

Chapter 1: *Guuma-li*, gathering

Dane Owen squinted under the restraint of fences, proximity to the outhouse and smoke that curled into the blue air. The feeling of being pushed from pillar to post sat like a hunk of spit at the back of his throat. He swallowed, adjusting the sticks surrounding the camp oven loaded with potatoes that had been salted by his father's generous hand. Things had tightened, most certainly, and would continue to tighten as long as they were off Bhonda. *'Be right, for sure*, Bubaa had said when he leaned into the screen door of their new gundhi. *Look there Gunii, pots an' all!* He whistled when they poked into the kitchen. The substantial wood stack in the corner of the yard, the rotating hills hoist, the spindly bumblebox were met with equal enthusiasm. Majorca was secretly pleased with the state of the floors, imagining sweeping them daily and feeling a small pinch of pleasure. *Better 'en dirt ay Gunii?* Dane asked his mother, smiling at the gruffness of her face.

She avoided his gaze, glancing here and there, taking it all in. The plaster rosette around the ceiling light, the floral carpet in the lounge and the way the previous occupant's furniture had left indents where the pile had become pressed down to floorboards, weighted rubbings. She considered how she might fit another armchair.

Dane watched his mother, more interested in how she was taking all this than the features of the house. *She's playing her poker face*, he thought.

It'll do, she said solemnly, lifting the sack of flour onto the pink formica bench, *for now*.

Bubaa threw a glance toward Dane, grinning, saying, *tough woman to please, your Gunii, enni?* as he pressed his lips onto her smooth cheek.

They were triangular, each another's edge. Indefinable without the other. More than that, they were an island and their fierce connection to mob, to community, to *Country* made them more like an archipelago.

As Dane crouched by the fire, an oily row of yellowbelly hung fresh and slick from a curl of wire attached to the clothesline, waiting. Murmurs of acknowledgement had passed between the fish and the fisherman in his quiet unhurried way, and gratefulness would swell inside him as their flesh warmed his belly shortly. Their gills flexed wide with the wire threaded through and their lips pointed to the bright sky. There was some tragic beauty about them, Dane reckoned, when fish were out in the air. Like a secret told. Or a mystery spoilt.

Someplace else a diesel motor revved, the butcher unlatched his door and a broom brushed over the corner store's landing collecting mostly dust, a cigarette butt and a crumpled paper bag that had contained assorted liquorice just yesterday. Someone pushed their baby in

a pram, the rhythmic squeak of the springs accompanied soft humming as the mother sung up the day to her precious *birralii duul*. Beyond these the wings of birds circled, ravens scrapped over a day-old wallaby carcass, a blue-faced honeyeater patiently worked the bark of a red gum until it divulged a fat juicy grub. In a not quite cognisant way, the fisherman knew all this to be happening that morning in his hometown, in part because those things usually happened, but also because he was ever-present, his mind was almost always within the place he was standing.

His father emerged from the back door, two long pointed knives at the ready and handed one to Dane as they both removed a fish from the wire. They squatted near the soil, each with a yellowbelly angled in their hands as they scaled and gutted the catch. Dane's calves contracted tightly. It had been a long way and he had better get used to it. Many more mornings like this ahead 'til he could get a bitta coin, after all, they would be paying rent now.

Bubaa had started the fire earlier, had picked the slimmest sticks and coerced the flames with a flick of the lighter under a curved hand. The crinkling of the fire sent smoke in ascending coils passed his pearly face. Eucalypt smoke dusted the dry air with a stillness that anyone unaccustomed to it would find oppressive. But Dane did not. Never had. No matter how scorching it got.

Fish by fish they lined the yellowbelly onto a discarded school desk lid. Sweet fish scent mingled with the men's as their fingers pressed into flesh, turning innards outward. A small *booglie* was exhumed, the fish's last supper, and several small shrimp. Their deft fingers were slippery with juice, slicing in places and flicking lines of bones clear.

"Dance down at the camp tonight," Dane said, his eyes remaining on the blade.

Bubaa's cheek creased toward his eye, sniffed and shifted position a fraction. "You going?"

"Might." He finished a fish, laying it on the empty edge of the desk lid. "Better keep Clayton outta trouble," he snorted. His younger cousin Clayton was always upsetting the ladies, telling this one he loved her and then kissing another.

"Mum and me might go down for a dance," Bubaa said, reaching for another fish and scraping the long edge of the knife down its flesh, the scales flicked into the air and landed in a silvery scattering on the dirt. The pair continued gutting; slicing the bellies and reaching inside the fish to remove the wriggly guts.

A *burrugarrbuu* landed on the fence, the wire swinging under its weight. It eyed the growing mound of guts on the dirt and wondered if they might become her next meal. Her

head tilted as she observed the men, they were familiar to her eye. The younger was *maliyaan* mob, she'd seen him swim the river and knew it to be his place. The older was her own mob from far more than a few paddocks away, he squatted and worked with stilted energy. His bones were stiff with old age maybe.

Slowly the stack of flesh rose on the desk top, a chopping board of sorts.

"Did good today son," Bubaa admired the feast. "Sing out to Gunii for the johnny cakes." Glancing toward the magpie perched on the fence expectantly, he collected the guts and crossed the yard, flinging them beneath the saltbush, "here you go." The bird bobbed gratefully and darted under the leaves to retrieve her prize.

After the last fish was prepared Dane went indoors to wash the muck off his hands. He pushed his shoulder onto the back door to avoid touching the handle. His mother was in the kitchen, bent over a large round enamel bowl. "Fire's ready," he told her.

Standing at the bench her stomach pressed against the metal edge, Majorca reached into the bowl, where a diminishing mound of dough rested and grabbed a large handful in her flour covered hands. She pressed each handful with her knuckles onto the bench, flattening it into a shape about the size of a bread and butter plate. Once each johnny cake was formed she stacked them onto a battered biscuit tray. The flour that dusted her hands and forearms streaked distinctly across her chin and cheek.

Dane washed his hands at the sink, noticing the sinews in his mother's forearms as she kneaded. He thought about her lifetime of hard work. Cooking and cleaning for landholders wealthier than they could ever dream of. So wealthy they owned more than one car, and that was sayin' something. He was *gagilbiyal*, sorry. So sorry. He knew this house was not where she wanted to be. This was not her idea. She had just agreed to her husband's suggestion. She just said *yes* to keep him happy. But now, in their first night in this house in town, she would need to find a reason to be happy here. A dance down the Camp would be the best thing for her.

When only loose flour remained in the bowl, she picked up the tray of pressed dough and eased it carefully through the rear door toward the fire. Dane followed his mother out.

With a short-handled metal shovel Bubaa raked the bright coals from the innards of the fire toward the front and placed a piece of fence gauze on top. He rearranged the camp oven to the rear of the flames, careful to balance it on timber. Majorca leaned over the coals and laid several rounds of dough onto the wire rack her husband had placed at the front. She was so near to the fire, almost within it, Dane marvelled at how much heat her hands could tolerate before she snatched her fingers away. Quickly her forehead decorated with sweat

beads that welled and rushed down her cheeks to be swallowed by the flames. His mother always made their johnny cakes. Dane loved them, like today with fish and potato, but he especially loved it when you broke open the bubbled pocket of bread, felt the hot air escape from inside and filled it with syrup that was brown with molasses.

“What you reckon, Mum?”

Majorca placed the dough one by one onto the rack. She watched them until the dough bubbled and rose slightly and then she flipped them with her fingers so that their criss-crossed underbelly was uppermost. When the underside was cooked she lifted them with her fingertips and flung them, steaming, back onto the biscuit tray.

“Mightaswell,” Majorca said.

“You say that like you got someplace else to be,” Bubaa eyed her.

“You don’t know where I might be now we are uptown,” she teased.

“They be calling you an uptown black down the camp tonight,” Bubaa gave a low whistle. “Better get our fancy shoes.” He was laughing. They always wore their best shoes to dances, ones with slippery soles.

“No matter. Uptown now. Stop your lairising and cook me a feed.”

Bubaa gave Majorca a mock salute and she pushed him in the arm. He gasped deeply and his smile fell away until he regained his balance. He efficiently followed the same sequence as the johnny cakes with the fish on the gauze above the fire. Placing a few fillets between two squares of wire, turning onto both sides and depositing each one onto the tray, beside the pile of cooked johnny cakes.

After they had eaten, a small mound of needle-like bones was piled in place of the flesh. Dane carried in the three plates and sat them on the sink. He went into the small bathroom and turned on the cold tap. The water gushed hot, the sulphurous scent of the artesian bore filling the tiny bathroom. He cupped the water in his hands and splashed his face, wiping the back of his neck with a damp handkerchief. Now he would be walking to the river every day until they could get work. His father found the long walk difficult as he got older, so Dane would need to go on his own.

When Dane was a young fella Bubaa had always taken his children fishing, mostly with his brothers, but sometimes the girls if they wanted. Once they had walked a long way downriver, past the disappearing fence line, past the second bore drain, where they raked a bucket brimming full of *booglies*. They had walked too far into the afternoon and as night fell and shadow cast itself long across the land, Bubaa decided that they should stay out on the river for the night.

A feeling swelled inside Dane, fretting for his mother, worried that she would be sick with worry also. Usually they must be home by dark. Any *birralii* caught roaming after dark would get a real flogging. If the coppers caught you that was even worse. Your Mum would come begging for the key to open the lock up.

Please Sergeant, he is just a boy, please let him come home with his mother.

And if the pleader was sorry enough, if the pleader was remorseful enough that *birralii* would hear the key slide into the heavy lock. Hear the cop threatening, *There won't be another chance for him. Take better care of him, do you understand?*

And as the boy was led out from the lock up he would see his mother's shoulders hunch over and her face drop to the vinyl floor like a speck of dust to be swept out, minute inside those four walls. So much smaller than the immense woman she was back home. Almost half her real size. And he might wonder.

His father had made a fire after the *gundanoos* had collected some scraps of wood from beneath the fluttering trees, passing whispers about visitors to each other.

As a boy, Dane had fluctuated between a deep connection to the river and to his mother. The pervading feeling was so similar he couldn't distinguish between the two. They were complimentary. And although he felt his mother in the smooth heat of the place, it also illuminated her absence from it. That night, as his brothers had cleared the ground of stones and scraped a shallow curve the size of a bowl into the dirt of the bank to press their hips into, he had cried for his mother back in their warm *gundhi* at Bhonda Station. His eldest brother, David, who felt the responsibility of his youngest brother most heavily, dug his curve close to Dane.

"You will see Mum just after sun up *Dhagaan*." He had reached his hand out and touched Dane's shaking arm. "If you cry, mother will feel it through the *dhaymarr* and die of sadness in the night."

Dane's sniffles stopped like a rush of river water had been flung over him. The restless quiet of the bush filled the space between voices. He considered. The comment planting a more terrible thought in his mind. Thinking out loud he whispered, "she won't will she?" He was unable to contain his sniffles with the possibilities.

"Remember when she knew you stole that packet of smokes?"

Dane sniffed his response.

"An' when ya *booraayed* and we was all in the room but Gunii knew it were you, 'cause she knows the scent of your stinky arse."

He nodded, Mum did always know which one of them had *booraayed*.

“And when ya said ya didn’t need to *giili-y* so you could stay watching Bubaa sheer that big ram.”

He remembered as the piss had trickled down the inside of his trousers until a puddle formed on the shed floor, seeping through the floor boards. His mother really had known all those things. Grief and worry racked him shaking the youngest brother’s shoulders as he lay on the *dhaymaarr*.

Fits of laughter peeled the air, a palm slapped the dirt. “Nah, *Dhagaan*. They messing ya up. Stop crying brother, Mum’ll be ‘right.’”

Amusement and snorts continued into the gradual darkness.

“Mum’ll be putting Sissy to sleep.”

Dane sniffled.

“Want me to sing for ya?” David asked. Before Dane could answer he started crooning, “telephone to glory, oh, what a joy divine!...”

The other boys joined in, some broken, some still unbroken. They were a mischievous, tormenting rabble those boys. After they harmonised the chorus at least four times they launched into another of Jimmy Little. They dreamed, perhaps, that they too might make it good someday.

“Gee she’s lubley.” George pondered.

“Who?”

“Sarah Sutton!” Jim shouted.

“Even her name rolls off the tongue,” joined another brother.

“Her name rolls almost as good as *shut ya face*,” George threatened. “Nah, this spot.”

They put aside the occasional nip from an ant, the hard thrust of a stone in their ribs, the length of the night that comes with sleeping rough. Each of them missing their claypock mattress at home and the warm Sunshine milk drink that Gunii made before bed to help them drift off to sleep. And the way her hand brushed the side of their faces when she was proud of them, or had missed them.

Near Dane, his father had been listening to his sons. He tended the fire and had offered no counsel, he allowed his boys time to experience this feeling. Deep true learning should not be rushed. The boy must know this feeling so he can find his way home.

Dane began crying afresh, this time quieter than before, for the place had started its murmuring at the coming of night.

“We cannot be untangled from this world we walk in,” he gazed up at the fluttering leaves as they grew silhouetted by the changing colours of the sky, the most magical of

canopies. “We take the place of the air, but the air also takes its place in us. We move the water with our bodies, but that water fills us also.”

He paused for a long time, there was no rush. The night would be long.

“We can change this place,” he nodded into the surroundings, “make things, but all of those things have come from this place, so they are only a little bit our doing.”

The sons let the voice of their father envelope them while the solid scent of the earth pressed into them. Their father did not interrupt the sounds of the bush again. His wisdom, as Dane knew now, was to let dust settle so you can clearly see what surrounded you.

Baayangali.