

CLAYPAN

CHAPTER ONE

With sweat blurring his eyes and a racing heart, – the dogs' baying ever closer, – he stumbled to the white Toyota, the only vehicle in an empty street. Steadying his shaking hands, he hot-wired the car just as the first German Shepherd and its handler appeared in the rear-vision mirror, dark outlines in the fading light.

Burt drove into the night, passing little traffic. A livestock road train blinded him with its piercing lights, forcing him off the bitumen, its deafening horn ringing in his ears as it rumbled past.

The fuel gauge was nudging empty when he hid the stolen Toyota behind a ridge at the side of the road and walked north.

Exhausted, he slumped under a bush and woke before dawn, the coolest time of night. His wet clothes clung to his skin, his crotch was sticky, and his swollen tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He looked longingly at what was left of yesterday's summer storms; muddy puddles with wriggly creatures flapping in their death throes.

Overpowering revulsion, Burt scooped the mixture into his sweat stained hat and cautiously sucked the liquid through clenched teeth. He then splashed himself with the soupy mixture from another puddle.

Burt jogged about twenty miles to reach the New England Highway.

As the dawn was breaking, he ran onto the road, fist pumping the air and was almost hit by a small truck heading south. He carefully finished crossing and walked north, the morning air crisp on his face.

A truck driver slowed and offered him a lift to Toowoomba. With his luck holding, he was then given a ride by a low loader driver who was looking for company on his way to Longreach.

Approaching Charleville, the driver tuned his receiver to the local radio station. Half asleep, Burt heard his name mentioned as a prison escapee. The driver looked nervously at his passenger while the announcer read the description:

Twenty years old, 190 centimetres, fit, light-framed, fair hair, pale blue eyes, a distinctive scar on his left cheek.

Burt remembered the glassing, blood everywhere. Underage, but tall, Burt had been asked to collect an order from the counter which had him

leaning over the shoulder of a heavy-set man who was talking loudly and gesticulating. The schooner of beer spilt onto the man's striped shirt. This fight was one item in a well-documented charge sheet that had had him placed in custody for nine months.

Now fully awake, he jumped from the truck as it slowed for an intersection. The driver was already talking on his CB wireless before Burt had even reached the side street.

He avoided eye contact by hiding under the broad brimmed hat stolen from a man asleep under a jacaranda tree and searched for a car.

Suppressing tiredness and the fear of capture, he walked further away from his previous life. Burt had completed more than half his jail sentence and Mick had urged him to finish it, but Mick wasn't the one being threatened by the drug cartel's contacts using the laundry steam hose.

With his head throbbing and his will to continue sapped by the threatening heat, He sat in the shade of a thick bush and counted the few vehicles that passed, mostly 4x4s and a couple of road trains.

Burt was panicked by nature's furnace as he watched the shallow pools of watery mud turn to soft cakes of cracked brown-red soil. And the creatures were shrivelled in death.

He flagged a couple of large lorries, but they ignored him. The word had carried, at least to the trucking fraternity.

Disillusioned, he started walking back to shade but stopped when a dented green 4x4 heading north slowed to a crawl, the driver taking in Burt's appearance: dirty clothes and the torn hat that covered nervous eyes and his scarred white face. The vehicle travelled a further hundred yards or so before reversing.

With his courage gone, Burt continued towards the road-side until he heard the deep growl of a dog standing in the tray of the two-seated Land Rover, its paws resting on the tail gate. The large dog stared at Burt while the vehicle came closer.

There was a white vehicle coming fast from the South, its outline distorted by the heat reflected from the bitumen. It was too far away to read the sign on the roof. Was it the police?

Alone in this vast, hot country – what to do? Burt sprinted to the Land Rover. The brindle dog, with its twitching stumpy tail and menacing growl, followed him as he hurried past the tail gate and stopped at the driver's window. The dog's saliva drooled onto Burt's sweat drenched shirt.

There was something not right here. Burt started running back to the scrub, which sent the dog into a rage. It thumped along the tray, its snarl coming through flared lips as it prepared to lunge. Burt froze.

He would hail the police car, its sign now visible and return to the security of Glen Innes Correctional Centre, his dreams of a new life, his second chance destroyed.

Burt was brought back to the moment by the blast from a road train's horn as it headed south, followed by the man's soft but threatening voice.

'Get in, boy.'

CHAPTER TWO

The police car driver, with his cropped, bright red hair, waved his freckled arm at the big man, giving him a sign of approval and a knowing look as he whipped by.

With a clammy skin and shivering from fear, Burt pulled the battered hat further over his face and shrank into the corner of the cab. While sniffing the strong smell of stale sweat and tobacco, he was mesmerised by the rifle cradled on the dashboard and was further enthralled by the aerials flexing from the bull bar. He attempted a firm thank-you but could only manage a hoarse whisper.

They travelled slowly, the silence broken by the barking of the dog when vehicles infrequently passed. About twenty minutes later they turned left on to a faint track. The wireless crackled, and the man picked up the mouthpiece.

'Yer there?'

'Yeah, got him. Back tonight.'

Burt's warm piss trickled down the inside of his thigh.

They were still near the highway when he opened the door. The dog snarled, ready to jump. Burt quickly shut it.

Quivering from his failed attempt to escape, Burt risked a sideways glance at his new warder. At least in his sixties, he was heavy-built, craggy. Silvery receding hair offset his once white face, now burnt leather brown as were his powerful arms, exposed below a short-sleeved checked shirt. His gnarled hands were prominent as he firmly held the wheel. In command of the vehicle, his life and now Burt's.

For nearly two hours, they steadily travelled westward through scrubby country and crossed many gullies. Burt's stomach was hurting from

hunger, but more so from fear, as he fought the hypnotic lure of sleep. He was startled by the man's voice disrupting the silence.

'Come far, boy?'

The HF and CB aerials flicked with the bouncing of the vehicle and the rifle showed signs of frequent use. Burt had no gear and was wearing another man's dirty hat.

'Yeah, just travelling', Burt croaked. After a pause he managed a husky whisper.

'Thanks for the lift.'

The man swivelled his eyes towards Burt and his lips extended in a thin smile before he again had to guide the vehicle through another dry watercourse.

The silence was oppressive but talking was difficult with no saliva. Was the man conserving his? Even the dog had stopped the challenges, the last being when a blue flyer was slow to hop away.

Though Burt was dripping wet from the heat of this mobile tin oven, it was the killer dog along with the rifle, the aerials, the long periods of silence and no buildings that crushed his spirit. Self-sufficient, the man rolled and lit his durry one handed without spilling a strand of tobacco.

Mile after mile bounced by. The only disruption to the monotonous sound of the engine, a four-cylinder diesel with the third injector misfiring, was the grinding and banging as the vehicle lurched over corrugations and deep ruts.

They parked under a tree with barely enough shade to cover the tray. A couple of reds, disturbed from their scooped-out day beds, bounded away.

'Out, boy. We'll camp here for a couple of hours, give the dog a run. Yer'll be hungry, eh, need a drink.'

Burt quickly obeyed without answering, his last drink having been the strained mud.

He'd heard stories of people disappearing in the outback. Would this place be the end of his journey, or would Mick be released in time to save him? His tracking skills were legendary.

'Fill 'er up, boy, couple of jerries' in the back.'

The dog was already sniffing, busily marking its territory. Burt wondered if dogs had double-jointed legs.

The man collected wood and lit the fire on top of old ashes. He filled the billy-can from the canvas water bag that was hanging from the bullbar

and put the billy, blackened by frequent use, onto the hottest ashes, the fire flaring as pieces of tar broke off.

‘Bring the esky, boy.’

It was large and heavy. Burt dropped the tail gate, grabbed the two handles and staggered to the fire. There was a strong smell of rotting flesh coming from a large padlocked box occupying over half the esky.

The man took out bread, chops, sauce, tea, two plates and two mugs.

‘Fetch the griller, boy.’

With the chops secure inside the wire rack, the man positioned the griller over the coals and supported it with two small logs. They sat, each on separate fallen timber, waiting for the chops to cook and the billy to boil. The man put two slices of stale white bread on top of the griller. When toasted, he put half the meal on each enamelled plate and poured the tea into the chipped mugs.

They settled back on their bush seats. Burt lifted his mug to sip the steaming hot tea when the man commented,

‘Well, Burt, a long way from Glen Innes, eh.’

Burt stifled a scream as the tea spilt down his front. The man’s cruel smile revealed tobacco-stained teeth and a chipped tooth before turning back to his food. The dog pricked its ears.

Burt’s impulse was to throw the metal plate at him. He was ravenous though, not having eaten since escaping prison. Burt ate the food and drank the rest of the tea.

‘Take a rest, boy, ‘til the heat cools.’

Did he mean the heat of the day or his burning stomach?

Impervious to the cloud of bush flies sucking his sweat, the man stretched his big frame on the ground, rested his head on a small log and pulled his hat over his eyes. Red soil clung to his shirt.

Doing as the man told him, Burt scraped the chop bones onto the fire, then threw on the tea leaves, the red embers hissing steam as they turned into chips of black in a pile of grey-white ash.

The dog was lying under the battered Land Rover, but its eyes followed Burt’s every move.

Escape, but escape where? He was lost, and the man knew this.

With his stomach on fire, he glanced at the heavy-shouldered dog before limping away from the Man’s rhythmical snoring, swatting the flies as they buzzed, twirling in front of him until they settled on his wet back.

His stumbling steps put distance between him, his new jailer and the brindle dog, but they never seemed to bring him closer to an ever-receding horizon. With the noise of snoring left behind, Burt walked in silence. Before him stretched a vast land, sparsely covered with unknown scrub and trees. It was a windless day, but occasionally the heated air created eddies that lifted dust a few feet from the ground.

Disturbed by his prison-issued boots, the fine red desert sand clung to his stinking clothes. Huge red kangaroos lazily lifted themselves into their hopping position and reluctantly moved to other shade. All distant things were shapeless, dancing before him as he squinted and extended the rim of his hat with his hand, attempting to lessen the intense glare from the afternoon sun.

His hushed world was disrupted when the dog locked its jaw above his left ankle, its low growl muffled by a mouthful of cloth, as the man's whistle commanded it to bring his prisoner back. Burt dragged the dog a few more paces before yielding. He hobbled the several hundred yards to the Land Rover, the dog trotting ahead, pleased with its work.

'Dangerous land, well! Man can lose his way quick. Time to go.'

The man had stored the esky. With an easy leap the dog jumped onto the tray. Burt stood by the ashes of the fire.

'Well, boy, yer'll be dead within the week. The summer storms might give yer a few days, but yer soft. Yer skin'll crack. Yer'll be delirious by the third day. If the heat don't kill yer, one of them mulga snakes will as yer stagger about. Nobody comes this way unless they're mustering and that's not for months.'

Burt stumbled to the passenger door as the man started the engine and slipped the vehicle into gear.

With the monotony of an endless red desert, the man often detouring to find a route through patches of scrub and water courses, and the dog silent with no cars to bark at; a huge wave of tiredness overwhelmed Burt, killing his will to fight. He slept.

It was dark when the vehicle jerked to a stop beside a weather-worn cottage. The man went inside and came back with a kerosene lamp that gave a low glow, enough to walk with but little more.

'Bring the esky and the swag, boy. Everything in the back.'

Taking the lamp, the man went to a shed which was about twenty yards away. Soon, Burt heard a diesel engine running and dim electric light came on throughout the cottage.

'Well, boy, there's enough food for a couple of days. Go careful with the water. The storms have missed. If yer get a good wind, the mill will fill the

overhead tank. Only use the generator for an hour at night to keep the batteries charged. It's temperamental, not serviced in a long while. Diesel and stuff in the shed.'

Still half asleep, but with panic awakening, Burt struggled to look at the man. He managed a gravelly whisper.

'But my mum. She worries. OK if I give her a ring?'

With a loud snort, the man shook his head.

'No telephone here, boy.'

The dog jumped into the back of the Land Rover as the engine started.

Still groggy from too little sleep, Burt stared at the dust trail glistening in the glow of a quarter moon, the vehicle now lost behind the trees. He was in another prison, its walls the horizon.

The stand of brigalow trees moved towards him. With difficulty, he marshalled his eyes to focus his mind as he turned back to the cottage, grateful for its protection from the dingoes calling to each other in the distance. He looked over to another patch of trees where he heard the grunting of pigs. Were they wild? Someone had told him feral pigs could run a man down and eat him alive.

He shut the gauze door, sorry he couldn't lock it, and spread the canvas roll – the man had called it a swag – on top of a galvanised wire mesh bed with a steel frame and legs, the mesh reminding Burt of the metal fence that surrounded the prison. Why was there only one swag, and the food? The man had been looking for him.

He could barely stand from exhaustion as he looked for a bathroom.

There was a room with a cement floor. It had a shower in a corner and a cracked shaving mirror flecked with toothpaste which was fixed to a fibro wall above a chipped enamel basin with one tap. Spiders nested in the plug hole as they did in the large cement wash tub alongside. There was no toilet. Ignoring the brownish colour of the warm water, he cupped his hands and drank from the tap then, still dressed, he stretched his wet body on top of the swag.

Not able to hold it in any longer, he forced himself outside and squatted by the door. Fighting his fear of snakes and shutting his mind to the intermittent howling of dingoes and grunting of pigs, Burt prayed the lamp-light would keep him safe as he ran to the shed and turned off the diesel engine.

Fatigued, both mentally and physically, he was lost to a deep sleep that lasted until daylight.

CHAPTER THREE

Waking to find himself lying on a wet swag, Burt looked at his watch, a present from Mick. It was just past six. He stripped, and angrily threw his clothes into a corner of the room and sat on a metal chair that was already hot enough to be uncomfortable. He thought of his last days in prison. His eyes would brighten and his face shine with anticipation when Mick talked about the desert and the back country. Burt loved Mick's stories. At these times, Mick's face would go dreamy and he would be lost to Burt. If this cottage was the reality, it was farfetched from the stories.

It was Burt's mate-ship that had helped Mick cope with his dark moments, a response to his confinement. And Mick, when possible, protected Burt from the prison bully.

Leaving the steel chair, Burt walked to the bathroom. His mood improved as he turned on the shower and stepped under the weak spray of warm brown water coming from a rusty rose, three parts blocked. Using a cracked cake of soap, Burt washed away his stale sweat and body odour, along with some of the misery of having been kidnapped and his loneliness without Mick. He vigorously rubbed everywhere except the blisters on his stomach. Slowly masturbating further eased his stress.

Stepping from the shower, he looked closely at faded words written across the spotted mirror.

'FUCKIN INSANE.'

Who wrote that?

His despair returned as the increasing heat, and his solitude killed the lingering respite from the shower.

Leaving the filthy towel on its peg, he opened the squeaking gauze door and stood on the cement steps. While the sun dried him, he was relieved to hear only the buzzing of flies that had discovered his shit and the occasional call of birds as they flew from tree to tree.

He rinsed his clothes in the tub and looked for somewhere to hang them. Naked, he walked towards the fence, but quickly hopped back for boots, the cruelty of this environment reinforced by the sharp prickles embedded in his feet.

Hunger pangs reminded him of how little food he'd eaten since his escape from prison. Opening the esky, the sickly smell persisted, so Burt removed the ten sweating chops and the bread that was wrapped in cloth.

The matches, tea, sugar and sauce had been packed inside the billy-can. He was about to go outside and light a fire when he saw an old stove, a type unknown to him, with cobwebs laced across the oven door handles.

There was timber split to size so that it would slip easily into the firebox stacked on magazines and newspapers.

While the fire was building, he found aluminium pots, a heavy cast-iron pan, enamelled mugs and a wire grilling rack. Burt put all the sinewy chops into the pan, placed two slices of the stale white bread into the wire rack and made tea in the billy.

Burt had left the front gauze door open and the remaining chops were covered with bush flies. Exploring further, he left the kitchen through the only other door and found an old meat safe standing on the edge of an earthen-floored breezeway, its hessian sides partly rotted. Burt had seen these safes in some of the houses in Sydney. He attached rags to the hessian that hadn't rotted and filled the metal evaporative tray with water then placed the remaining food in it.

Dressed in his half-dry clothes, Burt sat on a stool and stared at the stove. Sweating liberally from drinking several mugs of tea, he thought about what had led him to this forsaken cottage, built on a low, grassless hill. Its only company, apart from the occasional squeaking of the windmill, was the noise from the dingoes of the night, the grunting of the pigs hidden by trees that moved around in the dark, and the ever-persistent flies.

It was a massive jolt for a twenty-year-old who had grown up in a dysfunctional family living in the slums of western Sydney.

The man had been looking for him, but why?

Was it to fix the clapped-out jeep in the breezeway? He could certainly fix the Land Rover with its misfiring third cylinder. Would the man know of his mechanical skills learnt in the car re-birthing industry? He knew he was a criminal.

Burt's throat tightened. Was the man known to those he'd been caught eavesdropping before he was jailed. He'd been threatened then and even in prison as the drug gang tried to find out what he'd heard.

With these ugly thoughts, Burt walked to a tiny shed, about six feet by five, which he'd missed in the dark. On opening the door, a large brown snake disturbed a stack of old newspapers before slithering outside. He was staring at the seat of a grimy dunny. Clenching his teeth, he screwed his nose against the fetid smell of faeces and urine wafting from the pit through the lidless seat. There were cobwebs hanging from the tin roof. Black spiders scurried into the corners and hid from the glare. He shuddered as he walked to the shed that housed the generator and found a long-handled shovel among what looked like fencing tools.

Ready to run, he prodded the papers then scraped away the cobwebs, careful not to let spiders drop onto him, and used some of the paper to wipe the seat clean. Burt quickly relieved himself, wondering what might

be in the pit. He then ran to the house and had another shower. Still wet, he dressed, again ignoring the towel stiff from dried sweat. Burt was hungry but knew he had to portion the remainder of the food: six chops and cardboard like bread.

What if the man didn't come back the next day? He shut out the thought. There were enough challenges to manage without the 'what if' questions.

To keep from dwelling on his hunger, he explored the dilapidated cottage. A short passage that led from the gauze door to the kitchen gave access to two bedrooms and an enclosed verandah. The floor throughout, except for the verandah and bathroom, was made of crudely sawn timber planks with generous cracks between each. The ceiling and walls were made from fibro sheets.

The kitchen was furnished with a table, two stools and four chairs. His bedroom had the iron bed and one metal chair, the other, two iron beds and two metal chairs. A tatty sofa covered with grime and a dark red stain at one end, adorned the verandah. The only cupboard held four threadbare blankets and two lumpy pillows, their black and white striped covers marked with vomit. The fridge which was connected to an empty gas bottle shared the breezeway with the safe and the old jeep.

Burt stood on the front steps leading to the gauze door and looked over the endless land.

The only sign of human endeavour was the tired cottage with its crude contents, the shed, the dunny and the windmill alongside the near-empty dam. He'd seen pictures of these odd-looking machines that pumped life.

The galvanised blades squealed and clunked as they responded to a gust of wind. The breeze weakened, and the mill fell silent. The stillness of the day was accentuated by the ticking sound of the metal roof as it expanded in response to the steadily rising sun.

It was not yet seven-thirty and already the heat was radiating off the bare earth.

Where were the other houses, the electric light poles, the corner shop, the cars? – And no people.

He walked to the brigalow and found the best shade, but there was no escaping the oven-like heat, so he walked back to the coolest part of the cottage, the bathroom.

Plugging the drain with an old rag, Burt turned on the shower and lay fully clothed on the floor until the warm water flowed into the next room. He recalled the man's warning as he turned off the tap and walked back to the brigalow.

And so, the day went. Hatless, he travelled back and forth from the trees to the bathroom seeking to escape from the cauldron, his angular face quickly becoming sunburnt.

By midday, he weakened and finished the chops and stale bread. It was only ten minutes since he'd drunk a mug full of water from the kitchen tap, yet his mouth was dry, and he choked on the bread. Rivulets of sweat ran from his entangled hair. He staggered, having tripped over a stool, and put his hand against the western kitchen wall. He pulled it away before it burnt him.

He stripped to his underpants and boots, and roamed around outside without purpose, going from one patch of trees to another. The arid wind evaporated the perspiration, leaving his skin paper dry.

Burt raced to meet his mum in her floral dress which was drenched from the rain beating down on her. With a couple of paces taken, he fell onto the bare clay and grazed his elbows. He looked up and she and the rain had gone but there were the trees that took on grotesque shapes as they swayed and moved away from him.

Black pigs, their massive tusks shiny, squealed as they charged. He ducked as a big red kangaroo followed the pigs and bounded over him. The dog chased everything away before lunging at his neck. He put his hands to his throat and whispered,

'Good doggy, nice doggy', and threw the last chop at its feet. It wagged its stump and licked the blood from his elbow before it chomped off his hand.

Holding onto the bleeding stump, Burt stumbled inside and turned on the shower before fainting.

The water trickling through the floor cracks of the next room woke him before dark. With his stomach cramps urging him, he searched for the remaining chops.

Stopping the search, maybe he'd miscounted, he went to the shed that housed the generator. In familiar territory, he found the crank and held open the single valve, as he vigorously turned the handle. Letting the valve operate, the engine coughed into life then stopped. He tried several times with the same result; a splutter, then nothing. He checked and saw there was enough fuel. It was almost dark, and Burt remembered the snake. One more attempt, which failed. He threw the crank handle against the shed wall.

Sobbing, he ran to the cottage, lit a kerosene lamp and looked inside the empty meat safe. With shaking hands, he struggled with the matches as he attempted to relight the fire in the stove but instead ignited the pile of papers. Captivated by the flames, it was the smell of singed hair that broke the trance. With the fire out, he gulped water until his stomach hurt then lay on the swag and watched the spiders as they rushed away

from the flickering lamp. His sobs soaked the soiled pillow. He thought of his mum's fear of his criminal brothers when she couldn't prevent them bashing him. Would she fear this heat as he did, or would she stroke his wet hair and comfort him with her generous hugs?

The pain from his blistered body woke Burt just before dawn. He took a long shower then dressed, his clothes still wet from rinsing them. They clung to his sunburnt body, giving little relief. He rekindled the fire and made a pot of tea. The little lizards were too nimble for his clumsy attempts to catch them.

Covering his face with the oversized felt hat, he explored further away from the cottage.

Some distance from the breezeway a path wound through a stand of gidgee and led him to a cleared area. There was a blood-stained concrete slab in the middle, with a timber hoist at one end. Bleached bones, some not so old, were scattered about. The soil surround had been disturbed by animals. Burt lifted his hands to his throat. Would this be his punishment for listening to the drug lords?

That was the end of his adventures for the day as he galloped back to the cottage. Secure inside, he looked back at an innocent-looking clump of trees that hid a terrible truth; a truth represented by the pigs, the bones, the blood-stained hoist and the backdrop of dingoes talking, one to the other.

In his heat-stressed state, heightened by the discovery of the killing slab, Burt walked to the shed with the generator. There were enough tools to service the injector, which was blocked. He sluiced the accumulated sludge from the filter, tightened a few nuts, topped the batteries with distilled water, and turned the crank handle. The engine fired immediately and ran smoothly.

For the first time since leaving Glen Innes prison, Burt smiled with a sense of pride. The heat radiating from the tin roof was less threatening, but he couldn't forget the slab with splashes of dried blood on the wooden lifting arm.

He left the engine charging the batteries and studied the old jeep, mentally starting a list of what would be needed to make it work. Was this to be his escape vehicle?

He walked back to the generator shed. Even the purring of the engine and the pleasure of a job well done couldn't lessen the stomach cramps or relieve the solitude.

He saw the shadow across the doorway before he heard the voice.