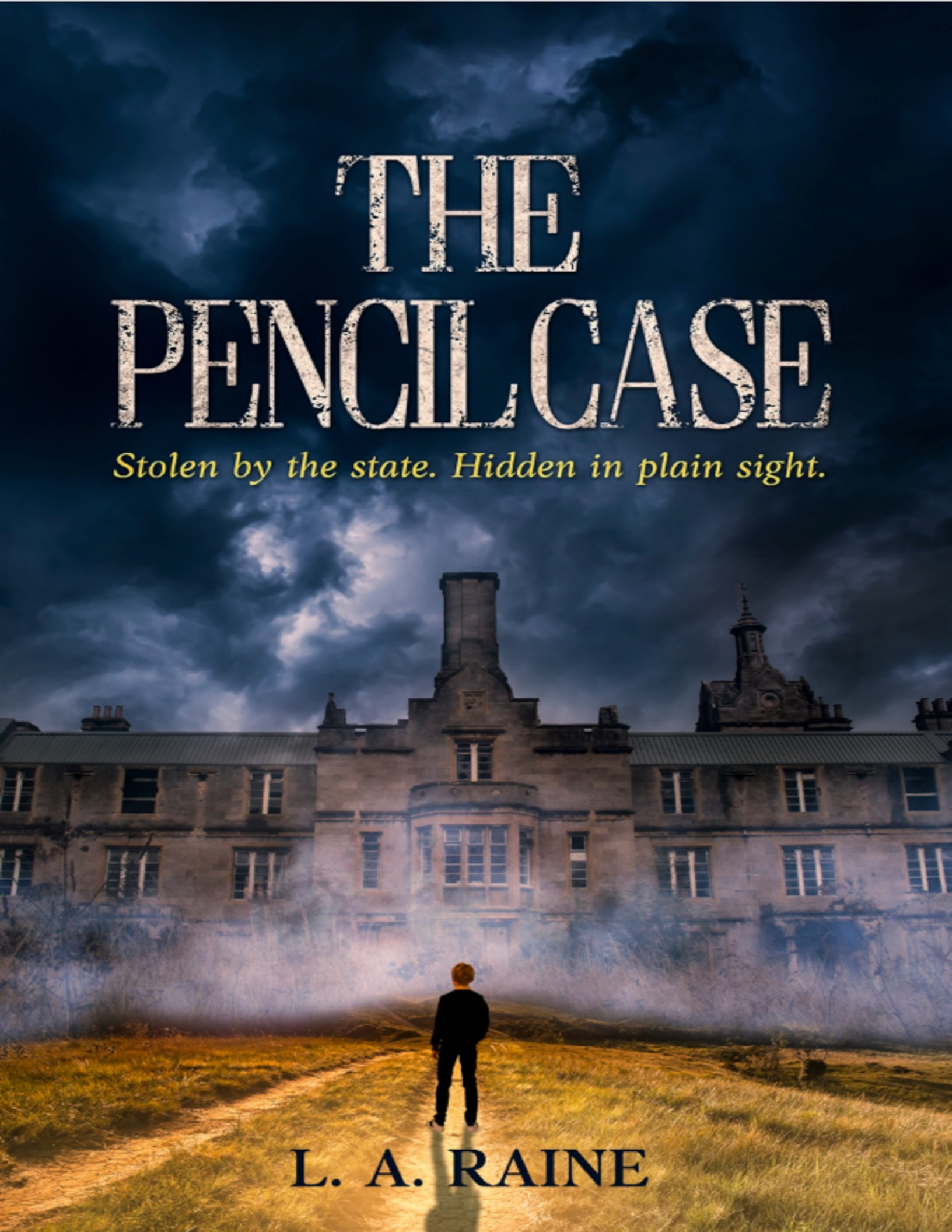
THE
PENCIL CASE
Stolen by the state. Hidden in plain sight.
L. A. RAINE

PRAISE FOR THE PENCIL CASE

Testimonials relate to the earlier edition of this work, published under the name Lorraine Cobcroft.

"Read even half a chapter of this and you'll know straight away you're dealing with a phenomenal writer and a fascinating story. This book is as important as it is riveting."

— Richard Walsh, author

"*The Pencil Case* is a phenomenal read… This story must be told. I hope to see it in film."

— Cherrye Vasquez

"A beautifully-written, utterly moving piece of art."

— Faith Rose

"…A very powerful story… a story that should be heard."

— M.A. McRae

"I spent a quiet moment this evening inside *The Pencil Case*, reading with the kind of focus that makes the outside world

fall away. The moment that truly stopped me was the seemingly small act of a blow with a pencil case that set in motion a lifetime of injustice. The way you unfold that moment, not as an isolated incident but as the beginning of systemic cruelty, compelled me to slow down and absorb every word. From that point on, the story refuses to let the reader look away.

What stood out just as strongly was your unflinching honesty. The way you trace Paul's journey through institutions, stolen identity, and bureaucratic betrayal creates emotional stakes that feel devastatingly real. Nothing is sensationalised, yet nothing is softened. This is the kind of book readers don't simply read; they endure it, reflect on it, and carry it with them."

— Linda Jones

"…A confronting account of a disgraceful time in Australia's history. From the 1900s until around the mid-1970s, government policy across the nation was to remove children who they considered to be 'at risk' in their home environment. This welfare legislation was enacted by people who were untrained and institutionalised themselves, people who were unable or unwilling to distinguish between genuine abuse or acknowledge that lack of money did not mean a bad home life…

A great deal has been written about the indigenous children who were taken from their homes and fostered—sometimes adopted—by white Australian families—but white children who were similarly torn from their parents were not

and are still not adequately acknowledged by the Australian government.

The Pencil Case is a deeply emotive story of one family's tragedy… Mrs Cobcroft has crafted a story which illustrates the beauty of the human spirit, the ability of a strong person to rise above the circumstances which, through no fault of his own, dogged Paul Wilson's life. There is nowhere to hide, emotionally, physically or historically for perpetrators or victims in this memoir. A must read for those who care."

— Diana Hockley

THE PENCIL CASE

Stolen by the state. Hidden in plain sight.

A NOVEL



L. A. RAINE

RAINBOW WORKS PTY. LTD

Revised Edition.

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by Lorraine Cobcroft writing as L.A. Raine

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DISCLAIMER

This book is a biographical narrative based on a true story.

While the overarching historical events, institutional environments, and systemic experiences related in this work are factual and accurate to the best of the author's knowledge, the narrative framework has been dramatised for the purpose of storytelling.

To protect the privacy and identities of real individuals, certain names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed, and some characters are composite representations based on multiple real-world individuals. Dialogue and specific scenes have been reconstructed using a combination of personal recollections, archival records, and creative licence to accurately capture the thoughts, emotional truths, and experiences of the protagonist.

The publication of this work is intended to serve as a historical testimony to a specific era in Australia's welfare system and is not intended to defame, misrepresent, or cause harm to any living or deceased person, family, or organisation.

No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were utilised in the writing, editing, or production of this novel.

READER CAUTION AND LANGUAGE WARNING

Until around the mid-1970s, government policy across Australia was to remove children they considered to be “at risk” in their home environment. This is the story of one of the victims of this policy.

Although the story framework (the journey with the lawyer) is fiction, and details have been changed, most of the incidents related happened as described. To create a story—and because memory is sometimes unreliable, interpretations and perspectives vary, and access to detailed knowledge of some incidents is limited—creative licence has been taken in describing some people and places and relating details of events and conversations. Names of people and places have been changed, but some characters are named or may be recognisable as known persons.

The story is told from diverse observations and fragmented, sometimes unreliable memories, including the memories of individuals whose perspectives were shaped by trauma and years of suffering pain, struggle, and cruel injustices. The author has endeavoured to be true to the protagonist's memories and representations, and to accurately reflect his thoughts and feelings.

For the sake of historical accuracy, the author has remained true to the manner of speech of the characters at the time, including the use of profanities and language that may, by today’s standards, appear racist, discriminatory, and, at times, offensive.

Reader caution is advised.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Lesley and Edith Tuck, in humble recognition of their dedication, generosity and hard work caring for homeless children.

I attended a reunion of 'their boys' a few years ago. One of those present proposed a toast to Les and Ede. It brought tears to my eyes when over two dozen men, all middle aged or older, raised their glasses and, with no prompting, chorused, "To Mum and Dad". There could be no more fitting tribute to the memory of a couple who gave so much to kids who had so little.

In the words of one who loved them, "If they aren't saints in heaven, they'll do me until some come along."

"To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight."

— E.E. CUMMINGS

"Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide."

— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

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Coming soon
Also by L.A Raine: Mortgaged Goods
Also by L.A Raine: A Will of Deceit
About the Author

CHAPTER 1

COURTROOM BULLSHIT



OCTOBER, 1956

"BULLSHIT!"

Frederick Wilson thrust a handful of torn paper towards the bench and stormed from the courtroom. Outside, he spat in the gutter, wiped sweat and tears from his face, slung a worn coat over his shoulder and stumbled down the street.

Slumped shoulders reduced his height to a neat six feet. His tie hung loosely now, its knot slightly askew. A narrow belt drew shiny, oversized trousers in to fit a scant waist, but the creases were sharp. Despite its fraying collar, his shirt was crisply starched and snow white.

At the corner, he hesitated and glanced back uncertainly. Suited men emerged from the courthouse. His children must be still inside. He remembered how they looked as he passed them, leaving: little Jenny, tearful, trembling, gripped that grubby doll like a lifeline; Paul, white–faced, lips set tight, stood tall and glared defiantly at the judge.

"A chip off the ol' block," he thought with a surge of pride. "He'll survive. He'll take care of his sister too, if they let him."

Another terrifying thought ripped through his being. He faltered and almost fell. "God, don't let them separate them," he mumbled.

Righting himself, he stared for a brief moment at the group congregating outside the courthouse.

"Bastards!" he screamed. "Curse you lousy bastards!"

He turned the corner and was gone.



JUNE, 2010

"It's been over 50 years now," Paul said, his tone more reflective than wistful, "but I remember me well. I was a bright, confident, happy–go–lucky kid—like my dad, Fred, if war and bullshit hadn't beaten so much of him out of him. Like my brothers. Sure, they're bushies—a bit rough around the edges. But they're decent, hard–working, and smart in their own ways. Their skins fit comfortably, and they wear she'll–be–right–mate grins and answer 'You bet' to every 'Can you?' question. That was me, too, until I was eight."

Ern shot Paul Wilson a sympathetic smile as they bounced through the entrance to the desolate property. Paul parked by the scant remnants of the old shack, and they climbed out of the sleek Rolls–Royce Ghost, now thickly coated with powdery–pink dust and showing faint red sweat stains on its plush dove–leather seats.

This case was challenging Ern's allegiance to professional principles. Of course he was aware of the tragedy of the 'Stolen Generation', and some of the victims' stories had moved him. But interviewing the players in Paul Wilson's saga had affected him on an emotional level, and he struggled to maintain an acceptable level of detachment. Confronted, now, with a mental image of a black car transporting terrified children away from the familiarity of this bushland home and into a foreign universe, his intellect acknowledged the logic and valid intention of removal policies, but his emotions resisted. He took several deep breaths and ordered his stomach to be still, but it was miserably upset.

He sniffed the air and listened to the sounds of the bush, snapped a million images of nothing and scribbled copious notes. He felt and smelt the dust, the blades of grey grass and the eucalyptus leaves.

Paul had told him how his dad predicted rain by observing the changing colour of tree bark, and now he peeled away the papery–white bark on the tree trunks to examine the red and yellow hues beneath.

He was thorough, but Paul had come to expect that of Ernest Stanley. He was the consummate legal professional. He'd become, over the past few months, a trusted mate. By now, Ern knew much of Paul's story, but he wanted to fill in the gaps in intricate detail. He wanted to understand the world Paul came from, and what drove him. He wanted to get to know the man Paul Wilson was, and the man he might have been.

The colours of the land had begun to soften and the shadows of the sparse scrubby trees lengthened as they started for the town, wheels crushing spiky, low, blue–grey grass flat against the hard, red earth. The sun's hot fingers painted streaks of burnt orange and brilliant red–gold over the distant horizon.

Paul pulled into the parking lot of the quaint little country motel, climbed out of the Rolls and thrust the keys in his pocket. Ern gathered his papers.

Paul phoned his wife, and Ern warmed in admiration as he listened to the one–sided conversation. In the area of relationships, at least, Paul had beaten the odds. He was resilient too. Ern had probed beneath his armour, seen the wounds and scars and the furious yearning for justice. But Paul presented, publicly, as a man content with his lot in life. He was equipped with a delicious sense of humour and a firm conviction that, one way or another, things would always eventually turn out all right. He was a survivor, not a victim, and that presented Ern with a challenge he embraced with vim.

They made selections from the mini–bar, switched the television on, and sank into the sighing depths of a worn cotton–covered sofa. In the morning, the reliving of Paul Wilson's saga would begin.

CHAPTER 2

A BUSH HOME



1948 *TO* 1956

I GUESS the bullshit really started when I was about five. I was born in '48, so it would have been 1953. We were living in a bush town in western New South Wales. A toff came to visit us, demanding money.

The man wore a crisp white shirt and a dark tie and was clean–shaven, with oiled hair slicked back from a pale forehead. He held a zippered leather folio with gold embossing on the front in his soft white hands. He shouted at Mum until she cried.

My dad was thin, but muscled from hard work and his hands were big and rough. The man looked no match for him, so it shocked me to see my big, strong father tremble in his presence. Dad swore at the man, but the colour left his face, and afterwards he sat at our kitchen table with his head in his hands. Mum said for once she wished he had money to go to the pub and drown his sorrows.

Dad spent a good deal of time in the pub, especially in shearing season. All the shearers were heavy drinkers. It was punishing work in those stinking hot sheds, lifting and throwing sheep and bending over them with blades, pushing those heavy clippers as fast as their hands would move. There was no automation, and shearers were paid piece rates, so they went at it hard. Dad was a gun shearer. He averaged more than 200 sheep a day.

When he wasn't shearing he went droving, broke horses or helped with planting or harvesting on nearby farms. It was hot, thirsty work. A few cold beers at the end of the working day was a

well–established tradition among Aussie workers, but Dad often had more than a few. Mum complained bitterly when he came home 'full', as she put it, but I liked that it put him in a cheerful, joking mood. He was often moody and glum when he was sober.

We lived in a little white cottage on the edge of town, close to the river. It had running water and electricity and a neat little garden edged with a white picket fence. I think it must have been the first home Mum and Dad ever shared. They lived there when I was born, and when Jenny arrived. They lived there when their first–born arrived too. He only survived a year. They laid him to rest under a mound of dirt on the riverbank.

When I was three, Mum brought Ian home to that house. She made a little bed for him in a drawer removed from the dresser. I was jealous of him at first, and annoyed that he seemed to cry all the time. My jealousy passed as he grew older and learnt to play. A year later, another brother, Robert, was born.

A few weeks before that toff came, Dad fell from a horse and hurt his back, so he couldn't work. A week after that visit he hitched his horse to the old wooden cart, loaded some stuff in it, and we left that house for ever.

He shifted us out to a shack on the edge of a big grazing property a few miles out of town. It used to be a worker's cottage, but a fire had blackened all the walls so there were hessian bags hanging where the windows used to be. There were only three rooms, and no bathroom. We washed ourselves, our clothing and the dishes in a huge tub outside the door that we filled with water dragged by bucket from a dam.

It was biting cold in the shack on winter nights and damp in the wet. When my brothers were old enough to sleep in a bed, I had to share with Jenny, because there weren't enough beds for four of us kids. I didn't mind really, because on cold nights we could cuddle close to keep each other warm. On hot nights, we put as much distance between us as possible, but everyone swam in sweat anyway and an extra body in the bed probably didn't make much difference.

Seemed like it was nearly always hot and dry out there. When folks weren't praying for rain, they were ploughing ankle deep in red–brown mud—the river cutting off access to town—and it would seem like the rain'd never stop. Then, for a little while, the paddocks

would be all soft and green and the sheep would fatten and the river would run clean and clear, but it wouldn't last long. The sun was merciless, and it'd quickly burn the grass and lift the red dust again.

The dryness made it hard to grow stuff, and the dust made it impossible to keep a home clean, but Mum scrubbed the big black stove and swept the dirt floors. She placed up–ended packing crates beside the beds, covered them with little cloths, and set treasured ornaments on them.

I helped her plant a veggie garden, and we picked berries and mushrooms in the fields nearby. We caught fish and craybobs. Sometimes she shot a pigeon or a rabbit. Now and again, Dad brought home a sheep or calf. "Road kill," he called them. Run over by a car or bit by a snake or something, he reckoned. We knew most were not.

I pinched fruit from local orchards. Got caught often. The owners would clip my ear and send me packing, but I don't think they minded really. Sometimes they'd give me fruit to take home to Mum.

After I started school, I scrounged cordial bottles and cashed them to buy bread. I loved the soft kissing crust, and I'd always pick at it on the two–mile walk home. I was nearly always hungry.

We had no money for several months after Dad's fall, but when his back started to heal, he started making whips and selling them. Everyone who bought them said they were works of art. I loved to watch, fascinated by the way he sliced and plaited the leather. I loved the raw smell of the cowhide and the coarse warmth of the leather between my fingers. I wanted him to teach me, and I dreamt of being a whip maker one day.

One time, before he started making those whips, he gave Mum a few bob. She gave some to me and asked me to walk to town to buy bread and cigarettes. We'd been living on thin onion soup for a week, so she was excited by the prospect of having bread to go with it. The thought of it had me salivating all the way on the long walk into town.

I passed the little white cottage that was my first home and thought wistfully that we'd never been hungry or cold when we lived there. Then I passed through the government housing estate. It was crowded with tiny fibro cottages with a single smoking brick chimney rising above each little tin hat. In their dusty, wire–fenced front yards, the screeches of frenzied mothers competed with

yapping dogs and bellowing kids. There were about five styles of cottage, repeated in patterns across a dozen streets. I wondered why we couldn't live in one of those cottages.

At the end of the main street, I stopped at Petracca's newsagent to look mournfully at comic books and wish I could afford to buy such treats. I couldn't read, but I liked looking at the pictures. I continued on past Spiros' Milk Bar to Comino's General Store. All the stores seemed to be owned by Greeks. They always had plenty of money. So did the toffs who owned the grazing properties scattered around the countryside, and the shearing contractors. It was only the shearers and farm workers who were poor.

Of course, the Aborigines were poor too. They lived in metal humpies in a settlement on the edge of town and wore clothes the toffs and shearers' wives discarded. The old men grew long beards and sat about smoking and drinking methylated spirits. The women sat in the parks with their legs crossed, watching snotty–nosed kids playing. Some of the younger men worked on farms and their wives helped out in the homesteads of the wealthy graziers. They were good workers, but they'd go walkabout for weeks or months on end, sometimes just when they were needed most. They were a friendly lot, but they didn't mix much with the white folks. Police would move them on when they sat about the street corners.

Mr Comino ladled some milk from a drum into a shiny tin billy, pressed the lid on, and passed it to a lady wearing a wide–brimmed sun hat and high–heel shoes. She thanked him, placed sixpence in his hand, smiled down at me, then clicked across the floorboards and down the wooden steps, dangling her milk pail from a gloved hand.

"G'day, Mr Comino," I said, sidling up to a huge wooden counter and dropping my coins on it.

"Yez tiz," he replied. "Wadda I get for you?" His accent always amused me, but Mum said it wasn't nice to laugh.

"A loaf of bread, please. And Mum wants some cigarettes. She said you know which ones she likes."

He fetched a loaf from a glass cabinet and placed it on a sheet of tissue paper on the counter, wrapped it carefully, and put a piece of sticky tape across where the ends of the tissue joined. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from a high shelf, and I held out Mum's string bag for him to put the bread and smokes into. Then he pressed some

keys on the cash register and it rang a bell as a drawer popped open. The drawer was filled with money.

How nice to own a shop and have all the bread you could eat, and sliced meat, and sweets, and ice cream and all that other stuff, and a drawer full of money as well!

He picked up the money, dropped it into the drawer, then passed me four pennies in change. As tempting as it was to spend it, I put the change carefully in my pocket to hand it back to Mum. It was hard to resist the sticky, sweet smells from colourful jars of jelly babies and caramels on the edge of the counter and the rich silkiness of the ice cream in the big, silver drums that cooled the front section of the store, but Mum would check the change carefully.

On the long walk home, I set the bag down and crouched to remove some burrs from my socks. When I stood, I noticed a dark–coloured snake slowly forming a wide circle around me. I froze. My heart pounded at the ground and my legs went woozy.

"Snakes'll bite if you annoy 'em, son," my dad had said. "But they're much scareder of you than you are of them. If you leave 'em alone, they'll get away quick as they can. If you see one near you, don't move. Movement frightens them. Jes' stay still an' it'll go away."

Somehow, remembering those words didn't reassure me greatly, but I was far too frightened to do anything other than follow his advice and stand stock still and silent. The scaly green–brown creature slithered through the dust, circling my feet. It raised its head slightly to look at me through beady black eyes, exposing a creamy underbelly. I was unable to identify it, but I was sure it must be a deadly variety. Any moment now I would feel its poison fangs sink into my leg, and its venom would surge through my veins. What should I do then? Movement after being bitten was fatal, but there was no–one within earshot to help. I was surrounded by vast grazing paddocks and the odd desert bush or gum tree. Behind and ahead lay miles of soft red–dirt road. Over a mile home, almost a mile to the first lonely cottages on the outskirts of the town, and at least half a mile through the paddocks to the nearest homestead.

I wondered if snakes regarded breathing or heart palpitations as movement. I was careful not to move a muscle, but I couldn't stop my racing heart or my nervous panting. I watched as the creature

slithered around me, leaving a smoothly grooved trail to mark the path it travelled.

If Mum were here, she would shoot it. She often shot snakes that came too close to the house. Lucky she was a good shot, because she always took aim and then closed her eyes when she pulled the trigger. Hated seeing anything die. Always said "poor creature" after, but she was concerned for our safety. Both Mum and Dad disapproved of shooting anything unless it was to eat or for protection.

Occasionally young blokes on shooting expeditions drove near our house or over the paddocks of the station—shooting kangaroos or rabbits mostly. Sometimes ducks. Dad never objected to them killing for skins and meat, but if they left dead or wounded ducks or animals behind he would chase them and yell swear words at them.

"Live an' let live, son," Dad said. "There's an order t' the universe. Every livin' thing exists for a reason. We're meant to hunt for our tucker, and sometimes we gotta kill for safety, but killin' for sport's disgustin'."

He'd say it was okay to kill this snake, though. It was threatening my safety. Only problem was, I had nothing to kill it with. I didn't have a rifle with me, and anyway, this creature would inject its deadly poison before I could raise a gun, take accurate aim and shoot to kill. There wasn't a strong stick within reach. If there had been, stretching for it was movement that would invite attack.

Dad often slid a stick under a snake's belly, lifted it up, and tossed it away from him so that it slithered off in another direction. Not brown snakes, they were deadly. He'd do that with a tree snake. He'd whack a brown snake with a stick and break its back. I wasn't sure I could hit hard enough and in the right spot to kill a snake. If it survived an attack with a stick, it would certainly be angry and strike.

I guess it was only minutes that I stood there paralysed with fear, but it felt like an eternity. Eventually, the snake quietly slithered off to the side of the road and disappeared in a clump of long, grey grass. I stood still for a few moments longer, scared that movement would alarm the creature and cause it to return and attack. Finally, I plucked up courage to move slightly. I picked up my bag, stopped, looked around me, and listened for any hissing sound or rustling in the grasses. When I heard nothing, I took a few more tentative steps.

My progress for the next few hundred yards was painfully slow. I kept stopping to look carefully around me and listen for any hint of the reptile's presence. When I finally relaxed a little and convinced myself the snake had found another interest, I hastened to the inviting shade of a gum tree near the side of the road and sat down to rest. The strain of standing perfectly still and the terror of the moment had left me exhausted.

Sitting there, under scant shade, a savage sun beating down on me and powdery dust irritating my nostrils and making my mouth dry, I was aware of the fierce, stabbing pains of hunger. I could smell the fresh–baked bread—a warm, soft, comforting aroma. My mouth watered and my nostrils twitched.

A little pick at the crust surely won't hurt?

I reached into the bag, extracted the wrapped loaf and carefully pulled away the tissue. The loaf broke neatly at the crease in the middle and the deliciously soft crumbs tickled my fingers. I set one half carefully aside and began to pick at the half in my hands. There was a loud crunch as I bit into the delicious crusty shell, and then my tongue found the silky–soft white middle.

When I finally rose to continue my walk, snakes no longer occupied my thoughts. My mouth was dry, my palms were wet and my bag was a little lighter. A light breeze had wrapped the tissue paper around the tree trunk, pressing it hard against the bark. One half of the loaf was little more than a crusty shell.

I tried desperately to conceive a plan to persuade old Mr Comino to exchange the small amount of change for a half loaf of bread, which cost nearly twice as much as I had in my pocket. I knew he wouldn't. I toyed with the idea of going back to look for cordial bottles, but it might take several days to find enough to pay for a half loaf. I walked the rest of the way home very slowly, with a heavy heart.

"What happened to the bread?" Mum asked when I handed her the bag and change. I stood in our kitchen staring hard at my feet and didn't answer.

"Answer your mother," Dad said. He spoke softly, but I could feel his glare.

"I ate it," I whispered. "I was really hungry and I just started picking little bits off the crust, and before I knew it there was a huge hole in the middle.

"But I can go back and buy some more," I added, hopefully.

"If we had enough money to buy more," Mum said. "But we don't."

The thought occurred to me that we would if she hadn't insisted I buy cigarettes, but I didn't dare say it. I learnt early in life to always be polite and respectful to my parents, and never answer back. Anyway, Dad was already unbuckling his belt, so I settled for pleading "But I was really, really hungry".

It didn't help, and nor did relating my encounter with the snake, which I'm sure neither parent quite believed. I copped a flogging and a stern lecture about stealing being wrong no matter what the circumstances.

I'm sure Dad pinched a thing or two when the chips were down, but he was big on the importance of honesty. He had no tolerance for thieves or liars.

THERE WAS A LITTLE SHED AT THE BACK OF THE SHACK WHERE DAD stored his tools and stacked wood to keep it dry for use in wet weather. He often took me down there and let me watch him clean his rifle and sharpen knives. He showed me how to split chips, start a fire and make a frame to hang a billy. He taught me how to make billy tea. He taught me to shoot a rifle, too, and he let me practise shooting tins off the old chopping block. One day, he brought a pocketknife home for me and taught me how to whittle. We made little wooden dolls for Jenny. Mine were queer–looking things, all bloodstained from nicking my fingers, but I loved copying anything Dad did.

I wasn't allowed in the shed when Dad was away, except to fetch wood for the stove. Every day, when he packed his tools away, he'd warn me never to touch anything when he wasn't around. But the first time he went droving again after his back healed, temptation exceeded fear of punishment. I was fascinated by the way he flicked his file like a knife after sharpening the axe. It would strike a mark in the timber beam above the shed door.

The day after he went away, I climbed up on a wooden block to reach that file. I stepped back, took careful aim and threw with all

my might. It missed of course. Flew right through the open doorway and glided neatly into the middle of a stinging nettle bush. I tried all day to figure a way to retrieve it, but to no avail.

In the afternoon, I filled the wood box by the stove, and then I took the bucket to fetch water from the dam and filled the tub outside the door ready for the evening wash–up. I helped Mum fetch the washing off the line. When Mum started the ironing, I fetched water in a jug for her to sprinkle on the pillowcases to damp them down. Then I helped her fold the underwear and shake the red dust from the towels. When she started peeling vegetables for dinner, I climbed on to the stool by the stove to watch her.

"When will Dad be back?" I asked her.

"Not sure. Four days. A week maybe."

I breathed a little sigh of relief. Time to find a way to fetch the file, maybe?

I felt her watching me closely and I squirmed a little.

"What did you do, Paul?"

I studied my feet in silence for a minute. How come she always knew?

"Come on, son. Out with it. I should have known there was a reason you were being so helpful today. What have you been up to?"

I gave her a pleading look, hoping desperately that being helpful would earn her favour.

"I threw Dad's file and it landed in the prickle bush." I said. "Can you help me get it out, Mum? Please!"

She regarded me thoughtfully for a minute, then shook her head. "Sorry, son. He's warned you often enough not to touch his things."

I slid off the stool and went outside to stare in desperation at that bush. I tried prodding at it with a stick, fishing for the file, but the nettles stung my hands and arms.

Mum made rabbit stew for dinner that night, and it tasted wonderful. After I helped her wash up, I sat on the stool watching the shadows from the kerosene lamp dancing on the hessian window coverings and thinking up stories to explain the file's disappearance. I pictured my father glaring at me as he unbuckled his belt. The only thing I was afraid of back then was the faint hissing sound that belt made as he slid it free of its keepers. It was a sound that made me cringe even when I knew I wasn't about to cop a flogging.

I often spent long, hot afternoons lying on my belly in patchy grass under a gum tree near the gate, listening to birdcalls and drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick. Dad's dog, Rusty, would lie there with me, his head resting on my back, panting hot breath over me. Rusty always went with Dad when he went droving. When Dad came back, he'd come bounding in ahead of him to find me lying there. He'd lick me all over and lie with me to wait for Dad to reach the gate. Then Dad would swing me up into the saddle in front of him to ride back to the shack.

I was lying there the day Dad came back from that trip, but for once I wasn't pleased to see Rusty. He sensed it and whined, but Dad didn't seem to notice. He pulled me up in front of him with a soft chuckle.

"And what have you been up to eh, Towser? I hope you were good for your mother while I was gone. I missed my little mate. One of these days, when you're a little older, I'll take you with me."

I knew I should confess what I'd done, and I was only postponing the inevitable by staying silent, but I was in no hurry to spoil the pleasant mood. He would find out soon enough. When we dismounted, I watched him remove the saddle and I helped him wash his horse down and give it feed and water. Then I followed him into the house and sat beside him while he drank his tea, and he told me stories. He told great yarns—exciting tales, but not always factual, I suspect—about the early explorers and how the country was discovered and settled. I'd often go down to the riverbank and pretend to be one of those explorers, coming back, exhausted, from a long trek—no food or water left, the only survivor from my party.

I sat there listening to him that afternoon, watching Mum roll pastry for a pigeon pie, trying to act as if nothing was wrong. I kept up the act after dinner when he sat outside under the eucalyptus trees and strummed an old guitar. He did that often, and I loved to listen. Sometimes Mum would sing. Dad would talk about his boyhood and his courting days, and months on the trail droving. Never talked about the war though. That subject was taboo. Mum mentioned it to me now and then, but she always told me never to speak of it to Dad. She said he had a real bad time and he often had dreadful nightmares and woke in a cold sweat.

Dad went down to the woodshed that evening, but the axe didn't need sharpening and I guess he didn't bother looking for the file. It

was late the next afternoon when he came looking for me, black–faced, and beckoned me to follow him. He led me to the shed door and pointed at the beam.

"Where's my file?"

For a brief moment, I considered lying, but I knew that would only make things worse. Lower lip quivering, I pointed at the bush. He pondered the situation for a moment, looking first at me and then at the bush, and then at me again. Then he grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, lifted me high in the air, and dropped me right into the middle of those nettles. I grabbed that file and scrambled out of there that fast you couldn't blink, but it stung like hell for hours afterward.

The next day he came home with a pocket full of darts and started giving me lessons in the art of throwing. Taught me well, too! I got to be damn good at it. Used to play in the pubs all the time when I was in the army. Used to win a few quid. In different circumstances—free to travel the circuits—I could've played competition and made a motza, I reckon.

DESPITE THE DISCOMFORTS OF THAT SHACK, I LOVED LIVING THERE. I loved the bush. Except on school days, I was feral and free. When Dad was at home, I followed him around the paddocks and watched him working. When he was away, I played on the riverbank by day and lay in the grass after dark, finding pictures in the stars and dreaming of one day taking a swag and going droving with my dad, camping out at night and making billy tea and damper and sleeping in the open.

From the time I started school I hated the unwelcome restriction of my freedom, and I hated that the kids tormented me because we were poor. In my second year, it occurred to me that I needn't go, but I could roam the riverbank instead, seeking shelter from the rain and the authorities by hiding in the bushes under the bridge.

The river became my haven. I spent countless hours roaming the grassy banks—crackling twigs tickling the soles of my feet—pretending to be an explorer or fisherman. I lay in the sun on the soft, warm sand. Dangling willows on the banks dared me to climb

and swing on their outspread limbs. On hot days, I stripped naked and dropped from the branches into the murky waters.

Dad found out about me wagging and punished me severely. For a whole week I wasn't allowed out to play or to go with him to the shed, or to sit outside in the evenings listening to his songs and stories. The punishment was enough to persuade me, for a while, to suffer long, boring days in a stuffy classroom, chanting times tables.

I wagged again and went down to the river one day in the spring before my eighth birthday. I was walking to school when one of the town kids came up behind me and hit me on the head with a heavy, wooden pencil case. I darted off to the riverbank to escape his bullying. Once there, I figured I might as well stay. Dad's explorer stories were fresh in my mind, and I felt inclined to retreat to my world of make–believe.

I marched up over the hills and across the endless flat expanse, keeping the setting sun always to my right to hold my course firmly south. The soles of my feet burnt. My pack weighed heavier by the minute. My throat burnt, and my belly rumbled. My supplies had dwindled to almost nothing. A pale moon peeped from behind a cloud to mock me. My heart pounded, and a giddy sensation overtook me. Despite the heat, I shivered.

I pushed on into blackness, summoning the last of my courage, concentrating intently on placing one foot after the other and staying erect. If I could reach the river, I could follow it almost all the way back to the camp. There would be water, and maybe fish. There might be some edible growth near the river.

My sides were grazed from numerous falls against rough–barked tree trunks. Pack straps cut into my shoulders. Weakness overcame me. And then, from a distance, came the glorious, rushing river song. On and on towards it, summoning the last reserves of my strength, until, in the blackness, I caught the reflection of a twinkling star, and then the soft shadows of the willows and the glorious sensation of sinking into sand.

I fell face down on the soft bed, lips parted to feel the clear, cool water on my tongue. Gulping, splashing, gurgling, caressing aching limbs with soothing slaps of wetness. Tiny rivulets traced through body hollows, cooling and reviving. I crawled up the bank to drop in a sodden heap on the sand and sleep.

In a moment, bored with this pretence, I leapt to my feet, snatched a bough from the willow and ran to a steeper outcrop of bank to cast a line. The bough whistled as the line whizzed through the air and cut the water. I dragged the bait expertly across the stream, and into a quiet, sheltered bay below. Almost immediately I felt the jerk and gently eased the line in. Again and again the line whistled through still air, and I reeled in my imaginary catch. At last, tired again, I wriggled up the bank to nestle against the wide willow trunk and rest.

A sharp, demanding voice cut the stillness. “What are you doing here, boy? Come here at once!”

My heart sank. I sprang to my feet and tried to run, but the sand swallowed my feet. My chaser was barely three yards behind, puffing loudly. I tripped and fell. A firm hand gripped my upper arm, dragged me up the bank and propelled me into the back of a black sedan.

The man took me home, and I saw the look of contempt as we approached the shack. My stomach churned, and my head throbbed as I watched my captor stride towards the woodshed. I trembled, fearing my father’s wrath and that dreaded strap.

They talked a while in hushed tones. I stared at my feet, waiting silently for that savage grip on my upper arm, the angry roar, the whistle of leather as a deft hand raised the belt, the flicking sound as it turned in the air and began its descent, and the fierce, burning sting as it cut across my upper legs.

There was no beating. The colour drained from my mother’s face and her hands began to shake. She covered her face with her apron, pretending to wipe perspiration from her brow, but I knew it hid tears. My father raged sure enough, but not at me. He raged at the man. He screamed and swore, and the man trembled, face ruddy and eyes bulging.

In the end, it was clear the man won. My father slumped forward, leaning heavily on his axe, gasping. Mum ran into the house sobbing. My triumphant captor grunted, stuck out his chin, bid them good day, and departed in a cloud of dust.

MUM LAID OUT MY BEST CLOTHES, SCRUBBED MY FACE, SLICKED MY HAIR, and twisted Jenny's locks into neat plaits, tied with frayed ribbons. Dad polished our worn shoes, sweating profusely as he spat, brushed and rubbed until he could see his reflection. Mum kissed us and hugged us tightly, and her tears wet my hair.

The black car came again. The fat man sat behind the wheel, silently staring straight ahead. He waited with pursed lips, white knuckles gripping the steering wheel as if, released, it threatened to take flight. Mum collapsed on the old stump Dad used to split the firewood as Dad lifted Jenny in his arms and seated her carefully in the back of the sedan. He shoved me gently, pointing to the far rear door, and he climbed into the front passenger seat.

The black sedan cruised slowly down the track, through the open front gate and on to the main road, where it picked up speed a little as it approached the town. The only sounds were the soft hum of the engine and the crackle of gravel beneath spinning wheels. Dad fixed his gaze firmly on the road ahead, fists clenched, jaw thrust forward and lips tightly set. I studied my shoes. They had never shone so before.

The car stopped in front of the local courthouse. A man with long, white, curly hair and black robes listened while two suited men took turns speaking and the fat man told on me for wagging school and playing on the riverbank.

He said stuff about Mum and Dad—mean stuff. He said they didn't care for their kids properly. He said they lived in filth. I tried to tell the long–haired man that wasn't true. Mum worked hard to keep the little shack clean. They told me to be quiet. Then the long–haired man spoke and hit a little wooden hammer on the table in front of him.

A man collected a piece of paper from the table in front of the long–haired fellow and handed it to Dad. The suited men and the fat man looked pleased with themselves. Dad ripped up the paper and stormed out, swearing.

A woman led us outside. We stood watching the shoppers going about their daily business. Some of the faces were familiar, but apart from the odd curious stare from the window of a car gliding by, there was no sign of interest in out plight.

I heard the monotonous chant from the schoolroom across the street, and, for once, I longed to be there listening to the teacher's

tiresome drone. I would have welcomed her sharp rebukes, and even the master's cane, if only I could erase the events of the past week and go home.

Raucous laughter drifted from the tile–fronted pub on the corner. Men lounged carelessly in the doorway. A tall, grey–haired man leant against the lamppost on the edge of the footpath, hands thrust deep in his pockets. A spent cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth. I recognised him as a friend of my father. He shot a brief, unconcerned glance at me, shrugged his shoulders, and strode off in the opposite direction.

The early spring sun shone bright and warm that day, yet I shivered, standing there in the monstrous shadow of that old stone building. Behind me, two grey–suited men passed casual remarks on the events of the morning in a tone of official satisfaction. I felt sick.

An image of my dad appeared before me, stiff and tense, fists clenched, face twisted with rage. His scream echoed through my head, again and again, weakening each time I heard it. I reached out, but my arms were too short. I tried to call, but the words stuck in my throat. A broken, tormented man faded from view, engulfed in a mist of fear.

The woman crouched and looked sympathetically at Jenny and me. "You're going away on a little holiday," she said. "Soon you can come back and see your mum and dad again, and then your family won't live in a shack anymore."

I frowned at her and shook my head.

"It won't be long. I promise. And then you will have better clothes and shoes to wear to school so the kids won't tease you. And you'll have books and pencils and a ruler, like the other kids, so you won't get in trouble any more for not having the right stuff."

None of that mattered a jot to me now. All I wanted was to go home.

The woman led us across to the black car, opened the door and helped my sister in. I watched her crawl to the far end of the seat, press her frail body hard against the door and begin to bawl. Tears streaked her tiny face. Two watery streams poured from her nostrils. Now and again she lifted a grubby rag doll to wipe her wet face on its belly. She gripped it as though it, too, might at any moment scream profanities and leave us.

The woman motioned to me to follow, but I resisted for a while. I stood there trying desperately to conceive an escape plan. Then the woman pushed me in beside Jenny.

I must not cry.

I sat stiff and erect, eyes clamped tightly shut to hold back tears.

"Don't carry on so, lass," one of the suits said, his voice high and harsh. "You'll be all right. You'll be well cared for where you're going. Better care than you're used to. Far better."

The car door slammed. The fat man climbed into the driver's seat. I reached over and placed a reassuring hand on my sister's shoulder. Her sobs softened.

The engine kicked over. The car eased from the kerb. Down the main street, on to the highway, it picked up speed as the miles fell away and the safe and familiar was left far behind.

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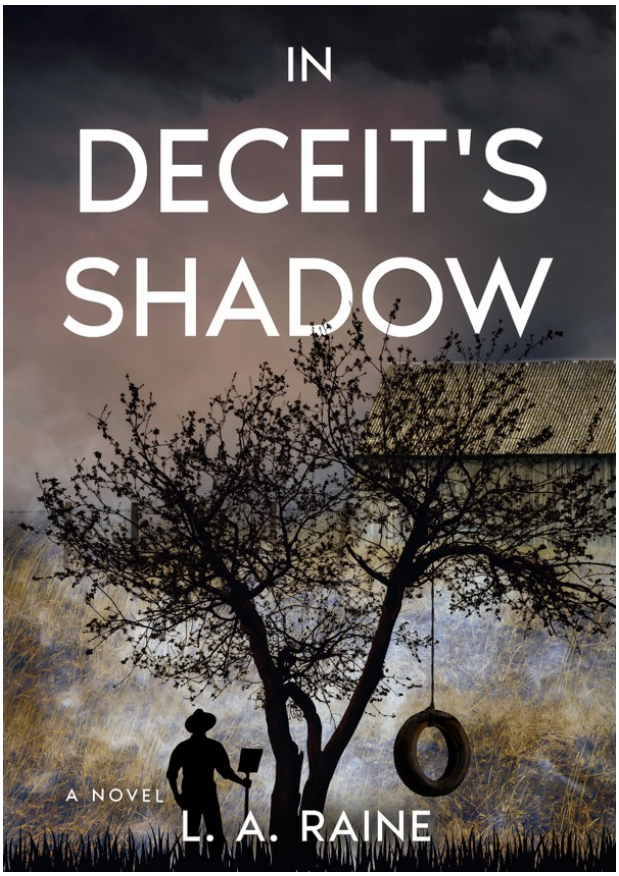
IN DECEIT'S SHADOW



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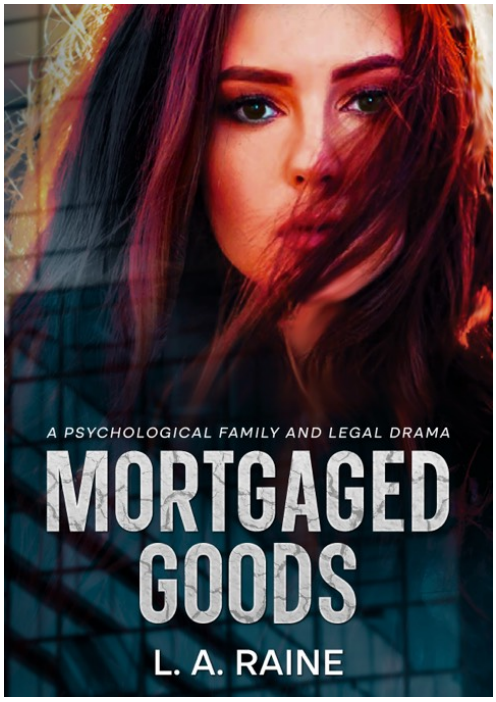

They buried a woman this morning—and with her, a thousand fears and nightmares.

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A carefully crafted legacy. An inheritance born from a lifetime of hardship. A psychological trap that could destroy everything she has fought to build.

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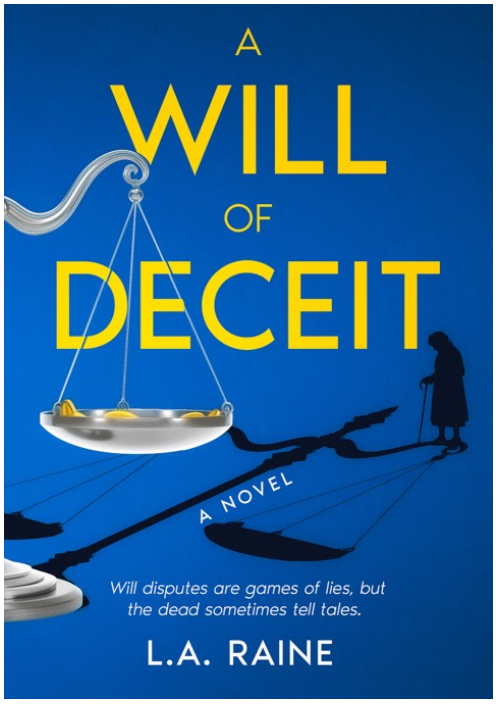

For estates lawyer Brittany McFarlane, will disputes are straightforward. When she agrees to help Joanna Wynne contest a seemingly simple will, she expects an easy win. Instead, Brittany steps directly into a toxic minefield of family secrets.

Beneath the courtroom battle lies a dark history of deception. At every turn, shocking truths emerge about a deceased woman who was never who she claimed to be, driven by a client whose narcissistic ambition hides a ruthless agenda.

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brother's reputation, and push her own fragile mental health over the brink, Brittany watches her life rapidly unravel. Then the package arrives. What it contains changes everything, forcing her to choose between the courts of law and the courts of conscience.

***A Will of Deceit* is gripping domestic suspense wrapped inside a sharp legal frame; perfect for fans of Liane Moriarty, Gillian Flynn, Celeste Ng's and Scott Turow.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.A. Raine is the pen name of Australian author, Lorraine Cobcroft.



Born in Australia, Lorraine spent much of her professional life working as a technical, business, and instructional writer before dedicating her retirement to her lifelong passion for literature. Today, she operates her independent writing and publishing company, Rainbow Works, from her home on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

Writing fiction and creative non-fiction under the persona L.A. Raine, she finds herself yielding to a furious yearning to use the pen to "nudge the world a little". Her character-driven psychological family and legal dramas strip away comfortable societal myths to examine issues of social injustice and celebrate the immense resilience of the human spirit. She unashamedly champions the unsung battlers of the world—those who endure systemic cruelty with quiet dignity, yet refuse to stop loving, giving, and hoping.

The Pencil Case is substantially Lorraine's own life story. Having walked beside the novel's protagonist for well over fifty years, she wrote this deeply moving, unvarnished account of institutional betrayal to demand recognition of Australia's stolen white children.

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