

# DIRT CREEK

"A heart-wrenching mystery . . .

A stellar debut."

—JANE HARPER, bestselling  
author of *The Survivors*

A NOVEL

HAYLEY  
SCRIVENOR

## **About *Dirt Creek***

*My best friend wore her name, Esther, like a queen wearing her crown at a jaunty angle. We were twelve years old when she went missing.*

On a sweltering Friday afternoon in Durton, best friends Ronnie and Esther leave school together. Esther never makes it home.

Ronnie's going to find her, she has a plan. Lewis will help. Their friend can't be gone, Ronnie won't believe it.

Detective Sergeant Sarah Michaels can believe it, she has seen what people are capable of. She knows more than anyone how, in a moment of weakness, a person can be driven to do something they never thought possible.

Lewis can believe it too. But he can't reveal what he saw that afternoon at the creek without exposing his own secret.

Five days later, Esther's buried body is discovered.

*What do we owe the girl who isn't there?*

Character-rich and propulsive, with a breathtakingly original use of voice and revolving points of view, Hayley Scrivenor delves under the surface, where no one can hide. With emotional depth and sensitivity, this stunning debut shows us how much each person matters in a community that is at once falling apart and coming together.

*Esther will always be a Dirt Creek child, as we are its children, still.*

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*To my mother, Danina. First, and always.  
And for Daniel, for telling me I should.  
To all of us, and our disasters.  
And for those who don't survive.*

# WE

Tuesday, 4 December 2001

We were waiting for things to converge.

It was still dark. Even if the sun had been up, we would not have needed to look around us. It was the same dirt, lazily punctuated here and there by dry grass, the same rust-ringed cement water trough close to the fence line, the same white cypress pines that dotted our own families' properties. A landscape as familiar to us as the backs of our own eyelids. And we knew we'd found the spot again by the smell. It pushed its way into our nose and throat like a rod of twisted tissue rammed so far it hurt. It was the smell of dead lambs left to rot in the sun.

The stitches in the man's arm tugged as he turned the steering wheel of his ute. From his vantage point in the driver's seat, the main house was just a smudge in the distance. The sun was coming up now. He was checking the fences after his time away from the farm. If he'd driven just a metre closer to the fence line – a metre was nothing on a property like his – he never would have found it. But the ute's cab tipped slightly as he drove over soft ground. The man stood in the space created by the open front door of the vehicle, and the smell hit him the same way it had hit us. He walked around the car and plucked a shovel from the tray. Us kids heard and saw it all. The man's laboured breathing was interrupted only by the occasional *shink* of the shovel in soil. We watched his face as he winced in pain. We took note of the angle of his shoulders as the blade hit something that did not give, something that was not dirt, or a root. We saw him crouch to scoop away earth with one hand, running his fingers along shiny black plastic. It was four days since anyone, including us, had seen Esther Bianchi.

The sun was properly up now. Sweat dripped into his eyes, trickled down his spine. We saw him blink. He stood back, used the shovel to sweep dirt from the edge of the

hole. There were only five or six inches of earth on top of the package, which seemed to be much longer than it was wide. The plastic was slippery in his hands.

Later, the police would admonish the man for moving the body. As soon as he suspected what he had found, he should have called someone.

'And what if it was just a calf or somethin', and I called you and you came for nothing?' the man would say, eyebrows pulled high into his forehead.

*Why would a calf be wrapped in black plastic?* the female detective would think but not say.

The man yanked the package with his good arm. The earth gave the parcel up and he fell back, his leg bending awkwardly beneath him. He scrambled away, his stitches pulling, pain unfurling like a flower. He stood and looked towards the distant house before stepping forward. The man unwrapped the plastic, ignoring the pain in his arm, retching at the smell. When the parcel's contents came into view, the man turned away, hand held to his mouth.

What does it all mean? For now, we can only tell you that we were there, that we watched blood seep through the man's sleeve as he walked away from Esther Bianchi's body and looked around him, as if the answer might be found somewhere in the open field.

# RONNIE

Friday, 30 November 2001

Once, Esther tickled me so much that I wet myself. We were at her house, in her backyard.

'Stop, Esther!' I said, laughing through pain.

'No mercy!' she cried.

She was the villain when we played, the person who moved the story forward while I fussed over details. We were eight years old.

I'd fallen to the ground in a patch of dirt. Esther was on top of me. So many years ago now, but I remember the way the laughing-pain swelled as she dug her fingers into the soft dough of my belly. It went on and on, like when you jump in the deep end of the pool and you're waiting, waiting to reach the bottom so you can use it to push up to the surface. I looked down, saw the wetness spreading across my sports shorts before I felt it. Esther saw it too. I shuffled away from her on my bum. I was too big to be weeing my pants.

I'll never forget what she did then. She stood and took a step back. I waited for her to scream or make fun of me. Instead, I saw amber liquid trickle past the hem of her netball skirt and down the inside of her long leg. The white skin was bruised: dusted with little purple and brown marks like the rump of a dappled horse. Her white school socks bloomed with a stain the colour of her kitchen curtains – a buttercup yellow.

She grinned and grabbed the hose, turning the tap on full bore and weaponising the stream with her fingers. We wrestled for it, squealing. My embarrassment washed away, dust swirling on the surface of the spreading pool of water before it soaked into the earth.

Esther's mum, Constance, made us strip at the back door, shaking her head. She gave me one of her shirts to wear home. It was so long it reached past my knees, like a dress, and I wore no underwear beneath it. Constance



hadn't thought to lend me some of Esther's, and I hadn't asked. I remember the shuddering thrill as I sat in the back of Esther's dad's ute, nothing between the seat and me but thin white cotton. I always loved being driven home by Steven, as he insisted I call him. When I was alone with him, I could pretend I was his daughter and we were going somewhere. He never talked that much but he seemed to enjoy listening to me. I'd have done almost anything to make him laugh. I could never tell my mum how much I liked him; she always seized up when I asked who my father was. It was something else Esther had pulled off that I couldn't – a father – but I didn't begrudge her. She deserved a dad who was strong, who'd lift her up and spin her around. A dad who loved her like I did.

My best friend wore her name, *Esther*, like a queen wearing her crown at a jaunty angle. She only ever called me Ronnie. I didn't fit the grown-woman name I'd been given. The glamorous syllables of *Ve-ron-i-ca* had nothing to do with me. We were twelve years old when she went missing. I was bossy and solid, shorter than Esther but determined to dictate the terms of our play, the kid who would assign roles when we pretended to be Power Rangers at recess, stomping off in a huff if other kids had their own ideas. But a lot of the time I wasn't getting my own way with Esther so much as saying out loud what she'd already decided she wanted to do. She would hurtle into a room, tongue sticking out, and leap so she landed with her knees bent and legs wide apart. She'd roll her eyes into the back of her head and say, 'Rah!' at peak volume, before streaking out of the room again. I needed things from people, and Esther didn't, not really, and I think that's why I was drawn to her.

It was no surprise Esther's mum thought I was a bad influence. But anything cheeky, and everything funny, started with Esther. Sometimes I only had to look at her – from the corner of my eye at an assembly, in the changing room of the local pool, from across the low tables we had in kindergarten – and I would start laughing. We were

always laughing, and I was always running behind, trying to make it look like I was the leader.

That last Friday afternoon in November, the day Esther went missing, I was supposed to be doing my homework at the desk in my bedroom. We finished early on Fridays – at two thirty – and Mum liked me to get all my work done before the weekend. Everyone in the class had to make a poster about a South American country, and I'd managed to nab Peru. It had been a close thing: one of the Addison twins had gone for it, even though everybody *knew* how much I loved llamas. I had pictures of them glued to all my schoolbooks. Now, I couldn't seem to get my pencil drawing of a llama right. He looked cross-eyed and his legs were stumpy-in-a-bad-way, though I'd copied as carefully as I could from the old issues of *National Geographic* Mum had brought home from the newsagency next to her work. Our fat orange cat, Flea, wound himself through the legs of my chair. I slipped the magazine under the poster paper, but it was too thick; I couldn't trace the line of the llama with my pencil. Giving up, I headed to the kitchen for a packet of noodles.

Flea darted out from under the chair, bending around the door as I opened it. He surged ahead in the hallway and made it to the kitchen before I did. His full name was Mr Mistoffelees, but 'Flea' had been as close as I could get when I was small, and it had stuck. Mum was standing by the wall-mounted phone in the kitchen, the white handset to her ear, her back turned. I walked towards her in bare feet and Flea pranced ahead, his head tilted back to look up at me.

'Did Esther leave school with you?' Mum asked, covering the phone with her hand.

'Yup.' I walked past her to the sink, took an upturned glass from the drying rack and filled it with water.

'Which way did you walk?'

'To the church.' How was I going to get the noodles out of the cupboard without Mum noticing?

'And then you split up?'

'Yeah.' Apples gleamed in the bowl on the kitchen counter. If I said I was hungry, Mum would tell me to have one. Groceries were expensive. Especially fresh fruit. Some days Mum existed on tea and Mint Slice biscuits, but she wanted me to eat 'properly'.

Mum was impatient, the phone still covered. 'Which way did she go?'

'Left. She always goes left at the church.' I drained the glass.

Mum gave me a long, steady look. 'Veronica Elizabeth Thompson, are you sure?'

I shifted on my feet. When I was smaller, I'd thought *Elizabeth* added after your name meant that you were in trouble. I'd used it on one of my cousins when he'd pinched an Easter egg from my basket at the big hunt we used to do at Pop's farm every year. Everyone had laughed at me.

I rinsed my glass. 'Definitely sure,' I said, reaching for a tea towel. I wiped the glass dry and walked towards the cupboard.

Mum let my words hang for a second, waiting for them to grow into the silence. She tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. My mum didn't even have a middle name. She was just Evelyn Thompson. For some reason, only the boys got middle names in her family. Her brother Peter's middle name was Reginald, which seemed like a punishment in itself. He was my favourite of Mum's siblings, and I'd been indignant on his behalf when I found out. Flea was rubbing against her leg, but Mum didn't even look down. On any other afternoon she'd have scooped him up, cooing to him that he was her *furry baby* and *four-legged child*. Or she'd have splayed her hand over her heart, pretending to die of shock at seeing me wash up after myself. Instead, she turned her whole body away and said something I couldn't hear into the receiver.

I put the glass away. When I sidled back to my room, there was a packet of Mamee noodles tucked in the waistband of my underwear.

It's impossible now to unlink my memories of Esther from each other. Like train cars with their couplings soldered together, each memory of her brings with it another one, surging forward, on and on in a long, clattering line. Since we were small, she'd been there, as important and unremarked as the house you grow up in. Esther's dad was born in Durton, like my mum, but had no family in common with my family, the Thompsons – always easy to identify thanks to our red hair. She wasn't related to the Rutherfords, who were wealthy, or the McFarlanes, who were stingy. There were a few Bianchis around – known for being Italian, mainly – but they were older, and their kids had all left Durton already. Esther and I were both only children, which was unusual at our school. Even Lewis was odd because he only had one brother. I enjoyed being an only child much more than Esther did. *Wouldn't you like a little brother or sister?* Mum had asked me once. 'No thank you,' I'd said. *Like you were politely declining a cucumber sandwich,* Mum recalled with a laugh.

Esther would have loved to have had four or five brothers and sisters, or at least a bunch of cousins, like I did. (If she had, they could've walked her home that day.) All I needed, all I ever really wanted, was her.

Mum didn't say much through dinner, didn't even hassle me to eat my corn. Corn made me think of alien teeth. I was waiting to be excused from the table.

'Esther hasn't come home from school yet,' Mum said.

I'd already pushed back my chair. The sun was still up, but it was after six. Esther's mum must've been flipping out.

'Ronnie, are you sure she didn't say she was going to do anything, or go somewhere after school? Could she have decided to go to the pool, or for a walk?'

We'd gone to the pool the day before, but we never went on Fridays. That afternoon had been stinking; only an idiot would've walked anywhere they didn't have to. Besides, Esther's dad always went with us to the pool.

We'd walked out the gate with the flood of other year six

girls. What had Esther said to me before she headed off towards her house and I headed to mine? *Bye*, I guessed. Had she turned to wave after we left each other? Had I?

Esther had got out of playing netball that day because she'd forgotten her runners. She wasn't pleased like I would've been. She'd sat with her head resting on her hands, watching hungrily from the sidelines. As we'd gone our separate ways I'd made a mental note to try wearing *my* leather school shoes for the next Sports Day.

'She just went home.' My left foot kicked the wooden bar that ran under the table. 'Like always.' Mum seemed to be waiting for more detail. 'I waved at her, and she gave a little wave back.' As I said it, the detail solidified in my memory. The wave, faint but certain, like the lines of a traced drawing.

The upright lamp in the corner of the dining room came into focus. I knew what I could do with the llama drawing. I could hold the magazine and cardboard over the opening in the lamp. With light behind it, the image would come through the cardboard. It would look so good that people would think my poster was the best. My thoughts raced ahead, playing out possible conversations, finding the obstacles I'd have to manoeuvre around. If someone asked if it'd been traced, I'd have to come clean, but if I just said, 'I drew it by hand,' that wouldn't be lying, would it?

Mum didn't say anything. She nodded to indicate I could leave the table.

Some sort of panic should have taken hold when I was alone in my bedroom. I know it doesn't make sense. How do I explain why I was so unconcerned that no-one knew where my best friend was? That I sat there working on my assignment? All I can say is it felt like someone had said they were having trouble finding the ocean. It was obvious to me that they just weren't looking hard enough, or in the right places.

The phone rang in the kitchen, and after a short while Mum came in. 'We're going to go and see Mack. He wants to talk to you.'

I was writing *PERU* in large bubble letters in the middle of the cardboard. Bubble letters were my specialty.

'About Esther?' I asked.

I didn't want Mum to see me messing around with the lamp. I'd have to fix the llama on an afternoon when she was at work.

Mum smiled weakly. 'Yes, Bup. About Esther.'

Bup was my mum's nickname for me. Sometimes I called her Mucca. At certain times, like at the start of a long road trip – to visit my aunty Kath who lived in Victoria, maybe – she'd say, 'Look at us, Bup and Mucca, off on an adventure.'

Mum's jaw was all tensed up as we drove to the police station. A vein popped in her neck, like a wiry plastic rod had been inserted under her skin, made of the same stuff they made school skipping ropes with, stiff but bendy. I'd never been inside the police station and had only ever seen Officer Macintyre around town or when he came to the school to talk about stranger danger. My mum called him Mack. He lived next door to the station with his wife, Lacey, who jogged across and let us in when we arrived. We walked past the high desk and into a small kitchen. Lacey pulled a bottle of milk from a tiny fridge and poured some into a mug that said *COPS ARE TOPS*. She added five heaped spoonfuls of Milo and put the cup in the microwave. Someone at school had told me that Officer Macintyre and his wife couldn't have children because something was wrong with her. I looked her up and down as she handed me the cup. She was skinny, but so was my mum, and she had me.

Officer Macintyre walked into the room and sat down. 'Hi, Evelyn,' he said, nodding at my mum. 'Hello, Veronica.'

He smelled of sweat and cologne, and he needed a shave.

'It's just Ronnie,' I said.

'No worries, Ronnie,' he replied, leaning forward on his forearms and smiling at Mum. 'Can you start by telling me what you and Esther did this afternoon?' He said it like

when there's only one lamington left, and you want it, but if you reach for it someone will say that you're being greedy, so instead you ask casually: *Does anyone want this?*

He asked the same questions Mum had as I took salty-sweet sips from the Milo. I told him we had netball, that Esther hadn't played. That we'd split up at the church. She'd seemed normal. What I didn't, or couldn't, tell him was that Esther on a normal day still exuded a kind of magic, like she might do anything. She could curl her tongue, she could bend over and place the palm of her hand flat on the ground while keeping her legs straight, she could sing. And she never traced.

'Does Esther like sport?' he asked.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Is she in trouble?'

Officer Macintyre's eyes moved to Mum, her chair pushed all the way back out of my line of sight. 'No, Ronnie, Esther isn't in any trouble. Not at all.'

Out the front of the station afterwards, Mum put her arms around me and just kind of held me until it got boring and I coughed.

'Bup.' She said the word into the top of my head, hairs moving where her breath touched them. 'I want you to go to Uncle Peter's while I help search.'

'But I wanna come with you.'

I always found Esther when we played hide-and-seek, her dark head bobbing behind some tree, too impatient to stay hidden for long.

'The last thing I need is for you to wander off as well,' Mum said, smoothing my hair with her hand.

My uncle Peter met us at the front of his place. He was Mum's older brother and she liked him best; I could tell because he was the only person I knew who really, truly made her laugh, other than me. He smiled his lopsided smile – he'd been slammed into while playing footy in his twenties and the left side of his face drooped a little – and pulled her into a hug. When I was little he'd let me tug at his beard, a goatee that had some white hair in it now. He

was wearing a polo shirt emblazoned with the logo of the trucking company he worked for. He walked side by side with Mum to the front door. The red hair on his arms glowed in the sensor light that clicked on as we approached.

'It's just awful to think about, Pete,' she said.

He nodded. 'Shelly's gone over there.'

Mum had never really hit it off with Esther's mum, but Constance and my aunt Shelly were good friends. Esther spent a lot of time at my aunt and uncle's and she loved the chaos at their place. Esther had the knack of always being herself, unlike me. When I was there, I could tell my aunt Shelly thought I was sly, and when someone thinks that about you it becomes true. I'd feel myself slinking around the backyard, and when I snuck into the kitchen for a snack I always seemed to get caught. Not that Aunt Shelly cared, but I could just tell she thought I was a bit spoiled. It wasn't like that with my uncle. He laughed at my jokes. Once, he made me laugh so hard I farted, which made us both laugh harder, until neither of us could breathe, which was probably lucky because it smelled bad. Another time, he'd brought me back a hat from somewhere on his trucking route that made it look like a sheep was sleeping on your head. I'd worn it every day until Mum said it had got lost in the wash.

My uncle hugged me, tight.

The light was fading as we walked into my uncle's house. I expected any second to see Esther jump out from behind a fence, eyes rolled back in her head, tongue out, laughing.

She'd been missing for six hours.



# SARAH

Friday, 30 November 2001

Detective Sergeant Sarah Michaels pulled the unmarked white sedan to a stop next to a free petrol bowser. Her detective constable, Wayne Smith, was sleeping with his mouth open in the passenger seat. They were around seven hours west of Sydney. They'd been heading back there from another job when a call from their superior had come through. *You're going to be spending some more time in the country, Michaels!* Kinouac had announced. Sarah was just grateful they hadn't made it all the way home before they had to turn around again.

'How ya feeling, boss?' Smithy asked, rubbing his eyes as he stepped out of the passenger's side.

'Hot,' Sarah said, unscrewing the petrol cap.

She'd done the bulk of the driving, the right side of her body in full sun the whole time. Before leaving Sydney she'd taken off the bracelet Amira had given her, leaving it on the glass tray by the bed, and put on her mother's watch instead. That arm stung now, and was already going red.

When Smithy walked inside to pay for the fuel, Sarah took her chance and reached across the driver's seat to grab the vanilla air freshener dangling from the rear-view mirror, pulling on it until the string broke. She threw it in a dark plastic rubbish bin that stood beside a stagnant bucket of water and a well-worn squeegee. The fragrant sliver of foam had been giving her a headache. It made her think of Amira and her endless incense.

Moments later, Smithy stepped back out through the automatic doors of the petrol station, and Sarah walked around to the passenger side. They were only half an hour from their destination; Smithy could drive the rest of the way.

There was a thin woman with dark circles under her eyes pumping fuel at the opposite bowser. She wore a long, pill-

ridden cardigan despite the heat. A baby screamed in the back seat. The woman replaced the nozzle and looked over at Sarah. Sarah got the feeling that if she hadn't been there – not in uniform but still obviously a cop – the woman would have left the baby, door ajar, while she went in to pay.

Smithy lowered himself into the driver's seat and shot Sarah a glance. 'Cheer up, Sarge, it might not happen.'

Sarah hadn't realised that she was frowning but refused on principle to rearrange her expression. 'Eyes on the road, Constable.'

Smithy was a gum chewer. His sandy moustache twitched, and the smacking sound of the gum irritated Sarah more as a passenger than when she'd had the road to focus on. Any flavour had to be long gone. It was a relief when they spotted a faded WELCOME TO DURTON! sign and turned off the highway.

Smithy pulled up in front of the smallest cop shop Sarah had ever seen.

'Where'd the air freshener go?' he asked, looking at the rear-view mirror.

'Must've fallen down,' she said.

Smithy craned forward to look under the seat and Sarah got out of the car.

The local sergeant met them at the door and introduced himself as Mack, squinting as he talked. At first, he directed his comments at Smithy. Then Smithy made the formal introductions, including rank, and Sarah caught a flash of a smile stifled by moustache as Mack swivelled forty-five degrees to face her. At least Mack had the decency not to raise his eyebrows. She didn't imagine they had too many female officers out this way. Or maybe they took what they could get.

Mack was a compact, tanned man with a five o'clock shadow who'd followed protocol to the letter. Better than many of the local cops Sarah had worked with in her two years in Missing Persons. He'd gathered the info they'd need to get started. Mack's wife had stayed at the station,

making calls. Sarah met her on the way in. Lacey Macintyre was thin but sturdy. With her tan and white-blond hair she wouldn't have looked out of place in the stands of a polo match, until she opened her mouth and a broad country accent came out.

It was a myth that Missing Persons had to wait twenty-four hours to start searching, particularly for kids. Sometimes, Sarah would arrive just as the child had been found, asleep in a backyard cubby, or lying low at a friend's house. In those cases, she'd smile, shake the hands of the local officers, and file a slim report when she got back. Excluding custody disputes, most children not recovered in the first three hours were already dead. In this case, it had been more than four hours since the child was last seen. Mack handed over the incident log and Sarah tried to ignore the heat in her right arm as she flicked through it. Mack said he'd meet the two officers at the search site later and walked them back to their white Commodore.

The light had faded to a blue haze. Smithy rolled the windows down. The town was flat, brown, the suggestion of hills in the distance. They drove straight from the cop shop to the small fibro house where Esther Bianchi's parents would be waiting. In the light shining from the porch, Sarah could see they had a novelty letterbox: the outline of a palm tree sprouted from the box, the letters B-I-A-N-C-H-I just visible beneath the tree's silhouette.

There was one woman Sarah thought of whenever she found herself at a front door. Sarah had just moved into Missing Persons from Child Protection. The woman's seventeen-year-old daughter, Carla, had disappeared. A crowded kitchen, a collection of tea cosies. The mother told Sarah, 'When your child is gone, you look around the house, and there'll be things in it that make you sick. If you've wasted time collecting cat figurines, it feels so fucking *stupid*. You'll never be that person again.'

They never found Carla.

A woman watched them walk up the path from her spot

on the verandah. Sarah was grateful she'd remembered to shrug her jacket over her sweat-stained collared shirt. It was important to look the part.

Smithy made the introduction and the woman brought them inside.

'Steve's still out looking,' the woman said. 'Esther's father, I mean.'

There was the rumble of a car pulling in outside.

They passed a pair of gumboots with a pattern of daisies on the hallway floor; a man's high-vis jacket hung next to the door. The air conditioner wedged in the dining room window hummed, but the room was warm and close.

'Is she here?' a deep voice called from the front door.

A man in head-to-toe workwear appeared in the doorway. He was a little over six foot, tanned, dark features.

'Perfect timing,' Smithy said, looking at Sarah.

She nodded.

'Would you follow me, Mr Bianchi?' Smithy said.

The girl's father followed Smithy down the hall. Sarah caught the smell of the father's sweat, partly rank, slightly sweet – it reminded her of her own father, returning from a game of squash with one mate or another who was also in the force. She heard what sounded like a back door closing. Sarah would interview the mother, and it was always best if the parents couldn't hear each other. As the woman moved to sit, Sarah glanced down at her folder: *Constance Bianchi*. Sarah joined her at the dining table, which was covered in a green tablecloth that Constance kept bunching in her hand, over and over. The creases in the satiny fabric formed a circle the size of a baby's head.

Sarah asked to check the woman's ID.

The licence confirmed what the mousy roots suggested – the woman was not a natural blonde. There was something sharp about her face that hadn't made it into the photo, even if her cheeks were full and her face was puffy from crying. Smudged mascara ran under her large, dark eyes, which refused to settle on one thing. Her mouth and nose