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# Tawny Trouble

**Deb Fitzpatrick**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

*For wildlife carers everywhere.*



## Tiger country

The road snakes blackly through thick forest. Why is it that night-time seems darker in the country? Darker and bigger.

The moon hangs like a crisp slice of apple over the road. Moths and all sorts of insects dive across our headlights. I press my cheek against the cold glass of the window and look out into the trees for possums, owls and ... who knows what else?

Before we left the city, Uncle Mo told us about a mysterious tiger that some people believe lives down here. Seriously, a *tiger*, in Western Australia?

‘The Tassie Tiger,’ he said. ‘It was real. But it didn’t just live in Tasmania. It roamed the whole country.’

‘Even here?’ asked my little brother Felix.

‘Even here. Most people believe it’s extinct now, though.’

‘*Most people?*’ I repeated. ‘So, you mean ... maybe it’s not extinct?’

‘Maybe not, Tess. Some people reckon there are still a few around.’ Uncle Mo lowered his voice, ‘And there have been *sightings* in the deep south, not far from Nannup.’

‘That’s where we’re going!’ said Felix, eyes wide.

‘That’s right. They call it the *Nannup Tiger*.’

‘Noooo,’ Mum said, a playful grin on her face.

‘Oh yes,’ Uncle Mo said. ‘The tiger *is still out there*.’



And now here we are, down in the deep south, in Tiger Country.

We’re driving back to our cottage in the forest, not far from the town of Nannup. I’m not sure I believe Uncle Mo’s tiger story. He loves mysterious things, and when we beg him to, he tells us about the night he was walking home from a friend’s place and a strange warm green light filled the whole sky above him. Uncle Mo said he broke into a run to get home, he was so scared.

I laugh a little thinking about that now. Beside us, hugging the edges of the road, are gnarled brown marri trees and, deeper in, the towering white trunks of karris.

‘Woah!’ Mum slows down and swerves around something. ‘See that?’

Our heads snap up. ‘What?’ says Felix, sleepy face suddenly alert.

‘Half a tree on the road, mate,’ Uncle Mo says.

‘Oh.’ Felix’s eyelids fall back shut. ‘Not a tiger then.’

A few seconds later Vivi cries, ‘Look!’ and points at the edge of the road. ‘A rooroo!’

Mum completely takes her foot off the accelerator and we look where Vivi’s pointing. A big grey kangaroo is poised on the road verge. Its glossy eyes shine in our headlights. A couple of smaller roos sit nearby, ears alert to the danger.

‘Far out, that’s a big one,’ says Felix.

‘King Kanga,’ says Uncle Mo. ‘That’s the boss of the pack for sure.’

‘Kingaroo,’ I say, and the twins giggle.

‘I’m going to take it easy along here I think.’ Mum slows right down and adjusts her glasses. ‘Don’t want to ruin the night for any of this wildlife — or for us.’

‘You hit something like that ...’ Uncle Mo starts.

‘Exactly,’ Mum nods. ‘And we have some precious cargo on board, don’t we kids?’

‘Uncle Mo?’ I guess.

‘No, Tess,’ Mum laughs. ‘You three is who I mean! But Mo’s precious too, of course!’

I smile at her in the rear-view mirror and snuggle back in my seat. I want to think back over everything we saw and did and heard today at the Festival. It was amazing.



Mum told us that the Nannup Music Festival takes over the whole town every year for a long weekend, but I had no idea how big it was going to be. The *whole town* is music. On the streets, in the pub, and on stages that have been specially set up. There’s everything from poets with acoustic guitars to full-on rock dudes with rock hair, and bongo players improvising live on stage. There are school bands with teenagers performing for the first time, and musicians who’ve been playing forever.

Today, Friday, was the first day of the Festival. There

were so many hairstyles walking around it felt like we were in a fashion show. ‘That’s an impressive mullet,’ Mum said. Then, ‘Check out those dreadlocks. And, *wow*, that’s gorgeous, that henna-ed hair.’

‘And henna-ed hands,’ I noted, as two older girls walked past us, designs spiralling across the backs of their hands and up their arms.

‘We’ve got shaved heads and rainbow heads and grey heads,’ Uncle Mo said, scanning the crowd. ‘This is a solid mix of young and old and groovy and, well, less cool people. People more like us, I would say.’

‘Hey!’ said Vivi. ‘We’re cool.’

‘I’m really cool,’ said Felix.

‘Of course you are,’ Uncle Mo laughed. ‘I’m speaking for myself.’

We spent the day moving between stages, stopping to watch kids busking, jugglers performing and funky locals playing fiddles on street corners. Everyone who was there for the Festival (which was everyone) wore a bright green wristband, which let us into the different venues. People danced and laughed and watched from picnic blankets. There were water stations and portaloos and a medical tent. People hugged and talked and ate and tapped their heels. Little kids grooved



while their parents watched on the grass not far away.

When we got tired of listening to music, there were stalls selling jewellery and handmade soaps and dreamcatchers. There were vintage threads to buy and crystals for sale and tarot-reading. I asked Uncle Mo how tarot cards work and he just shook his head and said, after a really long pause, 'I can't explain that.'

'What's ree-iki?' I asked, reading the sign on the next stall: Reiki.

His brow furrowed. 'Oh, that's pronounced "rayki". I — I dunno. Sorry Tess. I mean, I've *heard* of reiki, of course, but I don't have a clue what it actually is.'

I grinned at him. 'That's okay.'

A young woman in flowing pants leaned out and smiled at us. 'Reiki is an ancient healing practice that works by releasing unpolarised energy.'

'Oh ... excellent. Well, there you go, Tess,' said Uncle Mo, his face colouring. 'It releases ... unpolarised energy.'

The woman beamed at me. 'Sorry — I overheard you.'

As we walked on, Uncle Mo muttered, '*Unpolarised energy*, seriously.'

I giggled. And then I saw the FOOD TRUCKS.

A whole *zone* of food trucks, with tables in between where you could eat. I'm talking hot cinnamon doughnuts, Thai noodles, Japanese gyoza, Spanish paella, German kransky, freshly squeezed juices of every colour. Coffee, chai, gelato. I wanted to eat everything! And I especially wanted *doughnuts*. When we get back to the cottage where we're staying, I'm going to see how much spending money I have left because *all* of it is going on doughnuts tomorrow.

Tomorrow. I take a long warm breath as the black night slides past us. I'm so glad we still have two more days of the Festival. And another two nights at our cute cottage in the karri forest. I don't even have to share a room with the twins!

Right now, I have doughnuts to dream about.