PERSONS PRESENT

PERSONS PRESENT

A Novel

Abdul Kavungal (AK)

AWARD WINNING CREATIONS

Copyright © 2026 Abdul Jaleel Kavungal. All rights reserved.

Published by Award Winning Creations

First edition November 2026

This is a work of fiction. The people and places in it, including the town of Calder's Find, are invented, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual places or events, is coincidental.

A count is a promise made to the people who are not in the room.

CONTENTS

Part One: Collection

1 The Number Nine
2 Fidelity and Secrecy
3 One Person Present
4 Non-Response
5 The Kestrel Form
6 Corey Nash
7 The Green Ledger
8 Nothing Left In It
9 Then She Did
10 The Wardrobe

Part Two: Non-Response

11 The Back Rooms
12 Josie
13 The Note Returned
14 Lorraine's Count
15 Daniel
16 Ana Petrakis
17 What Happened
18 The Price
19 Owen and Josie
20 Queensland

Part Three: Persons Present

21 Gone
22 The Inspector
23 The Storm
24 The Eighteen Mile
25 The Rope
26 Persons Present
27 Tash
28 The Inquest
29 Finishing
30 Usual Residence

PART ONE

Collection

CHAPTER 1

The Number Nine

North of Port Augusta the Stuart Highway stops pretending it is going anywhere in particular. It simply goes. I had driven it once before, at nineteen, in the back of my father's Kingswood with Ray asleep against my shoulder and a bag of oranges sweating between us, and I remembered it as a single long note held for too long. Thirty-nine years later it was the same note. The salt lakes came up on the left like sheets left out on a line, and after that there was nothing to measure distance by except the white posts and the road trains that came at me out of the shimmer with their three trailers and their wind.

The Corolla, a white 2014 hatch, lifted on its springs every time one went past, like someone startled by a large man in a corridor. I counted them. Between Port Augusta and the Glendambo turn-off there were fourteen, roughly one every sixteen kilometres, which tells you something about the economy of the north and nothing at all about why I was on that road.

In the glovebox, under the logbook and the tyre-pressure gauge, were eleven birthday cards in a rubber band. They had come every September from 2014 to 2024, kookaburras and galahs and once, inexplicably, a giraffe, and inside, in my brother's square left-handed capitals, a sentence or two. HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAGS. STILL HERE. R. Or: FOUND A NICE BIT OF CRYSTAL THIS YEAR, THOUGHT OF YOU, NO IDEA WHY. R. Paper-clipped to each card was my reply. I had written every one of them, usually around Christmas, when guilt has a seasonal discount, and I had never sent any. Eleven envelopes, his address, no stamps. The arithmetic was not difficult.

The 2025 card had not come. I had noticed in the third week of September, standing at my letterbox in Norwood, and had thought, well, he has finally stopped, and had felt something I filed under relief. In December a constable from Calder's Find rang me on a Sunday afternoon while I was

deadheading the roses, and I learned that my brother had been dead in his dugout for four days before anyone knew, and that he was fifty-four, and that I was his next of kin, and that there was a will.

* * *

You see the town before you see the town. First the mullock heaps begin, small white cones off to the right of the highway, then hundreds of them, then what must have been thousands, pale as sugar, each one the spill of a shaft somebody had sunk on the strength of a feeling. There were signs at every pull-off, red and white, the paint cooked to the colour of old salmon: DANGER. UNMARKED HOLES. DO NOT WALK BACKWARDS. I liked that last one. It seemed good advice in general.

Then the turn-off, and a sign welcoming me to Calder's Find, Opal Capital of Somewhere, the somewhere shot out in a neat cluster of holes, and Hutchison Street running down a shallow slope with its servo and its café and its church whose spire was a steel cross on a mound, because the church itself was underground. From the main street you saw shopfronts and utes, and then you looked up at the low hills and saw doors. Doors set into the hillsides, painted green or blue or not painted at all, with a pair of windows on either side like a face looking back at you, and pipes poking out of the ground above them, and nothing else. Just doors in the hills. As though the whole town had gone inside and left the porch light on.

The Progress Association hall was a corrugated iron building beside the Mining Registrar's field office, and inside it smelt of instant coffee and floor polish and old paper. A woman in a purple fleece got up from behind a trestle table where she had been laminating something.

"You'll be Ray's sister," she said. "Pam Hartigan. I do the keys for Dunstan and Rowe. Sit down, you've been driving for nine hours."

"Seven and a half," I said.

"Still." She looked at me with the frank interest of a small town that had been told I existed and had formed views. Then she found a padded envelope in a drawer and shook it so the keys inside chimed. "Front door, that's the big one. The little one's the meter box. Don't know what this one is. Ray had keys to everything." She held the envelope out and then didn't

quite let go of it. "It's been aired. Edie's been going in. Mrs Varga, next door. And we got the cleaners from Coober in after, you know. After."

"Thank you."

"He was a lovely man, your brother."

"So I keep hearing," I said, and that came out wrong, as things I say to kind women in fleeces generally do, and she let go of the envelope.

* * *

The Number Nine was on Treloar's Hill, on the north side of town, up a dirt road that the Corolla took in first gear like someone climbing stairs in heels. The door was where Pam's mud map said it would be, at the end of a short cutting into the hill, a steel door painted a green that had once been ambitious. A window either side in a wall of grey besser blocks, and above, on the red gibber of the hill, a white plastic pipe with a little rotating cowl, turning in the wind with a faint complaint.

There was a dog sitting in front of the door.

He was a red cattle dog, the colour of rust on a gate, with a white blaze down his face and grey around the muzzle, and he was sitting very upright with his front feet together, facing the door, as if he had an appointment. He turned his head when I got out of the car and looked at me without much interest. Then he looked back at the door.

"That's Toff," said a voice, and a woman came along a little path from the next cutting over. She was small and very old, in a man's cardigan and men's boots, her white hair pinned up with what I later learned were two chopsticks from the Lucky Strike. "He waits. Every day he waits. I feed him, he eats, he comes here. Eight months." She considered me exactly as Pam had. "You are the sister."

"Margaret Aspinall. Mags."

"Edie Varga. I am next door." She pointed at her own cutting, where a blue door stood under a trellis of something dead. "Fifty-one years I am next door to somebody in this hole. Treloar, a Yugoslav, a German who drinks, nobody, then your brother. Your brother was the best one." She said it as a plain finding, like a judge. "He fixed my pump. He brought me oranges from Port Augusta."

I thought of the oranges in the Kingswood and did not say anything.

"Toff," said Mrs Varga, sharply, and the dog's ears moved but nothing else did. "You see. He is not my dog. He is only living with me."

I put the big key in the lock. It turned more easily than I expected, and the door swung inwards on a breath of air that was neither warm nor cold, and the dog stood up.

He did not go in. That surprised me. He only stood, his nose working, and then sat down again on the step, a little to one side, as if making room for me. As if it were my turn.

* * *

The first thing about a dugout is the temperature, and the second thing is the quiet, and the third thing, which takes longer, is the fact that there is no outside. It stays at twenty-three degrees all year. I had not understood that this would feel like being held. It smelt of stone and dust and faintly of Pine O Cleen from the cleaners from Coober, and under that of nothing at all. I had braced for tobacco and sweat and the soapy smell of the back of my brother's neck, and it was not there. The cleaners had been thorough. Eight months had been thorough.

The front room was a kitchen at one end and a sitting room at the other, lit by the two windows in the face wall, so that the light lay across the floor in two pale panels and then gave up. The walls were sandstone, cream and pink and a sort of bruised mauve in bands, and they were covered all over in the marks of a pick. Ray had cut this room by hand, and the strokes went in rows, each one a shallow scoop the length of my finger, all leaning the same way, left to right and slightly down, the slant of a left-handed man swinging from his left shoulder. I put my palm flat against the wall. It was cool and gritty, like the skin of an apple from the fridge. I counted the strokes in one row from the doorway to the corner: one hundred and forty. There were, at a rough estimate, sixty rows. That was eight thousand four hundred blows in one wall of one room, and the room had four walls and a ceiling.

"You never finished anything," I said out loud, to see what it sounded like in there. The stone ate it. There was no echo at all.

There was a laminex table with three chairs, and a fourth chair with a split seat by the stove. An armchair in brown corduroy by the left-hand window, turned so that whoever sat in it could see out of the window and

the door at once. I knew without being told that this was where they had found him. I did not sit in it. I walked round it the way you walk round a person sleeping.

On the shelf above the sink were four mugs on hooks. One said WORLD'S OKAYEST MINER. One was from the Lucky Strike Café. One was plain white with a chip in the rim. The fourth hook was empty.

A passage went back from the sitting room into the hill, cut tall enough for Ray, who had been six foot one. It was perhaps nine metres long and lit by bare bulbs, each with its own pull-cord, so you could light your way in stages. On the left was a bathroom, a concrete floor painted grey and a shower with a curtain printed with fish. On the right a small bedroom, a single bed made up with a crocheted rug, a chest of drawers, a poster of the Flinders Ranges hung in a niche where a window ought to be. I put my bag on the bed. This one, I decided. This was the spare room. I would be a guest.

At the end of the passage was Ray's room. The ceiling went up into a rough dome, and in the dome was the bottom of the ventilation shaft, a black round hole the width of a dinner plate, through which you could see a coin of sky. The bed was a double, stripped to the mattress. A pair of boots stood at the foot of it with the socks still pushed into them. On the far wall, set into an alcove that had been cut for the purpose, was an enormous wardrobe: dark timber, jarrah perhaps, with two tall doors and a drawer below. It fitted the alcove so exactly that there was no gap at the sides. He must have cut the alcove to the wardrobe. That was like him. He would cut a hole in a mountain to fit a piece of furniture and then sell the house his mother was living in to pay for the pick.

I did not open the wardrobe. I could not have said why. I stood in the doorway and listened to the cowl turning far above, a tiny squeak that came down the shaft and arrived in the room as something more like breathing, and then I went back up the passage pulling the cords one by one so that the dark followed me.

* * *

I had brought him with me. At the funeral director's in Port Augusta a young man in a tie had brought out a box of dark plastic with a brass plate on it, and I had signed for him like a parcel. I had paid for the cremation in

January by bank transfer and had not come to collect him, because collecting him would have meant coming. He had then ridden on the passenger seat of the Corolla for five hundred and forty kilometres with the seatbelt across him, because he had always been a nervous passenger.

I put the box on the shelf above the sink, beside the mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST MINER, then on the table, which was worse, and in the end on the floor beside the brown armchair, and I sat down with a cup of tea and looked at it.

I was there to count people. That was the official reason, and it had the merit of being true. The Bureau had advertised for temporary field officers in March, and I had applied on a Sunday night with a glass of riesling, and had written in the free-text field that I had taught mathematics for thirty-one years at a public high school off Magill Road and that I would prefer to be placed in the Calder's Find collection area for personal reasons. They had sent me a lanyard, a contract to mid-September and a device the size of a phone that would tell me where to go, and my reasons had come along in the glovebox.

The other reason was that I was the executor. Ray had made a will in 2017, three years into the silence and he had left everything he owned to me. Everything he owned was a dugout on Treloar's Hill, a claim on the Eighteen Mile valued at almost nothing, a bank account that would have embarrassed a teenager, and a dog he had not mentioned. He had appointed me executor because, the will said, in a phrase the solicitor read to me down the phone with some delicacy, *my sister is the most competent person I know*.

I sat with my tea and thought about that for a while, the way you press on a bruise.

* * *

Mrs Varga came over at six with a plate covered by a tea towel. Under it was lecsó, peppers and sausage, and two slices of white bread. She would not come in. Behind her the sky had gone the colour of the inside of a peach.

"Outside, three degrees," she said. "Inside, always the same. You will sleep like a stone the first night."

"Does he come in?" I asked. The dog. "Does Toff come in, usually?"

She looked at the dog and the dog looked at the door. "No," she said. "Not since. He goes to the door, he sits. I take him home. In the morning he comes back." She shrugged. "He is waiting for Ray. Or he is waiting for something. Dogs." She gave me the plate. "You are here for the census, Pam says."

"For six weeks."

"My grandson will do mine from Szeged, on the computer." She seemed proud of this, and then something occurred to her. "Last time they forgot me," she said. "Twenty-one. Nobody came. I was not counted. Seventy-seven years old and I was not anybody, for the government."

"I'm sorry."

"Is not your fault." She looked at me sideways. "Or maybe it is now," she said, and laughed at her own joke, a dry little bark like a fox's, and went home along the path with the dog walking beside her and then, at the last moment, stopping, and turning, and coming back to sit on my step.

I left him there. I did not know what else to do with him either.

* * *

She was right about sleeping. I went to bed at half past nine in the spare room under the crocheted rug, with the light off and the door open to the passage, and the dark was a dark I had not met before. In Norwood there is always light. Here there was nothing. I held my hand in front of my face and it was not there. The cowl on the vent pipe in Ray's room went round and round, a faint squeak every two point something seconds, and I timed it against my pulse, which was fast, and then slower, and then I was asleep.

I woke at some hour without a number. The dark was the same with my eyes open as shut.

Then I heard it. A sound in the wall, behind my head or further back, deep in the hill. Not loud. A small hard sound, ceramic on stone or on wood, the sound of somebody setting down a cup. Just that. Once. The clean, decided sound of a cup being put down by a person who has finished with it.

I lay very still. There was nothing else: the cowl, my breathing, the enormous patience of the rock. Dugouts settle, I told myself. I had once

explained thermal expansion to Year Ten with a steel ruler and a candle. I had not set down a cup. There was nobody else in the hill.

I thought, quite clearly, the way you think things at three in the morning: Ray.

Then I thought, That is the stupidest thing you have ever thought, Margaret, and I turned onto my side, towards the wall, and put my hand flat against it, against the cool grain of my brother's eight thousand blows, and kept it there until morning.

When I opened the green door at seven, with the cold stinging my face, the dog was still on the step. He had not gone home to Mrs Varga's. He stood when he saw me, stiffly, the way old dogs stand, and looked past my legs into the dugout, down the dark of the passage, and wagged his tail twice, slowly, at something I could not see.

CHAPTER 2

Fidelity and Secrecy

The training was held in the back room of the Progress hall, between a stack of folding chairs and a whiteboard on which someone had written, and failed to fully erase, FOOTY TIPPING ROUND 19: LYLE STILL WINNING. There were two of us. The other was Lorraine Wilton, who was not a trainee but the Bureau's community engagement officer for the whole of the region, a territory that by her own account was roughly the size of Belgium and considerably less flat, and who had driven down from somewhere north of the Painted Range that morning in a Land Cruiser the colour of the road.

She was in her fifties, solid, in a navy Bureau polo shirt and reading glasses on a cord, and she had the stillness of a person who has sat through a great many meetings run by other people. She put a thermos on the table and two cups.

"Siobhan's going to ring in," she said. "From Port Augusta. She'll be very enthusiastic. Don't let it put you off."

"I taught high school," I said. "I've survived enthusiasm."

She looked at me over the glasses. "Maths, Pam said."

"Thirty-one years."

"Good," said Lorraine. "Then you'll know the difference between a number and a fact."

The phone in the middle of the table lit up and a voice came out of it like a weather balloon released indoors. "Morning, Calder's Find! Can you hear me? Mags, welcome, welcome! Siobhan Kerrigan, I'm your area supervisor, I am so thrilled you're on board. Lorraine, you there, hon?"

"I'm here."

"Love it. Okay! So. Just to frame things." Siobhan framed things for some time. The census would be held on the night of Tuesday the eleventh of August. Most households across the country would complete online, using the unique login code on the letter that had already been delivered to

every dwelling, but in Calder's Find, and here Siobhan's voice took on the tender note of someone describing a special-needs class, a significant proportion of households had requested paper forms. From the twelfth, my job was to visit every dwelling in my workload that had not yet responded, offer help, collect paper forms, and record the outcome of every visit in the app. "Response rate is everything," said Siobhan. "Everything. Last time this area finished at sixty-eight per cent before follow-up. I would love, love, love to see us crack ninety. No pressure!"

I wrote 68 and 90 on my pad and drew a box round the difference. Twenty-two percentage points. In a town of fourteen hundred people that was a little over three hundred humans who were, for the moment, statistically adrift.

"And Mags, you've had the undertaking emailed? You've signed it?"

"I've signed it."

"Wonderful. Lorraine'll take you through the rest. I've got Andamooka at ten. Go, team!"

The phone went dark. Lorraine let the silence settle for a moment, the way you let a glass of water settle after someone has stirred it.

"She's good, actually," she said. "She just sounds like that."

* * *

The device was a phone with ideas above its station. It lived in a rubberised case with a lanyard clip and it held what Lorraine called my workload: a map of the town and the fields divided into collection areas, each dwelling a dot, each dot attached to a code. Green dots had responded. Grey dots had not yet. Red dots were what the app called *hard to count*, and in my area, Lorraine showed me, scrolling with one blunt forefinger, there were a great many red dots.

"Some of these aren't houses," she said. "Some of them are holes with a door on. Some of them have three families in. Some of them have nobody in and haven't had for ten years but the map still thinks they're there, because the map is a very trusting document." She zoomed in on the Eighteen Mile, a scatter of dots on a grey nothing. "Some of them are people who don't want to be found, and some of them are people who've never been asked properly, and from outside the door you won't always know which."

"How do I tell?"

"You knock," she said. "And then you wait longer than you think is polite."

There was also a satchel, canvas, with the Bureau's logo printed on the flap, containing blank paper forms, reply-paid envelopes, a clipboard, a supply of pencils that would, I could see, need sharpening, and a booklet of guidance on what to do if a householder became distressed, abusive, or unwell. There was a lanyard with my photograph on it, taken against my own kitchen wall in Norwood, in which I looked like a woman who has been told to look natural.

And there was the undertaking.

I had signed it online in July. Lorraine had a paper copy for me, because she said people should have a paper copy of anything they promise, and I read it at the trestle table while she drank her tea. It was headed UNDERTAKING OF FIDELITY AND SECRECY, which I liked: it sounded like something you would swear on a sword. It said that I would not, either directly or indirectly, divulge or communicate to any person any information given to me under the Census and Statistics Act, except in the performance of my duties. It said that this obligation continued after my employment ended. It said, in effect, that what was written on a census form was the household's, and the Bureau's, and nobody else's: not a neighbour's, not a journalist's, not a court's, not the police.

I read it twice. The first time for meaning, the second for loopholes, the way I used to read the rules for the external exams, looking for the sentence that would come back and bite a candidate in November. There were no loopholes. It was a short, clean, unambiguous document, and I found that I admired it. The penalty for breach was up to two years' imprisonment, or a fine of a hundred and twenty penalty units, or both. I worked out the fine in the margin of my pad, at the current value of a penalty unit. It came to something near forty thousand dollars. I thought that was about right. Not so large that it was theatre; large enough to mean it.

"You've done the sum," said Lorraine, who had been watching me.

"It's a reflex."

"Not a bad one." She took off her glasses and let them hang. "People will tell you things," she said. "Up here especially. They'll fill in the form in front

of you because they can't read it, or can't read it in English, or because their hands are bad, and they'll tell you who's living in the back room and who's just out of prison and who's not really the father. You write down what goes in the boxes and you leave the rest at the door. And the stuff in the boxes, you leave in the boxes."

"I understand."

"Most people think the census is the government counting people." She screwed the lid back on the thermos. "It isn't. You don't count people. People let you count them. Every one of those dots is somebody deciding whether to trust you for about four minutes. That's the job."

* * *

At midday she went off to Three Mile, the camp on the far side of the airstrip, where she had family and a meeting and, she said, an argument to finish with a cousin about a fridge, and I walked down Hutchison Street by myself with my lanyard in my pocket because it felt presumptuous to wear it.

The street in daylight was wider than it had seemed from the car, and emptier. A wind was coming off the gibber to the west, cold and steady, picking up the white dust from the vacant blocks and laying it along the kerbs in fine drifts like flour. There were utes nose-in outside the pub. A blower went past on the back of a truck, an enormous yellow vacuum with its intake hose folded up like the trunk of a sleeping elephant, and the man driving it lifted one finger from the wheel at me, the bush wave, which I returned a beat too late.

The Lucky Strike Café had a shopfront at street level, a glass door and a menu board, and inside a staircase that went down. The dining room was a cave. That is the only word for it. Someone had dug out a long chamber in the hill behind the shop, with a vaulted ceiling and pick-marked walls, and painted the walls white so that the pick marks showed as a soft pattern of shadow, like dimpled cream, and put in twenty tables with checked cloths and photographs of Greek islands in frames, and the effect was of eating lunch inside an enormous meringue. It was warm and smelt of oregano and frying onions.

The man behind the counter was round and bald and seventy, with forearms like hams and half-moon glasses pushed up on his forehead, and when he saw me he put down the knife he was holding and wiped his hands, slowly, on a tea towel tucked into his belt.

"You are Margaret," he said.

"Mags."

"Kostas Mavros. Gus." He came round the counter and took my hand in both of his. His hands were damp and very warm. "I am sorry," he said. "I am very, very sorry about your brother. He ate here every Friday for twelve years. The souvlaki, extra chilli, and an iced coffee, and he was always complaining the chilli is not hot enough. Every Friday I make it hotter. Every Friday, not hot enough." He let go of my hand. "I made a wake for him. Here. In December."

"I know. Pam told me. I sent some money."

"You sent money," he agreed. He did not say anything else about it. He did not have to. "Sit. You eat. Same as Ray?"

"I don't eat chilli."

"No," said Gus, looking at me with something like pity. "No, I didn't think so."

I sat at a table near the back, under a photograph of a white church on a blue sea, and while I waited I looked at the other people in the room. Nine of them: men in hi-vis and dust, three backpackers sharing chips, a couple in matching fleeces with a caravan-park map. At a table near the door sat a man by himself, a large man in a moleskin shirt and a good Akubra, which he had taken off and set crown-down on the chair beside him. He had a big, pink, pleasant face and very white hair, and he was eating a Greek salad with an air of virtue, and when Gus brought my plate the big man watched it go past and then looked at me and smiled.

He let me get two mouthfuls in. Then he got up and came over, hat in hand.

"Mrs Aspinall?"

"Ms. Or Mags."

"Mags. Lyle Baird." He put out a hand the size of a shovel. "I won't sit down unless you ask me, I know you've come a long way. I only wanted to say I'm sorry for your loss. Ray was a good bloke. One of the old school. We

were neighbours, more or less, on the Eighteen Mile. My claim's two k from his. We'd wave."

"Thank you."

"May I?" I had not asked him, but he sat anyway, gracefully for a man his size, and nodded at Gus, who brought him a coffee without being asked. "You'll be overwhelmed," Lyle said. "Everyone says it, but it's true. Probate, his gear, the dugout, the dog. Edie's got the dog, I hear."

"For now."

"Good old Edie." He turned his cup a quarter turn on its saucer. "I run the Drift, the motel up the end there. You're welcome to a room if the dugout's too much. No charge. I mean that. Some people find it hard, sleeping where it happened."

"It didn't happen in the bedroom."

"No," he said. "No, that's right. The chair, wasn't it." He let a respectful second pass. "Anyway. The other thing, and then I'll leave you to Gus's cooking. When you're ready, and only then, I'd be interested in Ray's claim. He and I talked about it now and then. It's not worth much, I'll be honest, there's not much left in that ground, but it squares off a bit of country I've got, and I'd pay you fair. More than fair. I'd sooner deal with family than have it go to auction and end up with some cowboy from Queensland sinking holes all over it." He smiled. "No hurry. You've got my card."

I did not have his card. He took one out of his shirt pocket and laid it beside my plate. It was heavy cream stock with a gold opal on it. LYLE BAIRD. THE DRIFT UNDERGROUND MOTEL. BAIRD MINING. PROUD SPONSOR, CALDER'S FIND DIGGERS FC.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"That's all anyone can do." He stood and put the Akubra on, and at the door he paid for my lunch as well as his own, which I only found out when I went to pay and Gus waved my purse away with an expression I could not read. It was not quite disapproval. It was more like a man watching weather.

"He's very generous," I said.

"Lyle is very generous," said Gus. "Everybody says." He took my plate. "Ray didn't sell, you know. Lyle asked him many times. Ray always said no. He said, I'm not finished with it yet."

* * *

The op shop was four doors down, in a shopfront with a hand-painted sign that said ST BARBARA'S OPPORTUNITY SHOP: ALL PROCEEDS TO THE CHURCH ROOF. The church was underground. I wondered what was wrong with its roof and then realised, standing in the street with the wind in my ears, that the roof was the hill, and that the hill was presumably leaking.

Inside it smelt of other people's wardrobes. There were racks of men's work shirts sorted by size and then by colour, and a wall of paperbacks, and a glass cabinet of what someone had labelled COSTUME JEWELLERY & OPAL (NOT VALUABLE), and a kettle on a card table with a jar of International Roast beside it, the lid off. A woman was on a stepladder hanging a set of curtains in the window. She was in her fifties, wiry, with short grey hair cut by someone who disliked fuss, and she was wearing a man's flannelette shirt over a black T-shirt and had a pencil behind each ear.

"With you in a sec," she said, round a mouthful of curtain hooks.

I waited. I looked at the books. Someone had donated an entire shelf of Patrick White in matching Penguin spines, which struck me as either a bereavement or a protest.

She came down the ladder and looked at me and, for about the length of a breath, did not say anything at all. It was not the look Pam had given me, or Mrs Varga. It was quicker and more careful. As though I were a form she needed to fill in correctly the first time.

"You're the sister," she said.

"Mags Aspinall."

"Josie Prior." She did not offer her hand. She went to the card table and spooned coffee into a mug and poured water on it from the kettle without asking if I wanted one, and then made me one too, and gave it to me. It was the colour of a creek in flood. "You'll be wanting to clear his things," she said. "When you're ready. I can take whatever's decent. Clothes, kitchen stuff. I'll give you boxes. Don't give the books to the tip, the tip burns them."

"Did you know him well?"

"Everyone knew Ray." She drank. Her eyes went to the window, to the street, and came back. "He brought stuff in. Bric-a-brac. He'd buy it back off me a month later, half the time. He bought those Patrick Whites twice." She almost smiled, and then didn't. "He was a soft touch."

"So I gather."

"No," said Josie Prior. "You don't. Not yet." She put her mug down on the counter, very precisely, as if setting it on a mark. "Sorry. That came out. I'm not good with people the first time."

"Neither am I."

"Well," she said, and something in her face moved and settled. "That's two of us, then." She glanced at the lanyard sticking out of my jacket pocket. "You're doing the census."

"Follow-up. From the twelfth."

"Ours'll be paper," she said. "My husband won't have it on the computer. He thinks the computer tells the government things."

"It does," I said. "That's rather the point."

She laughed then, once, surprised out of her. It was a good laugh, a smoker's laugh, though she didn't smell of smoke. Then she picked up the pencil from behind her left ear and wrote something on a scrap of paper and gave it to me. It was a phone number. "For the boxes," she said. "Any time. I'm here six days."

I walked back up Hutchison Street in the wind with the number in my pocket and Lyle Baird's cream card in the other pocket, and I thought about the eight thousand blows in my brother's wall and the chilli that was never hot enough and the Patrick White he had bought twice, and I thought that I was learning about him the way you learn the shape of a room in the dark, by walking into things.

At the top of the hill, outside the green door, the dog was waiting. When I got close enough he stood, and looked at me, and for the first time he came over and leaned the whole weight of his body against my shins, and stayed there, while I found the key.

CHAPTER 3

One Person Present

The wind got up on the Monday and did not lie down again for three days. It came out of the south-west across the gibber, across nothing, for what felt like a thousand kilometres, and when it reached Calder's Find it had nothing left to do except pick up the town's dust and throw it at the town. It got into my teeth and my socks. It got into the Corolla's air vents, so that every time I turned on the fan the dashboard exhaled a fine pink powder. It got into the dugout only as a sound: a low, interested hum in the vent shaft and a whistle under the green door that rose and fell with the gusts, like someone outside trying to remember a tune.

I spent the weekend learning the map. I drove my workload in the Corolla with the device propped in a cup holder, checking the dots against the doors, and discovered that the app had a cheerful confidence about the town that the town did not share. There were dots where there were only mullock heaps. There were dugouts with no dots at all, their doors set so deep into the hill that I only saw them because somebody had left a ute outside or a wheelie bin or, in one case, a full-size concrete statue of Elvis. I made notes in a spiral pad. Dot 114: no dwelling visible. Dot 115: two doors, possibly one dwelling, possibly two, possibly a shed. I enjoyed it more than I had expected to. A map that is wrong is a problem, and a problem is the closest thing I have to a hobby.

On the Monday afternoon I drove out along the Seventeen Mile Road as far as the bitumen went and then a little further, until the dust closed in and the white posts disappeared ahead of me one by one like the end of a sentence, and I turned around. On the way back I passed a sign for a dugout called the Kestrel, hand-lettered on a sheet of tin nailed to a star picket, and a bit further on a battered white four-wheel-drive Coaster parked in a cutting with PAINTED RANGE TOURS on the side and a man in a beanie hosing the dust off its windscreen, who did not look up.

* * *

Census night was the Tuesday. I had my own form.

Field officers could complete online like everybody else, and Lorraine had told me most did, but I had taken a paper form from my own satchel on the Friday, because it seemed to me that if I was going to spend a month asking other people to fill these things in by hand, I ought to know what it felt like. I sat down with it at Ray's laminex table at about four in the afternoon, with the wind fretting at the door and a pencil I had sharpened with a kitchen knife.

It is a peculiar document, a census form. It is very plain. It asks you, in large clear type, a series of questions that seem at first to have obvious answers, and then you begin to answer them, and you discover that each one is a small trapdoor.

How many people, including visitors, were in this dwelling on the night of Tuesday 11 August 2026?

I wrote 1 in the box. It was a good clean figure, a vertical stroke and a little flag. I looked at it for a while. Then I looked across the room at the black plastic box on the floor beside the brown armchair, where it had stayed since Thursday because I had not yet thought of a better place, and I knew perfectly well that the question was about the living, and I knew perfectly well what my brother would have said, which was something like *Put me down, Mags, I'm here, aren't I?*, and I left the 1 where it was. The form does not have a box for ashes. I am not sure what you would put in it.

Name. Sex. Date of birth. Relationship to Person 1, which in my case was a question about my relationship to myself, and which the form solved by telling me to skip it.

Then the one I had been dreading without knowing I was dreading it.

Where does the person usually live?

The form explained, in a helpful grey box, that a person's usual residence is the address at which they have lived, or intend to live, for a total of six months or more in 2026. I had lived in Norwood since 1994. I owned a bluestone cottage there with a front verandah and two lemon trees and a mortgage that had been paid off in 2019, which I had celebrated alone with a bottle of Grange I had been saving for something and then could not think what. My books were there, and my bed, and the dent in the couch, and my neighbour's cat who came in at the kitchen window and sat on the bench to

judge me. By any arithmetic I lived in Norwood. I would be in Calder's Find for six weeks, which was a little less than twelve per cent of the year. I wrote the Norwood address in the boxes provided, one letter to a box, in capitals, the way the form asked.

It looked like a lie. I could not see how it was a lie, and I turned the sentence over and looked at the bottom of it, and it still looked like a lie. I had lived in that house for thirty-two years, and the person who lived there was a person who did not answer her brother's birthday cards. I was sitting in his kitchen. The question was not where I slept. The question was where I *usually* lived, and I found that I had no confidence at all in my usual.

I put down the pencil and went out to get a coffee.

* * *

The Lucky Strike was quiet at five on a weekday. Gus was cleaning the coffee machine with a small brush and an expression of great tenderness. When I came down the stairs he raised his eyebrows at me without stopping.

"Iced coffee," I said. "Please. The way Ray had it."

"Ray had it with ice cream and cream and a chocolate flake and two sugars."

"Then that."

He made it in a tall glass that had been designed for something more festive, a glass with a stem and a curve in it like a hip, and he brought it to the counter and put a long spoon in it and watched me take the first mouthful. It was cold and sweet and absurd and tasted like being eleven years old on the jetty at Port Pirie, sitting on the warm boards with my brother eating a Golden Gaytime that was melting down both our wrists.

"Well?" said Gus.

"It's like being eleven."

He nodded, satisfied, as if I had given the correct answer to a test he had set for many people, most of whom had failed. "He said that too," he said. "Not eleven. Seven. He said it is like being seven years old and your sister is buying you a Gaytime because you lost your money in the sea." He picked up his brush again. "He talked about you."

I put the spoon down. "What did he say?"

Gus thought about it with real care, the way a careful man decides which of several true things to hand over. “He said you were the clever one,” he said. “He said you were always right. He did not say it like a complaint. He said it like he was telling me the weather in Adelaide.” He looked at me over his half-moons. “You have filled in the census?”

“Mine. Yes.”

“I filled mine on the computer,” said Gus. “My daughter made me. She is in Melbourne. She says, Baba, you must be counted, they decide the hospital from it.” He shrugged. “I said, I am seventy, they should decide the hospital from me already.”

* * *

At dusk the wind dropped, briefly, the way it sometimes does at sunset in the desert, as though the day had to take a breath before the night. I walked up the hill behind the Number Nine, over the top of my brother’s dugout, past the white vent pipe with its spinning cowl, along a track that wound between the mullock heaps to the crest of Treloar’s Hill. The ground was red and covered with small stones that rang when I kicked them. The cold was coming up out of the ground already. My breath was beginning to show.

From the crest I could see the whole of Calder’s Find, and it was not where I had thought it was.

I had thought of the town as Hutchison Street, the servo and the pub and the strip of shops, because that was what you saw when you drove in, and from up here Hutchison Street was a short bright line with a few cars on it, a bead or two of light. But all around it, on every hill and every rise, in every direction, small lights were coming on. Single lights. Pairs. Lights at ground level in the faces of the hills, where the dugout windows were. They came on one at a time as I watched, in no order, not like streetlamps on a timer but like people deciding: here, then there, then three together on the slope to the east, then one far out on the Seventeen Mile Road, isolated, so small it might have been a star that had come down to rest on the ground. There was no sound at all except the cowl behind me and, very far away, a dog.

I counted them. Of course I did. I stood on top of my brother's house in a cooling wind and counted the lit windows of Calder's Find as they came on, and by the time the light had gone from the west and the first real stars were out I had two hundred and twelve. I knew it was meaningless. A light is not a household and a household is not a person. Some of those windows were a man alone with a beer and some were six people round a table and some were a television left on for a dog. But I liked the number. It was mine. Two hundred and twelve households, tonight, on the night that counted.

I thought: in every one of those lit rooms, at some point between now and midnight, someone is supposed to sit down with a pencil and say who is there.

It is a strange thing for a government to ask. Not who owns this house, or who pays the rates, or who you would like to be. Just who is here, tonight. Who is at the table. The census does not care who you love or who you have lost. It wants the persons present, and it wants them on one particular night, as if the whole country could be stopped like a clock and its hands read.

I thought of Ray on census night in 2021, alone in the Number Nine, writing 1. I thought of him in 2016, the same. I thought of all the nights in between when nobody asked him anything.

* * *

When I came back down the dog was not on the step. I stood in the cutting with the key in my hand and felt something drop in me that I did not want to look at, and then I heard him: he had been round the side, at the base of the hill where it met the face wall, nosing at something in the dirt, and he came trotting back to me with his ears up and his tail going.

I unlocked the door. I went in. I turned on the light.

He came in.

He did not come in the way he had refused to come in on Thursday. He came in as if he had been called. He walked straight past me and straight past the brown armchair without looking at it, and down the passage into the dark, his claws clicking on the stone floor, and I followed him, pulling the cords one by one so the light went with us. In Ray's room he stopped in front of the great jarrah wardrobe and stood there with his head low, sniffing at the gap beneath the drawer. Then he lay down, very deliberately,

on the bare floor, pressed full length against the base of it, with his nose to the crack, and sighed.

"His boots," I said. "Is that it? That's where he kept his boots."

Toff's tail moved once on the stone. He did not take his nose from the crack.

I left him there and went back to my form. I signed it, at the bottom, in the place for signatures, and wrote the date. I put it in its reply-paid envelope and sealed it and put it in the satchel with the blanks. Persons present: one. Usual residence: elsewhere.

* * *

The house in Port Pirie was on a street of houses exactly like it, sandstone fronts and bullnose verandahs and a pepper tree in every third yard, three blocks back from the smelter, so that everything we owned as children had a faint grey film on it that our mother fought with Sunlight soap and a sense of personal injury. She lived there for fifty-one years. She went into care in 2012, when she began to put the kettle in the fridge and to call me by her own sister's name, and because Ray was her favourite, which all three of us knew, and because I was busy and had insisted, he held her power of attorney.

I found out in February 2014, from a letter from a bank in Adelaide that had been forwarded to me by mistake, that the house was being sold by the mortgagee. That there had been a mortgage at all. That my brother had borrowed against our mother's house, with her signature on the papers in a hand I knew had stopped being able to sign anything, to buy a second-hand blower and a claim on the Eighteen Mile from a man who had sworn there was a seam of crystal in it the width of your hand, and that there had not been, and that the payments had stopped.

I drove up. He was there, in the empty house, on a Saturday, because the agent had asked him to take the last things out. I stood in the hallway with its runner of pink carpet worn to the threads where we had run up and down it for twenty years, and he stood at the end of it by the kitchen door holding a cardboard box with our mother's good teacups in it, wrapped in the *Recorder*, and I said everything.

I was very calm. That was the worst of it. I was a teacher; I had practised on thousands of children. I laid it out for him like a proof, each step following from the last, the dates and the amounts and the signatures, and I watched it land, and then, because he had not said anything and I wanted him to say something, I said the last thing.

"You have never once in your life finished anything."

He looked at me down the length of that hallway. He was forty-two. He had our father's big hands and our mother's habit of going very still when he was hurt, as if pain were a bird that might fly off if you didn't move.

"No," he said. "I suppose that's right." And he put the box of teacups down very carefully on the floor between us, as if it were the last thing he had to give me, and walked out the front door past me without touching me, and drove back up the highway.

I did not see him again except across a crematorium chapel when our mother died the following year. I have the teacups in Norwood. There were six. One was broken in the box, and I have never known whether it broke before he put it down, or after.

* * *

I went to bed at ten. The dog was still lying against the wardrobe. I could hear him, from the spare room, sighing at intervals, the long put-upon sigh of an old dog who has been waiting a very long time and expects to wait longer. Somewhere around midnight, when the census, all over the country, became a fact, he stopped sighing and I heard his tail thump twice on the stone floor, and then again, slowly, three times, the way you might greet somebody who has come quietly into a room where you are lying, and has not yet spoken.

CHAPTER 4

Non-Response

The first door I knocked on as an officer of the Commonwealth was painted orange and had a sign on it that said NO SALESMEN NO RELIGION NO GOVERNMENT. I stood in front of it at nine on the Wednesday morning, the twelfth, with my lanyard round my neck and my satchel on my shoulder and the device in my hand showing a grey dot, and I considered the sign the way you consider a quadratic: as a set of conditions, some of which might have solutions.

I knocked. I waited longer than I thought was polite. I counted to forty.

The door was opened by a tall thin man in his sixties with a grey ponytail and reading glasses pushed up into it, and behind him, at a careful distance, a woman of the same age with her arms folded. They looked at my lanyard and then at each other, and I saw a whole conversation go between them without a word.

"Census," I said. "Good morning. I'm Mags. I'm just following up households that haven't completed yet. There's no obligation for me to come in. I can leave a form, or help you with it here, whatever suits."

"There is an obligation," said the man. His accent was German, softened by decades. "It is compulsory. There is a fine."

"There is," I agreed. "One penalty unit for every day you're late, technically. A bit over three hundred dollars. Though I've never heard of it being collected from anyone who simply needed more time."

"A penalty unit," said the man, and looked at the woman again. "You see, Heike. She knows the number."

His name was Klaus Brandt. He and his wife had come to Calder's Find from Leipzig in 1991, two years after the Wall, and had mined, and then stopped mining, and now made jewellery from other people's opal and sold it to tourists from a stall at the Drift. They had not filled in the 2016 census or the 2021 one, and had paid nothing for it, and they did not intend to fill in this one, and it took me forty minutes on their front step, in a wind that

made my eyes water, to understand that this was not a political position so much as a memory. Heike's father had been informed on by a neighbour in 1977 for listening to a West German radio station. The neighbour had been asked, by a pleasant official with a clipboard, simply to note who lived in which flat.

"Names," Heike said. It was the first thing she had said. "That is all they wanted. Only who lives where. That is how it begins."

I did not argue with her. There is no argument that defeats a memory, and I was not sure I wanted one. I told them what I knew: that the names were separated from the answers once the forms were processed; that the names were destroyed, or kept only in a form that could not be searched for a person; that I had signed an undertaking that would put me in prison if I told a living soul what was on their form, including the police, including the Prime Minister. I told them I had read it twice.

"Why twice?" said Klaus.

"Once for what it said. Once for what it didn't."

Heike looked at me for a long moment. Then she unfolded her arms and held out her hand for the paper form, and took it, and closed the door, gently, without another word, and on the Saturday I found it in the reply-paid box at the post office, completed in a careful black ink, every box. I only knew because Siobhan rang to tell me that the Brandts' dot had gone green.

"How did you do it?" she said. "They've been red since forever."

"I didn't do anything," I said, and found I meant it.

* * *

I learned the doors that week. I learned that if a dugout had a satellite dish and a dog bowl and a gas bottle outside, there was somebody home, and that if it had a ute with the bonnet up there was somebody home who did not want to be interrupted, and that if it had a padlock on the outside of the door there was nobody home and possibly had not been since the last mining boom. I learned that the best time was between four and six, when the miners came in off the fields and before they went to the pub, and that the worst time was any time on the Eighteen Mile after dark, because the holes did not care whether you had a lanyard.

I learned that people will tell you almost anything at a door, as Lorraine had said, if you stand there long enough and do not interrupt.

At Dot 207, on the eastern slope, a man of about seventy called Des Pruett completed his form in front of me at his kitchen bench and listed, as Person 2, Rita, female, aged eleven, relationship to Person 1: *companion*. Rita was a kelpie cross with one ear up and one ear down. She lay on the floor at his feet during the whole interview and looked at me with an expression of great intelligence and mild contempt.

"I'm afraid it's only people," I said.

"She's more of a person than half this town."

"I don't doubt it. But the form can't take her."

"Then it can't take me," said Des, and put down the pencil.

We negotiated. In the end we agreed that he would write Rita in the margin, beside the box, in brackets, so that whoever processed the form in Melbourne or Canberra or wherever it went would know that she had been present, and that the scanner would ignore her, and that both of these things could be true. He was satisfied with this. So, I think, was Rita. I put the form in my satchel, and in my spiral pad that night I wrote: *the margin is where you put what the boxes can't hold*. I underlined it twice and then felt foolish and crossed one of the lines out.

At Dot 63, on Gully Road, there were eleven people in one dugout. Three generations. The grandmother, Zora Kovač, had come from a village in Croatia in 1968, and her son Tomo had been born in the dugout, in what was now the laundry, and Tomo's wife Linh had come from Ho Chi Minh City by way of Adelaide, and their four children and two grandchildren and a nephew of Linh's who was staying indefinitely lived in a warren of rooms that went so far back into the hill that I lost count of the turns. I needed two forms. The granddaughter, Mia, fifteen, translated for her great-grandmother, who spoke a mixture of Croatian and English and Vietnamese that the family called Kovač, and who wanted to know, before she would give her date of birth, whether the government would use it to stop her pension.

"Tell her no," I said.

Mia told her. Zora looked at me and said something long and emphatic.

"She says that's what they said last time," said Mia. "And she says you've got a kind face but a government nose."

"Tell her my nose is my father's," I said, "and he was a fitter at the smelter in Port Pirie, and he didn't trust the government either."

Mia translated. Zora laughed until she had to be helped to a chair. She gave me her date of birth, which was the fourth of March 1939, and insisted I stay for coffee, which was Turkish, and then for soup, which was pho, and I left at seven with both forms complete and eleven people counted, and a container of sarma on the passenger seat where my brother's ashes had ridden.

* * *

On the Thursday I went to the Eighteen Mile.

It was the edge of my workload, a scatter of five dots across the old diggings north-east of town, and four of the five were wrong: a collapsed dugout with a sheet of iron where the door had been; a caravan with its windows smashed; a shipping container with a padlock; nothing at all. The fifth was a dugout cut into the side of a low rise, with a door made from what looked like the back of a wardrobe and a thin stream of smoke coming from a chimney pipe. Outside was an old man in a Bonds singlet and a cardigan sitting on an upturned drum, shelling peanuts into his lap. He watched me park the Corolla, a long way from him, on what I hoped was solid ground, and pick my way across between the heaps.

"You'll want to watch where you put your feet," he said, when I was close enough. "That's how they get you. Not the big ones. Little ones. Shaft a metre across, under a bit of spinifex. You'd never know."

"I'm being careful."

"Everyone's careful. Careful's not the same as lucky." He cracked a peanut. He was Yorkshire, I thought, by way of sixty years of sun; his face was a map of a dry country. "You're census."

"I am. Mags."

"Frank Hollis." He did not get up. "You can put me down as nobody."

"I'm sorry?"

"Nobody. Not anybody. I'm not anybody. Haven't been for years." He waved a hand at the diggings around us, the heaps, the holes, the wind. "Out

here, love, you're nobody unless someone comes looking. And no one comes looking."

"I've come looking."

He considered this. He offered me a peanut, which I took. "You'll be Ray Aspinall's sister," he said. "You've got his walk."

People kept telling me what I had of his. His walk. His eyes, or something round them. I had begun to feel like a kit from which he had been partly assembled.

"I am," I said.

"Ray came out Tuesdays," said Frank. "Brought me my paper and my baccy. Since Christmas, no one comes Tuesdays." He shelled another peanut. "Ray'd sit where you're standing. Talk about the Ashes. Talk about books. He'd lend me books. I've got one of his still, I suppose you'll want it."

"Keep it."

"It's about a whale," said Frank, with some disgust. "Six hundred pages about a whale. I told him I'd seen a whale, at Whitby, when I was a nipper, and it didn't take six hundred pages, it took about a minute. He laughed. He said someone else said the same." He looked out across the diggings, east, towards a long, low, broken line of heaps that ran into the distance. "Out there," he said, "is where they found the Tully lad's ute. Twenty-nineteen. Daniel. Eighteen, he was. They searched all the holes they could get a camera down and they never found him. So he's out there somewhere. Down one of them. And he's not been counted either, has he. Not since. Nobody's put him on a form."

The wind blew. I did not say anything. I did not know enough to say anything, and I could feel, the way you feel a change of temperature on the back of your neck, that this was not a thing to ask about from a stranger on a drum.

"So I'm in good company," said Frank Hollis, "being nobody."

I sat down on the ground beside him in the end, on a folded hessian bag he pushed across to me with his boot, and filled his form in for him while he told me the answers, because his hands shook too much to write in the boxes. Name. Date of birth: eleventh of November, 1944. Born: Scarborough, England. Usual residence: here. Persons present: one. When I

had finished he asked me to read his name back to him, and I did, Francis Edward Hollis, and he nodded, slowly, and said, "Well. There's that, then," and went back to his peanuts.

* * *

The police car caught up with me on the track back to the bitumen, at dusk, as the cold came down. It came up behind me with its lights going but no siren, and I pulled over onto what I hoped was not a hole, and a woman got out and came to my window and bent down. She was in her early forties, dark hair pulled back hard, a blue uniform jumper with three stripes on the sleeve, and the face of somebody who has been told the same lie by many different people and is still, against her better judgement, interested.

"Evening," she said. "Ana Petrakis. Sergeant. You're Ray Aspinall's sister."

"Apparently everybody knows that."

"It's a small town and a white Corolla." She looked at my lanyard. "You're out late on the Eighteen Mile."

"I was counting Frank Hollis."

Something moved at the corner of her mouth. "How'd that go?"

"He's counted."

"Good for Frank." She straightened and looked out at the heaps going grey in the last light, then back at me. "Do me a favour. Don't drive out here after dark. Not in that. The tracks move. Kids pull the warning signs out for a laugh, and people sink a test hole on Monday and forget it by Friday, and the miners are supposed to cap them and half of them don't, and I'm the one that has to come out with a torch." She tapped the roof of the car once, lightly. "I've done that job more than once. I'd rather not do it for you."

"I'll be careful."

"Everyone's careful," said Sergeant Petrakis, and I thought, Frank has told her that too.

* * *

On the Saturday Lorraine took me up the Painted Range road in the Land Cruiser, because, she said, I should see the country I was counting from somewhere other than a car park.

The Range is north of the town, an hour along a corrugated road the colour of paprika, a line of flat-topped mesas standing up out of the gibber plain like the remains of a table someone has sawn the legs off. Up close they are banded, white and ochre and a dark plum-red, and the bands are so level you could use them to hang a picture. Lorraine drove one-handed with the window down and her elbow out, and talked, not in the way of a guide but in the way of someone thinking aloud in the presence of another person she has decided is worth thinking aloud in front of.

She told me which of the creeks ran after rain and which never did. She told me where the old stock route had been and where the mission had been and where her mother's mother had been born, which was further north and west than we would go that day, and she told it plainly, without performance, the way I would tell someone where I had gone to school. She told me that her nephew Jarrah, who was nineteen and smarter than everyone, was working the census too, on contract, in the communities to the north, and that he was better at it than she was because the old people liked him and he did not mind being growled at.

"Last census," she said, as we came up onto the crest of a rise and the whole plain opened out below us, "the Bureau did a survey afterwards. To check. They go back out to a sample of houses and see who they missed." She glanced at me. "You'll like this. Your sort of thing."

"Go on."

"Nationally they missed about seventeen point four per cent of our mob. One in six, near enough. Up here, more. Whole households. Whole camps." She drove for a while. "That's not just a number for a report. That's houses that don't get built. Clinic hours. Seats. It all comes off the count. If you're not counted, you're not anywhere."

"Why were they missed?"

"Lots of reasons. People move round. Family's big, houses are small, and nobody wants to tell the government there's fourteen in a three-bedroom because the housing mob might do something about it, and not the good thing. Officers don't come, or come once and don't wait. Some people just don't want to be on anybody's list. You can't blame them." She slowed for a cattle grid. "Counting's never been neutral for us," she said. "That's the

thing to remember. For a long time when the government wrote your name down, it was so they could do something to you."

We stopped at a lookout and got out and stood in the wind with the plain below us going out to the end of the world, mauve and gold and grey, without a single straight line in it.

"So who doesn't get counted?" I said. "In town. From what you've seen."

She thought about it. "Old men on their own. People who've been burned before. People who rent a hole off someone and don't want the someone to know how many they've got in it. People with a reason to be nobody." She looked at me sideways. "And the dead, mostly. The dead never get counted. They've already been. Nobody goes back to check."

I thought of Frank Hollis's lad in a hole somewhere under this enormous light, not counted since. I thought of Ray. When I got home that night there were forty-one green dots in my workload that had been grey on Wednesday, and on Sunday morning Siobhan rang to tell me I was the highest-performing field officer in the region, which was a statistic, I later worked out, with three members, and that she loved, loved, loved it.

CHAPTER 5

The Kestrel Form

On the Monday I learned who Josie Prior was married to, and I learned it the way you learn most things in a small town, which is by overhearing it while trying to eat.

I was at the Lucky Strike at one o'clock with a bowl of Gus's avgolemono and my spiral pad open beside it, planning the week's route. At the counter, on the stools, two old miners in shorts and Blundstones and identical faded flannelette were working through a pair of iced coffees and the state of the town. One was enormous and the other was very small, and they had the air of men who had been having the same conversation since about 1983.

"Owen's bus has done the gearbox again," said the small one.

"Owen's bus has done everything again," said the large one. "That bus is held together with hope and fencing wire."

"He was in the pub Tuesday. Shocking state."

"He's been in a shocking state six years."

"Since the boy."

"Since the boy," the large one agreed, and then lowered his voice, though not by much, the way people lower their voices in a cave that has been designed to carry sound. "They reckon Daniel's down a hole at the Eighteen Mile. That's what Lyle reckons. Went down after he pushed the Nash kid, couldn't live with it. Owen won't have it said. Josie won't have it said either, but Josie wouldn't have it said if he walked in the door with blood on his hands."

"Josie's loyal."

"Josie's a saint. Married to Owen, she'd have to be."

Gus, behind them, put a plate down on the counter rather harder than was necessary. The two men looked round at him, and then at each other, and the small one cleared his throat and said something about the cricket.

I paid at the till. Gus took my money in silence.

"Josie Prior," I said. "At the op shop. She's married to Owen Tully?"

Gus counted my change into my palm, one coin at a time. "Fourteen years married. Together longer. Daniel was six when she came. His real mother went to Perth and did not come back." He closed the till. "Daniel was her boy. Not her blood. Her boy. You understand?"

"I think so."

"Those two," said Gus, and nodded towards the stools without looking at them, "talk too much. Everybody in this town talks too much about that night, and nobody knows anything." He looked at me over the half-moons. "You are collecting their form, I think. The Tullys. They are paper."

"I can't discuss who I'm collecting from."

"No," said Gus. "Of course. Good." And he seemed, oddly, pleased.

* * *

The Kestrel was the dot I had passed on my first Monday, the one with the hand-lettered sign on the sheet of tin. It sat at the end of a gravel track off the Seventeen Mile Road, about four kilometres out of town, cut into the side of a long low rise that the miners called the Kestrel because, Pam told me, a kestrel had nested in the old headframe there for twenty years. The headframe was gone. The kestrels were presumably elsewhere. The dugout had a face of dressed sandstone blocks and a door painted the dark red of dried blood and two windows with lace curtains, and in the cutting to the side, under a shade sail, sat the battered white four-wheel-drive Coaster that said PAINTED RANGE TOURS on its flank, its bonnet up.

It was a quarter past five on Tuesday the eighteenth of August. The light was going gold and long. The wind had died to nothing and the air had that particular stillness of a desert evening when every sound carries for a kilometre: a crow, a generator somewhere, the tick of my own engine cooling.

The grey dot had gone amber on my device that morning, which meant the household had rung the inquiries line and asked for collection. I had not been told who had rung. I did not need to be.

Josie opened the door before I knocked. She must have heard the car. She was in the same flannelette shirt, or one of its siblings, and she had a large envelope in her hand, the Bureau's reply-paid envelope, and her face

was set in a way I recognised from the faces of Year Twelve students walking into an exam room: not frightened, exactly, but braced, everything already decided and nothing to be done about it now except go through with it.

"You came," she said.

"You rang."

"I rang." She held out the envelope. It was not sealed. The flap stood open. "It's done. It's all done. You have to check it, don't you? Make sure it's filled in."

"I'm meant to check it's complete. Yes. I can do that here, with you, if you'd like. In case there's anything missing."

"No." She said it quickly. Then, more slowly, "No. You take it. I'd rather you looked at it somewhere else."

Behind her the dugout went back into the hill. I could see a kitchen: brown and cream lino, a laminex table not unlike Ray's, a clock in the shape of a cat with eyes that went from side to side, a television on a bench showing the six o'clock news from Adelaide with the sound off. At the table, with his back to the door, sat a man. He was long and lean and his shoulders were very broad and very still, and he had a grey beanie on his head, indoors, and his hands, which I could see on either side of him on the table, were large and flat and motionless, like two things that had been set down and forgotten. He did not turn round. He did not move at all. He was the man I had seen hosing the bus. I knew that the way you know a voice on the radio. He was listening to every word.

"Owen," said Josie, not turning, "this is Ray's sister. Mags. She's doing the census."

The man at the table said nothing. The cat clock's eyes went left and right. Left and right.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, to his back.

Nothing. Then, after a long time, one of the large flat hands lifted itself off the table perhaps two centimetres, and set itself down again.

Josie gave me the envelope. When I took it her fingers held on to it for a moment, exactly as Pam Hartigan's had held on to the keys, as if there were something still to be handed over that was not the object itself.

"It says everyone," she said. Her voice was low and very even. "Doesn't it. On the front. It says to include everyone who was here."

"Everyone who was in the dwelling on census night. Yes."

"Right," said Josie. "Right. Well. That's what I did." And she let go.

I said thank you. I said she might hear from the Bureau if there were any queries. I said the things I had said at forty doors that week, the formula, and she nodded at each of them as if ticking them off, and then she said, "Drive careful. Seventeen Mile's bad after dark," and closed the dark red door, quite gently, and I was standing in the gold light with a crow going over and the envelope in my hand.

I put it in the satchel. I did not look. I drove back along the Seventeen Mile Road towards the lights of the town coming on, one at a time, in the hills.

* * *

It was not unusual for a householder to give me an unsealed form. Many of them did, and many of them asked me to check it, and some of them asked me to check it out of their sight, because a form shows things about a person they would rather not watch you read: that they are older than they look, or poorer, or alone, or that the man in the house is not the father, or that the woman cannot write. I had a procedure. I sat at Ray's laminex table with a cup of tea and the satchel, and I took out each form and went through it page by page, checking only that every box that needed an answer had one, and that the persons listed in the front matched the persons answering inside, and then I sealed it in its envelope, signed across the seal, logged the code in the app, and put it in the zip compartment of the satchel for the courier. I did not read the forms. That is to say, I read them the way a proofreader reads, for the shape of the answers rather than their sense. I had done thirty-eight that way in a week. I was good at it.

I did the Kestrel form last, at about eight o'clock, with the dog asleep on the floor of Ray's room and the dugout so quiet I could hear the refrigerator thinking.

How many people, including visitors, were in this dwelling on the night of Tuesday 11 August 2026?

In the box, in black biro, pressed in so hard the paper had been dented on the page behind it: 3.

Person 1. TULLY, OWEN JAMES. Male. Born 1963. Sixty-three.

Person 2. PRIOR, JOSEPHINE ANNE. Female. Born 1970. Fifty-six. Relationship to Person 1: husband or wife.

Person 3.

I read it the way I had read thirty-eight others, for the shape. And then I stopped, and went back, and read it for its sense, because there is a point at which you cannot not.

TULLY, DANIEL OWEN. Male. Date of birth: 03/03/2001. Age: 25. Relationship to Person 1: son.

I put my cup down. I noticed, with the detached part of my mind that always notices, that I put it down with exactly the small hard sound I had heard in the wall on my first night, ceramic on laminex, and that I did not like noticing it.

I read the rest of Person 3. It was complete. Every box. Josie had filled it in, I could tell, because the hand was the same as for Person 2, a careful upright print that pressed too hard. She had given Daniel Owen Tully a country of birth, Australia, and a language, English only, and a religion, which she had left as *No religion*, and then, in a smaller hand, *(Anglican, baptised)*, in the margin, where the scanner would not see it. She had ticked that he had completed Year 11. She had left blank the questions about his job, his income, his hours worked last week, his method of travel to work, which was correct; the form told you to leave those blank for a person who had not worked. She had ticked, for the question that asked whether the person had ever served in the defence force, *No*.

And at the question *Where does the person usually live?*, she had ticked the box that said *This address*, and then crossed it out, with a single firm line, and then, beside it, ticked it again.

I sat back in the chair. Somewhere above me, at the top of the vent shaft, the cowl turned and squeaked, turned and squeaked.

* * *

Here is what I knew. I set it out on a clean page of the spiral pad, the way I used to set out a problem on the board for the class, the given and the required.

Given: in October 2019 a boy named Daniel Tully, aged eighteen, had gone missing on the night another boy died on the Eighteen Mile. His ute

had been found at the edge of the old diggings. Police had searched the shafts and found nothing. The town said he was dead, down a hole. Frank Hollis said so. The two men at the Lucky Strike counter said so, citing Lyle Baird. Owen Tully, by every account, would not have it said; Josie would not have it said; and Josie had written, on a federal document, in biro pressed hard enough to dent the page behind, that on the night of Tuesday 11 August 2026 her husband's son had been present in her house.

Required: to know which of these things was true.

Possibility one: error. A mistake in completing the form. But it was not a careless form. It was the most careful form I had seen all week. Every box that should have been filled was filled and every box that should have been blank was blank. People who make errors do not cross out *This address* and tick it again.

Possibility two: grief. A stepmother who could not leave the boy off. I had read about this. The guidance booklet had a paragraph on it, three lines long and very kind, about households that included a person who had died, and what the officer should gently say. People did it. Of course they did. I had wanted to write my brother into my own form a week before, and I had not loved him half as well as Josie Prior had plainly loved that boy. If she had written in a dead son on census night, it would be a lie only in the way that some poems are lies.

Possibility three.

I did not write possibility three on the page. I sat and looked at the space where it would go. Then, because I am who I am, I wrote a 3 and a full stop and left the rest of the line blank, and that was worse than writing it.

Because there was the dented page. There was *It says everyone, doesn't it.* There was the back of a man at a table who had not moved, and his hand lifting two centimetres and coming down. There was a cat clock looking left and right. There was a date of birth, 03/03/2001, whose numerals had been gone over twice, slowly, like a name piped on a cake and then iced again.

There was a dead man on a form. Or there was a man on a form whom everyone believed dead. The arithmetic of those two sentences was the whole of the problem, and I could not do it, because I did not have enough data, and I knew, sitting at my brother's table at a quarter to nine on a Tuesday night, that there was no one in the world I could ask for more.

* * *

I sealed the envelope. My hands did it; I watched them. Lick of the strip, the press along the flap with the side of the thumb, my signature across the seal in black biro, the date. I logged the code in the app and the amber dot went green, and somewhere in Port Augusta Siobhan Kerrigan's dashboard ticked up by one household, three persons, and she would never know, and nor would anyone, and that was the law.

Then I went into the spare room and got my folder out of my bag. I had brought the paper copy Lorraine gave me. I took it back to the table and sat under the light and read it, a third time.

I will not, either directly or indirectly, divulge or communicate to any person any information given to me under the Act.

Not to a neighbour. Not to a journalist. Not to a court. Not to a sergeant with three stripes who had told me not to drive on the Eighteen Mile after dark because she did not want to come out looking for me with a torch.

I read it slowly, the way I had read the external exam rules every November for thirty-one years, looking for the sentence that would bite. I read it for what it said. Then I read it for what it didn't. It didn't say anything about what I was allowed to know. It said nothing at all about what I was supposed to do with a thing I knew and could not tell. It was a clean, short, admirable document, and it had been written by people who imagined that once you had sealed an envelope you were finished with it.

At about eleven Toff came up the passage from Ray's room and stood in the doorway of the kitchen looking at me. Then he came and put his chin on my knee, which he had never done before, and kept it there, heavy and warm, his eyes going from my face to the satchel on the table and back. I put my hand on his head. We stayed like that for a long time, the two of us, keeping it.

CHAPTER 6

Corey Nash

The Shell servo stood at the top of Hutchison Street where the highway came in, a square of concrete and four bowsers under a canopy that had once been yellow and was now the colour of a smoker's fingers. In the morning the low sun came in under the canopy and lit everything sideways, so that the bowsers threw long shadows across the forecourt like a row of men waiting for something. I filled the Corolla at pump two. Fifty-one litres. The price was forty-one cents a litre higher than in Norwood, which I had expected, and which I worked out in my head, from habit, as a little under twenty-one dollars of extra cost per tank for living a long way from anywhere.

Inside it was warm and smelt of pies in the warmer and the floor cleaner they used on the lino. There were racks of chips and fishing lures and phone chargers and tyre gauges, a fridge of iced coffee in eight flavours, and a counter with a till, and behind the till a woman in a red Shell polo shirt with her hair dragged back into a clip, who did not look up from her screen.

"Pump two," I said.

"Ninety-four forty."

I paid with a card. While the machine thought about it I looked at the till, because it was in front of me, and there, taped to its side with clear tape gone yellow and lifting at the corners, was a photograph.

It was a boy in a footy jumper, red and white hoops, the jumper of the Calder's Find Diggers, which I knew because Lyle Baird's card had a small version of it in one corner. He was perhaps sixteen or seventeen. He had a broad freckled face and red hair cut very short, and he was grinning at whoever held the camera with the whole of his face, eyes screwed up against the sun, one front tooth slightly crossed over the other. He was holding a football against his chest with both hands as if somebody might try to take it off him. The tape had been replaced more than once. There were the ghosts

of older pieces of tape around the edges, a frame of them, like the rings of a tree.

The woman behind the counter had stopped looking at her screen. She was looking at me looking.

"That's my son," she said. "Corey."

I said I was sorry. It was what you say. She did not seem to hear it.

"Seventeen," she said. "He fell down a hole on Lyle Baird's claim, the night of the eighteenth of October twenty-nineteen. They had an inquest. They said he was on his own." She tore the receipt off the machine and held it out to me. Her hands were very steady. "He wasn't on his own. He never went anywhere on his own in his life. He went out that night with Daniel Tully and Daniel Tully came back without him, or didn't come back at all, and that's not an accident, that's a choice." She let go of the receipt. "You're Ray Aspinall's sister."

"Yes."

"He used to buy his tobacco here. Every Tuesday." She looked at the photograph, not at me. "Every time, he'd stand where you're standing and look at Corey. Never said anything. Just looked." Her eyes came back to mine, flat and grey and very tired. "I used to wonder what he was thinking. Now I can't ask him."

There was a man behind me with a pie and a carton of milk. Tash Nash, which was the name on her badge, looked past me at him, and I was finished. I went out into the sideways light and sat in the Corolla with the receipt in my hand and did not start the engine for some time.

* * *

Gus told it to me that evening, after closing, at the table under the photograph of the white church on the blue sea. He told it the way he cooked, carefully, with attention to the order of things, and he did not let me interrupt.

"Corey and Daniel," he said, "were friends. Since they were small. Corey was a year younger. Corey was loud, Daniel was quiet. Corey was the footy, Daniel was the books. You see this sometimes with boys. One is the noise and one is the ears." He turned his coffee cup on its saucer. "Daniel had trouble when he was sixteen. He took opal from a heap behind somebody's

blower. Not much. A pocket. He was caught, he went to court in Port Augusta, he got a good behaviour bond, a conviction. In this town, a conviction for stealing opal, that is like a tattoo on your face. People remember."

"Whose heap?"

Gus looked at me. "Lyle's," he said. "It was Lyle's blower."

I let that sit.

"After that," Gus went on, "Daniel worked for your brother. On Ray's claim, on the Eighteen Mile. Nineteen-eighteen. Twenty-eighteen." He corrected himself without embarrassment. "Ray took him on when nobody else would. Paid him a little. Taught him. How to read the ground, how to know where the opal will be, how to cut. Daniel was good. Ray said he had the hands." He paused. "Ray brought him here. Fridays. The boy would eat spanakopita and read a book at the table and say thank you every time I put a plate down. Every time. Eighteen years old. You know how many eighteen-year-olds say thank you every time?"

"Approximately none."

"Approximately none." He nodded. "So. October. A Friday night. Corey and Daniel go out on the Eighteen Mile in Daniel's ute. Ratting, they call it. Noodling on someone else's claim at night, with torches, on the mullock, looking for what the blower missed. It is illegal. Everybody did it once. Ray did it. I did it, in nineteen-seventy-something, God forgive me." He crossed himself absently. "Saturday morning Corey's mother wakes up and he is not home. Saturday afternoon somebody finds his torch at the edge of a shaft on Lyle's claim. They get the rescue people from Coober, they go down. Corey is at the bottom. Twenty-two metres. His neck."

He was quiet a moment.

"And Daniel's ute," he said, "is found Sunday, at the far end of the old Eighteen Mile, four, five kilometres from Lyle's claim. Empty. Keys in it. And Daniel is nowhere. They search a week. The police, the SES, miners with cameras on ropes. They look down every hole they can find near the ute. Hundreds of holes. Nothing. Then they stop."

"And the town decided."

"The town decided," said Gus, "very quickly. A boy with a conviction for stealing from Lyle's heap, out on Lyle's claim at night, and the other boy

dead, and he runs. What do you think? Lyle said to the police, maybe they argued over a stone. Lyle said it kindly. He said he hoped not. He said Daniel was a troubled boy. He said it at the footy club, he said it at the Progress meeting, he said it at the Drift, with the drinks. Very sad, very kind." Gus finished his coffee. "Lyle paid for Corey's funeral. Did you know? The whole thing. The wake at the footy club. A plaque on the scoreboard."

"That was generous."

"Lyle is very generous," said Gus, as he had said before, and this time I heard it: the faint flatness at the bottom of the sentence, like a step that is a centimetre lower than you expect.

"Do you think Daniel pushed him?"

He took a long time. He took off his half-moons and folded them and put them in his shirt pocket.

"I think," he said, "that I made that boy spanakopita forty times, and he said thank you forty times. That is what I think. That is all I know." He stood up and took my cup. "And I think your brother did not believe it either. He came here the Friday after, alone, and he sat where you are sitting, and he ate nothing. And after that he never brought anybody on Fridays again. He came alone." He took the cups to the counter. "Only, he started to buy cake."

* * *

The Progress Association hall had a library. It was a pair of glass-fronted cabinets along the back wall, under a framed aerial photograph of the town from 1974, and it contained the minutes of every Progress meeting since 1961, a set of Australian Encyclopaedias, the collected bulletins of the Mining Registrar's field office, and a row of thick ring binders labelled in Pam Hartigan's neat hand: DIGGER CLIPPINGS 2015 TO 2017, 2018 TO 2020, 2021 TO PRESENT. The *Digger* was the town's paper, a monthly, eight pages, photocopied in the Progress hall and stapled by volunteers.

"You can have a look," said Pam, unlocking the cabinet for me on the Thursday morning. She did not ask what I was looking for. That was its own kind of comment. "Put them back in order, that's all I ask. People never put them back in order."

I took the 2018 to 2020 binder to a trestle table by the window and turned the plastic sleeves.

The *Digger* of November 2019 had it on the front page. A photograph of the scoreboard at the footy oval with a wreath on it. A headline: VALE COREY. Underneath, the story, written with the careful, wounded restraint of a small paper reporting on its own: that Corey James Nash, 17, had died after a fall on the Eighteen Mile field in the early hours of Saturday 19 October; that a second young man, Daniel Tully, 18, had been missing since the same night; that a search by police and volunteers had been scaled back after eight days; that police were not seeking anyone else in relation to Corey's death; that the community's thoughts were with the Nash family, and with Owen and Josie. That last sentence had been added, I thought, after an argument.

Pam had also clipped the *Advertiser*. The Adelaide paper had given it a half-page on 21 October: OPAL FIELD TRAGEDY: TEEN DEAD, MATE MISSING. There was a photograph of each boy. Corey's was the one from the till, cropped to his face. Daniel's was a school photograph, the kind taken against a mottled blue backdrop, in which a thin dark-haired boy with a long face looked at the camera with an expression of polite endurance, as if waiting for someone to finish a sentence. The newsprint had broken his face into dots. Through his left eyebrow there was a pale line, a small clean gap in the hair, that might have been a scar or might have been a flaw in the printing. I looked at it for longer than I needed to. I could not tell.

There was a quote from Lyle Baird, identified as the holder of the claim. *It's every miner's nightmare. Those boys knew they shouldn't be out there at night. I'd been onto those shafts, I'd been getting them capped. I just pray Daniel turns up safe.*

In the 2021 to Present binder, near the front, was the inquest. The *Digger*, July 2021: CORONER RULES ON COREY. The Deputy State Coroner had sat at Port Augusta for three days in June. She had found that Corey Nash died of injuries sustained in an accidental fall into an uncapped test shaft on a claim held by Mr Lyle Baird; that the shaft had been one of several on the claim that were, at the time, the subject of a notice from the Mining Registrar's inspector requiring them to be capped or fenced; that

Mr Baird had given evidence that the work was underway and that the shaft in question had been due to be capped that week. She had found that there was *no evidence that any other person was present at the time of the fall*. As to Daniel Owen Tully, she had made an open finding: she could not be satisfied that he had died, nor that he had not.

I read that sentence many times. *No evidence that any other person was present.*

It is a very precise sentence. I admired it the way I had admired the undertaking. It does not say that no other person was present. It says that the evidence did not show one. A coroner is not permitted to find what the evidence will not bear, and she had not. She had drawn the line exactly where her knowledge stopped. But I had taught probability to sixteen-year-olds for three decades, and the first thing you teach them, after the coin and the die, is that the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence: that if you look for a thing in the wrong place, or with the wrong instrument, or not at all, then not finding it tells you nothing about the world and everything about the search.

Corey Nash had not been alone. His mother said so, and the town said so, and the coroner's own words left the door open by the width of their precision. Somebody had been on that claim. And somebody had driven a ute five kilometres in the dark to the far end of the diggings and left it there with the keys in, and walked away.

Walked where?

I took out my spiral pad. I wrote down the dates. Friday 18 October, night. Saturday 19, Corey found. Sunday 20, the ute. Eight days' search. Hundreds of holes, Gus said. I tried to estimate how many shafts there were on the Eighteen Mile. The aerial photographs in the Registrar's bulletins showed them as a pale rash across the ground, and I counted the heaps in one square of the grid and multiplied out, and got somewhere between eleven and fourteen thousand. A week of searching with cameras on ropes might reach, generously, four or five hundred of them. If you believed he was down a hole, it was quite possible he was down a hole nobody had looked into. The probability that a search of five hundred shafts out of twelve thousand would miss a body that was there was something over

ninety-five per cent. The town's version was mathematically perfectly sound.

So was the other one.

I put the pencil down. I sat in the Progress hall with the wind fretting at the iron roof and Pam's laminator ticking as it cooled, and I understood, with a clarity I did not enjoy, what my position was.

I could not ask Gus whether he thought Daniel Tully was alive. I could not ask Tash Nash what she would do if he were. I could not ask Sergeant Petrakis what the law said about a man the coroner had not been satisfied was dead appearing on a federal document seven years later, because the question itself was the disclosure. Every question I could think of carried the form inside it like a stone in a peach. If I asked anyone anything, I would be telling them.

And I would not tell. I had signed. I had read it three times. Josie Prior had put that boy on the form because the form said everyone, and because, I thought, she trusted the form to keep him; and if the form could not keep him, then nothing in this country could keep anything, and I was not going to be the one who proved it.

Equally, I found, I was not going to forget.

I wrote nothing more in the pad. I put the binders back in order, which Pam noticed, and nodded at, and I went out into the wind.

On the way home I stopped at the servo for milk. It was nearly dark. Tash Nash was alone behind the counter, and as I came in she was pressing a fresh strip of tape down over the corner of the photograph where the old tape had lifted, smoothing it with her thumbnail, slowly, from one end to the other, the way you would smooth a child's hair off his forehead. She did not look up. I took my milk to the counter and paid for it and neither of us said anything, and on the drive up Treloar's Hill with the headlights picking out the white heaps one after another I found that I was counting them, and that I could not stop.

CHAPTER 7

The Green Ledger

Josie brought the boxes on the Friday morning at eight, before the op shop opened. She had them flat-packed in the tray of a little Suzuki ute with a cracked windscreen, twenty of them, tied with baling twine, and she carried them to the green door in two armfuls and leaned them against the face wall and did not come in.

"There's tape," she said, and handed me a roll. "And a texta. Write what's in them on the side. Not *misc.* I hate *misc.* Nobody ever opens *misc.*"

"I'll be specific."

"You will, too. You've got the look." She stood in the cutting with her hands in the pockets of her flannelette shirt. The morning was clear and very cold and her breath came out white. Toff, who had slept in Ray's room again, came up the passage and out past my legs and went to her and pushed his head against her knee, and she bent and took his ears in both hands and held them for a moment, the way you would hold the face of someone who had come back from a long way off.

"He knows you," I said.

"Everyone knows Toff." She let him go. She looked past me, into the dugout, down the passage, to where the light from the last bulb fell on the doorway of Ray's room. "You been in his room much?"

"Not much. I sleep in the spare."

"Right." She nodded. "Right. Do it however you want. Only," and she stopped, and I saw her decide how to say it, "don't rush the books. If there's books. Ray's books. People always rush the books."

"I won't."

"And the big wardrobe. That's jarrah. That came from his mother's place, he said. That'd be worth something to someone." She said it lightly. She was looking at the dog. "Leave it till last, maybe. It'll be heavy."

She went back to the Suzuki. With the door open she paused, one foot in, and looked at me across the roof.

"The form," she said. "It's gone? You sent it?"

"Everything I collect goes to the Bureau."

"Good," said Josie. "Good." She got in. "Don't tell me anything," she said through the window. "I know you can't. I'm just saying, don't."

She drove off down Treloar's Hill with the empty tray rattling and a plume of white dust following her like a thought she could not shake.

* * *

I started with the front room, because it was easier. It had not been, I think, where he lived so much as where he received. The kitchen gave up its secrets quickly: a cupboard of tinned tomatoes and baked beans and pickled herrings, a drawer of rubber bands and Lucky Strike takeaway menus and keys that fitted nothing, and in the back of the cutlery drawer a set of six silver teaspoons with a P on the handles that had been our grandmother's and that I had assumed went with the house in Port Pirie. He must have taken them that day. Out of the box. Before he put it down between us. I held them for a while and then put them in a box and wrote on it, in texta, TEASPOONS (NANA PEARCE), which was not *misc.*, and which I could hardly read when I had finished writing it.

By noon I had done the front room. By three I had done the bathroom and the hall cupboard, which held a vacuum cleaner, a fishing rod, a box of old *Australian Gems and Crafts* magazines and a framed certificate of competency in shot-firing from 1998. I took the spare room's few things into the passage: a chest of drawers containing nothing but winter blankets and a tin of mothballs.

At four I went into his room.

I did the chest of drawers first. Shirts, mostly flannelette, mostly checked, mostly blue, folded with a care that surprised me; as a boy he had kept his clothes in a pile on the floor that our mother called the Leaning Tower. Jeans with the knees gone. Socks paired and rolled. Three good shirts on hangers on a hook on the back of the door, and one tie, navy, which I recognised, after a while, as the tie he had worn to our mother's funeral, standing at the other end of the chapel from me, not looking at me, and not looking away.

Then the wardrobe. I put my hands on the brass handles of its tall doors and pulled, and the doors did not move. They were locked. I looked at the keyhole, a small dark slot in an escutcheon of tarnished brass, and remembered the third key in Pam's envelope, the one she did not know. I fetched it from the bowl by the sink. It was too small; it went into the slot and turned nowhere. I tried every key in the drawer of keys that fitted nothing. None of them fitted this.

I stood with my forehead against the jarrah. It was cool and smelt faintly of linseed oil. Somewhere inside it, I supposed, his clothes hung on their hangers in the dark, his good jacket, his winter coat. I thought: leave it till last. Josie said. It'll be heavy.

Then I got down on my knees to look under the bed.

* * *

It was in a plastic tub, the kind with a clip-on lid, pushed right to the back against the wall, behind a pair of work boots and a box of shotgun cartridges with no shotgun to go with them. Inside the tub was a folded army blanket, and inside the blanket was a book.

It was a ledger. A proper one, the old kind, foolscap, bound in green cloth gone grey at the corners where a thumb had held it, with a red leather label on the spine on which someone, a long time ago, had stamped in gold the word ACCOUNTS. I sat down on the floor with my back against the bare mattress and opened it on my knees.

The first entry was March 2014. A month after the hallway. In my brother's square left-handed capitals: *START AGAIN.* Then below it, in the same hand but smaller, the ruled columns of a working miner: date, claim, weight in carats, description, buyer, price, running total.

I read it for its shape, the way I had read the forms. Then, as with the Kestrel form, I found I could not keep reading it that way.

There were sales. Not many at first. Ray had been, it was clear from these columns, a mostly unsuccessful miner, which I had always assumed and had never had the satisfaction of confirming. *11 ct potch w. colour, O.T., $140. 4 ct crystal chips, O.T., $95.* The O.T. recurred through 2015 and 2016 and 2017; Owen Tully had been a buyer then, before the tour bus, and my brother had sold him small sad parcels of not much, and the running total in

the right-hand column went up by tens and fifties and, once, triumphantly, in June 2017, by eight hundred dollars. *Nice bit of crystal. Thought of M.*

That was the year of the card that said FOUND A NICE BIT OF CRYSTAL THIS YEAR, THOUGHT OF YOU, NO IDEA WHY.

In September of every year there was a single line with no figures in it. *Card to M.* 2014. 2015. 2016. Each one in the date column for the week before my birthday. *Card to M. Kookaburra. Card to M. Giraffe, all they had.* I put my hand flat on the page.

In 2018 a new set of initials began to appear in the margins, not in the buyer column but beside the claim column, small and in pencil: *w. D.* With D. *Worked the north drive w. D. D. found a trace.* And then in October 2019 the entries stopped. There was nothing for eleven days. Then, on 30 October, a single line, not in a column at all, written across the page in pencil so hard it had torn the paper slightly at the end of the stroke:

He's alive.

I looked at that for a long time. Then I turned the page.

From November 2019 the ledger changed. The buyers changed: the O.T. disappeared and was replaced by other initials, and by *Drift buyer* and *HK man at Drift* and *Coober*. The sizes of the parcels changed, and the descriptions. *18 ct, black crystal, rolling flash, cut & polished. 6 stones, cut, nice red on black.* Cut and polished: Ray had never cut a stone in his life, as far as I knew, he had always sold rough. The prices changed. The running total began to go up not by tens but by hundreds, and then by thousands. And in a new column, ruled in by hand with a pencil and a ruler down the right edge of every page, there was a heading that said only *D.*

D. half. $1,140. November 2019. *D. half. $2,600. D. half. $375.* Every sale, from that November onward, split down the middle with a ruler, and the second half written in that narrow pencilled column, as if it were owed.

And among the figures, in the margins, in the gaps between weeks, small notes. I read them all. I read them as if they were addressed to me.

D. 19 today. Didn't want a fuss. Had a fuss.

D. cut his first gem. Better than mine. Didn't tell him.

Wet week. D. low. Crib till 3.

D. read Moby-Dick, hated it. Said Ahab should have got a job. Lent it to Frank, see what he makes of it.

D. asked for Patrick White. God help him. Gave him Voss.

D. finished Voss. Didn't hate it. Didn't say much. Sat up all night.

Josie, Tuesday. Told her. Should have done it a year ago.

Sold the big black to HK man. 22 ct. $14,000. D. half $7,000. D. says put it in the jar. Put it in the jar.

Hot. 47 in the shade on the Eighteen. Worked nights.

D. 24 today. Cake from Gus.

That one was in the week ending 7 March 2025, beside a sale of four small stones to the Drift buyer for six hundred and forty dollars, D. half, three hundred and twenty.

* * *

I want to be accurate about what I did next, because it is the only thing in this account of which I am truly ashamed.

I began the sum. I saw *24 today* in March 2025, and I subtracted, without wanting to, the way your hand goes to a hot pan: born March 2001. I saw a date of birth on a form I had sealed on Tuesday night, the numerals gone over twice. The two numbers moved towards each other across my mind like two trains on a single line in a textbook problem, *at what time will they meet?*, and I knew the answer, I could feel it arriving, and I stopped.

I am a woman who finishes sums. I have marked something like forty thousand exam papers and I have never once left a working half-done on a page. I did not finish this one. I put my pencil down inside my own head and I said to myself, in my classroom voice: D. is a letter. D. could be anybody. D. could be a Dimitri, a Des, a Dave; in a town of fourteen hundred people, with perhaps seven hundred men and boys, the number whose names begin with D would be, on a reasonable distribution of names, something like forty. Forty Ds. And a week in March. One week in fifty-two. And that was as far as I let it go. I did not multiply. I did not compare. I knew that if I compared, the forty would fall to one, and I would be sitting on my dead brother's bedroom floor holding a ledger that said my brother had spent six years doing something that the coroner, and the police, and the town, and the mother at the till of the Shell servo, did not know; and I could not know it. Not that night. I had sealed it in an envelope. I had promised.

So I read the ledger instead.

I read it from the beginning to the end, every line, all night, sitting on the floor of his room with the bulb burning over me and the dog asleep against my hip. I read every sale and every share and every note. I added up, because I could not help it and because it was safe, the whole of the pencilled column headed D.: from November 2019 to December 2025 it came to one hundred and twelve thousand, four hundred and sixty dollars. I added up what Ray had kept for himself: almost exactly the same. He had taken half. Not more. My brother, who had borrowed against our mother's house and lost it, had spent six years splitting every dollar down the middle with a ruler.

Card to M. Galah. September 2024.

September 2025, the week before my birthday: *Wrote card to M. Didn't post it. What's the use. Next year.*

The last entry was dated 4 December 2025. *Sold 31 ct to Drift buyer, $4,800. D. half $2,400. Tired. Chest bad. D. says see the doctor in Coober. Will. Monday.*

He had died, the police said, on or about the ninth. A Tuesday. He had not got to Coober on the Monday. I knew that without being told, the way I had known which chair. He had never once in his life finished anything.

The tears, when they came, were not the kind I was used to. I was used to the efficient kind, two or three at a funeral, managed with a tissue and a hand on the elbow of the person beside you. These came up out of me like something being pumped from a great depth, with a noise I did not recognise as mine, and they went on for a long time. Toff woke and sat up and licked my wrist, methodically, as if it were a job, and I let him.

* * *

It was after three when I heard it.

I had stopped crying. I was sitting very still on the floor with the ledger closed on my knees and my head back against the mattress, looking up at the black round mouth of the vent shaft in the ceiling, where no stars showed because the night outside was as dark as the night in. I heard the cowl, turning. I heard my own breathing settling. And then I heard something else, behind the wardrobe. Behind the wall.

A long, soft, scraping sound, like something heavy being slid a short distance across a floor of stone. Then a pause. Then a small sound, two or three quick light taps, the kind of sound a person makes setting things in a row on a shelf.

Toff was on his feet before I was. Every hair on his back was up, a red ridge from his neck to his tail, and he was growling, very low, a sound I felt in my own chest more than heard, facing the wardrobe with his head down and his feet planted. I had not heard him growl before. It was a serious sound, an old dog's sound, a sound with history in it.

"Who's there?" I said. My voice came out thin and the rock swallowed it.

Nothing.

The growl went on. Then, quite suddenly, it stopped. Toff lifted his head. He took a step towards the wardrobe, and then another, his nose working at the crack under the drawer, and the ridge of hair along his back lay down, and his tail, which had been stiff and low, began to move. Slowly at first, from side to side. Then faster. Then he gave a small high whine, a puppy's sound, ridiculous from that grey muzzle, and pressed his whole body against the base of the jarrah and wagged so hard his hindquarters swung with it.

I got up. I put my ear against the wardrobe door. It was cool and smelt of linseed. I heard my own blood, and the cowl, and the dog's tail thumping against the wood. Nothing else. I tried the brass handles. They were locked, as they had been at four o'clock, as they had been, presumably, since December.

"Dugouts settle," I said aloud, to the dog, to the wardrobe, to my brother. "Stone moves."

Toff looked up at me with his tail still going and an expression on his face that I can only describe as pity, and lay down against the wardrobe, and put his nose to the crack, and waited.

CHAPTER 8

Nothing Left In It

Lyle Baird rang on the Saturday, on my mobile, which I had not given him.

"Pam," he said cheerfully, before I could ask. "Don't blame her, I bullied her. Listen. I've been thinking you've been here a fortnight and nobody's shown you a mine. That's a disgrace. That's like going to Paris and nobody shows you the tower. Tomorrow? I do the tour myself, Sundays, for the tourists, ten o'clock. Come as my guest. Then I'll run you out to the Eighteen Mile and show you Ray's claim, if you haven't been. You shouldn't go on your own. I'd never forgive myself."

I said yes. I told myself I said yes because I had not yet seen my brother's claim and I could not drive the Corolla on the Eighteen Mile without risking the Corolla and myself, and Sergeant Petrakis had asked me not to. That was true. It was also true that I wanted to see the man up close, in his own country, and that I could not have told anyone why without telling them about a form.

* * *

The Drift stood at the north end of Hutchison Street, cut into the base of a long hill, with a frontage of honey-coloured sandstone blocks and a set of smoked-glass doors and a sign in gold script: THE DRIFT. UNDERGROUND LUXURY. Inside, the foyer had been carved into the rock and polished, so that the pick marks had been smoothed away and the bands of colour in the sandstone ran round the walls in clean stripes of cream and rose and plum, like the inside of a very expensive cake. There was a reception desk made of a single slab of something, a display case of opal jewellery under spotlights, and a framed photograph of Lyle Baird shaking hands with a former Premier.

The showcase mine was through a door at the back. Lyle was waiting for us there in a hard hat with a lamp on it, eleven of us: a busload of grey nomads from Bendigo, a Japanese couple in matching windbreakers, a

family from Brisbane with two boys who could not stop touching the walls, and me. He handed out hard hats from a rack. He put mine on my head himself and tightened the strap under my chin with his enormous fingers, gently, as if I were one of the boys.

"Right," he said, to all of us, in a voice that filled the drive without being raised. "Welcome to the Drift. My name's Lyle, and I've been digging holes in this country for forty-six years, and I've got the back to prove it. Watch your heads. Stay with me. Don't lick the walls, I know it's tempting."

The family from Brisbane laughed. He was good. He was very good. He took us down a gently sloping drive lit by bulbs in wire cages, and he showed us the old way and the new way: a hand windlass and a bucket from the nineteen-twenties, a tunnelling machine like a monstrous dentist's drill, a blower with its hose disappearing up a shaft into a coin of daylight. He showed us where the opal had been. He shone his torch on a seam in the wall, a thin grey line in the sandstone no thicker than a pencil, and then he turned off all the lights.

We stood in absolute dark. One of the boys gasped. Then Lyle switched on a small ultraviolet lamp, and the seam lit up. Not with colour, exactly. With fire. A line of green and blue and a flicker of red, running through the rock, alive, as if somebody had drawn on the dark with a match.

"That," said Lyle Baird, softly, in the dark, "is why we're all mad."

It was a beautiful moment. I hated how beautiful it was.

On the way back up he walked beside me. He smelt of aftershave and dust.

"Ray ever bring you down a mine?" he said.

"We hadn't spoken for eleven years."

"No. No, he said something about that." He did not say what. "He was a dreamer, your brother. God love him. You need a bit of dreamer to do this. But you need a bit of accountant as well." He glanced at me sideways. "I'd say you're the accountant."

"Maths teacher."

"Same thing, out here." He laughed. "Come on. I'll get you a coffee and then we'll go for a drive."

* * *

His Hilux was white and new, with a steel bull bar and a bank of spotlights on the roof and a red-and-white Diggers sticker on the back window, and it rode over the corrugations of the Eighteen Mile track as if they were a rumour. He drove fast and talked the whole way, one hand on the wheel and the other pointing.

The Eighteen Mile was a different country from the fields round the town. The heaps here were older and lower and more weathered, slumped, many of them, into soft white humps with spinifex growing on their flanks. The tracks between them were faint and wandered. There were wrecks everywhere: a rusted blower chassis with no wheels, a caravan with its door hanging, the skeleton of an old headframe made of mulga logs bound with wire. And holes. I had thought I understood about the holes. Here they were the ground. Every few metres, a dark mouth, a metre across, sometimes less, with a ring of spill around it, and nothing else to mark it at all.

"See, this is what people don't get," said Lyle. "The tourists, they read the signs, they think it's a joke. DON'T WALK BACKWARDS, ha ha. But it's not. You step back to take a photo and you're gone. Twenty metres. Thirty. Nobody hears you. I've seen it, Mags. I've pulled people out. Not all of them alive." He slowed for a washout. "Every year somebody. A tourist, a drunk, a kid. It's a dangerous place. It's a dangerous business. People think it's all luck, opal, but it's not. It's knowing where not to put your feet."

"Is that your claim?"

We were passing a stretch of ground on the left where the heaps were fresher and whiter, and a new star-picket fence ran along the track for a few hundred metres with a sign wired to it every twenty metres or so. BAIRD MINING. PRIVATE CLAIM. DANGER: SHAFTS. NO ENTRY. The signs were new, the red still bright, the cable ties that held them to the pickets still white and stiff. Behind the fence I could see, among the heaps, a scatter of shaft collars, and three or four of them were capped: low square lids of grey concrete, flush with the ground, weathered to the colour of the gibber.

"That's me," said Lyle. "South block. I've got the north block as well, up the top." He did not slow down. He did not look at it. "That's where the Nash boy went. You'll have heard about that."

"A little."

"Terrible thing. Terrible. I was home in bed. Didn't hear till Saturday afternoon." He shook his head. "Those two shouldn't have been out there. Everyone knew it, nobody said it. The Tully boy had form, you know. Thieving. I caught him at my own heap, at sixteen, middle of the night, pockets full. I didn't want to press charges. His dad begged me not to. But you've got to, haven't you, or it's open slather." He sighed. "I gave that boy chances. People forget that."

I looked back through the rear window. The new signs went on along the fence, bright as flags. The old concrete caps squatted among the heaps behind them, grey and patient and part of the ground. I thought, idly, the way you notice a misprint, that the caps had been there a good deal longer than the signs, and that whoever had put up the signs had made sure there were plenty of them.

* * *

Ray's claim was two kilometres further on, over a low rise, in a shallow valley where the heaps were few and old. There was a headframe here, a proper one, of welded steel pipe painted a rust-red primer that had faded to pink, standing over a shaft with a winch beside it on a concrete pad. There was a shipping container with a padlock on it, a rainwater tank, an old Land Rover body with no engine, and a bench seat from a car set on two drums under a sheet of iron, facing east, where somebody had sat and looked at the view. The view was the Eighteen Mile, rolling away white and pink and grey to the horizon, under a sky so large it felt like being looked at.

Lyle stopped the Hilux by the headframe and we got out. The wind was cold and steady. He stood with his hands in his pockets and his hat tipped back and looked at the claim with a sort of fond regret, as a man looks at a car he once owned.

I walked over to the bench seat while he looked. It had been the back seat of something long ago, a Valiant perhaps, maroon vinyl split and mended with black tape, and someone had built a low table in front of it out of a cable reel. On the post that held up the iron, at shoulder height, two nails had been driven in side by side, and on each nail hung an enamel mug, blue with white speckles, upside down so the dust would not get in. Two mugs. The seat was long enough for two people, and its vinyl was worn pale in two

places, one at each end, with a dark undisturbed stripe between them where nobody had ever sat.

I counted that without meaning to. You do not hang two mugs for one man.

"He'd sit out here of an evening," said Lyle, behind me. "I'd see the ute from the rise. Just sit." He came and stood beside me and looked down at the cable reel, at the two pale patches on the vinyl, and his face did nothing at all. "You'll have been going through his things, I suppose. In the dugout. That's a hard job. Find anything?"

"Teaspoons," I said. "My grandmother's."

"Ah." He nodded slowly, as though teaspoons were a serious matter, and perhaps to him they were. "That's the stuff that gets you. The little things." He turned back to the headframe. "Well. Nothing worth a burglar's while, I'd say. Ray never kept much."

"Twenty-two thousand square metres," he said. "Ray had it fourteen years. Put down nine shafts, I reckon. Two drives off the main one." He nodded at the headframe. "There's nothing left in it, Mags. I'll be straight with you. He worked it out. There's no level left he hadn't been on. He did all right off it the last few years, I'll give him that, God knows how. Must have found a pocket. But it's done."

"Then why do you want it?"

He smiled at me, the big, pink, pleasant smile. He did not seem to mind the question at all.

"Because it squares off my north block," he said. "Because I'd rather have it than some cowboy. Because I'm sentimental, if you want the truth. Ray and I were neighbours fourteen years." He took a folded piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and held it out. "I've had my bloke in Port Augusta draw something up. For the claim, and for the Number Nine, the both together. Save you the bother of two sales. Have a look, no pressure, take it to your solicitor."

I unfolded it. It was a letter of offer, on Baird Mining letterhead. The figure was one hundred and eighty thousand dollars.

I knew what the Number Nine was worth. The probate valuation had come through in May: sixty-eight thousand dollars for the dugout and the land title, on Treloar's Hill, *subject to the condition of the excavation*. The

claim had been assessed at three and a half thousand. Seventy-one thousand five hundred, together. Lyle Baird was offering me two point five times what the government thought my brother's entire life was worth, for a hole with nothing left in it and a dugout he had never, as far as I knew, set foot in.

"That's very generous," I said.

"I'm a generous man. Ask anyone."

"I have," I said.

He laughed. He liked that. He put his hand on my shoulder for a moment, heavily, and took it away. "Have a think. Talk to Dunstan's. I'm not going anywhere." He looked down at the shaft, at the winch, at the empty bench seat under the iron. "One thing I would say. Before you sell to anyone. Even me. Get somebody in to look at the Number Nine. Properly. An engineer. That back wall's crumbly, you know, in his bedroom. Behind that big wardrobe. Sandstone's soft there, there's an old drive goes close by it from the Treloar days. I'd hate you to have a fall come down on you in the night. Don't want to lose another Aspinall."

I folded the letter of offer in half and in half again.

"I'll keep it in mind," I said.

* * *

He drove me back to the Drift and shook my hand at my car and told me again there was no hurry, none at all, and that the offer would stand, and that if the dugout ever got too much there was a room at the Drift with my name on it. Then he went inside with his hat in his hand, and through the smoked glass I saw him stop at the reception desk and say something to the young woman there, and laugh, and touch her arm.

I sat in the Corolla in the car park with the letter of offer on the passenger seat.

I had not told Lyle Baird which room was my brother's bedroom. I had not told him there was a wardrobe. It was not visible from the green door: you would have to come in, and walk down nine metres of passage, past the bathroom and the spare room, pulling the cords, and stand in the doorway of the last room, to see it. And then you would not know about the wall behind it, unless you had stood there with your hand on it, or someone had told you.

Ray might have told him. Over a beer, Lyle would say. Neighbours fourteen years.

But Gus had told me, in my first week, that Ray always said no to Lyle Baird. Every time Lyle asked. And I had been reading my brother's handwriting for two days, every line of it, and in six years of notes about books and birthdays and wet weeks and a dog, the name Baird did not appear once, not as a buyer, not as a neighbour, not as anything at all. My brother had written down a giraffe. He had written down the heat. He would have written down a beer.

I added up what I had, the way I had been taught to and had taught others, the given and the required. A man who had looked straight ahead as we drove past his own fence. Signs newer than the caps they guarded. A figure two and a half times what anyone else would pay. A wall he had never seen, and knew.

I did not get a total. It was not that kind of sum. I started the car and drove home up Treloar's Hill, and when I let myself in, Toff was lying in the passage outside Ray's room, and he did not come to meet me. He lifted his head and looked at me, and then looked back at the wardrobe, and his tail went once, softly, against the stone.

CHAPTER 9

Then She Did

Siobhan had told me to take a day off. She told me on the phone on the Thursday night, in the voice of a woman reading from a policy, that field officers were entitled to one rest day in seven, that the system showed I had worked seventeen in a row, and that if I did not take the Saturday she would have to fill in a form about it. "And you know how I feel about forms, love," she said, and laughed at her own joke for some time.

So on the Saturday, the twenty-ninth, I bought a ticket for the Painted Range day tour from the rack of brochures in the Lucky Strike, ninety-five dollars including lunch, and at half past eight I was standing on the footpath outside the Progress hall in a cold wind with seven strangers, waiting for a bus.

I knew who drove it. I had seen him hosing it down in the yard at the Kestrel. I told myself this was not why I had chosen it. There were three day tours advertised in the rack at the Lucky Strike and the other two went to the dog fence and to an underground church, and I had seen a fence before, and I was not ready for a church. That was true. I am trying to set down only what is true, and the trouble with true things is how many of them there are at once.

* * *

The bus was a white four-wheel-drive Toyota Coaster with PAINTED RANGE TOURS along its side in a font somebody had been proud of in the nineteen-nineties, and it came round the corner from the highway at eight thirty-four, grinding as it changed down. Owen Tully got out and stood by the door with a clipboard. He was wearing the grey beanie and a fleece jacket with the company name on the breast, and he looked at each of us as we gave our names, and ticked us off, and when he came to me he looked a little longer and ticked me off just the same.

"Aspinall," he said.

"Yes."

"Up the back's got the best window," he said, and turned to the next person.

There were eight of us. A retired couple from Ballarat, Bev and Neville, in matching hiking sandals, who had been on the road for five months and could tell you the price of diesel in every town between Bendigo and Broome. Two young French women, travelling together, who spoke to each other very fast and to everyone else very carefully. A nurse called Grace, from Adelaide, on her week off from the Royal, who told me she had grown up in Elizabeth and had never been north of Port Augusta in her life. A man from Perth with a camera lens the size of a thermos. And me.

I sat up the back, as instructed. Owen had been right about the window.

He drove the way he had stood at the table in the Kestrel kitchen: without wasting anything. He did a commentary, through a small microphone clipped to his collar, but it was a spare one, stripped down to facts, with long silences in between in which the bus ground on through the gibber and nobody felt they ought to fill the gap. "On your left, the dog fence," he said, at one point, and there it was, a long thin line of wire running away to the horizon in both directions, and he said nothing more about it, and we all looked at it as the bus went through the grid, and I thought about the people who had built a fence five thousand kilometres long to keep one animal on one side of it, and how much it must have cost, and whether anybody had ever done the sum. "Five thousand six hundred kilometres," Owen said, as if he had heard me. "Longest fence in the world. Doesn't work." Neville from Ballarat laughed. Owen did not.

We stopped at a creek bed for morning tea, where he set up a folding table and a hot-water urn and a tin of Anzac biscuits and stood a little apart while we ate them. Bev from Ballarat, who was the kind of woman who could not let a silence alone any more than she could let a stray cat alone, went over to him with her mug.

"Do you have family here, Owen?"

"My wife."

"Kids?"

He looked at her for a moment. He had very pale eyes in that brown face, and when he looked at you it was like being looked at by the sky.

"One," he said.

"Oh, lovely. And what does he do?"

Owen poured out the rest of his tea onto the gibber, where it disappeared at once, as if the ground had been waiting for it.

"Time to go," he said.

* * *

The Painted Range came up out of the plain at about eleven, the way those mesas do, without any warning at all, as if the flat country had simply decided to stop. I had seen them from Lorraine's Land Cruiser at a distance, a fortnight before. From the bus, from close, they were not a range so much as a collapse, a long broken escarpment of flat-topped hills and spurs and lonely buttes, standing up out of the gibber like the ruins of something enormous. And they were painted. That was the only word. White at the top, a hard chalk white, and then bands of yellow ochre and rust and a deep plum-purple, and then white again, laid one above another as precisely as the lines in an exercise book, and running round every hill at the same height so that you could follow a single stripe with your eye from one butte to the next across a kilometre of air.

"Inland sea," said Owen, into the microphone. "Hundred and twenty million years ago, give or take. All this was the bottom of it. Mud, then sand, then mud. Weathered since. The colours are iron. Different amounts of it, different states." A pause. "The opal's the same story. Water through the sandstone. Silica. Takes a few million years." Another pause. "This country belongs to Lorraine Wilton's people. If you want the story of it, ask them. Not me. I only drive the bus."

The French women looked at each other and wrote something down.

He took us to three places. A walk along a ridge where the wind tried to take the hats off our heads and the man from Perth lay on his stomach at the edge to photograph a lizard. A lunch spot in the lee of a butte, with a tin shelter and two picnic tables and a long-drop toilet with a view, where Owen produced from the bus an esky of sandwiches and a container of pasta salad and a plastic tub of oranges cut into quarters. I ate an orange quarter and thought of my father's Kingswood, the Stuart Highway, the car full of the

smell of oranges and two children who were not yet anything to each other but children. And then, mid-afternoon, the lookout.

* * *

It was at the end of a spur, at the end of a track so rough that Owen made us all get out at the bottom and walk the last two hundred metres while he brought the bus up empty. At the top there was a low stone wall and a plaque and the whole of the Painted Range spread out below and away from us to the north and east: butte after butte, stripe after stripe, white and ochre and plum, running away into a haze of blue, and above it a sky so enormous and so empty that it was difficult, for a while, to remember to breathe in it.

The others went to the wall with their phones and their cameras. Bev and Neville took a photograph of each other and then asked Grace to take one of them together, and then took one of Grace. The French women stood without speaking. I did not go to the wall. I stood by the bus, out of the wind, with my hands in the pockets of my coat, and looked at the stripes, and tried to work out how many years were in each one: whether the white was thicker than the plum because there had been more time, or more mud, or both.

Owen Tully came round the front of the bus and stood next to me. Not close. A metre. He did not look at me. He looked at the view, as if he were checking it was still there.

"She put him on that form," he said. "Josie."

It was not a question, and then it was. I heard it change in the air between us. His voice was rough and low and very quiet, so that I had to lean a little to hear it over the wind.

"Mr Tully."

"Did she."

"I can't discuss any household's form," I said. "Not yours. Not anyone's. I signed an undertaking. I'm sorry."

He did not move. He stood looking at the Painted Range for what I counted as nine seconds. Down at the wall, the man from Perth had got his lens onto a wedge-tailed eagle, and was saying *look at that, look at that* to nobody in particular.

"Then she did," said Owen Tully.

He said it quite flatly. He did not say it to me. He said it to the stripes in the hills, a hundred and twenty million years of mud laid down one year on top of another, and his face did not change at all, except that the muscle at the hinge of his jaw went tight and then loose and then tight again, three times, like a man chewing something he could not swallow.

I said nothing. There was nothing I was permitted to say, and I had found, standing there, that there was nothing I wanted to.

"You're his sister," he said, after a while.

"I'm Ray's sister. Yes."

"I bought off him. Years. Little bits of nothing." He nodded slowly, as if agreeing with someone. "He used to come into my shop with his little parcels wrapped in a hanky, all pleased with himself. Hopeless. He couldn't grade a stone to save his life. I'd give him more than it was worth. Because he was a nice bloke." His hands, those large flat hands, were hanging at his sides, and I saw them close. "Your brother was a fool," said Owen Tully, "who thought he was a saint."

It hit me in the face. I mean that exactly. I felt it as heat, across the cheekbone and the side of the mouth, the way you feel a hand. Nobody had ever said a word against Ray to me in this town. Gus loved him. Frank Hollis had lent and borrowed books with him. Mrs Varga had been brought oranges. Even Lyle Baird, who had wanted something from him, had called him a dreamer and said *God love him*. I had driven eight hundred and fifty kilometres to settle the affairs of a man I had called, in a hallway in Port Pirie, someone who had never finished anything in his life; and in three weeks in his town I had been made to understand that I had been, at the very least, incomplete in my information. And now here was this man, who had sat in silence in his own kitchen with the cat clock going and lifted his hand two centimetres off the table when I left, telling me in a voice like gravel that my brother had been a fool.

"Why?" I said. "What did he do to you?"

Owen turned his head and looked at me then, for the first time. The pale sky-eyes, the beanie, the deep lines at the corners of his mouth that went down instead of up.

"Ask him," he said.

Then he turned and called to the others that it was time, and his voice was perfectly ordinary, a tour driver's voice, and Bev from Ballarat said *oh, already?* and they all came back from the wall, and we got on the bus.

* * *

He drove us home along the same road in the long gold light of the late afternoon, and he did not say anything into the microphone at all, and nobody seemed to mind; we were all tired and sunburnt and full of the size of things. Grace went to sleep against the window with her mouth open. Once, on a long straight, I looked up and found Owen's eyes on me in the big rear-view mirror above the windscreen, and he did not look away, and neither did I, and after perhaps four seconds he looked back at the road as if the road had said something. The mirror had a small plastic opal hanging from it on a bootlace, the kind they sell for six dollars at the servo, turning slowly as the bus swayed. It was the only cheap thing I had seen him own. The French women shared a pair of earphones. I sat at the back with my pad on my knee and wrote, after a long time, under the possibility I had left numbered *3.* and blank on the night of the Kestrel form, one word, and then crossed it out so thoroughly that I could not have told you, the next morning, what it had been.

At the Progress hall he let us off one by one, and ticked us on his clipboard again, as if the Painted Range might have kept one of us. Bev and Neville tipped him twenty dollars. He thanked them. When it was my turn he did not look up from the clipboard.

"Aspinall," he said, and ticked.

* * *

I walked home. It was nearly dark and the wind had dropped, and the town smelt of woodsmoke and diesel and somebody's onions frying, and up on Treloar's Hill the vent pipes stood against the last of the light like a field of small white periscopes, turning very slowly, keeping watch on nothing.

Mrs Varga was on her step under the dead trellis in her husband's cardigan with a cigarette, which I had not known she smoked. She lifted it to me as I came up the cutting.

"You went on the bus," she said. "With the Tully."

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody knows that." She drew on the cigarette and let the smoke out slowly through her nose, like a dragon in a children's book. "He came here once. The Tully. To your brother's door. Two summers ago, three. Very hot. He bangs on the green door with his fist. Bang, bang, bang. He shouts." She considered. "Not words. Only *Ray*. *Ray*. Many times. Your brother does not open."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. He goes back down the hill. He sits in his bus, down there, at the bottom." She pointed with the cigarette. "One hour. More. The engine running, for the cold air. Then he goes." She shrugged. "I thought, these men, they have a fight about a stone. Always a stone, here. I did not ask. Your brother, after, he brings me oranges and he says nothing, so I say nothing. This is how it is, next door. Fifty-one years." She stubbed the cigarette out on the step with great care and put the end in her cardigan pocket. "You look tired, Margaret. Eat something."

I went in. The dugout was dark and cold and smelt of stone. I pulled the cord for the first bulb, and then the second, down the passage, and at the end of it, in the doorway of Ray's room, the dog was sitting upright, very still, facing the wardrobe, as though he had been sitting like that for hours, and was prepared to sit like that for hours more.

CHAPTER 10

The Wardrobe

I did not sleep. I lay in the single bed in the spare room under the crocheted rug, with the light off and the door open, and listened to the dugout. I had been in it more than three weeks. I knew its vocabulary now: the creak of the cowl on the vent pipe, turning in the wind; the tick of the fridge in the front room; the faint high singing of the wire in the light fitting when the generator at the bottom of the hill came on for somebody's night shift. I knew the sound my own feet made on the passage floor, and the different sound Toff's nails made, and the sound of nothing, which in a dugout is not silence but a kind of pressure, like being under water.

I had my pad on the floor beside the bed with the crossed-out word in it. I did not turn the light on to look at it. I lay and thought about a man with pale eyes chewing on a sentence he could not swallow, and about the words *ask him*, as if you could. As if I had not spent eleven years not asking him anything.

At ten to twelve the dog began to scratch.

* * *

It was not loud. It was a steady, patient, rhythmic sound, claws on timber, two strokes and a pause, two strokes and a pause, coming down the passage from the end room. I lay and listened to it for a full minute, counting, the way you count the seconds between lightning and thunder: forty-one pairs. It did not get faster. It did not stop. It was the sound of a dog who had been told no for eight months and had decided, tonight, to take the matter up again.

I got up. I put my brother's old flannelette shirt on over my nightie, because it was the nearest thing and because the passage was cold, and I went down it in bare feet, pulling the cords as I went, so that the bulbs came on one after another ahead of me, and at the end of them, in the doorway of Ray's room, I pulled the last cord and the light came down on the domed

ceiling and the stripped bed and the jarrah wardrobe in its alcove, and the dog.

Toff was standing on his hind legs with his front paws against the left-hand door of the wardrobe, scratching at it, two strokes and a pause. He looked round at me when the light came on, and dropped down onto four feet, and whined. Then he put his nose to the crack between the two tall doors and breathed in, a long whistling breath through the nose, and looked at me again.

"It's locked," I told him. "I've tried."

I went to show him. I took hold of the left-hand handle, the brass cool and slightly greasy under my fingers, and pulled, to demonstrate to an old red dog at midnight the principle of a locked door.

It opened.

I stood holding it. I had tried it on the Friday, at four in the afternoon, with the third key and with all the keys in the drawer, and it had been locked. I had tried it again at three the next morning, with my ear against the wood and the dog wagging, and it had been locked. I had not touched it since. I would like to say that my first thought was a rational one, about humidity, about timber swelling and shrinking, about a lock with a worn tongue that holds sometimes and sometimes does not. It was not. My first thought was a single word, in my mother's voice, and the word was *Raymond*.

The smell came out first. Linseed and cedar and my brother: tobacco and dust and the particular sour-sweet smell of flannelette that has been washed in rainwater, which I had forgotten I knew. Then I saw his clothes. A row of flannelette shirts on wire hangers. A good tweed jacket that must have been our father's, I recognised the leather buttons. A long oilskin coat, stiff with dust. Two pairs of moleskins on a hanger. His shoes in a row on the floor of the wardrobe, four pairs, polished. A tie rack with nothing on it.

Toff pushed past my legs, into the wardrobe, between the shoes, and nosed through the hems of the coats, and was gone.

* * *

I have to explain this carefully, because I have had to explain it since, to people who need things in the right order.

The wardrobe had no back.

Behind the clothes, where there should have been a panel of thin timber nailed across the alcove, there was a curtain: a heavy one, of brown velvet, old and balding at the edges, the kind of curtain that would once have hung in the front room of a house in Port Pirie three blocks from the smelter. I knew it. I had pulled that curtain open and shut ten thousand times as a child. I had thought it went with the house.

I pushed the shirts aside along the rail, the wire hangers clicking, and drew the curtain back and hooked it on a nail that was there for the purpose.

There was a door behind it. Not a panel. A door: three old grey planks braced with a Z, like the door of a chook shed, set into a frame of rough-sawn posts that had been cemented into the rock. It had no handle, only a loop of leather strap nailed on where a handle would be, and the strap was dark and supple, as if somebody had been rubbing it with something. The door stood ajar perhaps ten centimetres, and through the gap came a draught, a slow movement of cold air against my face that smelt of stone and kerosene and something else, faintly, that I could not at first place and then could. Toast. Somebody had made toast.

From somewhere beyond the door I heard the dog's claws on stone, going away.

The bulbs in Ray's room did not reach past the coats. I went back up the passage for the big yellow torch that hung on a nail beside the stove, and came back, and stepped up into the wardrobe, between my brother's shoes, and pulled the strap, and the door swung inward without a sound, because somebody had oiled its hinges.

* * *

It was a drive. A short one, perhaps four metres, lower than the passage of the Number Nine, so that I had to stoop, and narrower, so that my shoulders brushed the walls on either side. There had been a string of small bulbs along the ceiling once, the kind people hang on verandahs at Christmas, but they were dark. In the torch beam I could see the walls, and I stopped, and put my hand on them, because they were not my brother's walls.

The pick marks were old. They were narrower than Ray's and shallower and closer together, and they ran the other way: from right to left, downward. A right-handed miner, a long time ago, working with a smaller pick and a lot of patience. Treloar, I thought. Or whoever came before him. The old drive from the Treloar days, that goes close by the back wall. And over the top of those old marks, in places, newer ones: here a widening, there a shelf cut at waist height. Those ran left to right, and slanted down. Ray's. And then, near the end of the drive, where the passage turned and opened out, a third set of marks, very fresh, the sandstone still pale inside them where the weathered skin had been cut through. Short and even and close together. Not old at all.

I counted nothing. I want that on the record. For four metres of passage I did not count anything.

The drive opened into a room.

* * *

It was a bedroom. Perhaps three metres by three and a half, roughly square, with a low ceiling and a reading lamp clamped to a shelf cut into the rock. There was a single bed against the far wall, an iron one painted white, and it was made the way they make beds in hospitals and in the army, the sheet folded down over the grey blanket in a straight hand's-breadth band and the corners tucked tight and square, so tight you could have bounced a coin on it, which I did not try. A pillow without a crease. A towel folded on the end of the bed. A pair of thongs, side by side, underneath.

Toff was lying on the floor beside the bed, with his chin on the edge of the blanket, and he did not look at me when I came in. He was breathing in long slow breaths through his nose. His tail moved once, against the floor, and stopped.

The shelf above the bed held books. I read their spines in the torchlight, because reading spines is what I do in other people's houses; I read Frank Hollis's and Mrs Varga's; I read Josie's, on the shelf behind the counter at St Barbara's. *Moby-Dick*, a fat old Penguin with the cover gone soft. *Voss*. *The Tree of Man*. *Riders in the Chariot*. Two books from the Port Augusta library, one of them *Great Expectations*, nearly six years overdue. A dictionary. A spiral-bound opal-cutting manual with its pages furred at the

corners from use. A crib board. A packet of Arnott's Arrowroot biscuits, opened, the end folded over twice and held with a clothes peg.

Wedged into a crack at the end of the shelf, standing up like a card on a mantelpiece, there was a photograph.

It had been taken on the claim. I knew the place: the bench seat that had once been the back of a Valiant, the cable-reel table, the iron roof on its post, and behind them the white and pink rolling distances of the Eighteen Mile. Two men were sitting on the bench seat. One of them was my brother. He was thinner than I remembered and browner and his hair had gone almost white and was too long, and he was laughing, really laughing, with his head back, a thing I had not seen him do since he was perhaps fifteen. The other was a young man, twenty or so, dark-haired, in a blue singlet, sitting at the other end of the bench with the stripe of untouched vinyl between them. He was holding something up to the camera between his thumb and his forefinger, a small stone, and the stone had caught the sun and made a point of red light in the photograph, a single bright spark of fire. He was not laughing. He was smiling, a little, the way you smile when you have done something difficult and are not sure yet whether you are allowed to be pleased. And through his left eyebrow there ran a pale line, a scar, cutting the eyebrow in two.

I had seen that line before, in a school photograph in a newspaper in a binder in the Progress hall. I had thought it might be a flaw in the printing.

It was not a flaw in the printing.

* * *

I would like to tell you I sat down. I did not. I stood in the middle of that small room with my brother's shirt on over my nightie and my bare feet cold on the stone, and I looked at the photograph, and at the bed, and at the books, and at the packet of biscuits with the peg on it, and I understood that I was in a home. Not a hiding place. Not a cell. Somebody's home, which somebody had made with care, with a towel folded and the corners square, the way a person makes a home when they are trying very hard to keep hold of who they are.

There was a low arch in the side wall, so low I had to duck for it, and beyond it a second room, smaller. I put the torch through it before I put

myself through it. A workbench made from an old door laid on two trestles; an angle lamp; a cutting machine like a small grey tin drum with a row of discs, and a drip tin rigged above the wheels on a length of wire; a jar of wooden sticks with blobs of dark wax on the ends; a magnifying visor; a bucket. On the bench, in a plastic container, small stones, grey and chalky, the colour of nothing; I tilted it under the torch and each one threw back a single cut of colour, green, blue, a red so sudden I nearly dropped it. On the wall above the bench, in pencil on the sandstone, in a hand I did not know, a column of figures, carats and dollars, with a line ruled under them, and halved.

Beyond the bench, at the far side of that room, the drive went on: a low black opening at the edge of the torch beam, and out of it came the draught I had felt at the door, steady and cold, carrying the smell of the night outside, of gibber and frost and distance. It went somewhere. It came out somewhere. I did not follow it. Not that night.

I backed out under the arch into the bedroom, and that was when I saw the mug.

It was on the floor beside the bed, at the head end, where a person lying down could reach it without sitting up. A white enamel mug with a thin blue rim, the kind you buy at a camping shop, chipped at the lip in one place, and it was the same size and shape as the three mugs on the hooks in my brother's kitchen. I thought of the fourth hook. The empty one, at the end of the row, which I had looked at every morning for three weeks while I made my tea, and had assumed was for a mug that had broken.

I picked it up.

The tea had been drunk. There was a pale brown ring inside it a third of the way down, where the tea had stood for a while before someone finished it, and below the ring the enamel was still beaded with wet. On the stone floor where it had been there was a darker circle, distinct and perfectly round. I put my finger on it. It was damp.

Stone dries. In a dugout, at twenty-three degrees, with dry air moving through a vent shaft all day, a ring of water on sandstone is gone in an hour. Perhaps two. I know this because it is the kind of thing I know, the kind of thing I have set as a problem for fourteen-year-olds, rates of evaporation, and marked, and explained twice to the ones who did not get it. I did the

sum standing there. I could not have stopped myself if I had tried, and I did not try.

Someone had been here today. Someone had lain on this bed, made tight, and drunk tea from this mug, and eaten an Arrowroot biscuit, and folded the end of the packet over twice, and pegged it. Someone had oiled the hinges of a door at the back of my brother's wardrobe and left its front doors unlocked behind them. Someone, at three in the morning a week ago, had set small things down on a shelf, one, two, three, small quick sounds, while I sat on the other side of the wall with a ledger on my knees and said aloud that stone moves.

Toff lifted his head from the blanket and looked towards the arch, towards the black opening beyond it, and his tail went, once, twice, three times against the stone.

I put the mug down exactly where it had been, in its own damp ring, so that the ring and the base of the mug lined up. I do not know why I did that. Then I went out the way I had come, through the drive and the plank door and the curtain and my brother's coats, and I left the door ajar the width of a hand, as I had found it, and I did not close the wardrobe.

I went up the passage to the kitchen. I did not turn on the light. I sat at the laminex table in the dark with the big yellow torch in my lap, switched off, and my brother's ashes on the floor beside his chair, and I waited, as the dog was waiting in the room behind the wall, for whoever it was to come home.

PART TWO

Non-Response

CHAPTER 11

The Back Rooms

I did not sleep, and I did not go back in. Those were the two decisions I made on Saturday night, and I held to both of them until a little after six, when the light at the face of the dugout went from black to the colour of weak tea and Toff stood up from the end of the bed, stretched one back leg and then the other, and walked down the passage to the back bedroom as if he were late for something.

I followed him because there is only so long a person can sit in a kitchen holding a torch she is not using.

The wardrobe stood as I had left it, both doors open, Ray's shirts pushed to the left on their wire hangers, the curtain behind them hooked back on a nail. Behind the curtain was the door. In daylight, or what passes for daylight thirty metres into a hill, it was a less dramatic object than it had been at midnight. Three old planks braced with a Z, like a chook-shed door, with a leather strap for a handle. Someone had rubbed the strap with dubbin, recently, because it was dark and supple where the rest of the door was grey.

I went through the way you go into cold water, all at once.

In the first room the walls had been cut by hand, the same as the rest of the Number Nine, the pick marks running in long curved rows like the grain of a wave that had decided to stay. Ray's marks, I thought, and then I put my palm flat on the wall beside the bed and knew they were not all his. Two hands had cut this wall. One cut long and leaning, left to right and slightly down, the swing of a left-handed man. The other cut short and even and close together. Patient work. Somebody who did not mind how long a thing took.

The bed was made. Not made the way I make a bed, which is to pull the doona up and call it a gesture. Made tight, the top sheet folded down over the blanket by exactly the width of a hand, the pillow squared. There was a reading lamp clamped to a shelf cut into the rock above it, and on the shelf

the books I had seen the night before by torchlight. I read the spines now properly. *Moby-Dick*, a Penguin with the cover gone soft as cloth. *Voss* and *The Tree of Man*. A dictionary, the big Macquarie, its top edge furred grey with thumbing. *Lonesome Dove*. A field guide to Australian birds. Two books from the Port Augusta library, nearly six years overdue, which is the sort of thing I notice. *Opal Cutting and Polishing for the Beginner*, spiral-bound, with a strip of masking tape down its spine where the wire had pulled loose.

On the floor beside the bed was the mug. I had left it where it was. It was dry now. A white enamel mug with a chip at the lip and a pale brown ring inside, a third of the way down, where someone had drunk his tea to exactly that line and then stopped.

The second room opened off the first through a low arch you had to duck for. It was a workroom. A bench made of an old door on trestles, an angle lamp, a cabbing machine with a drip tin rigged above the wheels on a length of fencing wire, a rack of dop sticks standing in a jam jar like pencils, a stick of green wax, a spirit burner. Plastic takeaway containers on the shelf, each labelled in a careful print I had not seen anywhere else in the dugout. POTCH. TRIM. SEAM 4 (RAY). DON'T. I opened DON'T. It held nine small stones, grey and chalky, and when I tilted the container under the lamp each one woke to colour as it tipped, and went dull again as I moved. I closed the lid. Whatever DON'T meant, it was not addressed to me, and I obeyed it anyway.

There was a ventilation pipe going up through the ceiling of the workroom, white PVC, the same as the one above Ray's bed. I had noticed in my first week a second cowl turning on the hill above the Number Nine, further back than any room I knew of. I had put it down to Ray. Most things that did not add up, I had always put down to Ray.

* * *

The drive went on past the workroom. I had not seen that in the dark. There was a gap behind a hanging tarpaulin at the back wall, and beyond it a tunnel no wider than my shoulders, running away into the hill on a slight rise. The walls here were older. You could see it at once. The pick marks were broader and rougher and stained with something, smoke or time, and

the roof was held up in two places by sleepers jammed upright, their ends split and furred. An old working. Some miner, long before Ray, had followed a level in here looking for colour and given up, and Ray had cut through the end of his own back bedroom one day and found the old man's dark waiting for him.

I went in with the torch. I counted paces, because counting is what I do with fear. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. The tunnel bent left. My hair caught on the roof and I felt grit go down the back of my collar. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. And then the floor stopped rising and the roof went away, and I was standing at the bottom of a shaft, with a square of white sky very far above me and an iron ladder bolted to the wall.

The ladder was old. The bolts holding it were not. Some had been replaced with galvanised ones that still shone where the torch caught them. The bottom rungs had been wrapped in tape, black electrical tape, worn through to the metal in the middle where feet went.

I am fifty-eight years old and I have had a knee since 2019. I climbed it.

There were thirty-one rungs, and I counted every one, and I did not look down after the twelfth. At the top the shaft was covered by a sheet of rusted corrugated iron lying across two lengths of steel pipe, with a gap at one side just wide enough for a person to turn their shoulders through. I pushed my head and arm through the gap, and the wind took my hair, and I was on the hill.

Behind the Number Nine, the hill goes up in a long slope of broken sandstone and gypsum, white and pink, littered with the mullock of a hundred years of people digging into it. From down on the road you cannot see the top of the slope. From the top of the slope you can see everything. I lay half out of the hole on my stomach like a seal on a rock and looked at it. Calder's Find, all of it, at a quarter to seven on a Sunday morning. The vent pipes standing up out of the hills like the stems of buried flowers. Hutchison Street with one car on it. Beyond the town, the fields, the heaps, the white cones in their thousands going out to the edge of the world, and the sun just touching the tops of them so that each one had a lit side and a dark side, like a class of children all turned to look at the same window.

Below me, perhaps fifteen metres down the slope, was the cowl over Ray's room, turning and complaining. I could have hit it with a stone.

Two old car tyres weighed down the corners of the iron. A path, not really a path, more an agreement among the rocks, ran away from the hole along the contour of the hill. If you walked out of this shaft at night you would be on the hill above a row of dugouts, and you could go down any gully you liked to any road you liked, and nobody looking out of a face window would see anything but the dark.

Going down was worse. I counted backwards, thirty-one to one, and when my foot found the floor I sat for some time with my back against the old man's rock and let my heart decide what it wanted to do.

* * *

What I knew, I set out on the kitchen table, the way I used to set out a problem for Year Eleven. In a list, on a sheet of graph paper from my own pad, bought at Officeworks in Kent Town before I left. I had the census stationery in my satchel, and I had my own paper. I used my own.

One. Ray had built, or opened, two rooms behind his wardrobe, with a way in and out over the hill.

Two. Someone had lived in them for a long time. The bed. The wall cut by a second hand. The library books six years overdue.

Three. Someone had been in them recently, within a day. The mug.

Four. Ray's ledger recorded shares paid to a person called D. from November 2019.

Five.

I did not write five, because five was not something I knew from the wardrobe. Five was something I knew from a form.

This is the problem, put as cleanly as I could put it that morning, with somebody's blower starting on the hill across the road like an enormous throat being cleared.

The undertaking I had signed was about information. Information supplied on a census form. I could recite the relevant part; I had read it twice in the training room with Lorraine watching me read it and smiling at the side of her mouth. I would not, directly or indirectly, divulge or communicate to any person any information that came to me in the course of the work. The penalty for doing so was a hundred and twenty penalty units, or two years, or both. I had looked up the value of a penalty unit the

first night and multiplied it out, and the sum had sat in my head ever since like a stone in a shoe.

The wardrobe was not on a form. Ray's back rooms were mine; I was his executor; I had the key and the probate papers. If I had come to Calder's Find with no lanyard and opened this wardrobe, I would have known that my brother had a lodger, and dug a bolt-hole into a hill, which was the most Ray thing I had ever heard of. I might have thought D. was a woman. I might have thought a great many things.

But I had not come with no lanyard. I had come with a form in my satchel, which twelve days before I had checked for completeness at this same table, and on which three persons were listed as present in the Kestrel dugout on census night, and the third of them was a man the coroner had not been able to find.

There is no way to unread a thing. I tried, for about a minute. Then I did what I used to tell my students to do when the question was ambiguous. Take the strictest reading. If you are not sure whether a rule applies, assume it does, and work inside it. You lose a little freedom. You never lose the marks.

So I decided that everything I knew about who lived in those rooms, I knew from the form. All of it. The guesses, the probabilities, the face I had seen in the photograph on the shelf, the scar through the left eyebrow, the name I would not even say aloud in an empty dugout. All of it was covered. Whatever I did next, I would do as though every word of it were sealed in the envelope with the household code on the front.

It is an odd thing to be the executor of a hiding place. Executor is a strong word; it means the person who carries out. I had come up here to carry out Ray's wishes, and his wishes, as written in a will he made at a solicitor's in Port Augusta in 2017, were three lines long and concerned the claim, the dugout, and the dog. Nothing about the wardrobe.

* * *

Siobhan rang at nine. Siobhan rings on Sundays because, she says, Sundays are when people are home, and she includes field officers in people.

"Mags! How's the far north treating you?"

"Windy," I said.

"Oh, I bet. Listen, I've got your numbers up and I just wanted to say, you are smashing it. Calder's Find is sitting at eighty-one point four per cent."

"That was Lorraine, mostly."

"Lorraine's got her own numbers, don't you worry about Lorraine. This is your workload. You're second in the region. Second! The only one ahead of you is Bevan in Roxby, and Bevan's got a mine camp."

I was standing in the passage with the phone against my ear, looking down towards the back bedroom, where the wardrobe doors stood open. Toff was lying across the threshold with his chin on his paws, watching the curtain.

"Now. You've got, what," and I heard her clicking, "thirty-seven households still non-response. And I see you got the bloke who says he isn't anybody."

"He says he's nobody," I said. "It's a different claim."

"Well, he's somebody to us! He's a dwelling with a code. If we can get you to ninety by Friday week, I will personally buy you a Golden Gaytime."

"I'd rather a beer."

"I'll buy you both." She paused. "Everything else all right? I know it's a lot, with your brother."

"Everything's fine," I said, and I watched the dog watch the curtain, and I thought of the number Siobhan would put on Calder's Find when she had it, and the number she would never have, which was the number of people who were actually here.

"You're a legend, Mags," she said. "Honestly. Ninety by Friday week."

When she hung up I stood in the passage for a while longer. Then I went and got the graph paper pad and tore off a clean sheet, carefully, along the perforation, so the edge was straight.

* * *

The note took me most of the morning. That is not an exaggeration. I wrote it eleven times. I wrote it long, the first time, a full page, and read it back, and it was a letter from a school to a parent. I wrote it with his name and tore it up so small I put the pieces in the stove. I wrote it signed with

nothing, and that seemed cowardly, and also imprecise: a note from nobody is a note from anyone.

In the end I wrote it the way Ray would have written it, which is to say I said the thing and stopped.

I'm Ray's sister. I won't tell anyone. Mags.

I looked at it a long time. *Won't tell anyone* was a promise I was already bound to keep by Commonwealth law, so in one sense it cost me nothing. In another sense it was the first promise I had made to anyone in eleven years that was not on a form, and I found my hand was not quite steady.

I folded it once and took it through the wardrobe and laid it on the pillow, squared to the edges of the pillow, because the bed had been made by someone who would notice if it was not.

Then I did a thing I had not planned. I picked up the white enamel mug from the floor and took it back to the kitchen and washed it, and dried it, and brought it back, and set it on the shelf beside the dictionary, handle out. It seemed the least I could do for a person who drank to the same line every time. I suppose I meant: somebody saw your mug and did not throw it away.

Mrs Varga knocked at the face door at half past twelve with a plate of something under a tea towel. She is eighty-two and she knocks the way a younger woman would kick.

"Pogácsa," she said, handing me the plate. "You eat them warm. Not tomorrow. Tomorrow they are stones." She looked past me, down the passage, at the dog. "Why is he lying there?"

"I don't know," I said. "He likes that room."

Mrs Varga gave Toff the long flat look she gives everything, the census included, and said, "That dog only lies like that for people. He doesn't lie like that for rooms." Then she told me the wind would drop by Tuesday and went home.

I ate four of the scones standing at the bench. They were the best thing I had eaten since Adelaide. I left two on a saucer at the end of Ray's kitchen bench, under the tea towel. I did not take them through the wardrobe. I was not ready to be a woman who left food for ghosts. But I left them where a man who came up the passage in the night would see them, and I left the

passage light on, and I went to bed at ten with the door of my own room open, and lay there listening to the hill.

Nothing came. The wind dropped a little after two. The dog did not move from the threshold all night; I know, because I got up four times to check, and each time he lifted his head and looked at me as if I were the one who did not belong.

CHAPTER 12

Josie

The op shop opens at ten on weekdays, except when it doesn't, which is when Josie Prior has gone to the tip with a ute-load of what she calls the unsaleables. On Monday it opened at ten past. I know because I was sitting in the Corolla across Hutchison Street from twenty to, with the engine off and the window down, watching a willy-willy pick up a plastic bag outside the Mining Registrar's office and carry it, turning, almost lovingly, all the way down to the servo.

Under the hand-painted sign about the church roof, the op shop's window had a new display since my first visit: a mannequin in a wedding dress and a hard hat, framed by the curtains Josie had been hanging. I had walked past it a dozen times and never once asked why.

Josie came up the street from the direction of the church, carrying a plastic shopping bag and a two-litre carton of milk, and unlocked the door without looking at the Corolla, and went in. A minute later the sign on the door turned from CLOSED to OPEN, although in practice it said CLOSED for a little longer, because it had been turned a moment too fast and it swung.

I gave her five minutes. Then I went in.

* * *

An op shop in a mining town smells of mothballs and dust and, underneath both, a faint mineral sharpness that I eventually understood was the smell of the clothes themselves, the work shirts and the King Gee shorts and the high-vis vests, which had been underground so long that the hill had got into the fibres and would not wash out. There were racks of them along one wall, sorted by size and then, I noticed, by colour, so that the extra-larges ran from navy to orange like a paint chart. A bin of single shoes. A shelf of jigsaws, each with a strip of masking tape across the lid on which someone had written ALL PIECES or 3 MISSING or DON'T KNOW. A glass

cabinet by the counter with costume jewellery, a set of brass scales, and a cardboard tray of opal chips in water in old pill bottles, two dollars each, which I suppose is what opal costs when it is nobody's.

Josie was behind the counter with the jug on. She looked at me once and said, "Morning," and I said, "Morning," and she said, "Cardigans are up the back," as though I had asked.

I went up the back. There were cardigans. I looked at every one of them. I am, I realised, a person who can spend twenty minutes on cardigans if the alternative is saying something, and I discovered that Josie Prior is the same kind of person about pricing, because for the entire time I stood among the knitwear she sat at the counter writing tickets for a box of paperbacks and did not look up.

Two women came in, bought a toaster and a pair of thongs, and left. A boy of about ten came in with his mother and stood in front of the jigsaws reading every label aloud. The jug boiled and Josie made herself a coffee, International Roast from the jar on the card table, three heaped spoons, no milk, and drank it while it was still too hot to drink.

At a quarter to eleven I brought a cardigan to the counter. It was brown, with leather buttons, the kind of thing my father wore to the bowls club in Port Pirie, and it was in no sense what I would have chosen if I had been choosing.

"Four dollars," Josie said.

I gave her a five. She opened the till, which was an old cash register with a crank on the side, and found a coin, and put it in my palm, and then she did not take her hand away. She left her fingers resting on my palm, over the coin, and she looked at me.

"Ray's sister," she said.

"Yes."

"I knew that the day you came in. You've got his hands." She took hers back. "His were wrecked. But it's the same shape."

I did not know what to do with that, so I put the coin in my purse.

"Do you want a coffee?" she said.

"Yes," I said, though I do not like instant coffee, and she made me one without asking how I took it, three spoons, no milk, and pushed it across the glass of the jewellery cabinet to me. It tasted like the inside of a tin. I drank it.

"Busy?" she said.

"Thirty-seven households," I said. "Thirty-six. One posted theirs in on Friday."

"Who?"

I looked at her over the mug.

"No," she said, almost to herself. "Course not." She drank. The bell over the door went and a woman came in with a garbage bag of donations, and Josie went round the counter and took the bag and thanked her and asked after somebody's knee and promised to see her at bingo, and the woman went out again, and Josie stood in the middle of her shop with the garbage bag hanging from one hand, looking at the door.

"Mrs Varga rang me," she said, without turning around. "Saturday night. Late."

I waited.

"She said Ray's dog was carrying on. Scratching at something." Josie put the bag down. "She rings me when she's worried, Edie. She's got nobody else to ring, since. She thought the dog was sick."

"He's not sick," I said.

"No."

There was a very long silence then. The kind in which you could hear the fridge in the back room cycle on, and a car door on the street, and the wind trying the tin of the verandah. I am a patient person in a classroom. I can wait out a silence until a fifteen-year-old cracks and answers the question. This was different, and harder, because the question had not been asked and I could not ask it, and Josie Prior, who had perhaps been waiting out silences in this town for seven years, was better at it than any fifteen-year-old.

"I found Ray's wardrobe," I said.

She closed her eyes.

She stood like that, eyes shut, in the middle of her shop, and I watched something go out of her shoulders, not all at once, but the way water goes out of sand. Then she opened them again and walked past me and turned the sign on the door to CLOSED, and this time she held it until it stopped swinging.

* * *

We sat in the back room, which was where the donations came to be sorted and where there was a card table and two vinyl chairs and a calendar from a tyre place in Port Augusta that was still on March. Josie took a packet of Winfield Blue from her shirt pocket, shook out one cigarette, and did not light it. There was a sign on the wall in her own handwriting saying NO SMOKING THIS MEANS YOU, and a scallop shell on the table that had once been an ashtray and now held paperclips. She held the cigarette between two fingers the way other people hold a pen.

"I'm not going to say anything about anything," I said. "I want you to know that first. I'm not able to. Whatever's on a form is on a form. I'm not allowed to talk about it with anyone, and I've decided that includes the person who filled it in. So if you're waiting for me to say a name, I won't."

Josie looked at me over the cigarette for a while.

"You're as bad as him," she said.

"Who?"

"Ray." She tapped the unlit cigarette on the edge of the shell. "Ray would never say it either. Six years, and I don't think he said it out loud to me more than twice. He'd say 'the lad'. Or 'my offsider'. Or he'd just say 'he', like there was only one he in the world." She laughed, not quite a laugh. "Owen hated that. When Owen found out. 'He.' Like a bloody hymn."

I said nothing, and she seemed glad of it, and she began.

She told me about October 2019 from her side, which is to say from the kitchen of the Kestrel, where she had been on the night Corey Nash died, doing a jigsaw. A Ravensburger, she said, a thousand pieces, a picture of a lighthouse in Cornwall. She had been doing it on a board on the kitchen table for a fortnight. Daniel had gone out at eight; he went out most nights; he was eighteen and he was a night person and he had been, since the business with the blower heap, a boy who stayed away from the town in daylight. Owen was at the pub. She was on the sky. You never get the sky done, she said, not with a lighthouse. The sky's all one colour.

He did not come home. That was not strange. He did not come home by the next afternoon, and that was not quite strange either, because sometimes he slept out at Ray's claim. Then Tash Nash rang, at four in the

afternoon, asking had Josie seen Corey, and Josie said no, and Tash said Corey had said he was going out with Daniel, and Josie said, well, there you are, they'll be together, and she told me she could still feel exactly how that sentence had sat in her mouth, comfortable, a sentence about two boys.

They found Corey a little after five. Some kids on motorbikes saw the drag marks of his runners at the lip of the hole, or what the police later said were drag marks, though she said it was only the scuff of a boy going backwards.

They found the ute the next day, out at the Eighteen Mile, and the searching began in earnest. Police from Port Augusta and Coober Pedy, the SES, a helicopter, a man from Adelaide with a dog, men from town with ropes and torches and an old winch on the back of somebody's truck, going down shaft after shaft. Owen went down three. She counted. He came up out of the third with his hands bleeding through his gloves and sat in the dirt beside it and would not get up, and Lyle Baird, she said, Lyle Baird of all people, put a blanket round him.

Then the searching stopped, and the town started.

"It wasn't loud," she said. "Some towns, they'd have thrown bricks. Here they just stopped looking at you. You'd walk into the IGA and there'd be this gap that walked along with you down the aisle. Somebody wrote KILLER on the Kestrel's door in pink marker. Pink. I always thought it must have been a kid, with a pink marker. I couldn't get it off. Owen painted the whole door." She turned the cigarette over. "Tash wouldn't serve me at the servo. Still won't. I fill up at the other end of town and Owen fills up in Coober."

"And the inquest," I said.

"The inquest." She made a sound. "Two thousand and twenty-one. Three days in Port Augusta, in June. No evidence any other person was present. Open finding on Daniel." She said his name, just like that, the way you set down a cup you have been holding too long. "I sat in that room and listened to a coroner say she couldn't find any evidence my boy was there, and I knew where he was the whole time. I knew. I sat there and I knew."

I held the mug of instant coffee in both hands.

"You knew by then," I said.

"Since the April before." She turned the cigarette in her fingers. "We were shut for the Covid. March, April. Nobody was allowed in. I used to come down here anyway and sit at this table because I couldn't sit at mine. And one night, a Tuesday, must have been nine, ten o'clock, somebody knocks on the back door. That door." She pointed with the unlit cigarette at a steel door with a bar across it. "I nearly died. Nobody knocks on that door. And it's Ray Aspinall, in his good shirt, the one with the pearl buttons, with his hat in his hands like a bloke come to tell you your husband's been killed. I thought that's what it was. I thought, it's Owen, he's gone down another hole. And I let him in and he sat in that chair, the one you're in, and he didn't say anything for ages, and then he said it."

"What did he say?"

Josie looked at the cigarette.

"He said, 'He's alive, and he's mine to look after now, and I need you to know, because you're dying of it.'"

The fridge in the back room cycled off. It is the only sound I remember.

"And I was," she said. "I was dying of it. I'd stopped eating. I was going to the Eighteen Mile every Sunday and walking the heaps calling his name like a woman calling a dog. Owen thought I'd gone mad. Maybe I had. And Ray just sat there with his hat. He didn't explain anything, not that night. He said if I wanted to know more I could, but it was better if I didn't, and he'd tell me whatever I asked, and he'd never ask me for anything except to not tell Owen. Not yet. And I didn't. For three years I didn't tell my husband our son was alive." She put the cigarette down on the table, very carefully, beside the shell. "I gave these up that night. Twenty a day for thirty years, and I walked home and threw the carton in the bin. I've had one in my pocket ever since, so I know I could." She looked at it. "You can make a lot of judgements about that. I've made them all."

"I wasn't making any."

"You will." She smiled at me, a real smile, worn at the edges. "You're a teacher. You lot can't help it."

* * *

I had not asked, and would not ask, about census night. But Josie told me anyway, a little of it, and I have thought since that she told me because I would not ask.

"He was at my table," she said. "That's all I'll say about that. He was at my table, eating my food, for the first time in nearly seven years. Owen was meant to be at the pub till eleven. He came home at half nine." She did not say what happened then. Her hand went to her throat and stayed there a moment and came down. "And afterwards I sat up and I did the form. On paper, because I didn't trust the computer. And there's the question. How many people were in this dwelling on Tuesday night. And I thought, I've left him off everything for seven years. I've left him off the Christmas cards. I've left him off when people ask how many kids. I've stood in this shop and let women tell me what he did. I'm not leaving him off this. It says everyone." She looked at me hard. "It says everyone, doesn't it?"

"It asks for every person present," I said. It was a general statement about a public question, printed on every form in the country, and I checked it in my head three times before I let it out of my mouth.

"Every person present," Josie repeated. "Well. He was present."

She stood up, then, and went to the steel door and lifted the bar and opened it a crack, and a slab of hard white light fell across the card table and over my hands. Outside was a yard full of donated furniture under a shade-cloth, chairs stacked on chairs, a cot, a pram, a kitchen dresser with no doors.

"He hasn't been out to the place in four nights," she said, with her back to me. "Where he's been sleeping. I take food out. Wednesdays and Fridays and Sundays. It was there last night, Sunday's, Friday's still there too. The ants had it." Her voice did not change at all. "He goes quiet sometimes. Goes to ground. He did it as a little boy. It doesn't mean anything."

"No," I said.

"If you see Ray's dog carrying on," she said. "If it's anything. You tell Edie Varga it's a possum. And then you tell him," and here she turned and looked at me, and her face was entirely calm and her eyes were not, "you tell him there's coffee. That's all. There's coffee, at the shop, if he wants it. He knows what it means."

I said that if I saw anything I would tell Mrs Varga it was a possum.

"There's no possums up here," Josie said. "Edie knows that. But she'll take it."

She let me out the front. She turned the sign to OPEN behind me and it swung, and I stood on the hot concrete under the verandah with a brown cardigan over my arm in the middle of a twenty-two-degree day, and I could not for a moment remember where I had left the car, though it was directly across the street, white as a fridge, the only Corolla in Calder's Find.

When I got back to the Number Nine the note was on the pillow where I had left it, folded once, squared to the edges. Nobody had touched it. The two scones on the saucer at the end of the bench were dry as stones, just as Mrs Varga had said they would be. I put them out for the birds, and then I remembered that there were almost no birds, and I put them out anyway.

CHAPTER 13

The Note Returned

I was up at half past five on the Tuesday because I had stopped expecting anything, and that is when things come.

I mean that as an observation, not a philosophy. In thirty-one years of teaching I learned that a student who has not handed in an assignment for six weeks will hand it in on the morning you have finally written to their parents. A kettle you are not watching boils. A brother you have stopped answering dies. There is no mechanism. It is only that we notice the coincidences that hurt.

Toff had spent the night on the threshold of the back bedroom again. When I came down the passage with my tea he was not there. He was inside the wardrobe, lying on his side behind Ray's shirts with his nose against the timber door, and when I said his name he thumped his tail twice on the floor and did not get up, as though he had been asked to keep a place in a queue.

I moved him. He let me. I unhooked the curtain and lifted the strap and went through, and before I had even turned on the lamp I could smell it: not a smell exactly, only the difference a person makes to the air of a closed room. Warmth. A faint sourness of clothes worn a long time. And something else, which I placed a moment later as soap, ordinary soap, the green Palmolive kind that Ray had kept by his kitchen sink and that I had been using since I arrived.

The note was on the pillow. Not my note. Or not only mine.

He had folded it the same way, once, and squared it to the edges the same way. When I opened it, my own handwriting was at the top, the six words in blue biro that had taken me a morning, and underneath, in pencil, in print so careful that each letter stood a little apart from the next as if they had been set in type, was his answer.

Thank you. I'm sorry about Ray. He talked about you every week. D.

That was the whole of it. I read it standing. Then I read it again, and then I noticed the envelope.

It had been under the note, on the pillow, squared to the pillow's edges like everything else. A small envelope, the size a birthday card comes in, a pale blue that had faded at one corner where the light had got at it. It was not sealed. On the front, in Ray's hand, the square left-handed capitals I had last seen in my own letterbox in Norwood two Septembers ago, was written: *Mags*. And under that, smaller, and crossed out with a single line, an address I knew, the address of the house where I had lived for thirty-two years.

I did not open it for a while.

* * *

Ray and I stopped speaking in 2014. I have set down why, as much as I can bear to, and I will say only that it was about our mother's house and about money, and that I said a thing to him in the hallway of that house which I had been saving for most of our lives. *You have never once in your life finished anything.* I remember that I said it quietly. I remember thinking, as I said it, that it was accurate.

I have set down already about the cards: eleven of them, 2014 to 2024, in a rubber band in the glovebox of the Corolla, each with my unposted reply clipped to it, and then, last September, nothing. I had worked out since, in the way I work everything out, that the last thing my brother knew of me was ten years and eleven cards of silence, and that he had drawn the obvious conclusion from the data, as anyone would.

I opened the envelope sitting on the floor of the back room, with my back against the rock and my knees up, because the bed was so carefully made that I could not bring myself to sit on it.

The card inside was not a newsagent's card. It had a picture of the Painted Range on the front, a proper photograph, the mesas red and white and banded like a cut cake, with the sky behind them that impossible blue. Inside it was covered from edge to edge in those square capitals, smaller than I had ever seen him make them, both sides, and down the back, and up the margins, the way he used to fill the backs of his school exercise books when he was ten. At the top, in different ink, as if added afterwards, he had written: *Draft.*

I will not set down all of it. It is mine. But I will set down some, because I have been trying in this account to be honest about what I knew and

when, and because some of it is the best thing my brother ever wrote, and he did not send it.

Dear Mags,

I've sent you eleven of these and you haven't answered one, which is fair enough, so I thought I'd write this one properly and then probably not send it either, so you can stop reading now if you like, the way you used to stop reading my school reports out loud at the bit where it said "Raymond is easily distracted".

I want to tell you about Mum's house first and get it out of the way. You were right. I knew when I borrowed against it that I might lose it, and I told myself I wouldn't, and I lost it, and I let you find out from the bank. That last bit's the worst bit and I'm sorrier for that than for the money. I know sorry isn't a number. You always said that to me when we were kids, when I broke something of yours. Sorry's not a number, Raymond. So I won't put a number on it.

One of Mum's cups broke when I put the box down in the hall. I heard it go. I've been sorry about that for eleven years too, it's a stupid thing to be sorry about with everything else, but there it is.

I'm teaching a young bloke to cut stone. He's better than me already. He's got patience, which I've never had, and he reads everything, he's reading Moby-Dick at the moment and hating every page of it and won't stop because he says he started it. I keep thinking you'd have made a better job of him than me. You'd have had him doing his times tables. He can't do his times tables, Mags. He's twenty-four. He can tell you the specific gravity of precious opal but he counts on his fingers for seven eights. I did too, you'll remember. You taught me with matchsticks on the kitchen floor at Pirie and Mum stood on them in her stockings and swore.

I've been doing what you said. Finishing things. I finished the drive at the back, which I started in 2008, you'd laugh. I'm finishing the lad. That's how I think of it. That's a strange way to put it but you'll know what I mean, you were a teacher, you get them at twelve and you finish them at eighteen and you send them off. I didn't get him at twelve, I got him at eighteen in a bad way and I'm trying to finish him so he can go off. It's the most important thing I've ever done. I haven't done it well but I'm doing it.

Happy birthday Mags. I hope you are well and I hope you have somebody. Weather's been mad. I miss you every day, it's a stupid thing to write in a birthday card but there it is.

Your brother,

Ray.

And underneath, in the different ink: *Too much. Do a short one.*

He never did the short one.

* * *

I have said that I was not a person who wept. That is true, as far as it goes. I wept when my father died, in the car park of the hospice in Port Pirie, for about four minutes, and when Graham and I signed the papers in 2003 I wept in the shower so that I would not have to do it anywhere else. I did not weep when the police rang me in December to say that my brother had been found. I said thank you, and asked the practical questions, and wrote the answers on the back of an envelope, and went and marked thirty Year Ten tests on quadratics, and every one of them got exactly the mark it deserved.

I wept on the floor of the back room until the light changed at the face of the dugout, the far-off grey square of it at the end of the passage, from grey to white. I wept with my face against the edge of a blanket that someone else had slept under for six years, which smelled of Palmolive, and I wept noisily, the way children do, without any interest in how it sounded. At some point Toff came through the wardrobe and lay down along my legs with his back against my shins and sighed.

Eleven unanswered cards, and he wrote the twelfth properly, and he looked at it and thought, she won't want this, and he meant to do a short one and did not. And I stood at my letterbox and called the silence relief.

Times tables. Seven eights. Matchsticks on the lino at Pirie and our mother swearing in her stockings, which I had entirely forgotten and which came back now complete, the yellow lino, the matchsticks in rows of ten, Ray at six with his tongue out of the side of his mouth, getting it right.

When I could, I read the card again, and then I did something I am a little ashamed of. I read it for information. I could not help it. *He's twenty-four.* So it was written last September, the week before my birthday, for the card he did not post. *I got him at eighteen in a bad way.* I sat on the

floor with my brother's love letter in my lap and the arithmetic went on in my head regardless, in its small cold voice, like a clock in a room where somebody has died, and I let it, because the arithmetic was also Ray's. He knew I would do that. He wrote it so I would.

The young man who slept in this bed had found this card among Ray's things, perhaps in the months since December, perhaps on one of his nights coming back through the hill. He had kept it. He could have burnt it, or left it, or taken it away to wherever he went. Instead he had put it on the pillow under his own reply, squared to the edges, and gone out over the hill in the dark.

He talked about you every week.

* * *

I did my rounds that day. I want that on the record. I did six households and got four forms, including one from a woman on Gully Road who had been hiding from me for nine days and who, when she finally opened the door, turned out to be hiding not from the census but from her sister in Whyalla, whom she believed I might be. I helped a man in his eighties fill in the question about his ancestry, which took forty minutes, because he wanted to tell me about all of it. I rang Siobhan and told her the numbers, and she told me I was a legend, and I said thank you.

On the way home I stopped at Mrs Varga's. She was in her front room with the television on and the sound off, watching a cooking programme from Melbourne with the expression of a judge at a trial she has already decided.

"The dog," I said. "On Saturday. I'm sorry he worried you. I think it was a possum."

Mrs Varga turned her head and looked at me for a long moment. There are no possums in Calder's Find. There is barely a tree.

"A possum," she said.

"I think so."

"Good," said Mrs Varga, and turned back to the television, where a man was setting fire to a pudding. "A possum is not a police matter." And then, without looking at me: "Josie will want to know it was a possum."

"I'll tell her."

"Tell her," said Mrs Varga, "it is a hungry one."

At five I went to the IGA and bought lamb chops, potatoes, a bag of frozen peas, a tin of International Roast, a loaf of bread, a block of tasty cheese and a packet of Tim Tams. The girl at the register looked at the shopping and then at me.

"Having people over?" she said.

"Not exactly," I said.

I cooked the chops the way our mother did, under the griller until the fat caught, and I mashed the potatoes with too much butter and boiled the peas, and I ate half of it at Ray's table and put the other half on a plate with another plate upside down over it and a tea towel over that. I filled Ray's old thermos with tea, milky, two sugars. I did not know how he took it. I guessed from the ring in the mug. Milky tea leaves a pale line; black tea leaves a dark one. The ring had been pale.

I carried it all through the wardrobe and put it on the workbench under the angle lamp. Beside it I put the tin of coffee, unopened, and the Tim Tams, and a knife and fork, and on top of the tea towel a fresh sheet of graph paper.

I wrote nothing on it. I thought about it for a long time and decided that the blank sheet said what I meant better than anything I could put there. It said: your turn. Or: you can write here, if you want. Or: I am not going to ask.

Then I went back through the wardrobe, and I did not latch the timber door. There was a hook and eye on my side of it; I had found that the first night. I had latched it every night since. Now I left the hook hanging.

I took the brown cardigan from the op shop off the back of the kitchen chair, where it had been since Monday, and put it on, because the dugout is twenty-three degrees all year round and I was cold anyway. And I sat up in Ray's armchair in the front room with the lamp off and the dog at my feet, and I listened to the hill, and somewhere after one o'clock I heard, quite distinctly, from the back of the Number Nine, the small dull sound of a cup being set down on a wooden bench.

I did not get up. That was the agreement I had made with the blank sheet of paper. I sat in the dark with my hands in my lap and listened to a man I had never met eat my mother's lamb chops, and when the sound of

the timber door came again, much later, closing softly on its leather strap, I found that my face was wet, and that I was smiling, and that the dog had gone.

CHAPTER 14

Lorraine's Count

Lorraine picked me up at seven on the Wednesday, with the Land Cruiser idling at the bottom of Treloar's Hill because she did not trust the Number Nine's driveway either, and when I climbed in there was a young man in the back seat with his knees against my headrest and a device in each hand.

"Jarrah," said Lorraine. "My nephew. He's been working the communities up north. He's down for two days to be shouted at by Siobhan in person."

"She doesn't shout," said Jarrah. "She loves, loves, loves." He let go of one device long enough to shake my hand over the seat. He had a wide, quick face and a fade haircut and a Calder's Find Diggers training top in the club's red and white hoops, faded nearly pink, with THE DRIFT UNDERGROUND MOTEL printed across the back in letters that had been designed to be read from the far side of a football oval. "You're the one beating me."

"I don't think I'm beating anyone."

"Eighty-six per cent in your town area," he said. "I'm on eighty-four. But my town area's two hundred k long and the roads are rubbish, so." He grinned. "Aunty says I'm not allowed to complain until I'm thirty."

"Twenty-nine," said Lorraine. "Then you can complain for a year."

We drove out through the town in the low gold light, past the servo and the Drift and the long white frontage of the Progress hall, and turned off onto the road that runs around the far side of the airstrip. A wind sock stood straight out from its pole, orange and fat as a sausage. Beyond it the camp at Three Mile came up out of the flat: thirty or so houses, some brick, some transportable, a basketball court with no nets, a community store with a mural of a goanna on its end wall and bars across its windows, red dirt yards with cars in them in every condition from new to geological. There were dogs. There were always dogs. Lorraine slowed to walking pace as we came in and lifted two fingers off the wheel to a man sitting on an upturned crate

under a tree, and he lifted two back, and that, I gathered, was the first part of the work.

* * *

I had thought, before I came north, that I knew what a census was. I had filled one in every five years of my adult life, on the kitchen table in Norwood, in a single sitting, and posted it the next morning on my way to school. I had taught the arithmetic of sampling and the difference between a population and a sample to perhaps three thousand teenagers. I knew what a count was. You went to each thing once and you added one.

Lorraine did not open her satchel for twenty-five minutes at the first house. I timed it, not deliberately, but because I am the sort of person whose eyes go to a clock when nothing seems to be happening. We sat on plastic chairs on a concrete verandah with a woman Lorraine called Aunty Maureen, who was perhaps seventy-five and wore a beanie with a pompom and a Collingwood scarf although it was already eighteen degrees, and we drank tea from mugs with chipped transfers of the Queen's Silver Jubilee on them, and they talked about a funeral in Port Augusta, and a cousin's car, and somebody's knee, and the price of mince at the store compared with the price of mince at the IGA, which was a matter of real feeling. Jarrah sat on the step and played with a puppy that had come out from under the house, and did not look at his device once, and that seemed to be the second part of the work.

When the satchel did come open, it came open the way you open a book with someone you love, at a page you both already know. Aunty Maureen's household had already responded. Lorraine knew this. She had looked it up on the way. She was not there to collect a form. She was there because the form that had been sent in listed four people, and there were, by my count from the verandah, at least nine people moving in and out of that house, and Lorraine wanted to know, gently, over the second cup of tea, who among them had been there on the night of the eleventh, and who had been elsewhere, and who had been elsewhere but counted here, and who had been here but counted nowhere at all.

"The two little ones were at their mum's in Coober," Aunty Maureen said. "Shontelle and the baby. But they live here."

"Most nights?"

"Most nights. Their mum's working."

"And were they on a form at their mum's?"

"I don't know, love. You'd have to ask her."

"I'll ask her," said Lorraine, and wrote it down in a spiral notebook that was not Bureau issue, and not, I noticed, the kind of thing a person would want to lose. "And Darren?"

"Darren's not here."

"No."

"He's been staying." Aunty Maureen looked at the dirt. "He was here that night. He's been here since June. But I didn't want to put him down, with the housing."

"I know," said Lorraine. She did not write that down. She let it go into the air between them and did not catch it, and after a while she said, "Housing doesn't see it, Aunty. Nobody sees it. It goes in a box and the box goes to Canberra and in Canberra he's a number with no name on it. But if he's not in the box, the clinic doesn't know he's here either, and the store doesn't know, and when they work out how many houses this camp needs next time, he's not one of them."

"I know that."

"I know you know. I'm just saying it so it's said."

They sat. A truck went by on the road outside the camp with a blower on the back, and the dust it raised hung for a long time in the still air before it came down. Then Aunty Maureen said, "Put him down," and Lorraine said she would have to come back with a form for Darren to sign himself, and Aunty said Darren would be at the footy training Thursday, and Lorraine said she knew where that was.

Back in the Land Cruiser, Jarrah said, "That's one," and Lorraine said, "That's one and a half," and wrote something in the notebook, and I understood that I had been watching a woman count by a method I had not known existed, in which the number came last.

* * *

We did six houses at Three Mile and two more on the road out, and then we went north for an hour on dirt to an out-station, three transportables and a

water tank and a shed on a rise above a dry creek lined with coolabahs, where an old man named Mr Coulthard and his two grandsons lived most of the year and where nobody had come to the door in 2021 at all.

Mr Coulthard filled in his own form. He had been waiting for us. He had his reading glasses on a cord like Lorraine's, and he wrote slowly in pencil in very upright letters, and when he came to the question about the language spoken at home he stopped and looked at Lorraine over the glasses and said something to her in that language, and she answered in it, and they both laughed, and he wrote it in. He would not let me help with any of it. He let me sharpen his pencil.

Afterwards Jarrah and the grandsons kicked a football in the creek bed, a long lazy game with no rules I could identify, the ball going up into the white sky and coming down among the coolabahs, and Lorraine and I sat on the tailgate of the Land Cruiser with the thermos between us, and that was when she told me about her own family.

"Twenty-one," she said. "Last time. You remember what it was like then."

"Lockdowns."

"Lockdowns. Borders. Half the field staff couldn't get up here, and the half that could weren't allowed in the communities, quite right too. So it was all online, they said, and phone, and they'd send people later." She poured. "And on census night we were in Port Augusta. My mother's brother had passed. We'd been down there a week. All of us, Mum, my sister and her two, Jarrah's mum, Jarrah, me. Seven. Mum was eighty-one. We did all the business and came home on the Friday, and there was a card under the door to say a collector had called. One card. And that was it. Nobody came back. By the time anyone could come back they'd closed the field." She drank. "The house went down as unoccupied on census night."

"All seven of you."

"All seven. Nought." She turned the cup in her hand. "It doesn't matter, in a way. It's anonymous. Nobody in Canberra knows it was us. But I knew. And I was working for them by then, on contract, in Coober. I was out knocking on doors for the Bureau, and my own mother's house was a zero." She looked at the creek, where the ball had gone up into a coolabah and stuck, and three young men were standing under it arguing about whose

fault it was. “Mum died the next year. So that was her last census. Not there.”

I thought, with my teacher’s brain, which would not be quiet even for this: a zero is not an absence of data. A zero is a datum. It is an assertion. Somebody had looked at that house and asserted, in a public record, that nobody was in it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I’m not telling you so you’ll be sorry.” She put the cup down. “I’m telling you because you’re good at this, and you think it’s about the number. It’s not. Well, it is. The number’s real, the number’s what gets you a clinic. But the number’s only ever as good as the door. And some doors, nobody knocks twice.”

* * *

On the long road back, with Jarrah asleep across the back seat with his mouth open and his boots against the window, I asked her who else.

“Who else what?”

“Who else nobody knocks twice for. In town.”

She drove for a while. The road ran straight for kilometres between low saltbush and then lifted over a rise, and from the top of the rise the town appeared ahead of us as a scatter of white heaps catching the late sun, like a field of salt.

“There’s two kinds,” Lorraine said at last. “There’s the ones who’ve been disappeared. And there’s the ones who’ve been allowed to disappear. They look the same from outside. They’re not.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Somebody did the first lot. The second lot, everybody did. By not looking.” She shifted down for a corrugation. “You get a lot of the second kind on the fields. Always have. Men came up here from everywhere to be nobody. Changed their names, didn’t send money home, dug a hole and lived in it. The town lets them. That’s the deal. You don’t ask a man where he’s from, he doesn’t ask you what you did. Old Frank Hollis, you’ve met Frank. Frank’s been nobody since about 1980 and he’s very proud of it.” She glanced at me. “Then there’s the first kind.”

I waited.

"You'll have heard about the Nash boy," she said. "Corey."

"I've heard what people say."

"What people say." Lorraine made a small sound in her nose. "People say the Tully boy pushed him and then went down a hole. That's what people say, because it's a good story and it's got an end. Two boys go out, one comes back dead and the other doesn't come back. You can tell that in the pub in a minute and a half." She was quiet for a moment. "My uncle Kenny was out on the Eighteen Mile that night. Coming home late from a funeral, my Aunty Rose's, out at the community. He says he saw a white Hilux go onto Baird's ground. Late. The one with the lights on the roof."

The saltbush went by. I kept my hands in my lap. I kept them there very deliberately, as you would keep your hands still on a table with a wasp on it.

"He told a young copper at the search, one of the ones they sent up from Adelaide. Copper never wrote it down. Nobody asked him again," Lorraine said. "Nobody asks Uncle Kenny anything. He's an old Aboriginal man with a Falcon held together with fencing wire, and the coroner had a nice statement from a man on the Progress Association that said he was home in bed." She did not look at me. "So that's the first kind. Somebody did that. Somebody decided whose story got written down."

I said nothing. I could feel the shape of everything I could not say pressing up against the inside of my mouth like a tooth that wants to come through. I thought of Ray's draft card, folded in the pocket of my cardigan, which I had carried all day without quite knowing why. *I got him at eighteen in a bad way.*

"You're very quiet," said Lorraine.

"I'm thinking."

"I can see that. You think like a car with the handbrake on." She drove. After a while she said, without any change in her voice, "Don't tell me anything. Whatever it is. I signed the same bit of paper you did, and I've been keeping it since 2006, and I'm not going to be the reason you break yours." She shifted up a gear. "But I'll tell you something, because it's not on any form. Uncle reckons somebody's been camping in the old Pole dugout out past the second fork on the Eighteen Mile. All winter. He sees the smoke from the vent of a morning when he goes out for wood. He leaves it. He says

it's not his business." She glanced at me again, once, quickly. "Uncle's very particular about what's his business. I'm the same."

"Thank you," I said, and I did not know exactly what I was thanking her for, and I suspect she did.

* * *

She dropped me at the bottom of Treloar's Hill at a quarter past five, with the sun going down red behind the Drift's sign. Jarrah woke up long enough to say, through the back window, "See you on the leaderboard, Mags," and fell asleep again before the window had finished going up.

I stood at the bottom of the hill for a moment in the cold, with the satchel over my shoulder. I had collected nothing all day. I had not, by Siobhan's measure, done anything at all. My green dots were exactly as green as they had been at seven that morning. And yet I felt that I had learned more about my job in that one day than in the three weeks before it, and that most of what I had learned was that I had been doing it as if every door opened once and stayed open, and every household had one true number, and the number was the household.

Lorraine leaned across the passenger seat and pushed the door open again just as I was turning away.

"Mags."

"Yes?"

"Your brother," she said. "Ray. He paid Jarrah to drive his ute down to Port Augusta one time, when Jarrah was sixteen and in strife at school and nobody'd give him anything to do. Three hundred dollars and a lecture. Jarrah's never forgotten it. Ray said it was a test drive. He said if Jarrah brought the ute back with a full tank he'd be a man he could trust." She smiled slightly. "Jarrah brought it back full. Ray made him do it again the next month."

"That sounds like him."

"It does, doesn't it. He liked giving people a second go." She reached for the door. "Some people in this town think that's a weakness. You want to watch out for them." And she pulled the door closed and drove away up Hutchison Street, the Land Cruiser's tail-lights going small and red in the

dust, and I walked up the hill in the dark to the green door, where the dog was sitting, as he always sat, facing in.

CHAPTER 15

Daniel

On the Wednesday night, after Lorraine, I left a plate again, sausages this time, and the thermos, and on the Thursday morning when I went through the wardrobe the plate was on the bench in the workroom, washed and dried and stacked on top of its own lid, the thermos beside it with the cup screwed back on, and underneath the plate was a sheet torn neatly from my graph paper pad. He had written on it in pencil, using the lines, one capital to each square.

Thank you for the chops on Tuesday and the sausages. They were very good. I hope it is not too much trouble. D.

I stood and read it four times. It was the *I hope* that undid me, the way it sat in its little squares like a man standing in a doorway with his hat in his hands. Then I took the pencil from the jam jar of dop sticks, where he had put it back, and wrote underneath, in my own hand, which thirty-one years of whiteboards have made large and impatient:

It is no trouble. I'll sit up tonight in the kitchen. If you would rather not, that's all right, and the food will be there either way. M.

I worked all day. I did eleven doors and got three forms, one from a woman on Gully Road who had been waiting for me with the form already filled in and a jar of quandong jam, which she said Ray had liked, and which she had been keeping for him, and which she now gave to me because she did not know what else to do with it. I came home at five. I made a stew with chuck steak and carrots, which takes three hours and fills a dugout with a smell like a promise. I washed up. At nine I put the kettle on the stove, not lit, and the white enamel mug from the bedside in the back room beside it, and Ray's WORLD'S OKAYEST MINER beside that, and I sat at the laminex table with the lamp on and a book I did not read.

Toff lay across the passage mouth with his chin on his paws, facing in.

* * *

He came at twenty past one.

I heard the wardrobe first, the small creak of the timber on its leather hinge, and then nothing for a long time, long enough that I thought he had changed his mind and gone back, and then Toff stood up, and his tail moved, once, twice, and he went down the passage without a sound. I heard a man's voice at the far end of it, very low, say a word I could not make out. It might have been the dog's name. It might have been *mate*.

Then he was standing at the end of the passage, at the edge of the lamplight, with the dog leaning against his shins.

I had imagined him so often in the past week that I had built a man, and the man I had built was wrong in almost every particular. I had made him tall, like Ray. He was not tall. He was perhaps five foot nine and so thin that his clothes hung off the points of him: shoulders, hips, the knobs of his wrists. He had on a grey work shirt washed nearly white and moleskins gone at the knees and old elastic-sided boots, and a beanie, which he took off as soon as he saw me, and held. His hair under it was dark and had been cut, I thought, by himself, with scissors, without a mirror. He had a narrow face that had been out of the sun for a very long time. Under the lamp his skin had the bluish whiteness of a child's after a winter. There was a scar through his left eyebrow, an old one, a neat pale line, so that the eyebrow went along and stopped and started again.

He looked at me, and then at the floor in front of me, and then at me again.

"Mrs Aspinall," he said.

"Ms. Or Mags." I heard myself say it and thought of Lyle at the Lucky Strike, and wished I had said anything else. "Mags, please."

"Mags," he said, carefully, as if he were putting it on a shelf. He did not come any further. "Thank you for the note. And for the food. I'm sorry about the scones on Sunday. I didn't know they were for me."

"They were for you."

"I thought they might be. I didn't like to presume."

"Would you like some tea?"

He considered this as if it were a real question with consequences, which perhaps for him it was. "Yes," he said. "Thank you. If it's no trouble."

"It's no trouble. That's the second time you've said that." I got up and lit the stove under the kettle. My hands were perfectly steady. I was proud of them. "Sit down. Please. Any chair but that one."

He looked at the brown corduroy armchair by the window, and then quickly away from it, and sat on the chair with the split seat by the stove, which had been, I understood in that instant, his chair, the fourth chair, not one of the three at the table. He sat on it the way a person sits on a chair they have sat on a thousand times, without looking, his body going into the shape the chair had kept for him. Toff got up into his lap. Toff was a full-grown cattle dog and much too big for a lap, and he arranged himself across Daniel's thighs with his front half hanging off one side and his back legs off the other and his eyes closed, like a sack of something precious, and Daniel put one hand on the dog's ribs and left it there and did not move it again for an hour.

I made the tea. Milky, two sugars. I put it in the white enamel mug and gave it to him, and he looked at the mug, and then at me.

"You brought it through."

"I washed it."

"Thank you," he said, and held it in both hands without drinking, the way I had seen Josie hold her coffee. "Ray gave me that. He said it was the only mug in the place I couldn't break."

* * *

We did not talk about anything for a while. That is not quite true. We talked about the stew, which he ate, a bowl and then, when I put it in front of him without asking, a second, slowly and with great attention, the way a person eats who has learned to make food last. We talked about the dog. He told me Toff's real name was Toffee, that Ray had named him for the colour and then been too embarrassed to call it out in the street. He told me Mrs Varga gave Toff a raw egg in his dinner every Sunday, which Ray had considered a waste of a good egg and Mrs Varga had considered medicine. He talked like a man who had read a great deal and spoken very little: in full sentences, with care, choosing words a half-second after he needed them, so that every answer came with a small pause in front of it, like a step before a door.

He did not ask me anything about myself. I thought at first that this was shyness. Later I understood it was courtesy, of a kind most people have forgotten. He did not ask because he had already been told, every week, for six years.

"He told you about me," I said.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

He took his time. "That you were the clever one. That you taught maths at Norwood and the kids were frightened of you and then they weren't, by the end of the year, and they came back to see you after. That you were always right." He turned the mug a quarter-turn on his knee. "He said you were right about him. About the house. He said that a lot. I didn't think it was fair, how much he said it, but it wasn't my place."

"It wasn't fair," I said. "I wasn't right. Or I was right about the money and wrong about everything else." I looked at my own tea. "He told you about the house."

"He told me everything, I think. Over the years." Daniel looked at the dog. "There's not a lot to do, in there. He used to come and sit on the end of the bed of a night and talk. I'd cut stone and he'd talk. About Port Pirie. Your dad's Kingswood. The smelter stack. You teaching him his times tables with matchsticks on the lino." He paused. "Yellow lino."

I could not say anything to that for a moment, and he seemed to understand that and waited, and drank some of his tea at last.

"I read your letter," I said. "The draft. The card."

"I know. I saw it'd been moved." He lifted his eyes to mine for perhaps the first time and held them there. They were grey and very tired. "I'm sorry. I should have put it somewhere you'd find it straight away. I didn't know if it was mine to give you. I didn't know if you'd want it."

"Where was it?"

"In the ledger. Back cover. He kept it there." He looked away again. "I took it out when I went. In December. I don't know why. I took it with me and then I brought it back. I've been bringing things back."

* * *

It was after three when I asked him about December. I did not ask him straight. I said, "The constable rang me on a Sunday," and left it there on the table between us, and he looked at it for a long time.

"It was a Tuesday," he said. "The ninth."

I waited.

"He'd been crook for about a week. He said it was indigestion. He said it was Gus's chilli, finally, he'd finally got the chilli hot enough to kill him, and he thought that was very funny. He was taking the white tablets out of the cupboard. Mylanta. He was taking a lot of them." Daniel's hand moved on the dog's ribs. "I told him to see the doctor in Coober. He said he'd go on the Monday. Then on the Monday he said Friday, when he was in town for lunch anyway. He said there was no point going twice."

"That sounds like him."

"Yes." He was looking at the armchair now. He looked at it steadily, the way you would look at something you had decided not to be afraid of. "I was in the workroom. Cutting. It was about four in the afternoon. He was out here reading. *Lonesome Dove*. He'd been reading it to me, a bit at a time, of a night, he did the voices, he was terrible at the voices. And I heard the book drop. That was all. It's a big book. It makes a sound."

The kettle ticked on the stove as it cooled.

"I came out and he was in the chair. His eyes were open. He'd gone. I knew he'd gone. I did what you do. I did all the things, I'd done a first aid course at school, I did it on the floor for, I don't know. A long time." He stopped. "He was a big man, Ray. I couldn't get him back in the chair after. I tried. I didn't want to leave him on the floor. It took me a long time."

"You got him back in the chair."

"Yes."

"By yourself."

"Yes." He swallowed. "I couldn't ring anyone. You understand that. If I rang the ambulance, it'd be the police, it's always the police out here, and they'd come in and they'd find the wardrobe, and then. I knew all that. I sat there and I knew all that and I had the phone in my hand. His phone. I had triple zero on the screen. I didn't press it." He looked at me, and his face was quite steady, and his voice was quite steady, and his hand on the dog had gone white across the knuckles. "I'm not proud of it. I want you to know I

know what it was. He'd have been found the same either way. But I didn't press it."

"He wouldn't have wanted you to press it," I said. "Would he."

"No. He used to say. If anything happens to me, you go out the back and you let them find me. He said it like a joke. He made me promise." He was quiet. "I didn't go out the back. Not straight away."

"You stayed with him."

"Two days." He said it plainly, as a fact, like a measurement. "I sat with him. Over there, on the floor by the chair. I turned the vent fan up as high as it would go, because of the. Because of what happens. You know. I didn't know what else to do. So I read to him." For the first time something moved in his face, and he put it away again. "I read him *Lonesome Dove*. From where he'd got to. I thought he'd want to know how it came out. I read all the first day and most of the night. I did the voices. I was worse than him."

I put my hand over my mouth. I did not mean to. He saw it and looked down at the dog to give me privacy, and went on, to the dog.

"I didn't finish it," he said. "I got to about a hundred pages from the end and I stopped. I thought, if I finish it, that's the end, and then I've got to go. So I didn't finish it. I sat there another day not finishing it." He breathed out. "And then on the Thursday night I fed Toff, and I put his water down, and I opened the face door about a hand's width, so he could get out to Mrs Varga, and so the air could. So someone would come. And I went through the wardrobe and I latched it and I went down the drive and up the ladder, and I didn't come back for three months."

He looked up.

"I've still got the book," he said. "I haven't read the end. I don't think I will."

* * *

I asked him, later, when the stew was cold in the pot and the tea was cold in the mugs, where he had been since, and he told me in general terms, in a way that I understood was careful for my sake: the Eighteen Mile, an old dugout, a tank, Josie. He did not say which dugout. I did not tell him that I already knew, from a woman who had told me nothing, on a road where she had told me only what was not on any form.

Then, because I am who I am, and because it was nearly four in the morning, and because I could not, God forgive me, leave a sum undone, I said, "Daniel. Will you tell me about Corey."

He went very still. Not frightened. Still, the way the dog went still when someone came to the green door whom he did not know.

"No," he said. "Not tonight." He looked at his hands. "I'm sorry. I will. I think I will. I can't tonight. I've only just started talking. I haven't talked to anyone for, a long time, except Josie, and she does most of it." There was almost a smile. "I can't do both of them in one night. Ray and that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You keep being sorry."

"I know," he said. "Ray used to say that. He said I apologised like other people breathe." He lifted Toff off his lap, carefully, in two movements, front half and back half, and set him down on the floor, and the dog sighed and lay against his boots. "I should go. It gets light about seven, and I'm a long way out."

He stood. He took the white mug to the sink and washed it, and dried it on the tea towel, and held it a moment, and then turned and held it out to me, and I understood that he was asking where it lived now. I looked at the shelf above the sink, where Ray's mugs hung on their hooks, and the fourth hook that had been empty since my first night.

"It's yours," I said. "Take it back with you."

He looked at the empty hook for a long moment, and then he put the mug in the pocket of his shirt, where it did not fit, and held it there with one hand.

"Thank you for the tea," he said. "And for the stew. It was very good."

"Will you come back?"

He was at the mouth of the passage, with his beanie back on and Toff at his heels. He turned, and in the lamplight he looked about fourteen and about a hundred, the way people look at four in the morning.

"Tomorrow," he said. "If that's all right. If it's no trouble."

"It's no trouble," I said, and he very nearly smiled, and went down the passage into the dark, and I heard the wardrobe, and the leather strap, and then nothing, and the dog came back up the passage alone, and lay down at the mouth of it, facing in.

CHAPTER 16

Ana Petrakis

The police four-wheel-drive came up Treloar's Hill at ten past nine on the Friday morning, slowly, in low range, the way you would bring a large animal up a narrow stair, and stopped at the bottom of my cutting beside the Corolla. I watched it from the face window with a cup of tea going cold in my hand. I had slept for two hours.

Sergeant Petrakis got out and stood for a moment with her hands on her belt, looking not at the Number Nine but at the hill above it. Then she came up the cutting and knocked on the green door with the side of her fist, three times, not loudly.

"Morning," she said, when I opened it. "Got a minute?"

"I've got several."

"Lucky you." She had on the blue jumper with the stripes, and sunglasses pushed up into her hair, and she had the look, close to, of a woman who had been awake since five for reasons that had nothing to do with me. "It's nothing. It's barely anything. I'll say what it is and you can tell me to go away."

"Come in."

She did not come in, not yet. She stood in the cutting and turned and looked back up at the hill, at the line of the slope above the face, where the second vent cowl turned on its pipe against the sky.

"Mrs Varga," she said, "stopped me after church on Sunday. She does that. Last time it was a car parked across her drive that turned out to be her own grandson's from Szeged, which he'd rented in Adelaide and left there for her to look at, so she could see he was doing well." The corner of her mouth went. "This time she says she's seen a light on the hill behind you at night. Twice in the last fortnight. Up the back, round the old Treloar workings. A torch, moving. Late. She wanted to know if it was me, and when I said it wasn't she wanted to know what I was going to do about it." She looked at me. "So this is me doing something about it."

I thought of the corrugated iron and the two tyres, and the thirty-one rungs, and the new galvanised bolts. I made my face do what it did at parent-teacher interviews when a father told me his son was gifted.

"I haven't seen anything," I said, which was true. "I go to bed early. I'm in the spare room, at the back. There's no window."

"No. There wouldn't be." She was still looking at the hill. "Mind if I have a walk up?"

"It isn't my hill."

"It's your title, I think, a fair way up. Treloar's old lease went with this place when your brother bought it. That's what the Registrar's map says, anyway." She glanced at me. "Not that you need to come. It's rough."

"I'll come."

"I thought you might," said Ana Petrakis.

* * *

We went up the side of the cutting on a goat track I had not known was there, through saltbush and loose white shale, the sergeant in front in her boots and me behind her in my sensible walking shoes from Kathmandu in Rundle Mall, which were already the colour of the hill. Toff came with us. He went ahead and came back and went ahead again, the way a dog does when he is showing you something and is not sure you deserve it. Below us the town lay out in the morning, the heaps and the roofs and the white sign of the Drift, and the Shell servo where Tash Nash's son was taped to the till.

The old Treloar workings were two hundred metres up and back, a scatter of grey spoil heaps and a rusted winch frame on its side and three or four shaft mouths, two of them filled in long ago and slumped into shallow dishes full of windblown sand, one fenced with a single strand of rusted wire on star pickets and a sign so faded that only the word DANGER survived. And the fourth. The fourth was the one with the sheet of corrugated iron over two steel pipes, weighed down with two old tyres.

Ana Petrakis stood beside it for a long time.

"Somebody's kept this," she said.

"Ray kept everything."

"Ray's been dead since December." She crouched, and put her hand flat on the iron, the way I had put my hand on the wall of the back room. Then

she lifted one edge of it, carefully, a few centimetres, and looked underneath, and let it down again. I did not breathe. I counted, because it is what I do. I got to nine. "Those bolts on the ladder are new," she said. "Galvanised. That's not 1960. That's Bunnings."

"Ray did a lot of things to this place," I said. "I'm finding out every day. He put a new hinge on the bathroom cabinet that I don't think the cabinet asked for."

She stood up and dusted her knees and looked at me for what felt like a long time, with her sunglasses still up in her hair, and her eyes, which were brown and very direct, doing the thing that Kenny Wilton would one day describe to me as looking at you when you talk.

"Where does it go?" she said.

"I've no idea," I said. "I've never gone down it from up here."

That was also true. I had come up it, once, on the Sunday, from below, and gone back the way I came.

"Right," she said. "Well. I'd put a lock on that, if I were you. Kids'll be up here. Or someone looking for somewhere to sleep." She said it in exactly the same voice as everything else. "I'll tell Mrs Varga I've had a look."

* * *

She came in, after. I made her a cup of tea and she sat at the laminex table in the chair nearest the door, which is where police and teachers sit, I have noticed, by instinct, and she looked round the front room with an interest that was polite and complete. The armchair. The box on the floor beside it. The mugs on their hooks, and the fourth hook, empty. She looked at the empty hook for exactly as long as she looked at everything else.

"How's the census going?" she said.

"Siobhan's thrilled."

"Siobhan rang me in July," said Ana Petrakis, "to ask if there were any areas of town I'd advise her field officers to avoid. I said the Drift bar after nine and the Eighteen Mile after dark. She said she'd love, love, love to make that a resource." She drank her tea. "I'm not here about the census. I know better than that. Your Lorraine gave me a talk about it once, at the Progress hall, when they wanted the police to help with the follow-up in 2021. It was a very short talk. It said no." She put the cup down. "You lot are the only

people in this country I can't make tell me anything. Did you know that? I looked it up, after Lorraine. Not with a warrant, not with a subpoena, not with a court order. Not a coroner, even. Whatever's on that form goes in the box, and that's the end of it."

"I know."

"I thought you would. You've got the look of someone who read the fine print." She turned the cup. "So I'm not asking you anything off a form. I'll tell you that straight, so we know where we are. If I ever do, you tell me to get stuffed."

"All right."

"I'm asking you as Ray Aspinall's sister, who's living in his house and who's been asking odd questions round town for three weeks." She said it without heat. "Pam Hartigan tells me you spent a morning in the *Digger* binders. Gus tells me nothing, which is how I know you've been talking to Gus. And Pam says you asked her for a copy of your brother's claim map, and then asked her what an inspector's notice was, and she didn't know, and you looked disappointed."

I had done that. I had asked Pam on the Tuesday afternoon, after Josie and before the chops, because I was my brother's executor and I had a claim to deal with and because, if I was honest, I had wanted to look at a map. She had photocopied it for me on the Progress hall machine, in two halves, and taped them together.

"I'm his executor," I said. "He had a claim. There are holes on it. Lyle Baird wants to buy it. I'd like to know what I'm selling before I sell it, if I sell it, and whether I'm liable for anything if somebody falls down something."

She nodded slowly. It was a perfectly good answer. It was, as far as it went, the truth. She knew that. She also knew it was not the answer to the question she had not asked.

"Fair enough," she said. "Ask me, then. I'll tell you what I can."

* * *

I asked her two things. I had chosen them in the night, in the armchair, the way I used to choose the two questions for the end of a test: the ones that would show me who had understood and who had only remembered.

The first was the inspector's notice.

She told me plainly. If the Mining Registrar's inspector found a shaft on a claim that was open and unmarked, he issued a notice to the claim holder requiring the shaft to be made safe, which meant capped, or backfilled, or at the very least fenced and signed, within a set time, usually fourteen or twenty-one days. The claim holder then sent in a declaration that the work was done. Sometimes the inspector went back to check. Often he did not, because there was one inspector for a field of fifty thousand holes and he was also responsible for the explosives licences and the toilets at the public noodling area. "It works on trust," she said. "Like most things out here. A man signs a bit of paper saying he's done what he's told. If he hasn't, and nobody falls down it, nobody ever knows."

"And if somebody does?"

"Then it depends whether anybody looks at the bit of paper." She looked at me. "Next question."

The second was harder to ask. I asked it as a hypothetical, which I have always distrusted in students, because a hypothetical is a confession with its hat on. I asked what happened, in law, when a person who had been the subject of an open finding at an inquest, a person the town presumed was dead, turned out to be alive.

She did not move at all. That is the thing I remember. She did not lean forward, or narrow her eyes, or put her cup down. She sat exactly as she had been sitting, and only her stillness changed, became a different kind, the stillness of a person who has heard a twig go in the bush.

"In general," she said.

"In general."

"In general, nothing much. It's not a crime to go missing. People do it all the time. It's not a crime to let people think you're dead, unless you've claimed the insurance." She was very careful. "It might be a crime to have wasted police time, if you'd lied to anyone, which you mightn't have. The coroner can reopen an inquest, if there's new evidence. A person who turned up would be asked, very politely, where they'd been and what they knew. They'd be a witness. Not a suspect, unless there was a reason." She let a moment pass. "Unless somebody had a reason to make them one."

"And if they had a record."

"Then everybody would want to make them one," said Ana Petrakis, "and I'd have to be very careful not to let them." She picked up her cup at last, and found it empty, and put it down. "I've been here since 2022, Mrs Aspinall."

"Mags."

"Mags. I've been here since 2022. I came up from Murray Bridge. The first week I was here, four different people came into the station to tell me about Daniel Tully, unprompted. Four. One of them was Lyle Baird. He brought me a cake from the Drift. Very generous man." She said it in exactly the tone Gus had used. "So I read the Nash file. I've read it maybe six times since. Every time somebody tells me the story in the pub I go back and read it again, to see if I've missed something." She stood and took her hat from the table. "It's a file you can read standing up. That's all I'll say. It's very short, for a file with a dead boy in it."

At the green door she stopped and turned, with the morning light behind her.

"I'm not going to ask you what you know," she said. "I don't think you'd tell me, and I don't think I'd want to be the copper who made you. But I'll say this, as a general thing. If anyone in this town ever wanted to tell me something about that night that's not in the file, I'd listen. Properly. I'd write it down." She put her sunglasses on. "And if somebody up on that hill ever needed to talk to a police officer who'd listen, I'm in the station most days, and the kettle's terrible, and I'm not in anybody's pocket."

She went down the cutting. At the bottom she bent and scratched Toff behind the ears, and he let her, which he did not do for everyone, and then she drove away down Treloar's Hill in low range, as slowly as she had come up.

* * *

I sat at the table for a long time afterwards, and then I did what I had done on the night I sealed the Kestrel form. I got out my folder and found the paper copy of the undertaking that Lorraine had given me in the back room of the Progress hall, between the folding chairs and the footy tipping, and I read it again, under the light.

I will not, either directly or indirectly, divulge or communicate to any person any information given to me under the Act.

I had read it the first time for what it said and the second time for what it did not say. This time I read it as a proof, which is to say I tried to find out exactly where it ended.

Given to me under the Act. That was the form. Three names, three dates of birth, one of them gone over twice; a tick in a box; a religion in the margin where the scanner would not see. That was on one side of the line, and it was sealed, and it would stay sealed, and if Ana Petrakis came back with a warrant from the High Court of Australia I would tell her what I had told her: to get stuffed.

On the other side of the line were things that had not been given to me under any act. A dog lying against a wardrobe. A hook and eye. A young man on the chair with the split seat, eating stew. Two days on a stone floor with *Lonesome Dove*. Those I had not got from the Bureau. I had got them from my brother's house, which was mine, and from my own eyes, and from a man who had chosen to sit at my table and tell me.

And yet. I sat there and made myself look at it honestly, the way I made the Year Twelves look at the step they wanted to skip. Would I have known who he was, in the lamplight, the moment he said *Mrs Aspinall*, without the form? Would I have known to leave the hook hanging? Every one of those things on the far side of the line had its root on the near side. I knew his name because Josie had written it in a box. I knew he was alive because she had pressed it into a page. If I told Ana Petrakis there was a young man sleeping on my hill, I would be telling her what was on the Kestrel form as surely as if I had handed her the envelope, because there was only one young man in this town whom a sergeant would want to know about, and the only reason I knew he existed was the form.

The law, I thought, draws its line round the paper. It is a good line. It is a line drawn by people who had never sat with a sealed envelope and then had the person in it come up the passage and ask for tea.

So I drew my own, and I drew it further out, where it would hold. Nothing that had begun with the form would leave me. Not to Ana, who was decent. Not to Josie, who already knew. Not to Lorraine, who had told me not to tell her. If anyone in this town was going to walk into the station

and tell Ana Petrakis what had happened on the Eighteen Mile on the night of the eighteenth of October 2019, it would have to be someone who knew it without me. It would have to be him, or somebody who had seen it with his own eyes. It would not be me.

I put the folder away. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. I had nine doors to do before dark and a stew to heat, and a man coming through my wardrobe in the night who had said he would tell me about Corey, and I found that my hands, which had been so steady on Thursday, would not quite stay still on the table.

CHAPTER 17

What Happened

He came earlier on the Friday, a little after eleven, and he did not stop at the end of the passage this time. He came into the lamplight and stood by the chair with the split seat and waited until I said sit, and then he sat, and Toff got into his lap as if he had been waiting all day for the chance, which perhaps he had.

I had the photocopy of Ray's claim map on the table. I had been looking at it after dinner, Ray's claim a long thin rectangle with its peg numbers and the ground on either side in other names, and I had left it there when I heard the wardrobe. He looked at it and then at me.

"You've been at Pam's," he said.

"I'm the executor."

"I know." He put one finger on the map, on the long boundary along the eastern edge of Ray's claim, where the next block was marked in small capitals L. J. BAIRD. He left it there. "I said I'd tell you."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't." He took his finger off the map. "I've been thinking about it all day. I thought, if I don't do it tonight I'll keep coming through and eating your food and not doing it, and that's not fair to you." He looked at the dog. "I've never said it from the start, in order. Not to anybody. I want to do it in order. If I get it out of order I'll stop."

"Then do it in order," I said. "I won't interrupt."

"You will," he said, without malice. "Ray said you would."

* * *

"It was a Friday. The eighteenth. Corey came round about nine, after tea. He'd been at training. He was a year under me, he was still at school, he was going to finish Year Twelve and go to Adelaide and play for Norwood. That was the plan. He was the best player the Diggers had had in twenty years. Everyone says that about a boy who's died. It was true about him before.

"His mum's birthday was in November. He wanted to find a stone for her. Not buy one. Find one, and get it set at the place in Coober, so he could tell her. He'd been on at me for weeks. I was working for Ray by then, on Ray's ground, so I knew where things were. And Lyle had been blowing on the next block all that winter, all along Ray's boundary. Big fresh heaps. Corey said, there'll be stuff in those heaps the blower missed, there always is, Lyle never looks properly, he's too rich to look properly. He said, nobody's going to miss a bit of colour off a heap.

"I said no. I want to be fair to him. I said no, the first few times. Because of what happened when I was sixteen. You know about that."

"Gus told me."

"It was Lyle's heap that time too. He came to court. He sat at the back. And afterwards, outside, in the car park at Port Augusta, he waited till Dad had gone to get the car, and he came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder, very friendly, and said, *Next time, son, it won't be the magistrate.*" He said it in a voice that was not his own, a big warm voice, and then he stopped and looked embarrassed, as though he had done something rude. "I never told anybody that either. Who would I tell.

"So I said no. And then I said yes. Because it was Corey and it was his mum, and because I was eighteen and I thought, it's dark, it's one night, we'll be an hour. That's all. I went.

"We went out in my ute, about half ten. We parked on the track, off the side, where it runs past Ray's ground, and we walked across onto Lyle's with our torches. Head torches, held low. I knew there were holes on Lyle's block. Everybody knew. He'd sunk four test shafts along that bit earlier in the year, looking for where the level went, and he'd left them. No covers, no pickets, nothing. Ray said one day some poor tourist's going to go down one of Lyle's holes and Lyle'll send flowers. Ray said the inspector had been out and given him a notice and Lyle had laughed about it at the Drift. So I knew. I told Corey. I walked him round them, all four. I said, don't go near these four. I said it twice."

He touched the map again, lightly. "Can I have your pencil?"

I gave it to him. He made four small crosses on Lyle's side of the boundary, in a rough line running back from the track, careful, the way he had made the capitals on the graph paper. Beside the one nearest the track,

the one closest to Ray's ground, he made a small circle round the cross. He gave me the pencil back.

"That one," he said.

* * *

"We were there about an hour. On the heaps. There was no moon. Corey found a bit of potch with a line of colour in it and I told him it was nothing and he said it was for his mum, and he put it in his pocket. He talked the whole time. You'd say be quiet and he'd be quiet for about a minute.

"Then there were lights on the track. Coming from town. High beam, and then a light bar on top, the whole row of them, so the heaps all went white. And Corey said, *That's Baird.* Because there's only one car with a light bar like that. And it turned off. Onto the block.

"I said, torches off. We turned them off. And it came on, slowly, along the side of the heaps, with the lights going over everything, and Corey started laughing. Not a big laugh. The way you laugh when you're frightened and you're seventeen and you don't want your mate to know. He said, *Bet you a pie he's come to check on his diamonds.* Then the lights went on past, out along the boundary, and stopped at the far end of the heaps, and went off. Corey put his torch back on. He had it down close on the face of the heap, and he said, *Dan, shine it here. There's colour.* I didn't come fast enough. I was listening for the Hilux. He was laughing again, properly this time, and he said, *There's colour, look,* and he stepped back from the face to show me, walking backwards so I could get the whole of it in my light. I was on the heap above him. I could see him against his own torch. I said his name.

"I said *Corey*. That's all. I didn't say stop, or don't, or hole. I said his name, and he turned his head to look at me, and he took another step back, and he went down."

He stopped. He sat with his hand on the dog and looked at the table a hand's width in front of the map, and neither of us moved.

"There wasn't a noise," he said. "That's the thing I wasn't ready for. You think there'd be a noise. There wasn't, not up top. Not till after. Then there was a sound from down the hole, a long way down. Only one.

"His torch was on the ground. At the edge. I don't know how. I think he'd let go of it when he turned to look at me.

"I didn't think. I ran back to the ute and I drove it across the block, with the lights off, and I got the rope out of the back. Ray made me carry a rope. Thirty metres. He said, measure the deepest hole you'll ever be near and add eight. I tied it to the towbar and went down it, hand over hand. It was twenty-two metres. I know that now. Then it was just down."

He turned his hands over on the dog's back and looked at the palms as though he expected to see something still written on them.

"He was at the bottom. On his side, with his legs under him wrong. I put my torch on him. His eyes were open. I knew. I touched his neck, the way they show you, and I held my hand there anyway, a long time. I said his name a lot. I don't know how long I was down there. Long enough for my hands to stop working properly on the rope. And then I went up, because I couldn't carry him, and I thought I'd get help, I thought, I'll get Ray. I went up the rope.

"And Lyle was at the top."

* * *

"He'd parked the Hilux right up near the ute. He had a big torch, the long kind, the kind the coppers have. When I came up over the edge he put it in my face, so I couldn't see him. I could only hear him. He didn't help me. I knelt there on the ground and he shone the torch down the hole for a while, and then back at me.

"I said, *It's Corey. He's down there. He's dead. We have to get someone.*

"And he didn't say anything for a bit. And then he said, and I'll tell you exactly, because I've said it in my head every day since and I haven't changed a word of it:

"*You were thieving on my claim, the boy's dead, and you've got form. Who do you think they'll believe?*"

He said it flatly. He did not do the voice this time.

"I didn't say anything. I couldn't. Then he said, *I wasn't here tonight. Neither were you, if you've got any sense.* And he turned the torch off, and he walked back to the Hilux, and he got in, and he reversed it all the way back to the track with the lights off. Then I was on my own with the rope.

"He didn't ring anyone. I knew he wouldn't. If he'd rung someone I'd have stayed. I think I'd have stayed. I'd like to think so." He was quiet for a moment. "No. I don't know that. I don't know what I'd have done. I know what I did.

"I pulled the rope up. I put it in the ute. I left Corey's torch where it was, at the edge, because I thought someone should be able to find him. That was the only thing I thought of that was right. And I drove away, out along the track, the wrong way, away from town, and I didn't know where I was going. I thought Port Augusta. The ute was on empty. It had been on empty all week, I was going to fill it Saturday. It died at the far end of the Eighteen Mile, past the old diggings, about two in the morning. Then I left the keys in it and I got out and walked.

"I walked to here. Across the fields, in the dark, the long way round, so I'd stay off the track. It took me till nearly five. I didn't fall down anything. I walked fifteen k through the Eighteen Mile in the dark with no torch and didn't fall down anything, and he walked backwards three steps.

"I knocked on the green door. Ray opened it in his shorts with a torch. He looked at me. I don't know what I looked like. And he didn't ask anything. He said, *Have you eaten?* And I said no. And he said, *Get in, then.*"

* * *

He told me the rest more quickly, as if the hard part were behind him and the rest were only arithmetic, which in a way it was. Ray had put him in the spare room, my room, that first night, and fed him, and listened, and had sat at this table until it was light with his head in his hands. Ray had wanted to go to the police on the Saturday. Daniel had begged him not to. Then on the Saturday afternoon Corey was found, and on the Sunday the ute was found, and the town decided, very quickly, as Gus had said, and by Sunday night it was too late to walk into the station and be believed, and they both knew it.

"Ray went out on the search," Daniel said. "On the Sunday. With everybody. He said if he didn't go people would wonder why. He walked the lines all day with Dad looking for me, knowing I was here. He came home that night and said, *The holes are gone.*"

"Which holes?"

He put his finger on the map again. On two of the four crosses, the two furthest from the track. "These. Filled in. Fresh spoil, machine tracks. And this one," the fourth, "had a cover on it, timber and iron, and a sign. New. And three signs up along the boundary saying DANGER. On the Friday night there was nothing. On the Sunday there was a cover and signs and two holes gone, and only this one left open." He touched the circled cross. "The one Corey was in. With police tape round it. So it looked like there'd been one hole he'd missed, and the boys had gone and found it in the dark."

I looked at the four crosses. I saw it at once, the way you see the error in a student's working before you have read the line it is on.

"Somebody did that on the Saturday," I said. "Early. Before anyone knew there was anything to look at."

"Ray thought so. Ray said he must've had someone out there at first light." Daniel looked at me. "We never knew who. We couldn't ask. Ray said if he asked anyone anything, he'd be telling them."

I thought of the night I had sat in this kitchen with the dates in my spiral pad and could not ask Gus, or Tash, or the sergeant, because every question carried the form inside it like a stone in a peach. My brother had sat at the same table, with the same problem, for six years.

"Lyle told the police he saw nothing," Daniel said. "He told them he was home. He told the coroner he'd been getting the holes capped and that one was due that week. Ray brought the *Digger* home. He said I should know what they were saying." He paused. "And then Ray went quiet for about ten days, and then the search stopped, and that night he got his book out from under the bed and wrote in it. I saw him do it. He wrote one line and pressed so hard it went through."

"*He's alive*," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. "You've read it."

"All of it."

"Then you know the rest," he said. "It's all in there. Half of everything."

* * *

It was past two. Toff was asleep with his chin hanging off Daniel's knee.

"Why didn't you go," I said. "After. Later. A year later, two."

I meant it gently. Nothing I say comes out gently; it is a defect of construction. He did not seem to mind.

"Every day I could have," he said. "Every day for seven years I could have walked down Hutchison Street to the station. I know that. Dad knows that. That's why he won't see me." He said it very simply. "At first it was Lyle. I was frightened of him. I'm still frightened of him. Then it was that I'd left it too long, and every week I left it, it was worse, because the first thing anyone would ask was why I'd waited. And then it was Ray. If I came out, they'd ask where I'd been, and I'd have to say. And Ray would be the man who hid me. He'd have gone to court for me. I couldn't do that to him." His hand moved on the dog. "And then Ray died, and I didn't have that any more. I only had the other things. And Tash Nash at the servo every day with Corey on the till, believing I did it." He looked at me. "She's right to hate me. I left him. I left her not knowing. I let her think it for seven years. I didn't push him. But I let her think it. That's a thing I did."

"You were eighteen."

"I was eighteen that night. I've been nineteen and twenty and all the rest of them since." He lifted the dog off his knees, the two careful movements, and set him down. "Ray used to say that. *You were eighteen.* I used to say, Ray, you said yourself, you can't keep being the age you were when you did the thing."

He stood. He looked down at the map on the table, at the four crosses and the circle, and then at me, and he asked it. Not in Lyle's voice. In his own, plain and careful and tired, as if he really wanted to know, as if I were the one person in the town who might be able to work it out.

"Who do you think they'll believe?"

I did not answer him. I have been asked a great many questions by young people, and I know the difference between a question that wants an answer and a question that wants a witness. I looked at him, and I let him see me look, and I did not look away.

He nodded, as though I had said something. Then he thanked me for the tea, though I had not made any, and went down the passage, and the dog went with him as far as the wardrobe and then came back to me.

I sat with the map until the cowl on the hill began to tick in the dawn wind. Then I folded it carefully along the line where Pam had taped the

halves, so that the four small crosses lay against each other on the inside, and I put it in the back of the green ledger, behind the last entry, where my brother had kept his card.

CHAPTER 18

The Price

Lyle Baird came up Treloar's Hill at a quarter to eight on the Saturday morning, on foot, which I had not known he could do.

I saw him from the face window. I was standing at the sink with the kettle in my hand, having slept from four until seven in the brown armchair with the claim map folded in the ledger on my knees, and I watched him come up the last of the slope with a cardboard tray of takeaway coffees in one hand and a large envelope in the other, picking his way between the rocks in his good boots, stopping halfway to get his breath and look out over the town as if he owned it, which in several senses he did. He had on a navy polo shirt with a small embroidered miner's lamp on the breast and the words THE DRIFT underneath, and his Akubra, and a pair of moleskins with a crease ironed into them. He looked like a man in an advertisement for a superannuation fund. He looked like the father in a family film who turns out to be kind.

Toff, who had been lying in the passage mouth, got up and went to the green door and stood with his nose to the gap at the bottom and did not wag.

I put the kettle down. I put on my cardigan. I went out into the cutting before he could knock, and pulled the green door shut behind me, and stood in front of it.

"Mags." He was a little out of breath and very pleased to see me. "I've brought you a coffee. Gus's. Flat white, I guessed. Teacher." He held out the tray. "I hope it's not too early. I'm always up at five. Can't help it. Forty-six years of the fields."

"Thank you." I took the coffee. It would have been absurd not to. "I'm afraid I'm not dressed for visitors."

"No, no. I won't keep you. I won't even come in, unless you want me to." He looked past me at the green door, a short, interested look, the way you look at a car you are thinking of buying. "I've got something for you. I

wanted to give it to you in person. I don't like doing these things through Pam. Pam's a good woman, but she types everything up and then it feels like a court case."

He gave me the envelope. It was heavy, good paper, Baird Mining letterhead again. I did not open it.

"It's a better offer," he said. "In writing, so you've got it. For Ray's claim, and this place. The lot. As is, where is. Contents included, so you don't have to worry about clearing it out, I know what that's like, I did my dad's." He smiled. "Two hundred and forty."

"Thousand."

"Thousand." He laughed, a warm, big, easy laugh that I could imagine at the Progress meeting and at the footy club and over a coffin. "It's too much. I'll say that before you do. Your Pam will tell you it's too much. The claim's worked out, Ray never got much off it, and the dugout's an old one, and it's on Treloar's lease, and the old Treloar workings run all through this hill. It's worth maybe a hundred and twenty to anyone else. But it squares off a bit of ground for me on the Eighteen Mile, and I liked your brother, and I'd like to see you right. That's the truth."

He had offered me a hundred and eighty, on the Eighteen Mile, a fortnight before, and I had not answered it. I had not known, until he said the figure, how much I disliked being told what was the truth.

"It's very generous," I said.

"It is," said Lyle Baird. "It's very generous." He looked at the green door again. "There's just the one thing. Not a condition. A favour. I'd like to have a look at that back wall, before you decide. For safety."

"Which back wall?"

"Ray's room. Behind the wardrobe. Like I told you out at the claim." He said it lightly, a man mentioning a gutter that wanted clearing. "Old Treloar put a drive through the back of this hill in the sixties, looking for a level he never found. I remember it. I was a kid, I used to come up here and throw rocks down his shaft. It runs right behind Ray's bedroom. And those old drives, Mags, they go. They let go. You get a bit of water in a wet year and the roof comes down, and if you're sleeping against it, well." He spread his hands. "I'd feel terrible. I'd just like to put my head in and have a look. Five minutes."

I held the coffee in both hands. It was very hot, and I let it burn, because the burn was something to hold on to.

"You told me that on the claim," I said. "I've had a good look at that wall since."

"Have you, now." He was still smiling. "With respect, love, you're a maths teacher from Adelaide. You wouldn't know a dodgy roof if it fell on you. Five minutes."

"No," I said.

* * *

I have said no to a great many people. It is one of the few skills I can claim to have developed to a professional standard. I said no to a principal who wanted me to lift a boy's Year Twelve mark by four points so he could get into medicine, and I said no to his father, who was on the school council, and I said no to the regional director who rang me at home on a Sunday. I said no to Graham, once, about a house in the Hills, and I was right, and it did not save the marriage. I said no to Ray in a hallway in Port Pirie, and then I said a great deal more than no, and it took me eleven years and a phone call from a constable to understand that no had been the right word and everything after it the wrong one.

So I know what a no does to a face. I have watched it happen across a desk two thousand times. And I watched it happen to Lyle Baird's, standing in the cutting with the town behind him, and I have never seen it happen so slowly or so completely. It did not fall. Nothing so obvious. It was more that something behind the face, which had been holding it up, sat down.

"No?" he said.

"No. Thank you for the offer. I'll read it, and I'll talk to Pam. But I'm not having anyone in Ray's room. Not yet."

"It's for your own safety."

"Then I'll take the risk. It's my wall."

He looked at me then, properly, for the first time. His eyes were a very pale blue, like the sky at the edge of the gibber, and they were not smiling at all, though his mouth went on doing it out of habit.

"You know," he said, quite gently, "your brother was a very stubborn man."

"He was."

"He wouldn't sell either. I asked him ten times. Twelve. I offered him twice what that ground's worth. He'd say, I'm not finished with it yet, Lyle. Every time. I'm not finished with it." He let that sit. "And then he was finished with it, wasn't he. Sitting in that chair for four days with nobody knowing." He shook his head, a big sorrowful shake. "That's what stubborn gets you, out here. A lonely death and a sister who didn't come to the funeral."

I did not say anything. I could not, for a moment. It was so precisely aimed that I think, if I had not been holding the coffee, I would have put my hand up to the place.

"I'm sorry," said Lyle. "That was unkind. I didn't mean it unkind. I'm a blunt man." He touched the brim of his hat. "Read the letter. It's a good offer. It won't be there forever. Nothing is." He looked once more at the green door, and once at the hill above it, at the second cowl turning on its pipe against the sky, and his eyes stayed on the cowl a moment longer than they needed to. "You want to keep an eye on that hill, Mags. All sorts go up there at night. Kids. Ratters. People who've got no business. You want to be careful who you let near your back wall."

Then he went down the slope, much faster than he had come up it, sure-footed among the rocks, and at the bottom he did not look back.

* * *

I read the letter at the laminex table. It said what he had said, at greater length and with better grammar. It said *as is, where is, together with all chattels, fixtures and contents*, and it said *settlement at the vendor's convenience, but in any case not later than 30 September*, and it said that the offer would lapse on Friday 11 September at 5 pm. It was signed in a large confident hand. I read it twice and then I put it in the back of the ledger with the map, which seemed to me the right place for it, among my brother's accounts.

Then I washed the takeaway cup and put it in the bin, and washed my hands, and went into Ray's room, and stood in front of the jarrah wardrobe for a long time.

All chattels, fixtures and contents. A cabbing machine. A jam jar of dop sticks. A container marked DON'T. *Moby-Dick* with a bus ticket in it. An empty fourth hook. A bed made tight enough to bounce a coin. Somebody who knew exactly what was in Ray Aspinall's back wall would want to buy it with everything in it, and settle by the end of September, and have a look first, for safety.

I did my rounds. It was a Saturday, and a lot of people were home, and I did fourteen doors and collected five forms, which Siobhan would later describe on the phone as phenomenal. At one of them, a fibro cottage on Gully Road with a fridge on the verandah, a woman of about my age filled in her form at her kitchen table and asked me, while she was doing the bit about the internet, whether it was true I was selling up to Lyle.

"Who told you that?"

"Lyle," she said. "At the footy, Thursday night. He said it was more or less done."

* * *

The Corolla was parked where it always was, at the bottom of the cutting, nose to the hill. I came back to it at half past three with my satchel and my five forms and found it sitting very low.

All four tyres were flat. Not slashed. Not punctured. Simply let down, all the way, so that the car rested on its rims like a cow lying down in a paddock. On the bonnet, in a neat row, a hand's width apart, someone had laid the four brass valve cores, each one pointing the same way.

I stood and looked at them. They were perfectly aligned. Whoever had done it had taken trouble, and had wanted me to see that they had taken trouble. It was not vandalism. Vandalism is untidy. This was a sentence.

I picked them up one by one and put them in the pocket of my cardigan, where they clinked like small change, and I walked down Treloar's Hill and along Hutchison Street to the Lucky Strike, because I did not know who else in town owned a compressor and was not Lyle Baird.

* * *

Gus came back with me in his van, a white Hiace with KOSTAS MAVROS CATERING on the side in blue letters, and a compressor in the back that

he said he used for the tyres of the van and also for blowing the dust out of the souvlaki grill. He knelt in the dirt beside each wheel in turn and threaded each valve core back in with his fingertips and pumped the tyres up to thirty-two, and did not say anything at all until the last one was done. Then he stood up, with a hand on the small of his back, and looked at the cutting, and at the green door, and at the hill.

"Lyle came to see you," he said.

"This morning. With your coffee."

"I know. He ordered two flat whites at seven and he said one is for the teacher." Gus wiped his hands on a rag. "He never orders two. Never. Twelve years." He folded the rag very carefully into a square. "Mags. Come and sit down a minute."

We sat on the low stone wall of the cutting in the late sun. Toff came out and lay at Gus's feet, and Gus reached down and rubbed his ears without looking at him, the way you do with a dog you have known a long time.

"You know I made the cakes," Gus said.

I had not known. Not as a fact. I had read it in the ledger, *Cake from Gus*, and I had not let myself think about it, the way I had not let myself finish a sum.

"For Ray," I said.

"For Ray, he said." Gus looked at the town. "Every year, first week of March. He comes in, Friday, he has the souvlaki, he complains about the chilli. Then he says, Gus, I want a cake for Monday. Chocolate. With walnuts. And candles." He turned his head and looked at me. "Your brother hated walnuts. Did you know? Twelve years he picks the walnuts out of my baklava and lines them up on the side of the plate. Like your valve cores. And every March, a chocolate cake with walnuts, and candles. For himself, he says. Nineteen candles. Then twenty. Then twenty-one." He was quiet. "Ray was not nineteen."

"No."

"And Daniel," said Gus, "when he came on Fridays, before, he ate the walnuts. Off Ray's plate. Every time. Ray pushed the plate over and Daniel ate them." He opened his hands. "I am not a clever man like you, Mags. I am a cook. But I can count candles."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Who would I tell?" He shrugged, a vast Greek shrug that began at the shoulders and went all the way down. "Ana? To say what? Your brother bought a cake? I baked the cake. I put the candles in a bag. I said happy birthday to nobody. That's all." He looked at the valve cores' empty places on the bonnet. "I'm not asking you anything. You understand. I'm not asking."

"I understand."

"But I'm telling you something. About Lyle." He lowered his voice, though there was no one within half a kilometre but the dog. "When Ray wouldn't sell, the last time, last winter, somebody put sugar in the tank of his ute. Out at the claim. He had to get towed in from the Eighteen Mile. He laughed about it. He said it was kids. He said it at my counter, laughing, and then he stopped laughing and he said, *Gus, if anything ever happens to me, it was my heart.*" Gus looked at me. "And then it was his heart. I know it was. The doctor said. I'm not saying anything else. But that was a funny thing to say, I always thought. To make a man promise what it was before it happened."

The sun was going down behind the Drift, and its long shadow came up Treloar's Hill towards us, and when it reached the Corolla the white paint went grey.

"He doesn't do things himself," Gus said. "Lyle. He has people. There's always a boy at the footy who owes him something." He stood up, slowly. "Lock your car. Lock your door. And whatever is behind your back wall, Mags, I don't know what it is, I don't want to know what it is, but keep it there."

* * *

That night I left a plate as I always did now, and the thermos, and under the plate a sheet from the graph paper pad, on which I wrote, in my large impatient hand, the first thing I had ever written to him that was not about food.

Lyle Baird came to the door this morning and asked to see Ray's back wall. I said no. Someone let my tyres down this afternoon. Please be careful on the hill. M.

I read it over. It said nothing that had been given to me under any act. It said what had happened in front of my own eyes, to my own car, at my own door. I left it.

In the morning the plate was washed and the thermos was empty, and under them, in pencil, in his squares:

Thank you. I will. I'm sorry about your car. He did worse to Ray's. D.

And under that, smaller, as if added afterwards, the way Ray had added *Draft* to the top of his card:

Don't sell it to him.

CHAPTER 19

Owen and Josie

Josie asked me on the Saturday, at the op shop, while I was paying two dollars for a saucepan I did not need.

"Come out for lunch tomorrow," she said. "It's Father's Day. I do a roast. I've done a roast every Father's Day for twenty years and he doesn't eat it, and I need somebody at the table who isn't me."

I said I did not think Owen would want me there.

"He doesn't want anybody there," Josie said. "That's never stopped me." She gave me my change. "Half twelve. Bring nothing. If you bring something I'll put it in the shop."

* * *

The Kestrel looked smaller in the middle of the day. A crow sat on the capped shaft where the old headframe had been, and the white Coaster was parked in the yard with its bonnet up. Owen was under it. I could see his boots.

Josie met me at the door in an apron that said I'M NOT BOSSY I JUST KNOW WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING, which she said had been donated and which she had been unable to put out for sale on grounds of accuracy. The kitchen smelt of lamb and rosemary and gas. The cat clock on the wall was moving its eyes from side to side with its tail, the way it had when I sat at that table with a clipboard three weeks before, and I found I could not look at it for long.

There were three places laid. At the end nearest the stove, the place I took to be Owen's, there was an envelope propped against the water glass. A plain white envelope, the kind you buy in a packet of twenty at the newsagent, with one word on the front in square pencil capitals, one letter to a square, as if it had been written on graph paper and copied out: DAD.

I looked at it, and then I did not look at it.

"Don't," Josie said, at the oven, without turning round. "Whatever you're thinking. Don't. Sit down."

I sat down.

Owen came in at twenty to one, washed his hands at the sink with a cake of Solvol for a long time and dried them on the tea towel, and nodded to me, and said, "Mrs Aspinall," which was more ceremony than he had given me on the whole of the Painted Range. Then he turned and saw the envelope, and stopped.

He did not touch it. He stood with the tea towel in his hands and looked at it, and the muscle at the hinge of his jaw did the thing I had seen it do at the lookout, tight and loose and tight.

"He wrote that," Josie said. "Not me. I want you to know that. I didn't ask him. He gave it to me Friday and said would I put it out. That's all I've done. I've put it out."

Owen folded the tea towel in half and in half again and laid it over the oven rail.

"Sit down, love," Josie said. "The lamb's resting."

He sat. He sat in front of the envelope with his hands on either side of his plate, and Josie carved, and put lamb on his plate, and roast potatoes and pumpkin and peas, and then without saying anything she took his plate back and cut the fat off his lamb, every piece, with small quick strokes, and pushed it to the side of her own plate, and gave it back to him. He did not thank her. He did not need to. I saw his eyes go to her hands while she did it, and stay there.

We ate. I talked, because somebody had to. I talked about the census in the general way I was permitted to: the percentage, Siobhan, Bevan in Roxby with his mine camp. Owen ate his lamb, all of it, which I gathered from Josie's face was unusual, and his potatoes, and left the pumpkin. Once, reaching for the salt, his knuckles brushed the envelope and it tilted against the glass, and he stopped with his hand in the air and then took the salt and did not straighten it.

When the plates were cleared Josie brought a lemon delicious to the table and three bowls, and sat down, and said, very quietly, "Are you going to open it?"

"No," said Owen.

"He's twenty-five, Owen."

"I know how old he is."

"He's twenty-five and he sat at this table on census night for the first time in seven years and you came home and stood in that doorway and you didn't say one word to him. You looked at him for a full minute. I counted. And then you went out to the shed. And he sat here with my lamb going cold and he said, Mum, it's all right. It's all right. And you sat in the bus till one in the morning with the engine going."

I held my spoon. None of this had come to me on a form. None of it was in any box; it was being said in front of me in a kitchen by a woman who had decided to say it, and I could do nothing but sit inside it and be counted as present.

Owen looked at his wife. "Not in front of her," he said.

"She knows," said Josie. "Don't you worry about what she knows. She's the only person in this town who's never asked me a single thing."

Owen stood up. His chair went back on the lino with a sound like a shovel in gravel. He looked down at the envelope for a moment longer, and then he picked it up, and I thought he would tear it, and so did Josie, I saw her hand come up off the table. He did not tear it. He put it in the breast pocket of his work shirt and buttoned the pocket down over it, and went out the back, and the screen door banged.

* * *

Josie did not go after him for a while. She ate a spoonful of the lemon delicious, and then another, and then she put her spoon down and sat looking at the place where the envelope had been.

"He walked the lines," she said. "That's what he can't get past. The eight days. He walked the lines on the Eighteen Mile with the SES and half the town, eight days, calling for him, looking down every hole with a torch. He went down three shafts himself on a rope. And all that time." She opened her hands. "All that time your brother had him in the back room on Treloar's Hill. Owen's never forgiven that. Not Daniel. Ray. He says, Ray decided for me. Ray decided I could walk the lines. Ray decided I didn't get to know. He says that's not a friend, that's a man playing God." She looked at me. "I'm sorry. He's your brother."

"He was."

"I told Owen in the end. Three years ago, near enough. On a Sunday, in the yard. I'd held it three years and I couldn't hold it any more. He didn't speak to me for a month. Then he went to Ray's and banged on the door, and Ray wouldn't open it, and he came home and he's never spoken his name since. Either of them." She stood up and took the bowls. "He's not a bad man, Mags. He's the most honest man I've ever met. That's the trouble. He thinks if you lie to someone because you love them, it's still a lie. He thinks the lie's the bigger thing." She ran the tap. "Maybe he's right. I don't know any more."

Through the window over the sink I could see him in the yard, standing by the bus with the bonnet still up, not doing anything to it. He had one hand flat on the breast pocket of his shirt, the way a man holds a place where something hurts.

When I left at three, he was still there. He lifted his hand from the pocket two centimetres as the Corolla went past, as he had lifted it from the table the first time, and put it back.

* * *

He came up Treloar's Hill at a quarter past nine that night, and I knew it was him before he knocked because Mrs Varga's face light came on next door, and stayed on, and her door did not open, which was Mrs Varga's way of watching.

He did not bang. He knocked three times, quite softly, the way you knock at a hospital room. When I opened the green door he was standing in the cutting with his beanie in his hands, and I could smell the rum from where I stood. He was steady on his feet. I have been to thirty-one years of staff Christmas parties, and he was the steadiest drunk man I have ever seen.

"I want to see where he kept him," said Owen Tully.

I did not say anything. I stood in the doorway of my brother's house and looked at him.

"Josie told me," he said. "Three years ago. Ray had him in the back. Behind a wardrobe. I came up here and banged on that door like a mad bastard and he wouldn't let me in." He turned the beanie in his hands. "I'm not asking you anything. I know you can't. I'm not asking about forms. I'm

asking can I see my mate's house. That's all. Ray's house. I just want to see it."

I thought about the strict reading. I thought about it for perhaps four seconds, standing there with the cold coming in round my ankles. The rooms behind the wardrobe were Ray's. I had found them myself with my own hands and my brother's dog; they were mine to show or not show, like the teaspoons. What I knew about who had slept in them was a different thing, and that I would keep. But he was not asking me for that. He already had it. His wife had given it to him in a yard on a Sunday three years ago, and it had been sitting in him ever since like a splinter under a nail.

"You can see Ray's house," I said, and stood aside.

* * *

He walked down the passage pulling the cords, as if he had done it before, and perhaps he had, years ago, before. In Ray's room he stood in front of the jarrah wardrobe and did not touch it, and I went past him and opened both doors and pushed the shirts along the rail, the wire hangers ringing, and unhooked the velvet curtain, and opened the plank door by its leather strap. Then I gave him the big yellow torch and stood back.

He had to stoop more than I did. I followed him at a distance, through the four metres of drive, and stopped in the opening to the first room, and did not go in.

He stood in the middle of the floor with the torch pointing at the ground. The reading lamp was off. I reached past the edge of the opening and turned it on, and the room came up yellow around him, the made bed, the shelf, the pick marks of two different hands.

He did not say anything for a long time. He looked at the bed. Then he went to the shelf, and he put out one hand, those big flat hands I had watched holding a clipboard and a tea towel and the breast of his shirt, and he touched the spines of the books, one after another, the way you touch the heads of children going past you in a line. *Moby-Dick. Voss. The Tree of Man. Lonesome Dove.* The Macquarie. The bird book. When he came to the opal-cutting manual with the masking tape down its spine he stopped, and took it down, and opened the front cover, and held it under the lamp.

I could see the inscription from where I stood. Blue biro, faded nearly to grey. *O. Tully, Lightning Ridge, 1988.*

"That's mine," he said. "I bought that the year I started buying. I thought I'd better know what I was looking at." He turned a page. "I gave it to him when he was twelve. He wanted to cut. I said, you'll cut when you can grade, and you'll grade when you've read that, cover to cover, twice. I thought that'd be the end of it. He had it read in a fortnight. Twice. He came and stood in front of me and said, *Ask me anything.*" His voice did something and came back. "I asked him. He knew it. He knew it better than me."

He closed the book and held it against his chest.

"When he was nine," he said, "he broke the windscreen on my old Landcruiser with a cricket ball. Bowling at the shed. And he knew I'd go off. I did go off, in those days. Not hitting. Loud. And he was gone. Four o'clock in the afternoon and he's gone and it's getting dark and it's July, freezing, and Josie's frantic and I'm out in the ute with a spotlight going round the fields thinking about holes. Every hole. Every hole I ever looked down." He stopped. "Found him at two in the morning. In an old dugout on the Seventeen Mile, abandoned, half fallen in. Right down the back of an old drive, curled up on a bit of hessian, asleep, with a torch and a packet of Scotch Fingers. Sound asleep. He'd gone underground. He always did, when he was in strife. Underground and still, like a lizard in winter, and wait it out." He looked round the room. The bed. The lamp. The shelf. "And I carried him out of there and I said, you ever do that to me again. I said, you ever do that to me again." He shook his head slowly. "Well. He did."

I stayed where I was, in the opening, with my hand on the cold rock.

"I'm not ready," Owen said. He did not say it to me. He said it to the room. "I know what Josie wants. I know what he wants. I'm not ready. I don't know what you say to a boy you buried." He put the manual back on the shelf, carefully, in its place between the bird book and the Macquarie, with its spine exactly in line with the others. "I don't know what you say to a boy you let go."

He stood there a while longer. Then he did a thing I have not stopped seeing. He unbuttoned the breast pocket of his shirt and took out the white envelope with DAD on it. It had been opened, neatly, along the top, with a

knife. He did not take out what was inside, and I did not look at it, and I have never asked. He looked at the made bed for a moment, and then he leaned down and set the envelope on the pillow, squared to the edges of the pillow, exactly as I had set my own note there a week before.

Then he sat down on the end of the bed, the big man, very carefully, as if it might not hold him, and put his face in his hands.

I went back up the passage and put the kettle on, because I could not think of anything else that was mine to do.

* * *

He came out after twenty minutes. His eyes were red and his face was set again, and he drank the tea I gave him standing up, in the white Lucky Strike mug, in three long swallows, as though it were medicine.

"Don't tell Josie I was drunk," he said.

"I won't tell Josie anything."

He looked at me, and for the first time since I had known him something happened at the corners of his mouth that went up instead of down. Not a smile. The place a smile would go.

"No," he said. "I don't suppose you will."

I drove him home. He did not argue. He sat in the passenger seat of the Corolla where my brother's ashes had ridden from Port Augusta, with his knees up near the glovebox, and did not speak the whole four kilometres out the Seventeen Mile Road, and at the Kestrel the porch light was on and Josie was standing under it in a dressing-gown with her arms folded. He got out. He walked to her. He did not say anything to her either, but when he got to the step he put one hand on the back of her neck, just for a second, the way you would steady something that might fall, and she shut her eyes.

I drove back with the window down, in the cold. The plate I had left on the kitchen bench was still there when I got in, under its tea towel, and the thermos was full. It was nearly midnight. I did not go through the wardrobe. I went to bed with the door open, and the dog came and got up on the end of the bed, as he had taken to doing, and settled his back against my shins.

At some time after two I heard the plank door, very softly, and then nothing at all for a long time, and then, so quietly that I could not have sworn to it in a court, a sound from behind the wall that might have been a

man crying, and might have been the wind in the old drive, and that I have never asked about either.

CHAPTER 20

Queensland

The paper forms had to be on the courier by four o'clock on the Thursday. Siobhan rang at seven that morning to tell me so, for the tenth time, as if it were news.

"Four o'clock, love. Lorraine's driving the satchels down to Coober for the freight, and after that anything that isn't in the bag is a non-response and goes to the estimate. And you know what I think of the estimate."

"A guess in a good suit."

"That's it." She laughed. "You're on ninety-one. Ninety-one! Get me two more and I'll stop ringing you."

"You won't."

"No," Siobhan agreed. "I won't."

I had eleven households left. I wrote them on a sheet of graph paper at the laminex table while the kettle boiled, in the order I would drive them: shortest path, nothing doubled back. Seven in town. Three on the Gully Road. One on the Eighteen Mile, which I put last because it was furthest and because I did not want to drive past the Baird fence any earlier in the day than I had to.

Above the list I wrote the date, as I had written it at the top of every page of every exam I ever set: *Thursday 10 September*. It was the last day of the collection. In four days it would be my birthday, and I would be fifty-nine, and I had not yet decided where I was going to spend it, which is not a sentence I had ever expected to write.

On census night I had filled in my own form at this table. Question eight, usual residence: *the address at which the person lives or intends to live for six months or more*. I had written Norwood. My house there stood empty, with the blinds down. My usual residence was a place I did not live, and the place I lived was not my usual residence, and I had ticked a box for that, and I had thought at the time that it was the first dishonest answer I

had ever given on an official document. I thought now that it had simply been the first one that was not finished.

* * *

The seven in town took the morning. Three had sent their forms in already and the system had not caught up, one was a pair of backpackers from Lyon who had been counted in Alice Springs and were quite certain about it, and one was a dugout on Hutchison Street with a dog chained in the cutting and no one home at nine or at eleven; I left a third card and recorded it as I was meant to. The other two filled in their forms at the door. A man in a Collingwood beanie said Aunty Maureen had said I was all right. I took that as a reference.

On the Gully Road two of my three filled their forms in on the bonnet of the Corolla, and the third was a shed with a padlock and a FOR SALE sign, which I recorded as unoccupied. The woman with the quandong jam, who was not on my list at all, came out to the road with another jar and asked me, kindly, whether it was true I was selling to Lyle.

"No," I said.

"Good," she said, and seemed surprised to have said it.

At half past one I drove out the Eighteen Mile in the Corolla, slowly, in second, past the new red signs on the star pickets, BAIRD MINING, DANGER: SHAFTS, NO ENTRY, every twenty metres along the fence as bright as the day they went up, and I did not look at the stretch of ground behind them where four small crosses lay folded inside my brother's ledger. Over the low rise the pink headframe stood on Ray's claim above the empty Valiant seat. I did not stop there either.

My last household was a caravan. It stood by itself on a patch of graded ground a kilometre past Ray's, an old Viscount with a canvas annexe and a wind generator on a pole and, on the roof, a white aerial like a short fat sword with a cable running down into the window. A man of about seventy was sitting in a camp chair in the lee of the annexe, with a crossword.

"Census," I said, through the window.

"I know who you are. You're Ray's sister. Stan Beattie." He did not get up. "I'm not a dwelling, love. I'm a van."

"The Bureau counts vans."

"Does it." He thought about that. "Well, they never counted me before. I was in Yowah last time, and before that I was forty years in Telstra's pocket putting up towers, so I wasn't anywhere." He pointed at the aerial on his roof with his pen. "That's a booster. Only phone signal between here and town that's worth the name. Half the Eighteen Mile comes and stands next to my van to ring their mothers. Ray used to. All right. Count me. What's the damage?"

I sat on an upturned crate in the annexe and he filled it in himself, slowly, with the crossword folded on his knee for a desk, and when he came to usual residence he stopped with the pen over the box.

"Where do I put?"

"Where you live. Or intend to live, for six months or more."

"I intend," said Stan Beattie, "to live wherever the van is." He looked out at the Eighteen Mile, white and grey and endless under the afternoon. "That's the trouble with your form. It thinks people stay put."

"It has a box for people who don't," I said, and showed him, and he looked at it with respect, as at a well-made tool.

When I drove away he lifted his crossword to me, and I saw in the mirror that he had gone back to it before I reached the track. Ten of my eleven were settled, one way or another. I went back past Ray's, past the fence, without looking.

* * *

There was one thing left in the satchel that I had not touched in three weeks.

I had sealed it on the night I collected it, at this table, with the household code on the front and the pencil tick in the box on my list, and I had logged it green on the device, and it had sat since then in the inner pocket of the canvas satchel with the other completed forms, flat and white and anonymous, an envelope among envelopes. I knew which it was without looking at the code. I had never needed to look.

At three o'clock, before I drove to the Progress hall, I took it out.

I did not open it. I held it in both hands at the laminex table, the way I had carried my brother's ashes in from the car, and I thought about what was in it: three lines in a woman's biro, a date of birth gone over twice, a household that had for one night been entirely present. I thought about

Josie saying *it says everyone*. I thought about the oath, which I could recite. I would not, directly or indirectly, divulge or communicate to any person.

I had not. I had told no one. I had not told Ana Petrakis with her careful questions, or Gus with his candles, or Josie, who had written it, or Lorraine, who had signed the same paper. I had not told the man who came through my wardrobe, who had the most right to know what it said and the least need. I had kept it the way the hill keeps the opal: not by doing anything, but by being stone.

And now it would go, and be opened by someone in a room in a city who did not know Calder's Find from Cooper Creek, and turned into a number among numbers, and in five years or ten a young woman with a lanyard would knock on the green door of the Kestrel and the number would be one of the reasons she knew to knock. That was what it was for. It had never been for me. It had only passed through my hands on its way to being counted, as most things do.

I put it back in the inner pocket and buckled the satchel and drove to the Progress hall.

* * *

Lorraine was in the hall with Pam, at the trestle table, with a clipboard and a roll of tape and the courier's grey plastic tubs stacked by the door. Jarrah was carrying tubs out to the Land Cruiser and pretending they were heavy.

"Last one," said Lorraine, when she saw me. "Always the teacher. Last one in and every page in order."

I gave her the satchel. She opened it on the trestle and counted the envelopes out in front of me, aloud, in tens, and I counted with her, silently, and we arrived at the same number. She checked it against the transfer sheet. She signed the sheet and gave me the pen and I signed it underneath her, and the time, 3:41 pm, and she tore off my copy and gave it to me.

Then she put the envelopes into a tub, all together, the Kestrel's among them, and snapped the lid on, and ran a strip of tape across it and signed the tape, and wrote a number on it in texta, and that was all. There was no moment. There is never a moment. I had thought there might be, and there was a plastic tub with a strip of tape on it, and Jarrah picking it up.

"That's it, then," said Lorraine. She was watching my face. "It's not yours any more."

"No."

"Feels funny, the first time." She capped the texta. "You carry them three weeks, and then you hand them over and you don't know what to do with your arms. But that's the job. You don't keep them. You let them go to where they're meant to go, and you trust the people at the other end. That's the bit nobody tells you. The counting's easy. It's the trusting."

"And if you don't trust them?"

Lorraine considered this, honestly, the way she considered everything.

"Then you still let it go," she said. "Because that's the promise. And you go back next time and count better." She put her hand on my arm, briefly. "You did good, Mags. Ninety-one and a bit. Siobhan'll be impossible."

I watched the Land Cruiser go down Hutchison Street with the tubs in the back, and turn onto the highway, and go south towards Coober Pedy, and get small. Then I went home with an empty satchel and did not know what to do with my arms.

* * *

He came at a quarter past twelve. I was at the table with the lamp and a pot of tea already made, because I had known, the way you know a change in the weather by your knee, that he would come.

He did not sit in the split-seat chair. He came into the kitchen and looked at it, and then he sat down on the floor instead, with his back against the cupboard under the bench and his long legs drawn up and his arms round them, the way a boy sits on a classroom floor when the chairs have been stacked for the cleaners. Toff went and lay against his boots. He had brought the white enamel mug in his shirt pocket, as he had taken it away. I poured his tea into it and leaned down and gave it to him, and sat back in my own chair, above him, because getting down onto a dugout floor at fifty-eight is a project and not a gesture.

"Dad was here," he said.

"Sunday night."

"The blanket was creased. At the end." He held the mug in both hands. "He left me a card. On the pillow."

"I saw him put it there. I didn't read it."

"I know you didn't." He looked into the tea. "He opened it. That's what I keep thinking about. He opened it. He could've just put it back shut." He was quiet for a while. "He held the manual, didn't he. It was back on the shelf at the wrong end. Dad never put a thing back where he found it in his life."

"He told me about the windscreen," I said. "And the dugout on the Seventeen Mile. And the Scotch Fingers."

Something happened in his face that I will not try to describe, because I would get it wrong. He put the mug down on the floor beside him.

"I'm going to Queensland," he said.

I had known that too. I had known it since the valve cores on the bonnet; if I am honest, I had known it since the night he told me Ray had made him promise to go out the back and let them find him. He was a person who went out the back.

"How?" I said.

"There's a name. A mate of Ray's from years ago. Col Brannigan. He worked the Yowah fields, up past Cunnamulla. He died out there in 2011. Heart, in his van. No family. Nobody much noticed. Ray went up for it and came back with his papers in a biscuit tin, because nobody else wanted them, and the tin's been in the second room ever since. Birth certificate. A Medicare card. An old licence. I'm about the right height." He picked up the mug again and turned it. "I can get as far as Longreach. I won't tell you how. It's better if you don't know."

"It is," I said. "I'm a terrible liar."

"Ray said you were the worst liar he ever met." He nearly smiled. "He said it like it was a good thing."

"Why now?"

He looked at me then, from the floor.

"Because the form's gone," he said. "Josie wanted me counted. Somebody's got it written down now, somewhere, that I was here. That I was a person. That's what she wanted, more than anything. It's done." He was quiet. "And because of your car. And the back wall. He'll keep coming to your door as long as I'm behind it. He came to Ray's door for six years. I'm not having him come to yours."

I wanted to tell him about Kenny Wilton and the light bar on the Eighteen Mile, and a young copper from Adelaide who never wrote it down. I wanted to tell him about a sergeant who had heard his name from four different people in her first week. I wanted to tell him there were people in this town who would believe him, that the sum was not what Lyle Baird had told him it was, at the top of a shaft, with a torch in his face. But Kenny's words had been given to me by Lorraine on a verandah, not by Kenny, and Ana's questions had been her own, and none of it was mine to hand on, and I had learned in three weeks a great deal about what was mine to hand on.

"There are people who'd believe you," I said. "More than you think."

"That's not a number," said Daniel.

"No," I said. "It isn't. I'm sorry. It's the best I've got."

We sat for a long time after that. The cowl on the hill ticked. The fridge cycled on and off. Toff sighed against his boots, an old dog asked to keep two people company at once.

And I thought about Ray, at the far end of our mother's hallway in Port Pirie in 2014, on its pink runner worn to the threads, and what I had said to him. *You have never once in your life finished anything.* I had said it as a verdict. I had said it because it was the cruellest true-seeming thing I could find, and I had found it quickly, the way a clever girl finds the answer at the back of the book. And it had not been true. He had finished a great many things. A claim, a ledger, a room behind a wardrobe, a life for a boy who had nowhere to have one. I had simply not been there to count them.

What I should have said to him, that day, was not a verdict at all. It was the same words turned the other way up. Not *you never finish anything* but the thing underneath it, which was a hope and not a sentence, and which I had been too proud and too right to say.

"Daniel," I said.

He looked up.

"Finish something."

He did not answer. He looked at me for a long moment, and then down at the mug in his hands, and I saw his thumb move once along the chipped place on its rim. I thought of *Lonesome Dove* on the shelf behind the wall with a bus ticket or a receipt or nothing at all marking a place a hundred pages from the end, and of my brother doing the voices, terribly, in a chair

that was now mine, and I said nothing else, because nothing else was the right size.

At a quarter to four he stood up, in one movement, the way young people do, and the dog stood up with him. He rinsed the mug at the sink and dried it on the tea towel. He did not hang it on the fourth hook. He held it for a moment, and then he put it into the pocket of his canvas jacket, as he had the first night.

"Thank you for the tea," he said, as he always did, as if it were an unexpected favour.

Then he went down the passage, pulling the cords as he went, one, two, three, so that the dugout went dark behind him room by room, and I heard the wardrobe, and the plank door, and nothing.

PART THREE

Persons Present

CHAPTER 21

Gone

Toff woke me by not being there.

For a week and more he had slept across the foot of my bed in the spare room with his back against my shins, a warm red sandbag that sighed whenever I turned over. On the Saturday morning I woke at ten past six with my feet cold and the room silent in the way of rooms dug out of a hill, where silence is a material, like the sandstone, and I listened for him. Nothing. Then a single click of claws on the floor of the back bedroom, and a whine so low it could have been the ventilation shaft.

He was sitting in front of the wardrobe. Not scratching, the way he had the night I found the door. Just sitting, with his nose an inch from the curtain, waiting for it to do something it had done a hundred times before.

I knew before I went through, and I went through anyway, in my dressing-gown and Ray's socks, ducking under the low timber lintel into the drive with the torch I kept on the shelf now for exactly this. The bed was made tight, as it always was. The shelf above it had gaps in it like pulled teeth. The opal-cutting manual with the masking tape down its spine was gone, and *Voss*, and *Lonesome Dove*, and the bird book, and the photograph of Ray and the young man holding up the stone between them, which had stood at the end. In the workroom the cabbing machine was still under its tea towel, too heavy to carry, and the container marked DON'T was gone from the shelf. On the hook behind the door there had been a canvas jacket and a hat. The hook was bare.

On the pillow, square to its edges, was Moby-Dick.

I sat on the bed, which I had never done, and held the book in both hands. Ray's ledger, page forty-one, in his square left-handed capitals: *D. read Moby-Dick, hated it.* I opened the cover. No inscription, no note. A bus ticket from 1994, Ray's, marking the chapter on the whiteness of the whale. It seemed to me a joke, and a gift, and a way of saying a thing without

having to write it down, which was how both men had preferred to say most things.

The white enamel mug was on the shelf beside the dictionary, washed, handle out. He had carried it off in his shirt pocket on Thursday night; he must have brought it back down the passage when he came for the books, and set it there, where it belonged. He had left the Macquarie, too heavy for Queensland. I touched the mug. Dry.

Toff came in behind me and put his front paws on the bed and breathed the pillow in long considering draughts. Then he went past me into the drive, and I followed him to where the air changed, cooler and smelling of outside, to the foot of the old shaft where the iron ladder went up into a disc of white morning. There was dust on the third rung that had been wiped by a hand. There was a scuff in the spoil at the bottom.

"He's gone," I said to the dog, because someone had to say it aloud.

Toff looked up the ladder for a long time. Then he turned and walked back into the dark towards the house, and I heard him lie down, heavily, in front of the wardrobe on the other side.

* * *

Daniel had told me on Thursday night, the night the last forms went, sitting on the floor of my kitchen with his back against the cupboard and his long legs drawn up, that he was going to Queensland. He had a name to use, a mate of Ray's who'd worked the Yowah fields and died there without much fuss and whose papers had somehow ended up in a biscuit tin in the second room. He had a way of getting as far as Longreach that he wouldn't describe. I had said the thing I had not said to Ray, and he had not answered, and at a quarter to four he had stood up and thanked me for the tea, which was what he always did, as if each cup were an unexpected favour.

I had not known it would be the next night. I had thought there would be one more. You always think there will be one more.

I dressed and walked up to Hutchison Street at half past eight, because the op shop opened at nine on Saturdays and I could not think what else to do.

The street at that hour was its own small census. Two blowers parked nose to tail outside the Drift with their tanks dusted pink. Gus hosing the

steps down to the Lucky Strike, who lifted the hose in greeting and then looked at my face and lowered it. Jarrah Wilton on a bicycle much too small for him, a loaf of bread under one arm. The servo's lights on, and behind the glass the shape of a woman at the counter who I knew was Tash Nash, and whom I did not look at for longer than a second.

Josie had the door of the op shop propped open with a brick and was dragging a rack of men's shirts out onto the footpath. She saw me coming and stopped dragging.

"You're early," she said.

"I wanted to catch you before anyone else did."

I watched her understand it in the time it took a semitrailer to change down through its gears at the far end of the street. She let go of the rack. It rolled a little way on its castors and came to rest against the bin.

"When."

"Last night, I think. Some time after midnight. The bed's made. His books are gone."

"Some of his books," she said.

"Some of them."

She went inside. I followed her past the crockery and the bin of odd shoes into the back room where she kept the kettle. She filled it and switched it on and then stood with both hands on the bench and her head down, and I saw that her shoulders were shaking, and I did not know whether I was permitted to touch her, and so I did not.

"He told you," she said, to the bench.

"Thursday. He said he was going. He didn't say when."

"He told you and he didn't tell me."

"Josie."

"No. It's all right." She straightened and took two mugs down from the hook and spooned in the coffee, three heaped spoons in hers and one in mine, which by now she knew. "It's all right. You were there. He'd have told whoever was there. That's how he is. He tells whoever's in the room, and if you're not in the room you find out from the room." The kettle boiled and clicked off. She did not pour it. "I was out there Wednesday with a box. Tins and bread and the good batteries. He was quiet. I thought it was the rooms. I thought it was being at yours. I thought, he's getting used to being

near people again, he's tired from it." She laughed, a short dry sound like a stone dropped into a bucket. "I made him a curry for Friday. Owen'll eat it and not ask."

I poured the water, because one of us had to.

"Did he have money?" I asked. "Enough?"

"He's got what he's got. Ray paid him in cash, the bits Ray could, and the rest Ray kept for him. Wrote it all down, you'll have seen." I had seen. Page after page of *D.* and a figure, and a running total in pencil in the margin that never seemed to go anywhere. "But Ray never sold the best of it. He said the market was rubbish, said wait. There's a parcel. Ray's parcel, he called it, like it was a thing in the post. Daniel said it was out on the Eighteen Mile somewhere. Ray put it down a hole when the Drift lot started sniffing round, about a year before he died." She drank her coffee scalding, the way she did. "So he's either got that or he hasn't."

"He wouldn't leave it."

"No," Josie said. "He wouldn't leave it. It's the last thing Ray did for him."

Outside a woman called to ask if the shirts were five dollars or ten, and Josie called back five, and put her mug down and wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand.

"The form," she said. "That's the only place he was. The only piece of paper in this whole country that says he's alive. And you've sent it off."

"It went on Thursday."

"Where to?"

"I'm not supposed to know exactly. To be processed."

"Processed," she said. "Like a sheep."

"It'll be counted," I said. "It can't be uncounted now."

She looked at me for a long moment with her red eyes. "Is that true? Or is that a thing you say?"

"It's true," I said. "It's the one true thing I know."

* * *

I drove the Eighteen Mile that afternoon because I could not sit still, and because a person who has decided to leave does not always leave on the first night.

The Corolla hated it: a graded track for the first few kilometres, then two wheel ruts with a hump of gibber between them that scraped the sump whenever I let my attention drift. On either side the old diggings went away to the horizon, mullock heaps by the thousand, white and cream and that unlikely pink, each one a cone of spoil thrown up from a shaft, each shaft a hole a metre across going down twenty or thirty metres into the dark. The signs said DO NOT WALK BACKWARDS, which I had thought was a joke the first time I saw it, and was not. Some heaps had a star picket beside the hole with a strip of orange bunting tied to it, faded to the colour of flesh. Most had nothing at all.

I stopped the car where the track forked beside a burnt-out blower, its truck chassis sagging into the ground on four rims, and got out and stood in the wind. It was a cold, clear day, and the wind came steadily from the south-west, lifting the fine dust from the tops of the heaps in pale streamers. I could see the Painted Range to the north, its flat tops banded red and white like something left out to dry. I could not see a single person.

Then I could. A ute, an old Falcon the colour of weak tea, was parked at the foot of a heap two or three hundred metres off the track, and a man was sitting on its tailgate. I had not seen him because he had not moved.

I walked over, keeping to a line of tyre tracks because I had learned that much. He was old, older than Owen, in a checked shirt and a beanie and trousers held up with baling twine, and a small grey dog of no particular breed was lying in the shade under the ute with its chin on its paws. He was eating a sandwich from a bread bag. He did not offer to get up.

"You're Ray Aspinall's sister," he said.

"I am."

"Lorraine's told me about you." He finished his mouthful. "Kenny Wilton. I'm her uncle."

"She's mentioned you."

"I bet she has." He considered the sandwich and put it back in the bag. "You're out here looking for somebody."

There are questions that are not questions, and in that country they are the most common kind. I did not answer. He did not seem to need me to. He looked away across the heaps and said, in the same level voice, as though continuing a conversation we had been having for some time:

"I seen that Baird fella's car out here the night the Nash boy died."

The wind blew. The little grey dog shifted under the ute and sighed.

"Lorraine said something," I said. "She said you'd seen a Hilux."

"Lorraine says things sideways because she's careful. I'm too old to be careful. I was coming back from my sister's funeral out at the community. Late. Eleven, half past. And there's torches out on Baird's ground, two little torches, kids' torches, way over there." He pointed, and I followed his finger towards a place that looked exactly like every other place, heaps and wind and light. "I thought, ratters. I thought, not my business. Then there's a car comes down the track behind me with its lights on high, and goes past me, and turns off onto Baird's ground. White Hilux with the light bar on the roof and a sticker on the back window from the footy club. Only one Hilux in this town with that light bar. Then I went home and went to bed. Then two days later they're all out here looking for the Tully boy, police and SES and half the town walking lines, and the Nash boy's already in the morgue down in Adelaide."

"And you told them," I said.

"I told a young copper. Blond fella, from down south. He's out here with a clipboard asking has anybody seen the Tully boy's ute, and I said no, I never seen the ute, but I seen Baird's car out on his ground that night, about half eleven, and the kids' torches before. He looked at me." He showed me how the constable had looked at him: politely, at a point some way behind his head. "He said thanks very much, uncle. He never wrote it down. I watched him not write it down. He had a pen in his hand and he didn't write it."

"Did anyone else ever ask you?"

"Nobody asks me anything," he said. "Lorraine asks me. Lorraine asks me too much." He smiled for the first time, briefly, with a number of teeth missing. "I watched that inquest in the paper. Nobody present, they said. No other person present. I thought, well, that's not right, is it. That's two people they've left off, if you count the Tully boy, and Baird makes three. Funny sort of counting."

I thought of my satchel, empty now, the last batch gone with the courier on Thursday. I thought of the box on the Kestrel form that said *persons*

present, and Josie's biro going down the page. I said nothing about it. I had become very good at saying nothing about it.

"Why are you telling me?" I asked instead.

He seemed to find the question reasonable. "You're asking round about it. People notice. Lorraine says you do the sums. And your brother was a good man to my nephew one time when nobody else would be. So." He gestured at the heaps, the wind, the whole bright empty field. "You can tell who you like. Tell that sergeant. She's all right, that one. She looks at you when you talk."

"She might want to hear it from you."

"Then she knows where I live," he said. "I've been living there sixty-eight years."

I thanked him. He took the sandwich out of the bag again, and I understood that the conversation was over. I walked back along the tyre tracks to the Corolla. When I turned round at the car he had not moved, except that the little dog had come out from under the ute and was sitting beside his boots, looking at me with exactly his expression.

Then he called out, one more time, his voice thin across the distance and the wind.

"Somebody's been in the old Pole dugout. Past the second fork. Been there all winter." He lifted his sandwich towards the north. "Not my business."

* * *

I found it, the Pole dugout, at a quarter past four, past the second fork and down a gully where the heaps gave way to a low breakaway of crumbling sandstone. Somebody in the 1960s had cut the face and believed in doors: corrugated iron on a timber frame, and a board above it with a name so worn I could read only the first two letters, P and O. Inside, it was three rooms, cold and dry, the walls pick-marked like Ray's. There was a ring of blackened stones in the middle of the first room where somebody had made small careful fires, and the ventilation shaft above it was furred with soot. There was a swept place where a swag had lain. There was a single tin of peaches, unopened, standing on a ledge cut into the wall, as if it had been left for the next person.

And there was, on the floor by the door, the print of a dog's paw I did not recognise, and over it the print of a boot I knew from the spoil at the foot of Ray's ladder.

He had been here. Since my wardrobe. Since Friday.

I stood in the doorway of the Pole dugout with the sun going down behind me and my long shadow lying across the empty floor, and I did the only arithmetic I could do. A man walks out of my wardrobe and up a ladder after midnight on Friday. He does not go to Josie. He does not go to the highway. He comes here, eleven kilometres by the track. He leaves before I arrive. He leaves the peaches. I took them with me, and could not have explained why.

Which meant he had not gone to Queensland. Not yet. He was still out here, somewhere among the ten thousand holes, doing the last thing he had to do before he could go.

I drove home with my headlights on and the Corolla's sump scraping the gibber every few hundred metres, and I did not ring Josie, because I did not know what I would be telling her: that he was gone, or that he was not.

CHAPTER 22

The Inspector

Siobhan rang at eight on Monday morning to tell me I was finished.

"Ninety-three point one," she said. "Once the late ones in the post caught up. Mags. Ninety-three point one. You beat Bevan."

"Bevan has a mine camp."

"Bevan has a mine camp and you beat him anyway. I'm putting you in the regional summary. There's a paragraph." I heard her turn a page. "Device back by the eighteenth, lanyard too, they're very funny about the lanyards. Will you do it again in 2031?"

I said I would be sixty-three in 2031, which was not an answer, and she laughed as if it were, and rang off. I sat at Ray's table with the device showing a grey screen that said NO CASES ASSIGNED, and thought that it was the first time in my working life that a number had been attached to me and I had not wanted to look at it. It was also my birthday. I was fifty-nine. Nobody in Calder's Find knew that, and I did not tell her.

Ninety-three point one per cent. Of what, was the question. Of the dwellings with codes. Of the people who had let me count them. Somewhere in the remaining six point nine was a man who had walked out of my wardrobe on Friday night and not gone where he said he was going, and somewhere else, in the ninety-three, sealed in a form I could no longer touch, was the same man. Both numbers were correct. Numbers were always correct and almost never enough.

I put the device in its satchel. Then I put on my good trousers and walked down the hill to the Mining Registrar's field office.

* * *

It was a demountable on stumps beside the Progress hall, painted the colour of a manila folder, open ten to two on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. At five to ten a woman in her sixties with a bob the colour of a new five-cent piece came along the footpath with a handbag and a thermos,

and looked at me, and looked at my trousers, and said, "You'll be wanting a claim."

"I'll be wanting a file," I said.

Her name was Bev Coutts, and she had worked in the field office for nineteen years. Inside, it was one room with a counter, a map of the fields stuck with coloured pins and a pot plant of great age which Bev watered from her thermos lid before she did anything else.

I explained that I was the executor of my brother's estate, which included a precious stones claim on the Eighteen Mile, and that Lyle Baird had offered to buy it, and that before I decided anything I wanted to understand the neighbouring ground. All of this was true. I had learned in thirty-one years of parent-teacher interviews that if you say the true things in the right order, people stop listening before you get to the part you did not say.

"Ray's claim," Bev said. "I was sorry about Ray. He used to bring me a vanilla slice when he renewed. Every year." She was already typing. "Baird's got a lot of ground out there. Which bit?"

"The bit adjoining Ray's. And I'd like to see anything on the file from 2019."

Her fingers stopped on the keys. Not for long. A small hitch, like a car going over a cattle grid. Then she went on typing.

"Claim register's public," she said. "Anybody can look at the register. The claim files, the notices and that, I'd have to think about. Inspector's directions go on the claim file. It's a public file in the sense that it's not a private one." She looked up at me over her glasses. "In the sense that nobody's ever asked."

"I'm asking."

"I can see that." She went to the filing cabinet. "You can read it at the counter. Copies are forty cents a page and I do them, not you." She drew out a buff folder held together with a bulldog clip and a perished rubber band, and put it on the counter between us, and kept her hand on it for a moment. "I typed some of what's in here," she said. "In 2019. I've thought about it since. I never thought anybody'd come in and read it."

She took her hand away.

* * *

I read it the way I used to mark exams. Every page, in order, and then again, out of order, by date.

The first 2019 page was a notice of direction from an inspector whose name was D. Halloran. It was dated Tuesday 3 September 2019. The inspector had found four shafts, numbered one to four on an attached sketch, open, uncovered and unmarked, within fifty metres of a track used by the public. It directed the holder to backfill or securely cover the shafts, and to mark them with approved signs, within twenty-one days. Twenty-one days from 3 September was 24 September. There were four grainy photographs: four black holes in four pale heaps, one with an old fridge door leaning against it, as if somebody had once meant well and then stopped.

The sketch was simple. A rectangle for the claim. A line for the track. Four crosses with numbers. Shaft 3 was the nearest to the track, and the nearest to the boundary of the claim beside it, which was Ray's.

The second was a declaration of compliance, completed in blue biro in large confident capitals. It was dated Monday 23 September 2019, one day inside the deadline. *All shafts referred to in direction backfilled or covered and signed as required.* It was signed L. J. Baird. There was a box marked *Inspector verified (Y/N)* and it had been left blank.

Then four weeks of nothing. Then a typed file note of a phone call from police on Monday 21 October advising of a fatality on the claim and requesting the inspector attend. Then the inspector's own note, handwritten, of his attendance with police on Tuesday 22 October. *Shaft 3: fatality site, uncovered, unmarked, police tape. Shafts 1 & 2: backfilled, spoil fresh, machine tracks fresh. Shaft 4: covered timber and iron, sign installed, new.* He had underlined *new*, once, and then, as far as the file showed, done nothing further with the underlining.

Then a letter from Lyle. On the letterhead of the Drift, dated Monday 28 October 2019, replying to the inspector's request for evidence of compliance. It was the letter of a reasonable man who sponsored the footy club. It said that all four shafts had been securely covered with timber and iron by 23 September, as declared, and that the covers had been inspected by

himself personally on that day. It said that he could only conclude the cover on shaft 3 had been removed by trespassers, as regularly happened on the Eighteen Mile, where night-time ratting was a well-known problem. It said that following the tragedy he had, as a precaution and at his own expense, engaged a contractor to backfill shafts 1 and 2 entirely and to upgrade the signage throughout. It said a copy of the contractor's invoice was enclosed.

And it was: Dunn Earthmoving, Calder's Find, with a little drawing of a front-end loader. Invoice dated 25 October 2019. Three lines.

Backfill 2 x open shafts, Baird claim, Eighteen Mile.

Supply and install 1 x shaft cover (timber/iron) and 3 x DANGER signs.

After-hours callout (Saturday). Works carried out 19/10/19, 0630 start.

I read it four times. Then I took out my own pencil and my own graph paper, and I wrote the dates down the left-hand side of the page in a column, the way I would have set it out on the whiteboard, and beside each one what was said to have happened on it, and who said so.

Tue 3 Sept. Inspector: four shafts open.

Mon 23 Sept. Baird: all four covered.

Fri 18 Oct, late, or Sat 19 Oct, small hours. Corey Nash falls down shaft 3.

Sat 19 Oct, 6.30 am. Contractor: backfills two OPEN shafts, supplies ONE cover, signs.

Sat 19 Oct, a little after 5 pm. Corey found.

Mon 21 Oct. Police notify inspector.

Tue 22 Oct. Inspector: 1 and 2 freshly filled, 4 covered, new.

Mon 28 Oct. Baird: all four were covered on 23 Sept; works done "following the tragedy".

I looked at it for a long time. It was a Year Nine problem. Four shafts. If all four had been covered on 23 September, and only one cover had been removed by trespassers, the contractor on 19 October should have found three covered shafts. He did not. He found two shafts open, which he described in writing as open, and a third which needed a new cover, which meant it had none. With the fourth, the one Corey fell down, that was four out of four. Nothing had been covered. Nothing had ever been covered. The declaration was false on the day it was signed.

That was the first thing. The second thing was the hour.

Lyle's letter said the work was done *following the tragedy*. The invoice said the contractor started at half past six on the Saturday morning. At that hour, according to every clipping in the Progress hall library and every version of the story I had heard over the counter of the Lucky Strike, nobody in Calder's Find knew that Corey Nash was dead. He was found a little after five that afternoon, at the bottom of shaft 3.

At half past six on the Saturday morning, a man who did not know there had been a tragedy did not ring a contractor on his day off and pay him the after-hours rate to fill in two holes and cover a third, on a claim where, by his own sworn account, everything had already been covered three weeks before.

Unless he did know.

I put the pencil down. The pot plant ticked in the warmth from the heater. Bev was at her computer, not looking at me, the way she had been not looking at me for forty minutes.

"Bev," I said. "Did anyone from the coroner's office ever ask for this file?"

"They asked for the direction," she said, to the screen. "And the declaration. I faxed them. We still had the fax." She paused. "They didn't ask for the rest. They didn't ask, so I didn't send. That's how it works. You send what they ask for."

"Who's Dunn Earthmoving?"

"Barry Dunn. Went to Kalgoorlie in 2021. His wife's from there." Her face was not quite steady. "Ray used to say Barry would dig a hole for anybody at any hour if the money was right, and fill one in for twice as much." She looked at the folder. "How many copies?"

"All of it," I said. "From September 2019."

It came to eleven pages, four dollars and forty cents. She counted out my sixty cents' change from a tin with the Queen on the lid, and put the copies in an envelope, and handed it to me across the counter with both hands, the way people hand over things at funerals.

"It's public," she said. "You can show anyone you like."

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm here."

* * *

I went to the Lucky Strike because I needed to sit somewhere with a door I could see, and because I had eaten nothing since six.

Gus brought me an iced coffee and a plate of chips with lemon and oregano, neither of which I had ordered. He looked at the envelope on the table and then at me.

"You been at Bev's," he said. "Three hours on a Monday. The whole town knows. Eat." He went back up to the kitchen, and I was halfway through the chips when the light at the top of the stairs changed, the way it does when someone large comes down from the street, and Lyle Baird came into the café with his hat in his hand.

He came over smiling, the big generous face, the Drift polo shirt with its little embroidered lamp, and stood by my table without sitting and put his hand flat on the back of the empty chair.

"Mags," he said. "Doing a bit of homework?"

"Executor's business," I said.

"Course you are. Course you are. It's a lot, settling an estate." He looked at the envelope, not for long. "You've had a think about my offer?"

"I've had a think."

"Two-forty's a lot of money for a claim with nothing in it, Mags. Market's soft."

"Ray said the market was always soft."

"Ray," Lyle said, and something passed over his face, quick, like the shadow of a bird over a heap. "Ray was a lovely bloke. Hopeless with money. You'd know that better than me." He took his hand off the chair. He turned to go, and then turned back, the way men like him do, as if the important thing has only just occurred to them. "You want to be careful out on the Eighteen Mile in that little car of yours. Somebody said they saw you out there Saturday. It's not a place to be on your own."

"I wasn't on my own," I said. "I was talking to Kenny Wilton."

He held my eyes for a moment longer than was comfortable. Then he put his hat on, indoors, underground, and nodded to Gus, who did not nod back, and went up the steps into the light.

Gus came and took my plate away. He stood over the table for a moment with it in his hand.

"Ray was not hopeless with money," he said. "Ray was generous with money. It's not the same. Anybody tells you it's the same, they're the one who's hopeless."

* * *

Sergeant Petrakis saw me at nine the next morning in the interview room at the back of the station.

I laid the eleven pages out in date order, left to right, with my sheet of graph paper beside them, and sat back and let her read. She did not say anything for six minutes by the clock on the wall.

At the invoice she stopped. She picked it up and held it close to her face and read the bottom line again. Then she put it down very gently, square to the others, and looked at me.

"Where did you get these?"

"The Registrar's field office. It's the public file on the claim. Bev Coutts copied it for me. Forty cents a page."

"And why," Ana said, "were you reading the public file on Lyle Baird's claim?"

"Because he wants to buy my brother's, and it adjoins it. And because I'm a maths teacher." I folded my hands on the table. "I can't leave a sum wrong. I never could. It used to drive my ex-husband mad."

She looked at me as if reading the small print on a contract.

"There's something else," I said. "Kenny Wilton was driving home on the Eighteen Mile track at about half past eleven on the Friday night, the eighteenth. He saw two small torches on Baird's ground, and then a white Hilux with a roof light bar and a footy club sticker turn off the track onto the claim. He told a young constable during the search. He says the constable didn't write it down." I paused. "He said I could tell you. He said you know where he lives."

"Sixty-eight years," Ana said. "I know." She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "The constable's a senior constable in Murray Bridge now. Nice kid. Wrote a lovely tidy report. The coroner liked it very much."

She looked down at the column of dates again. She was faster than Year Nine.

"Four out of four," she said.

"Four out of four."

"And half past six on the Saturday." She sat back. "You understand what this is and isn't. It's not evidence of anything that happened to Corey Nash. It's evidence that a man made a false declaration to the Registrar and then wrote a letter that doesn't add up. That's a compliance matter. It's a long way from a coronial one."

"I understand."

"But the coroner found that there was no evidence any other person was present. And the coroner relied, in part, on Mr Baird's statement that the shafts were covered and the boys must have taken the cover off." She tapped the invoice. "If Mr Baird was wrong about the covers, the coroner might want to know what else he was wrong about. And if Kenny Wilton puts Mr Baird's car on the claim at half past eleven." She stopped. "A coroner can reopen an inquest if there's new evidence. It isn't my decision. But I can put it in front of them, and I will."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I've wanted an excuse to open that file since the day I got here. It's the thinnest file in this building." She gathered the pages into a pile and tapped them square on the table. Then she held them, and did not get up, and looked at me again with the small-print look.

"Mags," she said. "Is there anything else you want to tell me? Anything that isn't on paper?"

The clock ticked. Outside, somebody was asking the front desk about a lost wallet, and on the street a blower started up with its long rising roar, and I sat with my hands folded on the table and felt the oath sitting in me like a level in a spirit gauge, the bubble exactly in the middle.

"There's a great deal I can't tell you," I said. "What I can tell you is on the table."

Ana Petrakis was silent for a long moment. Then she nodded, once, slowly, as if I had answered a different question from the one she had asked, and answered it correctly.

"Go home," she said. "And stay off the Eighteen Mile on your own. Kenny Wilton's good company, but he's not a search party."

CHAPTER 23

The Storm

For a day and a half nothing happened, which in a small town is a kind of event.

Ana Petrakis did not ring. Lorraine told me, on the Tuesday evening, that Kenny's Falcon had been parked outside the police station for most of the afternoon, and that he had come out and gone straight to the Lucky Strike and ordered a mixed grill, which he did twice a year, on his birthday and on grand final day. Bev rang to say that a man in a white shirt with a government lanyard would be driving up from Port Augusta on the Friday to spend some hours in the Registrar's office, and that she had been told to have the files ready and not why. That evening the Drift was busier than usual, and Lyle stood out the front of it in his polo shirt, greeting the tourists off the coach, shaking hands, laughing his big laugh. On the Sunday before, he had read the lesson at St Barbara's. I knew because Mrs Varga told me, with a look that suggested she had considered several things to say about it and decided they were all beneath her.

I packed the device in its prepaid satchel with the lanyard coiled on top. I cleaned Ray's stove. I read the ledger again, all of it, as if I might find a page I had missed. I went through the wardrobe twice a day and stood in the back rooms, and the bed stayed made, and nobody came down the ladder, and the peaches I had brought back from the Pole dugout sat on my own shelf, unopened, because I could not bring myself to eat them and could not bring myself to throw them away.

On the Tuesday night the wind went round to the north and the temperature in the outside world rose by eleven degrees overnight. I felt it when I opened the green door on Wednesday morning: not cold any more but a dry warm push, like air from an oven when the door has been open a while. The sky was not blue. It was a pale used white, the colour of a sheet that has been washed too often, and the sun came through it without edges.

Mrs Varga was standing on her path in her man's cardigan with her chopsticks in her hair, looking west.

"Today the dust comes," she said.

"The forecast said windy."

"The forecast is in Adelaide." She sniffed the air as if it had been offered to her on a spoon. "Shut your vents by lunch. Put a towel at the door. Bring the dog in." She looked at Toff, who was standing beside me with his ears back and his nose working. "He knows. Look at him. He knows better than the Bureau."

* * *

I took the satchel to the post office at a quarter to three, because the post office closed at three and the device had to be back by the eighteenth, and I have never in my life returned a thing late.

By then the wind was strong enough to lean on. It came down Hutchison Street from the north-west in long hot gusts that lifted the dust off the road and the mullock off the heaps and sent plastic bags tumbling past the servo at the height of a man's head. The sky had gone from white to yellow. There was a smell, too, which I could not place at first and then could: it was the smell of the inside of a vacuum cleaner bag, of fine earth heated and moved.

The woman at the post office counter weighed the satchel and stamped it and said, without looking up, "You'll want to be home in ten minutes, love." I asked her how she knew. She pointed through the window, past the parked utes and the bench outside the op shop, to the west.

I had seen photographs. Everyone has. The great red walls coming in across the plains, towering over a town, the kind of picture newspapers print on their front pages with a headline about the end of something. The photographs were wrong only in that they were still. This was not still. It filled the western horizon from the north to the south, a wall perhaps a thousand metres high, brown at the top and red underneath, and it was moving, and the front of it was not a line but a seething, a boiling-over, great rolls of dust turning over themselves as they came, so that it seemed less like weather than like the earth itself getting up and walking. The Painted Range

had already gone. The heaps on the Eighteen Mile were going as I watched, one row and then the next, as if somebody were rubbing them out.

I ran. I am fifty-eight and I have a knee and I ran up Hutchison Street to the Corolla, and I had the door open when the first of it hit.

It was not dark yet. That came after. First it was orange, a deep sour orange, as if the whole town had been dropped into a jar of marmalade. Then the wind came in properly, all at once, a single great shove that rocked the car on its springs and filled the air with a hiss like sand thrown against glass, which is exactly what it was. Then red. Then the streetlights came on along Hutchison Street, at ten to three in the afternoon, one after another, a line of small brown smudges hanging in the air, and through the windscreen I could see the bonnet of my own car and nothing at all beyond it.

I drove up Treloar's Hill in first gear with the headlights on high, which was useless, and then on low, which was less useless, and with my face so close to the windscreen that my breath fogged it. I could see the edge of the track for perhaps three metres. Dust came in through the vents, through the door seals, through places I did not know a car had. I could taste it, fine and bitter, between my teeth. I found the cutting to the Number Nine more by memory than by sight, and stopped the car with its nose almost touching the besser-block face, and got out into a wind that took the breath out of my mouth before I could use it, and got the green door open, and fell inside with Toff pressed against my legs, and slammed it.

Silence.

That is the thing about a dugout. The storm was a metre away on the other side of the door, and in Ray's kitchen there was nothing. The temperature did not change. The light at the windows had gone a dull dried-blood colour, as if the glass had been painted over from outside, but the room itself was exactly as I had left it: the table, the three chairs, the brown armchair turned towards the window. The only sound was the cowl on the vent pipe in Ray's room, which had stopped squeaking and started to scream, a thin continuous metal note very high up, coming down the shaft into the bedroom like something calling from the bottom of a well. And under it, a soft steady hiss, which was the dust coming down the vent and settling on the floor of Ray's room in a fine red cone.

I put a towel at the door. I stuffed a tea towel into the vent in the kitchen ceiling, standing on a chair. I went to shut the one in Ray's room and found Toff there before me, not at the vent but at the wardrobe, standing with his nose to the curtain, and whining, a long rising whine with a crack in it, like a child trying not to cry.

"There's nobody there," I said. "He's gone. You know he's gone."

He looked at me and whined again. Then he lay down across the front of the wardrobe and put his chin on his paws and did not take his eyes off me.

* * *

Josie rang at twenty past three. I knew it was her before I answered, the way you know a knock.

"Is he with you?"

"No."

"Has he been there? Today. Has he come through."

"No. Josie, nobody's been here since last Thursday. What's happened?"

There was a noise on the line that I thought was the storm and was her breathing. "He didn't go," she said. "He never went. He rang me. At twelve o'clock, on Stan Beattie's phone. Stan's got that van out on the Eighteen Mile with the booster on the roof, you'd have seen it. He's been out there the whole time. The whole time, Mags, five days, and he never rang me till today."

I sat down at Ray's table. Across from me was the chair with the split seat, and I found I was looking at it as if somebody might be in it, which was a habit the Number Nine had taught me.

"He said he couldn't get the parcel," she said. "Ray's parcel. He said Ray put it down an old shaft on the back of his claim, on a ledge in a drive, and the ladder's rotten, and he had to rig a rope, and it took him days to get the gear together, and he didn't want to ask anybody. He said he'd get it today. He said he'd come in tonight after dark and say goodbye to me properly, at the back door, and could I have the curry." Her voice went up and broke and came down again. "The curry. I threw it out. I threw the curry out on Monday."

"Josie. Where's he now?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm telling you. I don't know. When the dust came I rang Stan's number back and Stan said Daniel left his van on foot at half past twelve to go and do it before the weather, and he said." She stopped.

"What did he say?"

"He said Lyle's Hilux went past his van about one. Going slow. Out towards Ray's ground. Stan thought nothing of it, Lyle's got ground all over out there. Then the dust come and Stan shut himself in." She was crying now properly, the words coming out of it in pieces. "He's been out there two and a half hours, Mags. In that. And Lyle's out there. And I've got no car. Owen's stuck out at the Painted Range lookout with the bus and a load of Japanese and the road's shut, and I've got nothing but the Magna and it won't go down the drive in this, I tried, I put it in the ditch at the bottom."

"I'll come."

"In what? That Corolla?" A laugh, terrible. "You'll be down a hole in five minutes."

She was right. I looked at the dull red window and thought of the track to the Eighteen Mile, the ruts and the gibber hump and the signs saying DO NOT WALK BACKWARDS, and the ten thousand holes on either side of it with their pale heaps now invisible, and the Corolla's headlights reaching three metres into the dust.

"Have you rung the police?"

Silence on the line. Then, very quietly: "And say what?"

I understood her. I had been living inside that understanding for a month. To ring the police and say that Daniel Tully was missing on the Eighteen Mile was to say that Daniel Tully was alive. To say it on his behalf, without him, in a dust storm, to whichever constable picked up the phone at the station. To take the one thing he had kept for himself for seven years, the telling of it, and give it away because she was frightened.

And I could not say it at all. Not to the police, not to anyone. Everything I knew began with a form.

"Stay where you are," I said. "I'm going to ring Lorraine."

* * *

Lorraine answered on the second ring. In the background I could hear a television and children and a man's voice saying something about the generator.

"Mags. You right up there?"

"I need a car that can drive the Eighteen Mile in this," I said. "And I need someone who knows the track."

There was a pause, and the background noise receded, as if she had walked into another room and shut the door.

"Who's out there?"

I could not answer that. I sat at Ray's table with the phone and the dust hissing in the vent and I could not answer it, and the silence went on long enough for both of us to hear that I could not.

"Is it the young fella who's been living in the Pole dugout," Lorraine said. It was not a question.

"I can't tell you anything about anyone, Lorraine. You know that. You signed the same paper."

"I know I did. I'm not asking you to tell me. I'm telling you." Her voice was perfectly level, the voice she used on the Painted Range road to tell me which side of a dry creek to cross. "Uncle Kenny's known since July. He saw him at the water tank at the old Eighteen Mile camp, filling bottles at four in the morning. He didn't tell anybody but me. I didn't tell anybody at all." A pause. "Josie Prior's been driving out there every Wednesday with a box in her boot, Mags. People notice. People notice and they keep their mouths shut. That's not the census. That's this town."

I put my hand over my eyes.

"Is Josie with you?"

"She's at the Kestrel. Her car's in a ditch. Lorraine, Lyle Baird's out there too."

That changed her voice. Not much. A small tightening, like a rope taking up load.

"Right," she said. "I'll get Josie on the way. Twenty minutes. Put on boots and long sleeves, and bring every torch you own, and a jumper, it'll go cold when the front comes through. And bring that dog."

"Lorraine. You don't have to drive. If you lend me the Cruiser."

"You," Lorraine said, "are not driving my Land Cruiser out the Eighteen Mile in a dust storm. You'd have it down a shaft before the second fork. I'm driving." Then, after a moment: "And we'll go and look. That's all. We go and look. If we find trouble, we call everybody, Ana first, and nobody has to say anything except what's in front of their eyes. All right?"

"All right."

"What's in front of your eyes, you're allowed to say. Even you."

She hung up.

I put on Ray's boots, which were two sizes too big, with two pairs of socks. I put on a long-sleeved shirt and Ray's old oilskin vest that still hung on the hook by the door. I found the torches: the big rechargeable one from the back rooms, the little one from the glovebox, the head torch from the drawer in the kitchen where Ray kept batteries and string and rubber bands and the warranty for a kettle he had thrown out in 2016. I filled two bottles of water. I took the tin of peaches off the shelf and put it in the pocket of the oilskin, and could not have told anybody why.

Toff was standing at the green door when I came back up the passage. He had heard the word. He was quivering from nose to tail.

At ten to four the light in the window changed again, from red to a greater red, two blurred discs swimming in it, and a horn sounded twice, short, through the roar. I opened the door into the wind and the dust took my face like a slap, and Toff went past my legs and out into it without being asked, and I pulled the green door shut behind me and went after him, bent double, towards the lights.

CHAPTER 24

The Eighteen Mile

Lorraine drove the Eighteen Mile at the speed of a woman walking.

The Land Cruiser's headlights went out into the dust and stopped, as if they had hit a wall, and the wall was red and moving and lit from inside. Beyond three or four metres there was nothing. Lorraine had the GPS unit on its bracket on the dash, a small green screen with a dotted line wandering across it, the track log from a hundred daylight trips, and she drove with one eye on the line and one eye on the edge of the ruts, and her hands loose on the wheel, and she did not speak except to say, every so often, in a voice like someone reading out numbers, "Culvert," or "Bad bit," or "Heap on the left, close." The UHF on the dash crackled with fragments: a roof off on Opal Street, a caravan on its side at the park, somebody asking if the SES had a chainsaw. Josie sat in the front with both hands clamped between her knees. I sat in the back with Toff, who stood with his front feet on the console between the seats and his head forward, staring into the red as if he could see through it.

Perhaps he could. I could not see anything at all.

"Stan's van," Lorraine said, and there it was, suddenly, a long dented shape with a light on inside, so close I could have touched it through the window. She stopped. A man came to the door of the van with a wet tea towel tied over his nose and mouth like a bandit, and leaned out, and shouted something we could not hear, and Lorraine wound down her window two inches and the dust came screaming in through the gap.

"Which way," she shouted.

Stan Beattie pointed. East, past the end of the van, into nothing. "Ray's ground," he shouted. "Back of Ray's ground, by Baird's line. He had a rope and his pack. Lyle went past at one. Same way."

"You stay by your phone," Lorraine shouted. "If mine won't get out I'll come back for yours."

He lifted a hand and shut the door. The light in the van went small behind us and then went out, swallowed.

* * *

We came onto Ray's claim at twenty to five by Lorraine's watch, although I would not have known it was Ray's claim, or a claim, or anywhere. Lorraine knew. She stopped the Cruiser beside a steel peg I could just make out in the headlights, painted white once and now the colour of everything else, and sat for a moment with the engine running.

"Back of the claim's that way," she said. "Two hundred metres, maybe more. Baird's boundary runs along it. There's holes all through there. Old ones, new ones, Ray's, Baird's, the old men's from the forties. I don't know where they all are. Nobody does." She turned round in her seat and looked at me and then at Josie, and her face in the green light of the dash was very calm and very tired. "So here's how it goes. I drive in slow with the lights on. We walk in front, in the lights, where I can see you. We're roped. Nobody walks anywhere I can't see them. We go a step at a time and you put your foot down flat and slow and you test it. And nobody, ever, walks backwards."

"Lorraine," Josie said.

"I know. I know. We'll find him. But we're not putting anybody else down a hole tonight."

She got out and went round to the back of the Cruiser and came back with a coil of blue rope and a star picket with a strip of red cloth tied to the top. She tied the rope round her own waist in a knot I did not know, and round Josie's, and round mine, two metres apart, with the end looped round the Cruiser's bull bar, and she gave me the star picket.

"You're the one in front," she said. "Because you're the one who counts. Prod the ground in front of you before you step. Count your paces. If the picket goes in soft, or goes in and keeps going, stop and sing out."

So I was the one in front, in Ray's boots, with Ray's oilskin flapping round my legs and a head torch on my forehead and a star picket in my hands like a blind woman's stick, walking into a red dark on a dead man's claim and counting.

The wind was very loud. I had not understood that before; inside the car it had been a roar, but outside it was many sounds at once, a howl and a hiss and under them a low tearing, like canvas, that I think was the dust moving across the ground itself. It came at us from the left, from the north-west, in shoves, and between the shoves it did not stop but only slackened, so that I learned to step in the slack and stand braced in the shove. Grit got into my eyes and my mouth. The head torch lit a cone of whirling red particles in front of my face, each one bright as a spark, and beyond the cone there was nothing, and behind me the Cruiser's headlights threw my own shadow forward into the dust, huge and shapeless, a woman made of darkness walking ahead of me.

Prod. Step. One. Prod. Step. Two. The picket went into the ground with a dull crunch of gibber and spoil. Prod. Step. Three.

Toff was off the rope. Lorraine had said nothing about the dog and nobody would have been able to hold him anyway. He went out ahead of us, out of the light and back into it, a red dog in a red dark, with his nose down and his tail low, quartering left and right the way cattle dogs do, and every so often he stopped and lifted his head into the wind and stood there quivering, and then put it down again and went on.

Josie started calling at about the fortieth pace.

I had not expected it. She was behind me on the rope, and she had said nothing since the car, and then she cupped her hands round her mouth and shouted, into the storm, at the top of her lungs, a name.

"Daniel!"

The wind took it. It took it the way the stone in the Number Nine took my voice the first night: completely, without echo. But she had said it, outside, under the sky, at full volume, and I felt it go through me like a current through a wire. I had not heard anyone say it out loud like that, as a call and not a whisper, the whole time I had been in Calder's Find. Seven years, nearly, this town had said that name only in the past tense.

"Daniel! Danny! It's Mum!"

She called it every ten paces after that. Lorraine called too, a long high call, *ay-ee*, that carried better than either of ours. And at about the seventieth pace I found that I was calling it as well, his name, the name I had not said aloud even alone in an empty dugout for a month, because I had decided

that everything I knew about him I knew from a form. I said it to the wind, and the wind did not care, and nobody heard it but two women who already knew, and a dog.

"Daniel!"

* * *

Twice the picket went in soft. The first time it was only a patch of loose spoil on the side of a heap, and I stood with my heart going and Lorraine came up the rope and tested it herself and said, "That's all right. Go round." The second time the picket went in and kept going, and I nearly went with it, and Josie's hand closed on the back of my oilskin and hauled. I stood there and shone the head torch down and saw, at my feet, half a metre from the toe of Ray's boot, a round black mouth in the ground with no heap round it at all, no picket, no sign, nothing, just a hole a metre wide going straight down into a dark that the torch did not reach.

"Old one," Lorraine said, behind me. "Forties. They used to backfill the heaps for the next shaft." She took the picket from me and drove it into the ground beside the hole and tied her red cloth to it. "Round. Go round."

I went round. My legs had gone strange. I counted. Ninety-one. Ninety-two.

At a hundred and thirty, Toff barked.

It was not his ordinary bark. In the weeks I had known him he had barked perhaps a dozen times: at the postman, at a goanna, once at Lyle Baird's Hilux in the street. This was something else. It was high and repeated and frantic, and it came from somewhere to our right, out of the light, and it did not stop.

"Toff," I shouted. "Toff!"

He barked and barked. Lorraine swung the Cruiser's headlights round, slowly, the beams dragging across the dust like the arms of a crane, and there he was, twenty metres away, at the foot of a low pale heap, standing stiff-legged with his head down and his whole body pointed at the ground in front of him, barking into it.

We went to him on the rope, a step at a time, Josie making a sound behind me that I do not have a word for. I prodded every metre. The ground was firm. Then the picket struck something soft that was not spoil, and I

bent and picked it up, and it was a canvas pack, khaki, the straps frayed, heavy, lying on its side at the lip of a shaft.

The shaft was a metre and a bit across, cut square at the top and rounding as it went down, the way the old men cut them. There was no heap round this one either, or there was, but it was on the far side and low, and the near side was a smooth worn lip of sandstone with two deep scrapes in the dust across it, like marks made by heels. There was no picket. There was a hole in the ground a metre back from the lip where a picket had been, a round raw hole with the dirt around it torn up.

Josie took the pack out of my hands. She held it against her chest.

"That's his," she said. "I gave him that. That's his."

Toff stopped barking. He lay down on his belly at the very edge of the shaft, with his front paws over the lip and his nose pointed down into the dark, and he whined, once, long and low.

And from the dark, very faint, came a voice.

"Toff?"

* * *

I lay down on my stomach at the lip with Lorraine holding the back of my belt and shone the big torch down.

In the shaft the air was clearer. The dust came over the lip in a red veil and blew across the top of the hole, but below the first two or three metres it thinned, and the torch beam went down through it, down the round pick-marked throat of the shaft, past toe holes cut into the wall, past a length of old timber jammed across it at some depth I could not judge, and down, and down, to where the wall on one side fell away into the black mouth of a drive, and on the floor of that mouth, on a shelf of rubble at the side of the shaft, there was a shape.

The shape moved. A hand came up, pale, into the beam.

"Mags?" it said. "Is that you?"

"It's me," I said. "And Josie. And Lorraine Wilton. And Toff."

"Toff found me," Daniel said, and laughed, or tried to, and the laugh turned into something else and stopped.

Josie was beside me on the ground with the pack still clutched in one arm, shouting down into the shaft, and for a minute nobody could hear

anything, and then Lorraine said, "Josie. Josie. Let him talk," and she stopped.

"Where are you hurt?" Lorraine called down.

A pause. Then his voice came up, very careful, the voice of somebody who has been thinking about how to say a thing for a long time and has decided to say it plainly. "My right ankle's broken. I heard it. My hands are burnt off the rope. I hit my head, I think, but it's stopped bleeding. I'm on the ledge at the drive. About twenty metres. The shaft goes on down past me, I don't know how far. I'm cold." Another pause. "I'm all right. I'm not all right. But I'm all right."

"How long have you been down there?"

"Since about half one."

Three hours. In the cold, in the dark, on a shelf of rubble with a hole going down beside him into nothing, with his ankle broken, listening to the storm go over the top of the shaft like a train that never finished passing.

"What happened, Danny?" Josie called, and her voice was a mother's voice now, the one you use to a child who has fallen off the monkey bars, and I could hear what it cost her to keep it there.

The answer took a long time.

"I got the parcel," he said. "I came up on the rope. I threw the pack out over the top. And Lyle was there." The wind snatched part of it and gave it back. "He said he only wanted to talk. He said he knew I was alive. He said he'd give me money to go and stay gone. He grabbed the pack strap, or me, I don't know which. He grabbed and I pulled back and the picket came out." Silence. "I don't know if he meant it. I've been down here three hours thinking about it and I don't know. He grabbed me, and I fell. That's what happened."

"Is he still out here?"

"I heard his car go," Daniel said. "After. I heard the engine. I don't know where."

Lorraine had her phone out. She was crouched behind me in the lee of the low heap with the phone held close against her ear and her other hand over her other ear, and I heard her say, in the level voice, with complete precision, as if dictating it: "There's a man down a mine shaft on the Aspinall claim on the Eighteen Mile, north of Calder's Find. He's alive. He's

about twenty metres down. Broken ankle, head injury. I'm reading you the coordinates now." She read them. She did not say his name. She said only what was in front of her eyes. When the operator asked her something, she said, "I don't know his details. I can see him. He's a young man in a hole. That's all I know." And then: "Tell Sergeant Petrakis it's Lorraine Wilton and that it's on the Aspinall claim, and tell her Lyle Baird's car is out here somewhere and somebody should find it."

She put the phone down and looked at me across the dust. "One bar. They've got it. SES are all over town on roofs, they'll get a crew out but it'll be an hour. More. Flying Doctor won't fly in this. Ana's coming." She looked at the shaft. "An hour's a long time on that ledge."

Josie had her own phone out. Her hands were shaking so badly she dropped it in the dust, and picked it up, and wiped it on her jeans, and pressed one button, and held it to her face.

"Owen," she said. "Owen, it's me. Listen to me. Don't say anything, just listen." Her eyes were shut. "He's down a hole. On Ray's ground, the back of it, by Baird's line. He's alive, Owen. He's twenty metres down and his leg's broken and the SES can't come for an hour." She listened. Her face did something complicated. "I know you did. I know you did, love. I don't care. Bring the bus."

She put the phone down in her lap and sat there in the dust at the lip of the shaft with Daniel's pack held against her, and rocked, very slightly, forwards and back.

"He's coming," she said, to nobody. "He's coming."

I lay on my stomach and talked down the shaft. I do not remember most of what I said. I told him about the Corolla on the track. I told him about the peaches. He said I was whoever came next, so I should eat them, and I said they were in my pocket, and he said that was the most Ray thing he had ever heard. At some point I noticed it had got dark, actually dark, not red: the sun had gone down somewhere behind the storm and taken the last of the light with it. At some point the wind went round. It went round all at once, from the north-west to the south-west, with a great buffet that nearly lifted me off the lip, and the air turned cold so fast that I felt it on the back of my neck like a hand, and a few fat drops of rain came out of the dust and hit the sandstone beside my face and burst into small brown stars of mud.

"Front's through," Lorraine said. "It'll clear now. Bit by bit."

And out of the clearing dark, a long way off, two high lights came swaying over the heaps, slowly, very slowly, picking their way, and behind them a row of smaller lights, amber, square, the windows of a bus.

CHAPTER 25

The Rope

The bus was the battered white four-wheel-drive Coaster with PAINTED RANGE TOURS along its flank in letters the storm had half scoured away, its gearbox howling in first, and it came over the last heap at a crawl with its high beams swinging, and stopped thirty metres off where Lorraine waved it down. Owen got out before the engine had stopped turning.

He was a big man, Owen Tully, sixty-three, with a belly and a bad back and a face that had spent forty years squinting. I had seen him at his own table and at the lookout and drunk in my cutting, and I had never once seen him hurry. He came across the ground towards us in the headlights now at a half-run with something heavy over each shoulder, and he was not squinting. He did not look at me or at Lorraine. He went straight to the lip and knelt down beside Josie and took the torch out of her hand and shone it down.

He looked for a long time.

"G'day, mate," he called down. His voice was perfectly ordinary.

From the bottom of the shaft, after a moment, came the reply. "G'day, Dad."

That was all. Owen gave the torch back to Josie and stood up and dropped the two loads off his shoulders onto the ground, and his hands, I saw, were shaking, and he looked at them as if they belonged to somebody else, and then he closed them hard and opened them again and they were still.

"Right," he said. "Who's got a level head."

* * *

He had been down holes for twenty-two years before he drove the bus. He told us that later, at the clinic, the way men tell you their credentials after the fact; at the time he simply did things, quickly and in order, and told us what we were going to do, and we did it.

The bus had a winch on the bull bar, a synthetic line on an electric drum. He backed the bus round, in two goes, until its nose pointed at the shaft from twenty metres off, and chocked the wheels with rocks. Out of the luggage hold he brought a timber bearer, three metres long and as thick as my thigh, that he said he carried for bogs, and laid it across the shaft mouth on the side away from the bus, and bedded it down into the spoil with his boots. He laid an old piece of carpet over it, and a split length of fire hose over the carpet, and ran the winch line out across the ground and over the bearer so that it dropped straight down into the hole. Then he took out of one of the bags a harness, a proper one, faded orange webbing with steel buckles, and stepped into it and did it up with fingers that no longer shook, and took out another, smaller, and a coil of white static rope, and a flat grey thing he called a SAM splint, and two hand-held radios.

"Lorraine," he said. "You've used a winch."

"Every bog on the Strzelecki."

"You're on the remote. You're at the bus. You can't see the hole from there and I can't see you, so you do exactly what the radio says, nothing else. In, out, stop. Slow. Slower than you think." He gave her one radio and clipped the other to the chest of his harness. "Josie. You're on the lip with the torch. You keep it on the line and on me. You hold the dog."

Josie nodded. She had Toff by the collar.

"And you're Ray's sister," Owen said to me. He looked at me directly then. In the bus headlights his eyes were red with dust and with something else. "You're on the backup."

The backup was the white rope. He tied one end to his harness at the chest with a knot he did not look at while he tied it, and ran the other end back across the ground to Lorraine's Cruiser, which she had brought round alongside the bus, and passed it twice round the tow hitch, and then put the tail in my hands.

"Gloves," he said. I had Ray's gardening gloves in the oilskin pocket. I put them on. "Sit down there. Feet against the tyre. This goes round your back, like this, and you hold it here and here." He put my hands where they had to be. "The winch does the work. You're there if the winch stops doing it. When I go down, you let it out through your hands, slow, never more than you need. When I come up, you take it in. You never let it go slack and

you never let it go. If the winch fails, the hitch and your back hold it, and you hold on till somebody comes and helps you. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I said.

He looked at me for a second longer. "Ray reckoned you could do anything," he said, and went to the hole.

* * *

He went down at a quarter to seven.

I could not see him. I sat with my back against the Cruiser's rear wheel and my feet braced on the spoil and the rope coming to me out of the dark across the ground, and I could see the white line running away from me through the last of the dust in the headlights to the lip of the shaft, where Josie lay on her stomach with the torch, and Toff sat bolt upright beside her, and that was all. I heard everything through the radio clipped to Lorraine's collar, ten metres away at the bus, and through Josie, who repeated what she saw in a high clear voice like a woman calling a race.

"He's over. He's on the line. He's going down."

"Out," said the radio. It was Owen's voice, flattened and small. "Slow."

The winch whined. I let the rope out through my hands. It came off the coil at my feet and went round my back and round the hitch and away. I counted the arm-lengths; I could not help it. Two. Three. Four.

"Stop."

Lorraine stopped. I stopped.

"Timber across the shaft here," said the radio. "Old staging. I'm going round it. Out. Slow."

Seven. Eight. Nine.

"I can see him," Josie said. "I can see Owen's helmet. He's past the timber."

Eleven. Twelve.

The wind had dropped right away and in its absence the night was so quiet I could hear the winch drum ticking, and the rope sliding over the carpet on the bearer, and Josie breathing. Somewhere far off, back towards town, a siren went up and down. Above us, through thinning dust, one star came out, and then two. My shoulders burned. I discovered that I was

praying, which I had not done since I was eleven, and that the prayer was only numbers.

"Stop," said the radio. "I'm on the ledge."

Then nothing for a long time. Through the radio came small sounds: the scrape of boots, a grunt, rock shifting. Once, very clearly, Daniel saying, "Don't, it's fine, it's fine," and Owen saying, "It's not fine, mate, it's at right angles," and something that might have been a laugh. Josie lay with the torch and reported in fragments. He's got the splint on. He's taping it. He's putting the other harness on him. He's tying him on. He's tying him onto himself.

"Like a backpack," she said, and her voice went, and came back. "He's put him on his chest like a baby."

I sat in the dark with my brother's rope in my brother's gloves and I thought about Owen Tully kneeling on a shelf of rubble twenty metres down with the shaft going on into black beside his knees, strapping his grown son against his own body. I knew what Owen thought of his son; he had told me, near enough, at the lookout on the Painted Range. I knew there had been something in the Kestrel's kitchen on census night that Josie would not describe. And I knew that seven years ago, in another hole on this same field, a boy of eighteen had gone down a rope to his friend and found him dead. Now the boy was at the bottom, and his father had come down to him, and the father would not find him dead. That was all I let myself know. I thought about how he had stood at the lip and said *G'day, mate*, as if the boy had been out late at a party, because there was no other thing in the language that could be said and still let him do what he had to do next.

"Right," said the radio. "Lorraine. In. Dead slow."

* * *

The winch took them. I felt it before I heard it: the backup rope came alive in my hands, slack appearing in it as they rose, and I took it in, hand over hand round my back and round the hitch, keeping it just short of tight, the way he had shown me. Josie's voice came across the dark. "They're off the ledge. They're coming. They're coming up."

Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve. I was counting backwards now.

"Stop," said the radio, sharp. "Stop."

Lorraine stopped. I held.

"The timber. I'm under it. Hang on." A scrape. Breathing. Daniel's voice, thin: "Dad." Owen's: "I know. I've got it." Then: "Lorraine. Out. Just a hand-span. Then stop."

The winch gave a hand-span. I let a hand-span go and took it straight back up again as the line went heavy. Something in the shaft knocked, wood on rock, a dull hollow sound that came up out of the ground and went through the soles of my feet.

"Right. I'm round it. In. Slow."

Ten. Nine. Eight.

And then Josie shouted, "The rope, the rope, stop," and Lorraine stopped, and on the radio Owen said, very calm, "What."

"The hose has come off," Josie said. "The line's on the rock. It's on the edge. It's rubbing."

I could not see it. I saw it anyway: the winch line, carrying two men, lying across a lip of sandstone sharp as a bread knife, and every centimetre it moved sawing a little more of itself away.

"Can you put it back," said Owen.

"I can't reach. I can't reach without going over."

"Then don't. Mags."

I had not known he knew my first name.

"Mags. You're holding us now. Lorraine, give her the weight. Just a bit. Ease the winch off till Mags has it."

Lorraine said, "Owen," once, and then said nothing, and the winch whined backwards, a sound I would hear afterwards in dreams, and the white rope in my hands went from a live thing to a dead weight in less than a second. It pulled me forward off the spoil. My heels skidded. The rope went round the tow hitch and bit and held, and the turn round my back crushed my ribs, and Ray's gloves burned through at the palms almost at once. I leaned back against it with my whole body, my bad knee screaming, and I did not let go.

"I've got it," I said. I do not think anyone heard me. "I've got it."

Josie had gone over the lip after all. Not far: on her stomach, with Lorraine suddenly there behind her holding her ankles. I could see the soles of her shoes in the headlights, kicking. She was gone for perhaps five

seconds. Perhaps a minute. Then she slid back and shouted, "It's on. It's back on," and Lorraine ran for the bus.

"Take it," Owen said. "Lorraine, take it back off her. In. Slow."

The weight went off the rope. I sat in the dirt with my hands on fire and took in the slack.

Six. Five. Four. Three.

They came up over the lip like something being born.

First the top of Owen's helmet, and his head torch, a hard white star swinging, and his arm, reaching, finding the bearer, and his shoulder, and then the rest of him, rolling sideways onto the spoil with a great heave, and against his chest, strapped to him, white-faced and filthy, with his arms locked round his father's neck and his right leg bound stiff in grey, Daniel.

Josie got to them first. Lorraine got there second. I could not get up, so I sat with the rope still round my back and watched, in the bus headlights, the three of them on the ground at the lip of the shaft, a pile of people, nobody speaking, Toff barking and barking and running round and round them in circles, until Lorraine took her knife off her belt and began to cut the tapes.

Owen lay on his back with his son still on his chest and looked up at the stars that were coming out over the Eighteen Mile, and put his hand on the back of Daniel's head, and held it there.

"Look at you," he said. "Look at you."

* * *

The SES came at ten past eight, two utes and the orange truck, and Ana's police four-wheel-drive behind them with its blue lights silent and turning. By then we had Daniel in the back of the Cruiser on Lorraine's swag with the foil blanket from her first-aid kit round him, and Owen sitting beside him on the tailgate, and Josie holding Daniel's burnt hands in hers with cold water from a jerry can poured over them every few minutes. Someone had taken the rope off me. I do not remember who. I was sitting on the ground against the Cruiser's wheel with my hands open on my knees, palms up, looking at them.

Ana walked to the lip first and shone her torch down. Then she walked to the Cruiser and looked in at Daniel for a long moment and said nothing

to him at all. Then she came and crouched down in front of me and looked at my hands.

"You were told," she said. "Not on your own."

"I wasn't on my own," I said.

She nearly smiled. Then the radio on her shoulder spoke, and she stood up and walked a little way off to answer it, and when she came back her face had changed.

"They've found his Hilux," she said. Not to me exactly; to all of us. "Four hundred metres east, behind a heap near the track. Lights off. He's in it."

Nobody said anything.

"He's been sitting there," she said, "since about two. Engine off. Phone on the seat beside him. He hasn't called anyone."

I looked at Owen. He had not moved. He was sitting on the tailgate with his hand on his son's good ankle, and I remembered what Josie had told me in the back room of the op shop: that in 2019, when Owen came up out of the third shaft with his hands bleeding and sat in the dirt and would not get up, it was Lyle Baird who had put a blanket round him. Four hundred metres. Six hours. A phone on the seat. I did the sum and it would not come out, and I have done it many times since and it has never come out, not once.

Later, much later, she told me the rest, in the clinic corridor, in a voice so tired it had stopped having any expression at all. That when the constable opened the door Lyle Baird had been sitting with both hands on the wheel, and his hair and eyebrows and the shoulders of his good shirt were thick with red dust that had come in through the vents, so that he looked like a statue of himself. That he had turned his head very slowly and looked at the constable, and his eyes were wet, and the first thing he said was not a lie or an excuse or a threat. It was a question.

"Is the boy all right?"

And only then, after they had told him, the thing he would go on saying for months, to the police, to his solicitor, to the coroner, to anyone at all, as if by repetition it might become true.

"I only came to talk."

CHAPTER 26

Persons Present

The clinic in Calder's Find is a low brick building at the bottom of Hutchison Street with a ramp, a flagpole and a sign that says AFTER HOURS RING BELL AND WAIT, and that night the bell had been rung so often that the remote area nurse had propped the door open with a fire extinguisher. Her name was Kath Orr. She was fifty or so, in navy scrubs with dust on the knees, and she had been on her feet since the storm took the roof off the caravan park: two cut heads, an asthmatic, a man who had put his hand through a window holding a door shut. She looked at Daniel on the stretcher as the SES carried him in, and she looked at Owen and Josie behind him, and she did not ask a single question that was not about his body.

"Ankle," she said. "Hands. Head. Anything else?"

"Cold," said Daniel.

"I'll bet you are."

She gave him the green whistle first, the little tube of painkiller you breathe through, and he lay on the trolley under the fluorescent light sucking at it like a child with a straw while she cut his boot off with a pair of shears. I saw the ankle and looked away. She splinted it properly, and put a line in his arm, and cleaned the cut in his hairline, and wrapped his hands in something cool and white. Then she turned round and saw me standing in the doorway and said, "And what have you done?"

I held up my hands. Ray's gloves had come off with the skin of both palms.

"Sit," she said.

I sat on a plastic chair in the corridor and she dressed my hands too, quick and gentle, talking the whole time about nothing: the roof at the caravan park, a cockatoo somebody had brought in in a box. When she had finished, my hands were two white paws in my lap and I could not have held a pen.

"Flying Doctor won't come till first light," she said. "The strip lights are fine but the dust's still up at height, and he's stable. He'll keep." She looked down the corridor at the room where Owen sat on one side of the bed and Josie on the other. "They'll keep too. You should go home."

"I'll keep," I said.

Some time after ten Owen came out of the room and stood in the corridor, too big for it, looking at the noticeboard as if he were reading the poster about blood pressure. Then he sat down on the plastic chair beside mine. It creaked.

"I told you your brother was a fool who thought he was a saint," he said. "Up at the lookout."

"You did."

He looked at his hands. The knuckles were skinned. "He was a fool," he said. "Hiding a boy six years. Letting Josie carry it. Letting me think." He stopped. "He fed him, but. Taught him the wheel. Kept him alive." He said it to the floor, as though it had been dragged out of him on a rope. "That's not nothing."

"No," I said. "It's not nothing."

He nodded, once, and got up and went back in. It was, Josie told me long afterwards, the most he had said about Ray Aspinall in three years, and the kindest by a distance.

* * *

Toff would not come in and would not go away. He lay on the top of the ramp outside the open door with his chin on his paws and his eyes on the corridor, and every so often somebody stepped over him. Lorraine sat on the ramp beside him with her back against the wall and her legs out, still in her dusty work boots, with a cup of tea from the clinic's urn going cold in her hand. Once I went out and sat beside her.

"Jarrah's got the tank-stand blown over," she said. "And Kenny's lost his chook pen. Everybody's lost something." She drank some cold tea. "Not tonight, though. Not us."

"No."

We sat. The street was full of the smell of wet dust, which is a smell like nothing else, iron and rain and old stone. Somewhere a generator was

running. The sky over the Drift was black and clean and full of stars, as if it had been rinsed.

"You know she's coming," Lorraine said.

"Yes."

"You know what he's going to do."

I said that I did not know what anybody was going to do, and that I had been wrong about almost everything since I came to this town, and that I was not going to start guessing now. Lorraine looked at me sideways for a while.

"He's going to tell her," she said. "He's been going to tell somebody since he climbed out of that hole in 2019. He just needed to be at the bottom of another one to work out it was time." She put the cup down on the concrete. "That's not you. That's not your form. You didn't do anything except hold a rope."

* * *

Ana Petrakis came at a quarter to eleven, on foot from the station, with her hat in her hand and her notebook in her shirt pocket. She stepped over Toff without looking at him. In the corridor she stopped beside my chair and looked at my hands, and then at the door of the room, and then at me.

"Would you wait here, Mrs Aspinall," she said.

It was not a question, and I did not take it as one. She went into the room and did not quite close the door; it stood open the width of a hand, and through the gap I could see the end of the bed and the white block of the splint, and Josie's shoulder, and nothing else. I could have moved my chair. I did not. I could have gone out to the ramp. I did not do that either. I sat where I had been asked to sit, and I heard what I heard.

"I need to ask how you came to be down that shaft," Ana said. Her voice was the voice I had heard across her desk: level, tired, without any performance in it. "Before I do, I'll tell you that you don't have to say anything. Anything you do say I'll write down. If you'd rather wait and have a lawyer, that's your right, and I'd understand it." A pause. "For my notes. Persons present. Myself. Mr Tully. Ms Prior." Another pause. "And you."

It was very quiet. The fluorescent tube above my head buzzed. Kath Orr was in the next room talking softly to the asthmatic.

"My name," Daniel said, "is Daniel Owen Tully."

Nobody in the room said anything.

"I was born on the third of March, two thousand and one, in Port Augusta. I'm twenty-five. My father is Owen James Tully. My stepmother is Josephine Prior." He said it the way people recite their details at a counter, as if spelling them for a clerk, every word set down separately. "I was reported missing on the nineteenth of October 2019. I wasn't missing. I was on the Eighteen Mile, and then I was at Ray Aspinall's, and then I was in the back rooms at the Number Nine, for six years, until he died. Then I was in the old dugouts on the Eighteen Mile. Josie fed me. Nobody else knew, except Ray. And then my dad."

I heard Ana's pen. It moved, and stopped, and moved.

"And on the night of the eighteenth of October 2019," she said.

"I was with Corey Nash," Daniel said. "When he died."

* * *

I am not going to set it all down here. He had told it to me already, on a night in September, in the chair with the split seat, with Toff on his lap; I had listened to it then with my hands folded, and I had promised myself that I would not write it or repeat it, because it was his to tell and not mine, and because the first thing I had ever known of him I had known from a form, and I had decided that everything that followed from that form was covered too. He told it now to the person whose business it was. I heard it through a door. That is the most I will say about how I heard it.

But I will say that he told it plainly and in order, and that he did not make himself better than he was. He said they had gone ratting on Baird's ground, him and Corey, after eleven, because Corey wanted a stone for his mother and Lyle's new heaps ran all along Ray's boundary, and they were eighteen and seventeen and stupid. He said there were no covers, no signs, no fence. He said Corey had his torch on the face of a heap and stepped back to show him the colour. He said he went down after him on the rope from the ute, because there was nothing else to do, and that by the time he got to the bottom Corey was gone. He said that he sat at the bottom of shaft 3 with Corey for he did not know how long, and then climbed up, and Lyle Baird's Hilux was there with its lights on, and Lyle was standing at the lip.

"He said, you were thieving on my claim, the boy's dead, and you've got form," Daniel said. "He said, who do you think they'll believe."

Then the run, and the ute left at the edge of the old diggings, and the walk to Ray's in the dark, and Ray in his singlet at the green door, and the wardrobe. Then six years. He gave the six years in about six sentences. Then Ray in the brown armchair, last December, and two days of sitting with him because he could not call anyone without calling everyone, and the back drive and the ladder. Then the Eighteen Mile again.

Then today. Ray's parcel, down an old shaft on the back of Ray's claim, that Ray had told him about the winter before he died: the stones Ray would not sell, wrapped in a chamois in an ammunition tin. He had wanted to give it to Josie before he went. He had rigged the rope to a picket and gone down and found it and come up. And at the top, Lyle.

"He said he only wanted to talk," Daniel said. "He said he knew I was alive, he'd known since Ray died, he'd seen me on the Eighteen Mile in the winter. He said the sister had been at the Registrar's and the copper was asking questions and it'd be better for everybody if I went to Queensland and stayed there. He said he'd give me twenty thousand dollars. He had it in an envelope." A silence. "I said no. I said I was going to Josie's. I was half out of the shaft. He grabbed the strap of the pack, or my jacket, I don't know, and I pulled back, and the picket came out. I went down holding the rope." Another silence, longer. "I don't know if he meant it. I've thought about it all afternoon. I think he grabbed and I pulled and I don't know which of us did it. I'm not saying he pushed me. I'm saying he was there, and he drove off, and he didn't ring anyone."

Ana's pen stopped.

"You understand," she said, "that you're telling me you were present when Corey Nash died, and that you didn't report it, and that you let the coroner find that no other person was present."

"Yes."

"You understand that I may have to refer that."

"Yes," Daniel said. "I've had seven years of not saying anything. I've done the arithmetic. It doesn't come out any better that way."

I heard Josie make a sound, and Owen say, roughly, "Mate," and nothing after it.

"All right," Ana said. "That'll do for tonight. You'll make a proper statement in Port Augusta when you're fit, with a lawyer, and I'll make sure you've got one. Nobody's charging anybody with anything from a hospital bed." The chair scraped. "Get some sleep."

She came out into the corridor and pulled the door to behind her, gently, the way you close the door on a child, and stood for a moment with the notebook in her hand.

Then she looked at me.

It was one look, and it lasted perhaps two seconds. I have thought about it since more than I have thought about almost anything in my life. There was no accusation in it and no gratitude either. It was the look of one public servant at another across a counter: a look that knew exactly what the other one could not say, and why, and had decided, on her own authority, not to ask. She knew I had known. She knew how I had known, or near enough. She knew that if she asked me I would refuse to answer, and that I would refuse in a way that would cost me, and she knew that the refusal would change nothing now because the person whose secret it was had just given it to her himself, in the right order, with his name first.

She asked nothing.

"Your hands," she said. "Get Kath to give you something for them." And she put her hat on and stepped over Toff and went out into the rinsed night.

* * *

The plane came in at twenty to seven, a white Pilatus with the red and blue on its tail, low over the mesas in a sky so clear and pale it hurt to look at. I stood at the wire fence of the airstrip with Lorraine and Toff and watched it drop its wheels, and land, and taxi back to where the clinic's ambulance waited with its doors open.

There was room for one escort. Josie stood beside the stretcher with her bag over her shoulder and her face set, and then, at the last moment, while the flight nurse was strapping him in, she turned to Owen and pushed the bag into his chest.

"You go," she said.

"Jose."

"I've had him six years," she said. "You go."

Owen looked at her. Then he climbed the little stair into the plane with Josie's bag held against him like something that might break, folding himself down to get through the door, and the last I saw of him he was sitting on the fold-down seat by his son's head with his big hands on his knees, looking straight ahead.

Before they closed the door, Daniel turned his head on the stretcher and found me at the fence, and lifted one bandaged hand. He mouthed something. I could not hear it over the engine. Lorraine, who reads lips the way she reads country, said, "He says the tin's yours. It's Ray's. It's in Josie's car."

Then the door closed, and the propeller picked up, and the plane went down the strip and lifted and turned south over the Painted Range, and grew small, and was gone.

I stood at the fence for some time after the others had gone back to the cars. The census device was in a mail bag on its way to Port Augusta, with my lanyard coiled on top of it. My contract would end on Friday. I was nobody, officially; a woman at a fence with bandaged hands and a dead man's dog. But I found that I was counting anyway, the way I always have, the way I cannot help, under my breath, the people who had been in that room when he said his name. Ana. Owen. Josie. Daniel. Four. And one in the corridor, who was not present, and who had heard.

CHAPTER 27

Tash

I had turned fifty-nine two days before the storm, on the Monday, and nothing had come, which was nobody's fault and which I had told myself I did not mind. On the Monday after the storm, a week late, a card came.

It came in the ordinary post, in Ray's box at the end of the track, and the envelope was addressed in square capitals that were not quite Ray's: more careful, smaller, the capitals of somebody who had learned them by copying. The postmark was Port Augusta. Inside was a kookaburra on a branch, the kind of card a hospital kiosk sells, and under the printed greeting, in blue biro, four words and a letter.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAGS. STILL HERE. D.

I put it in the glovebox of the Corolla with the others, in the rubber band, on top of Ray's eleven and the one he never sent. Thirteen. Then I sat in the car in the sun outside the Number Nine with the door open and Toff's chin on my knee, and I did not count anything for a while.

* * *

He came home on the first of October, on the mail plane, with a plate and seven screws in his ankle and a grey boot up to his knee and a pair of hospital crutches he used as though he had been born on them. He went to the Kestrel. Owen had built a ramp up to the red door out of fence palings and an old bed base. It was not a good ramp. Nobody mentioned that.

By then the town knew. The *Advertiser* had it first, a short piece on page nine: a man reported missing in 2019 and believed dead had been found alive after a fall on the opal fields, and was assisting police; a 68-year-old Calder's Find man had been spoken to in relation to the incident. Then the *Digger*, which knew everyone's name and printed none of them, and did not need to. I watched the news go round Calder's Find the way I had watched the dust come: first a darkening on the horizon, then all at once everywhere, in everything. At the IGA women stopped talking when Josie came in, and

then, which was new, started again. Somebody left a lasagne on the ramp at the Kestrel in a foil tray with no name on it. Somebody else left a note in the letterbox that Josie read and folded small and put in the stove. Gus sent up a tray of baklava with Jarrah, who stood at the red door holding it out at arm's length like a summons.

He had made his statement in Port Augusta, with a lawyer from the Legal Services Commission sitting beside him, a young woman with a ponytail and a laptop who, Josie said, wrote down every word he said and four or five he did not. Nobody had charged him with anything. Ana had told Josie that the question of what, if anything, followed from his not having come forward in 2019 was a matter for the prosecutors, and that they would take their time, and that she would not lose sleep over it if she were Daniel. Josie had repeated this to me word for word, twice, as if it were a prescription.

I made a statement too. Ana came up to the Number Nine on a Tuesday morning with a constable and a laptop, and sat at Ray's table, and drank Ray's tea out of the WORLD'S OKAYEST MINER mug, and took me through the night of the storm from the moment Josie rang. I told her what had been in front of my eyes: the phone call, the red dark, the rope, the pack at the lip, the voice in the shaft, the winch, my hands. When she asked how I had known the young man in the shaft, I said that I had met him in Calder's Find in August and had spoken with him on several occasions since, which was true, and she wrote it down and did not ask where, and I did not say. When we had finished she read it back to me and I signed it with a pen held in a fist, because my palms had not healed.

Of Lyle Baird I heard only what everybody heard. That he had been interviewed in Port Augusta, twice, with a solicitor from Adelaide. That he had not been charged. That he had not been at St Barbara's on either Sunday since the storm, and that the footy club had held its committee meeting without him for the first time in twenty-two years, and that nobody had said why, and everybody knew. Gus told me he had seen him once, at six in the morning, walking on the airstrip road alone, in a jumper, an old man walking with his hands behind his back. "Like a priest," Gus said. "Like a priest who has lost his church." He did not say it unkindly. Nobody in Calder's Find, I noticed, had yet said anything about Lyle Baird unkindly

out loud. It was coming. You could feel it the way you could feel the north wind before the dust.

I did not see Daniel for a week. I thought that was right. On the Wednesday he rang the Number Nine on Josie's mobile.

"Will you drive me somewhere tomorrow," he said. "About four. I'd ask Josie, but she can't."

I knew where he meant before he said it. There is only one place in Calder's Find that Josie Prior cannot drive anyone.

"Yes," I said.

* * *

The Shell servo at four on a Thursday afternoon in October is the emptiest place in town. The lunch trade is over and the school bus has been and the miners are still out on their claims, and the sun comes in low under the old yellow canopy and lays the shadows of the bowsers right across the forecourt and up the front of the shop. I pulled in at pump three and turned the engine off. The doors of the shop were glass, and somebody had propped one open with a milk crate because the closer was broken, and through the glass I could see the counter, and the pie warmer, and the rack of sunglasses, and the till.

And Tash Nash, behind it, with her hair pulled back and her reading glasses on her head, doing something with a clipboard.

Daniel sat beside me for a minute with the crutches between his knees. He was wearing a clean shirt, a blue one I had seen in the op shop window the week before, ironed. He had had his hair cut. In the side light the scar through his left eyebrow was very white.

"You don't have to come in," he said.

"I wasn't going to."

"No." He nodded. "No. That's right." He looked at the shop through the windscreen, at the woman behind the counter, and his face did not change at all. "I've thought about what to say for seven years," he said. "I haven't got anything."

"Then don't say anything," I said. "Let her."

He got out of the car. It took him a long time, the boot and the crutches and the low seat of the Corolla, and I did not help him because he had not

asked me to. Then he went across the forecourt in the long shadows, swinging between the crutches, past the bowsers, up the step, round the milk crate, and in.

I left my window down.

I had sat at pump three before, in August, with a receipt in my hand, after Tash Nash looked past me at a man with a pie. I had sat there again in the dusk the night I watched her smooth the tape. I had thought then, in my teacher's way, that I understood her: a woman who had decided on a story because a story was better than a hole, and who had taped it to her till so she would not have to look for another. I did not think that now. I did not think I understood anything about Tash Nash, or about what it is to stand behind a counter for seven years facing the door your son's friend might walk through. I sat with my bandages gone and new pink skin on my palms, gripping the wheel of a stationary car, and I watched.

* * *

She saw him when he was halfway to the counter. I saw her see him. She was writing on the clipboard, and she looked up the way you look up when the door goes, and her pen stopped, and she put the clipboard down on the counter very carefully, squared to its edge, and took her glasses off her head and put them down on top of it. Then she put both hands flat on the counter on either side of the till, and stood there.

He stopped a metre short. He stood on his crutches with the light behind him.

Neither of them said anything for a long time. A road train went by on the highway and the canopy hummed. A man in a hi-vis shirt came across the forecourt from a ute, with his wallet already in his hand, and went up the step, and stopped in the doorway beside the milk crate, and looked from one of them to the other. Then he turned round and went back to his ute and sat in it with the door shut.

Tash spoke first. I could not hear the first thing she said. Her voice was low and the road train was still going. I saw Daniel nod.

Then she said something else, and this time I heard it, because she said it louder, as if she had decided it should be heard.

"I'm not going to forgive you."

"No," Daniel said.

"I want you to know that. Whatever happens with the court. Whatever they do to him. I'm not going to." Her hands did not move on the counter. "You let me think it. Seven years. You let me stand here and think it every day."

"Yes."

"Every day."

"Yes," he said. "I know."

She looked at him. I could see her face clearly, side-lit, the lines at her mouth, a woman of forty-seven who looked sixty and had looked sixty, I suspected, since a Saturday in October 2019. I had bought petrol from her a dozen times and she had never once looked at my face. She was looking at his now as if she meant to learn it.

"I've got one question," she said. "That's all I want from you. One."

He waited.

"What did he say." Her voice did not break. It went very flat instead, like a road. "The last thing. Before. What did he say."

Daniel took a breath. I watched his shoulders go up and come down.

"He had his torch on the heap," he said. "On the face of it. He was looking at the face of the heap and he said, Dan, shine it here." He stopped. "He said, Dan, shine it here. There's colour. And I didn't come fast enough, and he said it again, he was laughing, he said, there's colour, look. And he stepped back to show me."

Tash Nash stood behind her counter with her hands flat on either side of the till.

"There's colour," she said.

"Look," Daniel said. "That was the last word. Look."

She closed her eyes. She kept them closed for what I counted, because I could not stop myself counting, as eleven seconds. Then she opened them, and she said, "Was he happy."

"Yes," said Daniel. "He was so happy. He thought we were rich."

* * *

She did not cry. I want to set that down precisely, because I have heard the story told since, in the Lucky Strike and in the IGA queue, and in the stories

she cries, and he cries, and sometimes in the stories she comes round the counter and holds him. None of that happened. I was there. I was at pump three with my window down.

What happened was that she looked down at the till.

The photograph was where it had always been, taped to the side of the till at the height of a customer's eye: Corey in his footy jumper, number 14, grinning, a big-eared boy with a cowlick, the one the *Advertiser* had cropped. The tape had been replaced so many times that there was a ridge of old tape round the edges of it, yellow and brown and clear, layer on layer, like the rings of a tree. I had watched her press a new strip down with her thumbnail one evening in August, the way you smooth a child's hair.

She put her thumbnail under the corner of the tape and lifted it.

It came slowly. She worked it the way you work a splinter, a corner at a time, and the old tape came away in yellow flakes and fell on the counter. It took her a long time. Daniel stood and watched her do it and did not move. When the last corner came free she held the photograph in her hand and looked at it, and smoothed the curl out of it with her palm against the counter, once, twice.

Then she held it out to him.

He could not take it. His hands were on the crutches. He stood there with his hands on the crutches and looked at the photograph held out to him across the counter, and his face, which had not changed at all through any of it, changed.

Tash came round the counter.

She did not hold him. She came round the end of the counter past the pie warmer and stood in front of him, close, a head shorter than he was, and she reached up and put the photograph into the pocket of his ironed blue shirt, and pressed it flat there with her hand, once, over his heart, as if she were pressing down a strip of tape. Then she took her hand away.

"You look at it," she said. "Every day. You look at it like I did."

Then she went back behind her counter and picked up her glasses and put them on, and picked up her clipboard.

* * *

He came back across the forecourt in the long shadows, between the bowsers, and it took him much longer than it had taken him to go. I leaned across and opened the door. He got himself in, the boot, the crutches, the low seat, and sat with the crutches across his knees and his hand flat over his shirt pocket, and looked straight ahead through the windscreen.

The man in the hi-vis shirt got out of his ute and went into the shop. Through the glass I saw Tash take his money. I saw her give him his change.

I started the car.

We did not speak on the way back. I drove down Hutchison Street past the Drift, whose office blinds had been down since the storm, and past the op shop, where Josie was standing in the doorway with her arms folded and her face like a lamp that has been turned on, and out along Seventeen Mile Road towards the Kestrel. Halfway there he took the photograph out of his pocket and held it on his knee in the light and looked at it, and then put it back.

At the Kestrel he got out and stood on Owen's terrible ramp and did not go in.

"Thank you," he said.

"I didn't do anything."

"You drove," he said, and went in.

I bought petrol at the Shell the next week, and the week after. Tash Nash served me both times, and the second time, as she gave me my change, she looked at my face. There was a pale rectangle on the side of the till now, cleaner than the plastic round it, with a ridge of old tape at its edges, where the sun had not got for seven years. She has never covered it. She has not put anything else there.

CHAPTER 28

The Inquest

They charged Lyle Baird on the twentieth of October, a Tuesday, seven years and a day after the morning his contractor's loader went out onto the Eighteen Mile at half past six.

I read it in the *Digger*, which came out on Thursdays and which I now bought at the IGA like everybody else, standing in the queue. It was a short piece on page three, under a photograph of the police station that must have been taken years before, because the gum out the front was a sapling. A sixty-eight-year-old Calder's Find man had been charged with failing to comply with a direction issued by a mining inspector in 2019, and with knowingly making a false statement to police in the course of the investigation into the death of Corey James Nash. He had been granted bail and would appear in the Port Augusta Magistrates Court in December. Police said a further matter, relating to an incident on the Eighteen Mile field on 16 September this year, remained under consideration. The paper did not print his name. It did not need to. Under the piece, in the same size type, was a notice that the Calder's Find Football Club's annual presentation night had been moved from the Drift to the Progress hall.

That was how the town turned on him: slowly, and then all at once, and in the small print. The club took his name off the scoreboard, where it had been for nineteen years in white on green, LYLE BAIRD THE DRIFT PROUD SPONSOR, and for a week there was a long pale oblong where it had been, like the place on Tash's till. The Progress Association accepted his resignation with thanks for his service. The bookings at the Drift fell away until the only cars outside it were his Hilux and a cleaner's hatchback, and then the cleaner's hatchback stopped coming. At the Lucky Strike, men who had drunk his beer at the club for twenty years said they had always thought there was something about him. Gus, behind the counter, said nothing at all, and I watched him say it.

On the Saturday someone wrote on the sign outside the Drift in pink marker. I did not see what it said. By the time I walked past at nine, Josie Prior was there with a bucket and a bottle of turps and a scourer, on a stepladder from the op shop, scrubbing. I stopped at the bottom of the ladder.

"Don't," she said, without turning round. "Don't say anything."

I did not say anything. I held the ladder.

* * *

The Deputy State Coroner reopened the inquest into the death of Corey James Nash at the Port Augusta courthouse on Tuesday the twenty-seventh of October. It was not a hearing, exactly. It was twenty minutes in a small panelled room with a coat of arms over the bench and air conditioning that made a sound like distant surf, in which a woman in her fifties with grey hair cut very short said that she had received new information that, if it had been before the court in 2021, might have led to different findings; that she had set aside the finding that no other person had been present; that she would hear further evidence over three days in November; and that she would also hear evidence in relation to the open finding concerning Daniel Owen Tully, which, she observed, with the faintest dryness, now appeared to require revision.

Josie went down for it with Owen in the ute. I did not go. It was not my business, and I had decided to make myself attend only to what was. Josie rang me from the car park afterwards and said, "She's set it aside. She just said it. Set aside. Like a plate."

Then she said, "Tash was there. She sat in the front. She didn't look at us."

Then she said, "Owen held my hand in the car park. In front of everybody. He's never done that. Not even at the wedding."

* * *

The evidence days were the ninth, tenth and eleventh of November. I drove down on the Sunday in the Corolla, six hours, with Toff on the back seat on a blanket because Mrs Varga said she was too old to be left in charge of a dog with opinions. Lorraine drove down separately in the Cruiser with Kenny

Wilton in the passenger seat in a jacket and tie that had been bought, Lorraine told me, for his sister's funeral, and had been worn twice now, and that was enough for any jacket.

I stayed at a motel on the highway with a view of the gulf and a sign that said NO PETS which the woman at the desk looked at Toff and decided not to have read.

On the Monday I sat in the public seats at the back of the panelled room and listened.

They called the senior constable from Murray Bridge first. He was thirty or so, fair, with a careful haircut, and he stood in the witness box and agreed that in October 2019, as a constable in his first year, he had spoken to a Mr Kenneth Wilton during the search, and agreed that Mr Wilton had told him he had seen a white Hilux turn onto the Baird claim at around eleven-thirty on the night of the eighteenth, and agreed that he had not recorded this in his notebook or passed it on.

"Why not?" said counsel assisting, mildly.

The young man looked at his hands on the edge of the box. "I don't know," he said. "I think I thought it was nothing. I think I thought, everybody's got a Hilux." He looked up. "I've thought about it since. I think I thought that because of who was telling me." He did not look at Kenny when he said it. He did not need to. Kenny, in the front row, in his funeral jacket, inclined his head very slightly, as if receiving something owed, and not the whole of it.

Then Kenny gave his evidence, and gave it as he had given it to me beside his Falcon on the Eighteen Mile, without decoration, and the coroner thanked him, and he said, "That's all right. I been waiting."

Then they called Daniel.

He came up to the box on crutches with the boot still on, in the ironed blue shirt, and took the oath on a Bible, and sat when the coroner told him he could. The lawyer from the Legal Services Commission sat at the bar table with her ponytail and her laptop and her hand resting near a sheet of paper on which, I guessed, was the word *privilege* underlined. The coroner explained to him that he was not obliged to answer any question that might tend to incriminate him, and that the law gave him certain protections if he

chose to answer, which his lawyer would explain, and asked whether he understood. He said he did. He said he would answer everything.

And he did. It took most of the day. I will not repeat it; it was the same as he had told Ana through the half-closed door, and as he had told me in September in the chair with the split seat, and I had heard it enough times by then to know that it did not change in the telling, which is, a teacher will tell you, one of the few reliable signs of a true story. What I will set down is that when he came to the part about the torch on the heap and the colour, he did not tell the court what Corey had said. He said, "He said something to me. I've told his mum what it was. It's hers." And counsel assisting looked at the coroner, and the coroner looked at Tash Nash, in the front row, and Tash Nash gave a single small nod, and the coroner said, "Thank you, Mr Tully. You may go on."

Lyle Baird sat at the bar table on the other side, beside a solicitor from Adelaide in a suit that cost more than my car. He had lost weight. His shirt collar stood away from his neck. He looked at the table in front of him for most of the day, and when Daniel described the light bar going over the heaps, and the torch in his face at the top of shaft 3, and what the man said, he closed his eyes and kept them closed for some time, and I could not tell, and cannot tell now, whether it was shame or rage or only an old man's tiredness. Through his counsel he told the court that he would not give evidence, on the ground that it might tend to incriminate him in pending proceedings. The coroner said that was his right.

* * *

That evening I walked Toff along the foreshore below the motel, where the gulf narrows to its long grey end and the mangroves begin. The tide was out. The mud flats shone. There were people on the benches along the path, families with chips, a man with a fishing rod and no apparent intention of using it, and on the last bench before the boat ramp, sitting very upright, two men.

Owen had his back to me. Daniel sat beside him with the crutches leaning on the end of the bench and the boot stuck out straight in front of him. Owen was pointing at something across the water, the far shore, the ranges going purple, and talking, and I could not hear what he said. Daniel

was listening with his head a little on one side, the way he listened to everything, as if it might be the last time anybody told it to him. Then Owen put his arm along the back of the bench. Not round his son. Along the back of the bench, behind him, the way a man does at the footy.

Toff saw them and stopped, and looked up at me, and I said, "No," and he understood, and we turned round and went back the other way along the shining flats, and for once I did not count the steps.

* * *

I gave my evidence on the Tuesday morning, the tenth.

I had prepared for it the way I used to prepare for parent-teacher night: documents in a clear plastic sleeve, in date order, with a page of notes I did not intend to read. Eleven pages of photocopies from the Mining Registrar's public file, and the receipt for four dollars and forty cents, which I had kept because I keep receipts, and which counsel assisting asked to see and then, to my faint embarrassment, asked to have tendered.

She took me through it. The direction of 3 September 2019. The declaration of 23 September, with its empty box. The inspector's notes. Lyle's letter of 28 October. The invoice from Dunn Earthmoving, with its little loader, and its three lines, and its *After-hours callout (Saturday). Works carried out 19/10/19, 0630 start.* She asked me to explain to the court why the dates mattered, and I did, standing in the box with my hands on the rail where the skin was still new and pink, as I had explained a thousand things to a thousand fifteen-year-olds: slowly, from the beginning, with the working shown. Four shafts. Covered on the twenty-third, the declaration said. Two found open on the nineteenth by a contractor, and a third needing a cover, and the fourth with a boy at the bottom of it. Four out of four. Work begun at half past six on a Saturday morning, ten and a half hours before anyone in Calder's Find, by every public account, knew there was a boy at the bottom of anything.

"And you obtained all of these documents," counsel assisting said, "how?"

"I asked for them at the counter," I said, "and paid for the copies."

Then Lyle's counsel stood up.

He was courteous. He was very good. He established that I was the sister of the late Raymond Aspinall; that Raymond Aspinall had, on Mr Tully's evidence, concealed Mr Tully for six years; that I was the executor of Raymond Aspinall's estate, which held a claim adjoining his client's; and that his client had made me an offer for that claim which I had refused. He allowed all this to sit for a moment in the surf-sound of the air conditioning. Then he asked how I had come to take an interest in his client's compliance file at all.

"I was interested in the dates," I said.

"Why?"

"Because a man told me he saw a car."

"And before that? You came to Calder's Find in the winter. You were employed, I understand, by the Bureau of Statistics. You were in and out of every house in town. When did you first come to believe Mr Tully was alive, Mrs Aspinall, and how?"

The room was very quiet. I looked at the coroner.

"Some of what I know," I said, "I learned in the course of my duties as a census field officer. I'm not permitted by law to disclose it, to this court or anyone, and I won't. Everything I've given the court today is from the public file and I'm happy to answer anything about it. But I won't answer that."

He began to say something about the court's powers. The coroner raised one hand, not high.

"Mr Tully has given his own evidence about his whereabouts, at length," she said. "I don't see how Mrs Aspinall's beliefs about them assist me. I won't require her to answer." She looked at me over her glasses. "Thank you, Mrs Aspinall. I found your arithmetic very clear."

"Thank you, your Honour," I said, which was wrong, I learned afterwards; it should have been *Coroner*. Nobody minded.

I stepped down. And as I turned from the box to go back to my seat I looked, for the first time all morning, at the back of the room.

They were in the last row, by the door, where people sit who think they may need to leave. Josie in her good navy jacket, the one with the brooch. Owen in a shirt with a collar, his hat on his knee, his big shoulders hunched to fit the seat. They were not looking at me. They were looking at the back

of their son's head where he sat beside his lawyer at the bar table, and between them, on the bench, where anyone who turned round could see, his hand was holding hers.

* * *

At the lunch adjournment I went out to the corridor for water, and Lyle Baird was standing at the window at the end of it, alone, looking out at the gulf.

I could have turned round. I filled a paper cup at the cooler instead. When I straightened he was looking at me.

"Mags," he said.

"Lyle."

He did not come any closer. He looked very old in the flat light off the water. He said, "I put a blanket round Owen Tully, you know. In 2019. When he came up out of that hole. Did they tell you that?"

"Josie told me."

"I meant it," he said. "I want you to know. I meant that."

"I know you did," I said, and found that it was true, and that it did not change any of the sums, and that both those things were going to be true for the rest of my life.

He nodded, and turned back to the window. And as I went back down the corridor I heard him say it again, quietly, to the glass, to the gulf, to nobody, the thing he would go on saying.

"I only went out there to talk."

CHAPTER 29

Finishing

Probate had come through in October, in a long envelope from a firm in Adelaide that had charged the estate more for six letters than Ray had made in some years. I read it at the table in the Number Nine with my reading glasses on and Toff's head on my foot. The estate of Raymond John Aspinall, late of Calder's Find, opal miner: one dugout residence known as the Number Nine, Treloar's Hill; one precious stones claim on the Eighteen Mile field, with its pegs and its shaft and its old drive; one Toyota ute, unregistered; one cabbing machine; sundry tools and household effects; the sum of eleven hundred and forty dollars at the credit union; and, as it turned out, one army ammunition tin, recovered from a ledge in an old shaft on the said claim by persons unknown to the Adelaide firm, containing forty-one pieces of cut and uncut precious opal wrapped in a chamois leather.

Executor and sole beneficiary: Margaret Anne Aspinall. *The most competent person I know.*

I had been deciding what to do with it for three months. That is not true. I had known since the night on the Eighteen Mile what I would do with it, and had been doing the sums for three months anyway, because that is how I come to terms with what I already know. I priced the claim. I priced the dugout. I read the ledger again, every page, with a pencil, and added up the *D.* column from November 2019 to the last entry in November 2025, and subtracted what Ray had actually paid over in cash, and found that, by my brother's own accounting, in his own square hand, the estate of Raymond John Aspinall owed Daniel Owen Tully eleven thousand, two hundred and six dollars, which was ten times what the estate had at the credit union.

I put the pencil down. Then I picked it up and drew a line under the figure, twice, the way you do under an answer.

* * *

"He'll need a permit," Bev Coutts said. "First. Before anything. They don't transfer a claim to someone who hasn't got a permit."

"He's applying."

"Has he got identification? They'll want identification." She looked at me over her thermos lid. "He was dead, love. On paper. For a long time."

"The coroner sorted that out on the eleventh," I said. "He's got a birth certificate and a Medicare card and a letter from the court. He's got more identification than I have."

Bev considered this. Then she reached under the counter and brought out a form, and another form, and a third, and laid them side by side in front of me in the order they would need to be completed, and put a yellow sticky note on the third with an arrow and the words SIGN HERE (BOTH), and slid them across.

"Executor signs the transfer," she said. "Transferee signs and lodges it with his permit number and the fee, and it's registered when it's registered. Not before. And he renews it every year, on time, or it lapses, and then anybody can peg it." She tapped the sticky note. "You tell him that. Every year. Ray let his lapse once, in 2011, and Lyle Baird nearly had it, and I had to ring Ray at the Lucky Strike and make him come down in his socks."

"I'll tell him."

"He used to bring me a vanilla slice," Bev said, to the pot plant. "Ray. Every time." Then she looked at me with her small sharp eyes. "Are you keeping the dugout?"

"Yes."

"Living in it?"

"Yes."

"Good," said Bev. "Somebody ought to." And she stamped the receipt for the forms, which were free, out of what I took to be pure feeling.

That had taken no deciding at all, in the end. I rang an agent in Norwood the week after the inquest and asked him to find tenants for the house: a family, I said, if possible, with children, because it was a house that had been quiet for too long. He found a couple with twins and a piano. Graham, who still has a key and waters the roses when I am away, rang to tell me the piano had gone in through the front window on a crane, and that the whole street had come out to watch, and that he had never seen the place

look so pleased with itself. I packed nothing. Everything I needed was already in the Number Nine, or turned out not to be needed. The Corolla stayed. Lorraine said it would be dead within a year on the Seventeen Mile Road, and I said that it had survived worse than Lorraine, and she said that was not possible, and we were both right.

Daniel signed them at Ray's table the following Sunday, in front of Josie and Owen and Gus, who had come up the hill with a box of loukoumades and sat on the floor beside the armchair because there were only three chairs. I had asked him to come and had not told him why. When I put the papers in front of him he read every word, all three forms, slowly, with his lips pressed together, and then he read them again. Then he looked up.

"No," he said.

"It isn't a gift," I said. "It's a debt." I put the ledger beside the forms, open at the last page, with my double line under the figure. "That's what he owed you. By his own sums. The claim's worth about that, give or take what's still in the ground, which nobody knows. The tin's yours already. He wrote it in the ledger in 2023: *Parcel for D. if I'm not here.* I'm only the executor. I'm doing what I'm told."

He looked at the line under the figure for a long time.

"You've done the working," he said.

"I always do the working."

He signed. Then Josie signed as a witness, and Owen, who had said nothing all afternoon, put out his hand across the table, and Daniel looked at it, and shook it, and Gus opened the loukoumades.

* * *

I wrote to Ray on the night of the ninth of December, which was the night, as nearly as the doctor and the police could work out, that he died.

I wrote it at his table, on lined paper from a pad I bought at the IGA, with a pencil, because I have always done my best thinking in pencil and because a pencil can be rubbed out, although in the end I did not rub anything out. I will not set it down here. It was three pages. It was the letter I should have written in September 2014, and in every September after that, eleven times, and then a twelfth time to a card he never sent. Most of it was arithmetic, of a kind: what I had said to him in the hallway of our mother's

house in Port Pirie, and what it had cost, and how I had added it up wrongly for eleven years, carrying a figure I should have dropped. Some of it was a list. The rooms behind the wardrobe. The bed made tight. The white mug with the chip. The ledger. Forty-one stones in a chamois. Six years of a boy's life, kept, fed, taught, counted in a green book in a column headed *D.* I wrote, *You said I never finished anything, or I said that you didn't. I can't remember which of us said it now. I've been looking at what you left and I want you to know I've checked it, all of it, the whole sum, and it comes out.*

I wrote, *You finished him.*

I folded it in three and put it in a jar with a screw lid, a Vegemite jar, because that was the jar I had, and I put Ray's 1994 bus ticket in with it, the one from the whiteness chapter. Then I took the big torch and went through the wardrobe.

The back drive was cool and smelled of stone. Thirty-two paces to the rooms, as it always was, and the back drive beyond them. I had walked it often enough by then not to count, but I counted. At the foot of the ladder, where the drive opened out a little and the iron rungs went up thirty-one steps into the dark towards the corrugated iron and the tyres and the sky, the floor was soft, old spoil that had come down the shaft over the years. I knelt on my good knee and dug a hole in it with Ray's prospecting pick, the one with the taped handle, a foot deep, and put the jar in, and filled it in, and pressed it down flat with my palms, which had healed, although the new skin was still tender and I felt every grain.

Toff watched from the drive with his head on his paws.

I did not say anything. I had said it on the paper. I knelt there for a while longer with the torch off, in the absolute dark of the hill, and above me, up the ladder, through a nail hole in the corrugated iron, there was one star.

* * *

We took Ray out to the Eighteen Mile on the Thursday after, at first light, before the heat.

I had kept him on the floor beside the brown armchair for four months, in the plastic box from the funeral director in Port Augusta, because I could not think where else he would want to be, and because, if I am honest, I had not wanted to be the one who decided. Daniel decided. He said Ray had

told him once, on the claim, sitting on the tailgate at the end of a night's work with the sun coming up, that if anything happened he wanted to go down the old shaft on the back of the claim, the one where he kept the parcel, "so I can keep an eye on it". Daniel said it in Ray's voice, without meaning to, and Josie laughed and then had to walk away a little.

So we went: Daniel and me in the Corolla with Toff, and Josie and Owen in the ute, and Lorraine in the Cruiser, because she said she had found the place once in the dark and she would like to see it with the lights on.

The shaft looked like nothing in daylight. A hole in a flat, a low heap, gibber, saltbush. The marks of the bus tyres were still in the crust. But Daniel had been out with Owen the week before and the shaft had a cover now, a proper one, heavy steel mesh on a bolted frame, and a sign on a star picket, and so did every other open hole on the claim, seven of them; he had walked the whole thing with Ray's old map and pegged and covered every one, and then he had rung the inspector in Port Augusta and asked him to come and look. The inspector had come. He had walked the claim with Daniel for two hours, and signed the form, and in the box marked *Inspector verified (Y/N)* he had written a Y. Daniel had shown me the form in the car on the way out. He had not said anything about it. He had only held it out so that I could see the box.

He lifted one corner of the mesh with Owen's help. I knelt at the lip where I had lain in the red dark three months before, and opened the plastic box, and there was nothing to say, and nobody said it. I tipped my brother out into the shaft, and he went down in a pale soft stream, and some of him blew back across the lip onto my knees and my shoes and onto Toff, who sneezed. Then Owen let the cover down, and Daniel bolted it, and Josie put her arm through mine, and we stood there while the sun came up over the heaps and turned them pink, every one, as far as you could see.

* * *

Daniel taught me to cut on the second Saturday in December, in the workroom behind the wardrobe, on the cabbing machine he had used for six years and that I still thought of, and always will, as his wheel.

He was out of the boot by then, in a pair of Owen's old work boots, and walked with a limp that the surgeon in Port Augusta had said might go and might not. He came through the green door rather than the wardrobe now, and knocked first, which I found I minded slightly, and did not tell him. He sat on the stool beside me with Ray's container marked POTCH in his lap and turned the pieces over one by one with his long careful fingers, holding each one up to the bulb.

"Potch is opal with no colour," he said. "It's the same stuff. Same water, same silica, same millions of years. It just didn't line up right to bend the light." He held out a piece to me, grey, milky, the size of my thumbnail, rough on one side. "Most of what comes out of the ground is potch. Ray used to say the trick isn't finding colour. The trick is knowing potch is still opal."

"That sounds like Ray."

"He got it off a fridge magnet," Daniel said. "He told me that too."

He showed me how to dop it, how to warm the wax over the little spirit lamp and set the stone on the end of the wooden stick and hold it till it cooled. He showed me how to hold the dop stick against the wheel, light, always light, and keep the stone wet, and keep it moving, and look, and grind, and look again. The wheel was a grey blur with water running down it. The noise was a high thin whine, like the winch on the Eighteen Mile. I held the stone to it with my tender hands and the grey slurry ran down my wrists, and I ground, and looked, and ground.

"Lighter," he said. "You're not marking homework."

I laughed, and the dop stick slipped, and he put out his hand without fuss and steadied it.

I ground for an hour. My shoulders ached. The piece got smaller and smoother and greyer, a little dome of nothing, and I began to think, in the way you do, that I had been given the dud on purpose, as a lesson in humility; that Ray had kept a whole container of the stuff for exactly this purpose, for teaching beginners that most of life is grey.

Then I turned it in the light of the bulb, and there, low down on one side, just under the surface, like a match struck in another room, there was a flash of red.

One. Small as a seed. It came and went as I moved the stone. I held it still. It came back.

"There," Daniel said, very quietly, beside me. "See it?"

I could not answer.

"That's a pin of red," he said. "In potch. You don't get that every day." He took the dop stick gently out of my fingers and held it up to the bulb and turned it, and the red came and went, came and went, a single point of fire in a little grey stone that had taken several million years to make and an hour to find. "You can't sell it. It's worth nothing. One pin." He gave it back to me. "You keep that."

I kept it. It is on the shelf in the back room now, beside the Macquarie dictionary, where the white mug with the chip stood until January, on a square of Ray's chamois. Most days I do not look at it. But some evenings, when the light from the face of the dugout comes down the passage at the right angle, I take it down and turn it in my fingers until I find the red.

It is always there. You only have to turn it to the light.

CHAPTER 30

Usual Residence

The first results came out in the summer, on a morning so hot the cicadas in the pepper tree outside the Progress hall had stopped, as if even they could not be bothered.

I read them on my phone, sitting in the Corolla in the shade of the hall with the doors open, because the hall had the only reliable signal on that side of town and because I did not want to read them at Ray's table. I do not entirely know why. Perhaps I wanted to read them somewhere official.

There was a great deal of it. There always is. The population of the country, to the nearest person, which is to say not to the nearest person at all, because no count is ever that, and the people who make them know it better than anybody. The median age. The number of languages spoken at home. The number of people who had said they had no religion, which had gone up again, and somewhere in it, I supposed, was Josie's *(Anglican, baptised)* in the margin, invisible to the scanner, counted as nothing. I scrolled down and down, past the states, past the regions, to the small places, and there it was, on a screen the size of a playing card, in a typeface I could have drawn from memory: Calder's Find, and a number.

I will not write it here. It does not matter what it was. It was a number of four digits, a little higher than 2021, which Lorraine rang me that afternoon to say was mostly the camp at Three Mile, counted properly this time, every house, and one or two from the Eighteen Mile who had never been counted before, and she said it in the level voice, the one she had used on the phone in the storm, and then she said, "Not bad, for a census," and hung up.

I looked at the number for a long time.

He was in it. I knew he was in it the way you know a sum is right before you check it, because the working is sound. But I could not see him. Nobody could. The Bureau, before it publishes small numbers, nudges them very slightly, up or down, by an amount nobody is told, so that no one can take two tables and subtract one from the other and find a single person

standing in the gap. When I first learned that, in the training in the back room of the Progress hall, I had thought it was a kind of lie. A number that was not quite the number. I had said as much to Lorraine, across the folding chairs, and she had said, "It's the opposite. It's how we keep the promise."

I understood him now. The number on my phone was not a picture of anyone. It was a promise kept at the scale of a town. Somewhere in it was a young man who had been written down in biro by his stepmother on a kitchen table, pressed hard enough to dent the page behind, and somewhere in it was a woman who had collected that form and carried it up a hill and sealed it and sent it, and had never once, to anyone, said what was on it. Both of us were in there. Neither of us could be found. That was the arrangement, and it had held.

I put the phone in my pocket and drove home.

* * *

The Number Nine had a fourth mug on the fourth hook now.

It was the white enamel one with the chip. Daniel had brought it back in January, the day the letter came from Adelaide to say that the prosecutors had considered the matter of his not coming forward in 2019 and had decided, in the public interest, to take no further action. He had walked up the hill with the letter, through the green door, knocking first, and had read it out to me at the table, all of it, twice, and then he had got up and gone down the passage and through the wardrobe, and come back with the mug from the shelf in the back room, where it had stood since the night he left, and hung it on the empty hook beside WORLD'S OKAYEST MINER and sat down again without saying anything about it. Neither of us has mentioned it since. It is there every morning when I come out of the spare room, which I still sleep in, because it is the spare room and I am not Ray.

Lyle Baird's matters are listed for hearing in the winter. He pleaded not guilty to both, through the solicitor from Adelaide, and the further matter, from the storm, is still under consideration, which in the language of the police means that they are taking their time and would like everybody to know it. The Drift was sold in January to a couple from Victoria who have painted the sign a colour the town is still discussing. Lyle lives in Port Augusta now, in a unit near the hospital. Gus heard that from somebody's

cousin. Gus says he walks along the foreshore every morning at six with his hands behind his back. Nobody in Calder's Find has said a cruel thing about him out loud for a while. I think it is because he is not here to hear it, and a town like this one is cruel only to the faces it can see.

Tash Nash still works the counter at the Shell. The rectangle on the side of the till is still bare. Last week, when she gave me my change, she said, "Hot enough," and I said, "Hot enough," and that is the longest conversation we have had. I count it.

* * *

We had the birthday on the last Sunday in February, three days early, because Owen had a bus on the Wednesday and Josie said that if Owen was not there it was not a birthday, and nobody, least of all Owen, argued.

It was at the Number Nine, because Daniel asked for it to be. Gus came up the hill at four with a cake in a box held out in front of him in both hands like a thing that might go off, the same cake, he said, that he had been making at the start of every March since 2020 for Ray, who had told him it was for himself, and had eaten one slice and taken the rest away. "I knew," Gus said, putting it down on Ray's table. "Of course I knew. Who eats a whole cake every March? Ray ate like a bird." He wiped his hands on his trousers. "I put more walnuts this time. Now I am allowed to know who it is for."

Mrs Varga came with a plate of pogácsa and her chopsticks in her hair and sat in the brown armchair, which nobody had sat in since December 2025 except Toff, and which she took over at once as though she had been waiting for an invitation for more than a year and was not going to waste it. Lorraine came, and Jarrah, carrying a folding table from the Progress hall on his head. Kenny Wilton came, in his funeral jacket, which Lorraine said he had decided to wear to happy things from now on to change its luck, and sat on an esky by the door with his small grey dog, who looked at Toff and Toff looked at him and they agreed, after a short discussion, to ignore each other. Bev Coutts came, which nobody expected, with a vanilla slice in a paper bag that she put down at Daniel's place without a word. Josie came with a curry. Owen came with a carton of beer and a ramp, a new one, a good one, made

of treated pine, for nobody in particular, and leaned it against the face of the dugout, and said, "Might be handy," and went inside.

Ana Petrakis came at six, in uniform, on her way somewhere, and stood in the doorway, and said she could only stay a minute. Josie put a plate in her hands. She stayed two hours.

I had not had so many people in the Number Nine. I do not think anyone had. There were not enough chairs, and Josie brought six from the op shop in the ute, none of them matching, and we put the folding table end to end with Ray's and covered both with a sheet, and the room that had held one man and then, secretly, two, and then, for a while, me and a ghost and a dog, held fifteen people and two dogs and a cake with twenty-six candles on it that set off nothing, because Ray had never in his life installed a smoke alarm.

I counted them. Of course I did. I stood at the end of the table with the knife for the cake in my hand while they sang, Owen loudest and worst, and I counted them, the way I have always counted, the way I cannot help, and this time I did not mind that I could not help it. Josie. Owen. Daniel. Gus. Mrs Varga. Lorraine. Jarrah. Kenny. Bev. Ana. And four more who came late with a salad and a bottle and their own chairs, whose names I knew, all of them, because I had been to every one of their doors in August with a lanyard round my neck and a satchel and a device that is now in a warehouse in Melbourne. Fourteen. Fifteen, with me. Two dogs. One cake.

Everyone at the table.

That is what a count is, at the bottom of it. Not a number. A table, and a question asked of everyone at it, and every answer taken down, and kept. You do not count people. People let you count them. Lorraine told me that in August and I wrote it down and did not understand it. I think I do now. They let you, and then you keep it, and the keeping is the whole of the thing.

Daniel blew out the candles in one go. Mrs Varga clapped. Toff barked once, at nothing, for joy.

* * *

His birthday itself, the Wednesday, the third of March, was very quiet.

I got up early, before the heat. Toff was asleep across the doorway of the Number Nine, as he has slept every morning since the summer started, his

back against the frame and his paws twitching, a warm red sandbag laid across the threshold so that nothing could come in or go out without first stepping over a dog. I made tea in Ray's mug. I sat at Ray's table, which is my table, in the dugout that is my usual residence, which is the place, the form says, where a person lives or intends to live for six months or more in the year, and which I have written on a form now, in my own hand, for the electoral roll and the council and the bank, and which I will write on the next census form in five years' time, in pencil first and then in pen.

The light at the face of the dugout comes in through the two windows in the besser blocks and down the passage, and at that hour in March it reaches almost to the table, a long pale bar of it across the floor, across the dog, across my feet. Dust turns in it. The pick marks in the walls, my brother's marks and the old men's before him, stand out in it like writing.

I had bought the card at the IGA the week before. They had kookaburras and galahs. They did not have a giraffe. I chose the galah.

I sat with it open on the table in the light and the pencil in my hand for a long time. I had thought, since the morning the results came out, about all the things I could write in it. About the number, and the arrangement, and the promise, and the young man in it whom nobody would ever find. About Ray, who had sent me a card every September for eleven years and had never once asked me a question I would have had to answer. About red in potch. About what is owed, and what is kept, and how the two come out, in the end, to the same figure, if you do the working.

In the end I wrote what Ray would have written, in square capitals, as near as I could make them, which was not very near.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY D. STILL HERE. M.

Then I sat in the light with the card drying on the table and the dog across the door, and I listened to the dugout, which is never silent, which ticks and settles and breathes like any house, and which I no longer listen to for anything at all, because everyone who lives here is accounted for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abdul Kavungal (AK) writes fiction and non-fiction for Award Winning Creations.