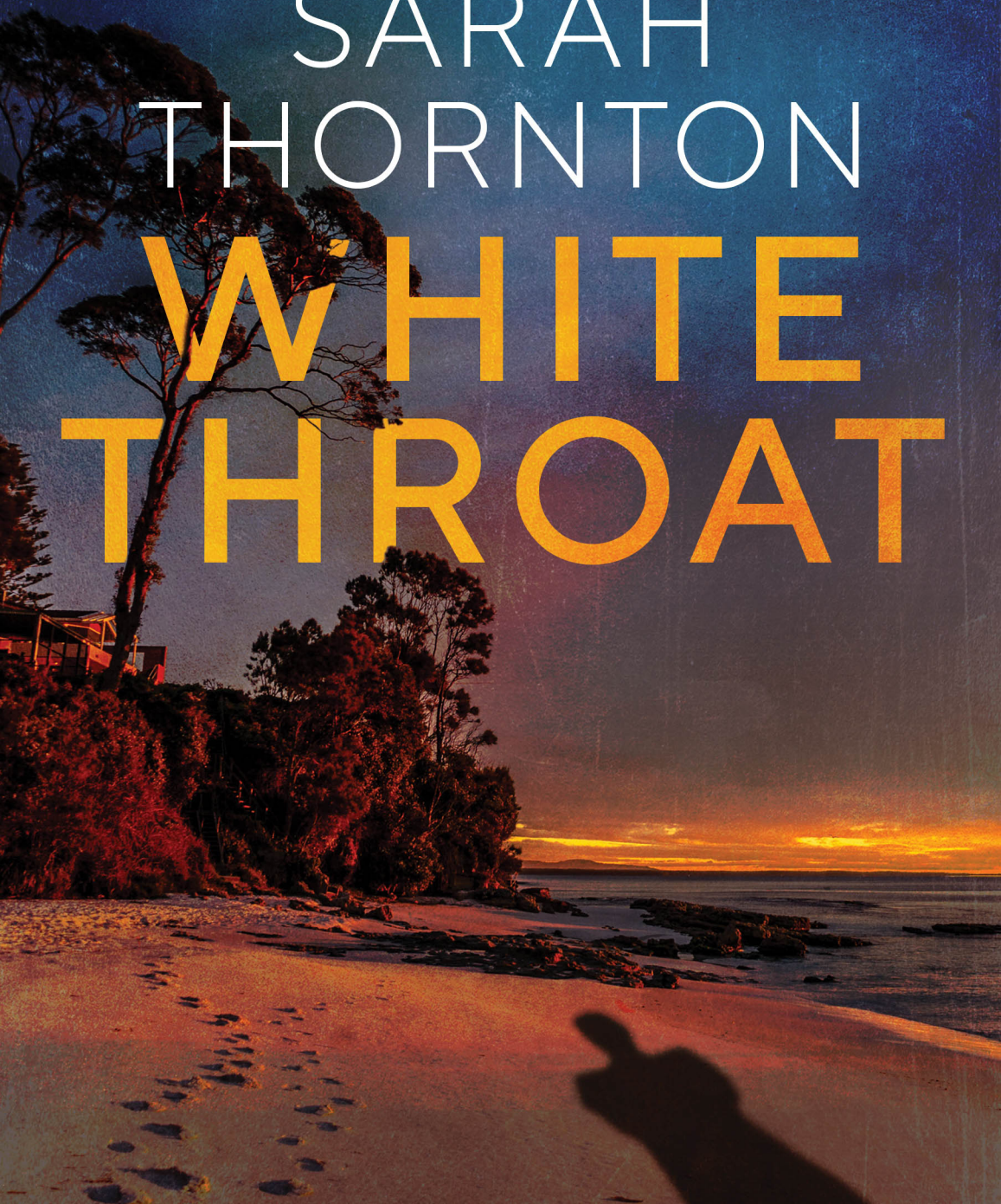




'Clementine Jones is a heroine for our times:  
fierce, feisty and fallible.' CANDICE FOX

# SARAH THORNTON WHITE THROAT



## CHAPTER 1

Looking out over an ebb tide from the back verandah was like watching God paint stripes. Creamy tidal flats, milk-green shallows, then bands of ever-deepening jade and turquoise. And beyond, sparkling in the sun, the sapphire brilliance of the deep channel. Each colour as transient as her own streaky existence.

Clementine Jones shifted her position on the wooden deckchair, her feet resting on the verandah railing, laptop perched on a towel draped across her sweaty legs. She'd been working on the latest submission for the turtle campaign.

The house-sitting gig she'd landed here in this little coastal backwater paid bugger all but it had offered a cheap ticket out: a reason to leave Katinga. The owner, Noel, was travelling overseas. Noel's house, if you could call it that, was a faded pastel-yellow fibro shanty just out of town overlooking the Great Sandy Straits, with Fraser Island—K'gari to the Butchulla people since distant times—floating on the horizon.

The backyard ended where the beach began and the place was surrounded by an acre of bush each side, but the shack was completely run down—brown stains under the windows, mould under the eaves, rickety timber verandah. It was more about minding Noel's dog, Sergeant, a fifty-five kilogram bull-mastiff, than looking after this renovator's delight.

Piama was billed as a 'seaside resort village' but really it was more of an oversized tidal flat, and there were only so many 'beach'

walks she could do. After repeat readings of the ten plaques along the boardwalk explaining the life-giving wonders of mangroves, she'd reached her boredom threshold. It was about the same time as she registered the rash of 'Save the Turtle' posters plastered around town. She'd called the number at the bottom. It had blown her away when Helen answered the phone. *Auntie* Helen—here in Piama, running the Wildlife Association of the Great Sandy Straits.

Clem watched as Pocket roused himself from under the pandanus and followed the shade around to the other side, flopping like a rag doll and stretching himself out next to Sergeant. Her little blue heeler looked about the size of a chihuahua next to the mastiff.

She shooed a march fly from her shin, watched it fly off into the lazy sheoak drooping over the guttering and let her thoughts wander to the phone call from Melbourne that morning. A follow-up on a job offer from Burns Crowther, a law firm wanting to expand its sports law division, looking for a solicitor with a profile.

*Profile.* She had one of those now. It was why she'd had to leave Katinga. But the managing partner didn't seem to care: 'You've got a name in sporting circles—all that publicity around the Cats' victory...oh and the little girl with the heart problem. How's she doing, anyway?'

This profile. This was the thing that hung inside her like a stone.

She had to admit, though, the offer was enticing. And as the afternoon sun reflected on the backs of a mass of soldier crabs, spreading like a purple blanket across the sand, she pictured the bustling streets, the exhilarating buzz of Melbourne...a slick inner-city apartment, champagne by the Yarra, coffee in a cobbled laneway.

Her screen flashed. Another email from the Cats' club President, John Wakely, wanting to know when she'd be starting pre-season training. There was a bit of a tone to this, his third message. Not



surprising since she hadn't replied to either of the previous two. The players were *champing at the bit* he wrote, *asking for training dates so they can mark their calendars*.

That was a laugh, the thought of Torrens or Devo or Maggot Maloney actually owning a calendar. Wakely must really be getting cranky now, though, because he mentioned her bonus. Paid on condition, he pointed out, that she coach again next season.

She felt a flush rise in her cheeks. She could return the money, but that wasn't what they wanted. They wanted her back, coaching, preferably to another premiership.

The march fly was back and getting stuck into her ankle. She didn't reach down to brush it away. She deserved the sting.

vv

There was a reason Clementine had never set foot in the WAGSS headquarters and, as she stepped through the doorway of Helen's shed that Tuesday in October with the draft submission in her bag, she knew she'd been right.

A ladder and some gardening tools lined one side of the shed. Open bags of blood and bone provided the aromatic backdrop to the trestle table draped in a green bedsheet that commanded the central space. Hovering at one end of the table was a woman in blue harem pants, the crotch hanging somewhere near her knees. Beside her stood a dreadlocked man in a blousy hemp shirt and striped purple pants. There were two other women, middle-aged, one in a floral dress, the other in shorts—each cutting out letters from a sheet of gold cardboard. The man was in the process of gluing a giant T on the end of 'SAVE THE TUR' while the harem-pants woman worked carefully on an L.

It wasn't the clothing or any other one thing that did it. It was the whole scene. A picture—like a Renaissance frieze of the Last Supper or that Sidney Nolan painting of the Ned Kelly trial—telling

the whole story in one panel. The feeling was something like a feral kindergarten.

She walked briskly towards the back of the shed where Helen sat at a desk staring at a monitor, her chin resting on her cupped hand. One finger was crooked across her lips as she read, eyes trawling left to right, expecting enlightenment at any moment.

‘Ah!’ she said, throwing her hands up in the air and springing from her chair, ‘Clementine!’

Helen had insisted she bring the submission over in person so they could go through it together. She’d assured Clem it would be just the two of them. Now, as everyone at the tables looked up, Clem felt a barb of suspicion. Helen was going to try to get her involved in the protest this Thursday—a sit-in at a bank in Barnforth. On the list of things Clementine had expressly ruled out when she’d agreed to help Helen with the campaign, occupying business premises ranked high. Just above obstructing traffic but a few rungs below chanting and tambourines.

Helen wore the lightest of sundresses, thin straps across her tanned shoulders, her auburn hair piled high in a messy topknot. Though she was the same age as Clem’s mother, she seemed younger. She had laughter lines around her eyes these days, but her skin was still amazing—she’d always worn hats despite allowing the rest of her body the full kiss of the sun.

‘You must meet the team. Everybody, this is Clementine, the lawyer I told you about.’

Clem nodded at them and gave an awkward smile.

‘Lovely to meet you,’ said the woman in shorts, holding out her hand, ‘I’m Gaylene.’ She wore bifocals and had a magnificent head of thick wavy hair that brushed her shoulders like a mane.

‘And this is Ariel,’ said Helen, with her hand on Yoga Pants’ shoulder, ‘...Mary,’ she gestured at the smiling woman in the dress. ‘And this is Brady.’ His face looked older than his body, with deep lines and discoloured teeth. Clem wondered if he’d had

some sort of addiction. They all smiled eagerly with what Clem suspected was recruiting fervour. Helen had worded them up, for sure. *Bloody hell, Helen.*

She was standing there grinning foolishly when Brady thrust out his hand and flashed his dirty pegs. ‘G’day. Looking forward to sticking it up the banks on Thursday?’

“”

Clem stood in Helen’s living room looking out towards the paperbarks along the river’s edge. Turtle Shores, with its beautiful old Queenslander homestead and three acres of untouched bushland by the river, was prized Piama real estate.

Helen had made the seachange to Piama three years ago, right after her retirement. It must have been about five years after Uncle Jim’s death. The couple had been old family friends of Clementine’s parents before they’d moved across town, then interstate and, finally, lost touch altogether.

A cooling breeze laced with eucalyptus rustled the wooden chimes at the back door and swept on through the louvred windows. Helen had created a real beachy feel—seascapes hanging on the walls, lots of shells and bits of driftwood alongside a black and white photo of Jim. She’d recently turned sixty and a greeting card was propped open with a sunbleached purple sea urchin. Clem glanced at it—roses on the cover, inside a handwritten joke about ageing and then *all my love* followed by a string of kisses.

She turned to watch as Helen made espresso, her blind cat, Fluffy, doing figure of eights around her legs. If nothing else, Clem thought, she would at least get her first decent coffee since she’d passed through Brisbane. And Helen baked, too.

‘Sooooo, about Thursday,’ said Helen, manhandling the portafilter on the coffee machine.

‘There’s no Thursday, Helen. In fact, I’m skipping from Wednesday straight to Friday this week.’

‘But it would be good for the campaign if you could take on... you know...more of a leadership role. Having someone with your background there, at the coalface—it would give us so much more presence.’ Helen had spent years in public relations. She had a keen eye for these things.

Clem didn’t care. ‘Um, Helen, remember when I said I’d provide legal support from my home office? And my very clear list of exclusions?’

‘Yes, yes, of course, and I’m grateful, we all are. I would suggest it’s more than legal support, though. The letters...the way you write...they’re the only reason we got a meeting with the minister.’

The Federal Minister for the Environment and Energy was considering the environmental impact statement supporting Marakai Mining’s proposal to build a new coalmine fifty kilometres inland from Piama. The project involved road and rail following the river right past Turtle Shores, then on to a planned two-berth deep shipping port with a dredged channel out to the ocean.

The development had a lot of local support, and only partly because of the new jobs that were promised. It would also be heaven-sent relief for a cluster of residents, mostly pensioners, whose houses would be acquired to make room for the port. A financial-planning scandal had ripped through Piama recently, wiping out nest eggs and just about everything else, leaving a trail of life-throttling mortgages. The prices the company was throwing around promised a way out.

WAGSS, on the other hand, was fighting for the survival of an endangered freshwater turtle, its habitat threatened by the development.

Clem had researched the legislation, scouring hundreds

of pages of the company's applications for approval, searching for weaknesses, any loose thread that could be unpicked. She'd drafted a letter to the minister and a hard-hitting submission to the department. But she'd done it all from the back verandah at the shanty. All except for that one meeting, which had, admittedly, gone well. Helen was still stoked at how they'd double-teamed the minister. But the big takeaway for Clem was the newspaper articles the next day—the photo captions as they left council chambers: *Clementine Jones...former lawyer...Manslaughter...young mother...nine months' prison*. It was a running commentary she couldn't seem to leave behind, popping up any time she stuck her head above the parapet.

Helen put the coffee mugs on the table, went back to the kitchen and returned with a plate of brownies.

'But what I don't understand is why you wouldn't want to participate more fully.'

Clem took a brownie and shook her head. 'I'm just shy, Helen.'

Helen nearly spurted her mouthful of coffee over the table. 'That's a good one. Shy? The coach of a men's footy team?' she said, snorting with laughter. 'Actually, you've never told me how that came about.'

'The footy?' said Clem, biting into the fudgy cake, stalling.

'Yes.'

'Wrong place, wrong time.'

'Come on Clem, I've known you since you were in nappies. You can give me more than that.'

Clem put down her mug, placed the brownie back on the saucer, slowly.

'Same reason I signed up with the turtle campaign, Helen—boredom, sheer boredom. There was a vacancy. I applied. Apparently coaching an under-sixteen team and playing women's footy for five years was more than enough experience,' she said. 'Well, given that I was the only applicant.'



‘But what were you even doing there? I mean, you’re a corporate lawyer...’

Would she ever get used to this? Helen had been so discreet for the last three weeks: not a single question. But now the fortress was under attack.

‘You don’t need to tell me about what happened in Sydney, Clem. I’ve read all that—I know what you’ve been through. It’s just, I’m interested in how you came to take the next step.’ She took a sip of coffee. Smiled again.

That smile. It was Helen’s answer to everything, it was an invitation, a welcome, expressing delight or disapproval, joy or sorrow. And it brought back powerful memories.

The night Dad brought them all in to the hospital to see Mum—only she wasn’t Mum anymore. She was this grey, ghostly, whispering thing.

Clem remembered standing there by the bed in the blue jumper Gran had knitted her. It was too small now and rode up, leaving her back exposed to the winter cold. Mum would have known she’d outgrown it. Dad didn’t. He didn’t seem to know the things Mum knew, and everything else was in the laundry basket. He was working, visiting Mum in hospital, caring for two kids, often cross, impatient with her little brother Josh...and, she realised now with a stab of pain, holding it together with strands of iron will and not much else.

That night, after saying goodbye to Mum, with her scary black-circled eyes and her cracked lips, Dad dropped Josh at Gran’s and took ten-year-old Clementine to their old family friends Helen and Jim—bewildered, stunned and clutching a bag of dirty washing.

Auntie Helen had welcomed her with that smile, brighter than the light that shone over the back door. She’d washed Clem’s school uniform and tucked her into bed with a hot milk and honey, the kind Mum made with the nutmeg sprinkled on top, then she’d kissed her forehead with lips like pillows. Clem spent five months

at Auntie Helen and Uncle Jim's until Mum had recovered enough to come home.

'It can help sometimes to share stuff, you know,' said Helen.

Clem had told one person: Rowan, the guy who'd saved her life in the Arkuna National Park a couple of months ago. Had it helped to tell him? To look into another person's eyes and share her unspeakable shame? She remembered well the flood of relief the moment she'd finally had the courage to say the words—the knot clenched tight inside had loosened, just a bit. *Yes*, she thought, *it had helped*. A single connection with another human being. And yet, she'd still run—left him standing there in her driveway. As she'd said to him, telling a friend, one friend, was not the same as facing the whole town.

And now here she was with Helen, her childhood mum when Mum couldn't be Mum.

Clem took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. 'I...yeah... well, I couldn't face Sydney.' The only thing she knew after her release from prison, the only certainty in the swirling eddy of her fractured life, was that she could not face her colleagues, her friends, her family, anything of her previous life.

Helen waited with patient eyes, both hands around her mug, saying nothing but speaking volumes with her stillness.

'And...well...this is not something I normally discuss,' said Clem, swivelling her mug around and around on the table.

Helen nodded, sipped her coffee.

'Yeah. So then I headed out west, and south...just drove around for a couple of weeks. Anywhere but Sydney. Ended up in Katinga.' Crushed by guilt, wanting nothing but anonymity.

She still had moments—in the middle of the night, usually—waking up in a sweat, seeing Sue Markham's head slumped on the steering wheel. A blood alcohol level of 0.095, so the charge sheet said. Significantly impaired, but not so drunk that she could forget that image. Thinking about it now, she felt the dry hollowness in her

stomach again, did a silent count to settle herself—*three, four, five.*

‘Then the team started winning, is that right? And you uncovered some sort of criminal conspiracy?’

Clem nodded, still staring down at the mug on the heavy wooden table.

‘And then, wham, your past was all over the papers again.’

Clem cleared her throat. ‘I think I better get going,’ she said, standing up.

‘No, no. Please, stay. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have pressed you.’

Clem was already out the door and hurrying to the car.

“”

Helen came over Thursday evening. She brought a bottle of sav blanc and filled Clem in on how the sit-in had gone. Ten of them in there for two hours, holding up the green bedsheets, letting every poor sucker in the queue know that *Elseya albagula*, the endangered white-throated snapping turtle—a turtle that could breath underwater through its bum, no less—was about to be extinguished in the Rivers region when construction began on the new port. The bank manager had been surprisingly tolerant until Brady brought out his handcrafted African bongo drums and the police were called to escort them out.

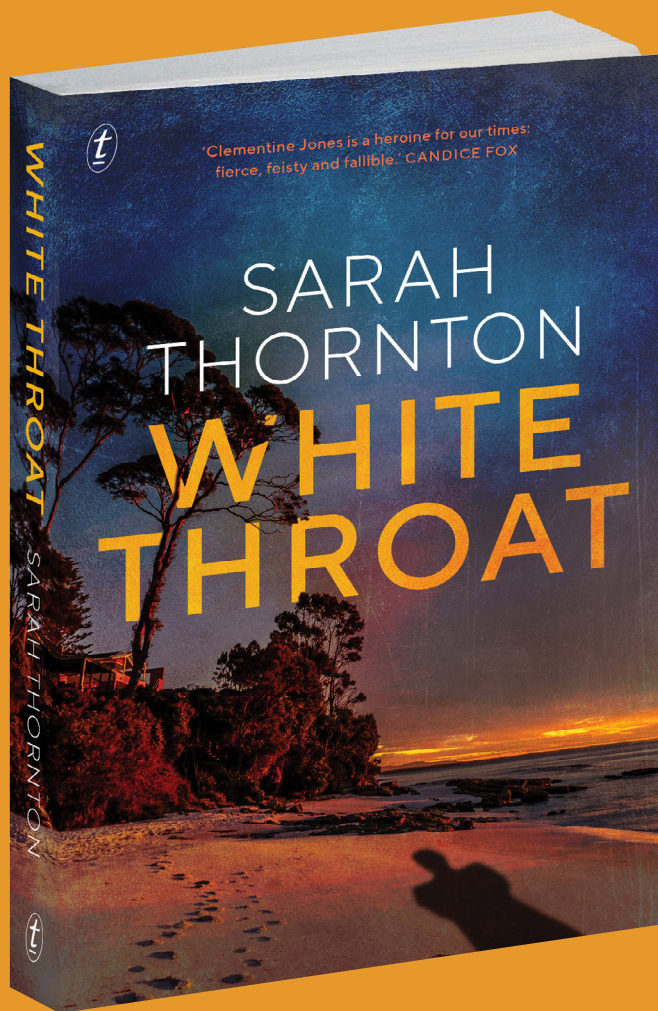
It was weird at first, drinking with Helen—navigating that cleft in time when grown-ups of your childhood cross over into your adult universe. The years collapse like a concertina as you find yourself in the same room—but thinking about the style of the furniture now, without regard to how it might come together as a cubby house.

Clem brought out another bottle from the fridge and as the evening wore on Helen began referring to her as Earless the Fearless on account of the fact a lowlife thug had sliced off the top of her ear in the Arkuna National Park. From anyone else it would’ve

been bad taste, but with Helen it was welcome relief from the unbearable intensity of it all.

And then there was the turtle. They were onto the top-shelf stuff by then, falling on the floor giggling like schoolgirls.

‘Oh God, how I love that turtle,’ said Helen, slurring. ‘Its little face and its bad breath. White-throated, arse-faced little darlings. Reminds me of all the butt-breathing arseholes who started sniffing around after Jim died.’ She laughed so hard she knocked over a glass.



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