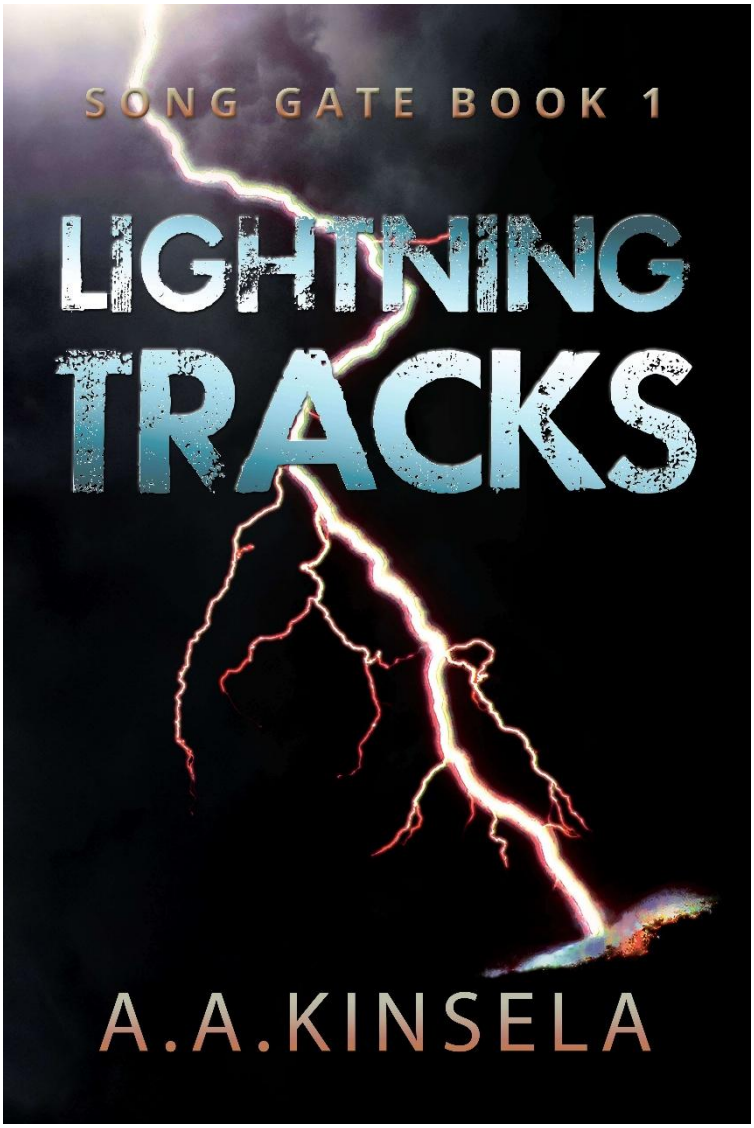
Lightning Tracks (Song Gate, #1)

A. A. Kinsela



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LIGHTNING TRACKS was a finalist in the 2018 Aurealis Awards – Best Fantasy Novel category.

Blurb

An assassin hunting a blood debt
An ancient land arising from legend
A feud between dreams and duty
...and a choice that will decide the fate of an entire civilisation

Sixteen-year-old Nick Williams' biggest problem is staying out of the principal's office – until an assassin murders his aunt and an estranged cousin drags him through a song gate to a war-torn land that shouldn't exist.

Hunted by a king who wants him dead, Nick's only hope for survival may be Cal, a deserting enemy soldier haunted by the massacre he was forced to commit, who is on his own desperate search for redemption.

Caught in a war where loyalty is a weapon, their greatest threat may not be the assassins on their trail, but the secrets they keep from each other.

But to save the people he loves, Nick must confront the thing he fears most-relinquish his dreams and claim the birthright he never wanted.

Review quotes

"*Lightning Tracks* takes the readers on an adventure in Australia's hidden depth ... With betrayals, tragedies, secrets, and battles, *Lightning Tracks* is an exciting and fascinating read for all teens especially for those who feel they are different."

"I was ... so engaged continuously and especially at the end. Kinsela maintains an ideal pace that keeps the story flowing naturally but not fast enough that the reader feels like things are being brushed over. Conflicts are raised and resolved, and new ones form in suspenseful and captivating ways while the longer story stretches out ... This story was full of delightful surprises."

"Terrific read! The further into the book I got, the harder it was to put down ... The characters are captivating. The story enthralling."

"Amazingly well-crafted fantasy that travels between two worlds. A.A. Kinsela has an imagination that will delight and captivate the reader."

"I was intending to save this book for my upcoming travels, but I started it early and couldn't put it down. It was finished before my departure date!"

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Content warning:

Lightning Tracks contains content that may not be suitable for all readers.

Although this is a work of fiction, I have drawn inspiration from ancient Mediterranean societies, many of which had views and practices we now consider outdated at best and inhumane at worst.

Within the pages of this book are depictions of violence and racism.

Please tread lightly if any of these distress you.

Sample internal pages

Lightning Tracks

Song Gate: Book One

A. A. Kinsela

Plainspeak Publishing

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The author acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which this book was written and published, the Wurundjeri, and pays respect to their people, culture, and Elders past and present.

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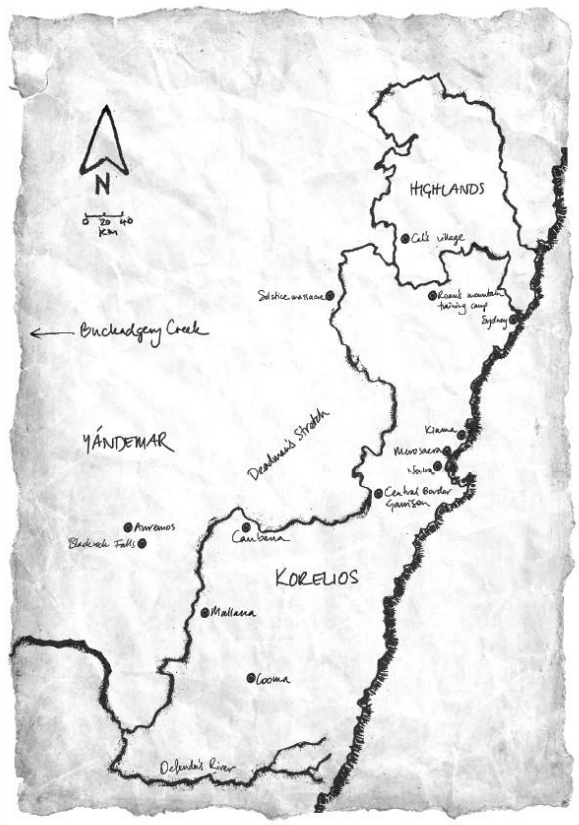
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Contents

Map VII

1. Suspension 1
2. Striker's Run 6
3. Wild lands 15
4. Solstice massacre 23
5. The border town 29
6. Questions and punishment 33
7. Escape plan 38
8. Desertion 45
9. The Auremos merchant 56
10. Joining the enemy 60
11. The lie of the land 70
12. Commander Julian 73
13. Priority target 76
14. Nallindéra 83
15. The Auremos vaults 91
16. Room with a view 95
17. Trial and tribulation 103
18. Valerius' book 111
19. The Arai oath 122
20. The training field 125
21. Roan's tracker 135
22. Maléya 139
23. Running the mountain 143
24. The test 152
25. Smoke 155
26. Blackmail 160
27. The governor's house 163
28. Cover blown 171
29. Cal's confession 178
30. Meeting at Blackrock Falls 186
31. Traitor 192
32. The amphitheatre 198
33. Julian's revenge 201
34. Home at last 209
35. Saving Miles 212
36. Initiation 221
37. The ultimatum 226
38. Forked lightning 230
39. The mark of royalty 238
40. The song gate map 243

Thanks to: 250



CHAPTER 1

Suspension

Nick's uppercut sent Brandon reeling. A left hook followed. He readied his arm to jab again but two of Brandon's mates sprang at him. They dragged Nick away, split his lip, tore his shirt, threw him to the ground, kicked his ribs. They would have done more if a swarm of teachers hadn't erupted from the staffroom.

Thirty minutes later, Nick lingered outside the principal's office. He'd long suspected that the polished bronze plaque on the door was deliberately glued just above eye level so that everyone had to look up in order to read the engraving: *Mrs Laura Cavendish, Principal*. Nick had seen this sign for the first time in Year Seven. He'd been shorter then, and more than a little daunted by the prospect of facing the school's figurehead, but now he was used to the visits.

Nick slapped the dirt off his shorts. When he licked his lips, he tasted blood. That was good. If he looked wounded, Mrs Cavendish might be more sympathetic.

He knocked, waited for the call of 'Enter!', and opened the door. Air conditioning breathed over him like a sigh from the Antarctic.

'Nicholas Williams. Why am I not surprised?'

He sat in one of the shabby chairs facing her desk and propped his elbows on the armrests. Mrs Cavendish studied him as if trying to determine where the streaks of dirt ended and his brown skin began. He realised then that his knuckles were grazed, and he tucked his hands under his armpits.

'Jewellery is not allowed at this school. Take it off.'

He glanced down. The top two buttons of his shirt had been ripped off and his necklace was showing. He picked at the leather knot till it loosened, then slipped the necklace into his pocket. When Mrs Cavendish frowned at the black tattoo on his chest, he folded the tattered remains of his collar together to cover the mark. No amount of blood, it would seem, was going to soothe her temper today.

'You promised me last December, Nick, that this reckless behaviour was not going to continue into Year Ten. Do you remember our conversation?'

Nick sighed. Mía was going to be so angry.

'Well? Do you?' Mrs Cavendish asked.

'Yeah.'

'Remind me what you said.'

'I said I'd think before I act.'

'And?'

'And I'd follow teachers' instructions.'

'And?'

'And I'd stay away from Brandon.'

'So what went wrong?'

Nick remembered how Brandon had shot him a vicious smile and said, 'I heard it's your birthday today, Nick. Why don't you get yourself a decent school uniform? I'm sure the op shop'd have a dress your size.'

Nick slammed his locker shut.

'Whoa,' Brandon said, backing up. 'Hit a nerve there, did I? Just trying to help. I mean, let's face it. You and your crazy aunt need all the charity you can get, since she can't even afford to buy you proper clothes. What'd she give you this year? Another homemade tattoo?'

Mrs Cavendish cleared her throat, cutting into Nick's thoughts. She tapped a long polished fingernail on the piece of paper that lay in front of her, her rings clinking. A gold mine hung off those arthritic fingers.

'It says here on the incident report that you and Brandon spoke to one another, and that you hit him first. Did he provoke you?'

Nick knew from experience that the longer he was silent, the worse the punishment, so he replied, 'He asked me what I got for my birthday.'

'It's your birthday today?'

'Yes. Sixteen.'

'Well, then. Happy birthday.' She didn't sound at all glad for him. 'What else did Brandon say?'

'Just the usual.'

'Remind me.'

'Does it even matter?'

She raised her eyebrows.

'Fine. He called my aunt crazy.'

'And that's why you retaliated?'

Nick wondered if it was a rhetorical question.

'Answer me, please,' she pressed.

'Of course that's why I retaliated! Geez!'

'*Don't* use that tone with me, young man.' Mrs Cavendish propped her glasses on the tip of her nose and scribbled something onto the incident report. 'You lost control, Nick, and Brandon needs stitches as a result. For that, I'm suspending you for five days.'

Nick ran his hands over his dreadlocks. Five days. The longest he'd ever got before this was three. Mía was going to bury him alive.

Mrs Cavendish opened a folder and dragged her index finger down a list of names and phone numbers.

'Miss, you're not going to call Mía right now, are you?'

'Of course I am. I have to inform her of your suspension.'

'But she doesn't speak much English. Can't I just tell her?'

Mrs Cavendish peered at him over the pink rim of her glasses. 'Her English is perfectly fine. In fact, you can tell her now, if you like. In this office.'

'No, I meant that I could—'

'I know what you meant, Nick. That you could tell her when you got home. The last time I trusted you to tell her something important, you conveniently forgot. Remember the meeting we scheduled last September to discuss your behaviour?'

Nick grunted. Mía had been so furious she'd barely spoken to him for a week. She'd actually walked the five kilometres to school and asked Mrs Cavendish in person to give him extra detentions. Then she'd added some of her own for him at home. He'd learnt a great deal about house cleaning that month. He'd also learnt never to lie to Mía again.

'Your aunt deserves better than to be treated in that appalling manner.' Mrs Cavendish offered him the receiver. 'Do you want to tell her, or shall I?'

'You can.' Nick held his head in his hands and listened to Mrs Cavendish dial his phone number.

'Hello, Mía. This is Laura Cavendish, principal of Buckadgery Creek High School. How are you?' She spoke loudly and clearly, as if she was talking to a deaf person. 'I'm well, thanks. Listen, I've got Nick in my office. He got into a fight at lunchtime and hurt another student.'

Nick imagined Mía's smouldering eyes gouging a hole in the floorboards as she received this news. He clenched his dreadlocks between his fingers.

'Nick's a little bruised. The school nurse has had a look at him and she says he's fine. The other student, however, needs several stitches.' Mrs Cavendish took her