

'Vikki Wakefield writes stories that will break your heart.'

Readings



**THIS IS  
HOW WE  
CHANGE  
THE ENDING**

**VIKKI WAKEFIELD**

## PROLOGUE

Dec said we wouldn't start hunting until dark. Pitch black was better for shooting. Hard to aim fast and shoot straight when you had to sort heads from tails—when it was just two beady eyes you could aim for the middle. You don't want to nick them, he said, especially the young ones. They never forget. Can't chance having a wounded animal come back for you when it's grown with a full set of teeth.

I was eleven. It was about eight degrees but it felt like zero. We were somewhere north of a town called Fiston—me, Dec, his mates Jarrod and Brett, one ute, two tents, three eskies, and a gun—and all I knew was it took five boring hours to get there and we could have stopped way sooner and still landed in a spot that looked the same: no fences, red dirt, sick-looking trees and lumps of moonrock. It was the furthest I'd ever been from home.

Dec told me to pitch the tents and get a fire started while they sat on the back of the ute, drinking beer. I'd only ever pitched a tent in our backyard; here the ground was rock-hard beneath six inches of dust, nothing to make the pegs stick. When they weren't looking, I weighed the pegs down with rocks and covered them with dirt. I made a circle of stones and



tried to light a few dry sticks, but I burned my fingers. The fire went out.

‘Like this.’ Brett reached into a toolbox on the tray.

‘Let him do it,’ Dec said. ‘Only way they learn.’

Brett ignored him. ‘Watch.’

When I wasn’t around, they made Brett fetch the beers. Dec and Jarrod talked about him behind his back and laughed to his face. It made them feel big to make him feel small—part of me hated them for it, but I knew if I had to pick I would rather be like them.

I expected Brett to rub a couple of sticks together and *whoof*, fire, but instead he squirted Zippo lighter fluid onto a greasy rag and poked it underneath the pile I’d made. He flicked his lighter and the sticks went up like they’d been burning for hours.

‘Add the big stuff when the small stuff’s caught. Right, kid?’

I glanced at Dec.

Dec let it go. ‘Get on with it.’

I ran off to gather more wood. I didn’t have to go far. I dragged a dead branch to the pit and dropped the leafy end into the flames; sparks shot skyward like a swarm of fireflies. I stacked medium-sized pieces in one pile, big ones in another. The stack of wood grew, and so did the pile of empty beer cans.

The way to please my old man was to keep doing whatever he asked until he told me to stop.

Dec looked on with flat eyes, the gun across his lap. He wore shorts and a singlet and his feet were bare. He never seemed to feel the cold. I counted eight empty cans on the

ground, but that was between three of them; I'd taken my eye off Dec so I wasn't sure where he was at.

Three was okay. Five was borderline. Eight was dangerous.

Dec had shown me how to use the rifle at home, twice, unloaded. I remembered everything he showed me: *back straight, chin up, steady, aim, breathe out, squeeze. Never aim if you don't mean to shoot. Both ends can hurt you, loaded or not, and plant your feet or the kick will put you on your arse.* But the way his fingers fumbled and his tongue poked from the corner of his mouth made me worried the gun knew him better than he knew it.

'That's enough,' Dec said finally. 'We don't need a bonfire to tell everyone we're out here.'

He handed me the last of his beer. He'd been giving me the dregs for the past year or so—said I needed to start getting match-fit. I was sure it was ninety per cent spit, but I swallowed it anyway. Jarrod laughed when I screwed up my face and gave me his, too.

One minute it was bright, cold daylight; the next, the sun blazed and fell. It was almost dark when we set off. Brett drove, with me in the passenger seat. Dec and Jarrod stood in the tray, aiming the spotty. There were a few rabbits here and there, but one sniff and they darted underground. The ute bounced over jagged rocks and sandy mounds that Brett said were wombat burrows; we made new tracks where there were none and I hung onto the dash, trying not to bite my tongue, wondering how we'd find our way back to the campsite when every tree-rock-fencepost looked the same.

I'd only eaten a packet of chips since lunchtime; if this was hunting, I worried we'd starve.

'Fucken useless,' Dec said after an hour.

He ordered Jarrod to drive, like it was Brett's fault the rabbits were too quick. Brett got in the back. I wanted to get in there too, but there wasn't room.

'Be quiet,' Dec warned, though I hadn't spoken a word since we'd left the campsite.

Jarrod drove fast. We came across a clearing with more burrows. The ground moved: a wombat—fat, sluggish, unafraid, until Jarrod drove straight at it. I heard Dec whoop in the back, which meant Jarrod should stop. He braked hard and I braced myself on the dash.

Dec let off a shot. Dirt sprayed, just left of the wombat's head.

The wombat looked over its shoulder and waddled off, slow as a turtle but still too quick for Dec's second shot. He fired again, missing its backside by a mile. I prayed it would get away and it did, but Jarrod edged the ute forward and nudged the mound with the bull bar. The entrance crumbled and caved in.

'Bury the sucker,' he said.

I didn't know my heart could bang that hard without busting my ribs. I imagined the wombat suffocating down there—it wasn't like we could eat it, so why was Dec shooting?

I got out of the ute and stood in the dust-swirled glare of the headlights, gulping down the lump in my throat.

Brett put his hand on my shoulder. Under his breath, he said, 'Dug its way in—it can dig its way out. Got claws like a bear.'

I nodded and climbed back in the cab. I'd had enough hunting, but Dec wasn't done. I turned around, saw the glint of the barrel, his body swaying. He slapped the roof twice and whooped again.

We drove over the slack wire of a broken fence and entered a new landscape: flat, dry paddock with tufts of weed, a muddy waterhole in the middle. A few rabbits scampered from cover and took off, dodging left and right, searching for somewhere to hide.

But Dec didn't shoot—he'd spotted something bigger.

'Goats,' Jarrod said.

They were bigger than any goats I'd ever seen, with full beards, yellow eyes and curling hooves. I counted eight, clustered around the waterhole. At first I thought they were blinded by our headlights, but then I realised they were curious, and not at all scared. They'd probably never come across people like us before.

Dec couldn't miss, not at such close range. Not with the goats just standing there, waiting to be executed.

'Sitting ducks,' Jarrod said. He crawled the ute towards them and stopped about forty metres away. 'Roast goat.'

The ute heaved. Dec had jumped off.

The smallest goat in the middle took a step forward. It pawed the dirt.

I took a breath and held it. Stuffed the urge to cry down deep. It was as if I'd landed on a different planet—there were no children here, only grown-ups. I closed my eyes and when my nose stopped burning, I breathed again.

I wouldn't look. If I didn't look, I wasn't part of it.

The passenger door clicked. A rush of cold air and my eyes flew open.

'Man up,' Dec hissed, tugging my shorts.

'I can't.'

'Come on. Quick.'

I shook my head.

The ute heaved again. Brett came around to the side. 'Might be better to let him take a rabbit his first time.'

'Did I ask you?' Dec said.

Brett drawled, 'Come on, man—he's a kid,' and gave me a crooked smile.

I climbed out before Dec could wipe the smile off Brett's face. I let him arrange parts of me to take the weight of the gun. He cupped my left hand under the barrel and hooked my right forefinger around the trigger, and neither hand shook because I had already decided I would aim to miss—just a fraction too high over that distance should be enough to send the bullet way overhead.

'That's yours—the dumb one in the middle. Right between the eyes. Don't nick him.'

Dec stepped away and my body went cold.

'Aim.'

I lined up the sight.

'Shoot,' Dec said.

I made the adjustments—a twist in my shoulders, a dip in one knee, a slight tilt to the barrel—and I squeezed. The shot sounded like a jet had flown over. I staggered backwards and dropped the gun in the dust.

Dec swore and hauled me back by the elbow.

The other goats were restless now, but the little one lowered its head and stared back.

Dec picked up the gun and aimed.

I willed it to run. The goat *knew*, but it didn't do anything.

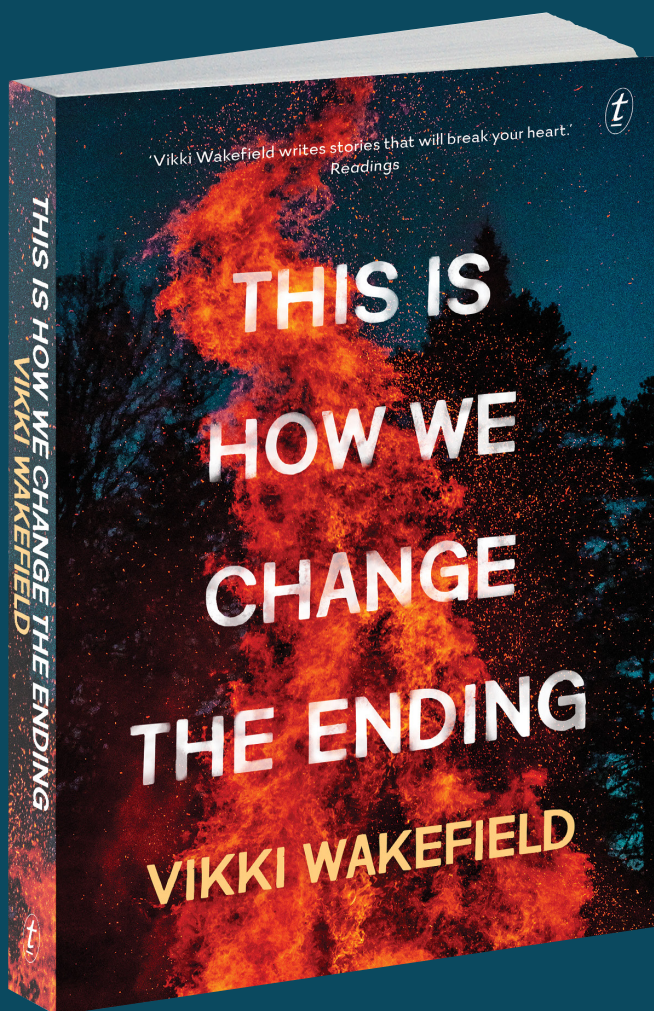
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They killed four. We left three of them lying by the dam. I threw up twice. Dec made me ride in the tray with the one he picked. Its eyes were still wet.

When we arrived back at our camp and they hauled its body from the tray, I said I was tired and felt sick. I crawled inside the sagging tent and stayed there, heard them laughing, heard everything through the nylon walls and here's what I know:

goat skin comes off like a banana peel  
the kid's got no idea  
no stomach for it  
no balls  
no heart  
no teeth.





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