

## Carol Chandler

### Cliff

I had a feeling of disconnection as we followed a path that led to the ocean. Jax, the dog, was padding quietly beside us. The track traversed an area of spinifex and as we reached a verge I could see the sand stretching out ahead of us. Dunes rising to the left, tufted with grass. Grains of sand blew onto my face, hitting my cheek, dark clouds scurrying across the sky.

Freya and Tyler began walking ahead of me along the shoreline, deep in conversation. I walked down to the water's edge, gazing out to sea when I noticed Freya run down to the waves a little ahead of me. She began wading in the water. Skirting the waves, I walked back towards the dunes and sat down on the sand where Tyler was sitting with Jax. He appeared to be staring at a point in the distance, beyond which Freya was wading.

There was no way that I was going into the freezing water, but I became conscious of a subtle warmth from the sun which was now shining through the clouds. I took off my jumper and leant back. Freya returned from the surf and she pulled a jumper out from her bag. It was a tight fit when she put it on but her body was still slender, strongly built, almost Amazonian; her long blonde hair was shiny in the light. For some reason, I remembered again how both of them had been ambivalent about having their baby, Scarlett. I tried not to think about this, conscious that things were different now. The coroner had definitely decided it was a cot death. They, no doubt, wanted this new baby that they'd both conceived.

Tyler stood up and began walking towards the bush. He was striding briskly ahead and Freya and I had difficulty keeping up with him.

Freya quickened her pace and caught up and they pulled ahead of me again. I could hear the crackle and hum of insects as we began walking along the track. It was difficult to hear what they were saying, possibly something about the neighbour or Zac, Tyler's son, as I heard them say the words "next door" and "Dee". The path became steeper and we began climbing along a ridge towards the mountain. They were still ahead of me but when I caught up they were talking about the time Freya had stayed up north with her mother. It had been a difficult time for them as it was directly after Scarlett had died.

"Maybe we should move back there to be closer to Mum," Freya said. "It might be better with everything that's happening."

I wasn't certain what she was talking about, whether it was something to do with the pregnancy, or Zac. The bush began to thin, and we emerged onto a cliff. The sea was stretching immediately below us, glistening in the sunlight, extending out towards the horizon.

The view was magnificent and I glanced at Freya who appeared deep in thought with a troubled expression on her face. She'd told me they'd scattered Scarlett's ashes in the sea, but I was certain it was further north. My legs began to shake as I stood on a rock very close to the cliff.

Tyler turned away and began climbing further towards the summit. I tried to ease myself off the rock but my legs froze completely and I began to panic. If my legs wobbled any further, I would slip and go over the edge. The wobbling became more violent and I sensed someone behind me. When I glanced around, Freya had disappeared and Jax was in the bushes. I could see the sharpness of his teeth, white against his dark fur.

He was watching me intently and I looked anxiously for signs of aggression. To my alarm, it appeared as if he were about to pounce. If he leapt forward, he would knock me off the edge, but he didn't move, just sat there staring at me intently. I tried speaking to him softly, but he began snarling a little. Waves of panic gripped me and I tried to ease myself further off the rock but my legs had frozen completely. They began to wobble violently and I took a few deep breaths as Jax began to growl.

Tyler emerged from the bush and Jax rushed to his side. When I turned further I saw that Tyler had caught my look of fear but to my alarm I noticed a mocking expression on his face.

"Where's Freya?" I asked, breathing deeply.

Jax began to bark more wildly and Tyler grabbed him by the collar but his hand became caught.

“Damn dog,” he said, pulling at the collar.

He disentangled himself. “Give me your hand,” he said to me, roughly.

I could see that he was checking himself, suppressing his emotions, so I gripped his hand, but I tried not to focus on the expression on his face which was stern and angry. He carefully helped me ease my way off the rock as I heard rustling behind me. After a few seconds, Freya appeared through the bushes.

“What’s happening?”

“Sarah was frightened,” said Tyler. “She couldn’t get down.”

I worked my way further down the path as I grasped on to Tyler’s hand but he was holding it so tightly, I felt uncomfortable.

“I don’t know what happened,” I said.

“Have you ever been afraid of heights before?” Freya asked.

“No, not really,” I replied.

Tyler pulled ahead of us as we began retracing our steps back to the car. Freya was silent and I glanced at Tyler who had a sombre expression on his face, I remembered Freya telling me Tyler’s father had been an army man who had been intolerant of frailty or weakness. “I’ve been thinking about whether it might be better to move into town,” said Freya as we reached the beach. “It might be better for when the baby is here.”

“We could do that,” Tyler replied. “But remember you didn’t like town. Anyway, I think the neighbours are going to move.”

He said it ominously and I wondered what he was up to.

“Is it OK if I borrow your car later to go into town?” I asked. “I think I’ll buy some things and drop in on Gary.”

Gary owned the emporium where I used to work and was a close friend of Tyler’s and Freya’s.

“Yes, that’s okay,” said Freya.

Jax began snapping at a bird near the dunes

“Damn dog,” said Tyler. “I don’t know why I took him on.”

He ran ahead of us and brought Jax to heel and we followed the track that led to the road. Once we’d reached the car, Jax leapt into the back seat and I felt anxious as I sat down beside him.

The sun was shining faintly through the clouds as we began driving back.

“There’s a concert on at the pub tonight, Sarah,” said Freya. “You should come. I want you to meet my friend Gabrielle.”

I was conscious that she was still preoccupied by something and I drifted off into my thoughts. Freya and Tyler began talking about the house Tyler was building in the mountains.

“I think it’s a good idea if we sell it,” said Freya. “I don’t know if I want to move there.”

She said it in a wistful way. Tyler said nothing. Glancing ahead at the road.

Jax leapt out of the car when we arrived back and I noticed the bean bag had been rearranged when we walked inside. There was an intense smell of something cooking, like grilled cheese and pickled onions, someone playing a guitar next door, the repetition of chords.

“Zac’s been here,” said Tyler. “As usual he didn’t tell us he was coming.”

I walked down to my room and Freya disappeared into her bedroom. When I came out, she was in the living room wearing a tangerine dress. The sheerness of the material made her pregnancy more obvious.

“I think I’ll go into town now if that’s okay,” I said.

Freya grabbed the keys from a bowl and handed them over. They were attached to a dull metallic key ring with a pattern of leaves.

“Say hello to Gary,” she said.

She looked stressed and exhausted and I smiled at her as I left the house. Jax was in the yard, sniffing a plant. He walked up to me and began nuzzling against my leg. I bent down and patted him, wondering if I should take him with me but he wandered away towards the steps. I glanced back and watched him shuffle up the steps and disappear inside.

Climbing into the car, I began driving to town, conscious of the looming shapes of the trees further out towards the ridge, the way they seemed to shield the mountains from the road.