

# **The Same Place, but Not the Same Way**

By Cedar

Edited by Noodtoonist, Simonsebs, & Upnorth

## Disclaimers

First, Loxie and Zoot, The Bare Pit, and any characters mentioned within this story are the intellectual property of their creator, Stephen Crowley. Stephen has graciously endorsed the writing of this particular fanfiction. If you have an idea for your own Bare Pit fanfiction, you should clear it with Stephen first. You will encounter some familiar characters, and some new ones. Still, Stephen deserves the lion's share of the credit. Without Stephen, there would be no Loxie and Zoot. This fanfic would simply not exist. I am just a simple fan trying to show my appreciation.

Second, this story should be considered non-canonical. None of the events described should be considered as having any bearing on the main storylines written by Mr. Crowley. This fanfic assumes the events of "Noodtoon #9: First Time for Everything" to have never taken place. If you are interested in timeline, the events are supposed to have taken place some time after the events of "It's a Nood, Nood, Nood, Nood World!" and that is as specific as I am willing to get.

Third, it should be said that I am a non-Australian. Any inaccuracies regarding the geography, flora, fauna, culture, and peoples of Australia are the result of my own ignorance. They are not meant to offend, and I apologize in advance if they do. I am simply uneducated.

Fourth, is the "don't try this at home" disclaimer. Some of the survival tips are grounded in reality, some are merely conjecture, and some are downright inaccurate. If you're going camping, bring a guide book, or an experienced nature guide. Don't rely on this fanfic for any real wilderness survival tips.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my editors. Their contributions have made this a better story. Indeed, without their creative inputs, I dare say this story would not exist. Their support goes beyond mere editing. These are the people who have encouraged my writing. So, thanks guys.

I would especially like to thank Stephen for his help in editing. I don't know how many fanfic authors have the input of the source material's creator. Stephen's edits have truly enriched this project. Most notably, he helped make the story "more Australian" and helped fix Mungo's dialogue. I am an American, and it showed in my writing. However, Koala Bay is an Australian local, and so Stephen's comments were invaluable. In my early draft, I tried to make Mungo

sound “wise,” but he ended up sounding more like an intellectual. Stephen helped me fix Mungo’s dialogue, and it has a very organic feel now.

Once again, thanks to my editors. You guys inspire me.

## Introduction

I have been a Loxie & Zoot reader since late 2001. If I remember correctly, the first storyline The Koala Bares was still running. Since then, I have made it a point to read the strip regularly. When the strip made the transition from Loxie & Zoot to The Bare Pit, I still kept reading. I have read every strip to date, and continually go back and re-read each of the stories.

I found Kylie to be one of the most compelling antagonists in the Loxie and Zoot universe. And, yes, I do use the word antagonist. She is not close minded or diabolical, like Tex Tyler. Nor is she an enterprising con-artist like Erman. Nor is she a prankster like the team of Mac and Daria. Nor is she a sleaze ball like Frank. Yet in the early days, she was still an antagonist. She created trouble for the residents of Koala Bares out of her own prejudices. She later learned the error of her ways, and was reformed as a full-fledged naturalist. I think that her willingness to re-examine her beliefs makes her the most human of the Loxie & Zoot “rogues’ gallery” (though I can see similar traits in Andy).

It is through her interactions with Mungo, that Kylie is finally shown the light. Granted, I can’t downplay the importance of Dr. Geena Alletti in her role in Kylie’s transformation. Yet I’ve always found the character relationship between Kylie and Mungo to be an interesting one. The second to last page of The Koala Bares focuses in on the dynamic between Mungo and Kylie. Similarly, the opening of It’s a Nood, Nood, Nood, Nood World! opens with a scene of those two characters. If that’s not important, I don’t know what is. I’ve always found the relationship between those two characters compelling, and I’ve tried to capture that same magic in this fanfic.

I hope you’ll enjoy reading it as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it.

## **Chapter 1: The Loneliest Birthday**

Kylie’s 38<sup>th</sup> birthday was the loneliest one she had ever had...

Kylie was required to work on her birthday. It was not something she was particularly happy about, but it came with the territory. Working in broadcasting, Kylie had to make certain sacrifices, and working on her birthday was one of them. The evening news had to be told, and she was the one to tell it. Her loyal Channel 5 viewers expected nothing less.

Still, it didn’t have to be all bad. Even around the office, birthdays were something worth celebrating. They typically meant cake and presents in the staff room. They also meant lunch breaks that typically lasted an hour and a half or longer, well beyond the length of a typical break. These events often made everyone relax, and

created a sense that they were not just employees, but really almost like a family. At the very least, she had some amusing distractions to look forward to...

...or so she thought. Yet all morning, no one said so much as a "Happy Birthday!" to her. No one even acknowledged that it was her birthday. The morning passed with no cards at her desk, or special deliveries of flowers. Kylie was a bit surprised, but figured they must have had some sort of party planned during lunch.

No matter, she had an on-site report to give that morning. She grabbed her field cameraman Carl and sound-recordist Macca, and went to report.

Macca had been with the station for the longest, and knew the large coastal town of Koala Bay like the back of his hand, so naturally he ended up driving the news van most of the time. He had recently decided to grow his light brown hair a bit longer, and grow a beard as well, which gave him the appearance of a seasoned news veteran.

Carl, who road in back was almost the complete opposite of Macca. He had darks skin and kept his head shaved. He had a young, chubby, face that made him look like sort of a grown up kid. Yet despite their physical differences, the two actually worked quite well together and made up two thirds of a formidable news team.

The story of the day was one of those lighter "human interest pieces." It was the story of a lost cat that had managed to travel more than 500km to get home to its family. Kylie hated to do stories like this. They seemed to undermine her personal desires to be taken seriously as a professional reporter. At times the network seemed like a bit of an "old boys club." Kylie had never seen any of her male colleagues cover "cute" stories such as this one. She wanted to be taken seriously, and stories of lost cats rarely ever shook the world (OK, NEVER shook the world).

It had also been the network's idea to send her to cover the Koala Bay Bares Naturist Resort's Open Day story last year. Not that Kylie really minded. In hindsight, that experience had been pretty positive for her. It had been her formal introduction to the world of nude recreation, for which Kylie was very grateful. She had also been given total editorial control of the story, which had been nice. The report had gone on to win several minor news accolades. At the time Kylie had hoped it would mark a turning point in her career.

Yet here she was doing another "cat" story. Still, Kylie was a professional. She did her report without any signs of frustration. "Okay, that's a wrap," she said to Carl and Macca who began to pack the equipment into the back of the van.

"Great report, Kylie," said Carl.

"Yeah, top notch," said Macca.

Kylie sighed. They were just being polite, but it wasn't going over very well with her at the moment. "Yeah, I guess," she said sighing. "Don't you guys ever get tired of doing stories like this? Don't you want to cover some of the bigger stories?"

"Well sure," said Carl. "But I've only been here for three years. I need more field experience before I'm ready to cover that stuff."

That didn't help Kylie at all. She had been with the network for more than a decade, but was still doing the same stories as when she had started. If she hadn't moved on to bigger and better things by now, then when? "What about you Macca?"

Macca just shrugged. "It's a living."

That didn't help either. "Okay, let's just pack it up and go." With all the equipment loaded, the three drove back to the station just in time for lunch.

Yet the lunch hour had arrived, but with no surprise party. Kylie ate her lunch, which consisted mostly of a Caesar Salad and an apple. She hadn't packed much of a lunch, as she had planned on some sort of food being made available. Truth be told, the lunch was not nearly sufficient, and she found herself wishing for a nice piece of birthday cake, preferably chocolate, and hopefully served with ice cream. Perhaps it was too much to hope for?

Kylie sat mostly by herself that lunch. A few people came and sat next to her, and made polite conversation. They were mostly temporary staff, interns, or office personnel. And while they were not the normal crew of anchors and cameramen she normally ate with, their company was still quite pleasant. Still, most of them seemed in a hurry to eat their lunch and get back to work.

Kylie glanced at her watch. There was only 5 minutes left of the lunch break. If anyone was going to spring a surprise they would have done it by now. 'They didn't forget, my birthday, did they?' Kylie wondered to herself. Now THAT was a depressing thought. Still, that didn't seem likely. So why hadn't anyone said anything?

'They must be trying to do something REALLY special,' thought Kylie. 'Sure, that must be it. Remember what they did a few years back for Bill, the main news anchor, on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday? They brought out a cake during the news, and had the whole staff sing "Happy Birthday" on the air. It had all been in good fun. Bill had blushed sheepishly all through it, and Kylie and the other broadcasters all smashed cake on his face in a moment of harmless fun. They must be planning something like that for me!' she thought to herself. Yeah, that was it. That HAD to be it.

Glancing at her watch again, she noticed that the lunch break was now officially over. She quickly bussed her dishes and went back to her desk. Usually by now, there would have been a rough draft of the evening's script on her desk to review. There wasn't. No matter, the evening's broadcast would probably have its share of "unscripted moments." With more time on her hands than she had anticipated, Kylie decided to head down to makeup a bit earlier than usual.

"Good afternoon, Jean" Kylie announced as she stepped into the makeup room and addressed her personal stylist.

"G...Good afternoon Miss Burns," stuttered Jean. "You're here a bit early." Jean was a young shy woman. She was also a habitual gum chewer, which made Kylie a bit nervous every time she climbed into the stylist's chair. She worried one of these days a piece of Jean's gum would find its way into her hair. These fears were a bit unfounded, as this had never happened to her, or anyone else for that matter.

"The draft wasn't ready yet. I figured I'd get into makeup a bit early," said Kylie. "I hope that's alright," she added.

"Sure, have a seat," said Jean as she cleared off the styling chair for Kylie.

No sooner had she sat down than her sound guy, Macca, came in looking for her. "Kylie! There you are! I've been looking all over for you. You need to get down to the conference room immediately."

Kylie was a bit taken aback by this. "Sure Macca, what's up?" she asked. She knew it had to be birthday stuff.

"Hey, I'm just the messenger," said Macca. "So, you know, don't shoot me. You should hurry though. It sounded pretty urgent." Urgent? Kylie found it humorous that they needed to create an "urgent" situation to get her to her surprise party. She would do

her best to try and “act surprised.”

She headed down to the conference room. The door was shut. She drew in a deep breath and braced herself for the shouts of “Surprise!” she expected on the other side of the door. She gently grasped the handle and opened the door. The shouts never came.

Inside the conference room was Steve, her producer, the various station managers, and even the station owners themselves. They were dressed officially in suits and ties. They were seated all on one side of a long rectangular table. There was a lone seat on the other side. “Kylie, you’re here. Have a seat,” said Steve in a stoic voice gesturing to the empty seat.

Kylie could feel her heart sink.

She meekly slipped into the chair. She wanted to say something, but was far too afraid.

“Kylie, as you know, the ratings and viewers of Channel 5 news have been on the decline for a couple of years,” said Steve. “Channel 8 now commands a wide lead over us. In an effort to attract viewers back to the station, we’ve had to make some, changes...”

The hesitation in Steve’s voice was dark and foreboding. “O—okay,” Kylie stuttered weakly.

“We appreciate your years of hard work, we really do...” said Steve trailing off.

One of the managers continued his sentence, “...It’s just that we’ve been really lagging in certain key demographics—particularly in the younger age groups. We’ve decided to bring in a fresh new face to help with those demographics.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kylie. “Are you firing me? Am I being fired?” She tried to remain composed, but felt herself fighting back tears.

“No, no one is getting fired,” said Steve calmly. “It’s just that you won’t be doing the evening news any more.”

“Am I being moved to morning news?” Kylie asked hopefully. Steve lowered his head sadly and shook his head no. “So when am I going off the air?” she asked. “A month? Next week?”

“I’m afraid it’s a bit sooner than that,” replied Steve.

“Not tonight!” Kylie said her voice almost a protest. Could this really be happening? Losing her job as a news anchor on her birthday?

“No, not tonight...” said Steve, again his voice trailing off.

Once again, one of the managers stepped in to finish his sentence. “...Your last broadcast was yesterday. Someone else will be stepping in to replace you on this evening’s broadcast.”

Suddenly all thought of her birthday were pushed to the side. Yesterday. Her last broadcast was yesterday. Not only was she being fired from her job as a reporter, she wouldn’t even have the satisfaction of telling her loyal viewers goodbye. “Who?” asked Kylie.

“Lynette,” said Steve. He immediately looked nervous in front of his superiors. As though he had said too much by revealing this information.

Lynette? She was just an intern! She was only 23 and had just completed her journalism degree. This was only her second job, and already she had been promoted to a news anchor position? Kylie didn’t hold any bad feelings against Lynette. She was quite attractive, and would likely pull favor with younger viewers. Still, it didn’t make Kylie

feel any better about her age to know she was being replaced by somebody so young.

The station owner spoke up. “She would be the youngest anchor in station history. For us it is the right move at this time.” And that was it.

“So...so what am I supposed to do?” asked Kylie.

“Well, we’re looking to offer you an assistant producer job,” said Steve. “It would come with a nice benefits package.”

The offering was a pittance. An assistant producer was basically a worthless job title. In her years with the network, Kylie had yet to see any assistant producers get promoted or go on to produce great work. It was little more than a glorified secretary position. It was a do-nothing job, and it was only slightly more merciful than being fired. Only slightly...

“I...I’ll have to think about it,” said Kylie. That was the truth. She didn’t know if she wanted the job at all, and accepting it outright would hurt her position to negotiate on salary and benefits.

“Sure, Kylie,” said Steve. “Take your time.” Steve walked around the table to so that he was standing on her side. “Is there anything else you need?”

“Can I...can I take the rest of today as a personal day?” she asked. If she wasn’t going to do the news tonight, there wasn’t any reason to stay for the rest of the afternoon.

“Sure Kylie,” said Steve. “Anything you want.” He went to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, but she brushed past him on her way out the door.

She was proud that she had managed not to cry in the office. Yet once she stepped into the hall, the tears began to flow freely. She went back to her desk, hoping not to be seen. She gathered up her purse and keys, and went to the elevator. She took the elevator to the parking garage.

Just as she was getting in her car, Carl shouted to her. “Hey Kylie, where are you going?”

“She didn’t want him to see her like this. She fumbled with the lock and tried to get in her car before Carl came over. She was not quite fast enough.

“I said where are you...are you crying?” He asked. “Hey Kylie, what’s wrong. You can tell me. We’re friends.”

It was that moment that Kylie decided to unload her fury on poor unsuspecting Carl. “Friends? You think we’re friends? Why on earth would you and I EVER be friends? We never go anything outside of work.” That wasn’t entirely true. There had been a few times where the crew had gone out to drinks, but they had also been part of a larger entourage. “I don’t call you. You don’t call me. We are NOT friends. We are work and nothing else. Get that straight. We are NOT friends, and WE HAVE NEVER BEEN FRIENDS.” She shouted the last few words so they echoed across the parking lot. She could see the look of hurt on Carl’s face. She hadn’t meant to say all of that, not by half. It had been incredibly mean. She hated to be so emotional. Still she had to keep moving. She slammed the door and quickly drove away.

She spent the drive home blinking back tears. When she got home, she looked for any good news. There were no birthday cards. No one had called and wished her a happy birthday. There was one message on her answering machine. It was an apology from Carl. She deleted it immediately, not wanting to be reminded of how she had lost her temper that afternoon.

Kylie settled in for a quiet evening at home with a bottle of wine. She was alone.

No one had wanted to celebrate her birthday. And why would they? She was just a jobless nobody. She knew that wasn't true, but she couldn't help sliding into a deep blue funk.

She drank more wine than she had meant to, and began to feel a little tipsy. For dinner, she fixed a piece of fish. She then had a much needed soak in the bathtub. When she finished, she did not get dressed. If she had been in better spirits she may have found the humor in spending her birthday in her birthday suit. Tonight, however, it was merely a matter of convenience. She was too upset to care if she wore clothes or not.

She went to the couch, and turned on the TV. While flipping through channels she caught a few minutes of the Channel 5 news. In just a few short seconds she saw the young Lynette being warmly welcomed by her new colleagues, Kylie's old colleagues. Kylie watched in the hopes that Lynette would screw up in any way--just a little something that would make her bosses reconsider. It was an incredibly vindictive thought, and Kylie was at least a little relieved that Lynette did a good job. Still, it was a bit too good. For her first day on the job, Lynette carried herself like a seasoned veteran. Kylie wouldn't hold her breath on a call from her bosses.

To make matters worse, her own story about the cat's odyssey had been cut entirely from the evening's broadcast. In an evening, she had been replaced from the airwaves. Her career and her life thus far had passed her by. Kylie turned off the TV. She decided to go to bed. It was still light outside, but she didn't care.

*Happy Birthday to me*

*Happy Birthday to me*

*Happy Birthday to me-ee*

*Happy Birthday to me!*

## **Chapter 2: Leave-takings**

Kylie woke up the next morning. She had not slept well. The good news was that her horrible birthday was over. The bad news was, well, everything else. She was no longer a news reporter. The thing she had worked so hard for had been snatched away from her yesterday; snatched away and given to a younger, prettier, reporter. The only thing that remained was to make her decision on the Assistant Producer job.

It was not a decision she wanted to make today. She couldn't work up the nerve to go to work today. She couldn't bring herself to look her former colleagues in the face. Worst of all, she couldn't bare to see Carl, not after the way she had treated him yesterday. So she called in.

"Steve, it's Kylie. I need to take another personal day. I hope that's okay." She spoke this message into his voice mail. Personally she was glad to talk to a machine and not to Steve. She didn't want to ask permission, she wanted to assume it was okay. She also did not leave any contact information.

So what to do with the rest of the day? Kylie mentally went over a few options in her head. She could stay in and read a book, she could go for a walk, she could take herself out for a fancy lunch. Still, there was only one thing she really wanted to do...

She decided a trip to the Koala Bares was in order. A swim in their pool might be just the thing she needed. Maybe she could even get Mungo to give her one of his

fabulous massages.

She got dressed, packed a bag of snacks and poolside essentials and got into her car. Her mobile phone was left rather haphazardly on her kitchen table. After an hour in the car, Kylie was at the gate to the Koala Bares. She entered the code on the numeric keypad. The old mechanical gate creaked, but slowly opened allowing her to drive through. She drove up the road, and parked outside the clubhouse.

One of the more interesting conundrums that occur in a naturist resort is, “where to undress.” The simple answer would be, anywhere at all, really. Yet there were a number of changing rooms in the clubhouse for just this purpose. There were two public changing rooms, as well as a few private rooms for some of the more nervous “first timers.” Kylie had gotten used to changing in the public changing rooms, but she had seen many people simply undress in the parking lot and store their clothes in their car. For a change of pace, she decided to do just that.

As she undressed, she noticed a few people glancing her way. It was interesting; here the people were not staring at her out of interest in the act of her undressing. Rather, they were simply being friendly. They were curious as to who might be arriving, and were ready to strike up conversation at recognition. Still, no one recognized her. Kylie put her clothes in her car and walked inside the office to buy a guest pass.

The sight of a familiar head of blonde hair and green hair clip barely poking above the high counter signified that Willow was working behind the desk that day. She had on a pair of headphones, and her nose buried in a book. She was muttering something to herself, but Kylie couldn't make any of it out.

“Willow,” she said announcing her presence. Willow did not look up. “Willow!!” she said a bit louder, still no acknowledgment. Kylie approached the desk, rang the bell, and shouted, “WILLOW!!!”

That had been enough. Willow removed her headphones, and put the book down. As if acting on autopilot, she began to speak. “Good morning and welcome to the Koala Bay Bares how may I... Oh! Kylie!” she said a bit surprised. It's not that Kylie was not a regular visitor by now, she was. Rather Kylie was what some of the resort workers called “a weekender”—someone who came on weekends, but never showed up for any weekly seminars or concerts, and never took extended holidays at “The Bares.” It was not meant to be a derogatory term. If anything, “The Bares” would not have stayed in business without the patronage of weekenders. Still, it explained why the site of Kylie in the clubhouse on a Wednesday would surprise Willow.

“Good morning, Willow,” said Kylie. “I'd like to buy a day pass.”

“Sure,” said Willow who stood up to take the money from Kylie. When Willow stood up her full height was revealed. She was at least a half-head or maybe even a full-head taller than Kylie. Willow was quite tall, she was even taller than most of the male members of the Koala Bares. She was lean and had long and graceful figure. By modern standards of beauty, Willow would not have any trouble finding a job as a fashion model, but she never expressed any interest in it. For that matter, if Willow had any interest in journalism, she would have made a very marketable reporter. Heck, she could have given Lynette some stiff competition for prettiest news anchor...

Entering the transaction into the till, Willow said, “glad to see you here on a weekday.”

“Yeah, well,” said Kylie. “I needed to get away from it all.”

Willow could sense something was wrong in Kylie’s tone of voice. “Rough week?” she asked.

“You could say that.”

“Want to talk about it?” asked Willow.

“No, not really.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Kylie was desperate to talk to somebody about everything that had happened. Still, she hated to do that to poor Willow. Willow was usually so bubbly and effervescent. Kylie may have been in a bad mood, but there was no need to drag Willow down with her. “So what’s that book you’re reading? You seemed pretty into it.”

Willow smiled and held up a copy of the Lonely Planet’s Guide to India for Kylie to read the cover page. “Trying to plan our trip.”

“Our?” asked Kylie.

“Yeah, I’m going to India with Tash and Herb. We leave this Saturday,” Willow explained. “We’ve been saving for this trip all year, and I’m trying to plan out what sights to see. I’m also trying to practice up on my Hindi,” said Willow pointing to her tape player and headphones.

“You are so lucky,” said Kylie. “I would love to go to India. I just LOVE Indian food.”

“Me too,” Willow gushed.

“So where are you going?” asked Kylie.

“Rishikesh,” said Willow smiling happily.

“I’m not familiar with it,” said Kylie. That much was obvious. She had never been to India. Sure she knew a bit about places like Bangalore and Calcutta, but she hadn’t ever really heard of Rishikesh.”

“It’s where the Beatles wrote the White Album,” explained Willow.

Kylie was a bit taken aback to hear this coming from Willow. Sure, the music of the Beatles was timeless, but Willow was so young. Was John Lennon even still alive the year Willow was born? If anything this sounded a lot like Willow’s cousin Tash and Tash’s boyfriend Herb rubbing off on Willow. “Sounds...groovy.” The word ‘groovy’ hung in the air, as though Kylie had just dated herself. Did young people even still say ‘groovy?’

Kylie was more than a little jealous. She had never really taken a long holiday of her own—she never had anyone to go with. She was always too busy with work. Hearing about Willow’s trip made her wish she had planned a trip of her own.

“And it’s not just me, a lot of people are on holiday this week,” said Willow.

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” said Willow elaborating. “Well, Fred and Janet have been talking about their trip to Hawaii forever, but they’re still here. Of course, Loxie and Zoot are here as well.” Willow seemed to be going through a mental checklist of who was still around to jog her memory about who was leaving. “But Herb and Val are gone. Harry, Kim, and the family are all on holiday. I haven’t seen the Aletti’s all month. Gee, even Mungo, is leaving, and I’ve never heard of him leaving before.”

“Mungo? Mungo’s leaving?” asked Kylie. Mungo had been an indelible part of Kylie’s experiences at the Koala Bares.

“Yeah, he’s going on a walkabout. Loxie and Zoot are helping him bring in his

summer harvest.”

“I’m sorry; would you excuse me, Willow? I need to go see Mungo before he leaves.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Willow as she slipped her headphones back on and went back to her book.

On the trail to Mungo’s hut, Kylie ran across Loxie and Zoot driving a golf cart up the main path. Thankfully it was Loxie behind the wheel and not Zoot so Kylie did not feel the need to step way off the trail to give the vehicle a wide berth. The cart’s occupants were both muddy. Their knees were dirty from kneeling, and their brows appeared to be streaked with mud from rubbing sweat away with dirty fingers. The back of the cart was loaded with bushel baskets full of cabbages, peppers, corn, and all sorts of freshly grown goodies.

“Kylie! Hi!” said Loxie happily. She pulled the cart over and got out to walk over to her. Loxie had black hair, and a healthy complexion. Kylie had to envy Loxie’s tan at least a little bit. She however, had fairer skin, and though she had gotten rid of most of her tan lines, she was still quite pale. Loxie was always positive and upbeat, and her sunny disposition was an inspiration to others. Loxie had made it a point to quickly befriend Kylie. And Kylie, in turn was glad for her friendship.

Zoot also got out of the car. His face was almost completely covered in mud, and his blonde hair had small clumps of dirt mixed in with it. There was something about those two that made Loxie and Zoot an especially cute couple in public.

“Kylie, it’s good to see you!” said Zoot warmly. “What brings you here?”

“Well, right now, I came to say goodbye to Mungo,” said Kylie.

“Good idea,” replied Zoot. “He’s set to leave at any moment. I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you.”

“I’ll be glad to see him too...” said Kylie. She could not hide the sadness in her voice.

Loxie was sympathetic. “I saw the news last night. I’m sorry, Kylie.” She hugged Kylie, an action that showed she had already put all the pieces together. “If there’s anything we can do to help, let us know.”

“Thanks, Loxie, that...that means a lot.” Kylie vowed not to cry. It was no small effort, but she kept in control of her emotions.

“Oh, yeah, I’m sorry too,” said Zoot. He went in as if he too were going to hug her, but seemed to break off at the last second. While Kylie was friendly with Loxie, she found it a bit more difficult to open up to Zoot.

After all, their first meeting had been less than friendly. A nude Zoot had interrupted an interview with, then, candidate for Mayor Tex Tyler. Kylie of course played this scene up for maximum ratings. The whole event had been a catalyst for the Koala Bay Bares open day, and Kylie’s own ventures into naturism. Sure that event had been a long time ago, and it seemed like water under the bridge. Even still Zoot and Kylie were civil, it would have been a bit of a stretch to call them “friends.”

Brushing off Loxie’s hug, Kylie said, “Thank you both for being so supportive. I really should go see Mungo before he goes.”

“You should stay for dinner,” offered Zoot. “We’re going to grill up some of these lovely vegetables.”

The offer was tempting, but Kylie was not in the mood for festivities. “I’m afraid

I can't stay that long."

"Oh..." said Zoot sounding a little disappointed. "Well we can't send you home empty handed. Take some vegetables!"

On this he was insistent. So Kylie picked out two ears of corn and thanked Zoot for being so generous. She would have taken more, but she didn't want to come across as greedy. She excused herself, and they went their separate ways, with Loxie and Zoot heading back towards the clubhouse, while Kylie walked by herself to Mungo's yurt.

If there was anyone she needed to see right now, it was Mungo. When they had first met, she thought him weird and almost antagonistic. Yet he had played a critical role in easing her into naturism. He had reminded her of painful memories of her past, and though she had not wanted to be reminded, she confronted her demons and emerged a stronger person.

She never knew exactly how Mungo knew about her and Fisher's Creek. It was a secret that only her, her mother, and a few friends knew about. Yet somehow Mungo knew about it. To hear Mungo explain it, he was simply "a great listener." New Age mystics would probably label it as ESP, while modern science would seek to debunk it as some sort of coincidence. The more one tried to explain Mungo's abilities, the more they seemed to defy explanation. Mungo was special, and that was it.

She came upon the short old man tending to his gardens and whistling an unfamiliar tune. He poked his head up at the sight of Kylie, and waved her over. His white flowing beard was streaked with mud, yet he had a smile that conveyed a sense of satisfaction in his summer harvest. She approached him. "I was expectin' ya," he said. "I've got somethin' for ya." He looked around on the ground in front of him, until he found what he was looking for. "Here!"

It was a hand made necklace of flowers. The aroma it gave off was heavenly. Kylie was surprised to see the sheer abundance of flower species. She doubted if even more than half of them were even in season. It was magnificent. "How sweet. You made this yourself?"

Mungo nodded.

"You remembered," said Kylie assuming the offering to be a birthday gift.

"Remembered what?" asked Mungo a bit confused.

Kylie could have been upset that yet another person had forgotten her birthday, but she wasn't. "It doesn't matter," she said, giving Mungo a friendly hug. She stood a full head taller than Mungo (most people did). As she wrapped her arms around him, his dark brown skin only served to accent how pale hers was by comparison. "It's good to see you."

"Yeah, good to see you too, Kylie," he said, returning the hug.

Letting go of Mungo, Kylie asked, "So where's Oscar?" referring to the large emu who seemed to have a strong affinity with Mungo.

"Oh he left. He was mad at me for not telling him about my travels. So he ran off. Haven't seen him in days." From any other person, this would have sounded like nonsense, but coming from Mungo it seemed plausible. "Don't worry though, he'll be back." As he said this he knowingly winked at Kylie.

"Yeah, so what's this travel? Willow said you were leaving," asked Kylie.

"I'm goin' walkabout. Been meanin' to for years," replied Mungo.

"How long will you be gone?" asked Kylie

“Until I get back,” answered Mungo. Sometimes Mungo seemed to speak in riddles. It only seemed to contribute to the aura of mysticism that surrounded him. Some might have interpreted it as a sarcastic remark, but it wasn’t.

“Can I go with you?”

Kylie was horrified by what had just come out of her mouth. How could she be so blasé? This was a walkabout, probably a spiritual journey of self discovery, and she had just invited herself along as though it were a camping trip. She was so ashamed.

On the other hand, she really didn’t have anything holding her back. She had no job at the moment, and plenty of accumulated time off in the form of unused sick days and paid holidays. And hadn’t she just been lamenting never taking a long trip? No time like the present right?

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! How could she have said something so stupid?

After a few moments of silence, Mungo gave his answer. “We leave tomorrow mornin’.”

Kylie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Had he really just said yes? What was odd is that he said, ‘we leave tomorrow morning’—‘we’! It was as though he had always anticipated her company. But that couldn’t be. Could it? “So, what should I bring?” she asked, both excited and shocked.

Mungo paused before speaking. “For you, bring good boots and socks for hikin’. Bring a small backpack, and bring somethin’ to carry water.” He paused, gave her a quizzical look and then added “...a toothbrush, toothpaste, and insect repellent too.”

Again, Kylie tried to read into Mungo’s speech. He had said ‘for you.’ Did that mean his answer would have been different if another person had asked? “What about clothes?” asked Kylie.

Mungo smiled. “Wear what you feel comfortable in,” said Mungo. “I am already dressed for the trip,” he said as he indicated his nudity.

“I will go nude,” said Kylie adding the quantifier, “where it is appropriate.” This was one of the fundamental differences between Kylie and Mungo. While Kylie enjoyed the freedom of being naked, she would not hesitate to wear clothes when the situation demanded it. Mungo on the other hand, was cut from a different cloth; or perhaps cut from no cloth at all. No one had ever seen Mungo wear anything that could be considered clothing. If anyone were to tell Kylie that Mungo had never worn clothing a day in his life, she would not be surprised.

“I hope ya do,” said Mungo.

“What about food?” she asked

“I’ll provide the food.”

Again, he hadn’t said he would “pack” food. He said he would “provide it.”

“Any other questions, Kylie?”

She had one more question to ask. She hesitated to even ask it, since the idea seemed so dumb. On the other hand, asking to come on the trip had seemed like a dumb question mere minutes ago, and yet now she had an invitation to join him. She decided to ask her silly little question. “Yeah, I’ve got one more question...”

### **Chapter 3: It’s going to be a documentary...**

“Do you...do you mind if I videotape our journey?” The question seemed to be in incredibly poor taste. This was supposed to be a solemn event, not to be treated as if it were just another story. Yet Kylie was hatching a plan in her head.

If she documented the walkabout, she could have total creative control. She would film it, and edit it according to her own rules. Then, she would have an exclusive story to show to her bosses at Channel 5—something that would make them take her seriously as a reporter. Maybe they would even offer her old job back, or at least offer her a chance to go back to reporting (anything on the air would be better than Assistant Producer). Or if not, maybe she could use the video as a bargaining chip with another network. It would be one hell of an exclusive.

It wasn't like no one had ever tried to document a walkabout before, so it was hardly an original story. Still the walkabout was a part of the cultural heritage of Australia's aboriginal people. It remained a captivating enigma to those of European ancestry, who were more inclined to avoid the hardships of the Australian outback. Granted, there were many other places that had similar rites of passage. Yet the walkabout remained an entirely Australian event, no other culture had anything quite like the walkabout. It captivated the cultural sub-conscious. Even if the story itself was not unique, she could put her own unique spin on it. People would watch it—a lot of people.

She was so busy planning her triumphant return to TV news that she didn't even hear Mungo's answer. “I'm sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, that'd be okay,” said Mungo repeating his answer for Kylie's benefit.

“Oh, thank you Mungo,” she gave him a firm hug. “THANK YOU!” She let go of him. “Oh my gosh, I have so much to do. I hope you don't mind if I go. I need to get ready.”

“No worries, I'll be here if ya need anythin',” said Mungo.

Kylie turned to go, but then asked. “So where should I meet you, tomorrow? And when?”

“Here,” said Mungo. “As for when, how about after you've had a restful night of sleep?” he suggested.

“Huh?” asked Kylie.

“It means I ain't in no hurry. We'll leave when yer ready.”

Kylie turned and left. She briskly walked down the path back to her car. She had so much to do to get ready. She was so happy she was practically skipping. This day had turned out much better than she had planned.

As she was going to get into her car, Willow, who had been mowing the lawn nearby called out to her. “Leaving already?”

“Yeah,” Kylie yelled back as Willow killed the mower's motor.

“Why? You just got here.”

“Something's come up,” explained Kylie, as she opened the door to her car. She quickly threw on her clothes. Before pulling out she gave a friendly wave to Willow. “Have a great trip to India!”

“I will,” shouted Willow who gave a friendly smile and waved back.

“Dhanyavad!” she shouted. “That's Hindi for ‘Thank you’.”

“Dhanyavad!” Kylie shouted back.

Kylie drove up the main driveway and back towards the city. As she drove it dawned on her, she didn't have a camera. What to do about that? It wasn't exactly

station business, so she couldn't borrow one of the news cameras. Besides, her project was to be kept a secret until it was completed. Maybe she could buy a camera? No, that wasn't a good idea either. She didn't know the first thing about cameras, and couldn't really justify the expense.

She arrived at home, and found her mobile phone on the table. She had two messages one from Steve, and one from Carl. She deleted the one from Carl, but listened to the one from Steve.

-Kylie, it's Steve. Yes you can take a personal day. We'd like an answer on the assistant producer job. Give me a call.-

She did just that. This time Steve picked up.

"Steve, it's Kylie," she said into the phone.

"Kylie, hi, did you get my message. Have you made up your mind about the Assistant Producer job?"

"No, I still need some time," she said. That was true. "Listen, Steve, I'm calling because I need to use some of my time off."

There was hesitation in Steve's voice. "...How much time?"

"Two weeks," said Kylie.

"Two weeks?!" asked Steve, his voice going up a full octave. "Are you really sure you want to do that?"

"I am," said Kylie firmly.

"Alright," said Steve. "I'll make the arrangements. The manager's aren't going to be happy. They want an answer on the job. Promise me you'll give me your answer when you get back."

"I promise," said Kylie. She didn't feel like she owed Steve anything. Yet she still wanted to be civil. "I'll see you in two weeks." She hung up without saying 'goodbye.' She would give him her answer, as promised, but she didn't have to like it.

Still, she still hadn't resolved the issue of the camera. This might be a little more difficult to resolve. Carl! That's right! Carl was an avid collector of camera equipment. He had admitted it after Kylie caught him browsing eBay when he wasn't on break. Maybe she had a camera he could borrow. Still she hated to call Carl after the way she had treated him yesterday, but what options did she have. After all, he had called her (twice in fact). The least she could do was ask.

She dialed his number. The phone rang five times before he picked up.

"Yo, this is Carl."

"Carl, it's Kylie."

"Kylie! We've been worried about you, both Macca and I. Word's gotten around the office, and I'm sorry to hear about you losing your job."

"Thanks, Carl. Listen, I'm sorry about the way I treated you yesterday." She was immediately interrupted.

"Don't worry about that. It's water under the bridge. Besides, I know you didn't really mean it."

It was nice to be let off the hook by Carl. "Well, thanks for accepting my apology. Listen, I was wondering if you could do me a small favor?"

"What's that?"

"Do you have a camera I can borrow?"

"I have probably a few dozen you can borrow, though you probably want just one.

Yeah, I can loan you a camera. Why don't you stop by my place around eight this evening to pick it up?" Carl suggested.

"Great, where do you live?" Kylie was a little embarrassed to admit she had no idea where Carl lived.

"It's Apartment 2, 67B Baker Street. Do you need directions?"

"No, I know where that is. I'll be there at 8." Kylie hung up the phone. She still had to pack. She got her old camping backpack out of the closet. The thing was covered in dust, which wasn't surprising as she hadn't been camping in more than four years. Kylie took a wet rag and wiped off the dust. She left the backpack out on the patio to dry off.

What else did she need? Sunscreen! She went to the medicine cabinet and took a bottle of SPF30; she reconsidered, put it back, and grabbed the SPF50. Come to think of it, it wouldn't hurt to bring two bottles. Better safe than sorry, right? She also got out the insect repellent, and a travel toothbrush and toothpaste.

She looked at the collection of toiletries. This was all Mungo had suggested, but surely it wasn't everything she needed. What about soap? What about shampoo? Sure there wasn't going to be baths and showers where they were going, but she could bathe in the rivers, couldn't she? Did he really expect her to go that long without showering? She packed a small bar, and a traveler's bottle of shampoo.

What about deodorant? Didn't she also need that? And a razor? What was she supposed to do about shaving her legs and armpits? Again, Mungo hadn't advised bringing any of these things.

Kylie realized that if she packed all of these conveniences, she would be carrying an awfully heavy pack. She made the decision to bring the razor, but to leave the deodorant at home.

There was one more thing that Mungo had forgotten to mention (granted, it was something he was unlikely to think of). She went into her bathroom and got a few tampons. Given her cycles, it was very unlikely that she would need them in the time she would be away, but better to be safe than sorry.

Water, however, wasn't a big issue. She had a small collection of Nalgene bottles since she always managed to leave them at work or lose them. She put three water bottles together with the sunscreen.

That just left her clothes. She went through her dresser and began to lay out sets of clothes on her bed. When she finished, her bed was cluttered with a large pile of clothes. There was no way she was going to be able to bring all of those outfits. Mungo had said to 'wear what she felt comfortable in.' But what did that mean? She really didn't know much about camping, but she did know she would not be able to bring all those clothes.

As she went through the various outfits, she began to pair them down. She selected only the most practical outfits. Unfortunately, this meant she had to say no to the summer dresses. She had a few sundresses, that she felt made her look "cute." Still, this was going to be a tough journey. Comfort was going to be critical, looking stylish, however was not. She eventually decided on a pair of jeans, and a pair of canvas shorts. She packed two tops, one with sleeves and one without. Kylie also brought two pairs of panties, but only a single sports bra.

The same rules applied for shoes. This meant she had to leave behind her sandals.

They were stylish, but not suited for walking more than a mile. She selected a pair of athletic walking shoes, as well as a pair of more durable hiking boots.

Not that she planned to wear clothes for the whole trip, mind you. If anything, she was looking forward to the opportunity to be nude, where it was appropriate, that was.

It was on that line of thought that Kylie decided to pack a sarong. Granted, she already had packed clothes, but the sarong was lightweight, and wouldn't take up much space in her pack. That way she could go nude, and if anyone showed up, she could throw on her sarong, and no one would be the wiser.

She looked over her collection of items. Surely that couldn't be all she needed to pack? Could it? She mentally went through the list of items Mungo had mentioned. Shoes, socks, clothes, sunscreen, water bottle—guess that was it! Kylie suddenly remembered a few “extra” items she wanted to take her pink and blue sunhat and her sunglasses. They were part of her “outfit” that she wore to the Koala Bares Resort. They allowed her to retain a certain amount of anonymity. She wasn't immediately recognizable as a news reporter when she wore these items. Not that she minded being occasionally recognized, it was just there were some times she needed some privacy.

Kylie glanced at the clock. It was 6pm. Where had the time gone? Still it wasn't THAT late. She had plenty of time to have a nice dinner before she needed to be at Carl's. She decided to fix a nice dinner to feature the corn she had got from Mungo's garden. Dinner was a simple affair; corn, potatoes, broccoli, and a small piece of steak, yet it was exactly what Kylie was hungry for. In particular, the corn was spectacular. The kernels were crisp and juicy, and required neither salt nor butter.

As she ate her dinner, she had to wonder what she would be eating in the near future. Mungo had said he would “provide” food. But what exactly did that mean? In hindsight, Kylie wished she had asked for a few more specifics. Oh well, there was no sense in worrying about it now.

Kylie cleared the table, and put the dishes in for a wash. It was now 7:20pm. It would not take 40 minutes to get to Carl's place, but she was really anxious to get the camera. She hoped he might be at home, and was willing to wait if he wasn't.

She got into her car, and drove to the address that Carl had given—67B Baker St. She recognized Carl's car in the driveway, and pulled alongside the house, parking her car against the curb. It was only 7:40, but she hoped she would not be intruding by coming a bit early. As she walked up the steps, she was surprised at just how impressive the yard was. There were a number of woody ornamentals out front, which seemed to be attentively pruned. Carl had never mentioned anything of his landscaping hobby at work.

Kylie knocked at the front door.

Opening the door, Carl smiled warmly. “Kylie. You're here!”

“I hope you don't mind that I'm a bit early,” said Kylie making excuses for herself.

“Not at all,” said Carl. “Please do come in,” he motioned for her to come inside. Kylie followed him indoors. The front hallway was adorned with many impressive photos of landscapes, plants, and animals. Kylie liked some of the more intricate insect photos the best.

“Did you...did you take all of these photos?” she asked tentatively.

“Yeah, it's just another hobby of mine,” said Carl dismissing them as though they

were trivial.

“These...these are really good,” said Kylie in awe. Who knew Carl was such an artist? At work he came off as a stoic professional.

“Well thanks,” said Carl. “So you’re here about a camera? Come this way. We’ll find you something.” Carl led Kylie into a room off the front hallway. There were bookcases lining the walls of the room, only instead of books, they held cameras. Kylie estimated there were at least two dozen video cameras. Who knew how Carl could afford them all? Carl went to one of the cases. “How about this?” he said pulling one of the cameras off the shelf.

Kylie didn’t know much about cameras, but she knew this wasn’t what she was looking for. “It’s a little too bulky,” she said. “I’m looking for something more lightweight,” she added, “and durable! I’m going on...” she paused to consider how to phrase her thoughts “...a camping trip...”

He went to his shelf and produced a very compact camera. “This is the Scout. The Scout, it’s portable, durable, and has a good battery life. The quality isn’t top notch, but it’s at least better than half of what I’ve got in my collection.” The camera looked pristine, as though it hadn’t been used.

“Looks expensive,” said Kylie.

“Oh, yes,” agreed Carl. “You know the old saying, ‘if you have to ask, you can’t afford it?’...yeah...” It was meant to be a joke, but Kylie could see Carl was quite protective of the small camera. “Be...be careful with it, okay?” asked Carl as he gingerly handed Kylie the camera.

“I will,” she said giving her word.

“So what exactly do you need a high quality, lightweight, durable camera on such short notice?” asked Carl a bit curious as to the answer.

“It...it’s going to be a documentary,” said Kylie cautious not to reveal her work until it was finished. “I’m making a documentary, and I wanted to try my hand behind the camera.”

“A documentary?” repeated Carl. “Well don’t leave me in the dark, what’s it about?”

“I’m sorry, Carl, it’s just that I want to keep that secret for now. But don’t worry, you’ll be one of the first people I tell,” she promised. He may even be able to help her in the editing process.

“A secret, huh? Well that’s okay,” he looked visibly disappointed. “Wait here for just a sec.” He left the room leaving Kylie by herself for a moment. She looked over the other cameras in his collection and waited for him to return. She didn’t need to wait long. “Spare battery,” he said handing her a black rectangular battery. “Each one gets about 9 hours of charge. You’ll need these too,” he said handing her three cassette tapes. “Three six hour tapes. Very high quality. That should be all the tape and batteries you need.”

Kylie hoped that was true. Eighteen hours of footage surely sounded like ample time to capture her story. “Let me pay you for the tapes,” she offered.

“Don’t worry about that,” said Carl. “It’s my treat, and I insist that you take them as a gift.”

Kylie smiled. Gathering up her things, she said, “well, thanks Carl. I should probably get going. I’ve got a long day planned for tomorrow.” She turned to leave.

“Kylie, wait!”

“Yes?”

“Look, I know we may not be CLOSE friends,” began Carl. “But I always thought we WERE friends, you know?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about the way I acted yesterday,” said Kylie apologizing.

“I always liked working with you,” he added. The passive use of the verb “to like” hung in the air as a reminder that Kylie was no longer a news anchor. “...sorry...” Carl mumbled apologizing for the faux pas.

“It’s okay. You didn’t mean anything by it. I always liked working with you too,” she admitted, and it was the truth.

“So I was thinking, maybe you’d like to get together for dinner, or some drinks?” offered Carl. “It’s not a date,” he added for clarification. “I just figured we could do something together as friends?”

Kylie was a bit flattered. She wanted to say, ‘Maybe’ but what she said was; “I’d like that.” That too was the truth. “Anyways, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you in a fortnight.” She let herself out the front door.

“See ya. Good luck with your documentary,” Carl called to her from the front door to give her encouragement. She waved back as she packed the camera equipment in her car and headed back home.

Once back at home, she packed all of her supplies into the backpack, including the camera equipment. She put it on. It felt more than a little heavy. Would she be alright to carry it? Kylie decided she would have to be. She was determined to document this event, and couldn’t see parting with any of the other items in her bag.

She got to bed early that night. Tomorrow was going to be a big day indeed.

#### **Chapter 4: The Journey Begins**

Kylie awoke the next morning feeling refreshed. Had the events of the past two days been just a dream? Was she really no longer a news anchor? And was she really going on a walkabout? The sight of her fully packed backpack on near the door of her bedroom served to remind her that this had not been a dream. Still, she was happy to be going. A holiday would do her some good.

But then this wasn’t really a holiday was it? Sure she might be able to have some fun, but really the primary goal was to produce an exclusive story to win favor with her employers.

At any rate, staying in bed and wondering about things wasn’t going to accomplish anything. It would be rude to keep Mungo waiting. This was, after all, his trip.

Kylie took the pack into the kitchen and began to make breakfast. She fixed herself fresh hot coffee, and had it with a bowl of cold cereal and half a grapefruit. The food was enjoyable for the most part, but it paled in comparison to the dinner of the previous night. In hindsight, Kylie wished she had made a breakfast of eggs and bacon. After all, this might be her last traditional breakfast for at least a while.

After breakfast, she did a brief sweep of the apartment. Everything was in order. All the dishes and laundry had been done, and her neighbor was coming by to pick up the mail and water the plants. At the very least, the house was in order for her trip. She

turned her attention to her pack. She rummaged through it to make sure everything was there. Shoes, clothes, sunglasses, hat, water bottle, sunscreen, camera, batteries, tapes—that was everything. Wasn't it? Kylie pulled the camera out of the pack and turned it on. The light indicated that the battery was fully charged. She turned it back off and put it back in her pack, though she did take out her hat and sunglasses. She would wear them both today.

The pack seemed lighter than it had last night. Kylie was thankful for this. She lugged it outside, put it in the trunk, and set off towards the Koala Bay Bares Resort, where Mungo was no doubt waiting.

It took a bit longer to get to the resort than she had planned, mostly due to heavy traffic in the town. As she left Koala Bay behind her, she was glad to be getting away for a while. She hoped she wasn't going to be too late.

She needn't have worried. Mungo was waiting for her in the parking lot. He had on a happy grin that seemed to suggest he didn't have a care in the world. Zoot was with him. He was wearing a floral print Hawaiian shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts. To say his outfit lacked any sense of fashion would have been an understatement. Kylie doubted he could look any more like a tourist if he tried. She got out of the car to greet them. "Morning, sorry I didn't get here sooner. I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"Did ya get a good night sleep?" asked quizzically.

"I did. It was very refreshing." That was the truth.

Mungo went back to being his usual cheerful self. "Then yer right on time."

Kylie turned her attentions to Zoot. "So why are you dressed like that?" she asked trying to be polite.

"Oh I'll be taking you both to the start of the bush track. You can go ahead and load your things into the boot, he said gesturing at his aging yellow VW Beetle. "I didn't want a repeat of 'last year's incident'," said Zoot as he gave her a knowing wink.

The incident he was referring to was a trip to town he had made last summer. He had forgotten he was nude when he left the resort, and had received a bit of a shock when he got into town. Actually, it had been a bit of a shock to a lot of people. That incident had served as the catalyst for the Koala Bares to have its Open Day, which in turn had been a catalyst for Kylie to feel more comfortable in her own skin. It had also been a catalyst for the staunch Tex Tyler to receive his comeuppance...

That wasn't what worried Kylie. What worried her was the fact that Zoot would be driving. Zoot's driving was the stuff of legend at the Koala Bares Resort. It was legendary, because of just how bad he was. Kylie had personally seen him wreck a golf cart against a fairly obvious rock. She was not thrilled about the idea of getting into a car with Zoot, but tried to be tactful. "Oh, Zoot, you don't have to drive. I'd hate for you to have to leave and spend the money on petrol. We can take my car, really it's fine." While she was sure Zoot's Beetle would get them to their destination, her car would get them to where they were going in comfort (and also in one piece).

"I insist," said Zoot. "I'll drop you off, and come back at the end to pick you up. That way no one's car gets abandoned at a trailhead for any length of time."

He had a point. There was no getting out of this situation tactfully. Begrudgingly, Kylie got her backpack out of her trunk and loaded it into Zoot's car. "I guess we're ready to go then?" she asked.

"Not just yet," said a familiar voice. It was Loxie. She was leading a large group

of Resort-goers towards the parking lot. “We came to wish you a safe voyage.”

Kylie was amazed at the outpouring of support. It was a large group of people, maybe even everyone at the resort that day. They were all waving friendly goodbyes and a few people were holding up a sign that read “Bon Voyage!” It was a warming display of support.

Granted, these people were probably all here for Mungo. Kylie could pick out a few familiar faces in the crowd, most notably those of Loxie and Willow, but there were many people she didn’t recognize. Mungo, no doubt, knew all these people by name. It was obvious that this was primarily his going-away party, and that she was just peripheral. Still, Kylie was safe in the knowledge that she had at least a few friends to wish her well—people who were happy to see her go, but sad to see her leave.

Breaking her trance, Zoot suggested, “we should get going.”

“Mungo, you can ride in the front seat,” suggested Kylie.

“No. I’ll ride in the back,” he said. He didn’t even give her the chance to argue the matter. He got into the back seat. Kylie took the front passenger’s seat, and much to her chagrin, Zoot took the driver’s seat. As the Beetle began to pull away well-wishers yelled good tidings at the car until it was out of sight.

“Goodbye, Mungo!”

“We’ll miss you.”

“We’ll tend to your garden while you’re gone.”

“We’ll look after Oscar to when he gets back.”

Slowly their cheers became less and less audible as the vehicle drove away.

The next half an hour was a nightmare for Kylie. True to form, Zoot’s driving was as terrible as always. If anything, it had even gotten a bit worse. It was as though he had intentionally practiced how to be a bad driver, and had honed this craft to perfection.

Zoot would take turns way too fast, forcing Kylie to lean to keep her balance in the seat. He drove too fast, and overtook cars in a way that Kylie could only describe as reckless. He took one bump so hard he even caused the radio to skip. The radio? Was such a thing even possible? Sure Kylie had managed to cause a tape or CD to skip in her own car, but the radio? Was he trying to get them all killed? She wanted to ask him to slow down, but each time she looked over at him, he seemed to be in such a good mood, so she kept silent.

As the drive wore on, she began to feel queasy, perhaps even motion sick. She was afraid that she would vomit all over the interior of Zoot’s car. Kylie rolled down the window in the hopes that some fresh air would help steady her stomach. She glanced back over her shoulder to see how Mungo was doing.

Much to her surprise, Mungo looked blissfully happy. He was intently gazing out the window with a look of almost-childlike wonderment. It was as though he had never outgrown the fun of being a child in the backseat of a car while on holiday.

This caused Kylie to wonder about his past. Did Mungo ever take car trips as a child? Probably not. It was rare to see Mungo in a car. In fact, in all the time she had known him, she had never seen him in a car. Sure there had been the time he drove around in a buggy with Tex Tyler in one of the wildest chases Kylie had ever seen, but that was different than a car. She had to wonder if this was his first trip in a car; probably not, but there was no real way to be sure.

Still, Mungo was enjoying himself, while she was not. Kylie endeavored to try and relax a little bit, to not worry about the drive. It worked. The less she worried, the more fun she seemed to have. At length, she engaged Zoot in conversation as they drove. She had never really gotten to know Zoot all that well before, and though she certainly approved of Loxie's choice in husbands, she still didn't know Zoot all that well. That changed as the car drove along. Soon she and Zoot were swapping stories and laughing at jokes as though they were old friends.

Mungo, sat in silence in the backseat. Both Kylie and Zoot had tried to draw him into their conversation, but he had said he was comfortable to just enjoy the scenery. He stared out the window lost in thought. Kylie had to wonder if he could even hear any of her and Zoot's conversation. He seemed to be off in his own little world.

After a while, Zoot pulled off onto a dirt road, and then into a gravel parking lot at the end. There were probably twenty other cars in the parking lot. Kylie glanced at her watch. It was now noon. The drive had taken almost an hour and a half, and while the first bit had seemed like an unpleasant eternity, the last leg of the trip seemed to fly by. "We're here already?" she asked.

"Yeah, I know," said Zoot. "Where does the time go? I was enjoying our chat. At least you too don't have to drive back by yourselves," he commented. He put the Beetle in park, and got out. "Anyways, we can continue our conversation when you get back." He popped the front hatch of the Beetle, and helped Kylie with her pack. He helped adjust the straps so the pack fit her better. With the pack on her back and properly adjusted, it seemed lighter than ever.

"I guess this is it," he said. "Have fun you two. I'll see you when you get back." He gave them brief hugs, then got into his Volkswagen, and drove off leaving the two hikers at the trailhead.

Kylie's stomach began to rumble. It was, after all, well past the time she would normally have lunch. Something to eat would be nice, but she didn't want to be a burden on this trip. For now, she wouldn't say anything, but she hoped they would have at least a snack before dinner that evening. And dinner! That was another matter entirely! Mungo carried a small pack with skins for holding water, and other various things. Kylie seriously doubted that pack contained a three course meal for dinner that evening. He had said he would "provide" food, so what was he going to "provide" this evening?

Pushing thoughts of food to the side, Kylie began to survey the area. It was a lush forest filled with tall eucalyptus trees. She wished she would have paid more attention on the drive over here, but the conversation with Zoot had been both engaging and distracting. She had no idea where they were currently. "Okay, Mungo, where are we?"

## **Chapter 5: On Public Land**

Yet it was a question that was quickly answered by a set of tell-tale signs. "Mungo! This is a national park!"

"Yep, it's also where we start our journey," said Mungo eager to begin the journey.

"Surely you don't mean to start your walkabout here?" Kylie asked incredulously. She imagined the walkabout to take place in undisturbed country. The bush tracks of a

national park did not seem like the right auspices for such a journey. Besides, these places were really more of a haven for tourists. Still, maybe it was better to start out easy, and then ease into things. After all, having some trails was certainly better than having no trail at all.

“It wasn’t always a national park,” said Mungo his voice reflecting on the changes brought on by time. “We should start walking. We have a lot of ground to cover.”

Kylie was curious as to how much ground constituted “a lot of ground?” Before they began, there was something she needed to do. “Give me just one second,” she took off her pack and got out the Scout camera from its case. The Scout was pretty simple in its operation; just point and shoot. There were a few advanced functions, but the default settings were surprisingly high quality. She checked the tape and the battery. The battery was at full charge, and the tape was at the start of the reel and ready to roll. Removing the lens cap, she began to dictate.

“Greetings, and welcome to our documentary series on the Walkabout tradition. Our guide is Mungo, a member of the Wirranii people whose people have been practicing the tradition of the walkabout for countless centuries.” As she spoke she put Mungo in the center of the frame. “Mungo has been generous enough to tell his story.” Kylie wasn’t particularly happy with this narration. It seemed a bit forced, and hardly the poetic diction she was going for. Still some narration was necessary to keep track of events. She could always dub over things during the editing process.

“What about your story?” asked Mungo.

Kylie hit the stop button on the camera. Mungo speaking had caught her off guard. Mungo’s question would need to be edited out. His story was the important one, not hers. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“Ain’t ya gonna tell your story too?” asked Mungo. “You ain’t even mentioned yer name yet.”

“My story...my story isn’t worth telling...” said Kylie dejected. It was true. She was a washed-up-has-been at age 38. Nothing about that made for a good story.”

“Nah!” said Mungo. “You aughta put yer own spin on things. Spend some time in front of the camera. Tell ‘em yer name. You’re Kylie Burns. This is your production.”

It was good advice, but it was difficult advice to take. “People don’t want to hear from me...” said Kylie still putting herself down. The look in Mungo’s eyes said he disagreed but he didn’t say anything more on the matter. Rather, he turned and began to walk up the trail, keeping a slow pace to allow Kylie to catch up.

Leaving the parking lot behind them, Kylie’s spirits began to pick up. The trail was fairly easy to begin with. It was quite warm outside, and it felt good to be outdoors and getting some exercise. Had she been at work today, she would have been going through the most stressful time of the day.

Although they did not stop for lunch, they did munch on fresh berries that grew wild along the side of the trail. It was hardly more than a snack, but it gave Kylie more than enough energy to keep going. In between they took sips from water jugs. Both of their hands were dyed a deep purple from the juices of the berries; the same was true of their lips. The weather was warm, but not excessively hot. It was pleasant.

It was interesting to see the reactions from other hikers to Mungo. Most of the people on the trail were headed in the opposite direction—back to the parking lot, back to

their homes and jobs. The majority of hikers were quite tolerant of Mungo's nudity. Most people simply walked by respectfully. There were a few people who giggled a little bit, but they meant no harm by it.

The reactions of young children were the most amusing to Kylie. Nearly all of the reactions were peppered with the same three questions. "Why is that man naked?" "Can I go naked too?" "Why not?" It was funny to see the adult's faces turned red, the way they twisted in the wind trying to answer such simple questions.

Still, there were a few people who were less than courteous. There were some people who frowned, but they were in the minority. There were some who felt the need to say or yell mean spirited things, but they were even rarer. One man in particular was quite nasty, and Kylie was worried that he would actually try to harm Mungo, harmless little Mungo! Fortunately it did not come to that.

Kylie had to wonder about the reactions of their fellow hikers. How would people have reacted the first time Mungo came through? Before this was a park? Mungo had spoken as though he had been this way before. She also had to wonder how people would have reacted if she had joined him in his nudity. There would be a time for that, but now was not that time.

As she trekked, she began to notice a few problems with her documentary angle. First, despite the portability of the Scout, it was difficult to walk and hold the camera to film. It was exceptionally difficult to do without jostling the camera and ruining the shot. There was an easy fix for this; to simply take most of the shots during breaks, or when they had set up camp for the evening. The second problem was a bit more difficult; Mungo. Mungo was more of the "silent type." This struck Kylie as a bit odd, because at the Koala Bares he had always seemed so outgoing. Then again, he was more of the type to join conversations, rather than start them. This problem also had an easy fix, she would need to draw him out into conversation. The two problems were both easily fixed, but capturing this documentary was not nearly as easy as she had originally thought.

"We'll stop here," said Mungo breaking the silence. He had led them to a remarkable bluff overlooking a verdant valley. The view was breathtaking. They were really high up, which was surprising, because the trail had not seemed particularly steep.

"Wow, Mungo, this is fantastic!" Kylie said taking out her camera to take a shot of the scenery. It was a great shot, but would have been even better if it was sunset. Still sunset wasn't all that far off. "So we're staying here for the night?"

"Nope, we've a bit farther to go," said Mungo. His admission brought Kylie crashing back into reality. She wanted to stay here to get her sunset shot. She was tired, and her feet were starting to hurt. Did they really have to go further? "Down there," he said pointing. "We'll camp by the waterfall." Kylie couldn't see a waterfall, but if she listened closely she thought she could hear one. "We're headin' that way tomorrow," said Mungo as he pointed north to a vast expanse of scrubland. To Kylie, it seemed so far away.

Still, even though they had farther to go, Mungo didn't seem to be in any sort of hurry to start bush-walking again. Kylie took the opportunity to set on a nearby rock and rest. It seemed that no sooner had she taken a seat, when their peace was interrupted by two travelers, a male and a female. Kylie could see them pointing and gesturing at her and Mungo. Did they mean to cause her trouble? She wished they would go away. They of course did not.

“Excuse me, are you Kylie Burns?” asked the male bush walker. He was dressed similar to how Zoot had been that morning; wearing khaki shorts and a floral print shirt. That similarity, was the only thing he had in common with Zoot. He had brown hair instead of blonde, and his face was round, and his cheeks dimpled.

“Umm...yes...do I...do I know you?”

“We’re big fans of your news broadcast,” he said. “Amy! You were right, it IS her,” he said calling back to his companion. “I’m Tim, by the way, Tim Kirby, and this is my wife Amy,” he said introducing his companion. She wore a yellow sundress, and had red hair and freckles. Like her husband, she had a round face. These two seemed like they were made for each other. This last point only served to accent the fact that Kylie was, herself, unmarried.

“Hi, I’m Amy,” she said introducing herself, and briskly shaking Kylie’s hand. “We’re big fans of your show. Really big fans.”

“Well, thanks,” said Kylie. “It’s always nice to meet my fans.” Normally that was true, but this was an exception. It served as a cruel reminder of the job she was leaving behind. Also, this couple seemed a little too perky. Right now she wanted to enjoy the view, not have a conversation.

“So what brings you out here?” asked Tim.

“Well the view,” said Kylie gesturing at the surrounding landscape. These people seemed to be rather rudely ignoring Mungo. This wasn’t especially surprising. They were HER fans after all. She kept looking over at him, hoping he would save her from further conversation with the Kirbys. Mungo, meanwhile, was content to enjoy the view in silence.

“So you won’t be doing the news tonight?” asked Tim.

Kylie was not keen on answering that question. She didn’t want to admit to her fans, and even to herself, that her return to the news was unlikely. “Not tonight, I’m on holiday.”

“On holiday?” asked Amy. “But you’ve brought your camera with you. You bring your work with you on holiday?”

It was a harmless question, but to Kylie it seemed like a scathing indictment. “Oh that, it’s...private.” Amy did have a point. This was, after all, her first holiday in many years, and here she was lugging around a camera, focused on her work.

“Well good for you,” said Amy encouragingly. “When I go on holiday, I really can’t be bothered to think about work at all. I guess that’s why you’re a big TV star and I’m not.”

Again, Amy wasn’t trying to be mean, but this conversation was excruciating. She wanted it to be over as soon as possible. It brought back all the bad feelings of the past few days. Frankly, she felt like crying. Yet she managed to keep her emotions in check.

She noticed, as the conversation continued, that the Kirby’s kept staring over at Mungo. They were trying to be discrete about it. But staring into their eyes, she could see their eyes darting back and forth between her and Mungo. They did not seem offended by his nudity; more curious than anything.

By the time their conversation was over, Kylie had posed for a few photos and autographed their guidebook. As if the autograph of an ex-reporter would be worth anything! The Kirby’s even offered for her to join them at their campsite. Kylie politely

declined.

“Let’s go, Mungo,” she said as she walked by him and headed down the track. He quickly caught up to her.

“You alright?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“No!”

If anything, her conversation with the Kirbys helped to motivate Kylie to move faster. She wanted to put distance between her and them. She wanted to put distance between her and the city, and bush-walking did just that. It felt odd to be in the lead. There was really only one trail to follow, so there was no way to get lost. Still, this was Mungo’s trip. Shouldn’t he be in the lead? Yet he didn’t seem at all bothered by her taking the lead.

Soon they were at the waterfall, their final destination for the evening. Much to Kylie’s disappointment there was a tent set up nearby. She was hoping for a peaceful evening without the distraction of other people. “You sure you want to stay here?” she asked.

“Yeah. We’ll camp ’ere.”

“Really I’m fine. We can go a bit farther,” Kylie offered. Yet her legs were very tired, and her stomach rumbled loudly.

“We’ll camp ’ere.” He was insistent. He dropped his pack, and took out what looked like a rolled up cloth. The cloth turned out to be a tent, which he proceeded to begin setting up. It was an antiquated A-frame style tent made of a heavier canvas material. Who knew how many decades old this tent was? It was a far cry from the light weight nylon tents featured at most camping stores.

In watching Mungo set up the tent, she realized how ill prepared she was for sleeping. She had not brought a sleeping bag or inflatable mattress, but then Mungo had not said to bring either of those things. Looking at his mostly empty pack, she doubted he had either. She hadn’t even brought a pillow! It began to sink in that this was going to be significantly more difficult than just camping. This was going to be “roughing it” in every sense of the word. At least the tent had a canvas floor...

She eyeballed the tent, and was surprised at just how small it was. She had her doubts about how it would sleep two people comfortably. “So we’ll both sleep in the tent?”

“Nah. I ain’t sleepin’ in the tent. It’s for you.”

Kylie was a bit flattered that Mungo had packed a whole tent that he did not plan to use. He had obviously taken some thought into her comfort on this trip. His generosity was actually quite humbling. “You didn’t need to pack a tent just for me.”

“You’re me guest,” was his reply. “Are ya hungry?”

She wanted to say ‘yes, I’m starving,’ but simply said “Yes.” “Do you want me to help you with anything?”

“You stay here. I’ll be back with somethin’ to eat,” he said as he disappeared off the trail in search of food.

What did he mean by “something to eat” Kylie wondered. She hoped that the evening’s dinner consisted of more than just wild berries. When Mungo returned, he was

bearing an armful of what he called “bush tomatoes.” Much to Kylie’s surprise, the fruit did taste like a tomato, although it lacked some of the characteristic acidity of a tomato. While it was a far cry from a three course meal (really more of a one course meal), it was both filling and satisfying. Once again, Kylie’s spirits were beginning to pick up. Yet they were quickly brought back down again when the owners of the abandoned tent returned. It belonged to none other than the Kirbys.

Naturally, the Kirbys were thrilled to see her, much more so than she was to see them. Despite her hopes that they would leave her alone, they instead wanted to continue their conversation from up on the ridge. Kylie answered their questions, but wished they would just leave her in peace. Still, they were just trying to be friendly. They even offered Kylie a share of their dehydrated Lasagna meal that they were preparing. Even for dehydrated food, it gave off a pleasant aroma. The offer was tempting, but Kylie declined. Dehydrated food was not in the spirit of this journey.

As the conversation wore on, Kylie looked to Mungo for support. Her friend was happy enough to enjoy the solace of the evening, while leaving chatter with the Kirbys to her. She felt herself wishing he would join in the conversation; anything to distract the Kirbys from their endless string of questioning. Mungo did finally speak, but he did not join the conversation.

“I’m goin’ for a swim.” That was all he said before wading into the deep collecting pool below the waterfall.

Kylie looked on in envy. A swim would feel nice. She wanted to wash off the dust from the day’s trip. Still, she had not packed a bathing suit in her pack. Ordinarily, this would not pose much of a problem. Yet in the presence of the Kirby’s this seemed prohibitive.

The Kirbys meanwhile encouraged Kylie to go for a swim if she wanted to. The offer was tempting. It would both let her get clean and give her some much needed personal space. Still, despite (or perhaps because of) their insistence, Kylie decided not to swim that evening.

She excused herself saying that she was feeling tired and would like to get some rest. The tent was a welcome part of the campsite, because it allowed her to get away from her fans, and enjoy the silence of a still evening. She took her remaining clothes from her pack, and balled them up into a makeshift pillow. The ground was more forgiving than she thought. In minutes she was asleep.

Light trickling in through small holes in the canvas served to let her know that morning had arrived. She stretched out, feeling refreshed, but still a little sore from all that walking. She was covered in a cold sweat. This was characteristic of when she had nightmares or other bad dreams. She must have had a bad dream last night. But about what? She couldn’t remember.

She re-packed her pack, and climbed out of the tent. She was happy to see that their camp neighbors were still asleep. Mungo was awake and tending to a small fire. Kylie was sorry she had gone to sleep so early and missed the fire, but there would be other opportunities on this journey.

He was scooping cooled ashes from the fire pit, and rubbing them all over his body. The white from the ashes against the dark brown of his skin made him look almost spectral in his appearance.

“What are you doing?” asked Kylie as he rubbed ashes against his face.

“Protectin’ me skin,” he said. “The ashes help prevent sunburn.”

“You know, I do have sunscreen,” offered Kylie, unsure why someone with such dark skin would be worried about sunburn anyway.

“Nah. That’s for you,” he said declining her offer. He went back to rubbing the ashes to cover his face. The next thing he did was horrifying to Kylie. He took a small pinch of ashes and put it in his mouth.

“What are you DOING?” she shrieked. She hadn’t meant for it to come out quite so loud. She hoped she hadn’t accidentally woken the Kirbys. Was Mungo EATING ashes?

He took his index finger and put it inside his mouth, rubbing the ashes against his teeth. “Better than toothpaste. Prevents cavities. Want some?”

“No thanks, I have the real thing,” said Kylie. She would have offered him some of her toothpaste, but she doubted he would accept. It was at that moment that she hoped she had packed enough toothpaste and sunscreen for the duration of the trip. She didn’t like the idea of using ash when those critical items ran out. Kylie decided to take advantage of real sunscreen and real toothpaste while she still had the chance. She brushed her teeth, and rubbed sun block onto her exposed arms and her face.

“Are ya hungry?” asked Mungo.

“No. I would like to get moving,” she replied. The truth was she was hungry—very hungry. Yet she was willing to put hunger aside if it meant getting away from her adoring fans.

“There’s fish in the water. I could catch ya some,” Mungo offered.

This was a sweet offer given how much work it sounded like. Still, a breakfast of fish did not sound especially appetizing. She also didn’t want to wait any longer and risk the Kirbys waking up. “Nah, let’s go.”

Mungo collapsed the tent, and rolled it back up and into his pack. With both their packs on, there was nothing preventing them from leaving. Kylie looked out at the pristine pool and lamented that she had not had a chance to swim. She still had time before the Kirbys might wake up, but she decided against it. She hoped there would be other opportunities to swim along their trip.

As they hiked out that morning, Kylie was eager to put distance between her and the Kirbys; to put distance between her and the worries of Koala Bay.

## **Chapter 6: On Private Land**

Kylie found the second day of hiking to be quite a bit more difficult than the first. Although she did not want to admit it, she was actually a bit sore. Yet once she got on the trail, the soreness seemed to go away, a bit. She had to wonder if Mungo was sore as well. He was, after all, quite a bit older than her, and even though Kylie wasn’t in the best shape, she would be surprised if he wasn’t sore.

If he was, he didn’t act like it. His pace was as quick as it had been yesterday. She tried to keep with his pace, but felt it easy to fall behind. By now she was breathing quite heavily, and her shirt was soaked with sweat. Yet Mungo kept his pace. How was it possible for him to be in this good of shape? He wasn’t sweating. He wasn’t even

breathing hard.

Finally it got to be too much for Kylie. “Hey Mungo!” she called. He was about 50m ahead of her on the trail.

“Yeah?”

“Can we...can we slow down a bit?” she asked. “I...I need to get some shots for my report.” She didn’t want to admit that she was so tired. There was at least some truth in what she said. She hadn’t gotten her camera out all morning.

“No worries,” said Mungo. He looked a bit sheepish, as though he had temporarily forgotten his hiking companion. “Let’s stop here for a while,” he suggested.

Kylie was more than happy to agree. She sat down on a rock, and began to take her camera out of her pack.

“Are yer feet hot?” asked Mungo.

“Yes.”

“Put on another pair of socks,” said Mungo.

“But that will make them even hotter,” protested Kylie.

“You’ve got a ‘hot spot.’ If you don’t do somethin’ about it, it will become a blister. Havin’ two socks reduces friction. Prevents blisters.”

This was sage advice from someone who never wore socks. Despite her misgivings about the idea, Kylie did as suggested and put on a second pair of socks. She took out the camera, powered it on, and framed Mungo in the shot. “So where are we going?” she asked.

She had decided to try things a little different. Trying to narrate the trip wasn’t working out very well. So instead, she would try to take a more conversational tone. Hopefully, Mungo would be a bit more talkative. Then in editing, she could go back and edit out the parts of her talking, and dub over them with better narration.

“We’re goin’ to Kurrajong Cattle Station,” said Mungo.

“A ranch?” asked Kylie incredulously. “We’re going to a ranch?”

“Yep,” said Mungo.

“But I thought we were going into the outback,” said Kylie.

“We are. We are.”

“But then why are we starting out in a National Park, and then going onto private land. Why didn’t we just start in the outback?” asked Kylie. It was a legitimate question, and one that would have saved them two days of hiking (plus that whole encounter with the Kirbys).

“There are still some places roads won’t take ya,” replied Mungo.

This was the kind of shot Kylie was hoping for. It had been a simple question, which had been given a poetic answer. He could have just as easily said ‘you can’t drive there,’ or ‘there aren’t any roads.’ Yet his answer was rich with natural symbolism. This was the side of Mungo that Kylie was trying to capture. It was that enigmatic spirituality that surrounded Mungo, which would make him a star. That would make her a star.

“But why are we going to a cattle station?” asked Kylie. That seemed a bit out of place for a walkabout.

“The owner is a friend of mine. I ain’t seen him in years.”

“Was his ranch here the first time you came through?” asked Kylie.

“Yeah. It was...” he paused. His voice was full of reflection. “...We oughta get goin’. I want to get there before sunset.”

Kylie looked down at her watch. It was noon. Did they really have to get started now? Would they really be hiking until sunset? Groaning she got back to her feet. She decided to keep her camera at hand for the time being.

In hindsight, she wished she hadn't taken the break. Sure, it was great to get a few shots for her documentary. But it felt painful to get back to walking. Her stomach was rumbling. She wished she hadn't said 'no' to breakfast that morning.

As if on cue, Mungo added, "We'll stop for lunch soon," as he hiked on and motioned for her to follow him.

She hated putting on the pack. Even though it had been adjusted for her, it was still heavy. Her shoulders were already sore from carrying it. She knew that most of the weight came from the camera supplies. If she could only get rid of those things, the pack would hardly weigh anything at all. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option. Maybe if she was lucky, she could get one of Mungo's fabulous massages.

They hiked on. True to his word, they did stop for lunch. Just as yesterday, wild berries were the lunch for the day. While they had been appetizing yesterday, they were no where as filling today. The berries were sweet, but Kylie hoped for something a bit more...substantial. If offered fish again that evening, she would not say no this time.

"This way," said Mungo, snapping Kylie out of her train of thought. He gestured away from the track.

"But Mungo, the trail goes this way," Kylie protested. "There's no track in that direction."

"Exactly," he said grinning. "C'mon!" He was clearly excited to get to their next destination. Kylie followed him.

After hiking for what seemed like hours, they came to an area where the brush was not as thick. Kylie looked out at the surrounding landscape. The hills off in the distance were dotted with...cows?

She squinted to try and focus on objects in the distance. Those WERE cows. Kylie's heart soared. Sure the cows were a ways off, but if there were cows, the station had to be close by. The sight of cattle, set her mind to steak. The thought of a nice slab of steak with a baked potato set her stomach rumbling. Sunset was not far off, and hopefully the same was true of dinner.

They continued trekking, but were soon met by a man on horseback. He wore a wide brimmed hat that cast most of his face in shadow. The man had a gray mustache to match gray hair that stuck out from below the bottom of the hat. Kylie seemed to think that save for those tufts of hair, he was probably bald underneath his hat. His skin was taut and leathery. He looked quite old. Too old, Kylie thought to be out riding a horse, especially in this heat.

Yet the man leapt down off his horse with the grace of a man decades younger. He strode with a wide gait and a very upright, tall, posture, which seemed to defy his age. The man was quite tall; as tall as willow if not taller. He seemed to walk right by Kylie and up to Mungo. "Wirinun. It's good to see you again." He had striking blue eyes. They seemed a bit out of place on him. Kylie would have expected brown eyes.

Mungo shook his hand briskly. "It's fantastic to see you too, Lars."

Kylie watched the two men greet each other as friends. What had Lars called Mungo? Wir...Wirinun? What did that mean? Was that Mungo's last name? She always just called him Mungo.

“So what brings you out this way?” asked Lars. He seemed so focused on Mungo that Kylie wondered if he could even see her. There was a chance that his vision had begun to fail him with age. So maybe, he really didn’t see her.

For that matter, he seemed to be oblivious to the fact that Mungo was naked. Everyone they had met so far, had looked at Mungo with darting and shifting eyes. Yet Lars stared Mungo directly in the eye (which was difficult given the height difference). If he had noticed Mungo’s nudity, he did not find it out of the ordinary.

“Walkabout,” replied Mungo.

“On a walkabout? Here?” asked Lars incredulously. “Forgive me Wirinun, but I thought you never came the same way twice.”

“It’s the same place,” said Mungo. “But it ain’t the same way.”

Kylie wished she had gotten that on camera. The emphasis on his voice was one of world-weariness. It was a tone of reflection on decades of change. It would have been a great shot for her documentary. Yet this was a solemn moment between friends. It didn’t seem right to take advantage of the situation.

“This is Kylie,” said Mungo properly introducing her. “Kylie Burns.”

Lars stepped forward to shake her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Miss Burns,” he said amicably. He stared her directly in the eye, which allowed Kylie to appreciate how truly striking his blue eyes were.

So she was not invisible after all. She wondered if Lars would recognize her from the news. For that matter, she wondered if Channel 5 even got reception out here. If he did recognize her, he did not say anything. Kylie was actually thankful for that. After the reception she got by the Kirbys, it was nice to not be the center of attention.

“How’s Malena?” asked Mungo.

Malena? Who’s Malena?

“She...she’s dead Wirinun,” said Lars somberly. Kylie could see a tear running down Lars’ cheek.

“Dead?” replied Mungo shocked by the news. “When?” This was the first time Kylie had ever seen Mungo surprised. It was very disconcerting. He was usually so happy and cheerful, and yet at that moment he seemed so vulnerable.

“It’s been three years. I’m sorry, Wirinun. I thought you knew.”

Mungo said nothing in return. Kylie could see a tear running down his cheek as well. She had never seen Mungo cry before. It would have made a very “artsy” shot for her documentary, but she didn’t dare film it. Some things were personal, and that was that.

“I’m sure you’ll want to pay your respects,” said Lars.

“Yeah... yeah, I do,” replied Mungo.

“Well, follow me then,” said Lars. Kylie wondered if she was supposed to just wait here in the clearing. Lars added. “You too, Miss Burns. You can have a shower, and some dinner at the farm house. We’ve also got a couple warm beds for you and Wirinun.”

“I’ll be sleepin’ outside,” said Mungo.

Lars looked sheepish. “Yes, forgive me, Wirinun. I did not realize.”

“I...I think I’ll also sleep outside,” said Kylie. That seemed only fair. She did not want to impose on Lars, especially not on their first meeting. Besides, if Mungo was going to sleep outside, as an observer it was only fair to assume she do the same.

“Nah, you oughta sleep in a bed tonight,” said Mungo.

“Are...are you sure?” asked Kylie. A comfortable bed seemed nice. She didn’t want to seem too eager to sleep in a bed rather than outside. But she would not put up much in the way of protest.

“The journey gets harder up ahead,” said Mungo. “Much harder.” He said it with such certainty that Kylie gulped nervously.

“Al...alright...”

“Please follow me,” said Lars as he climbed back up onto his horse. He turned the horse and slowly headed back towards a small white farmhouse in the distance. Mungo and Kylie followed walking on the left side of the horse.

They walked in silence until they got to the farmhouse.

## **Chapter 7: At the Farm House**

Lars took the lead. He dismounted from the horse and removed the heavy saddle and hung it over the railing. The horse was now free to wander off, and did just that heading for a feeding trough full of grain and oats. “Welcome to Kurrajong, Miss Burns,” said Lars.

The station consisted of a few small barns and pens for the livestock, with a farmhouse in the center. It was a quaint little farmhouse. It was two stories tall, and was painted white, though the paint was fading with age. While the farmhouse was charming, Kylie found the stench of the farm to be a bit overpowering. She had not grown up around farm animals, and she tried to resist her natural urge to gag.

“Let me take your pack,” offered Lars. Not wanting to object, Kylie handed the pack over to Lars, who took it from her. He beckoned for both her and Mungo to follow her indoors.

The inside of the house, like the outside, was very quaint. It was neat and tidy, and served as evidence that Lars was both a good stationer and a good housekeeper. Still, it was easy to recognize that the farmhouse was old; easily older than Lars himself.

He set her pack down in the main room. “The kitchen is off to the left,” he explained. “The bathroom is upstairs. It should already have towels that you can use. Your room is also upstairs, so feel free to take a nap. Also, help yourself to anything from the fridge if you want a snack. I’ll fix you some dinner when I get back.”

“Thank you, Lars,” said Kylie.

“Now if you’ll excuse us, Wirinun and I have some...things to attend to...” With his somber voice, Kylie could immediately tell that they were going to pay their respects to Malena, whoever she was. The two men exited through the front door, leaving Kylie alone in the farmhouse.

Kylie made herself at home, while she waited for them to get back. First thing was to have a shower. She went upstairs to the bathroom, and got into the shower. When she turned the knob the water did not come on automatically. The plumbing made a screeching noise and eventually the water came on.

The water pressure was disappointing to say the least. The water seemed to dribble out of the faucet. Back at home, Kylie’s shower was quite powerful. Also, the water wasn’t hot; it was just lukewarm. Still, a shower was a shower. After the day of

hiking they just had, it felt good to wash the dust off.

With her shower over, Kylie put on fresh clothes and went off to explore the house. Specifically, she was looking for any clues about Malena's identity. She wasn't snooping, per se, but she was looking for any hanging photos that might give her clues. Why? It wasn't like she was going to put it in her documentary. Still, she wanted to know more about this person who was so important to Mungo. She found nothing. Perhaps that was just as well.

She made her way to the downstairs area. There she found Lars' bookcases. She glanced over them, and found many books on history—particularly natural history. Lars' shelves were full of books on plants and animals of the world. He also had photos on the wall of many plants and animals in their natural settings. So Lars and Carl had something in common. Small world, huh?

Kylie was not particularly surprised to find that Lars did not own a TV; it probably wouldn't pick up any channels any way. But he also didn't own a radio, or stereo. Kylie was not expecting high end electronics. But not even a record player? How did Lars weather the solitude?

She found her way to the kitchen. Opening the fridge, she found it full of fresh vegetables and other good things to eat. She was particularly tempted by a wedge of cheese and an opened bottle of wine. The cheese was so fragrant, she wondered if it was home made. It had to be. After all, how far away was the nearest store?

Lars had said to help herself, and the rumbling of her stomach told her to do just that. Still, Kylie did not want to impose, so she decided to wait for them to return home.

About an hour later, Lars and Mungo returned both in good spirits. Any sense of grief or loss was replaced by warm smiles and good hearted laughter. It was like they were two long lost friends who had been reunited.

"Did you enjoy your shower?" asked Lars.

"Yes." It wasn't an entirely true statement, but for the most part, she had.

"Great, I'll put some soup on," said Lars, who went into the kitchen to start making dinner. Kylie and Mungo followed him and took seats around the dining room table. As Lars stirred the soup, he made polite conversation. "So, Miss Burns, I couldn't help but notice your camera..."

"Oh, yeah, I'm a TV news reporter." Why was she still using present tense?

"That's nice," said Lars. He didn't seem to be particularly impressed, which was not surprising for someone who didn't own a TV. Most people, when they found out she was a reporter, were full of questions. It was nice that Lars wasn't. "I'm documenting the walkabout," she said volunteering information.

"Ha! Imagine that! Our Wirinun, a TV star! Next thing you know, he'll be moving out to Hollywood and riding around in a limousine." Lars laughed heartily. So did Mungo. Kylie eventually joined them in their laughter. After all, the image of "Hollywood Mungo" seemed laughably out of place.

"Well, he may not be a movie star, but I think he's got a story to tell," said Kylie trying to be a bit more serious.

"Wirinun? Sure he's got a story, but it would take ages to tell," said Lars. "Not that I'm trying to discourage you." Kylie could begin to see why Lars and Mungo were friends. They both seemed to have the same manner of speaking.

"Soups on," he announced, and dished up two bowls of beef stew.

Kylie's stomach rumbled loudly. She eagerly ate a few bites of stew before looking over to see that Mungo had none. "You're not going to have any?"

"I'll provide for meself," said Mungo. "It wouldn't be in the spirit of the walkabout, eh?" Kylie felt bad for eating, but Mungo said assuringly, "You have some soup though, okay?"

With Mungo's blessing, Kylie hungrily ate her bowl of soup. It was hot and filling. "Wow, Lars, this is really great."

"I'm glad you like it. Would you care for some more?"

Kylie wanted to say yes, but was a bit uncomfortable.

"You oughta have more," said Mungo. "Keep yer strength up. The trip ahead's a lot more difficult." Kylie looked over at Lars to see him nodding in agreement.

"Alright then." She finished the second bowl as quickly as the first, but now she was quite full.

The group moved from the kitchen to the front hall. There, Mungo announced that he would be going to bed for the evening. He moved to exit.

"You're not staying here?" asked Kylie.

"I'll sleep outside," said Mungo. "You sleep indoors, in here tonight. Rest up."

"Yeah, yeah, it gets more difficult up ahead," said Kylie anticipating what he would say next. She talked a tough game, but was actually a bit scared of what lay ahead. If the past few days could be considered "easy" then what did "difficult" feel like.

Mungo took his leave, and Lars retired to the bedroom downstairs. Kylie went upstairs to her room, and laid down on the bed. The soft mattress was a welcome relief from the tent. It would only make going back to sleeping in the tent more difficult.

She did not go to sleep immediately. She lay awake, and then looked out the window. She could see the smoke and light from a small campfire; Mungo's campfire. Knowing he was out there made her feel safe and secure. After that, she fell asleep easily.

Again, she awoke covered in sweat. Another nightmare? It was rare that she ever had nightmares two nights in a row. What had frightened her so badly? She couldn't recall any details. She had this strange sense that in her dream she was that there had been someone watching her. Was that what had caused her such a fright?

She went downstairs to find Mungo and Lars chatting in the front room. They both took notice of her as she came down the stairs.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Lars.

"Yes, very well," said Kylie. Again, it wasn't an entirely true statement

"Ya ready to leave?" asked Mungo.

"Yes." It was difficult to say. There was no reason to prevent them from leaving, but the smell of bacon coming from the kitchen made Kylie wish they could stay for breakfast.

"You can leave yer clothes here if ya want," suggested Mungo. His suggestion caught Kylie by surprise. "From here on in we're hikin' in undisturbed country. You won't need them, and it'll lighten yer pack. We'll come this way again on our trip home."

## **Chapter 8: Apples in the Outback**

Kylie was shocked at how blasé Mungo had been. Yes, she did intend to go nude, but that was not a fact she was willing to share with just anyone. And though she had appreciated Lars' hospitality, she was a bit shy about revealing that particular detail of her trip. She blushed and looked over at Lars.

His eyes met her gaze, and yet he acted as though nothing were out of the ordinary. "You can leave them on the bed upstairs," Lars offered. "We don't get many guests who stay in that room anyway. They will be waiting for you when you get back."

"...Thank you, Lars," Kylie mumbled in reply. She shifted back and forth before announcing, "I'll be back down in just a second." She excused herself and went back upstairs. She could hear Lars and Mungo get back to their conversation.

Once upstairs in the guest bedroom, Kylie shut the door behind her. Okay, so she could leave her clothes here, but what exactly did that mean. Her first instinct was to bring everything, leaving nothing behind. After all, they were her things, so why shouldn't she take them with her? It wasn't like they would lighten her load THAT much. She knew all too well that it was the camera and film supplies that weighed her pack down. Still, there was no chance that she was going to leave those things behind.

Yet she was a guest on Mungo's walkabout. And if he could do the whole thing in the nude, she could certainly leave a few articles of clothing behind. Couldn't she? Kylie rummaged through her pack and pulled out her jeans and long sleeved shirt. She threw them on the bed. It hadn't been that cold, and that wasn't likely to change. She wouldn't need those warmer clothes.

But was that all she was willing to part with? Could she really "leave it all behind?"

Kylie removed her shirt, and her shorts and tossed them on the bed next to her warmer clothes. Wearing just her underwear she wrapped her sarong around her. She frowned. The sight of her bra straps coming up from underneath the sarong looked very unstylish. After all, she could go nude under her sarong...

She decided against this. She would take her underwear and her sarong on this trip. They were all lightweight, and would take up very little space in her pack. But what about her hat and sunglasses? Should she take them as well?

The sunglasses were essential. There hadn't been any clouds in the sky, so the sunglasses were definitely necessary. She was conflicted though about whether or not to bring the hat. She had always liked that hat, and was keen to bring it with her. On the other hand, it was covered in dirt, and if she continued to use it, it was unlikely to ever get back to its original colors. Still, she had a very pale complexion. The hat would provide some additional protection from the sun. She would take the hat.

With her pack re-packed and now re-dressed for the day, Kylie headed back downstairs. "I...I'm ready to go," she announced interrupting Mungo and Lars' conversation.

"So you are. So you are," said Mungo. "We oughta get goin' then."

"Take care, Wirinun," said Lars adding, "you too, Miss Burns."

"Thank you Lars," said Kylie. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"You're welcome, Miss Burns," said Lars. "I look forward to your return." He said that with such confidence that it felt good to know that even if no one back home missed her, there were still people who looked forward to her company.

She and Mungo left the farmhouse. There were no hugs or handshakes exchanged with Lars. There didn't need to be any. They would be back again, though how soon Kylie could not say. Only Mungo was privy to that information, and unless Kylie was willing to ask, he was unlikely to share it.

Falling into file behind Mungo, Kylie took out her camera and got a few shots. They were heading east into the rising sun. The sun seemed to be framed between two hills in the distance. It was an impressive shot with Mungo in the foreground and a beautiful sunrise in the background. After getting her shot, she turned the camera off and fell into the cadence of hiking. She found it easier to keep up with Mungo. She didn't know exactly why. Maybe they were hiking at a slower pace, or maybe a night in a bed helped her muscles relax...or maybe she was starting to get acclimated to bush walking. Regardless, it felt good to not have to struggle to keep up.

"So are ya goin' to go nude?" asked Mungo interrupting her train of thought.

"What? Here?" Kylie asked.

"Why not?" asked Mungo. He gestured at the surrounding scenery. Glancing behind her Kylie could see that the farmhouse was just a small dot in the distance. Yet it was still visible. There were a few cattle that dotted the hillsides.

"Are we still on the ranch?" asked Kylie glancing around.

"Yeah," said Mungo.

"...Then let's go a little further," Kylie suggested.

"Do ya really care if the cows see you naked?" asked Mungo pointing to the hillside.

"It's not that," said Kylie. She wasn't afraid of the cows seeing her naked. Stockmen, however, were another matter entirely. While they were still on the station, she would still stay dressed. She would go nude where it was appropriate, and right now it did not seem appropriate.

They kept hiking. Soon the cows on the hills were no longer visible. The vegetation was thicker, no longer showing signs of grazing. They looked to be in feral country now. "...Are we...are we still on the station now?" Kylie asked cautiously.

"Nah, we've been off for a while now," Mungo replied. How could he tell? The property line was not clearly marked. There had been no fence to go around or over. How did he know they were no longer on the station?

"Can we...can we stop here for just a second?" she asked.

"No worries."

Kylie took off her pack and set it gently on the ground. She unwrapped her sarong from around her torso and put it in one of the outer compartments of her pack. She might need to retrieve it at a moments notice. It seemed a bit odd to be standing out in the wilderness in just her underwear. She pulled her sports bra over her head, and tucked it into her pack. Now topless, she turned to Mungo. "Hey Mungo?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why did Lars call you Wirinun?" She was quite curious as to why this was. In their whole stay, she never once heard Lars call him Mungo. Up until now, Kylie had been certain that Mungo was his name. Then again, she had never really asked. Hearing someone else call him 'Wirinun' cast some doubts as to his true name.

“Wirinun--now that’s an old word,” he mused. “Means medicine man. It’s been ages since anyone’s called me that...” his voice dropped off, and he appeared to be deep in thought.

“I’m sorry, could I ask a quick favor?” Kylie interjected.

“Yes.”

“Could you say that line again?” asked Kylie getting out her camera. “I want to get that on tape. I just think it would make a good shot, that’s all...” She hated to ask him to repeat himself, but so far it seemed that every time he said something profound, she failed to get it on camera.

“No worries,” said Mungo. With Kylie steadying the camera on her shoulder, Mungo looked into the lens and repeated the line verbatim; neither changing nor adding a single word.

“Thanks,” said Kylie keeping Mungo in frame. “So does that mean that I should call you Wirinun?” she asked. Frankly, she had gotten used to calling him Mungo, though the description of medicine man described him quite well.

“Nah. Mungo’s fine,” he replied.

Kylie put the camera back in the pack. She slipped off her panties and tucked them into her pack as well. It felt good to be nude once again. In fact, she had been looking forward to it since they had first left Zoot at the start. With the last signs of civilization left behind, she could go nude free of the constraints of a more conservative society.

Kylie couldn’t help but feel a little out of her element. Sure she would go nude at home in the evening, and at the Koala Bares, but this was something very different. When she would go nude at home, it was always with the shades drawn and the doors locked. It was a solitary activity, one to not be disturbed by other people.

Going to the Koala Bares was a social activity. She liked to talk with Willow, Dr Geena, Loxie, Fred and Janet, and, of course, Mungo; though to some extent wearing her hat and sunglasses helped to cut down on people who would recognize her as a celebrity. But in that context, nudity was completely acceptable. The Koala Bares was private land set aside for people to go nude on weekends or on holiday. When she was nude, so was everyone else.

This was something completely different. Out here nudity was not necessarily tolerated, though it was also not expressly forbidden. If they encountered anyone else out here, they would likely be clothed. That was difficult to deal with. She could be nude in the company of nude people. She could be clothed in the company of nude people (and indeed had been when first on assignment at the Koala Bares). But could she be nude and interact with a clothed stranger? Kylie did not know the answer.

Hopefully, that opportunity would not present itself. After all, in the past 24 hours, the only person they had come across was Lars. This was uninhabited, feral, country. They probably would not encounter anyone else.

And even if they did, she could get her sarong out in time. Couldn’t she? Her sarong hung from an outer pouch on the pack. It was easily accessible, and she could get it in a hurry if she needed it. If anyone came along, she could get dressed in time. Kylie convinced herself that this would be the case.

At any rate, Mungo’s nudity helped Kylie feel more comfortable with her own. Even if they did happen to be surprised by other hikers, she would not be alone in her

nudity.

Kylie felt safe whenever Mungo was around. She felt secure.

She got her sunscreen out of her pack. She didn't want to burn, and would need to protect her fair skin. Taking a handful of sunscreen, she began to rub her face and arms.

"Good idea," Mungo remarked.

Holding out the bottle, Kylie offered, "Want some?"

"Nah. I'll me own." He took out a piece of fire pit charcoal and began to use the ashes to cover his skin. He had explained earlier that ashes could be used to protect the skin from the sun's harmful rays. Still, Kylie could not imagine using ashes when she had a perfectly good bottle of sunscreen. That was typical Mungo.

As she rubbed the lotion in, Kylie couldn't help but notice her skin. While it was soft, it was still too pale for her taste. This summer had been more stressful than usual. She had spent less time at the Koala Bares and it showed. She had a few tan lines. They weren't especially pronounced given her fair skin, but they were still noticeable. "Maybe later I could do a little sunbathing..." she said aloud. She immediately regretted saying it. Subathing? This was a walkabout, not a holiday. There wouldn't be any time for sunbathing. Would there?

"...Maybe..." said Mungo. He had an amused tone in his voice. He didn't say 'no' outright, but the tone in his voice seemed to indicate that given the amount of walking he had planned, it was very unlikely.

"Would you mind getting my back," she said offering him the bottle of sunscreen.

"Sure," he said taking the bottle from her. He put a large dollop of lotion in his hands, and began to rub her back.

Kylie could feel the tension leaving her muscles as he rubbed the lotion on her back. He had magic fingers, as Kylie could attest to from time spent on his massage table. "Mmmm," she said relaxed. "Maybe you could give me a massage later?" she said aloud. Again, she regretted speaking. This was his walkabout after all. Did he think her a nuisance for making all these requests?

"...Maybe..." he answered again. He had that same amused tone, but this time he seemed a bit more optimistic; as though it were more likely to find time for a massage than time to sunbathe. He finished with her back. "Could ya get me back?" he asked handing her a piece of charcoal.

"Oh...okay," said Kylie. Truth be told, she wasn't crazy about the idea of getting her hands all sooty, but then it would be rude not to return the favor. She broke off pieces of the ash and rubbed them all over Mungo's back. The oil from the sunscreen on her palms mixed with the charcoal to make a black oily mess. "There you go," she said once she had finished.

Her hands were oily and black. She wanted to clean them off. She was about to reach for a water bottle, but decided against it. Water needed to be conserved, and using it for hand washing was wasteful. Instead she ended up wiping her hands on her hips. This didn't work as well as she had hoped. Her hands were still dirty, and now so were her hips.

"Ready?" asked Mungo.

"Just a second," said Kylie. The bugs were starting to come out, so Kylie got out her insect repellent. It was an aerosol spray. She gently misted the spray over her body,

being extra careful on her face. It would burn if she got it in her eyes, and had a horrible bitter taste if she got any in her mouth. She already had the first hand experience to prove it. Putting the canister back in her pack, she said, "Okay now I'm ready."

Again, Mungo took off in the lead, and Kylie followed closely behind. With her hands dirty, she had a bit of a problem. She didn't want to get Carl's camera all dirty. Unfortunately, this would mean not getting any shots. Kylie hoped they would find water soon, so she could wash her hands.

If there was an incredible shot, she would use the camera, but was otherwise unwilling to get it dirty.

They hiked in silence for a few hours. Kylie was the first to break that silence. "Mungo?"

"Yeah," he said stopping, and turning around to face her.

"Are you sure you want me with you on your walkabout?" she asked. "I'm not trying to be a nuisance, but I can see how I might be. If you want," she offered, "I can head back to the station, and you can keep going." It was a difficult thing to say. If she gave up now, she would never get her story together. She could pretty much kiss her chances at getting back to anchoring goodbye, and accept the assistant producer job to toil in obscurity. However, this was a spiritual journey for Mungo, and if her presence was intrusive in any way, it was time to leave.

"Kylie," Mungo said with a grin. "Yer not a nuisance. Yer part of this journey. Yer a critical part of this journey. It wasn't somethin' I planned; yet here ya are." His words put to rest any ideas she had about going home early. "You'll see this through to the end." His use of the future tense was bright and optimistic. He added, "ya need to see this through to the end." He had said that last part in a more serious tone. It was as though he had inside knowledge of the trip ahead—knowledge that he was unwilling to share with her at this time.

They did not stop for lunch. It seemed that Mungo was not keen on the idea of lunch. He would eat larger meals for breakfast and dinner, but seemed to be content to hike most of the day taking smaller snack breaks. Kylie would have preferred a third, midday, meal to a series of smaller snacks. They found some bushes of something Mungo had called "lillypilly" to eat as they walked. It was a tart, pinkish berry.

Still they pressed on. Kylie could feel her pace beginning to slow. Mungo seemed to have as much energy as when they had left this morning, but she was getting tired. How long had they been hiking anyway? For that matter, how soon until dinner? Kylie was really beginning to regret not having packed a watch. "How much further?" she asked. She did not want to be a bother, but she was really getting tired.

"Just a bit more," he said. She took him at his word, and continued to follow. Her feet hurt. They were not blistered, just sore. She wondered to herself how Mungo's feet could take the punishment of walking barefoot.

Sure enough they turned a corner and came to a small meadow with a creek. It looked like a good enough place to camp. "Are we camping here?" she asked. She was relieved when he answered 'yeah.'

Kylie took off her pack and placed it on the ground. She went over to the creek. She was disappointed to find that it was only ankle deep. Granted, a campsite with water was always better than one without. But it meant that she could only drink and fill up water bottles in the creek. Bathing was out of the question. Still, she could at least get a

little clean. She ran her hands through the cool water to wash off the soot from the ash. She then rubbed her hands on her hips to wash them off as well. She wasn't especially clean, but she was cleaner than she had been that morning.

She turned around to see Mungo already working to set up the tent. Here she was already taking a break, while he was still hard at work. She had meant to offer to help him set up the tent, but it had slipped her mind when they got to camp. She was about to go over to help him, when something on the other side of the creek caught her eye.

"What is that?" she said aloud.

"Ya find somethin' interestin'?" asked Mungo.

"I'm not sure. Is that... is that an apple tree?" she asked. Kylie didn't know much about plants, but it sure looked like an apple tree to her.

Taking one look at it Mungo said, "Yep."

"How did it get here?" asked Kylie. It seemed far too fortunate to find an apple tree growing out in the wild—far too coincidental.

"A bird probably carried it here," said Mungo. Kylie was about to protest that there was no way a bird could carry an apple out this far, when Mungo added, "probably carried the seeds in its belly." That seemed plausible.

"I'm going to go pick some," said Kylie wading across the creek. "I'll get enough for both of us." She went over to the tree and picked a few low hanging apples. When she had gotten an armful she walked back over to Mungo. He had the tent set up now. Beaming with pride she announced, "I think we've got enough for a nice meal."

She set the apples on a clear patch of ground. Keeping one for herself, she polished it off with her fingers. With a rumbling stomach she took a bite. "Ugh!"

"No good?" asked Mungo.

"It's bitter," said Kylie with a disgusted look on her face. She spit out the bite she had taken.

"Bitter? Lemme try," he snatched the apple from her and took a bite. He took a bite from the same spot she had eaten from. Most people would have bit the exact opposite side of the fruit, but not Mungo. He chewed and looked pensive. "Sour. Not bitter."

"What's the difference?" asked Kylie, not really understanding the distinction.

"Sour means it's not sweet; there ain't enough sugar," he said. "Bitter is the plant's way of defendin' itself. Bitter makes ya sick." It was a subtle distinction, but nevertheless an important one.

Looking disappointed, Kylie asked, "so what are we going to do for dinner?"

"Apples."

Kylie frowned, "but they're too sour," she protested.

"No worries, I'll take care of that," said Mungo. "But first we need to build a fire." He gathered up some small twigs and dry straw from grasses. He took out a bow and drill from his pack. It occurred to Kylie that she had not actually seen how Mungo started his fires. The night in the park, she had gone to sleep before the fire. The night at the farm house she had seen the smoke from a distance, but had never seen him light a fire.

"Hold on, let me get my camera." She had never seen anyone start a fire without matches, and doubted most of her viewers had either. She got her camera ready.

To start the fire Mungo drew the bow back and forth in a sawing motion, which

turned the drill against a fire board. After a few minutes the board began to smoke. Mungo stood aside to let Kylie get a closer shot. Sure enough in the hole where the drill had been there was a small coal. It was about as small as a pencil eraser. Mungo took the coal and put it in a nest of dried grass. With a few minutes of tending to the coal Mungo had worked up a nice sized fire.

“Maybe by the end of the trip you’ll be able to start a fire like this,” Mungo suggested.

“...Maybe...” said Kylie. He sure made it look easy. Still, she doubted that she would be able to ever make a fire like that.

“Let’s go get dinner,” he suggested. “Gimme yer sarong...” he asked.

“Sure,” said Kylie retrieving it from her pack. “What for?”

“To collect the apples,” he replied. “I need to keep me hands free.” He took the sarong from Kylie, and they both waded across the creek to the apple tree on the other side. Kylie kept the camera at hand to get a few shots.

Approaching the tree, Mungo tied the sarong into a makeshift satchel. He grabbed a low hanging branch and hoisted himself up. He was about to climb higher when Kylie spoke.

“What are you DOING?” she asked.

“Climbin’ the tree to get apples,” he said as if he did this sort of thing all the time.

“But you don’t need to climb the tree to do that,” said Kylie. “There are plenty of apples within reach.” As if to prove her point she plucked a low hanging apple from the tree. “See? Apples.”

“The ones at the top of the tree are sweeter—more sunlight,” Mungo explained as he began to climb.

“Be careful,” Kylie warned as she stayed planted on the ground. That was the last thing she wanted to happen. Mungo was her guide to the Outback. If anything happened to him, she would be completely helpless. She had only recently come to understand just how harsh the Outback was. She had visions of him falling from the tree and hitting his head on a branch or a rock. She put those thoughts out of her mind. There was no sense in worrying.

She focused her camera on Mungo as he ascended the tree. It was at that moment that she realized that all of her shots to date had framed Mungo from the waist up. This shot however required that his whole body be in frame. She knew that to some extent she would need to edit his nudity for broadcasting. Yet framing him from the waist up seemed to be ignoring his nudity; acting as though he weren’t nude at all. That was not honest journalism. His nudity was part of his journey, and to ignore it was to ignore an important part of that journey. She resolved from then on to use more artistic vision in documenting his nudity.

Mungo climbed to the top of the tree, picked a few apples into the sarong, and climbed back down unharmed. Pulling out one of the apples he showed it to Kylie.

“See? A bit redder. It’s also a bit softer. These should be sweeter.”

They went back to the fire which was now burning nicely. Mungo took a sharp stick and skewered one of the apples. He held the apple over the fire.

“What are you DOING?” asked Kylie. After all the work he had done to get the apples, he was going to ruin them?

“Roastin’ them.”

“I...I didn’t know you could do that.” Kylie had never heard of roasting an apple. Was such a thing even possible?

“Sure, you can roast anythin’,” said Mungo. He added, “not everythin’ tastes good roasted...” This was a part of Mungo’s charm. Even when speaking seriously, he had this amazing sense of humor and wit about him at all time. It was that same wit that Kylie hoped to capture on camera. If she could capture just a fraction of his vivacious personality, her report would be a success.

Kylie steadied her camera and filmed the apple roasting. Chances were good that if she had never tried a roasted apple, her regular viewers probably hadn’t either. It was interesting to watch. Mungo held the apple over the flame; not in it. She had expected the skin to blacken, but instead it turned a darkly tanned brown.

“Here,” he said offering her the apple.

“Oh, that’s okay, you have it,” said Kylie. Truth be told, she was quite hungry. But he had done all the hard work in starting the fire, getting the apple, and roasting it. Then again she had found the tree...

“I insist.”

She took the apple. It was warm to the touch, but not hot. She took a bite. It was quite pleasant. The roasting had caused some of the sugars to caramelize. The apple had a warm and smoky flavor. It was evocative of the flavor of apple pie, despite the absence of cinnamon and other spices. “Mmmmmm.”

“Good, eh?”

“Very,” she said taking another bite. It was quite tasty.

“I’ll make another,” he said. He prepared another apple in the same fashion. This one he kept for himself. They sat around the fire eating apples and roasting them. Kylie found her own skewer, and gave roasting a try. She burned the first two, but after that she began to get the hang of it. It reminded her of roasting marshmallows over the barbeque. It was fun.

“So what do we do with the extras?” asked Kylie. They had picked more apples than they had eaten. Even though it was a simple meal, Kylie was quite full. They may not have been eating on her schedule, but she would certainly not go hungry. Though, in all fairness, she hoped tomorrow’s menu included some meat.

“Leave ‘em on the ground,” he suggested.

“Are you sure?” asked Kylie about to dump the apples onto the ground.

“We’ll share ‘em with our camp neighbors,” said Mungo. He could see a look of confusion on her face, “the birds.”

Kylie did as she was told and dumped the apples on the ground. The last little bit of sun was disappearing beyond the horizon. She wouldn’t be able to get any more shots tonight. That was okay, she had gotten plenty of footage today. “I think I’ll go to bed,” she announced. She wasn’t particularly tired, but she wanted to rest up for tomorrow’s trip.

“No massage?” asked Mungo.

“Hmmm, maybe tomorrow,” said Kylie. She didn’t want to be any more of a bother. He had really done a lot today. It would be better if he didn’t tire himself out anymore. “Good night Mungo,” she said as she climbed into the tent.

“See ya in the mornin’,” he said taking a seat next to the fire. He stirred the fire gently with a small stick and sat cross legged on the bare ground.

Once inside the tent, Kylie realized she had a small problem. In her haste to get rid of her clothing at Kurrajong, she had also gotten rid of her makeshift pillow. Her sarong was the only thing of any real use. She could either ball it up and use it as a pillow, or use it in place of a sheet. She decided to do the latter.

The problem was the sarong was simply too short. It was designed to be worn, not used as a sheet. As a result, she found it impossible to completely cover herself. She pulled the sarong up and over her shoulders, while her legs from the knee down were completely bare. 'Well, this is just great,' she thought sarcastically. 'How am I supposed to go to sleep like this?'

It was a rhetorical question, but it was answered quickly. Despite her concerns over her sleeping arrangements, she fell asleep quickly.

She awoke the next morning. Once again, she was covered in a cold sweat. She had had another nightmare; the same nightmare. She couldn't shake there had been someone in her nightmare watching her. She was awake, but still very afraid. Clutching the sarong to her breasts she sat up and said two words.

"Fisher's Creek."

The incident at Fisher's Creek had haunted Kylie for many, many years. When Kylie was nine years old she had gone down to Fisher's Creek with some friends. They had not planned to swim, and so they had not brought bathing suits. Yet the summer heat and the comfort of the water proved too tempting. Her friends went skinny dipping, and after finally getting over her fears, Kylie had joined them. It had been fun.

That was until some older boys had showed up. They came on their bikes; and the sound of their bike horns remained clearly etched in Kylie's memory. Hopping off their bikes they descended upon the unsuspecting swimmers.

They called her names; chubby, fat, ugly. They had called her friends names too. They shouted names back; mean, stupid, dumb. Kylie however said nothing. They boys had even threatened to take the girl's clothes.

Kylie remembered getting dressed in shame. Leaving her friends at the creek she had run home crying. Those horrible names haunted her for so many years. She had expected her mother to be sympathetic. She wasn't. She told Kylie that the whole thing had been her fault; that proper young ladies didn't go running around naked.

For years that memory had haunted her. For years she had lived under the belief that she indeed was fat and ugly. It had only been on assignment at the Koala Bares Resort that Kylie had finally made a breakthrough. Thanks to the help of Dr Geena and Mungo, Kylie had opted to go nude that day; and, indeed, many other days afterwards.

Fisher's Creek. She had dreamed about Fisher's Creek.

She sat up still clutching the sarong to her chest. After the nightmare she had just had, she felt a little bit ashamed of her nudity. She wished that she had not left her clothes back at the station. It was only a dream. Dreams couldn't hurt her. Could they? That was all in the past. Wasn't it?

As she held her sarong to her chest, she felt a slight pain. It wasn't a shooting pain; more of a soreness. Spending yesterday hiking without a bra had left her a bit sore. Her breasts weren't swollen, but there was a muscular soreness that persisted. Perhaps she would wear her bra for support today.

This had never really been a problem for her in the past. This was probably because she spent most of the time wearing a bra. Sure, she would go nude at home in

the evening, and at the Koala Bares. But those were far less strenuous activities; spending time on her couch, or on a sun chair, or in the pool. It did not put the same strain on her breasts as yesterday's hike had.

Yet that didn't seem to be in keeping with the theme of the walkabout. Mungo had been nude the entire duration, so couldn't she do the same for a few days? It was, after all, only going to be a few days. Wasn't it?

Kylie wondered how people managed in the times before clothes; how women managed before the invention of corsets and bras. Did they go around with sore breasts all the time? That didn't seem likely. Maybe the soreness was like starting up jogging for the first time? You would probably be sore for a few days, but after repeated activity, the soreness would subside.

She decided that she could go without her bra for today. But could she go without clothing at all? After the dream she had? That seemed much scarier.

She had to summon all her courage to not wrap the sarong around her body. Mungo. Mungo would help her put this in perspective. After all, if anyone else knew about Fisher's creek, it was Mungo.

She climbed out of the tent. Mungo was already awake and covering up the remnants of last night's fire pit. There were several small birds picking at the discarded apples from last evening's dinner. Mungo took one look at Kylie and could tell something was wrong. "You okay?"

"I...I had a nightmare," she admitted. "I'm still a bit shaken up by the whole thing."

"Wanna talk about it?" asked Mungo.

"I dreamed about Fisher's Creek," she blurted out. She was surprised how easily the words came out of her mouth.

"Oh..." Mungo replied. Kylie was not sure how much Mungo knew about the Fisher's Creek incident. Everything he claimed to know, he also claimed to have learned from a bird, which isn't the easiest thing to believe. Still, Kylie had to believe that he had a generally accurate perception of the event, even if he didn't know all the details.

"It just brought back a lot of bad memories," Kylie confessed. "I know I'm not fat and ugly, but there's still a part of me that's a bit hung up on that whole thing. It just...it didn't make me feel good...that's all."

"No worries," he said reassuringly. "It's just a dream. There ain't nothin' to be scared about..." His voice cut off.

"What? What were you going to say?" asked Kylie seeing that there was something more he wanted to say.

"This is part of the walkabout," he explained. "it...it shows ya things. They may not be things ya WANT to see, but they're things ya NEED to see. They'll help ya on yer journey."

"Wait, what?" asked Kylie. "You mean I was somehow supposed to dream about Fisher's Creek? That waking up terrified is supposed to help me?"

"Can't say for sure. Yer visions may come to ya in dreams, or they may come to ya while yer awake. But you'll have visions," he said that with certainty.

So what was the point of these visions? Why did she see Fisher's Creek in her dreams? What did it all mean? That she was fat? That she was ugly? If that's what these visions meant, she didn't want any part of it. "Mungo, this all sounds like a lot of

mumbo jumbo.”

Her words sounded spiteful. This is what he honestly believed, and she had just dismissed it as ‘mumbo jumbo.’ “I’m sorry,” she said apologizing. “I’m just still a bit on edge after my nightmare.” She tried to take the conversation in a different direction. “So have you had any visions yet?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted. “Not yet. Not yet.” There was a sense of lament in his voice. It was as though he wanted a vision, and was disappointed that one had not appeared. “We oughta get goin’. We’ll have breakfast later. Pack up yer things.”

He seemed to be in a bit of a hurry. He quickly went to work collapsing the tent. Was he mad at her? Kylie couldn’t really tell. Truth be told, she had never seen Mungo mad; he was usually so genial. She felt bad for snapping at him earlier.

“Ya ready?” he asked, calling attention to the fact that he was packed and ready to go, and she still needed to pack.

“Just give me a second.” She began to pack her things. Actually, there was remarkably little to pack. She had packed up her camera the night before, so all she needed to pack was her toiletries. She quickly gathered them up and put them in her pack. This just left her sarong. Kylie held it tightly in her fist. Should she pack it away? After the dream she just had, she wasn’t as keen to go nude as she had been the previous day. Reliving Fisher’s Creek, even in a dream, made her want to wear her sarong. She stood there in a moment of indecision.

“Kylie?”

“Yes?”

“There ain’t no reason for ya to worry about yer appearance. You ain’t fat. You ain’t ugly. Yer beautiful.”

“...Thanks.” It was a sobering compliment to get. She may not have been fat, and she may not have been ugly, but she was not beautiful. She was not beautiful. Though she did not agree with him, she did not decline his compliment. She slipped her sarong into a pocket of her pack. She could see him giving her a supportive smile.

“Let’s go then...”

## **Chapter 9: Birds and Snakes**

“Actually, I want to get a few more shots of the campsite,” said Kylie. She took out the Scout and panned over the campsite, she then panned over to Mungo, who didn’t feel like saying anything that moment. She then held the camera away at arms length and tried to center the frame on her face. “It’s day...four?” That was right. It had been their third night, and fourth day of the walkabout. “We haven’t seen another person since we left the cattle station...” She wanted to provide some narration for when she went back to edit the video. Without context, she might lose track of the order of events once pieces of footage hit the cutting room floor. Still she wasn’t happy with her take. Her dialogue felt forced and stilted. Granted, this sort of footage was unlikely to make the final cut, but it just wasn’t up to her standards of quality. Why was she having such a hard time creating organic sounding dialogue?

“Whatcha doin’?” asked Mungo.

“Just making a few notes,” said Kylie. “I want to leave a few segments where I

can remind myself of things that I might forget later. It makes the editing process easier,” she explained.

“Ain’t what it looks like to me,” said Mungo.

“Then what does it look like?”

“Looks like yer tryin’ to tell your story. And it looks like ya could use some help.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Kylie. “It’s YOUR story I want to tell,” replied Kylie.

“People don’t know Mungo. But people know Kylie Burns. I’m sure your fans would wanna see ya.” He had a point. “This is just as much your story as it is mine. And I can help ya tell it.”

Kylie wanted to tell Mungo that she really didn’t feel like telling her story right now. But she didn’t want to be rude. “How can you help me?”

“I’ll hold the camera for ya. It’ll be easier that way,” Mungo offered.

For Kylie, this was too good of an opportunity to pass up. It wasn’t that she was eager to appear on camera. Rather, Mungo lived a life that was not reliant on technology. At the very least, it would be fun to see him out of his natural element, and behind the lens of a modern video camera. “Okay,” said Kylie handing over the camera. “It’s pretty simple to use. You look through this eyepiece here. This button starts the tape, and this button stops it.” She was about to tell Mungo about the various zoom and focus options, but decided to keep it simple. “Have you got all that?”

“I think so,” he said with giddy excitement. He was like a little kid pretending as though he had a telescope and was in search of adventure. It brought a warm smile to Kylie’s face. “Ready, Kylie?”

“Hold on a second,” said Kylie as she went to her pack. She brought out her sarong, and was about to put it on for the shot. But she paused. Could she appear nude on camera? She had not considered this before, but now that the idea was in her head, it would not be dismissed so easily.

One of the founding tenets of advertising is the idea that sex sells products. It would be remarkably easy to market this documentary on her nudity alone. There would definitely be an audience who would tune in to see Kylie Burns nude. But they were most definitely NOT her target audience. She was a classy lady, and would not do anything to demean herself (or Mungo for that matter). She was in the business of producing art, and not smut.

But there were artistic merits to appearing nude on film. She had resolved the night before, that if she were to properly document Mungo’s story, she would need to boldly document his nudity. His nakedness was an integral part of his story, an integral part of who he was. So, for that matter, wasn’t her nudity just as much a part of her story. After all, she had hiked nude the entire day yesterday, and had sore breasts to prove it. Wasn’t it a bit disingenuous to not at least incorporate it into her story?

She set her sarong back down with her pack. “I… I’m ready Mungo,” she said as she turned to face him; to face the camera.

Mungo could hear the hesitation in her voice. He could see the hesitation in her eyes. “Ya sure? Ya don’t have to do this, y’ know.”

Kylie appreciated him being so respectful. But right now, she didn’t want to be talked out of this. This was something she needed to do. “Take the shot,” she said her

voice dropping to almost a whisper. She then added, “nothing below the belly button.” Aside from people at the Koala Bares, no one knew that Kylie Burns was not a natural blonde. And she intended to keep it that way.

A small green light flicked on, and this was Kylie’s cue.

“It’s been less than 24 hours since I have had a hot meal, and less than 48 since I had a hot shower, and yet it seems much longer than that. I’m starting to appreciate everything I had back home. It’s not just my kitchen, and my bed, and my bathroom. I miss the little things. It is difficult to greet the day without my morning cup of coffee. I have to wonder if the extra ounces of weight in my pack would have been worth it if it meant being able to bring some instant coffee.

“Yet as I contemplate extra ounces in my pack, I am reminded of a dull ache in my shoulders. Could I carry more? Yes I could. Is my carrying my existing load work enough? Yes it is. My muscles consistently experience a dull soreness. The hiking is difficult, but getting started in the morning is even more difficult.

“We have not seen any one since we left the ranch. And I doubt we will until our return trip home. If left to my own, the solitude would be maddening.

“Yet I am not alone. I have a fantastic guide to the Outback. He has been nothing if not considerate. Each night he builds a campfire. Each meal, he provides food from the landscape itself. He has gone so far as to pack a tent for my own personal use; and yet he sleeps on bare ground. It is as though he is most at home in the Outback. And if this is his home, then he is a great host.”

She was about to ask Mungo to stop the tape, when she realized that there was something she had neglected.

“You may be wondering why I am nude. My guide, Mungo, has insisted on doing his walkabout entirely in the nude. With the last signs of the civilized world behind us, I have decided to leave my clothes behind as well. The old saying goes, “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” It is a good saying. But there are no Romans here. This is the Outback. There are no roads.”

The dialogue flowed naturally. It wasn’t especially profound. But it rang true to any would be bush walker. The going was most certainly not easy. She missed the comforts of home, and yet she wanted to see what lay ahead. Mungo’s story was not over, and neither, for that matter, was hers.

“Okay, cut,” she said drawing her hand in front of her neck.

“Cut what?” asked Mungo a bit confused.

Mungo’s naivety was a bit comical. Did he watch TV or movies at all? Surely everyone knew what ‘cut’ meant? “It means turn the recorder off,” she said.

Mungo hit the stop button. “So why say ‘cut?’ Why not just say ‘stop?’”

“In the old days of filming, they would literally cut the film reel each time they needed to stop. Each of the various cut pieces of film made up the individual ‘takes.’ They would take these smaller film strips together and ‘splice’ them into a longer film,” Kylie explained.

“Cut. Takes. Splice. How do ya keep track of all this stuff?” asked Mungo.

“You get used to it pretty quickly,” said Kylie. “Actually I think it’s a whole lot more impressive how you know the names off all these animals and plants. How exactly do you do that?”

“I’m just a really good listener,” said Mungo.

“You listen to plants?” asked Kylie.

Mungo shrugged. “Ya get used to it pretty quickly. Let’s have some breakfast.” Breakfast that morning was apples, this time unroasted. They were tart, but not bitter. Kylie was beginning to understand that distinction.

As they munched their apples, Kylie spoke between bites. “So what did you think?”

“About what?”

“My on camera segment,” said Kylie. “You know, my ‘story.’”

“It was good,” said Mungo pausing to chew a bite of apple. “If ya want, I can hold the camera again.” There was an excitement to his voice. Kylie suspected that Mungo enjoyed using the camera, though she doubted he would ever openly admit liking any piece of modern technology.

“Yeah. That would help. I don’t know. There’s something about being in front of the camera that puts me in my element.” There was a note of sadness in her voice. Her future in front of the news camera was uncertain.

“Yer a natural storyteller,” said Mungo.

“Well, yeah... I’ve been a newscaster for many years.” It felt odd to bring up her job at such a time of uncertainty in her life.

“It’s more than that,” said Mungo. “Yer a storyteller. Yer still findin’ your voice to tell your story. But yer a storyteller all the same. There’s far too few proper storytellers left these days.”

What was Mungo talking about? To Kylie’s knowledge there was no shortage of artists. Yet she felt honored to be grouped among ‘the storytellers.’ Given the company Mungo kept, this could only be a compliment.

They finished their breakfast and got ready to hike. This meant applying their own version of sunblock; lotion for Kylie, ashes for Mungo. When they left their campsite that morning, it was full of birds that were more than happy to pick through the remains of last night’s dinner and that morning’s breakfast.

As they hiked out that morning, Mungo was full of energy. He made a point of pointing out each bird he saw and telling Kylie its name and how to recognize it by feathers or by song. The names he used were hardly scientific. For that matter, the names were hardly even English. Kylie was unsure of whether or not to film this, so she ended up taking a lot of shots. It was interesting information, but it didn’t really fit with her project.

“Look, Mungo, I hope you don’t mind, but I’m not really interested in producing a documentary about bird watching.” She hoped that she had not hurt his feelings.

“I ain’t teachin’ ya bird watchin’. I’m teachin’ ya somethin’ more important.”

“Which is?”

“How to talk to the animals.”

“Mungo, people can’t talk to animals,” protested Kylie. Sure, she had enjoyed the story of Dr. Doolittle as a child, but that was a work of fiction. People could not talk to animals.

“But I can talk to the animals,” said Mungo. “And you can too, if ya listen up .”

“But how does knowing the songs and names of birds translate to being able to talk to animals?” asked Kylie. She didn’t exactly follow that logic.

“They won’t wanna talk to ya if you can’t remember their name,” answered

Mungo. That was perfect Mungo logic. Even if it made sense to no one else, it made sense to him. And that was all that really mattered. Kylie endeavored to be a more attentive student from then on.

As they hiked, they took turns with the camera. Granted, Kylie was taking most of the shots. This was, after all, her project. Yet she let Mungo get a few more shots of her to help provide context. He seemed happy behind the camera. If he kept this up, she just might have to get Mungo his own camera as a birthday gift.

It occurred to Kylie that despite being friends with Mungo, she still did not know when his birthday was. He had known about her birthday, after all, but she didn't know when his birthday was. Well, that wasn't EXACTLY true. He had given her a necklace on the day of her birthday, but he had never said it was a "birthday present." Still, the point remained. Mungo was her friend, and she didn't even know his birthday. For that matter, she didn't even know how old he was. Still, she felt funny about asking. She would have to get that information from Loxie, Zoot, Fred, or Herb, or someone who had known Mungo for a bit longer.

During their hike, they came across something a bit unexpected. "Hey Mungo, look at this," said Kylie pointing to a section of ground just a bit ahead of them. "Is this...is this a path?" she asked. There were stones that seemed to be laid out in a pathway. "Who could have built this?" she wondered aloud. "Do you suppose there was some sort of ancient village nearby?" she asked excitedly.

"Maybe. But this ain't a path."

"It's not?" Kylie said disappointedly. "Then what is it?"

"I think ya can figure it out," said Mungo.

"How?" asked Kylie. "It looks like a path to me."

"Look closer," Mungo suggested.

It looked like a path to her. But for Mungo's sake she took a longer look. It still looked like a path. But there was something different about this path. It seemed to wander, bending frequently. If people had used this as a walkway, it would have been a bit inefficient. It should have been made straighter. So why was it bending like that.

"A...creek?" Kylie mumbled to herself. "This is a creek?" Mungo nodded. "It's a creek!" Kylie said happily. She had figured it out, with only a little help.

"How'd ya figure it out," said Mungo.

"From all the twists and turns," said Kylie. "A path wouldn't need all those bends. A path would be straight."

Mungo nodded. "Good. Very smart. Ya can also tell by the rocks," he said picking up a few of the rocks. "See how they're polished. The water does that," he held the rock up so Kylie could see.

"So where's the water now?" asked Kylie.

"It's the dry season," said Mungo. "Lemme see." He bent down and started moving some of the rocks. Below them were more rocks, and below them were even more rocks. "Here," he said handing her one of the rocks he dug up.

"I don't get it, it's just a rock," said Kylie.

"Take another look. What's different about it?"

"It's cool," answered Kylie. That wasn't all. "It's...damp? Now how is that possible?"

"The water's just below the ground. A good soakin' rain and this'll be a creek

again.”

“So you could get water by digging?” asked Kylie.

“Well...yeah,” said Mungo. “But you’d have to dig pretty deep. Ya could get water that way, but there are easier ways. Morning dew on leaves is easier to collect. Ya waste less energy that way.”

They left the creek bed and kept hiking. Kylie took a few more shots along the way. Before too much longer, they had arrived at their campsite for the evening. Kylie was happy to have left the dry creek bed behind them, because their new campsite had running water.

“I’m going to have a quick soak,” said Kylie. She was disappointed to find that this creek did not exactly permit ‘soaking.’ The creek was only 10cm deep, 20cm in the deepest spots. Kylie had to settle for sitting instead of soaking. She cupped her hands and used them to pour water over herself. She was able to get herself clean, but that was about it.

When she got back to the main campsite, she found that Mungo already had the tent set up. “Mungo, you didn’t have to do that. I would have helped.” She felt bad about not offering to help.

“Ain’t no trouble,” he said. He was quite busy with something. He was filing down a stick with a knife. The blade of the knife appeared to be made of rock and not steel. He was filing the end of the stick into a sharp point. It looked like... a spear?

“What’s that?” asked Kylie already convinced she knew the answer.

“It’s for huntin’,” said Mungo. So Kylie had been right after all. “We’ll have meat for dinner tonight.”

Kylie was awash with emotions. She had never been hunting, and didn’t much care for people who owned firearms. Yet at the same time, they word ‘meat’ swayed something primal within her. Perhaps she was only thinking with her stomach, or perhaps the walkabout was starting to sway her mind. She could not be sure. But on a professional note, she wanted to show this to her viewers. “Let me film it.”

“Get yer camera.”

As she got her camera, Kylie began to assess the situation a bit more. Mungo was going hunting. He also intended to kill his prey with a makeshift spear and not a knife. At the very least, this meant that whatever he was after, he wanted to keep at more than an arms length away. That thought was a bit frightening. Kylie knew that Mungo would never put her in harms way. But did she know enough about the Outback to know how and when to keep herself out of danger?

As Kylie was about to find out, snake was on the menu. That’s snake, not steak, though the two words sounded quite similar, there was a world of difference separating them.

Mungo speared a snake that had been sunning on a rock, clean through the head. Kylie had captured the whole thing on camera.

“Ewww! Gross!” She frowned. She had not meant to say that aloud. She would need to edit that out of the finished product. If anything, that had been a knee-jerk reaction. The snake had died instantly. Mungo had performed the killing stroke with surgical precision. And while it seemed gruesome to Kylie, it was probably more humane; relatively quick and painless. For that matter, who was to say that the cuts of meat in her fridge had been treated more humanely? Eating meat, being a carnivore (or

at least an omnivore who is partial to meat) was built on endless cycle of predator and prey. The outback served as a reminder to city dwellers that tended to forget this fact.

The snake was a black-headed python. Even though Kylie was no herpetologist, the markings were clear as day. There was no missing that prominent black head, even if the head had been speared through.

“It ain’t poisonous,” said Mungo. Kylie already knew that. People kept black-headed pythons as pets. Still it was a bit odd to see one in its native habitat.

“Can you eat a poisonous snake?” asked Kylie. She was curious, but didn’t want to suggest they go and look for one.

“All the venom’s in the head,” said Mungo. “Cut off the head, and it’s probably safe. Still, ya need to clean the meat well. Ya need to know what you’re doin’.”

“Have you ever been bitten by a poisonous snake?” asked Kylie.

“Once,” said Mungo pointing to a scar on his heel. In all their days of hiking, Kylie had not noticed this scar. It had healed well, but if she looked close enough, she could see it. “That won’t happen again. I’ve been much better about listenin’ for snakes. Most snakes are scared of humans. We’re too big to eat, so they only strike when they feel threatened.”

Kylie shuddered. This talk of poisonous snakes made her nervous. She would be happy if she went the whole trip without seeing one of their ilk.

Before they could cook the animal, it needed to be cleaned first. Mungo took the carcass well outside the boundaries of their campsite. He had explained that the smell from the entrails would attract other animals. That too made Kylie nervous.

He flayed the animal open using his stone knife, and removed the vital organs. It was similar to cleaning a fish. The digestive tract of the snake was unpalatable, and had to be removed. As she filmed the cleaning, Kylie could feel her stomach begin to turn. She had to restrain herself to keep from vomiting. When he had finished cleaning the snake, it was little more than a length of sinewy muscle held together by a scaly skin.

They took the snake back to the campsite. Mungo kindled a fire, and filed a smaller skewer to cook the snake meat on. Kylie filmed as he held the meat over the fire. It crackled and hissed and let off an appetizing aroma. When did the transition from snake to meat occur? It was hard to be sure, but the smells from the cooking fire indicated that meat was on the way.

“Here, try a piece,” said Mungo offering her the skewer after the meat had cooled.

Kylie gingerly tore off a piece and took a bite. It was chewy, almost like a jerky. The flavor wasn’t bad. Snake kind of tasted like chicken. Kylie remembered from the movie Jurassic Park that modern birds presumably evolved from dinosaurs. If that were true, wouldn’t it be more accurate to say that chicken tasted like reptile?

They shared pieces of snake over the fire, and Mungo foraged seeds from a plant he called ‘Burrawang’ to supplement their meal. The protein content had left Kylie feeling a bit more satisfied than their meal of apples from the previous evening.

They stayed up a few hours after sunset talking around the campfire. Kylie told him stories from working for Channel 5, and some of the more outrageous stories she had been sent to report on. Mungo talked about his travels, and all the animals he had seen. He did not mention if those travels had all been walkabouts. And Kylie did not ask. She did not want to interrupt his storytelling. After hours of talking, Kylie finally announced that she was ready for bed, and she went back to her tent.

Exhaustion quickly took over. She slept deeply. And once again, she dreamt of Fisher's Creek.

She awoke the next morning able to recall the dream a bit better. She needed no reminder of how the event had transpired. She had lived with guilt over it for many years. There was no need to go down that road again.

Yet in her dream, she was a spectator. She would see young Kylie forced to endure the insults hurled at her by rude boys, yet she was merely an observer. This dream was being 'shown' to her. But she could do nothing to change the events of the dream. She was powerless to do anything. It was disconcerting to see the incident from both the first and third person; in the first person as the younger Kylie and in the third as an impartial observer. This split of perspectives was troubling. She never had dreams this vivid at home. So why would she have them here?

There were other details she struggled to recall. Once again, she woke up covered in sweat. In the dream, she could remember that she had been hot, but not why. She had also sensed some unseen presence in her dream; as though someone had been watching. She couldn't tell if this should upset her or not. The dream had been plenty upsetting already.

As she sat up, she winced. Her breasts were even sorer today. So too were her legs. She was considering wearing her bra on today's hike. She would probably look ridiculous wearing only a bra to go with her hat and sunglasses. But who would see?

## **Chapter 10: At the Crossroads**

In the end, she decided to wear just her hat and sunglasses. After all, Mungo had brought nothing to cover himself for the entire trip. Granted, he did not have to deal with sore breasts. But if he could go nude the whole trip (and perhaps even his entire life) then she could certainly go a few more days.

She got out of the tent and found Mungo eating some of the snake the previous evening. It made for a strange breakfast to say the least. "It won't do us any good to let this go to waste. Have some," he said offering her a piece.

"I usually have cereal or toast, but why not?" she joked. After all, how many times in her life would she have the opportunity to have snake for breakfast. The meat was cold, and not nearly as tasty as it had been the night before. Still it was good protein, and Mungo was right, there was no sense in letting it go to waste.

"You're a bit quiet today," he noted.

At this point, Mungo could read her like an open book. It was a shame that this did not go both ways. So much of his life still remained a mystery to Kylie. "I had another dream. No, wait, it was the same dream. I just remember it more vividly."

"Fisher's Creek?"

"Yes?"

"Have ya worked out its meanin'?" asked Mungo.

Worked out its meaning? What did he mean by that? For that matter, what did the dream mean? That she was fat? That she was ugly? That she had been right to keep her body covered before. Those seemed to be the obvious conclusions that the dream was pointing towards. "No."

“I’m sure ya will,” he said confident in her ability to resolve her nightmares.

“Let me get a couple more shots of the campsite.” Kylie took out her camera and panned across the landscape. After about a half a minute, the tape ground to a halt.

“What the hell?” she said as she opened the casing. She found her answer. She was out of tape.

“Is it okay?” asked Mungo.

“Out of tape,” said Kylie. “It’s okay. I’ve got more.” She produced another tape from her pack and swapped the old tape for the new one. From a logistical standpoint, her documentary was 1/3 of the way over. She had used one tape up entirely, and had only two more to go. Had she really shot 6 hours of footage already?

“Yeah, let’s go,” she said.

Mungo quickly took down the tent, and they were off. The journey was tougher than it had been in previous days. The grade was steeper. On most days, Kylie had found that her muscle pains would subside after hiking for a while. Today, they were more prominent. Her thighs burned with the buildup of lactic acid that came with the uphill climb. The only good thing about the soreness in her legs, was that it made it easier to ignore the soreness in her breasts.

Once again, Mungo talked to her about the critters that called the Australian outback home. He pointed out the goanna and other lizards that were sunning on the rocks. Yet he also talked again about the birds. In fact, he was covering many of the same species he had the other day. When Kylie asked why he had such an affinity for birds over all other forms of life, he answered that “birds make for the best conversation.” That was Mungo for you.

Again, they took turns taking shots with the video camera. Once again, Kylie took most of the footage, but she let Mungo have his turn. This only seemed to confirm her suspicion that Mungo secretly enjoyed using the video camera. As he was taking one of his shots, he suddenly uttered, “Whoops!”

“What? What is it? What’s wrong?” asked Kylie a bit concerned.

“I..I think I broke it.” He sounded crestfallen, and he wore an apologetic look on his face. “I was just usin’ it like you showed me, and suddenly it stopped workin’. I’m really sorry.” He handed the camera to Kylie.

Kylie tried to be calm as she took the camera from Mungo. She hit the power button. A telltale red light flashed, and the camera went dark. “You didn’t break it. It just needs a new battery.”

“Oh, that’s good,” said a relieved Mungo.

Kylie was less relieved. Sure the camera was in working order, but now she had to deal with the fact that she had only one good battery. Her documentary was more than a third over; it was half over! She had expected more life from that first battery. After all, she had shot barely more than six hours of footage, and the battery was supposed to give nine hours of charge.

Kylie was a bit worried by this development. Was her trip half over as well? That would make her lack of battery power less inconvenient. She doubted that was the case. From now on she would need to be a bit more conservative with her shots.

“I only have one battery left. So we’ll need to pace ourselves when using the camera.”

Mungo agreed but seemed disappointed that this development would probably

limit his time with the camera. They kept hiking, and finally came to the crest of the hill. Kylie was relieved that the trip would start heading downhill. But the relief was only slight. Now instead of the front of her legs being sore, it would be the back of them.

As she looked out over the landscape, there was a prominent feature that caught her eye. “A road?” It wasn’t like the creek bed from yesterday’s hike. There marking the landscape was a dirt road that seemed to connect two distant points on the horizon. “That’s a road,” she said.

“So it is,” agreed Mungo.

“But I thought you said there are some places that roads won’t take you.”

“I did,” he agreed.

“So what do you have to say about that road?” asked Kylie.

“That road... won’t take us to where we need to go.”

“But we could have had Zoot bring us out here instead, and that would have saved a few days of hiking,” protested Kylie.

“But then you wouldn’t have met Lars, and I wouldn’t have seen me old friend.” He had a point. Their trip had no finite destination. This was about the voyage; not about getting from point A to point B in the shortest time possible.

“So we’ll be crossing that road?” asked Kylie.

“Yeah.”

“Hold on a minute then.” She got her clothes out of her pack; her bra, panties, and sarong and put the items on in that order. She would go nude where it was appropriate, and right now it did not feel appropriate. Granted this stretch of road seemed entirely deserted. But in her mind, she imagined a lone car stopping in that exact location at the same time they decided to cross. The thought of being caught nude by motorists was real enough, that she did not want to take any chances.

Mungo said nothing.

So they continued hiking. They hiked down from the hill, and before too much longer came to the road. Mungo stopped and paused. He seemed deep in thought and did not cross the road immediately.

“Yes?” asked Kylie prompting him to share his thoughts with her.

“What we do at the crossroads defines us,” he said sharing a very profound thought.

“That was good. Let me get it on tape,” said Kylie. Sure she needed to conserve tape, but the idea of shooting Mungo crossing this road seemed like an artistic juxtaposition of the wilderness being interrupted by the modern world.

Mungo dutifully repeated his line for the camera. To say he was improving as an ‘actor’ would not be accurate. He wasn’t acting at all. But he was getting better about intuitively knowing what Kylie thought made for good footage.

She turned the lens to the ‘wide angle’ mode and got an impressive panoramic shot as Mungo crossed the road to the other side. He paused and waited for her to cross.

But Kylie was deep in thought. ‘What we do at the crossroads defines us.’ It was a though Mungo knew all the details about the crossroads she had come to in her career. If this moment was going to define her, then she would make it count.

“Can you get a shot of me crossing the road,” she said as she crossed over to Mungo’s side and gave him the camera. She then crossed back to the other side so Mungo could get the shot.

Once back on her side of the road, Kylie removed her sarong and undergarments. They had neither seen nor heard any cars on their descent. If this crossing would define her as a person, then she would do it nude, just as Mungo had.

“Ready Mungo?” she asked.

“Hold on,” he said frowning. “There’s somethin’ here.”

“It’s in wide angle mode,” said Kylie. “It lets you get more in frame.”

“Didn’t know it could do that,” said Mungo. His eyes sparkled with wonderment and delight. If he wanted, Kylie would show him some of the camera’s more advanced features. She had trained him in the most basic use to keep the training simple. “There’s one problem...,” said Mungo.

“Which is?”

“I can’t shoot ya from the belly up. Yer too close.”

“I know,” she replied.

“So what should I do?”

“Take the shot.” It was an incredibly personal shot. And though it would likely wind up on her cutting room floor, she wanted to document this as faithfully as possible. Mungo hit the record button, and Kylie made her crossing. Her heart was beating out of her chest with nervousness.

“You okay?” asked Mungo who picked up on her nervousness.

“That...that wasn’t easy for me to do...” Kylie muttered. That was true. She had come along way since her first trip to the Koala Bares, but the last few shards of body consciousness ran deep.

“I know,” said Mungo who smiled deeply. “Let’s keep movin’” Kylie agreed that it sounded like a good plan.

They kept moving, and not long after, they arrived at their campsite for the evening. It was a good place to pitch a tent, and the vegetation was lush. But there was no water source. She would have no ‘soak’ that evening either.

Mungo was about to set up the tent, when Kylie said, “let me help you.”

“Nah. Yer me guest. I wouldn’t feel right about it.”

“Let me help you,” Kylie said more assertively. Mungo protested that he wouldn’t feel right about it. But Kylie was insistent. And so she helped him set up the tent. She assemble some of the beams, and helped him hook the canvas to the frame. Between the two of them they got the tent set up even quicker than Mungo had by himself.

“I’ll get the campfire goin’,” Mungo suggested.

“Actually, I’d like to give it a try,” said Kylie.

“Ya sure?” asked Mungo.

“Yes.” After her time at ‘the crossroads’ Kylie had made a personal decision; to contribute more actively to the walkabout. She would not hang around his neck like an albatross. She would be more than a guest. She would be a contributor.

Mungo produced his bow and drill. “First thing, ya need to gather up dried grass and kindlin’. Once ya get a coal, you’ll wanna have everythin’ ready to build yer fire.” So they searched the campsite and found everything they needed.

“Pile the grass into a small bed for the coal,” Mungo instructed. “Don’t pack it too tight. The fire needs to breathe. If ya pack it too tight, it won’t get any air.”

Kylie did as she was told.

Mungo then showed her how to set the drill bit into the board, and how to wrap the bowstring around the drill. “Draw the bow back and forth. Find a good rhythm. Ya don’t wanna press hard or go fast at the beginnin’. Ya first need to build up some sawdust. That’ll be the fuel ya need for the coal.”

“Like this?” asked Kylie as she drew the bow from side to side.

“Kind of. Yer speed is good, but ya press a little harder,” said Mungo as he critiqued her technique.

Kylie did as Mungo instructed. Her arms began to get tired. “How much longer?” she asked.

Mungo removed the drill bit. There was only a miniscule amount of sawdust where the drill had been. “Ya need to do it longer than that,” said Mungo.

Kylie was disappointed to hear that. Her arm was sore from fatigue. Just how much longer did she need to keep this up?

“I’ve got a flint to strike, if ya like,” offered Mungo.

“Is that easier?” asked Kylie.

“Nah. Not really,” said Mungo. “It’s easier to make sparks with a flint, than a coal with a drill. But it’s much harder to start a fire with just sparks. A coal really is better.”

Kylie went back to the bow and drill.

“I’ll go find us some food,” said Mungo as he got up to leave Kylie to her task.

“Okay, but one of these nights I want to help with dinner,” said Kylie.

“Oh you will,” said Mungo reassuringly. “You will…” He gave her a knowing wink, and went off in search of food. Kylie continued to work the drill and bow. Her arms were exhausted.

Later Mungo returned with an armful of fruit. “Let’s see how yer doin’,” he said. He looked at the sawdust she had amassed. “Good. That will make a good coal. Now comes the hard part.”

The hard part?

“Ya need to press hard and saw fast to ignite the coal,” said Mungo. Kylie began to increase her speed and pressure. The pain in her arms went from a dull soreness to a prominent fatigue. “Harder…faster,” said Mungo. How much harder and faster could she go? At the point when Kylie was about to give up mentally, a small puff of smoke came out of the firing board.

“Good. That’s a beaut coal,” said Mungo inspecting her work. The pressure and friction had worked the sawdust into a small coal. “The next part can be tricky. Gently transfer the coal to the nest of grass.”

Kylie did this as gently as possible. She was not about to lose all her hard work to clumsiness. She gently poured the coal into the center of the nest.

“Blow on it gently. The coal needs air. Don’t blow too hard or you’ll put it out.” Kylie did this step just as carefully as she had transferred the coal. With a few minutes of gentle blowing the dried grass caught fire in a small blaze.

“Excellent!” said Mungo clapping his hands together. “Now use the firewood. Start with the smallest twigs, and build the fire larger and larger until yer usin’ the largest pieces.” This step proved to be a bit easier. Kylie had built many fires in her fireplace at home. She built the fire up until she had an impressive campfire.

“Very good,” commended Mungo. He was right. It was a good campfire.

It seemed like a small victory, but that made it no less enjoyable. In an era of strike-anywhere matches, lighters, and fire starters made of compressed sawdust and gelled petroleum, Kylie had produced fire using little more than sticks. She was proud. Building the fire had not been easy, but she had done it. She now felt capable of conquering any challenge that lay before them. Little did she know what lay before them would be tougher still...

By the light of their campfire, by the light of her fire, they ate their dinner of berries and fruits that Mungo had collected. The dinner that evening was a quieter affair than it had been the night before. This was mostly because Kylie was more tired, and she was usually the one who initiated most of the conversation. That evening Kylie gained a newfound appreciation for Mungo. Helping to pitch the tent, and building the fire by herself had been physically exhausting. Yet every night so far Mungo had set up the tent, made the fire, AND found food without ever complaining of being tired.

“I think I’m going to bed,” Kylie announced after dinner.

“Already?” asked Mungo. The sun had just barely set.

“Yeah. I’m really tired, and I need to get my beauty sleep. Good night Mungo.”

“See ya in the mornin’.”

Kylie went to bed that night with a feeling of accomplishment. As her head hit the canvas of the tent, Kylie hoped she would have dreams that evening that did not involve Fisher’s Creek. She hoped this in vain.

That night she recalled the dream with a clarity that had exceeded the previous nights. The event at Fisher’s Creek played out for her yet again. It had been the same dream every night since they had started their walkabout. Kylie was now sure of this as fact.

She was forced to take part in the scene as a younger version of herself. And she was forced to watch without being able to interact, without being able to change events, as ‘older Kylie.’ In her dream ‘older Kylie’ was dressed as a news reporter, which seemed an especially cruel given the recent loss of her job.

Her clothes were hot and uncomfortable. Yet she was unable to remove them. Or, rather, each time she removed an article of clothing a replacement article would take its place. She yearned to be free of her clothes, yet in her dream they imprisoned her. They were hot and oppressive.

When she awoke, she understood her sweatiness in the morning as a psychosomatic reaction to the stress in her dream.

## **Chapter 11: An Unseasonably Hot Day**

Hot.

That was the first thing that Kylie thought of when she awoke that morning; it was hot—too hot! Once again, she awoke in a cold sweat from her all too familiar Fisher’s Creek nightmare. The sweat quickly evaporated in the heat, which in turn brought on more sweat in an effort to cool her core body temperature. The sun had only been up for a short while, and already she was sweating. It was going to be a sweaty day.

Kylie wished they had camped near a source of water. She hated to feel sweaty; and hated the smell that went with it equally. Even if their source of water was little

more than a puddle, she could still manage to get cleaned off a bit. Alas, there was no water in sight. She would have to wait until later on in the day, or when they reached their campsite that evening.

She was getting awfully sick of having the same damn dream night after night after night. So understandably, she woke up ‘on the wrong side of the bed,’ or on the wrong side of the tent, as it were.

As she climbed out of the tent, Mungo was there to greet her. “Mornin’!” He sounded cheerful, which did nothing to improve Kylie’s mood.

“Morning,” she grumbled.

“Didn’t sleep well?” It was a question that didn’t need asking. She hadn’t slept well any night so far.

“I had that same dream again,” she said. “This time, I had to watch the whole thing, like I was some sort of spectator. I was wearing clothes I would wear on a news report. They were hot, and itchy, and confining. But when I tried to take them off, I couldn’t. If I took off my jacket, another one would appear and take its place. It was...it was just awful...”

Kylie had recalled this particular detail of her dream a few nights ago, but hadn’t said anything to Mungo. She mentioned it now only in the hopes that Mungo might say something to make her feel better.

“So what do you make of that?” asked Kylie.

“Sounds like yer work on TV’s a source of anxiety for ya,” Mungo replied. The answer made sense to be certain, but it didn’t make Kylie feel any better—not by a long shot!

“So you’re some kind of Sigmund Freud now? Or should I say SigMUNG Freud?” It was only meant to be a joke, but there was a certain biting sarcasm that lay just below the surface.

“Only tryin’ to help,” said Mungo cheerfully.

“I know. Look I’m sorry. I know you’re only trying to help, but maybe I’m just not in a place where I want help.” Kylie made apologies, but her bad mood remained. “Let’s just get going. I’ll feel better when we get somewhere that I can get cleaned up.”

They took turns applying sunscreen to each other; Kylie used ashes on Mungo, and Mungo used SPF50 lotion on Kylie. The sunscreen only seemed to exacerbate Kylie’s need for a bath. The lotion mixed with the sweat to create a clammy smelly concoction that was thoroughly unpleasant.

‘Jeez, I bet I look dreadful right now,’ Kylie thought to herself. Her mood did not improve. “Let’s get going.”

As they trekked on that morning, the weather only seemed to get hotter and hotter as the day wore on. Kylie soon had a rolling sweat going, and needed to continually wipe her brow with her forearm to keep the sweat out of her eyes.

Getting shots for her documentary seemed hopeless. There wasn’t really any good scenery to capture. There weren’t any neat plants or animals, which she hadn’t already shot. And Mungo seemed especially quiet today. There didn’t seem to be anything worth shooting. Also, with her sweaty hands, Kylie was making a sweaty mess of the buttons and the optics of the camera. She decided to put the camera away, and hoped that she would get a few usable shots that evening.

Mungo continued to march on ahead, and Kylie continued to fall behind. “Damn

it, Mungo, you know I can't keep up when you go that fast. Can't we at least stop for a few minutes." Her mood had improved little since the morning; if anything it had gotten worse.

"Sure," said Mungo smiling back at her. He had a look in his eyes that suggested he wanted to say something else. Yet he said nothing more.

Kylie took a water bottle from her pack and began to gulp down large sips of water.

"Go easy. We need to conserve water," said Mungo.

"What? I can't have a drink?" asked Kylie getting defensive.

"Didn't say ya couldn't have a drink," Mungo replied. "We can't take our water for granted. We didn't refill last night, and we might not get to tonight either."

It was sage advice, but it was advice that Kylie did not heed. No water? Preposterous! They would find water tonight. Granted, they hadn't found water last night, but they would tonight. After all, it seemed highly unlikely that in two days of hiking they would fail to find water. This logic seemed flawless to Kylie.

She poured a few ounces of water over her head to wet her hair. Water conservation be damned! And you know what? Getting her hair wet was the best moment so far of this terrible day.

Mungo gave Kylie a stare. He didn't look mad. Rather he looked like someone trying to do math in his head. He looked as though he was trying to recalculate how to better ration their water in light of Kylie's actions.

After a few minutes they continued their walk. Despite Kylie's insistence on being in a foul mood, it didn't seem to affect his mood at all. Mungo was his normal cheerful self. Yet he didn't talk. Rather, he whistled. He kept whistling as they walked. 'Fine,' thought Kylie to herself. 'If you won't talk to me, then I won't talk to you either.' Where had she heard those whistles before? Oh, that's right! They were bird calls. Mungo was making bird calls. Ordinarily, Kylie would have been thrilled at her newfound knowledge, but not today. Today she was in too foul of a mood.

Yet Kylie could not go the whole day without speaking to Mungo. She would need his help to reapply her sunscreen. Even though it was SPF50, it did not provide all day protection; not in heat like this, and with her sweating as much as she had been. She summoned up all of her remaining courtesy, and asked for help. Mungo happily agreed.

Yet Kylie was particularly irritable that day. When she thought Mungo was being slow at the task, she really let him have it. "Would you hurry up with that already?" she snapped.

"Just about finished," said Mungo smiling. For every bit of attitude she gave him, Mungo repaid her in kindness. Why was she so intent on stirring up trouble today? Mungo had been a delight to travel with so far, so why did Kylie insist on trying to spoil his mood.

The rest of the hike was spent in complete silence. In spite of her mood, there was a spring in Mungo's step that suggested that he was quite happy to be outside, even if it was incredibly hot.

After a couple silent hours of hiking, Mungo announced that they would be camping here tonight. They had not yet found a source of water, and his choice in campsite provided none.

"What? Here?" asked Kylie incredulously. "There's no water. We should keep

walking.” It was a suggestion that Kylie did not enjoy. She was tired; probably too tired to keep hiking. But no water? This was ridiculous! She needed to wash off the sweat from the day.

“It’ll be dark soon. There’s plenty of food here. We still have water. If we keep movin’, we still may not find water, and we won’t have enough light to find food,” Mungo explained patiently.

Plenty of food? And where exactly was this plenty of food. “It’s not more snake, I hope,” said Kylie.

Mungo grinned and answered. “No, it’s not more snake. We’ll have orchid bulbs tonight,” pointing at some plants that Kylie would have never recognized as orchids. “I’ll get the fire goin’, and cook up some bulbs.”

“Do you want help?” offered Kylie. She tried to sound as unenthusiastic as possible. In the mood she was in, she had no real interest in helping with dinner.

“Nah,” said Mungo, who happily went about his business of building a fire and foraging for bulbs..

Dinner that night was incredibly disappointing. Well, it was for Kylie, anyway. Mungo seemed to enjoy the food all the same. Yet without water to clean the orchid bulbs, Mungo was unable to get them entirely clean. Despite taking careful bites, each bite contained trace amounts of dirt. It was food in the loosest sense of the word. It had all the calories of food, and all the taste of dirt.

When they had finished eating Mungo got back to working.

“What are you doing?” asked Kylie.

“Settin’ up the tent,” replied Mungo.

“You don’t need to do that,” said Kylie. “I can sleep outside.”

“Nah. Sleep in the tent.”

“Really it’s fine,” protested Kylie. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Best sleep in the tent,” Mungo repeated.

Why was he being so hardheaded? He was dealing with her like a parent would deal with a petulant child. He was trying to diffuse her anger with kindness, but Kylie was not in the mood for kindness.

“I’m going to bed,” she announced grumpily after Mungo had finished setting up the tent. She did not bother to thank him. After all, HE had been the one to insist on setting up the tent. She had tried to talk him out of it, but he had set the tent up all the same. She was not going to thank him for going against her wishes.

She did not say ‘good night’ either...

Mungo just shrugged his shoulders. The walkabout was a physically demanding ordeal. Eventually it broke you down, but it also built you up stronger than before. Kylie had reached her breaking point, and now the rebuilding would begin.

He did not begrudge Kylie her anger. She was angry, but she wasn’t angry with him. She was just angry. And even though she had chosen to lash out at him with her pent up anger, he knew that their friendship was as strong as ever.

Even though Kylie was going to sleep, Mungo had plans of his own for the evening. He went to his pack and produced two sticks. The sticks were made from an exotic native hardwood. They had been polished and had ornate patterns. He sat down next to the fire, and began to clap the two sticks together.

From inside her tent, Kylie could hear the sound coming from the sticks. Without

aid of a metronome, Mungo kept perfect time. He clapped out evenly spaced quarter notes with the sticks. He would occasionally break from the main beat to improvise sections. Yet he always returned to the main beat and held it in perfect tempo. It alternated between the beat and improvisation.

“How does he expect me to sleep with all that racket?” Kylie wondered aloud. Yet even with her bad mood, she could recognize that it wasn’t racket. It was music. The perfect adherence to the beat alone was enough to gauge its artistic merit.

Mungo lent his voice to the music. He sang with a deep baritone that had a remarkably sweet and pleasant sound. His voice shook the very landscape. The trees resonated with the sound of his voice. And Kylie could feel her very soul moved by the music.

It wasn’t exactly chanting, but the lyrics most definitely were not in English.

“I...I have to film this,” Kylie whispered to herself. She quietly got her camera and climbed out of the tent.

The sight of Mungo playing by the firelight was ghostly. The light flickered and danced across his skin, and the ashes that he wore from earlier that day made him look like an apparition. The sound of the music had her shaking. She was not afraid; she was deeply moved. Here in the heart of the outback Mungo played a concert for an exclusive audience.

Still her anger had not fully subsided. “You didn’t think to mention this to me? With everything I’ve been doing to make this documentary, you don’t think I’d have the slightest interest in filming this?” she asked accusingly.

Mungo gave her a look that informed Kylie that he had indeed heard her. But his focus was on the music. He did not lose a single beat, and continued to sing his ghostly lyrics.

“Fine,” mumbled Kylie. She turned the camera on, and fumbled for the night vision mode. She stared through the lens and frowned. The shot looked poor. The night vision ruined much of the ghostly effect. With everything bathed in a phony green hue, the shot looked terrible. Kylie switched off the night vision mode and tried again to capture the music. That didn’t work either. There wasn’t enough natural light to get the shot in focus.

“Well this was a waste,” Kylie grumbled. “I don’t suppose you’d play some music tomorrow? You know, when it’s light out? When I can actually film it?”

Mungo broke from the music for a second. “If that’s whatcha want. I’ll play for ya in the daylight no worries. But this music’s best saved for the night.”

Kylie was about to go back to her tent, but Mungo stopped her.

“Kylie?”

“Yeah?”

“Ya worry too much about my story. If ya don’t find yer own story, yer never gonna be able to tell it properly.”

Kylie was not in any mood to hear more of Mungo’s ‘storytelling’ mumbo jumbo. She rolled her eyes sarcastically. “Thanks. I’ll take that under consideration.” Her voice was thick with sarcasm.

Mungo resumed his music, and Kylie went back to her tent.

Climbing back inside the tent, Kylie did not put the camera back in her pack. She held it at a distance with her arm, and kept herself in frame. She did not turn the camera

on, but spoke into the camera as if it were running.

She spoke softly. She did not want Mungo to hear what she had to say. Yet the sound of his music provided enough background noise. Mungo would not hear her.

“So Mungo wants a story? I’ll give him a story! Attention world, this is Kylie Burns with an exclusive story. I am a 38 year old jobless loser. I have lost my job. I haven’t had a boyfriend in years. I have an abrasive personality. I have no friends. And I’m traveling with a senile old fool who seems content to march the both of us until our legs fall off. THAT is my story.”

Kylie was shocked at the malice that came forth from her mouth. It was incredibly hurtful. It was incredibly vindictive. She could only be glad that Mungo could not hear her tirade.

She slumped over, but still kept the camera on her face. “What’s wrong with me? I mean really, what’s wrong with me. Why is it that everyone else seems to have life figured out except me? Why can’t I keep it together?” These were not questions that had easy answers, and they had made her so upset that she began to cry. She used her sarong to dab away her tears.

She had been in a bad mood all day. Maybe now was time to change that? Think positive thoughts.

She hadn’t been fired from her job, so much as let go. If anything her employers were willing to retain her as an assistant producer. Most employers would not be so generous. And, to be fair, they had never once been critical of her work. She always got her yearly raises and bonuses, and her performance evaluations had been favorable. She may no longer be a reporter, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t done a good job during her tenure.

And boyfriends? Well, that was easy to explain. She had a few unsuccessful relationships in her 30s. They had been with nice guys, but none of them had been ‘the one.’ They only seemed to reinforce her view that she would not settle for anything less than true love. Given her string of boyfriends, she had just decided to stop looking for a while and to focus on her career. If she took the assistant producer job, perhaps she could give romance another shot. When she had been on the dating scene, she certainly had no lack of gentlemen callers.

Her personality? Her friends? In all fairness, she had a nicely sized group of friends; friends who were able to see past her ...professional personality. And the quality of her friends was remarkable. When things had seemed the most hopeless, her friends were there to help her out. Mungo’s presence outside the tent was proof of that.

In retrospect, her life wasn’t that bad after all. She had her friends. She had a job, if she decided to accept it. Things really weren’t so bad. She had had a bad day, that’s all. It had been a bad day, but tomorrow would be better.

“I think...” said Kylie addressing the camera, “...that I should get some rest.” She jokingly added in a faux-sign-off “more on this later as details emerge.” She put the camera back in the pack, and laid down to go to sleep.

The sound of Mungo’s ghostly singing filled her tent and lulled her to sleep.

Unbeknownst to Kylie, she had accidentally hit the power button on the camera. As she slept, the battery, the second and LAST of the two batteries, waned throughout the night. It was dead by the next morning.

## Chapter 12: Dreaming

Kylie did not go to sleep immediately, but she did eventually drift off to sleep. Her dream was a familiar one-- all too familiar.

Once again, visions of Fisher's Creek came to her in her dreams. It was the same dream she had had the night before, and the night before that, and the night before that. She had been having the every night since she had first come on the walkabout. She was sick of having the dream.

Once again, she was dressed for a news broadcast, and forced to stand aside as a spectator. Being dressed like a reporter was a cruel reminder of the career that had been snatched away from her. Yet she was unable to remove her clothes. Each time she would try to remove her jacket or skirt, another set would take its place. She had been through this all before.

Each night she was forced to replay the incident at Fisher's Creek in her dreams. She was merely a spectator. She could observe her dream, but could not interact with it. Each night, it played out the same way. It was a horrible recreation of a horrible incident from her past.

"Come on, Kylie, let's go swimming," said one of her childhood friends encouragingly.

"NO!" Kylie screamed at the children; at the younger version of herself. "Don't do it!" she shouted, trying to warn her away from reliving the painful memories of the past. It was hopeless. She was a spectator. The kids in her dream could not hear her. Everything was going to play out exactly as it had the night before.

"Oh, I can't" said the 9-year-old Kylie in her dream. "I didn't bring my bathing suit."

"That's okay," said her other friend, "neither did we."

"So how are we supposed to swim?" asked young Kylie, poor naïve young Kylie.

"We'll all go skinny dipping!" her friend replied.

"Oh, I don't know about that," the younger Kylie said with uncertainty.

"Oh, come on Kylie!" her friends protested. "No one's going to come down here. No one's going to see."

"Oh, alright," said young Kylie, who stripped off and joined her friends.

"NO!" protested the older, wiser Kylie. "You're going to get caught! Don't do it!" She tried to dissuade the young kids in her dream from making their mistake. Nothing she said or did changed how the dream played out.

She knew what came next. She hated what came next. Any minute now, there would be the sound of bike horns. With the bike horns, came the older boys, and with the older boys came the insults and the teasing. Kylie braced herself to relive the same horrible memory once again.

She gritted her teeth and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Things were different this time. The boys on their bikes never showed up. The youngsters were allowed to continue their dip in private. This wasn't how things were supposed to happen. This wasn't how things had happened at Fisher's Creek. This

wasn't it at all.

As an observer, Kylie watched this alternate reality play out. She was dumbfounded. This wasn't how it had happened.

One by one the kids emerged from the water. Her two friends came out first, followed by the younger version of Kylie. The three of them sat on the grassy bank near the creek to air dry. They all eventually redressed.

"This was fun," said young Kylie. "We should all do this again some time."

Kylie's friends agreed that, yes, they should all do this again some time.

This wasn't how it happened at all...

The young children left, including the younger version of herself, and the older Kylie was left alone staring out at an empty Fisher's Creek, still wearing the outfit of a news reporter. "I don't understand," said Kylie. "This isn't how it happened."

"It's the same place, but not the same way," said a familiar voice.

Even in her dream Kylie could still be surprised. Startled, she leapt with surprise. "Wirinun? What are you doing here?" She had called him Wirinun. She had spoken it automatically.

Mungo stepped forward. He looked different. He was still recognizably Mungo with his dark skin, white hair, and long white beard. His face was painted, with a white paint. He had a horizontal stripe across his brow, and a second horizontal stripe across the bridge of his nose. He had two vertical stripes of paint; one on each cheek, and the rest of his face was dotted with smaller dots of paint. And, yes, he was still naked. But something was different. His face looked decades younger. Any sign of age-defining wrinkles were not present. He looked young. Kylie had to wonder about him. Was this how she saw Mungo in her dream? Or was this how Mungo saw himself in reality? It was an idealized form of Mungo; true to life, but looking somehow more than a man. It was an avatar.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and powerful. "It's the same place but not the same way."

"I don't understand, Wirinun," said Kylie. In her dream she seemed incapable of calling him 'Mungo.' She called him 'Wirinun.'

"This is how things might've been," Mungo explained. "Ya know how things were, but now ya must decide how things will be."

Kylie did not understand. 'You must decide how things will be.' What did that mean? Did that mean she should take the assistant producer job?

Mungo continued to speak. "I know this dream has been frightening. But it's just a dream. It can't hurt ya. You are in control here."

She was in control? "I'm...I'm in control?" she asked unsure of herself.

Mungo nodded in agreement. "You are in control here. Ya can do anything you want."

"Anything I want..." Kylie mused. After so many nights of feeling helpless in her dreams, to suddenly regain control seemed almost unbelievable. She decided to test this power. She slowly removed her jacket. She was expecting another jacket to take its place. It did not. "I'm in control," she said more assuredly. "I can do anything I want." She removed her blouse. A new blouse did not materialize. "I want to swim," she said as she began removing the rest of her clothing. "Come join me, Wirinun!"

He said nothing, but followed her as she ran into the still waters of Fisher's Creek.

As Kylie submerged herself in the water, she felt a surge of relief; as though years of pent up anger, frustration, and depression were being washed away. From now on, whenever she thought of Fisher's Creek, she would think of this. She had replaced a harmful memory with a positive one.

She joyfully swam about with Mungo, Wirinun, swimming close by. "Hey, Wirinun?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you know about what happened to me at Fisher's Creek?" It was a question she had asked him before. She had asked him this question at the Koala Bares. That seemed like an old memory. How long ago had that been? A year? Two? She couldn't remember exactly.

She did, however, remember his answer. 'A little birdie told me.' Would he answer the same way this time.

"The animals talk to me," Mungo answered. It wasn't the exact same answer he had given her at the Koala Bares, but it was surprisingly similar.

"And what do they tell you Wirinun?"

"They tell me ya lost yer job. They tell me about the Assistant-Producer job, and how yer not sure about it. They told me about yer birthday, and how it made ya sad," there was an unusually heavy sadness in Mungo's voice. "They tell me that you've been sad more than usual these days."

These revelations were amazing. Sure she may have told him about her birthday, but the rest of it? She knew she had not told Mungo about the Assistant-Producer job, or that she had lost her job. How did he know about that? This seemed to blur the lines of what was possible in a dream. Was Mungo's presence the product of her imagination, the product of her dreaming? Or was Mungo able to enter her dreams? The latter seemed impossible, but if he could talk to animals, anything was possible.

"Ya don't need to be sad," said Wirinun. "Ya don't need to be sad about losin' yer job. You're young. You're talented. You'll find yer way."

So did that mean she should take the Assistant-Producer job?

Mungo continued. "The animals wanna talk to ya. Will ya listen?"

"I can't talk to animals, Wirinun," Kylie protested.

"Ya don't need to speak," said Mungo. "The animals wanna talk. Ya need to listen." These were obtuse instructions. What did it mean to listen to the animals? She had been listening to the songs of birds this whole trip, and hadn't heard anything.

Mungo continued. "Tomorrow'll be the hardest day yet. You'll be tested, but you'll succeed. Don't doubt yerself, and you'll find the way."

Mungo seemed to slowly vanish. The dream was ending. Yet still Kylie called out, "Wait, Wirinun! Don't go! I still have more questions to ask!" She reached out as if to grab a hold of the vanishing apparition.

Kylie awoke suddenly. She sat upright with her arm outstretched. "Wirinun!" she said aloud, before realizing that she was no longer dreaming. She was awake now.

It had all been a dream, but what a dream it had been. It all seemed so real.

It had been a good dream. Instead of waking up covered in sweat, her skin was dry and smooth. She had broken the cycle of nightmares. The aches and pains of hiking seemed to have vanished overnight. The soreness in her breasts was gone as well.

Even though she had not broken out in a sweat during her dream, she was already

starting to sweat again. It was awfully hot in the tent. Clearly, things had not cooled down from yesterday. And if it was already this hot, how hot would it be by this afternoon? They would need to start hiking soon to avoid the heat of the afternoon sun. Unfortunately, this meant that she probably would not have breakfast.

Kylie rolled over and grabbed the camera. Each day in the morning she checked the camera for damage. She would check the position on the tape, look for any damage to the camera or the tape, and try to wipe away dust from the lens and the more sensitive parts of the camera. She went through her morning routine, and turned the camera on. Immediately the low battery light began to flash and the camera powered off.

“Oh no!” said Kylie as she tried to turn the camera on again. “No, no, no, no, no.” Once again the low battery light flashed and the camera turned itself off. “No! No! No! Shit!” That was the end of the batteries. She had no more battery power to capture the return trip. The documentary was ruined. This must have happened when...when she had done her ‘monologue’ last night. “Shit!” Kylie let loose a string of endless profanities.

Her documentary was ruined. Her magnum opus was ruined. This was supposed to be her triumphant return to the TV news, and, just like her career, it had been cut short. Any good feelings from the dream last night were instantly replaced with feelings of anger and frustration. It was so unfair! Now she was doomed to a life of anonymity as an assistant-producer.

There was nothing more she could do. Her documentary was ruined beyond repair. Well, with any luck, the trip would be over soon as well. She unzipped the front door of the tent. Mungo was probably already awake and ready to go.

Kylie wanted to ask him a few questions, anyway. She wanted to talk to him about her dream; about what it meant. But did he already know about it? No! That was impossible! Wasn't it? And yet it seemed like she was unable to rule out the possibility. Kylie could not convince herself that the Wirinun, er...Mungo, who had been in her dreams last night had been something she made up. Maybe it really was him? No! It couldn't be! Could it? There was no way another person could enter and interact in another person's dream. Such things were scientifically impossible.

As Kylie opened the flap of the tent, she could see Mungo still lying on the ground. So he wasn't awake just yet. Kylie realized that this was the first time she had seen him asleep in the morning. He always seemed to get up much earlier than she did.

He was lying on the ground, sleeping atop leaves and bare pebbles. He couldn't possibly be comfortable like that. Then again, the tent provided just a small layer of canvas between her and the ground, and her sarong was barely even a blanket. If anything, two thin layers of fabric were the only difference between how she slept and how Mungo slept. They may have only been two layers of fabric, but the distinction still seemed quite large.

Enough. They needed to get moving.

As she approached him, Kylie could have sworn that his face was covered with the same pattern of face paint as in her dream last night. She could vividly see the pattern of lines and dots on his face. Yet when she blinked, the pattern vanished. Had it ever been there at all? This only seemed to blur the line between dream and reality. ‘Great! The day's barely started and already I'm hallucinating,’ Kylie thought to herself. She resolved to eat more, drink more water, and to try and get to sleep earlier.

“Okay, Mungo,” said Kylie tapping him gently on the toes. “Time to get going.” He did not wake up right away. “Come on, mate, rise and shine,” she said tapping him again. Still he did not wake up. “Mungo enough kidding around,” she said giving him a bit harder of a shake. “Mungo, are you alright?” she asked. The worry was rising in her voice, and she shook him harder. “...Mungo?”

### **Chapter 13: It’s Urgent!**

Still shaking him, Kylie was now beginning to panic. “Mungo, wake up! Mungo you have to wake up!” Why wasn’t he waking up? Maybe he had been bitten by a snake during the night. He couldn’t be dead. He just couldn’t.

Slowly opening his eyes, Mungo managed to utter a single word. “Ky...lie?” His speech was broken and slurred. He seemed dazed. Kylie could see that his mouth and his tongue seemed to be covered with a white film. He was dehydrated, and probably suffering from heat exhaustion. Or was that heat stroke? Admittedly, Kylie did not know the difference between heat exhaustion and heat stroke. All she knew was he needed water.

How had this happened? He had seemed so vigorous, so full of life around the campfire last night. So why was he so weak and feeble this morning?

Perhaps playing music had taken a toll on him. Kylie could not be certain how long he had played last night. But the physical activity of clapping the sticks together would have been tiring. The singing, too, would have left his throat dry. If he hadn’t taken any breaks he would probably be dehydrated. After all, it had hot last night. Very hot. And with the way the morning was, it would be much hotter by this afternoon.

There was another possibility. If that really had been Wirinun, er Mungo, in her dream last night, then maybe that sort of magic was physically demanding. Kylie put that thought far from her mind. Such things were not possible. Were they?

Acting quickly, she went to his pack. She quickly searched his pack for one of the animal skin bags that he used to hold water. She found one, but it was disappointingly light. It was empty. So was the second. She found the third bag to be nearly empty, but still had a few sips left. There were no other water bags.

Kylie began to panic about their water situation. Mungo was nearly out of water, and she only had two 20 oz bottles left in her pack. It would be enough for one day, and that was it. The situation had suddenly become desperate. They needed to find water today. If she didn’t get Mungo to a reliable source of water, he could become seriously ill. He could die out here! And if Mungo died out here in the outback, what chance did Kylie have of making it home. She could die out here too...stop thinking about that! Thinking like that didn’t help the situation, it only made things worse.

She took the skin bag over to Mungo. “Here, drink this,” she said.

He could scarcely hold the bag, so Kylie had to hold it for him. She held the back of his head and the water bag, and let him drink. He drank what was left of the water bag. That was it. Mungo was out of water. “Thanks...” he said smiling weakly. He could barely sit upright. How was he supposed to hike with her to the next source of water? She could leave him behind. No! That would never work. Even if she did find water, she doubted she’d ever be able to find her way back.

“Mungo. Mungo, I need you to think. We have to find water. We can’t go back the way we came; it’s a two day hike back to the creek. We have to find something closer.” Kylie tried to remain calm. “Where do we need to go?”

Dazed and confused, Mungo looked right, then left, then all about. “I...I dunno...” he replied. That did little to help ease Kylie’s worries.

“Come on Mungo,” said Kylie hopefully. “You know the Outback like the back of your hand. You’ve been here before. How do we find water?” She asked again hoping that he would remember.

“I...I dunno...,” he repeated. He sounded even surer of this fact.

Great! Just great! Now what was she supposed to do? They were stranded in the wilderness without a reliable supply of food or water, and her only guide was in poor health. What was she going to do?

“Gooooonk!”

The deep guttural sound alerted Kylie to the fact that an emu had wandered into camp. “Get out of here!” Kylie hissed. She needed to think of a plan, and having the large flightless bird interrupt her thought process wasn’t helping.

It did not appear to be leaving. Kylie picked up a small pebble, and threw it at the emu. She didn’t try to hit the bird, and the rock dropped a few feet away. She hoped it would startle the bird into leaving. “Go on, get out of here!”

The emu began to walk over to Mungo. “Get away from him!” Kylie hissed. She had heard stories about the kick from an emu being able to cut a person open. People had died from emu kicks, either from loss of blood from the wound being deep, or from infection from the wound not being properly treated. The last thing Kylie needed was an emu who suddenly decided to get aggressive. “Get away from him!” she hissed again.

Still the emu kept walking toward Mungo. There was something that seemed strangely familiar about this emu. “Oscar?”

The emu was now looking directly at her. “Oscar? Is that you?”

The large bird was now bobbing its head up and down as if it was agreeing with Kylie. It was Oscar! No! It couldn’t be! Sure he had gone missing from the Koala Bares, but there was no way he would come hundreds of kilometers to this random patch of the Australian Outback. Yet somehow, there he was. “Looks like I’ve got another ‘cat story’,” Kylie mumbled to herself.

So, Oscar was here. That didn’t really change anything. They still needed water, and unless Oscar had brought bottled water with him (which was ridiculous to think he would) their situation was still dire.

“Gooooonk! Gooooonk! Gooooonk! Gooooonk! Gooooonk! Gooooonk!”

Oscar was now making quite a racket in excitement. “Not now, Oscar,” said Kylie. “I have to think. I have to come up with a plan.” This was crazy. She had no plan. And now she was talking to an emu.

He still kept making noise. Kylie was beginning to lose her temper. “Damn it, Oscar! Not now! I said I’m trying to...” She trailed off mid sentence.

The animals want to talk to you. Will you listen?

There was something about Oscar, something different, which had caught her attention. The emu looked a little...plump. It was a strange observation to make, but Oscar did look a little fatter.

Kylie’s brain began to connect the dots. To say that Oscar was well fed at the

Koala Bares would be an understatement. People were always offering him bits of their lunches. But he had gone missing from the Koala Bares and had GAINED weight. How? How was that possible? If anything, he should have lost weight from the trek and the lack of free lunches. But he had gained weight.

“Do you...do you know where we can get water?” asked Kylie adding, “and food?”

The emu bobbed his head up and down as if he were agreeing with her. So that was her plan? To follow an emu that she assumed was Oscar? It didn't seem like much of a plan, but Kylie was positive that the emu was Oscar. She didn't have any other plans. She had to trust the animal. Animals had...instincts...

Going over to Mungo, she whispered in his ear. “It's alright; we're going to get food and water. It's going to be alright.” She added, “it's okay. Oscar's here”

At the mention of Oscar's name, Mungo seemed to perk up a little bit. “Oho! Is that right?”

“Save your strength,” said Kylie. “We still need to hike out of here.” Had Mungo known about Oscar the whole time? And if so, why didn't he say anything? She helped Mungo to his feet.

“Lemme pack up the tent,” said Mungo as he struggled to the tent.

“Leave it,” Kylie insisted. “We'll need to travel light.” She emptied the contents of his pack and put them into her pack. “I'll carry your stuff, but you'll need to carry the empty pack.”

“Sounds good,” he said as he took the empty pack from her, and put it over his shoulders. Was he grinning? He looked so tired, so exhausted, and yet Kylie could swear she saw him grinning.

“Wait here a sec,” she said. Kylie went to the fire pit and grabbed a piece of charcoal. It was cool to the touch. She went back to Mungo. “Here,” she said as she rubbed the black ash over his body. “You still need to protect yourself from the sun.” She continued rubbing until he was covered from head to toe in a dusting of ash.

“Ya wanna to get yer lotion?” asked Mungo.

“No, just use the charcoal,” said Kylie. Time was of the essence. She really couldn't be bothered to get her sunscreen and insect repellent, and if the charcoal worked...

“Ya sure?” asked Mungo holding the piece of charcoal awaiting further instruction.

“Yeah.”

Doing as he had been instructed Mungo rubbed charcoal over Kylie's body. He was quite thorough until she too was covered head to toe in ash; the Outback's version of sunscreen. Looking down at her arms, they were black and grey from the ash. If only she had a mirror. She could only imagine how she looked right now.

“We need to start walking,” said Kylie taking command. “Oscar, lead the way.” She didn't know for sure if the emu understood her, but Oscar started walking, pausing only to see if the two were following him.

Slowly, very slowly, they began to walk. Usually Mungo was faster than her, but not today. Oscar was in the lead, with Kylie following behind, and Mungo taking up the back of the pack.

He kept falling behind. Oscar and Kylie would wait for him to catch back up to

them, but as they continued to walk, it became more and more frequent. As he walked, he listed from side to side. He was in bad shape, and Kylie could see it clearly.

She searched the ground for sticks, and found one capable of supporting a person's weight. She snapped off the side branches and handed the makeshift walking stick to Mungo. "Here, use this," she said. She took off her pack and brought out one of the two remaining water bottles. "Drink this."

Mungo sipped at the water bottle. He drank thirstily. Within no time, he had finished the bottle.

Kylie was amazed at how selfless she had been in giving him her water. After all, the two water bottles represented all of the water they had left. Out here it was their lifeblood; and she shared it freely with Mungo. She would share the last bottle, too, down to the final drop.

"Better?" she asked hopefully.

"Better," Mungo said in agreement. "Let's go."

They continued their walk. Mungo seemed to be keeping the pace better after having a drink of water. As they walked, Kylie began to take more notice of her surroundings. They were walking on a walkway of smooth tumbled rocks. A creek bed. They were walking on a dry creek bed. Not only that, but Oscar seemed to be leading them downhill. Water flowed downhill. He was leading them to water, just like Kylie had thought he would. She knew this to be true.

Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Mungo hunched over. He looked like he was in pain. "Are you okay?"

He began retching until he vomited; it was bright yellow.

Running over to attend to him, Kylie asked again, "are you okay?"

"Nah," said Mungo weakly.

"You drank that water too fast," said Kylie. "You'll give yourself a stomach ache that way." Listen to her, she sounded like a doting mother. She took her second bottle of water from her pack. "Drink this--not all of it. Drink it slowly. It's the last of the water."

Mungo did as instructed. He drank a few sips, maybe a quarter of the bottle's contents, and handed it back to Kylie. She took a few small sips. She could have easily finished the whole bottle, but she restrained herself. All she really needed was a few sips to take away the cottony feeling inside her mouth. "Let's go."

They kept moving, but again, Mungo kept falling behind. Losing the contents of his stomach did little to improve his condition. It was clear that he couldn't go on like this for much longer.

Kylie came up with a plan. An emu could support a person's weight. Couldn't they? She looked at Mungo's relatively small frame, and Oscar's large stature and convinced herself that this plan would work. "Oscar, come here," she said, and she whistled to call him over. The emu did as she had commanded. "Okay Mungo, climb up on Oscar," she instructed.

As soon as Mungo put his hand on Oscar, the emu walked away. Kylie called him over again, and tried to coax Mungo back up on the emu. Again, Oscar walked away.

"I told ya, he's still mad at me," said Mungo. That was typical Mungo. Here they were in a fight for survival, and he was still making jokes.

"Save your strength," said Kylie. She didn't know how much further they had to go, but they both had to conserve their strength. She slipped her arm under one of his

armpits and helped to prop him up.

With Mungo putting some weight on the walking stick, and some weight on Kylie's shoulder, they began to walk again. The going was much, much slower. This was easily the slowest pace they had gone the whole trip. With the weight of her pack, and Mungo using her for support, her shoulders were getting quite sore. She was getting worn out. They hadn't eaten all day, and had been running on just a few sips of water. She was tired. Just how much longer could she keep this up?

The answer? Not much longer, but that was irrelevant.

They turned around a bend in the creek and discovered a small lagoon. Here in the harsh landscape of the Outback was a private little oasis. Kylie wanted to jump for joy. She wanted to run to the water. But she couldn't. She needed to get Mungo to the water first. She could celebrate later.

"Come on, let's go. We've made it," she said to Mungo. Those last few hundred meters were very slow going. Mungo seemed almost incapable of taking full steps. She was very close to having to carry or drag him that last little bit of the way. Once they got to the water, everything would be fine.

And what if it wasn't?

Reaching the banks of the small lake, Kylie gently laid Mungo down on the banks. She wanted to have a swim in the lake, but Mungo's needs came first. It had been her idea to put him in the lake, but she decided against that. The change in temperatures could be too much of a shock to his body.

She went to the lake and refilled the empty water bottles. She also refilled Mungo's animal skin water bags. She went back to Mungo and handed him a bottle of water. "Drink this slowly," she said. "I don't want you throwing up again."

Kylie went back to the lake. She needed to cool down Mungo's core body temperature somehow. She took her sarong from her pack and soaked it in the lake water. She went back up to Mungo and kneeled down beside him. Using the sarong, she gently dabbed his skin. The sarong got black and sooty from the ash that Mungo used as a sunscreen. The sarong was probably ruined.

Kylie made a few trips down to the lake to re-wet the sarong. She continued to cool Mungo down. He was starting to look a little better. "Are you feeling any better?"

"A bit."

"I'll go find some food," Kylie offered. "Go easy on the water." In her time on the news, she had heard stories of marathon runners passing out and needing to be hospitalized from drinking too much water. It had something to do with the salt balance in the body. Although Kylie did not understand the physiology of it all, the idea of having some food with water sounded medically sound.

Truth be told, Kylie didn't know how she would find food. Yes, she had watched Mungo forage for food, but could she repeat it? Spearing a snake was out of the question. Could she find fruits or vegetables? Maybe, but it would take all of her wits.

She glanced around for anything that would give her clues to where to find food. There were just trees; trees with birds in their boughs. She couldn't eat the trees, and she couldn't eat the birds. Wait a minute! The birds! The birds had given her an idea. She had seen these same birds picking at the remains of their roasted apple buffet (okay, not these SAME birds, but the same species nonetheless). That meant that these birds were fruit eaters. Maybe if she watched them for long enough, they would lead her to food.

The birds studied her quizzically. After a few minutes, one of the birds flew into the bush, with Kylie following after it. She followed the bird's flight path for several minutes, until the bird landed on a familiar looking shrub.

"Lillypillies," Kylie said aloud. She was sure that they were lillypillies. Yet she was still new at this. How could she be sure that she had properly identified the fruit. She paused and watched. As if the bird had sensed her hesitation, it began to eat the fruit. Well, if it was good for the birds, it probably wouldn't kill her.

"I hope you don't mind sharing," she said as she plucked a cluster from a branch. The bird just looked at her. She popped one of the fruit into her mouth.

Bitter will make you sick.

These fruits were definitely not bitter. They were tart, but not bitter. They would make a good meal. She picked as many clusters as she could and went to bring them back to Mungo.

She found him lying on the banks of the lake, where she had left him. He hadn't moved, but he was sipping water from the bottle. He looked stronger.

"I've brought dinner," she said. He still seemed a bit weak, so Kylie fed him lillypillies one at a time. She was nursing him back to full health. She didn't know if she was doing a good job, but she thought she was.

She alternated feeding him lillypillies and eating some herself. After a while, Mungo announced, "I'm full."

"Do you mind if I have the last of them?" asked Kylie.

"Not at all."

Kylie finished off the last of the fruit. She was full now, too. "Excuse me," she said. "I need to go to the bathroom." Kylie felt a bit odd saying 'going to the bathroom' when there was no bathroom, or for that matter any room nearby. She excused herself to take care of nature's calling.

## **Chapter 14: The Fountain of Youth**

Finishing her trip to the "bathroom", Kylie asked "Are you feeling better?" as she rejoined her friend.

"Much," he said. It was true. His eyes were bright and vibrant. His mouth was no longer chapped after having slaked his thirst. He looked like his usual self. If anything, he seemed more vibrant and vigorous than usual. "I'll light a fire."

"And I'll bathe," replied Kylie. She left Mungo to his own devices, and went by herself down to the small lake. She stood at the edge of the water, and dipped her toes in to test the water. She found it to be quite pleasant. It was not too hot. It was not too cold. It was just right. Grinning in anticipation, Kylie began to wade out deeper and deeper.

She dunked her head under water, and then ran her fingers through her blonde hair. She wished, then, for some shampoo and conditioner. It was wishful thinking to be sure. Still, it was nice to get her hair wet. She rubbed her hands over herself to loosen some of the stubborn trail dust. She didn't get entirely clean, but it was the cleanest she had been in over a week. It would have been nice to apply some facial lotion, and some moisturizer after her bath. That would have to wait until she got home. She found

herself more than a little homesick. Today had been the hardest day by far. Thoughts of home cooked meals and curling up with a good book made her miss home all the more. How much longer did Mungo plan to stay out here?

Glancing back at their campsite from the river, Kylie could see smoke. Mungo had the campfire ready for the evening. She decided she was finished bathing. It was time to join him back at camp. As she walked out from the water, her reflection in the water caught her eye. Kylie had always thought of herself as being a bit chubby. She still felt this was the case, but had grown to be more accepting of her figure. Yet in the reflection in that pool, she looked practically svelte. Her stomach was smaller from the time spent in the Outback. Even though she was not completely clean, she looked remarkably good. "Not bad, girl," she said to herself striking a model pose. Not bad at all...

Kylie returned to camp to find Mungo tending the fire. "Enjoy yer bath?" he asked.

"Very much," replied Kylie who was still air drying from her bath. "You're looking better," she said. It was true. He looked nothing like the weak dehydrated man she practically had to carry that day.

"Same old Mungo," he said. "Just gimme a little food and water, and I'm back to me old self." He paused then added, "I guess I've got you to thank for that."

Kylie tried to be modest. "You mean you have Oscar to thank for that. By the way, where is he?"

"Sleepin'," said Mungo who pointed at the tired emu laying on the outer edge of their campsite. Oscar's neck was stretched out long across the ground, and his feet were tucked under his large body. "So ya talked to the animals," he said.

"I did not," protested Kylie. "I just followed Oscar, and then watched a few birds to find edible plants. That's all. I didn't talk to any animals."

"Ya know their names. They spoke to ya. It wasn't in English, but ya understood it."

Kylie wanted to explain it all away using logic. There had to be a logical explanation for everything that happened today. Yet she said nothing more. Perhaps a part of her was content to accept Mungo's explanation. It made her feel...magical...

"If ya want, I can go find some more to eat," offered Mungo.

"No, thank you," replied Kylie. "I'm actually not very hungry. Besides, I don't you wandering off and hurting yourself." She paused and shifted her weight her feet.

"Yer thinkin' somethin'," said Mungo, who could read her like a book.

"I...I want to ask you something, but I'm afraid to," replied Kylie.

"Kylie, we're friends. There's nothing you can't ask me," said Mungo. She believed him.

"I...I want to go skinny dipping!" she blurted out. She covered her mouth immediately as though she couldn't believe what she had just said.

"Ya wanna go back in the water? Go ahead! Go swim!" said Mungo.

"I don't want to swim," said Kylie, "and I don't want to swim in the nude. I want to skinny dip."

"What's the difference?" asked Mungo.

"I swim in the nude all the time at the Koala Bares. It's great, but it's just kind of... pedestrian. Tonight, I want to skinny dip," she said emphatically.

“Still don’t see the difference,” said Mungo now a bit confused.

Kylie explained. “Skinny dipping is about having fun in the spur of the moment. I want to be spontaneous. I want to splash about, and make all kinds of noise. I want to howl at the moon tonight,” she had a twinkle of carefree abandon in her eyes. “That’s what I want.”

“Then do it,” said Mungo encouragingly.

“I want you to do this with me.” She stared at him intently. “Will you... will you go skinny dipping with me?” They had swum together at the pool of the Koala Bares before, but this was different.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” he replied.

“Come on then,” said Kylie, holding his hand, as she started running towards the lake. He followed after her. When they got to the shore, she let go of his hand. She flailed her arms haphazardly above her head. “Wooo-HOOOOO!” she shouted, as she ran into the still water of the lake. As she turned around, she could see Mungo splashing in after her. He had a wide smile on his face.

“Wooo-HOOOOO!” Kylie shouted again thrashing her arms about with carefree abandon. The sound of her jubilant shouts echoed across the landscape. The water was the perfect temperature, and there was a large full moon that hung in the center of the sky, illuminating everything in a white ghostly light.

She and Mungo swam around. Kylie dove under the water. As she came up she noticed that Mungo still had not gotten his hair wet. Sure his beard was wet, but that was unavoidable. The hair on the top of his head was still quite dry. “Hey Mungo?”

“Yeah?”

“You look like you need to get your hair wet,” she said playfully splashing him.

“Hey! Stop that! Cut it out!” Mungo protested. But she did not stop splashing him. Eventually he had to retaliate, splashing back at her. This elevated into a playful splash fight, which Kylie won easily (though, perhaps Mungo had been holding back).

Eventually they swam back to the shallower part of the lake, and spent time sitting, laying, and lounging on the sandy bottom of the lake. For a while, they sat in silence, but Kylie wanted to talk. “I love skinny dipping,” she admitted.

“Ya seem to be enjoyin’ yourself,” Mungo agreed.

This had not prompted the reaction she had been hoping for. So Kylie tried a different approach. “I forgot my bathing suit,” she said giggling.

“Whatcha mean ‘forgot?’” asked Mungo. “I didn’t think ya packed one.”

Again, this was not the reaction she had been hoping for. She tried one more time. “This is just as much fun as last night,” she said. She was trying to goad him into an answer.

“Yer right it...”

“Aha!” said Kylie. “I knew it! I knew it! That was really you in my dream last night,” she said excitedly. “That wasn’t just a dream. I didn’t dream it all. You were there in my dream—really there. And you remembered it!”

“Ya caught me,” Mungo admitted. “I was there.”

He had admitted it. The entire thing seemed so impossible. How could Mungo be in people’s dreams? And yet, he had been there. “So you don’t just talk to animals, you also walk in dreams? Is that it?”

“Yeah. I can walk in dreams,” said Mungo. “Haven’t done it in years. The

connection needs to be really, really strong for it to work,” Mungo explained. “It’s also physically exhaustin’. That’s why I was so tired today.”

“Why did you do it?!” asked Kylie giving him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “You had me worried.”

“I didn’t mean to worry ya,” said Mungo. “But ya handled the situation well. You’ve learned a lot from bein’ out here. And everythin’ ya did today, ya did right. So, thanks, for takin’ care of me today.”

Kylie was flattered. Sure she and Mungo were friends, but she was happy to learn that their friendship was even deeper than she had expected. “I guess I should thank you then. After all, you were the one who led us here tonight. You were the one who helped me to finally get over that incident at Fisher’s Creek.”

“Ya don’t need to thank me,” said Mungo. “Ya did all those things yerself. I just gave ya a nudge in the right direction.”

Things got quiet once again. This had been an emotional moment for both of them.

“Hey, Mungo?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you ever find your story?” asked Kylie. “You never told me why you came out here on the walkabout in the first place.” It was something that she had been curious about, but had not asked. This seemed like the appropriate time to ask.

“I came out here to come to terms with death. I’m gonna die.” He could see a look of worry in Kylie’s face. “Don’t worry, Kylie. I ain’t sick. I ain’t dyin’. I may live another 10, 20, or even 30 years, but I ain’t gonna live forever. I wanted to see these places once more.”

“And?”

“Things have changed. Development’s creepin’ onto the land. Who’s to say what happens here in 30 years. It may be a town. It may be a city. But for now, even though things have changed, it’s still as I remember it. It’s the same place but not the same way. The walkin’ was much easier last time I was here. I was younger, my legs did didn’t hurt as much. But it ain’t all bad. This time I had friends; Oscar, Lars, and you to see me through it. I wouldn’t have made it this time without me friends.”

Mungo’s answer was satisfactory. Kylie was flattered to hear that her role in the walkabout was far greater than she had originally imagined. She was not a nuisance. She was essential.

Turning his attention to Kylie, Mungo added, “But you? You’ve still got time on yer side. Yer still so young. Sure the loss of yer job has been difficult. But that’s only what you do. It ain’t who ya are. You’ve been given an chance to go wherever ya want, to do whatever ya want. Don’t let it go to waste.”

“I won’t,” she said reassuringly. She took his hand in hers, and the two held hands as they gazed up at the stars. “Hey, Mungo?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t...don’t be in a hurry to go anywhere. You know, to...die. I’d...I’d miss you too much.”

He looked over at her with a reassuring look on his face. “I won’t.” It was all that needed to be said.

They laid back in the shallow water and watched the moon and the stars.

“Hey, Mungo?”

“Yeah?”

“How...how much longer will we be out here. It’s not that I don’t want to be here, it’s just that I’m starting to miss home.”

“Me too,” agreed Mungo. “Another two nights.”

“Really? That’s it?” Kylie had expected another 3 or 4 nights at minimum.

“Yeah,” said Mungo pointing out over a ridge. “Kurrajong’s just over that ridge. It’s a tough climb, but a short walk. We’ll stay there tomorrow night, and back at the waterfall the night after that. And then we’ll be home.”

“That sounds good,” Kylie replied. “I think I’m going to get out. My fingers and toes are getting really wrinkled.” Letting go of Mungo’s hand, she got up and went to head back to camp.

“I’ll go too,” said Mungo. “I’m getting’ tired.” He followed her back up to the campsite. The fire was still going, but it was no longer the roaring blaze it had been. It was now just down to coals. Not that the fire was needed; the moon gave off enough light, and the evening was certainly warm enough.

Mungo settled into a comfortable resting spot on the ground, and Kylie did the same. Though this was the first night she would spend outside the tent, she was not particularly sad to see it gone. If there were ever a night to sleep under the stars. This was it. Kylie doubted she had ever seen this many stars over the light pollution in the city.

“Good dreams, Kylie.”

“Good night, Mungo.” Two nights and three days. They would be home in two nights and three days. Kylie drifted off to sleep. Her sleep was deep, but dreamless. She awoke the next morning feeling completely refreshed. She felt even better than she had when Zoot had first dropped them off in the parking lot.

## **Chapter 15: The Trip Home**

It felt strange to wake up to the open sky and to remember that the tent was gone. She sat up. The sun was just beginning to peak above the horizon. It was the first Outback sunrise that she had awoken to, as on the other days she had slept in a bit later. The rays of the sun cast the surrounding rock in a pinkish hue. Mungo was asleep a few meters from her. She thought about waking him up to watch the sunrise. No. It was better to let him sleep. Oscar was asleep as well. There was no way that she was going to wake the emu up from his night’s sleep.

It turns out that she didn’t need to wake anybody up. Mungo and Oscar awoke with the first rays of the sun, just as she had.

“Mornin’,” said Mungo stretching his arms above his head. “Sleep well?”

“I did,” said Kylie. “No more nightmares,” she said, adding, “I guess I have you to thank for that.”

“Well, I don’t know I’d go THAT far,” said Mungo being modest. He gazed out at the lake before them. “Wanna swim?”

“I do,” said Kylie hesitantly.

“But?”

“But...well...I’m kind of anxious to get home.” It was true. She was. “I was thinking we’d get an early start?” She then added, “if you’re feeling up to it. I don’t mean to push you after the day you had yesterday. We can stay a bit longer.”

“Nah, that’s okay,” Mungo replied. “I’m feelin’ much better, thanks to you. I’ve got noproblem startin’ early. It means we’ll get to spend more time with Lars at Kurrajong.”

At the mention of the station, Kylie felt an excitement come over her. Tonight they would be at Kurrajong. That meant running water, and a home cooked meal. And a bathroom! And two nights after that? She’d be home and eating her food, using her bathroom, and sleeping in her bed. She had come to enjoy her time in the Outback, but now it was time to go home.

Packing up to leave went quicker than usual. Since they didn’t have a tent to pack away anymore, they were ready to go in minutes. Both of them made it a point to check and double check that the water bottles and water bags were completely full. Yesterday had been a close call for both of them. Even though they would be at the station tonight, there was no need to take any chances.

“Care for some sun block?” asked Mungo holding up a piece of charcoal from the fire pit. He was already black and sooty from the ash.

“Actually, I’ll use the lotion,” said Kylie. She had done the whole ‘black and sooty’ approach yesterday. It had kept her from burning in the heat of the sun. It worked. She knew that now. But still, she preferred a few minutes of feeling oily and greasy to an entire day of feeling dusty and sooty. “Can you do my back?”

He agreed. “Ready to go?”

“Yes,” said Kylie slipping on her pack.

“Let’s go, Oscar,” said Mungo letting out a high pitched whistle. The emu let out a surly noise, but fell into file behind Mungo and Kylie.

Mungo was true to his word. The hike up the ridge was indeed tough. Yet as they hiked, Kylie couldn’t help but notice that she seemed to have an unexpected source of endurance. Sure she was breathing steadily and sweating, but so was Mungo. Yet they both made it to the crest of the ridge without needing to stop and catch their breath.

The view from the top of the ridge was quite breathtaking. It was the highest point on their trip so far, and they were able to see out over the vast and expansive landscape. “There’s the Kurrajong,” said Mungo pointing to a few small building that seemed a short hike away. “And there’s park beyond that,” he said pointing to the area beyond the ranch.

Turning around he continued pointing. “And there’s where we camped the third night,” he said as he pointed to the small winding creek, and where Kylie presumed was the apple tree. He continued pointing, until he came to the final point, “And there’s where we stayed last night,” he said pointing to the lake they had just hiked up from.

As Kylie watched him trace their route, it all began to make sense. A circle. They had been going in one large circle. She hadn’t noticed it out on the hike, but it all seemed so obvious now. “We’ll be at Kurrajong early this arvo,” said Mungo. “Ya hungry?”

“I...I think I can make it until this afternoon,” said Kylie. She was indeed hungry, but she was spurred on by a surge of adrenaline. The rest of the hike was all down hill. “Let’s go,” she said anxiously.

Oscar made a loud noise, indicating that he would much rather stay and have

lunch. But still they pressed on. As if spurred on by an unseen force, Kylie was at the head of the pack. The downhill worked in their favor. They hiked quickly. It almost took conscious effort to not let momentum turn their walking pace into a brisk run.

Eventually they came to the bottom of the hill, and went back to their normal hiking pace. After hiking a bit further the landscape was dotted with the familiar cattle and sheep.

“Mungo, are we back on station property?” asked Kylie.

He briefly surveyed the landscape. “Yeah, I reckon.”

Out came her sarong.

“Not goin’ nude no more?” asked Mungo. He looked a little disappointed.

“As I said before,” said Kylie, “I will go nude when it is appropriate. And right now, it does not seem appropriate.”

“So what’s ya rules for “appropriate”?” asked Mungo.

“Well, at the Koala Bares, obviously,” said Kylie. “And when I’m at home. And with people I feel comfortable around.”

“Ya don’t feel comfortable around Lars?” asked Mungo. After all, Lars was Mungo’s friend.

“If it’s just you and Lars, then yes, I will go nude. But if there are any workers, then no.” said Kylie. She was about to start hiking, but thought of something. “Huh.”

“Somethin’ the matter?”

“No. Everything’s fine,” Kylie replied.

“Then what’s on yer mind?” asked Mungo.

“I was just thinking,” Kylie began. “When I first came to the Koala Bares as a reporter, I didn’t understand the difference between a nudist and a naturist. To me, it all seemed like semantics. You know? Different words for the same thing; naked people. But after being out in the wilderness, I guess...I guess I’m a naturist...” This was a milestone for Kylie. Sure she was a repeat visitor to the Koala Bares, but she had never considered herself a naturist until this point.

“Yer a naturist,” said Mungo. “We oughta get goin’. Lars’ll be expectin’ us.”

How? How would Lars know to expect them. Mungo hadn’t said when they would be back. So how could Lars know. Ordinarily, Kylie would be full of questions, but she decided to let this go. After all, it wasn’t like she was making her documentary any more.

“Gooonk! Gooonk! GOOOONK!”

“Oscar says he’s leavin’,” said Mungo providing the translation. “Say’s he’ll meet us back at the Bares.”

“Mungo, that’s crazy!” protested Kylie. “How is he supposed to find his way back by himself? Shouldn’t he stay with us?”

“Way I see it, he found us, not the other way ’round. Besides, how’s he gonna get home in Zoot’s car? He can’t exactly fit in the boot.” That was Mungo’s logic for you; perfect and precise Mungo logic.

Oscar gave a goodbye ‘Goonk!’, and then ran off into the brush. Kylie didn’t know how she knew this, but she knew with certainty that she would see the emu back at the Koala Bares just as Mungo had promised.

The two of them hiked on, through the herds of cattle in the direction of Lars’ farm house. As they approached, they ran into a young stockman.

“Can I help you folks?” asked the young blonde haired fellow. He had large forearms, and was wearing jeans and a white work shirt. Well, the shirt had been white at one point, but it was dyed a light brown from the evidence of hard work. He eyed them both over.

“We’re visitin’ Lars,” said Mungo.

“Oh. Well that explains a lot,” he said noting Mungo’s nudity with his gaze. “I’m Seth, by the way,” he said introducing himself. “Follow me, “I’ll take you to Lars.” Instead of leading them to the farmhouse, he led the two to a barn.

Inside the barn, Lars was cleaning up after the animals. His brow was sweaty, and Kylie was impressed to see him doing such a physical job in spite of his advanced age. As soon as Lars saw Mungo his eyes lit up.

“Wirinun! It’s good to see you. Miss Burns, you’re looking good as well. You’re both early.”

“We ain’t early, we’re on time,” insisted Mungo.

“That you are. That you are,” said Lars jokingly. “I bet you’re both starving. Let’s go get you something to eat.” He put down his pitchfork and led them back to the farmhouse.

“Please make yourself at home. I’ll have a quick shower, and then we can have a feast.” Lars excused himself and went upstairs to have a shower. Kylie and Mungo took seats around the kitchen table.

“So will you eat with us?” asked Kylie. “Or will you forage for something?”

“Nah, I’ll be eatin’ Lars’s food. He’s a beaut cook,” said Mungo.

“Huh? I don’t get it,” said Kylie. “Why didn’t you eat last time we were here?”

“Cos we were on the walkabout,” answered Mungo.

“And we’re not now?” asked Kylie. Mungo shook his head no. “So we’re not on the walkabout? It’s over?”

“Yep.”

“It’s over?” she asked again. “It’s really over? I was...I was having fun.”

“So was I,” said Mungo. “We can still have fun. But the walkabout’s over. I have my story and you have yours.”

“I guess I was just expecting to feel...different. You know? I still feel like myself,” said Kylie. She had expected the walkabout to fundamentally change her. And, in a way, it had. But she didn’t feel different.

It was Lars who answered her. He had finished his shower and was now dressed in a clean shirt and pair of jeans. “But you have changed. The walkabout changes a person.” Lars spoke as a person who knew this from experience. Kylie wasn’t sure how she knew this, but she could sense something about Lars. There was a common experience that bonded the three of them together.

Ordinarily, Kylie would have been pestering Lars with questions. How long had he known Mungo? Why did he call Mungo “Wirinun”? Who was Malena? Yet Kylie gave a simple succinct reply. “Yes. Yes it has.”

“Anyways, I should get dinner started,” said Lars. “I was thinking I could make steak. I could also make lamb chops,” Lars suggested.

Steak.

The word had a very pleasant sound to Kylie, whose stomach rumbled in anticipation.

“Steak,” said Mungo.

“A steak for Wirinun,” said Lars. “And for you, Miss Burns?”

“Kylie.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“It’s just Kylie. No more ‘Miss Burns’ for me.”

“Kylie. Alright then, Kylie, what would you like for dinner?”

“Steak.”

With all the orders accounted for, Lars set out to make dinner. As he marinated the steaks, he also chopped up red potatoes for roasting, and prepared spinach as a side dish. Soon the kitchen was filled with the smell of good things. Hunger began to catch up to Kylie. She doubted she had ever been hungrier in her life, and if the smells were to be believed, Lars’ cooking was going to be something spectacular.

Finally dinner was ready. Grinning with anticipation at the food before her, Kylie cut herself a bite of the thick grilled steak.

“Delicious.”

“Thank you,” replied Lars.

The dinner was a quiet affair. Kylie was too hungry to make much in the way of small talk. The same was true for Mungo. Fortunately Lars didn’t seem to mind too much. They each finished off their steaks, and both Mungo and Kylie went back for more potatoes and more spinach.

They helped Lars with the dishes, and soon they found themselves with hot mugs of coffee sitting around the kitchen table. Soon they were all laughing and swapping stories. Kylie was amazed at how easy it was to talk to Lars. By the end of the evening, the two of them were thick as thieves.

They were interrupted only once that evening.

Seth came into the kitchen. “Hey, boss, the crew was going to go into town for a pint. Want to come?”

“No. I’ll stay with my friends,” said Lars. Seth let them be, and a few minutes later the engines of several trucks could be heard as they drove off into town.

“Well?” asked Mungo.

Kylie knew exactly what he was talking about; a little promise she had made earlier. “Oh, alright,” she said. She unwrapped her sarong and let it drape across the back of the chair. “I hope you don’t mind Lars.”

“Not at all,” replied Lars. He too began to undress. “I don’t normally wear clothes when I’m here by myself. And normally I wouldn’t if it had been just Wirinun. I hope you don’t mind. It is, after all, more comfortable this way.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” said Kylie. She had not expected Lars to undress, but it made her feel more comfortable.

They all stayed up late that night, chatting and laughing, and telling stories. Finally it was Lars who announced that he was tired, and would be turning in for the evening. “Kylie, you can have the same room upstairs.”

“Thanks Lars.”

The three of them left the kitchen. Lars went straight upstairs, and Kylie was about to follow him. She paused when she saw Mungo heading for the front door.

“You’re not staying inside?” she asked. “I thought you said the walkabout was over?”

“It is. I just prefer sleepin’ outside. I’ll have me yurt over me head soon enough.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I sleep in a bed.”

“Nah,” replied Mungo. “You deserve to sleep in a bed tonight. You’ve done great on this journey. Even better than ya realize. See ya in the mornin’, Kylie,” he said as he turned to leave.

“Sweet dreams, Mungo.”

They parted ways for the night. Kylie went upstairs to the bedroom she had stayed in the last time they were here. There, on the bed, were the clothes she had left. This was the single longest period that Kylie had spent in the nude, and the sight of clothes seemed almost foreign to her.

She set out the clothes on a nearby chair, and slipped underneath the covers of the bed. The mattress was soft and forgiving. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was fast asleep.

Mungo was waiting in the living room when Kylie came downstairs the next morning. She was dressed not in her sarong, but in the clothes she had left behind earlier. Mungo said nothing. She would go nude where it was appropriate, and from here on out, she no longer felt it was appropriate. That was her right. Mungo was proud of her for being so adventurous thus far. He had not expected she would spend as much time nude as she had.

“Are we heading out already?” she asked.

“Not yet,” replied Mungo. “Lars is cookin’ breakfast.”

Bacon. Kylie smelled bacon.

“Well, I guess we can stay for breakfast,” Kylie said jokingly. Lars was a fantastic cook, and she liked the idea of sticking around for breakfast.

They had coffee with breakfast that morning; delicious hot black coffee. Kylie had really missed a morning cup of coffee, so to have one was a real treat. Ordinarily, this would have been the highlight of her breakfast, but Lars easily outdid the coffee with a breakfast of bacon, eggs, and buttered toast. It was some of the best food Kylie had ever tasted, and it made her anxious to get home and make food from her own kitchen.

They finished breakfast, helped with the dishes, and said their goodbyes to Lars.

“So you’re going then? It was good to see you Wirinun. Next time don’t take five years to come and visit again,” said Lars.

“I won’t,” said Mungo shaking Lars’ hand vigorously. Kylie could tell from the seriousness in his voice that he intended to follow through on his promise.

“And, Kylie,” added Lars, “you’re more than welcome to come back here any time you like. You’ll always have a warm bed and a hot meal at Kurrajong.”

“Thank you, Lars,” said Kylie. “Thank you so much for opening up your home to me. And you’re a real excellent cook, too. If you ever wanted to get a change of scenery, you could probably make a great chef at a nice restaurant.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you to say, Kylie, but I’ll never get tired of this scenery. I guess you could say I’m ‘married’ to the land. But do come back some time.”

Kylie said that she would. And you know what? She meant it. She would come back, and would definitely bring Mungo if she did. Lars was a really nice fellow, and she was glad to have his friendship in addition to Mungo’s.

Not wanting to waste any more time, the two hikers left Kurrajong, headed back

to the waterfall, and then? Back home. Kylie was giddy with excitement. With a good breakfast in their bellies, they hiked all day, not stopping food, only taking a few short breaks for water. They reached the waterfall much quicker than Kylie had expected. Perhaps after all this time walking, she was starting to build some muscular endurance. There was no way they had hiked this fast when they had gone the route in reverse at the beginning of the trip.

There camped beside the waterfall, was a familiar blue tent.

The Kirby's tent.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" asked Kylie. One encounter with the Kirbys had been plenty. "It's not going to be sundown for a few hours. I'm feeling good enough to walk to the end of the track."

"Really?" asked Mungo sounding surprised. "Well, I guess we could but I called Zoot this mornin' to say we'd be in tomorrow. We could walk to the car park, but I'd rather camp here."

Kylie didn't want to argue with Mungo. He did, after all, have a point. Why camp in a parking lot when a beautiful natural waterfall was available? With any luck, the Kirby's were out trekking for the afternoon, and wouldn't be back until the evening.

No such luck.

"Kylie? Is that Kylie Burns?" asked the familiar voice of Tim Kirby. Amy was with him.

"Yeah, it's me," she said hoping to avoid small talk—again, no such luck.

"Well, hey there, Kylie," said Amy. "So you're still out here on vacation then?"

"Yeah. Have you been here the whole week?" she asked. The tent didn't look like it had moved, and both Tim and Amy were wearing the same clothes as when they had first met. Tim wore his khaki shorts and floral print shirt, and Amy wore her sundress. Then again, Kylie was wearing the same clothes too.

"No," said Tim. "We just got in this morning. We had such a great time here, we just had to come back. Now isn't that lucky running into you here like this?"

Kylie obviously had different definitions of luck than Tim and Amy Kirby.

"So when are you going back on the air?" asked Amy. "They've had that, what's her name - 'Annette?' - on the whole time you've been gone."

"Actually I'm not going back on the air," said Kylie. "Lynette is the new anchor," said Kylie correcting Amy's mistake with the name. "In fact, I'm leaving the news business for good."

"I'm leaving the news business for good."

Had she really just said that? When exactly had she made up her mind? It must have been at some point between their night at the lake, and the night at the Flying O Station. Yet having said it, she recognized it for truth. She was not going back to the world of the TV news. She had other plans for her career, and for her life, that did not revolve around the TV news.

Tim and Amy's jaws dropped in surprise. Even Mungo looked surprised, in a way that seemed to say, 'I knew it, but even I'm surprised to hear you say it.'

"What? Really? That's too bad," lamented Tim.

"Yeah, no offense to Lynette, but she's not very good," added Amy.

"Now why is that?" asked Kylie.

"She's too...perky," said Amy. "Look, I know that she's young and energetic, and

that she'd probably make a good sportscaster. But as a news anchor? It all seems a bit inappropriate. You can't be perky and report the real news. Because the real news isn't always happy. You have to be serious sometimes, like when a disaster hits, and I just don't think Lynette is serious enough to do your job."

Kylie immediately corrected Amy. "It's not my job anymore. It's Lynette's. And she'll grow into it. Even I had to grow into it. I wasn't a great anchor my first few years, but I got better." A week ago the news of Lynette's shortcomings would have been music to her ears. But now? Now, if anything, she felt a sort of camaraderie with Lynette. She knew all too well the scrutiny that goes into a life behind a news camera. She was done with the TV news, and wished Lynette all the success she could muster.

With the news of her departure from the TV news the conversation drifted to other things; politics, sports, books, movies. Kylie was surprised to learn that behind the Kirby's fandom of her news broadcasts, they were actually very nice people once they could get past the whole 'idol worship.' She was actually starting to like the Kirbys.

They ended up sharing a communal campfire. It was nice to see Mungo get a much needed break from starting the campfire. The Kirbys also offered to share their dinner of beans and rice over tortillas. This time, Kylie accepted their offer. Mungo did too. There was plenty to go around, and every one ate their fill that evening.

They spent the evening talking and making jokes. Kylie was surprised to discover that she was having a wonderful time. Were these the same Kirbys that had annoyed her so much a few nights ago? They were clearly the same people, so it must be a different Kylie Burns who was interacting with them.

After a while, Mungo announced, "I'm goin' for a swim." Just as he had on their first night of the trip, he swam in the pool at the base of the waterfall.

"Are you going to swim as well?" asked Amy.

Not getting to swim on the first night was something that Kylie had lamented. The water looked pleasant and inviting. Mungo looked like he was having a good time. "Oh, that's alright," said Kylie.

"You should," said Tim. "Amy and I went for a swim earlier this afternoon, and it was great."

That little extra bit of encouragement was all that Kylie needed. "Alright, I'll do it," she said. Kylie took off her jeans and her T-shirt. The Kirby's gave her supportive grins. Kylie then took off her bra and panties. The look on the Kirby's face? Priceless! Gone were the supportive grins, and in their place were looks of shock and surprise.

It was amusing to Kylie that the Kirbys had been accepting of Mungo's nudity, but were so surprised by her own. At any rate, she didn't care. She was going to have her swim.

The Kirbys meanwhile beat a hasty retreat back to their tent, arguing as they went.

"Come on Tim, let's go!"

"But I..."

"Now! You know you didn't have to say anything."

"Me? You were the one who started it."

"I did not."

"You did so."

Kylie and Mungo enjoyed their swim without interruption. When it came time to

get out, Kylie was forced with a dilemma. She did not have a towel. She could use her sarong in place of a towel, but that meant that she couldn't use it as a blanket. In the end, she decided to air dry. She did not redress, and slept on top of her sarong. Mungo slept a few meters away on the bare dirt. The Kirbys did not give any indication to suggest that they would come out of their tent this evening.

Kylie had pleasant dreams that evening. None of them were about Fisher's Creek.

Kylie awoke the next morning. The sun had been up for a while, but Mungo was still asleep. Better to let him sleep a bit longer. He had pushed himself hard these last few days. They both had.

As Kylie began to wake up, her eyes were immediately drawn towards the beach around the waterfall. There on the beach were a pair of khaki shorts, a floral print shirt, and a yellow sundress. Undergarments were strewn about rather haphazardly.

Kylie strained her eyes. Behind the waterfall were two faintly visible shadows, in the shape of their campsite neighbors. Even above the noise of the waterfall, Kylie could hear them.

"Ha ha! This is kind of fun!"

"Shhhh! Do you want to wake them up?!"

Kylie turned to her traveling companion, and nudged him awake. "Mungo wake up."

"Huh?" he asked groggily.

"Let's go," she said quietly. "Let's go home."

"O...okay. Are ya sure ya don't want breakfast?" He asked.

"Positive. Let's go." She was about to leave, but stopped. "Give me just a second!" She ran off and came back a few seconds later. "Okay, now I'm ready to go."

"What was that all about?" asked Mungo.

"Oh, I just left a little 'surprise' for the Kirbys," said Kylie as she gave him a knowing wink. "Let's get going."

They discretely packed and left without ever alerting the Kirbys of their departure. Sure they might be a little disappointed to see that Kylie had left without saying goodbye, but they ought to be thankful. More than anyone, Kylie knew that skinny dipping was an act best done with close friends. An unwanted audience had spoiled the experience for her when she was a child, and had indeed spoiled things for many years to come. She would give the Kirbys all the privacy they needed.

Meanwhile, back at the lake, the Kirbys had just finished their swim. "That was kind of fun," whispered Tim as he slipped his shorts back on.

"Yeah, it was," said Amy as she put her dress back on. She surveyed their campsite. Something about it had changed. "They left!" she said when she realized that their campsite neighbors had vacated the campsite.

"Huh, so they did," said Tim a bit surprised.

"It was probably because you were making too much noise," chastised Amy. "Leave it to you to scare them off!"

A wry grin came to Tim's face. "I'm not so sure about that..." He pointed to a spot on the ground by their tent. "Look."

There, scrawled in the dirt was a message for the Kirby's. It read 'Kylie Burns'

followed by an email address, and 'Koala Bay Bares' followed by a phone number. It was the message that Kylie had left behind for them.

"Well that was nice of her," remarked Amy. "But I don't get what 'The Koala Bay Bears' is all about."

"Ha ha! I get it," laughed Tim. "Koala Bares, not Bears. Get it?"

"I don't see what you're laughing about. I don't see what's so funny about...oh, wait, I just got it!"

Again, Kylie and Mungo made good time. They stopped to eat berries along the trail, as they had done on the first day of their hike. But tonight? Tonight they would be home and could have anything they wanted for dinner. Kylie was mentally weighing the options in her head. How about fish? Or pasta? Or a nice piece of chicken? In some ways, the anticipation of the meal was likely to be better than the meal itself.

Home.

She was almost home.

As they hiked on some of the more trafficked trails, it was interesting to see how people reacted to Mungo. During their first trip through, there had been a few people who had reacted unfavorably to Mungo's nudity. But today? Everyone they met seemed to be in a good mood. People smiled and waved.

At last, they came to the parking lot. At the sight of a certain familiar VW beetle, Kylie's spirits soared. No more hiking! Hooray! The car's owner was standing next to the beetle. He was wearing the same clothes as when he had dropped them off. And, yes, he still looked like a tourist.

"Zoot! It's so good to see you," Kylie gushed she ran forward and gave Zoot a hug.

He returned the hug. "It's good to see you too, Kylie."

Mungo was close behind. "I don't suppose you'll wanna hug me," he said. "I'm covered in ash."

"You think that's going to stop me?" said Zoot, who gave Mungo a big bear hug. "I don't care if you get my shirt dirty. What do I need clean clothes for anyway?" He laughed at his joke. They all did. "Let me take your packs," he said putting them in the boot. "I bet you're ready to get home."

Kylie and Mungo each admitted that, yes, they were.

"You can have the front seat, Mungo," Kylie offered.

"Nah. I wanna sit in the back." So that was how they sat. Zoot drove, Kylie sat up front, and Mungo sat in the back. Mungo's reasons for sitting in the back quickly became obvious. He stretched out and fell asleep in the back seat. Kylie didn't wake him. He had earned a nap.

"So...how was it?" asked Zoot.

"It was great," said Kylie, and indeed it had been. "It was tough, and I don't think I've ever been more tired, sore, and dirty ever before in my life," she admitted. "But all in all, it was fun."

"Yeah, tell me about it," said Zoot.

So Kylie did just that. She told him about bush walking through the park and meeting with the Kirbys. She told him about Kurrajong. She told him about their trek through the rugged outback; about what they ate, how they started fires, and about some

of the birds and animals they had seen. Kylie told Zoot of their scary situation, when they nearly ran out of water, and Oscar had come to the rescue. And she told him of the voyage home. There were a few details that she omitted. She didn't talk about her failed attempt at a documentary. There was nothing to talk about there. She also didn't mention her dreams, and how Mungo had 'walked' in her dream. She didn't know if Mungo would want something like that kept secret.

"Sounds like a great story," said Zoot, "but I don't believe all of it."

"You don't?" asked Kylie a bit surprised.

"Yeah, that part about Oscar? Sounds fake to me. Nobody would believe that."

He added, "I don't doubt that there was an emu, but there's no way it was Oscar."

Kylie did not argue the point. If Zoot didn't believe her about Oscar, that was his decision. She believed what she believed. "It was a really amazing experience. It helped me get some perspective on my life. And my career."

"Yeah, Loxie filled me in on that," said Zoot. "I'm sorry to hear about you losing your job. So you're holding up alright?"

"Better than alright," said Kylie. "I...I learned that there's more to life than TV, the news, and my career. I don't know what I'm going to do next, but I'm not going back to the world of televised journalism. And I don't think I ever would have come to that realization if I hadn't gone on the walkabout." She could swear that when she said that last part, that Mungo had smiled at her from the back seat. But when she turned around, he appeared to be deeply asleep.

"Well, it sounds like you've got it all figured out," said Zoot.

"Well, I wouldn't go THAT far," said Kylie. "But I feel good."

"Good," said Zoot. They were nearing the gravel road that lead to the Koala Bay Bares. "Hey, we were planning on having a welcome home dinner. You'd be one of the guests of honor. You interested?"

"I...I'd really like to be getting home. I'm sorry, Zoot," she hoped she hadn't hurt his feelings. "I would just like a quiet evening at home. I need to unwind, eat my own food, use my own bathroom, and sleep in my own bed. I hope you understand."

"After all that time in the Outback, I can understand that. How about next time you drop by, we'll make you dinner?"

"That sounds good," said Kylie. "Please give my regards to the folks at the Bares." Zoot promised he would, as he drove the short remaining distance on the gravel road.

Finally, they arrived at Koala Bare's parking lot, and Zoot pulled the car into an empty space. The parking lot was empty of people, and for that Kylie was thankful. She liked her friends at the Koala Bares just fine, but she really just wanted to go home. If anyone besides Mungo or Zoot knew she was back, she wouldn't hear the end of it until she had personally said hello to almost everyone at the resort. This was better. It would let her get home without making her feel guilty about not staying longer.

Kylie's heart soared. There was her car! In less than an hour she would be home. Zoot got her pack from the front boot, and helped load it into Kylie's car. She gave him a hug, and thanked him for the ride. She offered to give him some money for petrol, but Zoot declined.

"So are you going to say goodbye to Mungo?" asked Zoot.

"He's still sleeping. I wouldn't want to wake him," said Kylie.

“He won’t mind,” said Zoot. “I’m sure he wouldn’t.”

So Kylie went to the passenger door and opened it. She gently shook Mungo awake. “Mungo? Hey Mungo?”

“Hmmm...yeah,” he said yawning.

“I’m going to go,” she said. “We’re home now.” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I had a great time, Wirinun,” she had let the Wirinun slip on accident. “It was fun. Thanks, Mungo.”

He smiled warmly. “Yer welcome, Kylie.”

They said their final goodbyes, and she got into her car and drove away. As she drove off, Kylie suddenly felt a twinge of loneliness. After being with Mungo 24 hours a day for so long, she knew she would miss his constant company. He was a friend, a true friend, and she had already begun to miss him. She would go to visit him at the Koala Bares soon—as soon as time permitted.

Yet the loneliness passed as she pulled up her driveway. It was replaced with feelings of relief. She unpacked her car, and got the hide-a-key and opened the front door. Kylie dropped her pack in the front hall.

Home.

She was home.

## **Chapter 16: Home at Last!**

Once inside, Kylie was confronted with a serious dilemma. Shower first? Or dinner? Admittedly, she was hungry. All she had to eat that day was berries. Then again, she felt grungy and desperately wanted to be clean. She smelled like someone who needed a shower.

A shower. A shower came first. Kylie went upstairs to her bathroom. She turned the water on nice and hot. The mirrors in her bathroom immediately fogged up. Kylie could care less. She left her clothes in a ball on the floor, and stepped under the water of the shower.

She had enjoyed her various swims during the walkabout (both the real ones and the one metaphysical one), but nothing compared to having heated water. She turned the tap up just a little more. Normally she didn’t like her showers this hot, but tonight she made an exception. Kylie half expected the waters to run brown from all the dirt. She had expected to need to shower for an hour to get fully clean. Almost disappointingly, she got clean rather quickly. She shaved her legs and armpits, and after that stayed under the water for a few more minutes, before she decided not to waste any more water.

After her shower, she applied an ample amount of facial cream, and various moisturizers. Perhaps she used these products in excess, but she wanted to feel and smell as clean as possible. She left her clothes on the floor of the bathroom. Laundry would have to come later. Now it was dinner time.

She went downstairs to look for something to eat. It was painfully obvious that she needed to go to the grocery store—perhaps tomorrow. But she found a bottle of pasta sauce and some linguine in her pantry. Through the magic of seasoning, and by carefully attending to the pasta, she managed to prepare a nice meal. Sure, it wasn’t as good as the one Lars had prepared a few nights ago. But you know what? That didn’t matter. She

was home. This was her kitchen. This was her dinner, and it was fantastic.

She left her dishes in the sink. Dishes like laundry would have to come later. Her bed was calling to her. She went to her bedroom, and slipped underneath the covers and sheets. The feeling of her smooth skin against her high thread count cotton sheets was amazing. “Ohhh...I’ve missed this,” she murmured, as she drifted off to sleep.

She awoke at 11:06am the next morning. She never slept in this late, and ordinarily she would feel guilty about it. But after the walkabout? She had earned every minute of last night’s sleep.

Kylie went to the kitchen, and fixed herself a cup of coffee and had it with toast and coffee. Ah, coffee. Of all the things she had missed on the walkabout, she missed coffee the most. The hot beverage warmed her to the core. She followed her breakfast with a shower. Sure she had gone to bed clean last night, so she didn’t NEED a shower. But she sure wanted one. So she did exactly that.

So what to do today? Technically she was still on holiday; a vacation that was only halfway over. If she wanted to go to the Koala Bay Bares today, she could. There was nothing stopping her.

Instead, she decided that she needed to take care of a few business matters. The first of which was a call to Steve, her producer, or rather, ex-producer. She did not enjoy what she had to do, but it had to be done. She would turn down the offer to stay on as an assistant-producer.

Kylie picked up her mobile phone and dialed Steve’s number. She was not looking forward to making this particular call, but it had to be done. Be strong Kylie. The phone rang.

“This is Steve.”

“Steve, It’s Kylie,” she said speaking into the receiver.

“Oh, Kylie, I wasn’t expecting to hear from you for a couple more days. What’s new?” There was a pause. “Have you reached a decision on the assistant producer job?”

“I have.”

“Oh, that’s great. Listen, stop by as soon as you can. We have the paperwork all drawn up and ready for you to sign.”

“No, Steve, listen,” said Kylie. “I have made up my mind. I have to decline your offer.”

“I...I don’t understand...” said Steve sounding very confused.

“I’m just not interested in being an assistant producer,” said Kylie.

“...I can’t make you an anchor again.”

Did Steve always have such a problem listening? “I’m not asking to be an anchor. I’m...I’m done...” It was true. She was ready to put the world of TV broadcasting behind her.

“I...I don’t understand...”

“I think it’s time I moved on. I had some time to think about things on my holiday, and came to the realization that I want to do something else with my life.” Kylie added, “listen, there’s no hard feelings here. You were only doing what the studio heads told you to do. We had a good run, and I enjoyed working with you.” That was true. Steve was a great producer, and was respected as one of the best in the business.

“...Alright. I can’t say I understand your reasons. But I do wish you luck. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes, can you give me a good recommendation?”

“Sure, what sort of jobs are you looking for?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” said Kylie. “I’ll be in later this week to get my things and clear out my desk.” There was a brief pause. “Goodbye Steve.”

“...Bye...”

And that was it. Just like that she had quit her job of 7 years. It hadn’t been as bad as she had expected. There was barrage of questions. Steve had not pleaded that she reconsider. It had felt like a clean break. Just like that, she was free. She would need to find a job eventually, but for now, she had plenty of money to pay her bills.

The next thing on her list was to return Carl’s camera. She gave Carl a ring and set up a meeting for that evening to return the camera.

After driving across town, Kylie knocked on the door to Carl’s house. Carl came to the door. “Kylie, it’s great to see you, come on in,” he said opening the door and motioning for her to come inside.

“Okay, but just for a while,” said Kylie. She had a few other things that she wanted to attend to back at home; pay bills, read mail, fix dinner, etc., etc. She followed Carl inside, stepping into the front hallway. “I wanted to give you back your camera,” she said handing over the Scout. “I’m sorry, it’s a little dirty...”

Carl turned the camera over and surveyed it for any damage. “It looks fine, nothing a little canned air and a cleaning cloth can’t fix.”

“And here are the batteries. They’re both dead.”

“Nothing to worry about,” said Carl. “I can charge them back up, and they’ll be good as new.

“And here’s 20 for the tapes,” said Kylie stuffing a bill into his hand.

“Kylie, you know I can’t accept this. Consider the tapes a gift,” said Carl.

“Well, thank you for the gift,” Kylie said graciously.

“So...?” said Carl fishing for more information.

“So...what?” asked Kylie.

“Oh, come on! You know what!” said Carl. “Your documentary, how did it go?”

“I’ll be honest,” said Kylie, “filming didn’t go well.” That was sort of true. She had run out of batteries and been unable to film the end of the trip. Yet that wasn’t the whole story.

“Really?” asked Carl sounding surprised. “I hope it wasn’t anything to do with the camera. Ah jeez! You know I probably should have sent you off with the Venture model. It would have been more to carry, but it probably would have done a better job. I’m sorry Kylie.”

“Carl, relax, it wasn’t the camera.”

“No?”

“No.” Kylie explained, “you see, when I lost my job as a news anchor, I had this great plan to go out and get this incredible exclusive story. I thought that I could sell the story and use it to leverage my way back to being an anchor. The thing is, as I was out getting the story, I came to realize that I didn’t care if I ever got to be anchor again.”

“But you’ll be a producer, right? You took the job they offered you. Didn’t you?”

Kylie shook her head no.

“Really? Really Kylie are you sure about this?” Carl seemed really disappointed — more disappointed than Kylie had ever seen him before.

“Is everything all right Carl?” asked Kylie.

“Yeah, I guess...”

There was something more that he wasn’t telling her.

“Lynette’s mean!”

Kylie had to giggle at that last one. The way Carl had said it, made him almost sound like a little kid.

“Don’t laugh. I’m serious. She’s always yelling and telling Macca and I how to do our jobs,” said Carl.

“Look, she’s probably just nervous,” said Kylie. “She has a lot riding on her shoulders being the youngest anchor on television. She’ll grow out of it. And besides, I was mean.”

“...No...no you weren’t.” The hesitation in his voice was comical.

“Of come on Carl, even you don’t believe that. Look, I know I could be difficult at times. But we can joke about that now.”

“I guess...” He still seemed glum.

“So what’s bothering you?”

“Are we...are we still going to be friends?” asked Carl quietly. “Look, I don’t have too many friends, and I would really appreciate it if we could stay friends.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about Carl,” said Kylie. “I’m sure we’ll still be friends, and the same goes for Macca too.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Sure I do. I tell you what, how about we get together this Friday night for steak and beers.” After the week she had just had, there was no way she was going to pass on steak and beer.”

“Sounds good.”

Kylie said her goodbyes to Carl. She assured him that they would stay friends and asked that he give her regards to everyone at Channel 5. He had said he would. She got into her car and drove home.

It was now getting late in the evening, and Kylie was ready for dinner. Now that she was home, she could get back to eating on her schedule; three square meals, at their regular times. She glanced into her fridge. It was not quite empty, but she did not find anything she wanted. She would have to go to the store tomorrow.

She checked in her freezer. It too seemed empty, until she happened upon a thin square box that was coated in a layer of freezer ice crystals. She chipped the ice away from the box to see what it was.

Frozen Pizza.

Jackpot.

Kylie turned on the oven and put the pizza in. She turned on her CD player to listen to some music while she waited. In a short while the pizza was ready. Kylie sat down at her table and had a few slices. It wasn’t good pizza (few frozen ones truly are) but after a week in the Outback, it tasted amazing. Plus, it meant that she could have the leftovers for breakfast the next morning. Cold pizza, now there’s a breakfast you can’t get in the bush.

After dinner Kylie decided to have a bath. She had already had a shower that morning, and though she had not been sweating enough (or even at all) to merit a bath, she had one all the same. After spending her time in the Outback she was having hot

water once again.

She decided to pamper herself. She decided to have a nice warm bath—with bubbles! It was a piping hot bath and it was exactly what she needed. She submerged herself in the water so only her face was above the water. Kylie had a nice tub, to be sure, but it was times like this that she wished that she had a backyard pool. She loved to swim, and would need to get back to the Koala Bares as soon as possible to use their Olympic sized pool—as well as their Jacuzzi. Kylie took the opportunity to shave her legs and armpits. She used all of the fancy soaps and lotions that she had missed so badly on the walkabout. By the end of her shower, her skin was feeling incredibly smooth and soft.

She toweled off and put on her robe. She still smelled of apricots from the body wash she used. It was a pleasant smell; one that made her very glad to be home. Strolling about her home in her terry cloth robe, she made her way into the kitchen. She popped a bag of microwave popcorn and poured herself a nice full glass of red wine.

She settled into the couch with her popcorn and her wine. Kylie wanted to watch some TV, but after looking at the schedule of programming, nothing sounded good. The tape of her and Mungo's trip was sitting out on the coffee table. Should she watch it? She had already decided not to edit it and produce it as a documentary, but did that mean she couldn't at least watch it. Why not?

She got the tape, went over to the VCR and put the tape in. Kylie settled back onto the couch to watch the tape. She dimmed the lights and put the bowl of popcorn next to her on the couch. Kylie munched on her popcorn and sipped on her wine as she watched the video.

As she watched the video, she realized that it was a bit boring. After all, there were almost six hours of unedited footage. It would take all evening to watch it. So she watched the video with her hands on the remote, constantly alternating between the "Play" and "Fast Forward" functions. She would slow the footage down for parts that she found interesting, such as the footage of Mungo climbing the tree or starting fires, but she would fast forward past some of the parts that she found boring. The parts that were boring included many of the conversations on the trail. It wasn't that she found Mungo boring, far from it actually, but it just wasn't as good as enjoying his company in person. She turned away from the screen with the shot of Mungo killing and cooking the snake. That part still made her a bit squeamish.

Kylie was a bit surprised, though, at the quality of the footage. She didn't have much experience behind the camera, but her lack of experience was not obvious from the footage. Each shot seemed perfectly framed. The panoramic shots of the landscapes conveyed the broad and vast nature of the Australian outback. The shots of Mungo were good too. Despite the lack of professional makeup, and the fact that he was usually covered in ash, he was surprisingly photogenic. The shots of the flora and fauna were amazingly crisp. It was an impressive video to say the least. She could have easily edited the video down and made a good production. That was, of course, if she had intended to produce the video (which she did not) and if the video had succeeded in capturing the return trip home (which it had not).

Another thing Kylie found surprising was the shots that Mungo had taken of her. She had very little experience with a camera, and yet had managed to take some very good shots. Mungo, however, had no experience, and had produced some absolutely

incredible shots. The framing, the lighting, the shadows, and literally everything about his shots were near perfect. There was no way an amateur could produce footage this good, and yet there it was.

Kylie was amazed at how happy she looked on camera. As she fast forwarded through the tape every single shot of her had her smiling, laughing, and generally enjoying herself. Given the amount of complaining she had done on the trip, there should have at least been a few shots of her looking grumpy or upset. There weren't any.

For that matter, there seemed to be a disproportionate amount of shots with her in them. She had only remembered Mungo using the camera on a few occasions, and yet he seemed to have gotten at least a dozen shots. Granted, most of the camera work was her own, but there was more of Mungo's footage than she had remembered.

After fast forwarding she finally got to a point where the first tape was over. She put in the second tape, and began to watch it. There wouldn't be much footage on the second tape—maybe only an hour, and then she lost battery power.

She quickly made it to the end of the footage on the second tape, and the TV screen went black. That was the night she had run of batteries; which had effectively ended her documentary prematurely. "Well, guess that's all she wrote," Kylie murmured aloud.

Yet the screen went from black to back into focus. There was more? No there couldn't be. It wasn't possible. Yet the images on her TV screen proved otherwise.

It was footage of their night at the lake; the night of their skinny dip. The shot began with her and Mungo running into the lake. It captured their splash fight, their conversation in the shallows, and their eventual exit from the water. Kylie had to rewind the footage to watch it again. And again. And again.

It made no sense for this footage to even exist. The battery had died. That was it. With nothing to power the camera, how did these shots even exist? For that matter, the camera had been tucked away in her pack. Hadn't it? There was no way the camera was even close enough to the lake to capture these shots.

The footage was...incredible. The light from the full moon provided perfect lighting for their midnight dip. The fidelity was astounding. Sitting there on her couch, Kylie almost lost herself in the moment. It was as though she were back at the lake with Mungo.

Their conversation had been recorded perfectly. The sound quality was incredible. There was no loss in audio quality. There was no way the camera could have captured the sound this well. It simply was not suited for this quality of footage. The video itself seemed high definition (if not even beyond that). Yet the camera was not suited for high definition film, and Kylie's TV was not an HDTV. This footage made no sense.

As the Kylie on the screen was exiting the lake, Kylie hit the pause button on her remote. The image of her remained static on the TV screen. She was about to hit the power button and go to bed, but she stayed there on the couch looking at herself on the screen. Even though it was only a video, she was amazed at how good it looked. She doubted she had ever looked this good on film before; and that included her time with Channel 5 News. Yet despite the lack of makeup, she looked incredible. It was impossible to tell that at the time this was filmed she had not shaved her legs or washed her hair in several days. Her skin had this creamy white appearance from the light of the

moon and the water beading off her skin. She looked as though she had stepped off the canvas of a Botticelli.

“Wow, I look really beautiful,” she remarked to herself. The words hung in the air. “I’m...beautiful?” she said with an uncertainty in her voice. She had never thought she was beautiful; maybe pretty or cute, but not beautiful. Yet the image on the screen was all the assurance she needed. “I’m beautiful,” she said aloud. “I’m beautiful,” she repeated more emphatically. “Oh my god, I’m so beautiful.”

Tears flowed openly from her eyes. They were tears of joy. In all her 38 years of life she had never allowed herself to think that she was beautiful. But now? There was no more lying to herself. There was no more deceiving herself. She saw herself as she truly was.

Beautiful.

“I’m so beautiful,” she cried.

She got up and opened the patio door to her balcony. Kylie stepped out onto her balcony. The wood of her balcony felt good on her bare feet. The night air was cool and refreshing. Slipping out of her robe, she hung it on the railing of the balcony.

“I interrupt your regular programming for this breaking news. I am Kylie Burns. I am 38 years old. I am beautiful, and I have my whole life to look forward to,” she broadcast this information into the dead of night. She didn’t know if she had woken up any of the neighbors, and frankly she didn’t care. If there was anyone who could see her out nude on her deck, she didn’t care either. She was beautiful.

## Epilogue

Back at the Koala Bay Bares Kylie found Mungo out lying in a grassy field. Oscar was napping nearby. So the emu had found his way home, just as Mungo had said he would. “They told me I’d find you here,” she remarked.

“Who’s ‘they?’” asked Mungo acknowledging Kylie’s presence.

“The kookaburra,” said Kylie pointing to a bird in a nearby tree. She did not say whether or not she was joking. It was best to let Mungo figure that out for himself.

“Yer lookin’ well,” said Mungo giving her a hug. “You too, Wirinun,” said Kylie returning the hug.

Releasing the hug, Mungo asked, “So yer gonna start callin’ me ‘Wirinun’ too, huh?”

“Yes,” replied Kylie adding, “when it is appropriate.”

“So how’s the editin’ goin’?” asked Mungo. “Have ya finished yer documentary?”

“I’ve decided not to go through with production on my documentary,” said Kylie. “I’ve also decided to give the evening news a break; a permanent break.”

“So I’d heard,” replied Mungo winking. He didn’t say how he’d heard. It was best to let Kylie figure that out for herself. “So what’ll ya do now?” he asked.

“I hadn’t exactly figured that out yet,” Kylie said truthfully. “I was thinking, though, that it should be something special; something I’ll really enjoy.”

“Sounds like a beaut plan,” said Mungo.

“Oh, by the way, I’ve brought you a little something,” said Kylie. She reached

into her purple purse, the one with the green polka dots, and got out Mungo's gift. "It's a copy of the tape from the trip," she explained. "It's the only copy I made. It's the only copy I'll ever make. This way you'll have a copy, and I'll have a copy." She knew Mungo did not have a TV or VCR, but that was irrelevant. He would appreciate the gift all the same.

"Thank you, Wirina," he said graciously accepting the gift.

"What was that, you just called me? Wirina?" asked Kylie. "That's a beautiful name. What does it mean?"

"It's somethin' I made up. It means medicine woman. Sorta like a counterpart to Wirinun." Mungo explained. "You have the makings for a very powerful medicine woman. If you like, I can teach you more."

"That sounds good, and all," replied Kylie, "but maybe later. Right now I could really go for a swim in the pool. Would you care to join me?"

"Ya read my mind."