

The VALLEY



STEVE
HAWKE

A masterfully told epic of the Kimberley.

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Steve Hawke grew up in Melbourne but found his way to the Northern Territory and then to the Kimberley as a nineteen-year-old in 1978. Captivated by the country, the history and the people, he stayed for almost fifteen years working for Aboriginal communities and organisations. He now lives in the hills outside Perth, but continues his strong association with the Kimberley, returning most years. His writings on the Kimberley include *Noonkanbah: Whose Land, Whose Law* (1989), the children's novel *Barefoot Kids* (2007), the play *Jandamarra* that premiered at the Perth International Arts Festival in 2008 and toured the Kimberley in 2011, and *A Town Is Born: The Fitzroy Crossing Story* (2013). *The Valley* is his first novel for adults.

*For Sam and Tony,
for helping me to get out there in the wild country.*

Author's Note

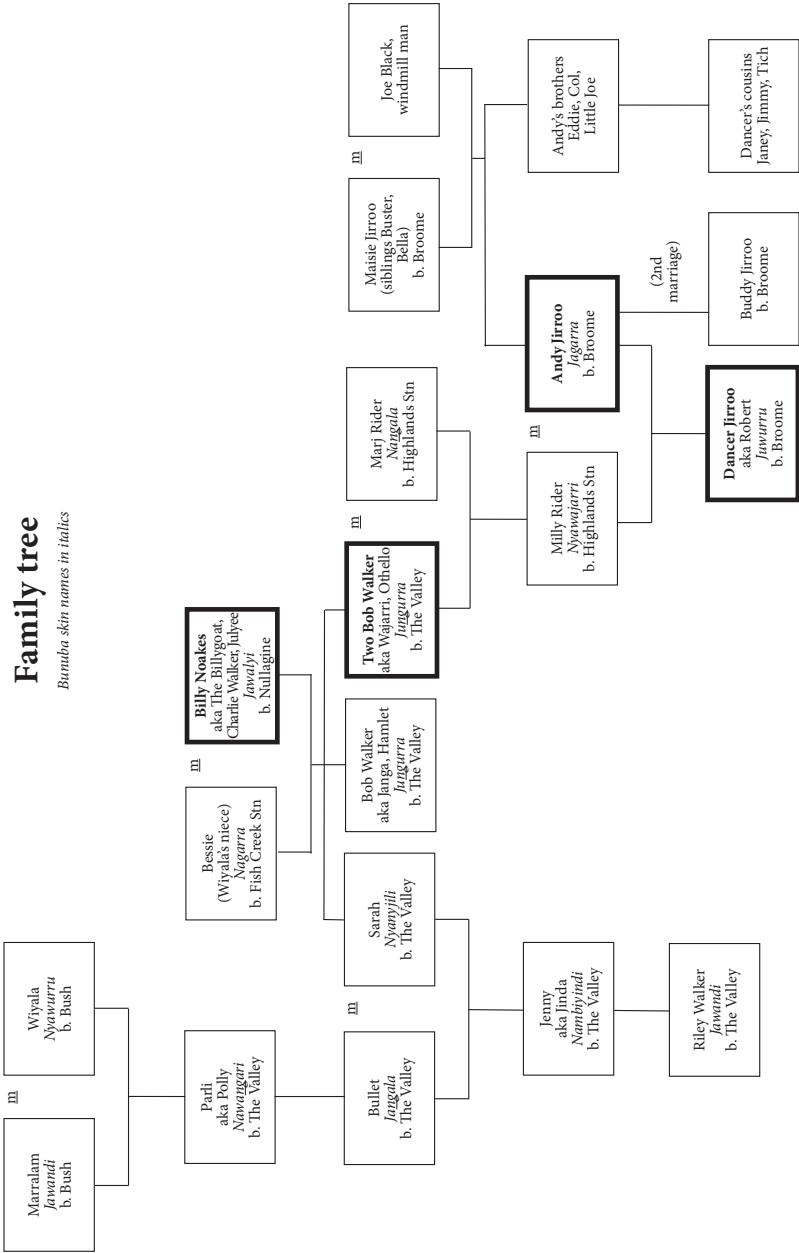
Some of the towns and geographical locations in this novel are real enough, but the imagined stations and communities and characters that lie at the heart of the story are entirely my creation, and bear no relationship to the real world.

Similarly, I do reference actual language groups of the Kimberley, in particular the Bunuba. I have worked for many decades with the Bunuba community. But that work has been a jumping-off point. In this novel I am not describing actual Bunuba country, or real Bunuba people. And nor should it be thought that this work is endorsed in any way by the community; it is my imagining, and my responsibility.

Three of the characters have appeared in my other work. Dancer and Andy first came to life in my children's novel *Barefoot Kids*, and Marralam is a fictional warrior in my stage play *Jandamarra*. It took the idiosyncrasies of my wandering mind to bring them together here.

Family tree

Bunuba skin names in *italics>*



Prologue

The faint path veers right, but three steps to the left on the trackless granite, a different, hidden path beckons. Riley does not hesitate, despite the years.

The afternoon sun is warm as they make their way beneath the looming overhang, but the morning cold lingers in the shadowy depths. Dancer glimpses desiccated animal bones, but Riley's quick tread allows no close examination, and before he knows it the vista opens on a small glistening valley enclosed on all sides.

The cousins halt as one, hands touching featherishly. Riley, slight and dark. Dancer, heavy-set and gangling all at once, yellow more than brown, like an adder asleep in the sun. The skeleton of the hut is weathered grey beneath the reds and browns of the cliff. The rusted sheets of iron lie amongst the green vegetation like twisted flakes from the rockface. As their eyes sweep across the stark remains, they both see the bones. They hesitate only a moment.

The bones lie with arms folded, at peace. The flesh had withered before the hut's walls had crumbled, before dingoes or other predators could disturb the remains. Riley shows no fear, even when the skull falls apart at his touch. He merely steps back.

At the foot of the bed is an ancient tin trunk. With the lightest of nudges, Riley elbows Dancer forward. Dancer carefully removes the two smooth stones weighing down the lid. As he reaches out to touch it, the disintegrating skull fills his mind's eye. He eases the lid open, amazed at how readily it comes free.

A parcel wrapped in oilcloth sits at the top. Dancer gently unwraps it. He senses Riley step closer, feels his cousin's breath on his shoulder.

There are two pouches of worn leather. He can't help a small smile as he realises that each is made from the balls sac of an old-man kangaroo. Carefully he lifts them, and holds them up. Riley reaches over to take them.

Bending close, Dancer can just make out the pencilled scrawl on the top page of the fragile, yellowed papers: *The Last Will & Testament of William Noakes*.

Part One

1

Poison Hole, 1916

The ground birds are sheltering from the heat of the day. The only sounds breaking the silence of the bush are the occasional clinking of a buckle against a harness ring, the muffled steps of his horse and the two mules, and the odd snort as one of the animals tosses its head at a bothersome fly.

It's Billy's first solo trip, and he's enjoying having no chores and the freedom to daydream. He's trying to work out if he's turned sixteen yet. It was March when he stepped ashore in Derby. That must be six months ago now, but since he found his brother details like dates and calendars seem to have lost their meaning.

He dallies at Packhorse Creek, letting the horse and mules drink their fill, watching the play of light on the water and the fish fry darting about in schools. These are the times he likes best, being alone in the bush. It's only a few miles to the camp now, following the creek down, but there is no incentive to push on. He isn't expected until tomorrow. If he times his arrival right supper should be ready, and apart from unloading the stores and turning the mules out, he might be able to take it easy. Billy rarely gets a chance to take it easy.

As he tops the second-last crest he realises there is no smoke rising from the camp. Strange for this time of day. Kites are spiralling, dozens of them, their whistling cries filling the air as they swoop and wheel. Uneasy now, he flicks the reins to urge the horse into a brisker walk. As the camp comes into view he

knows something is wrong. There's no-one in sight; not at the blacks' camp, not around the kitchen boughshed, nor at the bark hut.

The knot in his gut tightens as he stands the horse and scans the camp. An open flourbag in the dirt. Packs loose on the ground. Des's chair overturned. Jones keeps a clean camp. Every item is precious out here, two hundred miles from town; between scavenging dingoes and inquisitive munjons, it doesn't pay to leave gear lying around.

Then he sees the empty brew bucket. Fear takes hold.



The camp at Poison Hole is the furthest north in this part of the Kimberley, days of riding beyond the battling pastoral leases. Jock 'Twelve Inch' Jones has been here three years. A lanky Scotsman with deep set, burning eyes; tough as they come, making a living of sorts as a dogger getting a pound's bounty per scalp, and topping up his tuckerbags now and then with a contracting job for one of the station owners.

Twelve Inch had taken on Des eighteen months back for a fencing contract. For reasons that escape Billy, except perhaps that they are both of Scottish blood, they've stuck together since. He was not impressed when Billy turned up, tagging behind Des. 'Two white men in a camp's one too many in these parts,' he'd growled. 'Three's plain feckin' ridiculous. No passengers here, kid. Ye'll work like a blackfeller or ye'll roll your swag.'

Des had been only a touch more welcoming when the brothers were reunited at Mount House. He'd cleared out for the Kimberley when Billy was a babe, and hadn't expected to see any of his family again. He'd tried to talk Billy into heading back to Derby.

As they'd approached the Poison Creek camp the first time, Des said, 'He's not called Twelve Inch for his weddin' tackle, though that's a fearsome enough sight. It's for the barrel on that

revolver of his. Special mail-order job from America, only one like it round here. Stay out of his way as much as you can.'

Twelve Inch scornfully dubbed him 'The Nullagine Billygoat', but mostly ignored Billy except to bark orders.

Until he went on a bender. He'd arrived back in camp one morning with a gleam in his eyes, and brought the brew bucket out from the hut. Twelve Inch was in a rare jovial mood as he presided over the brewing. First came 'the base'.

'Ye've got to get that right, or the metho'll kill ye,' he grinned at Billy. 'We don't mind a bit o' mayhem, but we don't want to be turnin' our toes up just yet, do we now. We Scotsmen know about these things. Read the Scottish play, laddie? *Macbeth*?'

Billy shook his head dumbly.

'The witches, laddie, the three witches. The middle one was in me family line, they say. Eye of newt,' he cackled, as he threw a handful of pepper into the simmering water in the iron bucket.

Boiled sugar and treacle and a dash of curry powder went into the murky broth. But the pièce de résistance, in his eyes, was the handfuls of white bark he stirred in. Billy recognised it as the same type the natives burned to ashes, and mixed with the tobacco they chewed.

'Gives it a kick, laddie, a kick like a mule,' Twelve Inch exulted.

The sun was getting low. After much tasting he decided the base was ready. Rubbing his hands together, he fetched two bottles of methylated spirits from his hut and emptied them into the bucket.

While Twelve Inch waited for the brew to reach perfection, Des took Billy aside and gave him some rare brotherly advice. 'Join in or clear out. He's inclined to take a set against anyone that's sober when he goes on the grog. That waterhole a couple of miles upstream's not a bad spot for a spell.'

Billy made the wrong call. The lovingly prepared base could not mask the raw, astringent bite of the meths. He couldn't stop the reflex that spat the foul mix out. Twelve Inch scooped him

another measure. Glittering eyes fixed on Billy, he hissed through clenched teeth, 'Drink it.' The pannikin trembled in Billy's hands. He gagged and spat again, unable to control himself.

'Eatin' me tucker's one thing. Wastin' me grog's another, ye mangy billygoat,' Twelve Inch snarled, unbuttoning the flap of his holster. He took a big draught himself, then drew the revolver. 'Drink!'

This time Billy managed to swallow. But the fire in his throat was unbearable. He retched a spray that reached almost to Twelve Inch's boots.

The first shot was in the air. Billy looked despairingly at his brother, but Des's eyes were fixed firmly on the ground as he took a sip. Was that a smirk being suppressed?

The next shot buried itself in the dirt, a yard from Billy's right foot. He leapt and ran, with Twelve Inch's mad laugh ringing in his ears.



The memory overwhelms Billy as he surveys the camp. The terror. The mosquito-ridden desolation of the two nights cowering at the waterhole, no swag, no tucker, until he crept back. The sight of Des and Twelve Inch comatose in the dirt.

He leads the horse and mules back to cover, tethers them firmly, then edges towards the camp, rifle in hand. He steps anxiously into the open and makes his way to the hearth. The ashes are cold. He stands a long time. No thoughts. Just dread. And a vivid, momentary flash of his mother Mary, coughing her last.

A whimper from the hut.

Thinking Twelve Inch must be in there, dead to the world with one of the women, he approaches on tiptoe. But not quietly enough. The whimper becomes hysterical screaming. Bessie! A hand goes to the breast pocket where he's stashed the neatly folded neckerchief.

Bessie had come up with her parents from their country to the south. She was to become the second wife for old man Thursday, anointed by Twelve Inch as the boss of Poison Hole's native camp. Her cheeky smile and shining breasts have woven through his dreams every night since. He'd used his shilling to buy the neckerchief, thinking she might wear it, folded over her hairbelt to cover herself. That she might flash that smile at him.

'Bessie?' he whispers.

The screaming stops. 'Who dat?'

'Billy.'

'Billy? Where Twelbinch?'

'I don't know. What's going on? Where's Des?'

'Aaieeee!' The cry echoed. 'Where Twelbinch? Where him?'

'I don't know! What's happened?'

'Lemme out! Lemme out! Your brother he binish. Twelbinch been killim. Shootim. They been arguin'. Drunken one. Twelbinch been killim, him an' ol' man Thursday. Where my mummy? My daddy?'

'Nobody's here. Nobody.'

She wails again, 'Quick now. Quick. Before he come back.'

In the dim light he is confused for a moment. When his eyes adjust he realises she is pulling frantically against a chain. A leg-iron holds her shackled to the hut's centre pole.

Mind a frenzy, feet of lead. Des! Fear escalating. White-faced, wide eyes staring.

She is cringing now.

'No, no. It's all right.' Hands up, palms out. Frantic to reassure her. He grabs a blanket from Des's bed. She cowers as he drapes her. He steps back, hands raised again. She clutches the blanket, shrinking to a tight ball, averting her bruised face.

'Axe. Grabbem axe. Cuttim chain,' she pleads.

'The key?'

'Twelbinch gottim. Longa pocket.'



Poised to strike at the chain, he suddenly pauses, realising the ring of axe on metal will carry through the bush for miles.

Twelve Inch must be disposing of the bodies. Des's and Thursday's at least. The others too? Thursday's first wife Nora, and Bessie's parents. Or have they fled? He has already thought of flight himself, when he went out for the axe. But on the big bay stallion Twelve Inch would outride him with ease.

Billy is a witness now. Twelve Inch cannot afford to let him live.



Bessie is sleeping at last, though fitfully. Billy sits the rifle across his knees and steels himself to wait. He has never fired it, not even a kangaroo for the pot. Get through the night, he tells himself, face the morrow when it comes. Just don't let him find me here asleep.

The lock had resisted his every effort to prise it open. With night approaching, he'd eventually calmed Bessie somewhat by bringing her tucker. As she ate he pressed her for what she knew. From her tearful, garbled account it seemed that after a day on the grog Des had fallen asleep. Twelve Inch prowled the camp, still drinking his witch's brew, talking to himself. Suddenly he'd shouted to Nora, demanding Bessie be sent up to his camp.

When Thursday tried to protest, 'Dat Twelbinch just pullim out dat rebolber, and shootim ol' man straight out. No word. Nothin'. We just standin' there. Can't believe. Then he been growl, like a dingo, "She got no promise man now. Come here you bitch," he been say longa me. "Time you were broken in".'

She tried to flee. A shot whistled past her head. Des was woken from his drunken torpor. She'd seen him staggering to his feet as she was being dragged to the hut. After being chained, she'd seen nothing but heard plenty. Arguing. A cry of fear from Des. Another single shot from the revolver.

Her mob were crying out for her until Twelve Inch roared at them to shut up. 'He been tellem siddown la camp. Anyone move, anyone runaway, anyone makem noise, they the next one gettim bullet, he been tellem.' She heard horses being led in. He grabbed a few things from the hut, gave her a slap to shut her up, left her a small bowl of water, and told her he'd be back. She'd been here on her own, imagining the worst, since yesterday afternoon.



All he wants to do is let go, shut down. His mind hasn't stopped racing, but he has been paralysed by fear. Terrified any sound might betray him. Too scared even to see to the horses. Lying in wait is all he can think to do.

Twelve Inch will come. The question is when. Travelling by night holds no fears for him. Billy figures if he's made camp, it won't be close by. He will come soon, or not until well after daylight.

This leaves the dawn hour. Perhaps. He doubts his chances, but can think of no other plan.

The mules are loaded with stores, and the camp is full of useful items. Before first light he will get everything loaded. The last job will be to take an axe to Bessie's chain, then mount and ride. Over the back country to Halls Creek if he can find his way, then east for the Territory, perhaps even Queensland. Leave this terrible country behind.



He starts awake. Stifling a gasp, he grabs the rifle. Boots walking. Gear being dumped. The flare of a match, then the glow of a kerosene lamp. When Twelve Inch pushes open the door he will be facing his own bunk, and Bessie. Des's bunk where Billy sits is out of the immediate line of sight. He lifts the rifle, trying to keep a steady hand.

As the light and the boots approach the door, Bessie can't hold back a cry of fear. 'Quit yer neighin', filly,' Twelve Inch rasps. 'Breakin' time. She's been a rough few days, an' I'm ready fer a change o' pace.'

The door is kicked open and Twelve Inch towers, one hand holding the lamp. His flies are already unbuttoned, and the other hand is undoing his belt buckle.

'Stop there.' Billy can hear the quaver in his voice.

Twelve Inch whirls. 'Billygoat. Ye're back already, ye mangy excuse fer a man. Make yer useless brother look good ye do. What a surprise.'

'Where is he?'

'Who?'

'Des.'

Twelve Inch just grins and takes a step towards him.

'Stop there!' It sounds as panicked as it feels.

Twelve Inch lets go of his belt and flips open the cover on the revolver's holster.

'Stop!'

The shot booms in the confines of the hut. Twelve Inch springs back as the bullet whizzes above him. The shadows from the lamp whirl crazily as he gets his balance back. His trousers slip down around his knees and the revolver is no longer in snatching distance as its weight pulls his pants down further.

'Ye've not got the balls to kill a man, Billygoat,' Twelve Inch snarls. 'We both know how it's goin' to end.'

'The key. Where's the key?'

'Fer her?'

Billy nods.

'Ye're in the feckin' Kimberley, laddie, not merry old England. Think ye're a chivalry knight or summat? That's a gin. An' she's mine.'

'The key.'

Twelve Inch leans down and starts to pull up his trousers. 'It's

in me trousers pocket, Billygoat. Wait now.'

Suddenly the lamp is flying through the air in his direction, and Twelve Inch is snatching for the revolver.

Just before the glass of the lamp explodes against him Billy gets a shot off. Twelve Inch is hit, but staggers forward, roaring with rage and disbelief more than pain as he claws for his gun. Billy shoots again, one-handed, and misses, as he bats at the flames of his burning shirt. Bessie leaps, with just enough slack in the chain to land on Twelve Inch's back. Her momentum knocks him forward onto Billy. His belly is pressed against the barrel of the rifle as it booms once more.

Twelve Inch's dead weight pins Billy to the ground, the rifle wedged between them, digging into his ribs. Smells of gunpowder, blood, kerosene, burning cloth and flesh almost overwhelm him. And Bessie screams without cease.

Somehow he jerks free of Twelve Inch. For a few moments he can do nothing but gasp for breath. But the flames are feeding on the kero. Grabbing blankets, he manages to douse them, burning his hands and forearms in the process, and adding the acrid odour of burning wool to the foul stench in the hut.

And Bessie screams.

He wants only to lie back and breathe, to be alive. But Bessie screams.

He crawls back to Twelve Inch. The only way he can turn him over is to put a shoulder to his guts, and push. Slowly he rolls, blood and intestines spilling. Billy fishes through the wetness for a pocket, for a key.

Hands slippery with blood he fumbles with the lock, screaming back at her to shut up. When he finally makes it turn and the hasp of the leg-iron springs open, Bessie tears herself loose and flees into the night, still screaming.

Billy drags himself into the open air, crawls to the hearth two dozen yards away, and collapses.

The past casts long shadows in the Kimberley's high country.



A murder in the remote bush in 1916 sparks a chain of events that will haunt a family for generations. Hidden in the refuge of a secret valley, their tiny community lives unknown to the world.

When, a century later, Broome schoolboy Dancer falls foul of the local bikie gang, he and his father head up the Gibb River Road. Here, in a maze of rugged ranges and remote communities, Dancer begins to unravel the truth behind the mysterious disappearance of Milly Rider, the mother he never knew.

But the valley hides its secrets well. As Dancer learns the ways of his mother's country, he uncovers a precious inheritance – one not even those closest to Milly expected to find.

'The Valley deftly disentangles the accumulated driftwood of secrets, lies and fragmentary memory to reveal the redemptive power of coming to terms with our past. Steve Hawke draws us into a world that is respectfully and honestly grounded in decades of living in the Kimberley and working with Aboriginal communities, and in his own unique voice and humanity.'

STEPHEN KINNANE, award-winning author of *Shadow Lines*

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