

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

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CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

INT. OFFICE WAITING ROOM - DAY.

THREE JOB CANDIDATES are seated along the window. TWO of them have their faces in their phones, while the third, BETH BRYANT, has her eyes on a doorway.

RECEPTIONIST

Shouldn't be a moment.

C/UP on BETH's face, she cracks a nervous smile and nods. To her left, a JOB CANDIDATE begins to take photos of herself on her phone's camera. Opposite her, the remaining candidate- CHARLENE JACKSON, is frantically typing a message. To BETH's right, the door swings open. A WOMAN with a certain Charlotte Rae-vibe flitters into the waiting room, shooting BETH an excited wink in the process. An AGENT in a suit steps out.

HERB MARSHALL

Ms. Silvers?

[The SELFIE-TAKER sits up attentively.]

Thank you for waiting. [Smiles.] Unfortunately, you won't be moving onto the next round- but thank you for coming. Be sure to valida-

[MS. SILVERS abruptly snatches up her portfolio, and hastily exits the room.]

Ms. Jackson? This way, please.

BETH and CHARLENE turn to each other excitedly- at least as excitedly as two strangers can be together.

BETH (VOICE-OVER)

Being a talent agent was never in my five-year-plan, and yet I felt so confident that it was fit for me.

[The RECEPTIONIST smiles politely at BETH, who nervously smiles back.]

Although I was never was any good at convincing people when I was the right choice for something. Not my parents, nor my teachers- [Chuckles.] And certainly never men... That's why I stopped bothering. As soon as I hit thirty I made my decision: Career over a husband... Now I just have to convince my Mother that it's the right choice.

SOUND FX: BETH'S PHONE RINGS.

Slipping the smartphone out of her pocket, the word 'MOM' causes BETH's eyes to roll automatically.

BETH

Were your ears burning?

MRS. BRYANT

Did you get the job?

BETH

Final round now, down to me and someone else.

MRS. BRYANT

Are they ugly?

BETH

MOTHER! What's that got to do with the price of milk?!

MRS. BRYANT

Just wondering.

BETH

I can't talk, they'll call me in at any moment.

MRS. BRYANT

Good luck.

BETH (V.O.)

Luck or hard work? My mother never did know the difference... And she never wanted me to know it either- thankfully I'm too cynical for that.

[A DOOR swings open, an AUSTRALIAN MAN stands in the doorway, holding it open whilst talking to the occupants within.]

Tom Lanter...

[As if suddenly in a **fantasy-scene**, TOM LANTER slowly turns around, facing BETH BRYANT, who doesn't know where to look. TOM smiles at BETH, who shyly smiles in return.]

The hottest star on the planet. Staring right at me.

[We switch to a **non-fantasy** wide-shot of TOM LANTER, still in the doorway with his back turned to BETH, before switching **back to her daydream again.**]

Those arms- THOSE EYES... Those antipodean abs...

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER

G'day, you must be Beth?

[BETH swoons on the inside- and outside.]

I'd like to see you now.

BETH BRYANT

But I don't know the first thing about being an agent! What if I ruin your career?!

HERB MARSHALL

Excuse me?

[The **fantasy-scene** coldly ends.]

We'd like to see you now.

BETH

Oh, right- [Voice-Over:] See, not even my fantasies are a good fit! Ruin his career? Outdoing yourself there, Beth...

BETH whips up her portfolio and follows HERB MARSHALL through the doorway, closing it behind her.

CUT TO:

EXT. AGENCY CARPARK - DAY.

We see a row of over-priced sports cars- each more elaborate than the one next to it. In between them, an unseen WOMAN softly sobs to herself.

The agency entrance swings open as BETH BRYANT exits, thanking people as she leaves.

BETH

Thanks again, see you on Monday!

BETH slips her phone out of her pocket, and immediately dials 'LUCA', her best friend and roommate.

It barely rings before:

LUCA (ON PHONE)

I've been dying- did you get it?

BETH

I start on Monday.

AARON WARE

LUCA (ON PHONE)

[Gasps.] I'm kvelling! Told you- [indecipherable.]

As BETH heads towards her less-than-stellar car, the SOBBING catches her off-guard.

CHARLENE JACKSON is sitting on the curb, with a broken phone in her hand.

BETH

Hang on- let me call you back... [Hangs up phone] It's Charlene right?

[No response.]

[BETH notices the broken phone, and kneels down.]
I'm sorry- looks ruined. Do you need to call someone?

BETH holds out her phone.

CHARLENE

It's OK- I'm just a little tired. Long day.

BETH

Long day, right?

CHARLENE

Congrats on the job- sounds like you were perfect for it.

BETH

Thanks- sorry to-

CHARLENE

Please don't.

BETH

I understand... Take care.

[BETH looks guilty as she walks away from CHARLENE- who breaks down in heavier tears. BETH stops in her tracks, and whips around on her heels with a slight spring in her movements.]

You know- I'm going to need an assistant, right?

CHARLENE looks up at BETH with a confused expression.

BETH (V.O.)

It was the least I could do.

END TEASER, FADE TO:

TITLES: 'CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK'

TITLES: FIVE YEARS LATER

BETH (V.O.)

And it all worked out- I got an office, we both ended up with over-priced cars... But the best part? Charl makes the best cappuccino. Mmm.

BETH BRYANT, now with her own office and list of high-powered cliental, paces back and forth alongside the large windows that overlook New York City.

BETH

Tell [Sarandos] they can have Lanter for this animated series- with a three-picture deal attached- NO, must be LIVE ACTION! Producer credits included. No-no, YES, NO! Simultaneous cinema release is now in his contract. [Pauses...] Yeah- that Widow debacle made everyone sit up. No- It doesn't matter what Kidman wanted- she's not my responsibility anymore- he is now- [Listens...] Look, just do what you can- then do better.

BETH slams-down the phone.

CHARLENE immediately enters the room, carrying a pile of screenplays. She places the pile on BETH's desk.

CHARLENE

For Lanter.

BETH

Anything worthy?

CHARLENE

[Shrugs.] The usual fair- the top one sounds funny.

BETH glances at the topmost script, whose cover-page reads: 'MOTHBALLS FOR MARY!'

BETH

Poor Mary- What time's he due?

AARON WARE

BETH flicks through the pile of scripts, reading through the titles quickly.

CHARLENE

Two P.M.

BETH

Send him straight through- OH, here, pass these onto Roger, I'm sure one of his Reality TV "stars" would be interested in at least one of them- god help us all.

CHARLENE

That good, huh?

BETH

Three. Out of how-many? Sixteen scripts? Three don't sound like they were written by a jellyfish.

CHARLENE sycophantically laughs.

CHARLENE

I could read them for you? I always check them out anyway. Wouldn't make-

BETH

-And deny myself the pleasure of hearing about Mary's Mothballs?

SOUND FX: BETH'S PHONE RINGS.

BETH walks away from it, leaving CHARLENE to pick it up.

CHARLENE

Beth Bryant's Office, how may I help you?

LUCA (ON-PHONE)

It's me.

CHARLENE

It's him.

BETH (whispers)

Tom Lanter?

CHARLENE motions the phone towards BETH.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

Hi Mr. Lanter, are we-

LUCA (ON-PHONE)

It's me.

BETH

Oh- sorry, thought you were-

LUCA (ON-PHONE)

The hunk-o-Aussie-manliness? Is he coming in today? What time? What should I we-

BETH

Yes, and no, you can't just pop in for a perve!

LUCA (ON-PHONE)

Aw.

BETH

Anyway- what's for dinner?

LUCA (ON-PHONE)

I was going to ask you to bring something home. Maybe a little Aussie cuisine? [Laughs]

BETH

Lazy. I'll grab a pizza.

LUCA (ON-PHONE)

No- Mexican?

BETH

Korean it is. See you then. [Hangs up.]

CHARLENE

Do you need copies of the [FlixNet] contracts for today?

BETH

Tom Lanter takes longer to decide on a role than I do in a bakery- it can wait.

AARON WARE

CHARLENE begins to exit, before being stopped:

CHARLENE

Good one.

BETH

Actually, have them ready just in case- I'm starting to think they gave me his contract because no one else can keep up with him!

CHARLENE

That bad, is he?

BETH

VH1 called, they want him for Divas Live.

CHARLENE

[Shrugs.] He's always nice to me.

BETH

Oh, I'm not saying he isn't nice- he's Australian- they're nice by default- to a fault.

CHARLENE

So...?

BETH

I'm saying he's indecisive.

CHARLENE

Oh.

BETH

Which in this business- makes him difficult.

CHARLENE

Well, at least he's hot!

BETH

Aha, at least you're married.

CHARLENE

Party pooper.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

CHARLENE jokingly sticks out her tongue, then exits.

BETH

(Mutters) Well, in any case, I'd never date an actor.

The CLOCK clicks over to MIDDAY, BETH snatches up her car keys.
SHOT: BETH enters the bright winter sunlight.

EXT. "WEEPING SOPRANO" RESTAURANT - MIDDAY.

MATCH CUT: Sunlight turns to Camera Flashes.

PAPARAZZI are eagerly trying to snap photos through the tinted front windows. An OLDER COUPLE try to navigate the vulture-like flock and enter the restaurant.

INT. DINING HALL - MIDDAY.

BETH BRYANT and her MOTHER are seated at a table-for-two.
A WAITER is pouring them each a glass of water. He clears his throat, then speaks with an overly-French accent:

WAITER

Would you like to hear today's specials?

MRS. BRYANT

I'd like to hear your real accent.

BETH

Not this again. Ignore her- Yes please, Waiter, what does the chef recommend?

MRS. BRYANT

At these prices? A heart transplant!

BETH

The Zoo lets her go for a walk once a week.

WAITER

Of course, Ms. Bryant- Mrs. Bryant- happy to see you both as always. Today, our Michelin-star Head Chef has prepared a peppered filet mignon, served with asparagus, squash, broccoli, and walnuts, under a lemon-and-bull's eye jus.

BETH

We'll have that, thanks.

MRS. BRYANT

You're paying, I'll take three to-go.

ALL THREE laugh as the Waiter takes the unopened-menus.

BETH

Oh, hold the nuts on mine.

MRS. BRYANT

Not mine! It's been eight years since I held any-

WAITER

Sacré bleu!

THE WAITER rushes off, leaving MRS. BRYANT to lap up his embarrassment.

BETH

You've scarred him for life.

MRS. BRYANT

He's a good looking fellow, why don't you-

BETH

I beg you not to finish that sentence.

MRS. BRYANT

Just trying to help! You're thirty five- everyone else is married!

BETH

Everyone who?!

MRS. BRYANT

Your sister.

BETH

She's given you three marriages.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

MRS. BRYANT

Exactly- three weddings!

BETH

While in prison! You couldn't even attend them!

MRS. BRYANT shifts uncomfortably in her seat for a moment.
Beth raises an eyebrow, But her MOTHER will not accept defeat!

MRS. BRYANT

[Airily.] Well at least she found someone.

BETH

[Frustrated.] CHEQUE PLEASE!

MRS. BRYANT

What about that Tom Lanter? The papers say he's single.

BETH

HA! No they don't! Every other week he's snapped with another woman!

MRS. BRYANT

And to think- that woman could be you- you're his agent!

BETH

For a whole month! Plus, keep up- we're a little past the days of casting couches, thankfully.

MRS. BRYANT

Your father wanted to see you married before he died.

BETH

Don't play that card.

MRS. BRYANT

I'm not playing any card!

MRS. BRYANT cheekily grins at her unimpressed DAUGHTER.

BETH

Dad got to see me happy.

AARON WARE

MRS. BRYANT

Look at how happy we were for five decades!

BETH

You both watched TV all day.

MRS. BRYANT

We enjoyed our hobbies.

BETH

In separate rooms!

MRS. BRYANT

I never was fond of sports.

BETH

Except kicking me around.

MRS. BRYANT

Nonsense! Why are you always so negative.

[BETH glares at her MOTHER as if to say: "REALLY?!"

None the wiser, MRS. BRYANT wiggles in her seat.]

These seats are rather sturdy- good cushioning.

BETH gulps down her water as if it were wine.

INT. BETH'S OFFICE - DAY.

The CLOCK shows FIVE-PAST-TWO.

BETH BRYANT sits in her chair, looking up at her wall of client head-shots. The largest, belonging to TOM LANTER, sits in the centre. BETH presses a button on the intercom.

SOUND: 'BEEP!'

BETH

Any sign of him?

CHARLENE (THRU-INTERCOM)

Not yet- do you want me to try his PA?

BETH

Give it a few more minutes, he probably took Ninth again- he'll be stuck in traffic.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

CHARLENE (INTERCOM)

Copy that.

SOUND: 'BEEP!'

On the clock, SEVEN-PAST-TWO transitions into TWENTY-PAST-TWO. BETH now stands at her window, looking down at the street below. Behind her, the door clicks open, causing BETH to instantly whip around with a smile. It fades when she sees CHARLENE poke her head in the doorway.

CHARLENE

His assistant isn't answering, what do you want me to do?

BETH

When's my next appointment?

CHARLENE

You have a three o'clock with- um, oh gosh, I've forgotten her name! She's one of the new ones.

BETH

Well, if she arrives early, let me know.

BETH sits down at her LAPTOP and opens it- immediately clicking on her E-MAIL.

At least 102 new e-mails flood her screen.

With a disinterested 'SIGH!', BETH closes the LAPTOP, and leans back in her chair.

EXT. APARTMENT FRONT-DOOR - Evening.

BETH arrives at her front door.

She's balancing her briefcase, two portfolios, and three bags of Korean food whilst trying to grab her keys from her pocket. Awkwardly, she manages, but as BETH moves the key towards the lock, the door swings open.

BETH almost falls through.

LUCA

GUESS WHAT?!

BETH

You're mad and I'm not?

LUCA

Ha. No- Lanter's first film is on!

BETH

That's the last name I want to hear- here, make yourself useful. OOF, My arms are killing me.

LUCA

Mmm- smells great!

BETH

Thanks, ancient family recipe.

LUCA takes the food bags from BETH and places it on the coffee table in front of a long, four-seater sofa.

The sofa sits in front of an over-sized television embedded in the wall. Two ancient-Greek statues border each side of the screen, while the down-lighting creates arches along the wall.

LUCA

Forgot the chopsticks as usual!

BETH

There're spare ones in the third drawer down.

LUCA

Oh, that's what that drawer is for?! Ever notice how everybody has that mysterious drawer in their kitchen that's for, like, lost and keys and-

BETH

Chopsticks? He went AWOL today.

BETH falls into the trendy sofa, and picks up a box of food. LUCA returns, passing her a pair of wooden chopsticks.

LUCA

Is that normal?

BETH

Not from him- he's difficult, sure, but he's always been reliable.

LUCA tries speaking with a mouthful of food.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

LUCA

(Indecipherable.)

BETH

I dunno, maybe eighteen? Nineteen?

LUCA

[LUCA swallows.] You're his agent, you should know!

BETH

You're in love with him, you should know!

BOTH look at the screen and tilt their heads simultaneously.

BETH AND LUCA

Nineteen.

LUCA

Did you try his assistant?

BETH

No, Luc'- [Gasps.] Gee, that thought never did cross my mind, why weren't you there today?!

LUCA snaps his chopsticks at BETH.

LUCA

Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.

BETH

But the highest form of artistic expression.

LUCA bursts out laughing.

LUCA

WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!

BETH shrugs.

We see the TELEVISION SCREEN as it changes over to a commercial break.

The title "THAT'S SO KANGARUDE!" fades out, replaced by an advertisement for a product called "Shampoozled".

COMMERCIAL NARRATION

Is your over-priced Shampoo leaving your hair as knotted as your stomach at the price?! Then you need 'Shampoozled!'

BETH

Do you remember in middle school- Mr. Knotts?

LUCA

YES! And he always had a booger in his moustache that no-one ever told him about-

BETH

-So he'd always find an excuse to wipe under his nose!

LUCA AND BETH

MR. SNOTTS!!!

LUCA

I heard he married that nasty lunch lady.

BETH

Now we know what kids today are eating.

LUCA

Gross.

The TV switches back over to "THAT'S SO KANGARUDE!"

BETH

Have you ever seen a real Kangaroo?

LUCA

Does a hairy Aussie at Pride count?

BETH

Isn't that more of a Koala?

LUCA

Racist.

BETH

You started it!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

LUCA

That's so kanga-rude!

BETH

Well here, crocodile someone who cares?

LUCA

With that poor service? You've got to be echidna me!

BETH

Well... I... Ah, I got nothing!

LUCA

Dollar in the jar!

BETH reaches beneath the sofa cushions, and scoops-up several quarters and a one-dollar bill, then places it all in a jar which sits in the middle of the coffee table. A label on the jar reads "PUN-OFFS!"

BETH takes a large sip of her glass of wine, before leaning back into the sofa.

BETH

Anyway- as I was saying, Lanter missed his two-o'clock today, his Manager, Assistant, not even his Dog Walker know where he is- which tells me, he's either gone on a bender, or picked up some supermodel on a night out.

LUCA

Why don't hunks like that ever go for costume designers?

BETH

Named Luca?

LUCA

No, I mean, someone with a regular job!

BETH scoffs, and points to a glass cabinet filled with golden awards and trophies.

BETH

You've just won your fiftieth award! How regular do you think your job is?!

LUCA

OK then- a waitress? Why don't they ever go for a waitress?

BETH

Because life isn't a Tom Lanter movie.

LUCA

Have you tried telling him that?

BETH

Tomorrow- [Pauses...] IF he shows up.

LUCA

If not, that'll be...

BETH AND LUCA

[Vocal-Fry:] So kanga-rude!

FADE OUT.

INT. AGENCY OFFICE CORRIDOR- Morning.

BETH rushes down the corridor with her phone to her ear.

BETH

Have you tried his parents? (Listens) No- I don't, are they still in Burbank, or did they move back home? Try them and get back to me. Thanks, bye.

[BETH hangs up the phone as she enters the atrium to her own office.]

[CHARLENE moves around from her desk, and hands BETH a pile of envelopes, contracts, a newspaper, and a stack of phone messages; all with a fresh cappuccino balancing on top.]

Morning, how are you? How's Grant?

CHARLENE

Stressed. Still can't get a job- Ooh, by the way, I was meaning to ask you-

But BETH isn't paying attention:

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

We're on damage control this morning. Lanter's still missing, but Greg will be here any time soon, make sure you put a bit more whiskey than usual in his coffee- he sounds tense and quite frankly, I don't need my head bitten off before midday.

CHARLENE

Lunch with your mom?

BETH

No, thankfully- I'll probably be ordering in today, so decide what you want and order two, it's on me.

BETH disappears behind her office door.

CHARLENE

Sure, Sushi will help my husband find a job..

CHARLENE retreats back to her desk, and immediately picks up the phone.

EXT. BETH'S OFFICE - DAY.

BETH is pacing back and forth behind her desk, while arguing on the phone. She looks and sounds distraught.

BETH

Are you kidding?! No- I don't think! The contract's worth fifteen-million! PER FILM! And you can't get a message to him at all? Not even a note? GREAT.

[BETH slams down the phone.]

Dead-end. Again- I'm so sorry, Greg, I just don't know what to tell you!

A MAN of around fifty leans back in the client chair, looking unimpressed.

GREG

Common publicist's nightmare.

BETH

I can imagine- so far the press doesn't know, but if word gets out, who knows what sort of nonsense will be spread!

GREG

I once had a client who had three different families in three different states- apart from the public family!

BETH

Actors are the strangest creatures.

GREG

Amen! [Raises coffee, then sips from it.] Mmm, perfect. I must remember to tell Charlene she's outdone herself this time.

BETH

So how did you handle it?

GREG

I could drink a whole bottle of scotch and still-

BETH

The actor not the coffee. Do I know him?

GREG

Her, actually- the papers kept writing about her stints in rehab. Of course, there was no addiction- well, unless you count the secrets.

BETH

Family... WAIT!

[BETH clicks down on the intercom button.]

[SOUND: 'BEEP!']

Charl- do you have a number for his brother?

CHARLENE (INTERCOM)

His brother... Let's see... No, it doesn't look like it.

BETH

That's where he is.

BETH tries her hardest to stay calm.

GREG

But... Joe lives in Australia! We checked Tom's passport records, he hasn't left the country.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

Not by commercial flight, he didn't! He's worked with the biggest producers and studios on both coasts- how many private planes is that?!

GREG

I can't just go to Australia! It's Christmas at the end of next week- We've got the grandkids coming this year.

The door swings open.

CHARLENE pokes her head through, with a wide smile on her face.

CHARLENE

When do we leave?

BETH

We're not.

BETH turns around and notices the intercom is still live.

CHARLENE

Aw!

CHARLENE disappears behind the door.

GREG finishes off his coffee, then pulls out a cigar.

BETH

And stop eavesdropping!

CHARLENE (INTERCOM)

Sorry!

BETH re-clicks the intercom button, turning it off.

SOUND: 'BEEP!'

GREG

Will the agency insurance cover the trip?

BETH

Without proof that he's there? Not likely! Can't even get them to fix the ladies bathroom.

AARON WARE

GREG

Oh- right- Look- you're understandably under a lot of stress with this, we have small insurance bonds for each client in case of emergencies.

BETH

Oh, Gregory, I can't accept that! If we're right, he's just with his brother- not in a hospital somewhere.

GREG

And that, to me, is a PR emergency. With this [FlixNet] contract nearing finalization, none of us will be getting paid if he's not there to sign them.

BETH

Are you sure?

CUT TO:

C/UP on LUCA's face- he looks surprised.

LUCA

WHEN DO WE LEAVE?!

INT. LOUNGE ROOM- Evening.

BETH

We don't- at least you don't.

LUCA

But- it's AUSTRALIA! They have hot crocodile hunters there!
AND HEMSWORTH BROTHERS!

LUCA falls onto the sofa with melodramatic disappointment.

BETH

It's not definite. I'm still waiting to see if Greg is able to even get us there- let alone an address!

LUCA

I saw a movie about Australia once.

BETH

That's... very likely... [Laughs.] You're still not coming.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

LUCA

But, what about that promise we made? When we were ten!

BETH

We were ten! And that promise involved marriage, and five kids named after cartoon characters!

LUCA leaps up, and strikes a sultry pose.

LUCA

Rainbow Bright Goldstein is a fabulous name!

BETH

You're one-of-a-kind.

LUCA

And that's why you need me there!

BETH shakes her head slowly with a remorseful look.

SOUND: 'Aeroplane Landing.'

INT. AIRPORT LOUNGE- Night.

BETH and CHARLENE both reading- CHARLENE is reading a gossip magazine, whilst BETH is reading an industry newspaper.

AIRPORT ANNOUNCER

Passengers for Koala-Tea Air Flight SIX-NINE-EIGHT, this is your opening call for first class and business class passengers, please proceed to the gateway with your boarding pass ready.

BETH

That's us, he better hurry up. [Looks around in panic.]

CHARLENE

Oh well, I told you- my husband would have been more than happy to come!

BETH

I had no say!

LUCA steps in front of them.

AARON WARE

LUCA

Did I hear our call? Was that our call? Is it time?!

CHARLENE

We heard our call.

CHARLENE stands, then crosses her arms.

BETH also stands, then rolls her eyes; sensing what's about to happen.

LUCA

Wicked! Need to me ta-

LUCA's attempt to pick up CHARLENE's carry-on luggage is met with an abrupt:

CHARLENE

NO! I'm perfectly capable. Women can lift their own luggage, you know?

LUCA

Can you, though?

ALL THREE move into the short queue, where ALL THREE look miserable, uncomfortable, and/or embarrassed.

BETH

If you two are going to fight for twenty hours, I'm having you moved to economy.

CHARLENE AND LUCA

But-

BETH

Look, I get it- but I don't want to hear it. I've got enough to worry about without you two picking each other's nits.

LUCA

I'm sorry.

CHARLENE

Next time, Grant is coming.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

Let's hope there's isn't a next time-

FLIGHT ATTENDANT #1

G'day, welcome to Koala-Tea Air, may I see your boarding passes? Mrs. Bryant- [SOUND: 'BEEP!'] Mrs. Jackson- ['BEEP!'] Mr. Goldstein- ['BEEP!'] Perfect! Through these doors, down the gangway, then the Flight Crew will show you to your seats. Thank you for flying with us today, enjoy your stay in Australia!

BETH

Thank you.

CHARLENE

Thanks.

LUCA

LOVE the blazer, so kitsch!

FLIGHT ATTENDANT #1 blushes at LUCA's compliment.

INT. PLANE/BUSINESS CLASS - DAY.

LUCA places the last of the carry-on luggage into the over-head compartments, then settles in on his aisle seat. CHARLENE is in the window-seat, with BETH in the middle. Each with enough leg-and-elbow room to move around.

LUCA

I've never flown business class, this is lux!

CHARLENE

Neither has my husband.

BETH

Charl! Let it go- we've got a long flight ahead.

SOUND: 'BETH's PHONE RINGS.'

The screen reads "MOM."

BETH

Hi, Mom- sorry, I forgot to call you from the- yes, yes, everything's fine, we're on the plane now.

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

Already?! Well, lucky I called then! I could have dropped dead and been trying to call you for the next two days!

BETH

I'm sure if you dropped dead you'd be too busy to call anybody- Is Aunty May looking after you?

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

Am I looking after her, more-like!

BETH

Don't try calling me, I call you- the roaming charges will be enough to send you broke.

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

And what if I do drop dead in that time?!

BETH

Then you'll never get your Aussie souvenirs, will you?

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

Make sure it's a spoon!

BETH

Yes, Mom- I have to go, the flight attendant is checking everyone's tray tables- we're taking off soon.

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

You better be home by Christmas morning! It's not the same without your father.

BETH

I will, don't worry. With or without Tom Lanter. Love you, bye.

BETH breathes a hefty SIGH of relief as she hangs up, then switches her phone off.

LUCA

Would you have preferred Beth's mom take this ticket?

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

LUCA smirks at Charlene- who rolls over in her seat and places her eye-mask over her eyes.

CHARLENE

Wake me up when we're there.

BETH and LUCA exchange relatively-blank looks, before BOTH faces light up with excitement.

LUCA AND BETH

HEMSWORTHS, HERE WE COME!

TRANSITION TO:

Titles: "TOO-MANY HOURS LATER..."

LUCA

[Whispers.] Oh, right, it'll be summer there! I hope he's by the beach, I want to see some of them Aussie abs.

BETH

[Whispers.] How do they differ from New York abs? Miami abs? [Normal volume.] Californian abs?!

RANDOM PASSENGER

SHHH!

BOTH look behind them, before whispering again.

LUCA

'Coz they're Aussie abs. With Aussie accents.

BETH

Wait, no, the rainforests- far north Queensland- see, right here? That's the perfect fit for me.

LUCA

Oh wow! Stun-ning- how is this even a real place?

BETH

That's why it's so far away. If it was next door, we wouldn't care so much, would we?

CHARLENE snorts.

LUCA

I shouldn't have come- it'll be Christmas soon, that's not fair on her man.

BETH

It's done now.

LUCA

What's she been reading?

BETH leans over and grabs a script off CHARLENE's tray table. The front page reads:

BETH

The Marshes of Death... by Grant Jackson- oh.

LUCA

Did you know he was a writer?

BETH

No, I thought he was a mechanic!

LUCA

[Laughs.] Any good?

CHARLENE

Yes, actually!

CHARLENE, now awake, snatches the script from BETH's hands.

BETH

Sorry- just curious.

CHARLENE

Keep your voices down, please. How far have we got to go?

LUCA

Nine hours. We can't whisper any quie-

CHARLENE

Fantastic. Nine hours of this. [Grumbles to herself.]

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

CHARLENE rolls over, lifts a koala-print blanket over her head, and then places two ear-plugs in her ears.

LUCA

[Raises voice.] Here looks stunning- look! TINY PENGUINS!

BETH

Gorgeous! Let's hope he's there then!

RANDOM PASSENGER

I'M TRYING TO SLEEP!

EXT. TRAIN STATION- MORNING.

The scorching hot SUN is beaming down on BETH, LUCA, and CHARLENE as they stand on the steps of a train station with their luggage at their feet- all seven suitcases, and five carry-ons.

Behind them, the steam train pulls away from the platform with a loud;

SOUND: 'TOOT-TOOT!'

BETH

Well... I can't see any beaches- or trees.

LUCA

I can't see any penguins- or abs.

CHARLENE

I can't see anything! Are you sure this is even the right place?! We're in the middle of nowhere!

We pan across a vast, dry desert.

Random tin buildings out in the distance look more like mirages in the heat.

Barely any trees scatter the dry landscape, which appears to cater more to small, dry bushes. Some green, some dull-yellow.

LUCA

Can we get a taxi?

CHARLENE

Sure, I'll hail the next one that comes along.

AARON WARE

BETH

Charl, please? Instructions where to be here on Tuesday morning, ten-sharp. They didn't say anything else apart from "Catch the bus up to the river crossing- we'll see it from there."

CHARLENE

It's only eight.

LUCA

So we wait.

BETH

Right- We wait.

LUCA

Are you sure the info is good? They seemed pretty old- his Nan tried to pour the kettle into the fish bowl!

BETH

Sure, his pop showed me his collection of ticket-stubs- they've clearly been here a few times.

LUCA

Old people are so cute.

CHARLENE

I'm hot!

LUCA

(Under-breath) Debateable...

BETH

Stay on the station, there's shade there. I'm going to walk around for a bit.

LUCA

Geez, you're game. I'm not doing any work in this heat. I'm schvitzing so hard I just lost a pound by scratching my nose.

[LUCA guzzles down as much water as he can before letting the rest fall over his face.]

[Sighs.] Much better.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

EXT. VILLAGE SQUARE- MORNING.

On the opposite side of the station, a small village of three tin, and one wooden buildings.

The first, a tin building closest to the station, is bordered by a porch/veranda, with a dull red post box six-feet from the front entrance. A chipped, faded sign reads 'Post Office'.

The next one, a two storey wooden building, has several large windows that are open, exposing a quaint little bar inside.

Ignoring the final three buildings- a bank, a supermarket, and a police station respectively, BETH enters the PUB.

INT. ERNIE'S PUB - DAY.

ERNIE

Strewth! Don't see many new faces out 'ere!

BETH

Ghee-Day, mate!

BETH over-annunciates the greeting.

ERNIE

Crikey, sheila's a yank! 'Ear that, Rosie- got ourselves a Yankee!

A woman wearing a men's navy-blue singlet/tank top appears beside BETH, startling her slightly.

The uncouth, oil-stained ROSIE stops next to an OLD MAN who sits at the bar. ROSIE looks BETH up-and-down, surveying their guest with a flabbergasted look on her dirty face.

ROSIE

Bit lost are ya, Chook? Don't get many o' your lot around here without rhyme or reason!

OLD MAN (BILL)

See Ern', told ya Hollywood would follow.

The short ROSIE pats BETH on the head, then moves to the MAN.

ROSIE

Heat's getting' to ya head, Bill- drink up and get on out. So what brings ya out here, love?

BETH

Work.

BILL sparks up, his eyes alight.

BILL

Fair dinkum, told ya! She's here for-

ROSIE

Oh rack off, Bill!

ROSIE grabs BILL by the arm, and escorts him out, but not before he finishes off his beer.

ERNIE places a coaster on the bar, then plonks a freshly poured beer on top of it.

ERNIE

Must be buggered in this heat! 'Ere, darlin', 'ave a cold one- on the house.

BETH

Thanks.

ERNIE pours two more- one for himself, and one for ROSIE- who has since returned from ejecting BILL.

ERNIE

Welcome to Australia- cheers!

The THREE clinks glasses.

BETH AND ROSIE

Cheers.

While taking a sip, BETH notices a large, wooden sign on the wall with the word 'DIDYABRINGYAGROGALONG' painted across it.

BETH

Is that where I am? Diddy-abri-

ROSIE and ERNIE burst out with laughter. BETH, in trying to be polite, laughs along with them.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

ERNIE

So what work do you do?

BETH

I wrangle difficult people into overly-paid jobs.

ROSIE

Ahh, a head hunter.

BETH

More-or-less. Never really thought of it like that.

ERNIE

So what brings you out so far?

BETH

I'm actually looking for... [Thinks.] What was it called?

BETH pulls out a piece of paper, but struggles to read the poorly-scribbled instructions.

BETH

River-Deep Cattle Station. I believe the owner is Joseph?

ROSIE and ERNIE give each other knowing looks.

BETH looks from one to another, with a hopeful look on her face. A look which is quickly wiped away:

ROSIE

Wouldn't know it from a bar of soap!

BETH

Huh?

ERNIE

They must be new- or from the gully. We only really deal with folk on this side of town- too many bludgers down the gully. Always looking for trouble, aren't they Rose?

ROSIE

Too right, mate. Town's the safest place for a pretty thing like yourself.

BETH looks around, outside the wide-open windows.

AARON WARE

A large blow-fly begins to buzz around her head. She swats it away, but it insists on lingering.

BETH

Not really a whole lot of town, is there?

ROSIE

What did you say your name was?

BETH

Oh, I didn't- [Pipes up.] Hi! I'm Beth.

The COUPLE barely smile back at her- on account of their missing and/or stained teeth.

EXT. TRAIN STATION- MORNING.

CHARLENE and LUCA are sitting on the train platform, each on either side of the entrance.

Seated on wooden benches, LUCA looks quite content fanning himself with a map, while CHARLENE looks miserable.

LUCA

Gum? [Offers her a packet.]

But CHARLENE doesn't answer, she can only sulk in the heat. LUCA shrugs, then continues fanning himself.

INT. ERNIE'S PUB - DAY.

BETH sits on a stool beside an open window, staring out at the vast, wide landscape.

Several cottages in the distance also appear to be dancing in the heat as two kangaroos hop across the paddock.

BETH sits up excitedly, immediately searching for her phone.

BETH

[Squeals.] KANGAROOS!

ROSIE and ERNIE don't budge from the bar.

ROSIE

Plenty around here- especially near the river.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

Oh, darn! Where'd they go?!

EXT. TRAIN STATION- MORNING.

LUCA and CHARLENE continue to sit in silence on the train platform. LUCA now wears the map as a hat.

BETH rushes up the steps, and leaps onto the platform in excitement.

BETH

There you are! Guess what I saw?

CHARLENE

Water? PLEASE tell me it was water?

BETH

No- but there's a bar on the oppo-

CHARLENE scurries away, out of the station.

LUCA slides across the bench, letting BETH sit down next to him.

BETH

I SAW A KANGAROO!

LUCA

No way!

BETH

I know, right!

LUCA

WHAT?! Who'd have thunk? A kangaroo in the Aussie outback!

LUCA laughs, BETH punches him in the arm jovially.

BETH

The pub has beer.

LUCA

WHAT?! Who'd have thu-OW!

AARON WARE

BETH has punched LUCA in the arm twice as hard.

LUCA

I'm kidding! We still have an hour- want a drink?

BETH

[Shrugs.] Better than sitting here, I guess?

EXT. VILLAGE SQUARE- MORNING.

As BETH and LUCA arrive outside ERNIE'S PUB, CHARLENE storms out of the weathered building.

CHARLENE

There's only beer! No cocktails!

BETH

What were you expecting?

ERNIE

Ah, it's early today.

[BETH, CHARLENE, and LUCA stare at ERNIE, looking confused. The BAR TENDER points out into the distance.]

Early birds catch the worm, but late ones miss the bus.

[ALL THREE whip around, spotting a speeding cloud of dust nearing the station, and its adjoining bus stop.]

[Their luggage sits unattended- with the bus getting closer by the second.]

Better run, kids- not another one for a week.

Without thinking, BETH, LUCA, and CHARLENE speed off across the poor-excuse-for-a-village.

CHARLENE races out in front, clearly the fittest.

The bus nears, but CHARL is too far away.

She starts waving her arms.

The bus comes begins to slow down, minimizing the dust-cloud in the process.

CHARLENE leaps out onto the dirt road.

The bus driver hits the breaks.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. BUS- MORNING.

BETH and LUCA sit in the front passenger seats.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

CHARLENE sits behind them, her eyes wide with fear.

BETH

Here, have a mint- they're really strong, it'll snap you out of it.

CHARLENE

I-almost-DIED!

BUS DRIVER

Don't get many Americans around here- what brings you this far out at Chrissy time?

BETH AND LUCA

Work.

CHARLENE

My near-death, apparently.

BUS DRIVER

We often get backpackers and hitchhikers on this route- not often Americans, mostly Europeans.

LUCA

That barman said there wasn't another bus for a week?

BUS DRIVER

Nah, yeah- not enough people out here. You'd need to go down into town for better service. Phones too.

BETH

That's OK, where we're going should have a car.

BUS DRIVER

We're nearing the river now- I hope you know where you're headed- only stations around here. Pretty much all look the same. No streets, just dirt roads without names. Santa doesn't even visit out here! [Laughs.]

BETH

Impossible, Santa's magic, he can find anyone.

CHARLENE and LUCA roll their eyes.

AARON WARE

BUS DRIVER

Well, you'd need magic to find anyone out this way!

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY.

The BUS drives off in a cloud of dust.

BETH, CHARLENE and LUCA stand on the opposite side, overlooking a field, with a single farm on the river's edge.

LUCA

There ya go, Charl- water.

CHARLENE

I hate you.

CHARLENE storms ahead, dragging three suitcases behind her.

BETH

Lay off her- she's not in a good place.

LUCA

Are you kidding?! Look around- none of us are!

LUCA wipes his brow of sweat.

CUT TO:

C/UP on a letterbox made out of an old, rusted oil-drum.

On the side, the words 'RIVER-DEEP' are scrappily painted in white paint above red letters which read "NO MAIL - NO PHONE"
Mid-Shot of BETH, CHARLENE, and LUCA whose relieved looks all sink with disappointment simultaneously.

EXT. DRIVE-WAY - DAY.

We follow BETH, LUCA and CHARLENE as they walk up a long, dusty drive way.

Several sheep and cows lazily graze in the paddocks on either side of the road.

A two-storey, wooden house- painted light yellow- glares at them with giant windows for eyes.

Two other buildings- clearly barns- sit parallel to the house, with a green tractor in-between them.

LUCA

Why do I feel like we're about to get chainsaw-massacred?

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

This isn't Texas.

LUCA

And it ain't Kansas neither, it's worse! We're in a foreign country, about to become vegemite sandwiches by the Australian version of Leatherface!

CHARLENE

Why did you bring him?

BETH

Look- I don't want to be here as much as either of you want the other here. It's December, I should be sitting by the fire, not walking in it! So just shut up, let's get this done, bring him home, and enjoy what's left of Christmas, Okay? Because if I have to spend another minute with the millennial version of Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, I'm going to leave you BOTH here!

BETH storms off ahead, leaving CHARLENE and LUCA to look at their feet in embarrassment.

LUCA

Who brought her, am-I-right?

LUCA holds his hand up to high-five CHARLENE- who walks away rolling her eyes.

EXT. FARM HOUSE - DAY.

BETH walks up to the front door, and knocks three times.

LUCA and CHARLENE soon arrive.

BETH knocks again.

BETH

Hello?! Anybody home?

MALE'S VOICE (OFF-SCREEN)

Can I help you?

ALL THREE Americans whip around, spotting a shirtless farmer in ripped jeans.

LUCA

Wow- this is why Moses went into the desert.

BETH

You must be Joseph? Hi, I'm Beth-

JOSEPH

He's not here.

BETH

Actually I was wondering if you knew the word-

NGAIIRE (INSIDE HOUSE)

He's not here!

LUCA

Well, clearly he is!

BETH

Please, I'm his agent.

JOSEPH

We know who you are.

An INDIGENOUS WOMAN, around the same age as BETH, appears at the front door, without opening it.

NGAIIRE

Please- he doesn't want trouble.

JOSEPH

Did you check out his holiday home in Hawai'i?

BETH

I understand you think you're helping him, but he's got a multi-million dollar contract at stake.

NGAIIRE

STREWTH! He's dreamin' if he thinks he's worth that!

The WOMAN cackles.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOSEPH

Ngaiire, why don't you drive them back to the pub? Sorry you came all this way for nothing.

CHARLENE

GREAT!

BETH

Liar.

JOSEPH

Come again?

BETH

He's right there!

BETH spots a MAN in a paddock, with his back turned to the cottage.

The MAN, clearly TOM LANTER, is posing with a shovel in his hand, while the other is held out in front.

JOSEPH

[Yells after BETH.] OI! HE DOESN'T WANT TO GO BACK!

NGAIIRE

Come on in, I'll chuck the kettle on.

NGAIIRE opens the door, letting CHARLENE and LUCA enter, whilst BETH storms off across the farmyard.

JOSEPH, however, doesn't know which way to go.

EXT. Paddock - DAY.

TOM LANTER stands frozen still.

Behind him, BETH BRYANT comes into focus.

The long grass in front of TOM begins to move.

SOUND: 'SOFT HISSING.'

TOM LANTER whips around, spotting BETH.

TOM LANTER

STAY STILL!

He looks intense.

BETH

Huh?

BETH takes another step forward, and is about to take another when the moving grass catches her eye.

TOM LANTER

Snakes- two of them. Just stay- [Deep breath in.] -Still.

BETH spots the first snake as its head rears up above the grass.

SOUND: 'SQUELCH!'

The head of the shovel slices down on the snake.

TOM LANTER leaps back, holding his hand out at BETH- who takes several steps backwards.

BETH

Whoa! That thing-

But TOM raises his voice:

TOM LANTER

STAND STILL! Snakes can't hear, but they feel movement- just stay still, I'm trying to draw it-ARGHHH!

The SNAKE suddenly leaps up at TOM's leg.

He whacks the shovel down, narrowly missing it.

It strikes at his legs- which are only protected by thin, khaki shorts.

He holds the shovel like a golf club- and as he strikes, we snap back into BETH's **fantasy scene** in slow motion.

SOUND: 'SQUATCH!'

The snake rips in half as it flies through the air, causing snake blood to spray BETH in the face, snapping her out of her **fantasy daydream**.

BETH

Why didn't you go to the penguin island?!

TOM LANTER

What are you doing here? How did you find me?

BETH

I'm your agent, it's my job to keep track of you- why did you disappear?

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER

I don't want to talk.

BETH

Well I didn't come all this way to play snake golf.

TOM LANTER hurries past BETH, heading towards the house.

TOM LANTER

Ngaiire will drive you into town- there's always a room at Ern's. You can catch a train back to Adelaide tomorrow.

BETH begins following TOM.

BETH

We need you back in the states! [FlixNet] is having a meltdown, they're ready to tear up your contract.

TOM LANTER

Let 'em.

BETH

It's worth millions, Tom!

TOM LANTER

Money's not everything.

BETH

No, well yeah- whatever- Respect is worth twice as much.

TOM LANTER

She'll be right.

BETH

Who? Is that why you're here? A woman!?

TOM LANTER

I don't want to talk about it.

They arrive at the house.

AARON WARE

CHARLENE and LUCA are sitting on the front porch, each with an ice-cold drink in their hands- well, CHARLENE is rubbing hers against her forehead.

BETH

Well you're gonna have to talk about it!

TOM LANTER

Why did you come here? How did you find me?

BETH

Really?! I just told you!

TOM LANTER

No you didn't.

BETH

Sheesh, Lanter- I know you have a reputation for being a pain in the butt!

TOM LANTER

That's why they gave you my portfolio.

BETH

Is that why you've ran away? Because you don't like me?

TOM LANTER

No, you're fine- you're just not welcome here. Ngai, can you pop 'em down the pub?

NGAIIRE

Sure thing, Hollywood- back in a jiffy.

NGAIIRE races off towards the barn.

TOM LANTER steps up onto the porch, ready to enter the house.

LUCA doesn't know where to look.

TOM LANTER

Look, I get it- you're under a lot of pressure, but you have thirty other clients, and- [Shrugs.]

Sound: 'CRACK!'

The wooden fly-screen door slams shut as TOM LANTER disappears into the cottage.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

WE'RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE UNLESS YOU COME WITH US!

CHARLENE

Is that so?

BETH

Not now, Char- TOM? TOM?!

TOM LANTER appears behind the fly screen, his shirt now missing. LUCA almost drops his glass.

TOM LANTER

Ngaiire's grabbin' her keys- won't be a tick.

BETH

Can we at least talk about this?

TOM LANTER

[Walking away] There's nothing to talk about.

BETH

What about your commitment to the Children's Hospital?

TOM LANTER

I'm sure Leo or Matty Damo can play Santa for a change.

INT. FARM HOUSE - DAY.

BETH

[Enters Cottage.] That's not how it- I didn't come all this way for nothing.

TOM LANTER

And yet, it appears you have. Fancy that.

TOM takes a bite out of an apple, and leans back against the dinner table with one foot crossed over the other. He looks sexy. Very sexy.

BETH

Is it cancer?

AARON WARE

TOM LANTER

Strewth, Bryant!

BETH

You're the hottest star on the planet at the moment- have you been seeing Dr. Minkoff?

TOM LANTER

Yes. Every week.

BETH

And what did she say?

TOM LANTER

She told me to follow my gut instinct.

BETH

So you followed it to the middle of nowhere?!

TOM LANTER

We're not nowhere.

BETH

Where the heck are we then? Diddy-abri-googly-eyes?

SOUND: A CAR engine starts up- it sounds rather sick.

TOM LANTER

Huh? No, we're out "Bakkayonda".

BETH

We're going in circles!

TOM LANTER

Easy fix- Ngaiire sounds like she's ready to go. Hoo-roo, thanks for stopping by, Merry Christmas!

[BETH refuses to leave.]

I'm not going back there, so you might as well leave.

[BETH crosses her arms.]

Go home to your husband, it's Christmas next Monday.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH raises a single eyebrow, then holds up her wedding-ring finger- well, where a wedding ring would normally be.]

TOM LANTER (Cont.)

Well, I'm sure there's a few single blokes in town that'd love to have ya as a missus.

BETH

What a shame for them.

[BETH walks up to TOM LANTER, getting so close to him that her nostrils twitch at his natural musky smell.]
I'm only going to say this once: I'm not going anywhere without you- so you better get packing, or the media will be on your door-step quicker than I can say "Diddy-Abri-Google-Eyes", capiche?

BETH walks away confidently.

TOM LANTER watches her leave, admiring her stubbornness.

TOM LANTER

It's Didyabringyagrogalong. Well, did ya?

BETH opens her mouth to respond, but is distracted.
Outside, CHARLENE emits a long, shrill, terrified scream.
BETH and TOM exchange worried looks, then rush outside.

EXT. FARM YARD - DAY.

CHARLENE is running around in circles in front of an outdoor dunny/outhouse.

CHARLENE

SPIDERS! EW-EW-EW! GET 'EM OFF ME!

NGAIIRE

Ah- Sheila and Mongrel- don't worry about them mob. She's a sweetheart, but he's a, well- (shrugs) mongrel!

CHARLENE

THEY'RE MONSTERS!

NGAIIRE

Ah, they're not so bad- they keep the flies out.

AARON WARE

TOM LANTER, bemused by the situation, slips away unnoticed.

LUCA

Just don't look them in the fifty-five eyes.

BETH

Luca!

CHARLENE

Don't you have a toilet inside?! WITHOUT spiders!

JOE LANTER

Sorry, no sewer system. Outdoor dunny only.

Behind them, the sound of the CAR ENGINE chokes out with a putter, unnoticed by everyone but NGAIIRE, who rushes off.

LUCA

So... Where does, er, it go?

JOE LANTER points to the river.
The muddy brown waters slowly drift towards the expansive desert.

BETH AND LUCA

Gross.

CHARLENE

Not as gross as those spiders!

JOE LANTER

You've got them in the states.

CHARLENE

We don't keep them as pets IN THE BATHROOM!

NGAIIRE

Oi, American lady?

BETH whips around, leaving JOE LANTER to clear out the spiders. NGAIIRE stands with her shoulders slumped over- her hands now covered in black oil.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

Hi! Beth Bryant- talent agent.

BETH reaches her hand out, regrettably. NGAIIRE hesitates for a moment then smacks her sticky hand into BETH's. The AMERICAN almost sinks into the earth

BETH (V.O.)

GREAT. I just had my nails done.

NGAIIRE

Yeah, we met, remember? You gotta be back soon?

BETH

Pardon me? [It clicks.] Oh- is everything okay?

NGAIIRE

Left the ute stalled too long, ay- overheated.

CHARLENE overhears, and immediately rushes over.

CHARLENE

Oh, no-no-no, you've got another car, right? A tractor?!
A HORSE?!

JOE LANTER

Rooted again?

NGAIIRE

Too right.

JOE LANTER

Fair dinkum. Chuck'us a coupla coldies, dead-set gonna
be flat out all arvo.

JOE LANTER rushes towards the car.

NGAIIRE

Of course, I'll fire up the barbie, chuck on some snags.
You mob right for tea?

LUCA

I'm sorry I have NO idea what any of that was.

AARON WARE

NGAIIRE looks at him blankly, before speaking more slowly:

NGAIIRE

Too right. Me mate Lanto here is gonna be flat out with the hard yakka on me ute, so are you drongos peckish, coz I'll chuck us a sausage sizzle with a few beers... ay?

LUCA

I think that means food? [To BETH.] I heard sausage.

BETH

Where's the pun jar when you need it? Yes please- do you need a hand with anything?

NGAIIRE

You can grab the esky, heaps good'a'ya.

CHARLENE

Are they vegetarian sausages?

NGAIIRE

Yeah, good on ya!

NGAIIRE laughs heartily as she leads BETH towards the house.

CHARLENE

Well, she's interesting...

LUCA

I think she's wonderfully camp. This whole place is.

CHARLENE

This whole place is stinking hot, where even are we!?

LUCA

(Over the top Aussie accent) Aw-shtra-ya, mayyyte.

CHARLENE opens her mouth to respond, but decides against it; opting instead to walk away.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN- DAY.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

NGAIIRE lifts a large, blue ESKY/DRINK COOLER up onto the kitchen table, then walks over to the old, mouldy fridge. The fridge door squeaks as it opens.

Inside, there are plenty of bottles of beer, three kinds of sauces, a small tower of half-eaten meals, and a chicken carcass on a plate. Plus more beer.

BETH tries her hardest not to look amused.

BETH

Glad to see you're all eating healthy.

[NGAIIRE begins loading beers into the esky.]

Need any help?

NGAIIRE

She'll be right.

BETH

Sure. So... How long have you lived out here?

NGAIIRE

My whole life.

BETH

Oh?

NGAIIRE

Used to live down in the gully, then met Joe and Tom at school, when he bought the farm he hired me, been here ever since, ay.

BETH

OH! So you two aren't-

NGAIIRE

Aren't what? Married?

[BETH nods. NGAIIRE bursts out laughing.]

What a crack-up! Hear that, Tommy? Your mate here thinks I'm married to your brother!

TOM LANTER calls out from somewhere within the house.

TOM LANTER (OFF-SCREEN)

Marriage is all she ever thinks about!

BETH

Hey- that's my mom's game. I could care less myself.

TOM LANTER

And what was it that you asked me during our first meeting? "Have I ever thought about marrying a co-star?" You lot are all the same, just want to sell papers.

BETH

We want to keep you in work!

TOM LANTER

Well, lucky for you I found a job.

BETH

You can't stay here, Tom- I don't think you understand.

TOM LANTER

I don't think you do!

BETH

Then help me.

NGAIIRE

I'm gonna leave you two-

BETH AND TOM

NO!

TOM LANTER

It's okay, Ngai- argument's over before it started. Once the car's fixed, you can be on your way.

BETH

And what if we don't leave?

TOM LANTER

A pampered Big Apple agent like you? Stuck out here with the snakes, spiders, scorpions-

BETH

We have them in the states!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER

-The dingoes, crocs-

BETH

HA! There are no crocs out here! I asked them at the pub! Too far south.

TOM LANTER

Yeah, that's just something they tell tourists.

BETH

I'm sure.

TOM LANTER

Fair dinkum, right Ngai?

NGAIIRE

Of course, Tommo- nearly got bit me-self.

TOM LANTER

See, not safe out here.

NGAIIRE

Stop pullin' her leg, ya bogan- don't listen to him! I've known him since he was thirteen. We never knew if it was him screaming, or one of the chooks screeching.

TOM LANTER

Yeah, yeah.

BETH

Chooks?

TOM LANTER

Chickens. See- you don't even speak the language?!

BETH

Wait, I think I've got it now: BOCK-BOCK-BAAHHHK!

NGAIIRE bursts out laughing, TOM LANTER rolls his eyes.
JOE LANTER appears at the door.

AARON WARE

JOE LANTER

Do you want the good news or the bad news first?

BETH

Just lay it on me.

JOE LANTER

She's completely bugged- I can fix it enough to get you into town, but it'll take at least a week. I'll need to ride down to the gully and pick up a new gasket.

CHARLENE appears over JOE's shoulder.

CHARLENE

A WEEK?! We're going to miss Christmas!

BETH

Are you sure there's-

JOE LANTER

You could always catch the next bus?

CHARENE

THAT'S ALSO A WEEK AWAY! Beth- do something, this is your fault! Grant's going to be furious, he's unemplo-

LUCA

Don't blame her, it's his fault!

TOM LANTER

I told ya, you should have stayed home.

TOM LANTER disappears down the hallway.

NGAIIRE

You ladies can take my bed- I like it on the roof.

BETH

What about Luca?

LUCA

Yeah, what about Luca?!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

He can take my bed.

LUCA's eyes light up.

LUCA

Where will you sleep? Next to-

BETH AND CHARLENE

LUCA!

EXT. FARM YARD - LATE AFTERNOON

As dusk settles over the cattle station, BETH steps out onto the porch with a bottle of beer in one hand, her phone in another; waving it above her head.

Within the cottage, LUCA, NGAIIRE, and CHARLENE are singing along to Christmas Carols, clearly drunk.

Tight on the phone; the battery bar is half-full, but there's clearly no reception.

Staring up at the slowly-darkening sky, filled with shades of blues, purples, pinks, oranges, reds, yellows, and somehow a touch of green; a single bright star catches her eye.

Outside a barn, JOE LANTER is leaning over the car engine.

A single lantern dangles above his head.

Enjoying the evening air, BETH wonders away from the house.

Cross-fade to BETH as she walks out onto the road.

SOUND: 'BEEP-BEEP-BEEP!'

Her phone lights up in her hand, whilst in mid-air. Instantly, she flicks through her recent calls, and dials 'MOM'.

MRS. BRYANT (ON SPEAKER-PHONE)

I wondered when you'd call, it's been three days!

BETH

Has it? S'felt like a week.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING.

MRS. BRYANT is sitting on the edge of her bed.

MRS. BRYANT

Where are you?

BETH (ON PHONE)

I have no clue- somewhere called Bakkayonda? Or Diddy Kong?

MRS. BRYANT

Never heard of it, must've be too fancy then.

CUT TO:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DUSK.

BETH

It has its charms- look, I've got some-

The ground beneath BETH's feet begins to rumble. She looks up at the house, the orange light from within flickers out onto the dusty farm yard.

BETH

Wait, I think there's about to be an earthquake.

MRS. BRYANT (ON SPEAKER-PHONE)

What's that noise? Are you by a road?

BETH looks over at JOE LANTER- still hunched over the engine of the truck.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - MORNING

MRS. BRYANT's normally airy demeanour begins to darken.

MRS. BRYANT

It sounds like an-

[BETH'S TERRIFIED SCREAM rings out through the phone.]
Beth? BETH?! Silly girl! [Hangs up phone.]

CUT TO:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DUSK.

BETH falls to the floor as dozens of large, dark-red kangaroos pounce past with a thunderous rumbling.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

Large, hairy, elongated paws smack the ground, causing a 'CRUNCHING' sound as they hit the gravel.
BETH screams again.

BETH

HELP! HELP!

Somehow, every kangaroo that hops past, misses BETH. She spots her phone on the ground, barely a metre away. The light is still glowing.

BETH

MOM?! CAN YOU HEAR ME?!

Terrified, she tries to crawl forward.
Within reach, she slowly moves her hand forward.
SOUND: 'CRUNCH!'
A kangaroo foot lands on the phone.
It flips in the air several times before hitting the ground again.
Instinctively, she attempts to rise to her feet, and leap for the phone. An arm grabs her around the waist.
She's dragged up in the air.
Through blurry vision, read: **fantasy scene**, she sees Tom Lanter.

EXT. FARM YARD - DUSK.

Seconds later, BETH is lowered off the back of a horse.

BETH

Tom- you saved me! [Coughs.] After all that-

But it is not TOM LANTER.

JOE LANTER

Gotta watch out! Every night at dusk, the kanga run.

BETH

Everything here really can kill us, can't it?!

JOE LANTER

Only if you do silly things- like walk in the pathway of a kangaroo mob. That's their quickest route home.

AARON WARE

BETH

Sheesh! [Rubbing her elbows.]

JOE LANTER

You're lucky I was out there- I could've been inside, enjoying the party.

BETH and JOE LANTER turn their heads towards the cottage. From inside, NGAIIRE and LUCA are heartily singing a slow Christmas carol, whilst CHARLENE complains:

CHARLENE (OFF-SCREEN)

Guys, can't we sing something less boring?! Why are you even singing, Luca- YOU'RE JEWISH!

LUCA (OFF-SCREEN)

[Loudly whispers.] I'm also really [Burps.]

BETH

Sheesh- You can still join them, you know?

JOE LANTER lifts up BETH's elbow.

JOE LANTER

Looks pretty bad-

BETH habitually pulls away. Before realizing her rudeness.

BETH

Sorry.

JOE LANTER

Sorry- my bad. Giz'a'squiz?

[BETH raises her elbows in front of her chest.]

Let's get you cleaned up before it gets infected.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM - EVENING.

JOE LANTER holds the fly-screen door open for BETH, who enters first, rather shyly.

Inside, CHARLENE, LUCA, and NGAIIRE are drinking around a rather skeletal looking branch that has several Christmas decorations hanging off the smaller branches and fractals.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER is sitting in a tattered old arm chair, looking rather impressed. Everybody has a beer in their hands, each in various stages of emptiness.

CHARLENE

[To BETH.] Ouch, what happened?

LUCA

Isn't it meant to be your knees?

BETH

I hate you.

JOE LANTER

Since you're all stuck here for a couple of days-

BETH

I don't think they're going to remember by morning.

LUCA

Where's the bathroom again?

LUCA tries to stand up, albeit in a wobbly fashion.

JOE LANTER

Out the back.

LUCA

Look around! It's all outback here, Joseph.

LUCA bursts out laughing as he stumbles through the front door- CHARLENE and NGAIIRE also scream with laughter. Even BETH and JOE can't help but share in the laugh. TOM LANTER, however, quietly sips his beer.

JOE LANTER

Will he be right?

BETH

I don't know, the heat might be getting to us all.

JOE LANTER

Oi, bozo! Make yourself useful and watch the guy doesn't end up in the river?

TOM LANTER rolls his eyes, swigs the rest of his beer, then rises to his feet. As he leaves the cottage, he grabs two more beers from the esky.

BETH

I've never seen him drink beer.

JOE LANTER

Really? Mother's milk out here.

CHARLENE

Best milk I ever had!

JOE LANTER

Through here, I've got a first aid kit.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING.

JOE LANTER leads BETH into the kitchen. She instantly takes a seat on one of the three wobbly chairs. In the background, we can hear the party continuing in the lounge with only NGAIIRE and CHARLENE.

JOE LANTER

It's a bit old- [Looks grim.] Don't really use it much.

JOE places a rusted, red, tin tool-box on the table, and opens it up. BETH's nostrils flare up at the musty smell.

BETH

You said old, not ancient. What on earth do you do about accidents?!

JOE LANTER

[Shrugs.] Don't have 'em?

BETH

Out here? Where everything's trying to kill you!? How is that even a "thing"?!

JOE LANTER grabs a tea-towel from the bench, and pours a tiny bottle of liquid over a small portion of it.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

I guess we're just used to it.

Moving back over to BETH, he dabbles the ointment onto her grazes.

BETH

Thanks- ouch!

JOE LANTER

Sorry- ointment's probably older than this house.

BETH

That's... comforting...

JOE LANTER

[Laughs.] If my brother wasn't... well, my brother, I'd say you two were a perfect fit.

BETH

Oh really, where on earth would you get that from?

JOE LANTER

Just a vibe, I guess.

BETH

I don't date clients.

JOE LANTER

Hey- I'm not one to judge.

BETH scans around the ancient cottage.

BETH

Clearly.

JOE LANTER

See- there, that. The sass.

BETH

I'm sorry, it's just been a long day- apparently it's turning me into my mother.

AARON WARE

JOE LANTER laughs again.

JOE LANTER

You're really funny.

BETH

You're really sweet.

BETH studies his face as he focuses on cleaning her wounds. He's none the wiser.

JOE LANTER

All done.

BETH

Thanks- [Eyes light up.] MY PHONE!

CUT TO:

EXT. COTTAGE FRONT PORCH/YARD - EVENING.

BETH bursts through the screen door, leaps across the porch, and scurries- painfully- towards the road.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - EVENING.

Seconds later, she arrives to find her phone; smashed to pieces by the mob.

BETH

[Frustrated growl:] That's so... [Shout:] KANGARUDE!

Her voice echoes across the pitch-black plains.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTBACK PLAINS - SAME TIME.

A kangaroo's head pops up in the moonlight, follow closely by three more. They stare off towards the source of the echo.

CUT TO:

EXT. FARMYARD - MINUTES LATER.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH's sunken shoulders lead her way as she walks around the back of the house.

Stopping near the river, she stares up at the moon.

SOUND: 'THUMP!'

BETH almost jumps out of her skin.

SOUND: 'THUMP!'

It happens again.

Long-shot of a cattle shed/barn. The door is open, and a soft yellow light is flickering within.

BETH

Hey, Joe?! JOE?!

BETH races up to the barn, reaching the doorway, she leaps over the threshold, whilst saying:

BETH

Hey Joe, if we went- OH MY GOODNESS, NO!

BETH's hands instantly clasp onto her face.

We see LUCA with his shirt off, arm-in-arm with TOM LANTER, underneath another sign that reads 'DIDYABRINGYAGROGALONG?'

BETH

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, LUCA?!

LUCA

It's not my fault!

BETH turns to leave, then turns back instantly.

BETH

NO-NO-NO, NOT THIS!

TOM LANTER

I'm a big boy, I can do what I want. No paparazzi here.

BETH

Not you, him! [Points to Luca.]

LUCA

I'm innocent, he started it!

AARON WARE

BETH

Never in a million years...!

TOM LANTER

Well, actually...

BETH

This explains so much!

LUCA

What's that supposed to mean?!

BETH

Not you, HIM! [Points to TOM.]

TOM LANTER

You still can't imagine why I wanted to leave, can you?

BETH

It's the twenty-twenties, nobody cares anymore!

TOM LANTER

The press cares- the fans care. And the people who say they don't care? They always care the most! Then you're suddenly pigeon-holed as a gay actor, forever playing the "camp best friend" because [Anger rises:] THAT'S ALL YOU'RE WORTHY OF!

BETH

That couldn't be furth-

TOM LANTER

Name me one actor who came out, but kept their leading man status? One?!

BETH

Um- well-

TOM LANTER

Society claims to be ready for it- but are we really?

BETH

Yes.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

LUCA AND TOM

NO!

BETH

Luca- stay out.

LUCA

He's right! Once he comes out of the- the-

TOM LANTER

Barn.

LUCA

No more Romeos, no more James Bonds- because it's not authentic to the part!

BETH crosses her arms in disbelief.

TOM LANTER

The haters won't swallow it, and the supporters demand representation. That's not why I act. I act to not be me, Bryant. Soon as I come out- that's all over, I'll be forced to play me and- and- [Chin up defiantly.] I'd rather quit.

BETH

But this isn't something to be ashamed of!

TOM LANTER

I'M NOT ASHAMED! Don't you get it? It's just nobody else's business! But the media, the fans, the haters- they make every bit of our private business their business. They sum us up as though our private lives have any sort of bearing on our talents. That's not what I signed up for.

BETH

No, you signed up to be my client.

TOM LANTER

And as my agent, I'm telling you this: I am not happy.

TOM LANTER exits the barn.

LUCA leans back against a barrel with a guilty look on his face. He takes a deep breath in, ready to speak, but is instantly cut-off by BETH:

BETH

I don't want to hear it.

CUT TO:

Close on a dusty barn window.

CHARLENE's eyes are peering through, wide open in shock; shock which turns to anger.

FADE OUT.

SOUND: 'A WHIMPER' and 'SCURRYING'

FADE IN.

EXT. OUTBACK PLAINS - NIGHT.

We follow a DINGO as it trots over the moonlit terrain.

Sniffing everything it passes, the DINGO dodges a bush, limbos under a fallen tree trunk, then leaps up onto a rock.

It surveys the darkness for a moment, before looking down at the rock it's perched on.

It leaps off, sniffing the dirt around the small boulder.

THE DINGO spots a pitch-black crevice under the rock, and sniffs its way towards it.

It reaches the cave-like nook.

A SNAKE springs out, snapping its powerful jaw at the DINGO; which barks a whimper, before scurrying away.

The SNAKE cautiously retreats back to its slumber.

CUT TO:

Close on a jet-lagged BETH, who lays wide awake on her back with a stream of blue moonlight across her face.

INT. NGAIIRE'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING.

A CLOCK on the wall shows three-fifty.

BETH breathes out an anxious sigh, then rolls over onto her side, spotting CHARLENE on the floor, snoring loudly.

BETH rolls over again, hearing TOM LANTER's voice in her head.

TOM LANTER (DREAM-LIKE V.O.)

You can't imagine why I wanted to leave, can you? ...Those who say they don't care? They care the most! ...You wouldn't understand... I act to not be me, Bryant.

BETH sits up sweating, almost as if she'd had a nightmare.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

SOUND: 'Creaking of Floorboards.'

SOUND: 'Shutting of Front Door.'

BETH looks up at the window, watching JOE LANTER head across the yard towards the barns.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - EARLY MORNING.

Not long after, BETH is standing in front of a grimy mirror, above a mouldy sink.

She looks disgusted, but turns on the hot tap.

SOUND: 'RICKETY PIPES'

SOUND: 'WATER GUSHING'

As quickly as she can, BETH cups her hands, and fills them up with water; before throwing it over her face and turning the taps off.

The silence echoes eerily, BETH looks up in the mirror.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT BATHROOM - EVENING.

A slightly-younger BETH is standing in front of her bathroom mirror, with her hair up in a bun. Her white work-shirt is unbuttoned at the top, exposing a gold necklace with a 'B' hooked around a 'C', which she's twirling in her fingers.

A MALE voice from outside the bathroom pipes up:

CONNOR (BEHIND DOOR)

Can we at least discuss it?

BETH

Go away, Connor.

CONNOR (BEHIND DOOR)

Come on, Bethlehem! I don't want to fight, it's almost Christmas! Can't we-

BETH

We moved across town for your work- I'm not moving across the country!

CONNOR (BEHIND DOOR)

There are more movie stars in Chicago!

AARON WARE

BETH

What?! No there isn't.

[BETH rips open the door, storming past CONNOR.]
Where do you get this nonsense?!

CONNOR

Look- this is a brilliant opportunity for me- for us!

BETH

And what about my job? MY OPPORTUNITIES?!

CONNOR

YOU'RE AN APPRENTICE!

BETH

WOW- (she can't believe her ears) Just, wow.

MARK

I didn't mean it like that!

BETH

Yeah, you and my mother never do.

CONNOR

Ouch. And you call me selfish!? Every single time, you twist my words around then compare me to her!

BETH

Well, if it looks like a mom, and sounds like a mom.

CONNOR

(Sounds defeated) Then I guess it's over.

BETH

If that's what you want.

CONNOR

What I want is for us to go to Chicago together, the firm has already suggested a few upper-class areas where you'll fit right in- UH, I mean-

He knows he's overstepped the mark- pun not intended.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

Why? Because I'm a snob? Because I earn more than you?
Is that why you want to move?

CONNOR

No! I want to move because- (he's lost for words)

BETH

Typical men.

CONNOR

(He raises his hands) Here we go.

CUT TO:

BETH stands in the darkness.

INT. COTTAGE ENTRANCE - EARLY MORNING.

BETH

(Softly) Here we go.

As quietly as a desert mouse, BETH slips through the screened wooden door with her hands in both her pockets.

BETH (V.O.)

I would kill for a coffee right now.

[BETH reaches the first cattle shed, lights are pouring out onto the cluttered yard.]

[Standing in the doorway, she leans against the beam, watching JOE LANTER extract the last few drops from a cow while JOE's back is turned to BETH- who smiles.]

They don't have a coffee-flavoured cow, do they?

BETH can't help herself and emits a chuckle.

JOE LANTER twists his head around.

JOE LANTER

Ah! Mornin', off to catch the worm?!

BETH

Huh?

JOE LANTER

Early bird- worm?

BETH

Oh, of course- sorry, rough night. [Pretends to yawn and stretch] What's Ngaiire's bed made out of? Sharpened hay?

JOE LANTER

Just a bit old is all.

BETH

Smells it.

[JOE laughs]

Need any help?

JOE LANTER

Nah, she'll be right- got enough for today.

BETH

I haven't had fresh milk in forever.

JOE LANTER

You city folk miss out on the best in life.

JOE LANTER walks towards her, carrying two full buckets of milk. BETH can't help but notice the muscles in his arm are tensing up.

BETH

I wouldn't say that- it's just.. [Thinks.] Different, I guess? A lot busier, that's for sure.

JOE LANTER

Can't stand the city meself, too peaceful out here.

JOE LANTER stops in his tracks, taking in the moonlit landscape surrounding his cattle station.

As we say in Oz: "How's the serenity, aye?"

BETH

Isn't it lonely out here?

[JOE shoots her a rather awkward look]

I'm sorry- I know you blokes don't like to "Talk about their feelings"- or so says your brother. And my dad... And, well, every man I've ever dated.

[JOE LANTER laughs.]

Or looked at for that matter. [Shrugs.]

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

Yeah, nah, it's 'orright. Loneliness, huh? [Thinks.] Never really thought about it if I'm honest.

[JOE begins walking towards the second cattle shed.]
Got the dogs- plus Ngaiire's great company- and there's enough people in the Gully- Nah, couldn't give a hoot if I'm honest. Like I said at tea: After Iraq, I've come to enjoy the quiet twice as much.

BETH

Can I at least carry a bucket for you?

JOE LANTER looks at her arms.

JOE LANTER

They're heavy, but I'd be sexist to say no, right? Isn't that what they say on the telly? [He passes her a bucket.]

BETH

WAIT?! [Her eyes light up] YOU HAVE A TV?!

JOE LANTER

Nah, down in the gully there's one- sometimes works.

[He enters the shed]

Most times it's just blank and snowy.

BETH

Shoot! I was hoping to see if there's any fallout.

JOE LANTER

Bit tough without your comforts?

BETH

We haven't even been here twenty-four hours!

[JOE raises an eyebrow.]

Harder than anything in my life!

JOE LANTER

[Laughs.] You get used to it.

BETH

Maybe I don't want to get used to it.

AARON WARE

JOE LANTER

I hate to break it to you, Chook, but I don't think Tom's going back to America anytime soon.

BETH

[Disappointed.] Well, I was kind of hoping you'd help me convince him.

JOE LANTER tries to hold back a laugh.

JOE LANTER

I couldn't convince my brother to climb a tree in a flood! He's as stubborn as a mule.

BETH

And I suppose you're up for anything?

JOE LANTER

No. I'm just as stubborn.

[He steps up onto a ramp and climbs into the chicken coop.]

I'm just not a moron- HEY LADIES! We've got a guest today!

BETH

You're not going to- Um...

BETH shoots a look at a large, clean butcher's knife hanging from the wall.

JOE LANTER

Oh, yeah, nah- just eggs today, savin' a roast chook for Chrissy tea-

[JOE motions to a pile of baskets that sit outside the door-less pen.]

You said you want to help?

BETH

Oh fun!

With a cheerful disposition, BETH places the bucket of milk onto the barn floor, then almost-skips over to the coop; whipping up the baskets as she ascends- then descends- into the chicken house.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE reaches his strong, dirty hand out for a basket.
BETH passes one to him- their eyes linger for a moment.

JOE LANTER

Do you know what you're doing?

BETH

No clue.

JOE LANTER

You check a nest, if there's eggs, put 'em in the basket.

BETH

Oh- I could have guess that.

[BETH bends forward, then upright again.]

What if I get eggs that have a baby?

JOE LANTER

Not possible- I keep the bloke across the paddock.
Otherwise he'd have more kids than Clint Eastwood.

BETH

[Laughs.] That's a good one- I'm surprised you know Clint Eastwood.

JOE LANTER

Yeah, he and I go way back- used to work for my Grandad-

BETH

Oh ha-ha.

[BETH kneels down to collect her first eggs.]

Turns out you got the comedy gene.

[Her arm reaches out, her hand aiming for two eggs.]

[Above BETH, two chickens suddenly drop down.]

[Feathers fly.]

ARGH! AARRRGHHH! HELP!

BETH rolls around the coop as several more chickens leap onto her, flapping their wings wildly.

JOE LANTER

NOT AGAIN! [He barks at the chooks] Settle ladies!

Feathers continue to fly as BETH's terrified screaming fades us out to black.

OPEN ON:

INT. KITCHEN - MINUTES LATER.

BETH sits under the bright light. She's shaken, her normally-kempt hair is messy, and her whole body is covered in feathers and muddy stains.

JOE LANTER stands at the kitchen sink, filling up a large pot with water- the pipes rattle

LUCA and CHARLENE enter the kitchen, BOTH rubbing their eyes- and heads.

CHARLENE

What's all the noise about?

LUCA

BETH! Did you get into a fight with a pillow?

BETH

Shut up.

LUCA tries to laugh, but feels far-too sick (read: Hungover). Instead, he slides into the chair next to BETH, while CHARLENE disappears, read: falls face-first, onto the dusty couch. JOE LANTER moves over to the table with the pot of water.

LUCA

Is that for coffee? Ohh, stop moving the house.

JOE LANTER

No-no, I'll get a brew on shortly- someone had a little accident in the chook coop.

BETH

[Hilariously-shaken.] They tried to... EAT ME!

EVERYBODY laughs- even CHARLENE, albeit, only JOE LANTER doesn't feel ill in doing so.

JOE LANTER

They can be territorial.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

LUCA

Could they sense a Foxy Lady in the hen house? Oy gavult, my head! Don't let me drink ever again.

BETH

[Rolls eyes.] Self-inflicted, I have no sympathy- but, LOOK AT ME! I look like an Ostrich!

JOE LANTER

Well, to be fair, it is Australia- so you're more likely to be an Emu.

JOE LANTER places a glass of water on the table for LUCA with a cheeky smirk.

BETH leaps to respond- only to pull herself back from the ledge at the last second, and takes in a deep breath instead.

LUCA

You don't look like an Emu.

[BETH stands up, placing her fists on her waist.]

OK, spoke too soon- OW!

BETH has punched LUCA in the arm.

JOE LANTER

There's a lock on the bathroom if you need a shower.

LUCA

Is there a lock on the pipes so we can get some sleep?

BETH

Yeah, that's really loud. Is there a plumber in the Gully?

JOE LANTER

Sorry about that, built the system myself, so it's not the greatest- but it gets the job done.

[LUCA takes a long sip of water.]

And we get nice, fresh water from the river.

LUCA spits the water back out, completely spraying BETH.

LUCA AND BETH

GROSS!

AARON WARE

BETH

GREAT. Tarred and feathered in one day.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - MINUTES LATER.

BETH enters the bathroom, and turns on the light. She's still covered in chicken feathers, albeit not as many.

After closing the door and locking it, she avoids her reflection and turns to the combined bath-and-shower.

Pulling back the plastic shower curtain, she reaches for the taps. Unwittingly looking down into the bottom of the bathtub, she leaps back in fright.

Three large, black scorpions are scurrying around.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN. - SAME TIME.

JOE LANTER hears BETH's scream, and instantly leaps out of the kitchen.

INT. BATHROOM - SAME TIME.

JOE bursts through the bathroom door, finding BETH pressed up against the wall, pointing towards the bathtub.

JOE LANTER moves over to it, and looks down, spotting the scorpions.

JOE LANTER

[Frowns.] Yeah, nah- you don't want a bite from those little buggers.

BETH

Little? LITTLE!?

LUCA and CHARLENE stumble into the doorway, but neither dares enter the cramped room.

CHARLENE

It's not another spider, is it?

LUCA

Or a Snake?!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

Take a look for yourselves.

LUCA

[Stands back.] Ladies first.

CHARLENE

[Scandalized.] Get outta here! You go first, you're a man.

LUCA

Prove it.

BETH

OH, SHUT UP! They're just snails- I was caught off-guard is all! Look, see for yourself.

BETH grabs JOE's arm, and leads him out of the bathroom; then motions for LUCA and CHARLENE to enter.

LUCA, confident he can trust his best friend, leads CHARLENE into the bathroom.

They BOTH look into the tub- their screams fill the farmyard.

SOUND: 'BETH SLAMS THE DOOR SHUT.'

LUCA (BEHIND-DOOR)

HEY! YOU'RE A MONSTER!

CHARLENE (BEHIND-DOOR)

THIS IS AGAINST O.H.S.! MY UNION WILL SUE YOU!

BETH laughs, before re-opening the door; therefore letting JOE LANTER tend to the monstrous scorpions.

BETH

We're stuck out here, and I'm NOT going to be listening to you two bicker the whole time. Just kiss and make up!

LUCA

Only if I can kiss-

BETH

LUCA!

LUCA and CHARLENE hang their heads as they exit the bathroom.

AARON WARE

CHARLENE

I'm sorry- I'm just missing home. I miss Grant.

LUCA

Me too. Not Grant- I miss TV.

JOE rushes past, with a bucket held close to his chest.
THE AMERICANS leap backwards- just to be safe.

BETH

I understand, truly. For some dumb reason I miss my Mom.

[Pauses to let her words sink in.]

And I miss the snow! Look what we're stuck with, I'm so dusty- Look, just let me shower, we can discuss it when I'm feeling less like-

LUCA

-A Vegas showgirl gone wild?

BETH slams the door shut.

As LUCA exits to the lounge, CHARLENE's eyes tense up at the bathroom door.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING.

With the sun now up, and BETH now freshly showered, she stands over the kitchen bench chopping up pieces of last night's leftover sausages.

Moving over to a pot on the ancient stove, she places the pieces into a scrambled egg mix on the hot plate, and begins to stir. Outside the window, she watches JOE LANTER shovelling camel poop in the paddock, while two of the golden creatures joyfully trot around him.

TOM LANTER enters the kitchen behind BETH.

TOM LANTER

Morning! Sleep well?

BETH

Morning? You sound happy- For a change. It's good.

BETH looks up at the couch in the lounge, LUCA is fast asleep, while CHARLENE has drifted off in an armchair.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER

I guess? Feel a weight off me shoulders, that's f'sure.

BETH

Was it really bugging you that badly?

TOM LANTER

Your friend gets to walk around freely, without hurting anyone in the process. Or being hurt.

BETH

Oh, he gets hurt- trust me on that. And your fans will live- even the women. In fact, they'll just think they stand more of a chance with you!

TOM LANTER

No doubt about that. Still, I like my privacy.

BETH

I see that now.

TOM LANTER

Mmm, smells great. Doesn't happen hear much.

BETH

And it's almost ready- wanna go call the others?

TOM LANTER salutes BETH, then exits the room.

TOM LANTER

WAKE UP SLEEPY HEADS!

[He exits the cottage loudly.]

[Faintly] NGAIRRE! JOEY! BREAKKIE'S ON!

CHARLENE

Let me sleep! [Rolls over awkwardly.]

LUCA, however, leaps up at the sound of TOM's voice. He stumbles into the kitchen, and falls into a chair.

BETH

Feel better?

LUCA

If by better you mean worse? Then yes.

BETH dishes him up a bowl of scrambled eggs.

In the middle of the table, a tower of campfire-cooked toast sits, ready to be buttered.

NGAIIRE appears in the open window with a pitchfork over her shoulder, and dirt on her forehead.

BETH

Get some salt into you- and drink plenty of fluids.

NGAIIRE (THROUGH OPEN-WINDOW)

Smells deadly, Beth!

BETH

If by deadly you mean good?

NGAIIRE (THROUGH OPEN-WINDOW)

I mean terrific! [Disappears.]

LUCA

I love their language here- can't understand a word they say, but I love it!

BETH

I'm getting used to it.

TOM LANTER re-enters.

TOM LANTER

Mornin'... you. [Winks at LUCA.]

LUCA

Morning.

LUCA blushes wildly as TOM LANTER stands near him- the AUSSIE not knowing what to do.

BETH

[Bemused.] Oh for crying out loud- just do it!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER leans down, awkwardly kissing LUCA on the lips.

JOE LANTER

How sweet, we get dinner and a show.

TOM LANTER

Oi! Good on ya.

TOM play-wrestles JOE- as brothers often do.

JOE LANTER

Good to see you smile for a change.

LUCA

So how do we get- [Motions to CHARLENE] -To smile?

EVERY HEAD turns to the uncomfortably-positioned CHARL.

CHARLENE (MUFFLED)

I can hear you, ya know!

[She raises her head.]

You're all so LOUD! Ugh!

NGAIIRE

Beaut tucker, Beth!

LUCA

Yeah, these eggs- [Swallows.] So fresh and fluffy.

TOM LANTER

Just like you.

LUCA and TOM share a less awkward kiss.

JOE LANTER

I'll just grab a little-

[JOE grabs a piece of toast, and begins levering scrambled eggs onto it.]

Still got plenty to do, and I wanna get into the gully before noon- What?

As JOE begins to take a bite of his breakfast, he notices BETH staring at him with a look of incredulity.

BETH

Your... hands... [Mortified.]

EVERYBODY looks at JOE's brownish-greenish hands.
HE looks at EVERYBODY, then at his hands.

JOE LANTER

[Shrugs.] Meh, just a bit of camel poop.

SOUND: 'THE CLINK OF EVERYBODY'S FORKS HITTING THEIR PLATES'
Simultaneously, EVERYBODY drops their cutlery in disgust- even
NGAIIRE, who says:

NGAIIRE

Least it's better than Tom's cooking.

ALL laugh.

CUT TO:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - MORNING.

Long-shot of the outback.

From a distance, we spot a horse being ridden by JOE LANTER,
with BETH BRYANT tightly holding on behind him.

As we move closer, their conversation becomes clearer.

BETH

So it had never occurred to me, really- he seems just so,
well-

JOE LANTER

"Typical male"?

BETH

Not to be rude, but- yeah. I mean, you say he's stubborn,
but I've honestly never seen that side of him. He's only
ever indecisive- never "Dead set"- is that what you Aussies
would say?

We transition to later in the conversation as they pass between
two large, orange rock formations.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

-But if he had ever stolen any of my girlfriends as a teen, I would have- right in the nose! But, nope, we've never properly fought like that. Not even as adults.

BETH

Oh, wow- boys won't always be boys then, will they?

JOE LANTER

We had our moments- but never a full-blown punch-on. Came pretty close to it when I hit eighteen, headed off to the Army soon after.

BETH

He wasn't happy?

JOE LANTER

Yeah nah, he was only fifteen- cried for weeks.

BETH

That's cute. Did y'all grow apart?

JOE LANTER

Nope, the opposite. When I got back from Iraq, his career had taken off, but every Christmas he'd come here and just hang out with his big brother. No matter how famous he gets, he's still such a dork sometimes.

We transition to even later in the conversation as the path starts to descend down the side of a gully.

BETH

Just because you have barely anything in your house! You can judge all you like, but we needed clothes.

JOE LANTER

So what excuses the other seventeen cases?

BETH

HA. Seventeen! Cheeky. Well, we we didn't actually know where we were going- plus we all had to bring our work with us, and I had to bring a bunch of scripts for Tom to decide upon- IF he can.

AARON WARE

JOE LANTER

IF he's even going to act anymore!

BETH

Don't remind me.

JOE pulls on the reins to slow the horse down.

JOE LANTER

Atta girl! We'll get you some water in a tick.

[He tilts his head back, speaking to BETH again.]

They're a little, well, eccentric here- don't get many visitors, so just stay by my side, and try not to let them know you're American.

BETH

Are they racist?

JOE LANTER

Not so much- they're just a bit, how do I put this... behind the times...

BETH

So they're racist.

JOE LANTER

Ha. You'll see.

JOE LANTER stops the horse by a makeshift hitching post fashioned out of an arching tree.

He slides off the back of the equine, then helps BETH down.

She falls into him, pressed against his chest.

JOE giggles, BETH blushes- and apologizes:

BETH

Sorry, lost my footing.

JOE LANTER

You're right, darl'- thirsty?

BETH

Parched.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

Come, meet my favourite person here- Old Man Gilbo.

We pan across the gully as JOE leads BETH between a row of hand-built houses made from various materials.

The hodge-podge nature of them looks almost cartoonish, but ultimately charming as each contain a letterbox, a small garden, and curtains straight out of 1985.

BETH can't help but smile at the villagers as they go about their morning routine- including a group of Indigenous children who run past with four dogs and a puppy in tow.

RAY

Mornin' Lanto!

A middle-aged man calls out from his front porch; which looks to have been built using the front of a large truck.

JOE LANTER

How's it going, mate?

RAY

The wife ran off with him.

RAY hangs his head, then swigs his morning beer.

JOE LANTER

Ah, Ray, I'm so sorry- is there anything I can do?

RAY

You can introduce me to your new Mrs.?

JOE LANTER

Not gonna happen, Ray- you look after yourself, orright?

RAY

All the same around here!

RAY stumbles inside his door-less home.

JOE LANTER

A lot of them around here are either angry, or liberated- depends on the day.

AARON WARE

BETH

Angry at what?

JOE LANTER

Society.

BETH

Of course, so what are they liberated from?

JOE

Society.

BETH

Goes without saying.

JOE LANTER

They're friendly enough.

BETH

Did his wife really leave him?

JOE LANTER

Yeah, nah- she died twelve years ago.

BETH

That poor man.

BETH turns back to RAY's cottage with an empathetic look. Turning back around, she comes face-to-face with a koala as it jumps out in front of her- well, a MAN dressed as a koala.

KOALA MAN

SAVE THE KOALAS?!

The KOALA MAN jingles a plastic bucket filled with coins in front of BETH's face.

JOE LANTER

Not today, mate.

BETH

I think I have a dollar some-

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

[Whispers.] You don't want to do that, what's in there today? Nuts and bolts? Staples?

The KOALA MAN looks annoyed at JOE LANTER.

KOALA MAN

Well if anybody had any coins once in a while!

The KOALA MAN storms off in a huff.

BETH

Interesting place.

JOE LANTER

That's a word for it- UH OH, HERE'S TROUBLE! G'day Tillie, can't stop in for a cuppa today- I've got company.

A mostly-toothless woman with long, scraggly hair drunkenly stumbles over to JOE, and plants a large, sloppy kiss on his cheek. She then turns to BETH, and snaps her jaw at the American visitor.

TILLIE

He's moine ya little cactus! [Cackles loudly.]

BETH gasps, so JOE LANTER reassuringly puts his arm around her.

JOE LANTER

She's our new farmhand, actually.

TILLIE

Oh-dee MOO to you too! MOOOOO!

TILLIE cackles as she stumbles off.

BETH

WOW. Just... Wow.

JOE begins walking towards a large, mostly-blue building, with four roundish windows on either side of double doors.

JOE LANTER

I did warn you!

AARON WARE

BETH

You said they were old fashioned, not crazy!

JOE LANTER

Just wait- after you.

BETH steps inside, instantly being met with a bright, red-and-blonde environment.

We scan the room: PAMELA ANDERSON posters line every inch of the walls and furniture.

BETH

Strewth!

CUT TO:

INT. COTTAGE LOUNGE - MORNING.

TOM LANTER'S P.O.V.

He holds a glass of water out for LUCA, who refuses to accept it by wildly shaking his head in fear.

TOM LANTER

He was pullin' ya leg! The water's from the rain-tank out the back.

[As TOM LANTER turns, we pull away from his P.O.V.]

[He points out the window.]

Look! It's right there!

LUCA cautiously takes the glass of water, and has a sip.

LUCA

If I die, it's on you.

CHARLENE

If you die, there'll be more room for us on the way home.

CUT TO:

INT. OLD MAN GILBO'S SHOP - MORNING.

BETH is standing beside an old rotary phone with the receiver against her ear.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

My hands are tied, Herb, he's dead-set refusing to. [Pauses to listen] Sorry, twenty-four hours and already I'm talking like them- I KNOW, please, stop riding my- NO, I can't tell you anything else! [Listens] If you think that'll help- I'm still not telling you where he is. [Pauses- looks shocked] SO FIRE ME THEN!

BETH slams down the phone.

We pan around to see JOE LANTER talking to OLD MAN GILBO. JOE looks up at BETH with a concerned expression.

JOE LANTER

Everything couda?

JOE LANTER moves out of his seat, and stands at the counter of OLD MAN GILBO's store of useless junk and early-nineties Baywatch posters.

BETH takes a deep breath in before turning around to respond:

BETH

If you mean "copasetic", that wasn't even the worst of it. Are you sure you don't mind if I make another call, Mr. Gilbert?

OLD MAN GILBO

No worries, Pammy, anything you need!

BETH

Thank you, I will pay you for the calls.

OLD MAN GILBO

Take no cash around here- and not the first time I've gotten on the blower to the states!

[Nudges towards the many posters.]

If you get me drift!

BETH

Uh- Yes, I think I do. [In voice-over:] Unfortunately.

BETH dials a series of numbers of the rotary phone. It takes a while; JOE LANTER watches intently, while OLD MAN GILBO chugs on his beer.

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

Hello?

BETH

Mom, it's me.

MRS. BRYANT (ON-PHONE)

About time! I've been worried sick!

BETH rolls her eyes and sinks into the counter with anxiety.

CUT TO:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - MID-MORNING.

JOE LANTER and BETH are racing across the desert astride the horse. BETH looks deeply unhappy.

BETH

This isn't the way we came!

JOE LANTER

I know, I want to show you something.

BETH

UM, OK?

We pull back as they race off in a cloud of orange dust.

EXT. CLIFFSIDE - MID-MORNING.

JOE LANTER slows the horse down as they arrive at the edge of town, Ernie's pub, and the train station.

BETH

Yesterday I saw a kangaroo out here, but after being steamrolled by them, it's not as exciting.

JOE LANTER

Your elbows look better.

BETH

That ointment worked like magic.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

Who knows, maybe it was. [Raises eyebrows excitedly.]

JOE LANTER ties his horse up to a hitching post, then sets off away from town, keeping his eye on the ground.

BETH

Doubt it, the only magic out here is when the sun goes down, taking the heat with it!

JOE LANTER

That's not true- OK, stop right there.

BETH

Um, OK?

JOE LANTER points out across the vast desert.

JOE LANTER

See that?

BETH

Yep, looks exactly like the miles of outback behind me.

JOE LANTER

Want to see some magic?

BETH

Does it involve water?

JOE LANTER

Yes. Close your eyes- go on, it's ok.

[BETH hesitantly closes her eyes.]

Now, take two steps forward.

[Without hesitation, BETH steps forward.]

OK, open up.

BETH opens her eyes, which widen after a moment.

BETH

Huh. Magic.

AARON WARE

She's now looking out across a small, quaint country town, with fresh, green grass, a main street, and even a school.

JOE LANTER

Thought you might like the view- it's all perspective around here. Gotta keep your eye out, just never know.

They move closer to the ledge, and sit down on a rock. BETH closes her eyes, and breathes in deeply.

TOM LANTER

How do you feel?

BETH

On top of the world.

BETH keeps her eyes closed. JOE LANTER can't help but watch her breathe in and out.

JOE LANTER

It's not Diddy-ya, by the way.

BETH

[Opens one eye.] Pardon me?

JOE LANTER

It's Did ya bring ya grog along- as in beer. It's not the town's name, it's just a traditional Aussie greeting.

BETH

[Opens both eyes.] Oh, now I feel silly.

JOE LANTER

Don't. Truth be told, up here doesn't really have a name. But that's Glendambo down there, where we grew up.

BETH

So why didn't we go there for your gasket-thing?

JOE LANTER

Because in Dambo, they take money.

BETH

Oh- money. The cause of this whole problem.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOE LANTER

It couldn't have been that bad, surely?

BETH

I don't want to talk about it. I shouldn't have even mentioned it.

JOE LANTER

Not healthy to keep bottled up.

BETH

Says the man who avoids society!

JOE LANTER

I'm just saying, you never lost your cool- whatever they said to you, it'll pass.

BETH

That's great and all, but in my industry, things only pass if those with the cheques say it can. See: money.

JOE LANTER

So, what choices do you have? Either do as they say, or suck it up, Princess.

BETH

Princess? That's a bit sexist!

JOE LANTER

You arrived here with the cleanest fingernails I've ever seen in my life, your hair smells like strawberry, you have fifty-one suitcases, an entourage, and you live in the Big Apple- penthouse apartment, no doubt.

BETH

None of that makes me a Princess!

JOE LANTER

It's just an expression.

BETH

An outdated one!

AARON WARE

JOE LANTER

Look around, everything's outdated here!

BETH

Yeah, and how's that working out for you?

JOE LANTER

Whoa- come off it, you city folk always think you know what's best for us out here. That's why I don't go down to the valley.

BETH

You really think it's better out here? Surrounded by creepy old drunks with Baywatch fetishes!

JOE LANTER

Princess Hoity-Toity much? No wonder Tommy hates it over there. Not everyone's like you, your majesty.

BETH

You know what, I think we'll just pack up and catch the train out tomorrow.

BETH storms off towards the horse.

JOE LANTER

Yeah, I think that's a good idea! [Follows her.]

BOTH stumble and trip on the rough, uneven ground as they argue.

BETH

SO DO I! Take me back to the farm, my nails are getting dirty out here!

JOE LANTER

Have fun getting ya royal pumpkin to the station, Cinderella!

BETH

WE'LL WALK!

JOE LANTER

YOU'LL GET EATEN!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

GOOD! WELL AT LEAST THERE WON'T BE ANY BAYWATCH OR LANTER BROTHERS IN THERE!

BETH attempts to jump up on the horse, but can't. JOE approaches her to help, and after some tense awkwardness, she finally lets him lift her up.

INT. COTTAGE LOUNGE - MIDDAY.

JOE LANTER'S LOUNGE is now consumed by BETH'S work. The coffee table has become a desk with laptop, pens, contracts, at least thirty headshots, and a tower of scripts fifty-high. CHARLENE enters from the kitchen, with an empty mug in her hand. She places the mug down, then slips the pens inside it. On the armchair, LUCA has set up a large drawing tray using a discarded door. A mug also sits on his makeshift table, filled with coloured pencils and markers. LUCA has his head down, focussing deeply on an extravagant costume for a ballet. BETH bursts in the door:

BETH

Well at least something good came of this, I SAW A KOALA!

LUCA AND CHARLENE

YOU DID?!

BETH

Yeah, a drunk old man with a donation bucket- pack up, we're getting out of here tomorrow morning.

LUCA

But-

BETH

No buts, I'm not spending another minute here.

CHARLENE

I've just set up your office!

BETH

Well, as JOSEPH here would say "Suck it up, Princess", we're leaving before dawn.

LUCA AND CHARLENE

BEFORE DAWN?!

JOE LANTER storms into the house.

JOE LANTER

C'mon Beth, don't do this- you came all the way out here.

LUCA

Whoa. Drama.

LUCA sits up attentively whilst CHARLENE looks mortified.

BETH

It's over. I'll tell Tom he's free of his contract.

CHARLENE

[Happy.] Does that mean I'll be home by Christmas?!

LUCA

[Sad.] Does that mean I'll be single by Christmas?!

BETH

Come off it, I don't need any more stress. Mom's upset, the agency wants to fire me. We don't fit in here.

CHARLENE AND LUCA

FIRE YOU?!

BETH

'Coz I won't tell them where he is.

CHARLENE

So there was a phone there?!

CHARLENE leaps up.

BETH

Yeah- but trust me, you don't want to go there.

CHARLENE

Yes I do! I haven't been able to speak to Grant in days!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

It was a thirty-minute horse ride, Charl, do you even know how to ride a horse?!

CHARLENE

I'll walk.

BETH AND JOE LANTER

You'll die out there!

CHARLENE

I don't care, I miss Grant!

CHARLENE snatches up her backpack, and rushes out of the door. BETH looks at LUCA with a concerned expression.

LUCA

Do NOT ask me to follow her!

EXT. DIRT ROAD - MIDDAY.

CHARLENE struggles to rush up the road. Behind her, the River-Deep Cattle Station is barely visible. She's bright red, dripping in sweat, and hunched over. She takes a tiny swig of her water. Spotting a large boulder, she stumbles over to it, and checks her phone in the shade. The time says "Twelve-Thirty".
SOUND: 'BEEP-BEEP-BEEP!'

CHARLENE

[Gasps.] RECEPTION!

With a sudden burst of energy, she leaps upright, instantly placing the phone to her ear.

CHARLENE

Grant? Grant? Is that you? Oh baby, I miss you!

EXT. FARM FIELDS - SAME TIME.

AARON WARE

NGAIIRE is riding around on a horse while TOM LANTER drags a large sack of food across the rough ground.

NGAIIRE looks up, and spots BETH rushing across the field.

NGAIIRE

She's coming.

TOM LANTER

Brace yourself.

BETH

You're free.

TOM LANTER

Come again?

BETH

We're leaving tomorrow, you're free.

TOM LANTER

After all that?

BETH

After all that. I'll make sure they don't find you.

TOM LANTER

Even if they send me scripts, I can always just shred 'em, y'know?

BETH

But you can't shred lawyers. Really sorry it turned out like this. You deserve to be happy.

BETH turns and begins to leave.

TOM LANTER

What about Luca?

NGAIIRE

Oi.

BETH

He can stay if he wants- but I highly doubt he will.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

NGAIIRE

Hey, guys-

TOM LANTER

I think I like him.

BETH

You hardly know him.

NGAIIRE

OI, YOU MOB- LOOK!

NGAIIRE points to the road. Behind the fence, CHARLENE can be seen stumbling towards the driveway- before falling flat on her face and disappearing out of view.

Instinctively, NGAIIRE motions the reigns towards the road, racing off on horseback to collect CHARLENE.

BETH

We told her not to go!

TOM LANTER

I'll get some water- go get Joe.

BETH (V.O.)

Great. That's the last person I need to see right now.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM - DAY.

NGAIIRE bursts through the door with a faintly-awake CHARLENE in her arms.

TOM LANTER stands at the ready, with two buckets of water, each with ice floating on top.

NGAIIRE

Good- wash her down- where's Joe?

TOM LANTER

I told Bryant to get him.

BETH

Why does he need to know?

AARON WARE

LUCA

Oh my goodness! Will she die?!

The light in the room begins to darken.

TOM LANTER

No, she's just overheated.

CHARLENE (WOOZILY)

I'm fine, really, look I made cheese dance [Giggles.]

BETH

Well, can't get any worse than this.

SOUND: 'ROARING THUNDER!'

LUCA

You had to say that, didn't you?!

EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY.

A dark, vicious storm has hit the outback.

We pan from left-to-right: BETH, LUCA, TOM, NGAIIRE, and JOE sit on the front porch, each with a beer in their hands.

BETH

Lucky we didn't leave right away.

LUCA

Told you we should stay the whole week.

BETH

This isn't a sign.

LUCA

Isn't it?

TOM LANTER

Nothing's making you leave, babe.

LUCA

I'm not flying back alone! I can't think of anything worse than seventy hours on a plane with just my thoughts!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH

I'm sorry, Luc'!

JOE LANTER

No, I'm sorry.

BETH

WOW! Look at that rain, comes down on you really hard when you least expect it.

JOE LANTER

I said I was sorry!

TOM LANTER

C'mon you two, or I'll get the hose!

BETH AND JOE

SHUT UP!

We watch the ferocious storm momentarily, before fading out.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN.

INT. BEDROOM - EVENING.

BETH stands over NGAIIRE's bed, re-packing her suitcases. The room is dim, lit by a single lamp emitting a soft golden light.

BETH

Can you pass me that charger, please?

LUCA hands BETH a laptop charger, wrapped up with a hair-tie.

LUCA

I should check on Charl.

BETH

That's sweet, I'm glad to see you two getting along.

LUCA

Don't go that far- it's only while she's asleep.

BETH chuckles as LUCA exits.

JOE LANTER appears in the doorway, and knocks.

BETH

Not a good time for a fight.

JOE LANTER

I don't want to fight.

BETH

Nor an apology.

TOM LANTER

I just wanted to let you know there's two torches on the porch, just leave them at the station- or keep them, no skin off my nose.

BETH

[Eyes down] Okay, thank you.

JOE LANTER opens his mouth to speak, but decides against it. Seconds later, LUCA races back in.

LUCA

SHE'S AWAKE!

INT. COTTAGE LOUNGE - EVENING.

CHARLENE sits awake on the couch, looking rather pale and tired. NGAIIRE is kneeling on the floor beside her, with a wet towel, and a cold glass of iced water at the ready.

BETH

Thank goodness you're awake, I didn't want to have to leave without you!

CHARLENE

Oh, I can't leave right now, I feel rancid.

LUCA

You look it.

CHARLENE pretends not to hear LUCA, whilst BETH shoots him a disapproving look.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

CHARLENE

I could have sworn I spoke to Grant- is he here?

BETH

No, you were hallucinating.

CHARLENE sinks down in her seat.

CHARLENE

I'm so hungry.

NGAIIRE

Get some rockmelon in ya- that'll hit ya spot.

NGAIIRE rushes off to the kitchen.

CHARLENE

I'm sorry.

BETH

Don't be, you didn't do anything wrong!

CHARLENE

I regret it already.

LUCA holds up CHARLENE's half-empty bottle of water.

LUCA

What? Regret nearly dying instead of drinking your water?

EXT. BARN YARD - NIGHT.

JOE LANTER continues to work on the broken-down Ute, surrounded by muddy puddles after the rain.

BETH (V.O.)

It was never in my five year plan to visit Australia- let alone the middle of nowhere. Leaving is the best thing for everybody- and I mean everybody.

[She watches JOE wipe his brow, and sigh]
Especially Joe.

JOE LANTER notices BETH, unsure what to do, he smiles and waves at her.

She doesn't smile back. Instead, BETH turns, and re-enters the cottage quietly.

INT. COTTAGE - NIGHT.

BETH lays wide awake, listening to the soft pitter-patter of rain hitting the window.

She rolls over, but something makes her sit up again.

SOUND: 'THUNDEROUS RUMBLING.'

BETH

[Mutters.] Great, have to walk in that.

But the thunderous rumbling continues.

A flash of lightning sparks up- but also doesn't stop.

BETH sits up in bed- the sound suddenly sounding terribly familiar.

BETH

UH... OH... [Shouts.] LUCA! TOM! TOOMMMM!

BETH races out of the room.

LUCA and TOM appear in the hallway.

SOUND: 'Thunderous rumbling growing louder- multiplying.'

BETH

THEY KNOW YOU'RE HERE!

BETH races out the front, just in time for a fourth helicopter to arrive above the farm.

Looking up at the driveway, she spots at least six news vans pulling up to the gate.

Numerous journalists immediately hop out, followed by eager cameramen.

BETH

Stay inside, I'll handle this.

BETH walks out across the muddy yard, lit by four spotlights from the choppers above.

At least twelve journalists aggressively shove their microphones in her face.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

JOURNALIST #1

Is Tom Lanter here? Who are you?

JOURNALIST #2

Are you his secret wife? Are there any kids?

JOURNALIST #1

Is he gay?

JOURNALIST #3

Are the rumours true- he married his sister?

BETH

TOM DOESN'T HAVE A SISTER, YOU INSUFFERABLE VULTURES! GO AWAY BEFORE WE UNLEASH THE DINGOES!

JOURNALIST #4

Are you still his agent, Ms. Bryant? What can you tell us about his [FlixNet] deal?!

BETH turns around, spotting CHARLENE standing on the porch, looking rather pleased with her arms crossed across her chest.

BETH

You.

[BETH moves towards CHARLENE for a moment, before turning back, calmly.]

JOURNALIST #1

How did you find him out here?!

BETH

Okay-OKAY, stand back- if you all shut up, I'll explain.

[Shoots CHARLENE a 'knowing' look.]

Mr. Lanter is gay. There'll be no further questions. Mind your own business for a change- IT'S ALMOST CHRISTMAS, GO HOME!

BETH turns and heads towards the house quickly.

CHARLENE stands frozen on the spot.

NGAIIRE, who stands beside CHARLENE, reads the situation and takes a step away from the TRAITOR.

AARON WARE

CHARLENE

Looks like that office is now mi-

BETH

Go. With them. Now.

CHARLENE

Fine. Good. I'll grab my stuff.

As CHARLENE turns to enter the cottage, BETH grabs hold of her arm, and leans in closely, whispering:

BETH

Everything you have, you have because of me. Even that office... Capiche?

As BETH enters the house, NGAIIRE pretends to walk inside, but ultimately bumps into CHARLENE forcefully, knocking her off the porch, and into a muddy puddle; while her phone lands- then sinks- into an even deeper, muddier puddle.

Several JOURNALISTS rush forward in an attempt to catch an interview with the newly-muddied CHARLENE.

TOM LANTER steps out of the cottage, attracting their attention.

TOM LANTER

I'll answer one question each, then leave.

[EVERY JOURNALIST thrusts out their microphone and asks their question at the same time.]

Yeah, Nahhh- [Smiles widely.] Just joshin' ya! Now, get outta here before I sic the dogs onto you!

TOM smiles, turns on his heels, and re-enters the house.

BETH, meanwhile, exits the cottage, tossing CHARLENE's suitcases and carry-ons in a large puddle next to the journalists- showering them all with muddy water.

INT. COTTAGE LOUNGE - EARLY MORNING.

BETH sits on the lounge room floor, with the script suitcase wide open. She's deep into a screenplay, but looks rather unimpressed- scoffing every few lines.

SOUND: 'Creaking Floor Boards.'

Looking up, she finds TOM LANTER entering the room.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER

Any good?

BETH holds up the script.

TOM LANTER

Strewth?! 'Mothballs For Mary' - by Grant Jackson?

BETH

I threw this out a week ago! That's why she sold you out- I'm so sorry. It's all my fault.

TOM kneels down, takes the script out of BETH's hands, and begins reading it out-loud:

TOM LANTER

"Exterior, Restaurant, Day- Mary looks up Adonis- ADONIS?! Strewth! With lust in her eyes: 'Why don't you show me how big a don is?'" - Nope, crikey! I'm out.

BETH

I know right?! Don't read on, it'll just ruin Christmas for you.

TOM LANTER laughs.

TOM LANTER

So... stay?

BETH

What is it you say? Yeah, nah? I miss home, I miss the snow! Christmas in the Outback is just so-

TOM LANTER

Hot?

BETH

Yes. So hot that it should be illegal! As soon as I get home, I'm going to light a fire, roast some s'mores, then make a snow woman.

TOM LANTER

Do you wanna build a rock man?

AARON WARE

BETH

Cute. When we get home, I'll make sure Luca puts a dollar in the pun jar for you.

TOM LANTER looks down disappointingly.

TOM LANTER

Make sure he writes to me?

BETH

How will he get it, Kanga-post?

TOM LANTER

Very funny- guess I didn't give it that much thought.

BETH

Do you ever?

TOM LANTER

Do you? You came all the way out here on a whim.

BETH

Cheeky. You're lucky I'm not your agent anymore!

TOM leans forward, hugging BETH tightly.

For a moment, she doesn't know how to respond, before a photo of JOE LANTER in his Army uniform catches her eye, causing BETH to lean in and return the hug.

TOM LANTER

Thank you for freeing me, I knew you would.

BETH

Pardon me?

TOM LANTER stands up with a smile on his face.

TOM LANTER

Why do you think they gave you my contract?

BETH

Sexism? Frustrated with you?

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

TOM LANTER

Nah, the opposite- I didn't feel safe with them. I knew you'd understand what was happening to me. I couldn't exactly tell them that though, could I?

BETH

Suppose not. Glad I can help, even if it led me to Creepy Crawly Land.

TOM LANTER

Yeah, funny how things snowball.

[TOM LANTER places his hand on BETH's shoulder, then rises to his feet.]

I'm gonna get the cows and chooks done, give us a shout when you're leaving? I wanna say goodbye to Luca.

BETH smiles at him and nods.

EXT. FARM YARD - EARLY MORNING.

Merely an hour later, BETH stands outbalanced in the driveway, loaded up with her suitcases and carry-ons. She's saying goodbye to NGAIIRE whilst LUCA is passionately saying goodbye to TOM LANTER underneath a Christmas wreath which hangs above the porch awning.

NGAIIRE

'Nother coldie before you leave?

BETH

No thanks- I've had more beer in two days than I've ever had in my life!

NGAIIRE

Oh, well, in that case?

[NGAIIRE looks up at the house]

Wait right there!

LUCA finally breaks away from TOM LANTER- both regretting the decision.

LUCA

Feels lighter without Charlene.

AARON WARE

BETH

That's the last name I want to hear right now.

LUCA

We ready?

BETH

Is your brother not going to say goodbye?

TOM LANTER shrugs.

TOM LANTER

Never met anyone more stubborn than Joey.

BETH

Funny that, he says the same thing about you.

LUCA

We better go, the longer I stay, the harder it's getting.

TOM LANTER grabs hold of LUCA's hand.

BETH

But Ngaiire-

TOM LANTER

She's just grabbing a beer for you- I'll tell her you had to go- quick, before she returns.

BETH quickly hugs TOM LANTER, while LUCA sneaks in one last kiss, before the two AMERICANS begin to walk up the driveway.

BETH

You're right, it does feel lighter.

We move in close on BETH, whose blank look starts to turn to devastation. Behind her, the lights on the house suddenly go out, unnoticed by both BETH and LUCA. Until, suddenly...

SOUND: 'Sleigh Bells.'

NGAIIRE

OI! YOU MOB!

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

We see NGAIIRE in the moonlight, sitting on the roof of the cottage, next to a large, dark object.
TOM LANTER has disappeared inside the cottage.

BETH

NGAIIRE! Get down, that place is a hundred years old!

But something happens.

Bright, white flood lights suddenly hit the yard as BETH briskly moves towards the cottage in a slight panic for her new friend. She tries looking up at NGAIIRE, but is blinded by the lights.

MUSIC: (A song about SNOW begins to play extremely loudly.)

The cottage door cracks open.

BETH tries to see who has exited, but tiny white specks falling to the ground catch her off guard.

Looking around, it's snowing.

IN THE OUTBACK.

BETH gasps, LUCA squeals and claps with joy.

JOE LANTER steps off the porch, and into the papery snow.

BETH

You-

JOE LANTER

[Shrugs.] You said you missed the snow.

BETH

I told Tom that.

JOE LANTER

These walls are thin. I just-

But before he can say anything else, BETH leans forward, and passionately kisses JOE LANTER.

NGAIIRE

DEADLY, AYE LUCA?! WOO-HOO-HOOOOOO! WOO-HOO-HOOOO!

But LUCA doesn't respond- he rushes forward, leaping onto TOM LANTER, and almost knocking the movie star to the ground.

We pull back, spotting NGAIIRE throwing movie scripts into a wood chipper, one-by-one as fake snow filters across the new-found lovers.

FADE OUT:

BLACK SCREEN.

The song about 'SNOW' begins to fade out.

BETH (VOICE-OVER)

What was I saying? Oh, yeah- it never was in my five-year plan to end up in the Australian outback. At all. Not even driving through. And certainly not at Christmas.

FADE IN:

EXT. WINDOW-LOOKING-IN. - DAY.

Looking in through a snow-covered window of a neat, freshly renovated house- as evidenced by paint cans, a ladder, blue tarp, and a half-finished wall.

We focus on a fully decorated, green Christmas tree, under which at least twenty-five wrapped-and-ribboned presents sit.

TITLES: 'FIVE YEARS LATER'

BETH (V.O.)

I never did hear from Charlene again- thankfully. Nor the agency- also thankfully. Not that I really give a hoot-

A heavily-pregnant BETH approaches the tree with an Angel as we switch to an INT. mid-shot.

INT. COTTAGE LOUNGE - DAY.

Reaching up on her tippy-toes, she struggles to reach the top. JOE LANTER moves into the shot, helping his wife (as evidenced by a wedding photo) place the ornament on top.

BETH kisses JOE as her narration continues, the camera begins to slowly pull back.

BETH (V.O.)

Luca and Tom ended up renovating one of the cattle sheds, and made a nice little nest for themselves- the chickens weren't happy of course- but at least they got used to me.

We finally see that they are still on the farm.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OUTBACK

BETH (V.O.)

Because as it turned out, even with spiders in the loo, I was a good fit for this place after all.

INT. DINNER TABLE - EVENING.

LUCA, TOM, and NGAIIRE are cooing over a BABY in a Christmas being fed by BETH LANTER, while JOE LANTER places a steaming-hot roast chook into the centre of the table.

BETH (V.O.)

So now it's in my fifty year plan to make sure I spend every Christmas in the Outback. With everybody I love.

MRS. BRYANT sweeps into the room, wielding two bottles of wine.

MRS. BRYANT

WHO STOLE MY CORKSCREW AGAIN!?

BETH (V.O.)

And I mean EVERYBODY.

We switch to a wide-shot of the farm.

The LANTER-BRYANT FAMILY, now with three YOUNG CHILDREN are dancing around a bonfire, as fake snow falls over the yard. TILLIE, KOALA MAN, OLD MAN GILBO, ROSIE, RAY, ERNIE, a now-pregnant NGAIIRE- plus various others- are also joining in the party as KOALA MAN grabs MRS. BRYANT by the hand, and swings her around for a dance.

Pull back, fade out.

THE END.