

THROUGH MY EYES AUSTRALIAN DISASTER ZONES
series editor Lyn White



Mia

DIANNE WOLFER

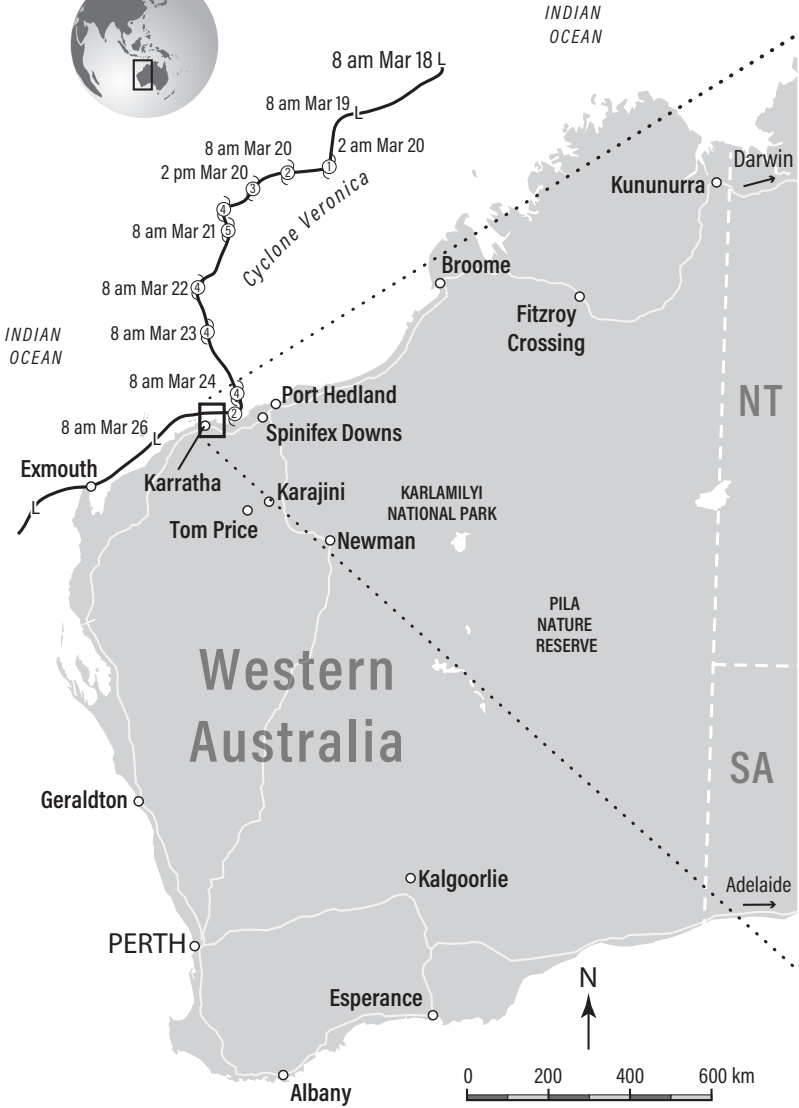


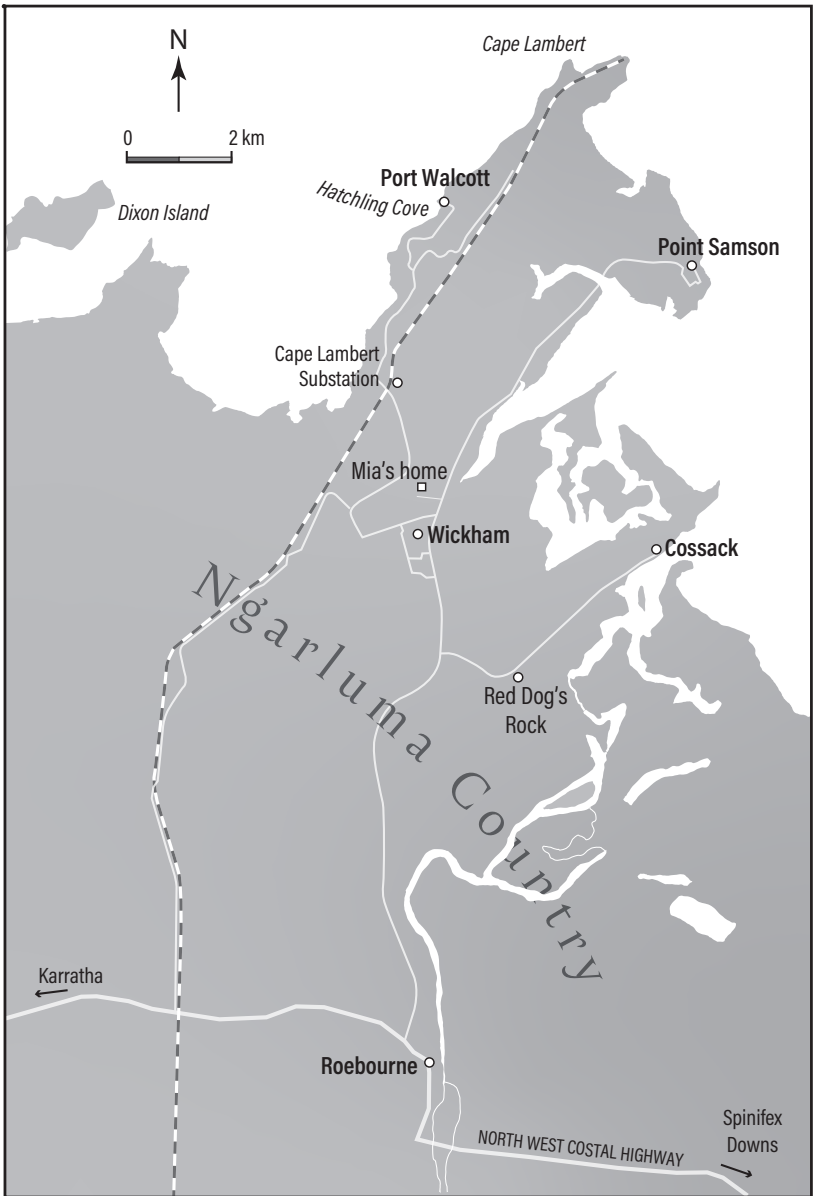
ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON



This story takes place in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, on the lands of the Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi and Banyjima people. We acknowledge the traditional owners of these lands, who belong to the oldest continuing culture in the world and who have cared for and protected Country for thousands of years. We honour them and pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

The novel is set during Cyclone Veronica which occurred in the Pilbara in 2019. The characters and some of the locations are fictional, to protect the privacy of communities and individuals. We have also altered some details and the chronology of various events, for the sake of the story, but the essential truths of the devastation caused by the cyclone remain.







One



Netting cuts into Mia's flesh. She can't breathe. Her arms flail as she struggles to keep her head above water. Wild screeching echoes over black waves as the weight of the net drags her deeper. Mia gasps, but instead of saltwater, she gulps muggy Pilbara air.

She opens her eyes, sweat soaking her back. The nightmare felt so real. Mia hears the screeching again.

'Okay, I'm awake,' she calls to the corellas outside her window.

Their squawking starts around six every morning. The birds are more reliable than any alarm clock. That's good on school days, but not so fun on weekends when she wants to sleep in.

Mia takes three deep breaths, gazing around her room as her heart rate settles. The fan is gently turning, posters of horses and turtles cover the walls, and books are piled everywhere. She opens her curtain, banishing the frightening underwater images.

Since her first nightmare last year, Mia's learned

coping strategies with the help of the school counsellor. Now, most of her dreams are peaceful, but remembering that first nightmare still rattles her.

Mia was in the ocean, flailing through a maze of sea plastic and tangled sea creatures. The bed felt like it was dissolving. The nightmare replayed for weeks. Mia woke every night, her mind filled with images of dolphins caught in ghost nets, and seabirds choking on plastic. Then there was the other dream about flooded turtle nests . . .

She looks out the window. The vast Pilbara sky is cloudy and grey, but there's no rain falling. That means Mum's equine therapy classes can go ahead.

The wet season won't finish for another six weeks, but today Mum is restarting riding sessions. Her regulars said they were desperate for some horse-time. So far, it's been a quiet wet season. Around five cyclones usually develop in the warm waters off Western Australia during the wet, but so far the only cyclone to threaten the Pilbara this year has been Riley. That one stayed well offshore.

Mia watches the heavy clouds jostle. 'Don't rain before midday,' she tells them.

A fly buzzes along the windowsill. As Mia opens the latch to shoo it out, she feels a blast of heat. Across the yard, she can see the horses flicking their tails and tossing their manes. She sprays eucalyptus aerosol on her face. Flies hate the smell.

Mia pulls on her jodhpurs and rummages through her messy wardrobe. Where's her horseriding shirt?

Maybe Mum washed it. Mia runs along the hallway in her bra, opens the back door and dashes out to the washing line. There it is, flapping in the breeze. She shrugs on the cotton shirt. It clings to her skin in the humid air.

She stops for a moment to gaze around their property. Pilbara Animal Care is a twelve-hectare block, down a dirt track, off the road connecting Roebourne and Point Samson. For Mia, it's the best thing in the world being tucked away in the bush with so much open space, five kilometres from Wickham, a small town in the middle of nowhere.

She buttons her shirt and walks down the hallway to join her mother in the kitchen. Mum's ready for equine therapy classes in riding pants and an indigo shirt with the vet logo Mia designed for her. It's a horse surrounded by mulla-mulla, her mother's favourite flower.

'Morning – thanks for washing my shirt.'

Mum smiles. 'How did you sleep?' Her voice is casual, but her worried brown eyes give her away.

'Mm, fine . . .' Nightmares are the last thing Mia wants to talk about today.

'Great.' Mum kisses her forehead, then pushes back her long dark hair. 'Toast, porridge or muesli?'

'Toast, please.'

While Mum sips tea and checks their morning schedule, Mia spreads their neighbour Jimmy's mango jam across her toast.

'How many are coming today?' she asks between mouthfuls.

‘Six regulars and two new riders.’

‘Rosa?’

‘Of course! She’s your first one.’

Mia grins. Rosa is a bouncy, totally horse-mad seven-year-old who’s been coming to Saturday sessions for two years. She’s Deaf, and last year Mia mastered enough Auslan to have short conversations with her. She licks jam off her fingers and practises signing a few instructions: *stop, go, loosen the reins*.

‘I’m heading over to the office.’ Mum grabs her hat from a hook on the wall before stepping onto the wide front veranda. ‘See you there.’

‘Okay, won’t be long.’ Mia swallows her last bite. ‘I’ll just brush my teeth.’

She heads down the hallway to the bathroom, flicks on the light and steps around a possum in a cage. As well as being a vet and equine therapist, Mum also cares for injured wildlife. Sadly, there’s plenty of need for her skills. In the Pilbara, native birds and animals are often hit by cars and the huge road trains taking mining equipment and essentials to remote camps and communities.

‘Good morning, Possum,’ Mia says. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be gone in a moment.’

The possum blinks its sleepy eyes.

Mia drags her sun-bleached hair into a ponytail. She glances in the mirror. Her eyes still look a little startled from the nightmare. Mia remembers Dad describing them as two big green olives. She smiles at the memory. It will be good to see him and her other family in the school holidays.

She pulls on her elastic-sided boots and races across the yard. Their stable is by the gate, next to Mum's office and surgery.

As Mia opens the gate their horses crowd around her. She gives them each a hug, then tickles Bandit's soft muzzle, inhaling his warm, horsey smell. Bandit is their cheekiest pony, but she loves him best.

Bandit's stable buddies are Freckles, a miniature pony, and Sultan, a bay-coloured ex-racehorse that Mum rescued last year. Mia fills their feed boxes and gives them a quick brush. She never tires of the way the steady rhythm of horse brushing calms her. Their clients love grooming the animals too. It's a bonding part of their horse-time.

An excited buzz grows in the air as people start to arrive. Mum's riders are mostly children, but locals of all ages come to watch, or just to be around the horses. Some even drive from Karratha, over fifty kilometres away.

Mia watches the little kids milling around Freckles, knowing first-hand how soothing horse-time can be. Being with Bandit helps settle her own anxiety. She thinks back to that first panic attack last year.

They were at Hatchling Cove, ten minutes' drive from home. Mum was repairing a storm-damaged dune and Mia had wandered along the high-tide line, gathering sea-glass to make into jewellery. At the far end of the cove, she stumbled across a dugong. It was tangled in netting.

‘Mum,’ she yelled. ‘Help!’ But the wind blew away her words.

The beached dugong gave a weak chirp as Mia’s trembling hands tried to loosen the net.

‘*Mum!*’ she screamed as loud as she could, jumping up and waving her arms.

In the distance, her mother shaded her eyes, staring up the beach. Then she dropped her spade and began running.

Mia scooped water into her hat and poured it over the animal’s raw skin. The dugong shuddered.

‘Hold on,’ she whispered. ‘Please don’t die.’

Mum arrived at last.

They worked together, loosening and untangling the netting until the beautiful creature was free. But it was far too heavy to drag to safety. Mum phoned the ranger, then they soaked their shirts and squeezed water over its back. The dugong stared into Mia’s eyes and something passed between them. It was a moment that words could never explain.

Mia knew the animal was going to die and that there was nothing she could do. She felt utterly helpless as the dugong took its final breath, still gazing into Mia’s eyes.

She’d seen death at Mum’s surgery, but not like this. Mia’s world seemed suddenly less secure. Her heart raced. A choking sensation gripped her chest. Mia gasped for air. For a moment she thought *she* was going to die.

After that her nightmares began. Then, news articles about marine pollution became a magnet for her attention. Mia watched climate change clips compulsively and started gathering fishing boat flotsam from local beaches. There were so many lures, lines and litter. How had she never noticed all this junk before?

Being with animals was the one thing that calmed her. Having lots of horse-time still does. When the counsellor explained that anxiety and panic attacks are not unusual, Mia was relieved and felt less alone.

Since then, she's learned ways to manage symptoms before they take hold. Mia's determined not to let her fears get in the way of becoming a vet like Mum, and following her passion to help endangered wildlife.



'Mia.' Mum waves from across the home yard. 'It's almost time for the first session. Could you bring Bandit over, please?'

'Coming.' Mia pushes away thoughts of stricken wildlife and takes five deep breaths.

Bandit shakes his mane, stepping briskly as Mia leads him towards Mum. Then she goes back to saddle the other horses.

The gate clangs. Mia glances up from buckling Sultan's girth strap. It's Rosa, arriving with a jaunty swagger, wearing her battered Akubra hat and new cowboy boots.

'Hi, Miiia,' Rosa yells in what her family call her Deaf voice. She points to her shiny boots, grins, then drops her bag and runs to the mounting tower.

Rosa swaps the Akubra for a hard hat, then jiggles about as Mia leads the ex-racehorse towards the tower. Sultan whiffles. He loves Rosa as much as she loves him.

When Rosa began riding, they paired her with Freckles, the miniature pony, but once Rosa heard how Mum rescued Sultan from starvation after he'd been dumped in the bush, she begged to be allowed to ride the big bay. Now the two are inseparable. Each week, Sultan greets her with a whiffle or a whinny. Rosa has learned to read every toss of his head.

'Hello, Sultan,' she says with a huge smile.

The racehorse nudges his little rider.

Rosa launches herself into the saddle and takes the reins. She trots around the riding circle with the bravado of a bronco rider, then urges Sultan into a canter. After a few loops he settles back to a trot. Rosa shifts effortlessly to a graceful rise. Mia laughs with delight. The kid's a natural.

Rosa reins in Sultan, stops, and turns to Mia. 'Let's go,' she signs.

After swinging into Bandit's saddle Mia rides ahead as they leave the home yard and set out on the medium riding circuit. Last October, before the wet season, the horses startled a massive bungarra halfway around. Mia wonders whether they'll see the old lizard today. Sultan barely blinked when the goanna ran in front of them, but Bandit shied, and Mia came a cropper on the red Pilbara dust.

Mia turns in the saddle to make sure everything is

all right. Rosa gives her a thumbs up. Even with a cloudy sky, the bling on her new boots is dazzling.

‘Lookk,’ Rosa shouts.

Sure enough, the prehistoric-looking lizard is strutting across the scrub, its forked tongue flicking. *Better a bungarra than a snake*, Mia thinks. There are plenty of venomous ones in the Pilbara, and Mia keeps a pressure bandage in her saddlebag just in case. Like most wildlife, she knows that if you don’t bother snakes, they’re unlikely to bother you.

They wait for the goanna to pass. Rosa balances the reins in one hand and makes a sign with the other hand that Mia doesn’t know – palm facing downwards, all fingers in a claw. Rosa moves her hand forward, a bit like a spider. She notices Mia’s puzzled expression, so she signs each letter to spell *creepy*.

Mia holds Bandit’s reins firm until the bungarra bolts. Then she hooks them over the front of the saddle and reply-signs, ‘I like them.’ She thinks for a moment, then has a stab at signing, ‘Did you see the lovely spots on its baggy skin?’

Rosa giggles and makes a face. Then she signs, ‘Lizard,’ and something else with an open hand and five fingers against her head, which might be a swear word.

Mia points to her watch. ‘Sorry, Rosa, we have to head back soon.’

Rosa frowns, but taps Sultan’s belly with her heels. At the end of her half-hour, Rosa usually tries to sneak in extra time. They trot to the tower, where Rosa dismounts and leads Sultan into the stable for a rub-down.

More onlookers have arrived while they've been gone. Two children are patting Freckles. She's tossing her mane, loving the attention.

Mia walks Bandit towards their neighbour, who lives in a shack at the end of their lane. Jimmy is a lanky old stockman who can't ride anymore because of his dodgy hips, but being with the horses makes him happy. Others come and go, but since Jimmy's wife died, he's rarely missed a Saturday to come over and sit with the horses.

Jimmy's wise eyes are as blue as dragonfly wings, a startling contrast to the leathery skin of his face. He's like a grandad to Mia and his bitzer dog, Dog, is best buddies with her kelpie, Biff. The two Pilbara dogs have a similar muzzle, so they're probably related.

'Ready for a brew, Dimples?' Jimmy holds up a billy, using his favourite nickname for Mia.

'I'm ready for your damper!'

Jimmy tilts his weathered Akubra hat as she tethers Bandit in the shade.

Each Saturday Jimmy brings home-baked bread wrapped in a tea towel. Between sessions, he spreads his mango jam on the damper and brews tea for everyone in a billy over the campfire, adding a gumleaf or two to flavour the tea.

'It's bonzer watching the riders again,' Jimmy says as he swings the billy in a circle. 'I'm glad your mum didn't wait till the end of the wet season to restart her sessions.'

'Me too,' Mia agrees, between sips of Jimmy's smoky-tasting tea.

She checks her watch. The next rider should be

here any minute. All Mum said was that her name is Erin, and that she'd be riding Bandit.

Right on time, a dust cloud rises over the track and a flash new Land Rover pulls up at their gate. A tall teenager steps out.



Two



Mia watches the new girl struggling to unlatch their gate. It's the standard bush-block loop of wire over a hook, so it shouldn't be that hard . . .

The girl manages it at last. As the Land Rover drives through, Jimmy nods to the L-plates.

'Fancy wheels for a newbie,' he chuckles, scratching his bristly chin.

Mum chats briefly with the girl's parents, then leads her over to the campfire.

'Erin, this is my daughter, Mia,' she says, smiling at the teenager.

The girl looks older than Mia, probably sixteen if she has her L-plates. Mia hasn't seen her around, which is unusual in a place where everyone knows everyone. The nearby mine is putting on more staff, so maybe Erin's family are new to town.

Erin swats flies from her neat fringe and mutters, 'Hello.'

Her smile doesn't reach her eyes. It's hard to know

what to make of her. She has a stylish air about her, and her fitted jeans are tucked neatly into the most beautiful ankle boots Mia's ever seen.

'Hi.' Mia feels self-conscious as she scrapes mud off her own well-worn Blundstones. 'I'll go and get Bandit for you.'

Mia tucks wayward strands of hair behind her ears as she heads to where Bandit is waiting. She rests her head against the grey pony for a moment before taking a deep breath, then leads him back to the fire pit.

'This is Bandit,' Mia says brightly, trying to cover her awkwardness.

As Mum explains how to step into a stirrup and swing into the saddle, Mia holds Bandit's bridle, trying not to stare at Erin's nails. No wonder she struggled with the gate!

'It's okay.' Erin laughs. 'They're acrylic. It'd take more than a pony to break one.'

Mia blushes, embarrassed to have been caught staring.

'Make sure you behave yourself,' she whispers into Bandit's furry ear as Erin puts one boot in the stirrup.

Bandit harrumphs but stands steady.

'And this is how you hold the reins,' Mum explains.

Mia adjusts the stirrup length for Erin's long legs. Bandit is only fourteen hands high, so she's almost too tall for him.

'Ready?'

Erin nods.

'Walk on.' Mia leads Bandit around the training circle.

He flicks his head and Mia stops him to readjust the insect veil over the pony's eyes. The heat is already stifling and it's not even eight o'clock. The bureau is forecasting 38 degrees, but it feels like they've already passed that.

Erin's back is rigid. She's making a big effort to look relaxed, but Mia notices her pale knuckles gripping the reins.

'How are you doing?'

'Fine,' the older girl says curtly, arching an eyebrow.

Clearly not fine, Mia thinks. 'Have you ridden before?' she asks, holding the bridle firmly. Bandit can sense a rider's fear. He'll be mischievous if given half a chance.

'Yes, but that was on a *proper* bridle trail, not a dusty training circle.'

Mia struggles to keep her voice calm. 'Okay, let's leave the yard and you can ride around our short bush loop.' She pulls Bandit's head rope and they set off along the track, Biff padding along behind.

Despite Erin's attitude, Mia tries to be friendly as she walks alongside.

'You're doing well,' she says, even though Erin is yanking the bit in poor Bandit's mouth.

They head through typical Pilbara scrub, with spinifex grass and a few scraggly trees growing in the red pindan dirt. A mob of half-grown joeys hop towards them.

'They're our teenagers,' Mia tells the other girl, swishing flies from her face. Chatting usually helps riders

relax, so she continues trying to make conversation with Erin. ‘Mum’s vet speciality is horse care, but she treats injured wildlife as well. Our home is a madhouse.’

‘I’d never seen wild kangaroos until we came to the Pilbara.’

‘Really?’ Mia tries to keep the surprise from her voice. She’s never met anyone who hasn’t seen roos hopping through the bush. Even Dad’s buddies in Perth complain about them crossing roads on the outskirts of the city.

‘We have a lot of other wildlife in Melbourne,’ Erin adds defensively. ‘Some outer suburbs have lyrebirds, wombats and even koalas. I just haven’t seen kangaroos there.’

‘Are you from Melbourne?’

‘Yeah, we’ve moved here because my dad’s on a short-term contract at Cape Lambert.’

‘I’ll bet the Pilbara is different to life over there.’

‘It sure is!’ Erin pouts. ‘Dad’s keen to make enough to pay off our boat, but if it wasn’t for the money, I don’t know why anyone would want to live here.’

Mia grips the halter, inwardly rolling her eyes.

‘How can you stand this heat?’ Erin continues. ‘And the flies and dust and endless talk about possible cyclones . . . Wickham is *so* boring. There’s nothing to do.’

‘Have you been into Karratha?’

Erin pulls a face. ‘It’s not much better. The shops are terrible. In Melbourne my friends and I go shopping every weekend. It’s what I miss most!’

‘Did you see the Red Earth Arts Centre in Karratha?’

‘Umm, yes!’ Erin frowns, staring around at the wide

empty space. ‘Dad says Melbourne has eighty times more people than *all* of the Pilbara.’

‘Really?’ Mia is surprised. Around 63 000 people live in the Pilbara; she can’t imagine five million people in one place.

The older girl raises an eyebrow again. ‘Mmhmm!’ She gives Mia a withering smile, taps her boots against Bandit’s belly and asks, ‘Does this horse go any faster?’

If I slap his rump, Mia thinks, *he’ll go fast enough to throw you*, but she bites back the words. Erin is a client. Besides, Bandit is being patient, and she doesn’t want to slap his rump.

‘We always take it easy on the first lesson.’ Mia grits her teeth, then tries to be nice. ‘I’ve never been to Melbourne. Or anywhere outside of WA!’

‘You’re joking!’ Erin’s voice is patronising. ‘What about Perth?’

Mia nods. ‘Most school holidays I fly down to the city to see my dad.’

Erin’s posture loosens. Mia notices that as she relaxes, Erin begins swaying in time with Bandit’s gait.

They’re quiet for a while, then Mia says, ‘I’m in Year Eight at West Pilbara High. What year are you? I haven’t seen you on the school bus.’

‘Year Ten – I’m sixteen. Dad’s contract is only for three months, thank goodness, so I’m doing Distance Ed.’

‘What’s remote learning like?’

‘It’s all right.’ Erin shrugs. ‘But a bit hard to stay interested. Mum enrolled me in equine therapy so I’d meet other people around my age, and get outside more.’

Mia can't think of a reply. Most people come to Mum's sessions for more serious therapeutic reasons. She reminds herself not to be judgey.

'Our riders are mostly younger,' she tells Erin at last, 'and there aren't many teenagers between Wickham and Point Samson.'

'Seriously?' Erin glides her nails through her hair.

'On weekends, me and my friends go to Hatchling Cove,' Mia says. 'Have you been there?'

'Not yet.'

'It's only ten minutes' drive from Wickham. We'll be there this afternoon. I could introduce you to my friends.' Mia scuffs the dirt. 'We're only thirteen, but some of the older kids from school might be there.'

'Thanks.' Erin gives her a strange smile then looks away.

They reach the end of the circuit and Bandit stands quietly as Erin dismounts.

'Want to feed him?' Mia asks.

'Umm, sure.'

Mia hands Erin a carrot from the feed bucket. 'When Bandit is well behaved during a ride, we give him a treat.' She shows Erin how to hold her hand flat.

As Bandit nibbles the carrot Erin's smile seems genuine.

'His muzzle is so soft and whiskery!'

'It's lovely, isn't it?' Mia rests her head against Bandit's neck, then the pony turns to Erin and rubs his big, sweaty head across her beautiful clean shirt. Erin looks horrified.

‘Sorry!’ Mia stares at the horse slobber across Erin’s chest. ‘If you rinse your shirt as soon as you can, it should be okay.’ She takes Bandit’s halter and backs away.

‘See you next week,’ Mia calls, ‘or maybe later at the beach.’

‘Maybe.’ Erin hurries across the yard to the waiting Land Rover.

‘What’s she like?’ Mum asks as Mia leads Bandit back to the stables.

‘Hmm, different to most people around here.’



When all the visitors have gone, Mia hoses down the horses. Biff jumps in and out of the horse trough. Then he shakes water over her with a contented doggy grin.

Mia laughs, wets her bandana and ties it around her neck. She can’t wait to meet her friends at the beach and cool off properly. She grabs an orange from the kitchen, then heads to their wide veranda where the reception is best to text Kirra and Jess. She hopes they’re in mobile range.

What time?

Two o’clock?



The veranda faces south, so even on a hot day it’s cool. Mia peels the orange and pops slices of fruit into her mouth, wondering who else’ll be at Hatchling Cove. Being alone at the dugong end of the beach can still make her edgy, but today she’ll be with her friends.

‘Lunch, Mia.’

‘Coming.’

‘Did Erin enjoy her session with Bandit?’ Mum asks, handing her a sandwich.

Mia shrugs. ‘I think she expected white fences, polo shirts and a manicured track. She didn’t like anything about our bush circuit, but she did like feeding Bandit, until he ruined her shirt.’

‘What happened?’

Mia explains, then wolfs a sandwich and collects her snorkelling gear, hoping the snooty new girl won’t be at her special beach.