

Alice

Tick. Tick. Tick. The clock above the public bar is being willed toward midday by a dozen pairs of glazed ebony eyes.

Bowen's already nice and warm inside. All the rough edges have been smoothed over in the two hours since opening. He could stay here all day talking to mates, but the price is steep compared to bottle shop bargains and there are many more hours in the day to get through. Anyway, she'd soon turn up and there'd be hell to pay.

A clank of padlocks and the shriek of a rusty roller-door signals the opening of the bottle. Bowen shuffles across the tired lino past the broken smoke machine, pushing the door into the white heat of the day. There's a queue already in the drive through and the young bloke behind the counter is going through the motions on another shift he needs to complete before he's got enough to escape to the coast.

'Cask mate,' Bowen says in the young bloke's direction. He chucks a blue note and a small goldie onto the worn counter.

Bowen pauses midway across the street to wait for a shiny four-wheel drive to slide past. He steps into the dust trail and breathes in, tasting the red desert at the back of his throat, feeling the late afternoon sunshine on his bare back, his heartbeat easy and low despite the approaching climax of the hunt. He emerges from behind a mulga tree and edges through patchy grass, watching a large wallaby intently. Its ears twitch and he stops dead, back foot slightly off the ground, eyes narrowed, muscles tight. He's close enough to see the sun dancing in its auburn coat. He can smell the creature in the breeze. The salty blend of oils and saliva tell him it's a young male. It will cook well. He can feel the texture of the stringy flesh on his tongue. The wallaby stoops to chew at the base of a plant and Jandemar moves forward like silk, spear high and steady.

'Ay Bowen,' a voice says from across the street.

'Fuck off Jacky.'

'S'matter eh?' Jacky says, arms wide.

'You owe me 'n you know it,' Bowen snaps a look, turns his back, tightens his grip on the cask and walks quickly now along Espie Street. That purposeful stride is a clear warning.

Constable Gary Davis is fiddling with his tie. It's day two after a transfer from Sydney and he's still getting his head around the names and ranks of the other coppers. He stares at a white board in the briefing room, trying to decipher the handwriting.

'Forget it, mate, that case is closed. In fact, they're *all* closed,' says Sergeant Robson, placing a polystyrene cup on a desk and scraping a seat behind a desk full of papers. Robson glances at the

blank face. 'Didn't they tell you Davis? We've not only got the highest per capita homicide rate in the country, we've also got *the best solved* homicide rate in the country. It's an easy job here mate. The dumb fuckers line up to confess.'

Bowen never feels more like an Arrernte elder than he does when he's halfway through a cask of McWilliams port. He doesn't notice the rubbish in the long grass under the crippled Kingswood. He forgets all about how he needs to replace the front door of the house after he kicked it in, chasing her down one night. Even the stains in the bare mattress he's sprawled on have disappeared. Bowen rolls his head back and loses himself in the silhouettes of branches on blue drifting back and forward over the roof. The sun flickers through the trees and there's a light breeze on his face. He edges closer now, feet slipping silently into the ochre sand, a sheen on his brow as he concentrates on the moment. He hears his father and his father's father. The lessons learned as a boy. The craft that will pass to his son and his son's son. He calculates the trajectory required to make the kill. The wallaby is chewing intently, its focal range is short and posture relaxed. It senses no danger. Jandemar draws his hand back slowly, his lean body coiling for the release.

'Yo bastard!' she screams, running up to the verandah.

'Fuk'n basted! Where the fuks the...'

Bowen waves the back of his hand at her and turns away.

'You fuk! You fuk'n shit. Where is it? You spend it all dincha?' she says, a crooked index finger trained on the base of his skull.

She kicks at him wildly. Sensing the impact, he rolls to one side, drawing the cask under him. The top of her foot slaps hard in the small of his back.

'BITCH, you fuk, fuk'n BITCH!!' Bowen screams, arching in pain. He staggers to his feet, whirling around, eyes big, black and red. She's already in the kitchen, hands rifling through pockets. Bowen rises up behind her, draws his hand back slowly, his body coiled for release. She turns and his fist smashes into her eye socket, cracking the top of her nose. She's out cold before she hits the floor.

Davis doesn't need eyes to know how poor it is here. He can smell it. It's a potpourri of rotting food, dog shit and human perspiration. Robson puts a hand on his revolver and slams the door of the Landcruiser. There's the distant whine of an ambulance that won't be needed.

They mount the steps of the verandah. She's sobbing, rocking backward and forward, cradling her man, half his blood soaked into the mattress and a kitchen knife in his thigh.

The spear cuts the air in a perfect arc, sunlight flashes along its length. Bowen watches dreamily as it closes in on the wallaby. It slides smoothly into the back of the creature's neck. His father would be proud.

'Wha'd I tell you Davis? Case closed.'