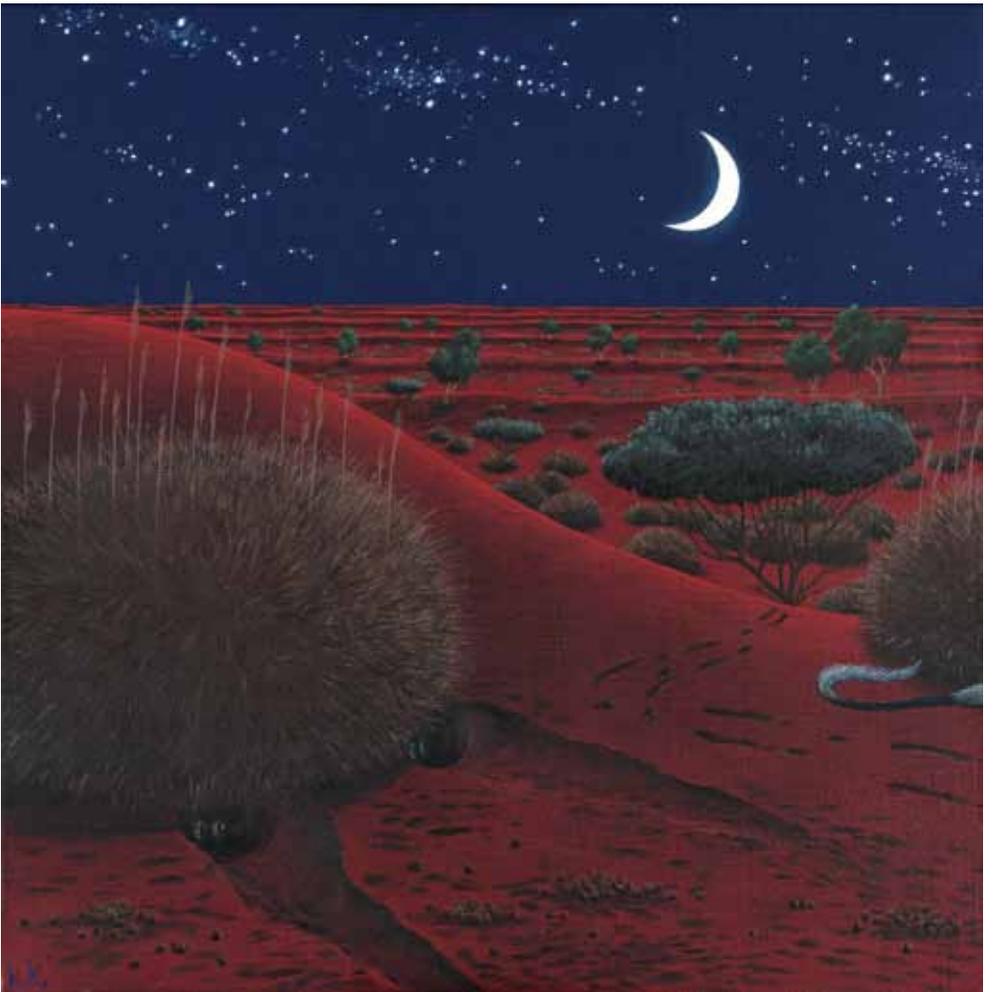


BILBY'S RING

TALE ONE

OUT IN THE
GREAT RED SAND LANDS



CHAPTER 1
BILBY



He took one look at what was left of her – Walpajirri, his mum – killed just outside their burrow. She lay on her side, legs at strange angles, head half chewed away, belly ripped open. The fox they'd run from had eaten the best bits, even her long delicate nose-tip. Grey fur, white fur, everything was torn and mangled, white tail-tuft the only thing not smeared in blood.

She'd sent him running for the nearest burrow; now she was dead and he was left, alone. Their home range was large in this endless land of red sand and spinifex. There was not another bilby out there.

One of Walpajirri's long pink ears lay beside a bush.
He turned away and ran.

Across the dark red-sand flat Bilby raced blindly, everything inside him numb. Stars and a thin moon tried to light the way but Bilby knew where he was heading. The soak would be dry but there should be more food there – if rabbits had not found it first. The rabbit mob that was following him and Mum had moved into the last lot of burrows they'd dug. That was only two dunes back and the area would soon be eaten bare. Then they'd move on to these new ones, where she now lay. That's just the way it was.

Bilby crossed the first plain then a dune and settled into a steady pace, pretty sure now that nothing was following. The fox might have gone back to eat more of Mum, or a cat would finish what was left of her. Why had she been killed and not a rabbit? There were always plenty of them. His head and chest felt empty like his belly, as his body twisted through spinifex clumps. Ahead rose a tall dark witchetty bush, alone on a wide patch of bare clay-sand. With no cover, he crossed the bare patch quickly, then smelt tucker beneath the bush. Bilby should have kept running but he stopped. A fat creamy grub in a root beneath his paws might stop him thinking about anything else. His mouth began to water and

his belly growled; he and Mum had found little to eat that night. She had died hungry. Bilby sniffed for the best spot and started digging.

Snap!

A dry stem broke across the far side of the bare patch but Bilby hardly noticed as his claws scraped a root. He could only think of that fat grub inside it.

Snap! ... Snap!

Bilby's huge ears caught every prickle of sound; those snaps came from a different place. He kept his paws moving but now he was listening hard.

Tail-tip still, don't turn those ears!

Walpajirri's voice hissed in his head.

Some creature was out there, maybe creeping closer.

Keep digging, don't look up!

Whatever it was must not know that Bilby knew it was watching him. He raised his nose high, as if about to sneeze. If a fox was around he would smell that for sure ... but no scent drifted on the still night air.

'Chooo!'

He pretend-sneezed then lowered his nose again, ears and eyes straining.

Snap!

That was closer, behind a spinifex clump at the edge of the bare patch.

Bilby's muscles tightened, ready to run: forget the grub, now he was the hunted one!

Burrow first, then fill your belly!

Would Walpajirri ever stop nagging?

Snap!

Now Bilby knew that something was creeping through the still dark night with breathtaking care.

His body was trembling.

Snap!

Go!

Claws dug deep as he spun from the hole, away from the killer, heading back the way he'd come. It was five long bounds across the bare patch to a wide spiky wall of spinifex grass. He leapt, high across needle-sharp spines, hoping the killer would fall on them and scream.

Ears flat back, body stretching out, black and white tail keeping balance behind, Bilby ran the race for his life. Find the old burrows, even though there might be rabbits, any meat-eaters will be eating mum. Across the creek line and up the first dune, he could hear no sounds of a killer behind.

Never look back, just run!

It didn't matter what caught him: dingo, fox, goanna or cat. It would all be the same, hot breath and saliva, claws, tearing teeth, the last sharp terror of death.

He leapt a dead cassia, old and brittle, then heard its twigs snap behind. Something was chasing him and catching up! He must reach a burrow, dive and dig. No one dug faster than a bilby, but this bilby had to get there first!

Across the last flat with the old burrows ahead, Bilby's breath was rasping and his legs were weak. Luckily the main tunnel was the nearest, a rabbit came from it and hopped away. Now it should be empty, he reached the dark entrance and dived.

Thud!

Bilby's lungs seemed to burst and stars went spinning as his body slumped and blackness fell. He couldn't work out what was happening; until his nose told him everything. He'd smashed into the body of a big buck rabbit and now it was trying to push him back out: heave and grunt, heave and grunt, its head hard against Bilby's back, forcing his body over warm sand. As he felt cool air and the rabbit stopped pushing, Bilby opened his eyes and the stars stayed still.

A huge buck, thick and muscled, rose high above him, full of fight.

Bilby somersaulted and dived for the tunnel but the big buck was fresh and fast.

'Arr, no yer don't,' it kicked him with a chest blow. 'A long-nose tryin' to claim its burrows back? This is rabbit country now, so get lost, before we finish yer properly!'

Bilby slumped, coughing, then bunched and lunged again but the huge buck blocked his way. On the mound outside the tunnel, they fell into a clawing kicking fight.

Other rabbits came crowding close.

'Shred his ears!'

'Push his nose in!'

'Rip his tail off!'

'Finish him now!'

They squealed and kicked at any sight of Bilby fur.

He was belly down, smelling his own blood, the big buck biting and clawing at his back. As it shifted to get a better grip, Bilby twisted with all the strength he had left. The buck was still on top but now he was on his back, hind feet up against the rabbit's chest. As Bilby kicked rabbit claws ripped through his skin and the buck flew backwards into the night!

Through the settling dust, all Bilby could hear was his own pounding chest and rasping breath. There was no sound from the other rabbits.

He looked up.

They all stood staring the same direction.

He raised his head higher to peer through the darkness and could just see the white underbelly of the buck. It lay with its legs spread, head thrown back, above the sand in a strange way. Bilby stared with the rabbits, hardly believing what he saw. The huge rabbit he'd just fought lay skewered where he'd kicked it, above the base of a fallen tree, the spear-sharp point of an old mulga root sticking out through its broad bloodied chest!

As Bilby sat up the rabbits spun to stare at him then spun and ran squealing down the nearest burrows. He waited as the pain in his chest grew less and the thump of rabbit paws in tunnels faded below. He stared down at his body. No cuts or blood on his belly or legs but his back felt a proper mess. At least they were not the death bites of a cat.

His muscles tightened and his ears jerked up. Where was the creature that had chased him here? Whatever it was might have found a rabbit but could still come sniffing for him. A cat would kill again just for fun, a starving dingo might look for more and foxes simply never gave up.

With a grunt of pain he was up on his paws ready to scramble down the tunnel. He stopped, as the stink of rabbit swept up from the entrance. It would be putrid down below but rabbits didn't often dig deep. At the end of Walpajirri's old main tunnel, he'd burrow further into clean sand. Bilby stared about sniffing. The smell of death outside was worse than rabbit inside. His stomach heaved as he stared at the dead buck, its chest still seeping body juice and blood. He'd killed a buck rabbit: that was something.

Would Walpajirri be pleased, or nag?

Burrow first, then fill your belly!

He must go down now. He was starting to shake.

Bilby took a deep breath and turned to the tunnel. Deep below he'd sleep and forget for a while.

A noise by the dead buck made him spin. Something was creeping around the corpse!

With not much light to help his eyes and the stench of rabbit and blood up his nose, it was hard to tell what the creature was.

A dark low shape was moving quickly, sniffing around the silent corpse. Bilby dared not move as it came towards him but it wanted the dead buck now, not him.

As the creature turned to tear at the rabbit, Bilby saw a sight he would never forget. Across its head, dark back and legs, white spots were scattered like brilliant stars – as if a piece of the night sky had fallen to earth!

The stench of guts came spilling out as the star-spotted creature ripped the rabbit open. Soon it was gulping flesh and gizzards in large, ravenous, half-chewed lumps. No wonder the starving thing had nearly caught him.

The only safe bilby is deep below!

But instead of going headfirst down the burrow, Bilby backed until he could just see out. What in a skyful-of-scats was he doing? Belly pressed flat against the tunnel floor, Bilby watched as the rabbit was torn to bits. Still skewered to the stake, it did a ghastly dance with each desperate tug and tear – then suddenly broke free!

The spotted creature went flying backwards, skin and flesh still clenched in its teeth. With a twist it landed belly down, lay still for some breaths then to Bilby's disgust, began eating where it lay: bite and swallow, bite and swallow, hardly waiting to chew the chunks.

The swallowing stopped.

The sound of gagging began.

Bilby stared. A big grub had done that once as he gulped it down hungrily: gone too far down to cough back up but not far enough down to swallow. A lump of rabbit, maybe fur, was stuck in the spotted creature's throat!

Now it was heaving, up on its haunches, trying to back away

from the blockage. It twisted and writhed in a frenzy to live then slumped on the sand with a strangled gasp. A last thread of air came wheezing out then the spotted creature lay silent and still.

For one breath Bilby stared and then he leapt, up the tunnel and across the sand. In three bounds he reached the creature, turned and kicked it hard in the side. He heard a sharp pop of air and spun to see a slimy lump on the sand. A strangled gasp of air sucked in as Bilby bounded back to the burrow.

Beneath a night sky jammed with stars, he waited by the entrance, as slowly, with terrible gasping and rasping, the spotted creature's breathing came back.

The only safe bilby is deep below!

Still Bilby waited outside the entrance.

'Chuooditch!'

The sound like a sneeze almost made him dive, but the spotted creature had not moved.

Bilby's muscles tightened as its eyes turned and found him.

'Chu...ditch!'

It spoke the same sound in a rasping voice but now as a word, not a sneeze.

'It's ... my name ...' the spotted creature gasped. 'I'm a spotted quoll of sundown way ... The Chuditch. You ... whatever you are ... you gave me back my breathing. I'd be dead meat for dingodogs ... gone to The Telling ... with no one to tell how my story ended.'

'I would have told,' Bilby frowned.

The creature tried to laugh but coughed instead.

'What ... how you ... choked a chuditch to death with a dead rabbit?'

'How a weird spotted thing tried to kill me!'

'Hey, I'm a meat-eater Bub. A girl's gotta eat and I was starving! If I'd caught you I would have eaten you quick as that rabbit and probably choked the same way. What rabbit would have tried to give me back my breathing? How come you did?'

Bilby stared. He had no idea why he had done it. And no idea why he was standing there talking to a meat-eater, one who would still chase and eat him as soon as it could, even though he had given it back its breathing. No wonder Walpajirri never stopped nagging.

Never look in a meat-eater's eyes.

Never listen to a meat-eater's lies.

One sniff of its ways and you'll be wise!

'How did you know to kick me?' the spotted thing asked.

Bilby frowned. 'A big grub got stuck in my throat once. I staggered around and fell down a deep gutter. When I hit the bottom the grub popped out. I didn't think about kicking you, I just did it.'

Bilby crouched as the chuditch sat up and stared at him.

'Good thing I waited to watch the fight and then ate the big buck,' she grinned. 'If I hadn't, I might have snatched a baby bunny, gulped it down and choked and died while you were still fighting.'

Bilby's ears lowered and sat apart as he puzzled. No predator had ever spoken to him like this, or really, ever spoken to him.

'You're a bandicoot of some sort by the look of that nose,' the chuditch continued. 'Deadly tail Bub, and those ears! They are something else!'

'I can hear better than anyone else around here.'

'I believe it. So what sort of giant-eared bandicoot are you?'

'I'm a bilby. Those cats and foxes call us rabbit-eared bandicoots but in The Telling we're called pink-eared bandicoots.'

'Are there wayback stories about us in your Telling: The Spotted Quolls of Sundown Way? That's why I've travelled so far from home range.'

The creature sprang up eagerly as it spoke.

Fear flooded Bilby at last. He spun and dived deep down the tunnel.

'Wait!' he heard the chuditch call. 'I can't eat you now ... I promise! You gave me back my breathing!'

Rabbit diggings confused him at first until he found the old main tunnel. He raced to the bottom and started digging, pushing rabbit rubbish behind. Two body lengths on in clean sand he stopped and listened, through the backfill that now blocked the tunnel behind him. Outside, in the old twisting tunnel, not a single sand grain slid. The chuditch had not followed.

All Bilby wanted now was sleep. He squatted back, head between his paws, ears folded forward and closed his eyes.

Safe below he would now wait until the strange spotted predator had gone.



CHAPTER 2
CHUDITCH

Bilby woke at the end of the old tunnel that Walpajirri had dug two fat-moons ago. He'd slept all day and it was night again. He raised his ears. Through the backfill and far above he could just hear Old Mother Nightjar, gobbling her call across the dune tops. The old bird would be out hunting moths and beetles by now. Bilby frowned, ears turning. Rabbits were moving in their maze of tunnels above. They should all be out feeding by now. He yawned. Hideous rabbits had rampaged through his dreams, then the strange predator that had chased him last night had stolen a snake from the nest of The Great Eagle of The Telling. In a rage, The Great Eagle threw the dark-furred chuditch high against the night-time stars. When the creature fell back down to earth, its dark fur was covered with brilliant star spots, and Bilby saw them as if for the first time.

Forever then those chuditch are marked, to show their greedy, thieving ways.

As soon as he woke, he knew the dream and the words came from one of Walpajirri's stories. It was part of The Telling of The Chuditch, the spotted quolls of sundown way. She was always telling endless tales: about the ways of bilbies, of all the creatures they knew and of some, like the chuditch, they did not.

Every creature has a Telling, she'd say. When our breathing stops, all that's left are the stories of what we have done. They become our Telling. The Tellings of every bilby and bird, and all other creatures that breathe, are part of The One Great Telling we learn. This shows how each kind of creature is, and how all creatures live with each other across a home range. Only the invaders, Walpajirri would hiss, those rabbits, cats, foxes and camels have no Tellings, which is why they cannot be known or trusted!

Bilby frowned. The spotted quoll was not an invader then. Stories of The Chuditch were in The Telling. He turned in the tunnel to face the backfill.

Of course, he hoped this strange new killer was gone, if not it could be waiting to get him. He remembered its promise: *I'm not going to eat you ... You gave me back my breathing!*

How could you trust the promise of a meat-eater?

But he had brought its breathing back.

Bilby frowned. He knew what to do. He would stay below this night and the next day. By then the killer would surely have moved on.

But instead, Bilby began to dig through the backfill.

What in a skyful-of-scats was he doing now?

Bruised muscles ached, the cuts and bites along his back pulled and stung, he was weak and tired, there was an unknown predator around and he was digging out? He must be crazy but he kept digging, until his pink nose-tip poked out through the sand. Bilby sniffed cautiously up the tunnel.

Nothing but rabbit-stink.

He put his whole head out and listened.

No scent or sound of a strange new killer.

Bilby pushed through the rest of the backfill and climbed up the dark tunnel, sniffing and listening at every turn. The chuditch might be waiting around any corner to surprise him.

But above, in the confusion of new tunnels, not even a rabbit lurked.

Bilby stopped before the entrance, where the old tunnel levelled out. He sniffed nervously over the last stretch of sand. It was flattened and stunk of a meat-eater, but different from cat or the rancid stench of fox. Bilby frowned. It smelt like the chuditch must have slept there the daypast! Cats would sleep in burrows, but deeper in a side tunnel for coolness or warmth. Sleeping just inside the entrance was weird!

He waited and listened, then moved carefully over the flattened patch of sand and out.

A skinny moon was trying to shine amongst bold bright stars. It made Bilby think of his own empty belly, and then the grub he'd been chased from. He looked around. These dunes were already being eaten bare by rabbits. He might as well head back to where he'd found that fat grub and, yes, Walpajirri ...

Burrow first...!

Bilby stared about, sniffing and listening. Only bones and fur bits were left of the rabbit carcass but the stink of blood and guts

was still strong. Rabbits moved in the tunnels below but none seemed to be outside. Maybe they were still scared from last night. His white tail plume flicked. One bilby could not stop a rabbit invasion but if he made them go hungry, even one night, that was pretty good.

A beetle buzzed through the spinifex, crickets clicked and Old Mother Nightjar gobbled her call. He'd go and find the old bird before he headed back. She'd have something to say for sure, she was almost as bad as Walpajirri.

A sudden noise sent him spinning back to the tunnel. The chuditch came racing down the dune and skidded to a stop by the rabbit remains. An enormous stick insect twitched feebly in her mouth.

'Tucker for you!' she gasped, spitting the insect onto bloodied sand.

Bilby stopped at the entrance and turned to stare.

'Don't do plants but I do insects', the chuditch rasped. 'You must do insects, by the look of those pathetic little pointy teeth, and you must need a feed after all that running away and rabbit killing last night.'

Bilby could hardly believe what he heard. This predator, who would have killed him last night, was now grinning and trying to make a joke! He looked at the large stick insect, dumped where the buck had been torn apart. It was coated with disgusting saliva and now covered in blood, guts, and sand!

'I can't eat that! It's covered in your spit, rabbit guts and blood!'

The quoll looked down at the slimy insect in surprise.

'I'll eat it then!'

As the chuditch crunched and swallowed noisily, Bilby spoke, not really knowing why he bothered to explain. 'I'm a plant-eater and an insect-eater, not a meat-eater! Blood and guts and meat – even the smell of predators – makes me feel sick!'

The meat-eater looked up in surprise, then peered at her creamy-white belly and sniffed.

'We smell bad?'

'You stink! All meat-eaters do ... like old fat and rotten meat!'

The chuditch stared at Bilby then laughed.

'Well, thanks! You sure don't worry about how a girl feels! Rotting meat and old fat smells pretty good to me. At least I was

right about the insects. I thought that if I brought you tucker, you might tell me things while you ate it.'

Bilby stared. 'What sort of things?'

'Like, if we chuditch, the spotted quolls of sundown way, used to live around here. I haven't seen any since I left my home range: in The Place of Tall Trees, where they touch the clouds, way past summer-sun. Each season back there more ferals invade our tall-tree country and humans move closer too. There are stories in our Telling about chuditch who lived in The Great Red Sand Lands, where the prickly spinifex grass grows. That's why I headed this way many moons ago. If I find a place where we used to live, with no cats, foxes or humans, I'll go back and bring my mob.'

'Cats are everywhere and foxes too at the moment,' Bilby said. They were enough without a strange new predator as well, he thought. 'What are ferals and humans?' he asked.

The chuditch stared as if surprised. 'Ferals is the name humans use for the invaders: rabbits, cats and foxes, different sorts of birds, rats and mice, and heaps more – some big like those scary camels – all those creatures without a Telling. You don't know humans? I guess not, I haven't seen any in this red sand country. Humans are everywhere back at home range, tall as emus, but not birds. They stand and walk on two back legs, straight up like trees, but the walking legs bend forward in the middle instead of back, like a camel's front ones do. They've got no tail and most of their skin is bare, just short hairy stuff on their arms and legs, and longer hairy stuff on their heads. Their skins are all different colours, from pale pink to brown, some as dark as my backfur. They cover their skins with weird stuff that's all the different colours you could think of. Humans do all sorts of weird things that no other creatures would think of.

Bilby frowned. There were stories in The Telling of creatures called firekeepers. They had dark, bare skins, walked on two long legs, and were greatly feared. It was said they no longer hunted across the home ranges he and Walpajirri knew. He stared at this creature that had come so far. Bilby longed to see the place where tall trees touched the clouds and to watch a human walking.

The chuditch was staring back at him.

'So do you know about my mob? Are there stories about us in this country?'

‘Wayback, Mum told me a Tale about how The Chuditch got their spots but I can’t remember, I was so small.’

Bilby fibbed. He was not going to tell a creature who could kill him that those of her fur were marked as thieves. No creature he knew told a Telling Tale that made them look bad. Another memory came into his head.

‘You could go to The Big Bloodwood Forest, where The Old Pink Cockatoo lives,’ he suggested. ‘They say the old bird remembers every story from The Telling ever told to him. Mum and I went down there once after rains. If anyone knows it would be him.’

‘Take me to the old cockatoo!’

As she spoke, the chuditch stepped towards Bilby.

In a whisker’s twitch, he had spun and dived.

‘Wait! Where are you going? I promised, remember? You saved my life! I can’t eat you now!’ Bilby heard the chuditch call as he raced down the tunnel.

When he reached the bottom, she was shouting halfway down.

‘You have to take me there! You must!’

From the light, Bilby saw that the chuditch had stopped. She was smaller than him and must know that a kick from his back legs in a burrow could tear her open. She really must want to learn stories.

‘Take me to The Big Bloodwood Forest! I have to speak with the old cockatoo! I can protect you from cats on the way!’

She stopped begging and Bilby could hear her breathing fast above.

‘I’m coming up,’ he called. ‘Back off to where you ate the rabbit.’

The chuditch was waiting behind the mulga root.

Bilby scrambled from the tunnel and stood, slightly crouched and ready to bolt. They stared at each other for many breaths: the killer, quick and lithe, with prickle-sharp claws and tearing teeth, and the prey, larger and probably stronger but with blunt claws for digging and small weak teeth.

‘You have to take me!’ the chuditch begged.

‘I have to?’

To Bilby’s amazement, the killer made another joke.

‘I could forget my promise and catch you,’ she grinned.

*Never look in a meat-eater's eyes.
Never listen to a meat-eater's lies
One sniff of its ways and you'll be wise!*

Bilby frowned: would Walpajirri ever leave him alone?

'It was a joke, Bub!' the chuditch said.

Suddenly anger rose inside Bilby like a wildfire.

'My dad was eaten by a dingo! A fox just ate half my mum's head and guts! My mum's mum was killed by a cat, and you ... expect me to travel with you, another killer?' Bilby shouted at the chuditch, his ears low and wide apart.

Was she laughing at him? Then she wasn't ... and when she spoke, her voice was sad.

'Only my Mum's tail was left,' the chuditch began. 'She was showing us kids where to look for frogs, beneath the tall trees down by the creek. Her head was in a hollow when I saw the fox and shouted, but it was too close. Mum yelled at us to get home then ran at the fox to stop it chasing us. We waited three nights in home hollow but she never came. When we got too hungry and came out, we found her tail and blood beside the tree. I won't ever run again, not when there's danger to a creature of my fur.'

Old Mother Nightjar gobbled her call across the flat. At least she had not been eaten, yet.

Bilby stared up into a sky strewn with stars. This wide land beneath them that he called home range, was all he knew. It had always been there, just as the Telling told. But now weird things were happening: a new predator had nearly caught and killed him and then told of strange new things. Now he'd heard of tall trees that reached the clouds, and of humans and ferals, he knew things would never be the same.

'Don't you want to find a place with no invaders? No rabbits, cats, foxes or camels? What if The Old Pink Cockie knows where heaps of other bilbies live?'

The chuditch was really trying hard.

Bilby stared at her. Walpajirri always talked of finding other bilbies but never with much hope. He stared around at this land where now he was the only bilby left. He had a very good reason why he shouldn't go with this new predator, but what good reason did he have to stay?

Bilby drew in a deep breath.

'I will take you to The Old Pink Cockatoo,' he said.

CHAPTER 3
FRIEND OR FOOD?

'Let's go! Let's head for The Old Pink Cockie now!'

The chuditch leapt in the air as she spoke, and Bilby spun for the tunnel again. It took all his courage to stop, then stay, outside the entrance instead of diving in.

The only safe bilby is deep below!

It was all he'd heard and knew since a baby. Everything inside him wanted to dive. Was he mad thinking he'd get used to travelling with a predator?

'Stop leaping about, you're making me jumpy. You're a killer who tried to eat me last night.'

The chuditch stopped and backed to the mulga stake.

'I promised and I won't go back on that, or joke about it again. I'm not going to eat you now.'

The killer sounded as if she meant it, but Bilby knew what Walpajirri would say.

'How far to The Big Bloodwood Forest?' the chuditch asked.

Bilby looked up at the skinny sliver above them. 'When the moon grows thin again then fattens we should be close,' he said. 'We'll head summer-sun way across the dunes, to where the water flows salty after rain. Then we'll follow the claypans and white lakes where there should be better tucker.'

'What sort of tucker?'

'Saltybush and thornbush plants, more insects and mice, and maybe rabbits,' Bilby said.

'What, so I can choke on another one and feel lucky you're there to pull it back out?' The chuditch was grinning but Bilby could not.

He looked around at this home range, where Walpajirri his mother had died. Maybe it was time to get away for a bit. He looked down their old tunnel where safety lay, but a bilby could not hide in a burrow forever, and the big buck was right, it was rabbit country now. Maybe The Old Pink Cockatoo would know

where other bilbies were.

'Let's go then,' he said.

High dunes lay across the direction they would travel, so each one had to be climbed. Although it was cold-time the days were warm and no rain had fallen for ages. The fine red sand was powder-dry and pushed away beneath their paws; easy to slide down but hard to climb.

Bilby set a pace that he knew he could run at all night, but that was far too slow for the chuditch. She bounded from side to side for a while then disappeared off after sounds in the night. The first time back, she leapt from darkness and nearly scared Bilby out of his skin. A hungry belly and nerves made him grumpy.

The second time she leapt out, Bilby stopped and shouted.

'Don't jump out at me like that!'

After that, the chuditch would wait well ahead so Bilby could see her clearly as he came. Not far on they passed a desert poplar tree and Bilby smelt tucker in its roots below. Soon he had a paw-full of small pink grubs in his belly and ran on feeling not so grumpy.

Later that night, on a wide flat between dunes, a huge grey cat surprised them as they crossed its hunting path.

'Don't slow down or look at it,' Bilby hissed as the killer stopped to stare.

The oddest things could confuse cats and a bilby running with a strange spotted predator might just do it. Fear stabbed at Bilby as they ran past, close enough to smell the killer, then see and feel, that cold yellow stare of a cat's eyes. That stare seemed to follow them through the night, though Billy's ears told him that the cat had not.

'I'd fight a cat my size, but that was one big scary scat,' the chuditch said as they stopped on the next dune.

'What would you do if it chased you?'

'Run for it, Bub! I'd be up a tree, under a rock, or heading for a burrow fast as! If it chased me for a while I might fight back. Cats get puffed much quicker than quolls.'

'They're not so bad to run from if a burrow's close,' Bilby agreed as they headed on.

'Puur! That was strong,' the chuditch complained as they

leapt another of the cat's hunting paths, halfway down the dune. 'Have you ever sniffed their paws where the scent glands are? Talk about catstink! It must squeeze out with every step. No wonder their hunting paths smell so bad.'

'No wonder the whole country stinks, with hunting paths crossing all over it,' Bilby nodded.

Although the huge grey cat was the only one they saw that night, the chuditch now ran beside Bilby, only swerving when tucker was close. He felt pleased when a little button quail escaped, then cross when she caught one of the chatty little hopping mice.

Dawnlight was growing and frost began to bite when Bilby stopped beside a small sandy creek. He smelt yalka bulbs below in the red sand and he was starving.

'We'll sleep the day here,' he said. 'I should burrow first but soon it'll be too bright. Bilbies only like to be out after dark. Are you okay to hunt when it's light?'

The chuditch nodded.

'Will you watch out for killers while I feed? Then I can dig and get below.'

Burrow first, then fill your belly!

What in a burrow-full-of-fleas was he doing, asking a killer that could kill him to watch out for other killers? But he was pretty sure the chuditch would keep watch, and keep her promise not to eat him. She could fight off a cat and there was no sign of dingodogs or foxes in the area, so they should be safe enough. It was his fault that they'd gone so far and it was getting light, but the sooner he got this predator to The Big Bloodwood Forest, the sooner he could leave her and get back to normal life.

'You fill your belly while I keep sharp,' the chuditch grinned.

Bilby turned to the yalka patch, dug up the first few small brown bulbs and was soon nibbling nutty white flesh.

The chuditch sat quietly while he fed, keeping a sharp eye around the dune tops. When Bilby finished eating, she followed him to the bottom of the nearest dune. He sniffed by a cassia bush, then without warning, began to dig and showered her with sand. She shook herself, then sat back to watch him dig: strong front paws clawing out the sand for the back feet to rake and throw behind. In a few breaths, the bandicoot had disappeared.

Bilby dug a short travelling burrow, curving down through the sand into clay below. He then tunnelled straight up but stopped just below the surface, right beside a spinifex clump. If a creature came down the main tunnel he could race up this one, dig out and flee. He crept back down to the end of the main tunnel and settled into his sleeping pose.

Chuditch waited for the bandicoot to come out. When no sand had spurted for quite a while she went to the entrance and looked in. The tunnel sounded short but she couldn't hear him moving below. She turned and sat by the big old cassia bush, on the pile of fresh sand he had thrown out. The first rays of sunlight turned the dune tops fire-red and for many breaths, all creatures fell silent. Chuditch too sat silent and still as the fire-colours faded and morning noise returned. She heard the wing-sweep of air as a crimson chat flew into the bush, its head and belly now redder than the dunes. Not noticing the chuditch the small bird dropped, to snatch at a beetle crossing the sand. A blur of spots and dark fur flew and the chat was dead, its head bitten off.

Sucking at the neck, Chuditch drained the small bird dry. Its blood might be the only drink she'd get for a while. She ate the body, feathers and all, crunching the tiny bones to bits, then licked her whiskers, looked around and backed down the tunnel a short way. There was no sound from the bandicoot below as the sun sailed up to flood the dunes in gold.

Bilby crept up the tunnel well after dark, over quoll smell and out beneath the stars. His nose told him first then his eyes could see the story of the crimson chat's death. Marks in the sand and a few feathers told most of it. Sadness made his chest tighten. Once, a pair of crimson chats had nested in saltybush near one lot of burrows. Bilby remembered the fat-moon nights when they and Walpajirri would swap Telling Tales. He was only a kid back then but hadn't forgotten.

Bilby shivered then stretched in the cold air. The cuts and bruises from the fight with the rabbit still stung and ached. He spun as the chuditch came racing down the dune side, this time dragging a black and white bandy-bandy.

'Lucky to find a snake now, hey? Snuggled under leaf litter, too cold to wriggle away, poor thing.'

As she dropped by the burrow to tear at the banded snake, the sadness in Bilby's chest turned to rage.

'Why must you kill beside my burrow and then bring more dead things here to eat? I've told you I only eat insects and plants, and the smell of blood and guts makes me sick! Two crimson chats were my mum's best friends and you go and eat one right here! Don't kill or eat creatures anywhere near me, or you can go and find The Old Cockatoo by yourself!'

Bilby glared at the chuditch and she stared back, the end of both their tails twitching. In the silence that followed it felt as if the whole country around them was listening.

'I'm going to feed,' Bilby said at last and hopped away, still shaking with rage.

He did not see the chuditch kill or eat a creature that could bleed again.

As the moon slowly began to fatten, the two crossed endless dunes and flats. Rain had not fallen in these parts for many seasons and hard times had begun to grip. Fine sand blew across bare dune tops, stinging their eyes to blind them with tears. Across wide flats between the dunes, plants were parched and drooping leaves, with little fruit or seeds to eat. They were both growing lean but Bilby could still feed himself by digging for grubs, fungi, yalka bulbs and roots. He left most food above ground for the chuditch but she found little more than spiders and beetles. Soon, Bilby might have to dig for termites.

One night when the moon was full-fat, Bilby smelt a stink that he knew too well. They began to dodge scratchings and rabbit scats and the dunes grew barer as they ran on. Soon every plant they passed had been eaten, leaves and roots as well as the bark, down to the wood and as high as a rabbit could reach. Then, at the edge of the barest dune, they stopped to stare down at a dark round claypan. Its dead-flat surface would once have held water but that had dried many seasons ago. Taller acacia bushes, with bark too tough for rabbits to gnaw, were still alive around the claypan.

They stood for some time, sniffing and listening. If rabbits were around, there could be predators too.

'Maybe I'll eat rabbit tonight,' the chuditch grinned. 'Don't

run off in case I choke and you have to save me again.'

'I reckon these rabbits will be tough-as,' Bilby said. 'By the look of this country most might be dead, with only the toughest and smartest left. If it's been dry for seasons there won't have been babies, so all you'll catch is a cunning old battler. I wouldn't like to meet one of those in a burrow.'

'Look!' the chuditch whispered, then she was gone, creeping down the dune side from bush to bush.

Bilby heard the rabbit then saw it, hopping slowly like a big old doe. It was coming back across the claypan: there could be a soak with water out there. As Bilby headed down the dune, a rabbit squealed loudly then growled like a grumpy doe. Two creatures were fighting swearing and snarling, as they rolled and crashed across dry leaves. As he reached the bottom, the noise became muffled and Bilby ran as fast as he could. Above the burrow where the muffled noise came from, he heard the chuditch scream from below. Bilby dug straight down towards the noise but the quoll came scabbling out of the tunnel, gasped for air and flopped on the sand.

'I was on its back ... it dragged me down the tunnel ... jammed me up against the roof! It pushed up so hard I couldn't breathe ... I was sure my chest bones were going to snap! When I stopped breathing, it tried to push me off and kick ... that's when I twisted and got away. The vicious old scat!'

For the second time Bilby watched the chuditch get its breathing back. This time he began to grin.

'I warned you they were cunning old scats. I was digging down when you got away.'

'What will I have to promise if you save my breathing again?' the chuditch laughed, when she saw where he'd dug.

'Tell how a bilby saved a fierce killer quoll, first from a dead buck rabbit, then from a scrawny old doe,' Bilby grinned.

When Chuditch had recovered they went across the cracking claypan, to the last place where water would have pooled. Rabbits, foxes and dingodogs had dug down, following the water as it dried back into the earth. The narrow soak hole was now as deep as the length of two rabbits, but only had a muddy sip of water at the bottom.

Bilby peered down, sniffing.

‘Those rabbits might have hit rock too hard to dig,’ he said.

‘How long will the old battlers last after the water’s gone?’ Chuditch asked.

‘If there’s green tucker they can hang out for a while but this country is rabbit-dead. That’s what we call it when rabbits have eaten a place bare; not a seed or a plant left to grow back when it rains,’ Bilby muttered. ‘Hopefully the few left will soon stop breathing, or be too old to have babies when the rains come again.’

He sniffed wide around the entrance of the soak.

‘Only rabbit tracks are fresh,’ he said. ‘I’d say any predators have moved on a while ago.’

The nights were getting shorter and not so cold when they reached the place where water flows salty after rain. Small white lakes, red-brown claypans, and wide creek lines were all there as Bilby had remembered. Juicy-leaved but tough plants grew across this country: many kinds of saltybush, bindiibush and burrbush, plants that could find water deep below.

The first night out feeding, Chuditch came back grinning.

‘I won’t tell you what I caught but for the first time in ages my belly feels almost full.’

Water below, plants grow.

Seeds and fruit, more take root.

Insects chewing, fat and nice,

Food for bilbies, birds and mice.

Bilby sang one of Walpajirri’s songs aloud, for the first time with Chuditch near. ‘My Mum sang that, when we travelled this way many seasons ago,’ he said, looking away.

As the moon grew full-fat then thin again they followed the twisting line of country where water flows salty after rain. Late one night, Bilby stopped on a high dune. Ahead, against the stars and night sky, the dark line of all the earth they could see had changed, from the smooth dips and rises of curving dunes to a ragged line of tumbling hills.

‘End-of-earth has changed,’ Chuditch pointed out.

‘We’ve reached The Crumbly Hills,’ Bilby said.