puddles on the dirt track until I get to the barn. I open the door and climb up onto the plank timber floor.

There are bales of hay for the winter and some pollard for the hens, and in the corner near the old rusty water can are five old traps. Each trap is attached to a chain and a small heavy post about a foot long. I pick it up and look at it.

The brown links that lead to the trap are rusty and the teeth on the trap aren't sharp. They struggle to fit into each other and as I tread on the bar I let my foot off too soon and jump as the trap springs closed. My heart beats fast. I throw the trap back in the corner with the others and leave the barn.

That afternoon I think about the rabbits and how they suffer with the poison and the fact that, like Tilly says... I never help with anything on the farm. I find my father's navy air force gloves from the Second World War in a drawer in the laundry.

He had been to Canada, something to do with the war, some cold place a long way from here... driving aeroplanes... but they were not bad gloves he once told me, because he didn't kill anyone... says he was snow blind. I don't know what that means because I haven't seen snow but I will one day...I know I will. The gloves have warm lining and are much longer than my fingers.

These will help me set the traps, I think as I walk up to the barn.

"Where you goin?" yells Tilly.

"Rabbiting," I reply, adding the - ing.

"Ah really? she sniggers, "You don't know how to set a trap,"

"I do so," I reply as I walk straight ahead. I need to be alone to see just what I can do. Maybe she is right.

Anyway, that afternoon when the branding is over and the cows are being milked, I set off down the paddock, past the row of privet trees towards the burrows. In my green dress, rubber boots and Dad's gloves, I carry and pull the trap along behind me over the grassy tracks made by the cows.

I am now close to the warren where I see the rabbits run and play in the silence of the afternoon. It is quiet and there are no rabbits anywhere,