

The Chase
Sarah Dreier (2019)

‘Riley. Wait up. You’re killing me here.’ I said, panting. Despite it being five o’clock in the morning, she was powering up the hill as if it was nothing. I turned to see how high up we were and caught my breath. It was beautiful. The sun was rising over the tree line, the golden rays twinkling off the winding creek below. Who could own a property like this and not want to live on it? The thought reminded me that not only were we trespassing, but on a very dangerous man’s property.

‘Hey, do you think this is the best idea?’ I asked. Riley stood beside me as I admired the view. ‘Tommy’s not exactly friendly.’ I shuddered as I remembered our last encounter. We had been swimming in the creek when he’d turned up. He’d caught us trying to run away and warned us that if we ever came here again, he’d hunt us down and put us to use as dingo bait. The way he had said it made it impossible not to believe him.

‘Kaylah, please. You know he never comes here.’ Riley laughed, rolling her eyes. ‘In the thirteen years that I’ve know you, I have never met anyone who worries so much. Don’t tell me you believed his ridiculous threat.’ She snickered. ‘Just chill. I reckon we’ll get tonnes of good pictures on that big rock down the other side, then we can run to the windmill.’

The thought of running any further made me want to curl up and die of exhaustion. But the windmill was worth it. ‘Sounds good. I can’t wait to cross climbing a windmill off my bucket list,’ I replied, picking up the pace again.

‘Look. Perfect timing. The sun is just hitting the rock,’ she said, as I came to stand beside her.

‘Okay, if we prop your phone up on that log, then you can set the timer and run to get in a pose with me,’ I replied. I ran to the rock and climbed up, testing some poses. I turned to tease Riley about her ‘selfie faces’, but the comment on my lips died as I saw her stumble on a root and sprawl onto a protruding rock.

‘Riley,’ I yelled.

‘I’m okay,’ she said as I raced over.

But as she stood up, I could see a red splotch growing beneath her jeans. ‘Sit down,’ I instructed.

‘It’s just a scratch,’ she replied indignantly.

‘Sit down,’ I said again. She rested back on the rock and rolled up her jeans. I inspected her leg. It wasn’t a scratch. The rock she’d landed on had created a large gash in

her calf. I swore and began rummaging through my backpack. 'Looks like bringing bandages was a good idea after all, hey?' I teased, remembering her argument earlier that I was being "ridiculous" by bringing the first aid kit.

'Ha ha,' she replied, rolling her eyes.

'That's us for the day,' I said, pulling the bandage tight around Riley's leg. 'The quickest way home is down the hill and across the paddock.' I pointed North. 'That is, if you're willing to risk being in Tommy's paddock,' I said, shuddering.

'Okay, I should be able to jog,' she said, standing up. I placed her arm over my shoulder to support her, and we began to jog across the paddock.

After a few minutes, Riley stopped.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Do you hear that?' she whispered.

I listened. A deep rumbling filled the air. I looked around. There was a white Land Cruiser coming into view at the edge of the paddock. 'Tommy,' I yelled.

'Get down. We can't let him see us. That's his hunting ute. He keeps all his guns in the box on the back.'

'I knew this was a bad idea. I knew it.' I said in terror.

'Calm down. He's headed this way, but if we can get to the stretch of forest over there, we'll have cover. From there, we can cross over the fence onto my property.'

'He's less than a kilometre away and the forestry is roughly the same, but he's in a car and we're on foot. So, you do the maths!' I shouted.

'Let me re-iterate,' she said, getting up. 'Run.'

I didn't need telling twice. I was off. The rumbling of the Landie's engine got louder as the vehicle came closer. My ears rang as something whistled past my head. 'He's shooting at us,' I yelled.

'Keep running. Stay low.' Riley said beside me. I glanced sideways, wondering why she wasn't ahead of me, and saw she was limping. I remembered her gash. The spot on her jeans was growing; the bandage must have come loose. I stopped. 'Lean on me,' I said. She nodded and we continued running. One hundred metres to go.

'Come on. We can make it.' I said to myself.

I felt as if I was going to collapse. My body couldn't possibly move any faster. It was as if I was watching the scene from afar. I could hear screaming; only afterwards did I realise it was me. The rumbling of his ute filled the air and drowned out everything.

We slowed down as the scrub around us thickened, forming a protective barrier around us. Tommy was further behind now, trying to manoeuvre his way through the scrub. Riley was yelling again, but I couldn't tell what she was saying. Everything had gone blurry around me and her voice sounded as if she were miles away. It occurred to me that if I felt like collapsing, Riley must be almost passing out. After all, she was the one with a cut running halfway up her calf. Thankfully, her property was up ahead. The fence seemed like a gateway into Heaven, we stumbled up to it, clambered through, and collapsed. We were safe.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'I think so. Just hurts a lot,' she replied.

'Do you think you can walk home?' I asked.

'Yeah, it's only bleeding a little. I'll make it,' she said, getting up. We walked across the paddock, through her parent's olive grove. 'So, the windmill tomorrow?' I asked.

'What?' Riley asked, her eyes wide and incredulous. 'Are you crazy?'

'Didn't think so.' I laughed.

'Phew. I think we'll stick to my place from now on.'