

THE REACH

B. MICHAEL RADBURN



PANTERA
PRESS

PROLOGUE

*Devlins Reach, Dharug National Park
New South Wales*

A story is never far away ... you just have to dig a little. The journalist tells the story, while the photographer *shows* it. But, given the right photo, that one glimpse of time can speak volumes. That was Brewer Hutch's quest ... to capture the picture that roared.

Hutch struggled through the marina service station's front door, his camera bag slipping from his shoulder and spilling hot coffee all over his hand. 'Shit!' he hissed, letting the screen door snap shut behind him as he eased the bag onto the veranda floor. Hutch sat, composed himself, licked coffee off his thumb and sighed.

The morning sun, low on the eastern horizon, glimmered off the wake of the river ferry across the way. Its engine burbled faultlessly, a gentle drone in the crisp, quiet air. But the relative peace was soon disrupted by the squeal of

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

brakes from a midnight-black Kenworth hauling logs from the mill in the high country. Hutch recalled the sign he'd seen coming into town yesterday: *Big River Logging Co.* The Kenny stopped at the ramp's T-junction and turned off its motor with a monstrous exhale from the airbrakes.

Hutch squinted against the light, fished a pair of Ray-Bans from his battered leather jacket, and polished them clean on the hem of his faded Motorhead T-shirt. He held the glasses up to the light, and observed the weary reflection staring back at him. His face appeared to be a decade older than his thirty-five years, the consequence of a restless night in an unfamiliar bed. He slipped the Ray-Bans on.

Hutch knew this assignment wasn't a Pulitzer-Prize-winning gig – *far from it*. But no one goes on assignment expecting to take a prize-winning photo. Those pics come from the mundane, in a burst of the extraordinary. He'd learned the phrase from his editor, Brendan Dahl at the *Herald*, and would never forget it. 'They happen every day,' Bren had told him. 'The trick is being ready ... sensing that moment just before it happens, because no one knows the weight of the accursed second more than the photographer. It can make the difference between a good photo and a bad one. Between being a Pulitzer winner or a putz.'

Hutch glanced at his wristwatch, anxious for the phone call from Parks and Wildlife. He sipped his coffee, watched the ferry straining closer along its taut cable, a single cream utility parked in the centre bay. The pick-up looked old – a mid-sixties Ford, perhaps – but very much suited to the district. Devlins Reach was one of those towns stuck in

THE REACH

time – a *photographer's dream*, Hutch decided. There was something about it that the present could not quite touch ... like a memory ... or even a ghost.

Hutch relaxed back and stared out over the vast river. 'How about it?' he whispered to the universe. 'Is today gonna be extraordinary?' But the universe remained tight-lipped about the whole matter, so he sipped his coffee and eased into the calm, looking around at the environment so different from the city, just two hours away. The Hawkesbury's tributary of Devlins Reach cut its way through the lower portion of coastal ranges, its ridged fingers spreading through acres of plantation forests, filling the air with a perfume of pine, eucalyptus and brackish water.

The sound of the ferry claimed his attention once more. It ground to a halt directly across from the service station, bow ramp milling against the road's concrete incline with a squeal. Hutch wiped his lips with his jacket sleeve as the Kenny growled to life again with twin plumes of blue-grey poison coming from its exhaust stacks.

Two boys wheeled their bicycles around the closed gates and off the bow of the ferry. Hutch guessed they were around twelve or thirteen. The one in a grey hoodie stopped to tie the vessel to the roadside bollard, then caught up with his fair-haired companion, who wore a sagging windcheater, a faded red against the diamond glimmers of the morning sun off the river.

The Ford utility, doors and mudguards speckled with rust, eased off the deck behind the boys when the gates opened. The driver was an older woman with silvery hair tied up in a

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

stringy bun. She stared at Hutch through cloud-grey eyes as she passed him. Hutch nodded, but received nothing in return, so turned his attention to the ferry as its waterline dipped deep into the river under the weight of the Kenworth's logs.

The two boys were climbing the rise towards the marina. Hutch sat upright on the bench. The boys leaned their bikes against two veranda posts, then stood in front of the Coke machine beside Hutch. He watched as the kid in the grey hoodie pulled a fistful of coins from his jeans pockets and flicked back his hood. He had the same fair hair, full cheeks and line of faded freckles across the bridge of his nose as the other boy. Hutch guessed they were brothers, with Grey Hoodie the eldest.

The Coke machine delivered its bounty with a clatter of small change. Grey Hoodie cracked open the bottle and drank first, then passed it to his brother, who wiped the rim with the hem of his windcheater and drank deeply. *These boys were used to sharing.* Grey Hoodie caught Hutch's eye and frowned with a *What are you looking at* glare. Hutch grinned as the small-town cliché played out before him. *Welcome to Devlins Reach*, he thought. Then his phone rang.

Hutch plucked it out of his pocket, hoping it was his Parks and Wildlife contact with good news. He pursed his lips, disappointed at seeing his editor's name on the screen. 'Hey, Bren.'

'Brewer ... I'm looking around the office and don't see you anywhere. I'm also looking in the submissions file and don't see the pictures for the Sunday feature ... Should I be worried?'

THE REACH

‘There was a delay yesterday,’ Hutch explained, ‘so I stayed the night. Parks can’t get me access to the excavation site without approval from the university. It’s the university’s dig and they’re in no hurry to get back to me.’

‘I thought that was prearranged.’

‘So did I. Parks said the university would give them the okay before I arrived, but apparently it has to go before some board first. They can’t guarantee that’ll happen before the weekend.’ Hutch braced himself for the response.

‘Shit, Brewer! We’re already advertising the fucking feature for this Sunday. Do you have *anything* I can use?’

Hutch glanced down at his camera bag, noticing the two boys were watching him. He turned his back on them. ‘I’ve got a ton of pictures of the surface mounds and entry hatches, but that’s it.’

‘Jesus Christ! You *do* know what a photo feature means, don’t you?’

Hutch knew the sarcasm didn’t require an answer.

Brendan continued, ‘Emma Hatfield has written a great piece on these buried riverboats, “Ghost Ships of the Hawkesbury”, but it needs your fucking pictures, man.’

‘I’ll get them,’ Hutch said. ‘Trust me.’

There was a moment of silence, and Hutch turned around and looked at the kids. The older boy was now sitting on the end of the bench, the other’s eyes strangely focused on Hutch’s lips.

‘You know, sometimes it’s best to ask for forgiveness after the fact, rather than for permission before.’

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

Hutch sighed. 'I understand, Bren. Don't worry. You'll get your pictures.' He ended the call.

The younger kid patted his chest to get his brother's attention, then fervently signed something with his hands. *The kid was deaf— no, earing impaired,* Hutch corrected himself.

The older boy agreed with a curt nod to whatever his brother was saying. 'Hey, mister,' he said to Hutch, 'if you need to get inside those buried boats, my brother and I can get you down there.'

Hutch glanced backwards and forwards between the two boys. He didn't like going outside the law, but where was the crime? He just needed those pictures. 'You're not shitting me, are you, kid?'

The older boy looked indifferent. 'Nope,' he said tersely.

Hutch smiled. 'What are your names?'

'The name's Jayden Wiggins, but everyone calls me Jay,' he said and nodded at the other boy. 'This is Fingers, my brother.' He gestured to the ferry carrying its heavy load across the river. 'Our father is the ferry master. Everyone knows our dad.' His lip turned up at the corner in an aborted smile. 'Sooner or later, everyone has to. He's the first and last face you'll see on the Reach.' He returned his stare to Hutch. 'There ain't no place on the Reach we can't get you.'

Hutch took a final sip of his coffee, then retrieved his camera bag. 'Okay, let's do this.' He stood to go.

Fingers patted his chest, and Jay turned to him, watched his hands dance in conversation. Jay signed back, not as fluidly, but just as quickly. They then nodded in unison. 'It'll cost you,' Jay said.

THE REACH

Hutch paused. 'What ever happened to civic duty?'

'What ever happened to earning an honest dollar?' Jay replied.

'What are you, forty?'

Jay shrugged nonchalantly. 'We can get you down there, or leave you here ... Your call.'

The kid meant it. 'I'll give you ten bucks for your service.'

Fingers simply shook his head. He could clearly lip-read well enough.

'Twenty,' said Jay. 'Each,' he added.

'You're killing me,' Hutch said. But forty bucks was a small price to pay for making his deadline. He retrieved his wallet from his jeans, plucked out two notes, handed one to Fingers and waved the other under Jay's nose. Jay went to grab it, but Hutch yanked it away and slipped it in his jacket pocket. 'That's yours once you get me down there, okay? Shall we go?' Hutch gestured to his car. Jay getting over his evident disappointment, signed to Fingers and they grabbed their bikes.

'Keep up,' Jay cried over his shoulder. He mounted his weathered Raleigh and rolled down the driveway to the road that led into town.

Hutch smiled. He took his time starting his Mazda, pulled out leisurely and was soon behind the two boys, who were lucky to be doing fifteen ks. *Keep up, huh?* Then the kids left the road and turned sharply onto a track on the right. *Jesus!* Hutch missed the turnoff, braked hard. 'Okay,' he whispered, and reversed. 'I get it.'

The trail was barely a goat track, obviously unused in a long time. He turned onto it, coarse bush and tree branches

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

squealing along the car's paintwork as its narrow wheels slid over the loose surface at each bend. A fallen tree came way too close for comfort on the first tight bend. Hutch lost sight of the boys, pushing his luck on the trail, and was ready to give up when he caught a fleeting glimpse of Fingers' red windcheater ahead. Then they were gone again. *I'll give you keep up*, he thought, and pushed the accelerator a little harder – and his driving ability even more so.

The track arced around the back of the service station and headed towards the river. *This makes sense*, Hutch decided. The boat hulks lay buried in reclaimed land north of the town. Maybe he didn't need the kids after all. He relaxed a little, realising he had been holding his breath during the pursuit, and slowed down. Then he saw the kids in a clearing of she-oaks, and didn't know whether to be angry or relieved. He settled for a little of each as he parked beside them.

Hutch collected his camera bag from the passenger seat and stepped out. He rubbed his free hand along the scratches in the paintwork. 'This little picnic just cost a lot more than forty bucks,' he murmured.

'It's over here,' said Jay.

Hutch turned. The kid was pointing through the oaks to a single track. 'Lead the way,' he said.

They walked in silence. The track squeezed through the crowded undergrowth, descending into the sound of lapping water ahead. Stipples of blue sky broke through the curtain of oaks – hinting at a clearing – and finally there was something Hutch could recognise: one of the earthen heaps

THE REACH

that defined the dig site. He stood between the two boys at the tree line. It bordered a vast meadow of the university's archaeology mounds – secured entries to the buried hulks below. The scene was very familiar, only this time he was *inside* the security fence, feeling empowered; not outside and ineffective, as he was the day before. Jay and Fingers crouched behind a modest deadfall of trees. Hutch followed suit. The site was clear all the way to the levee bank that skirted the water's edge. They ducked lower as a logging truck rumbled past the eastern fence line, its trail of dust billowing across the clearing.

'When was the last time the university people were out here?' Hutch asked.

'Last summer,' said Jay. 'One of the boats was exposed in a wash-away after the big rains. Place was crawling with triple-Os for a couple of months.'

'Triple Os?'

'That's what our dad called them ... *Overpaid, Over* educated and *Over* here.'

Hutch smiled, remembered his father's joke about archaeologists. 'Hey, kid,' he said. Fingers stared unblinkingly at his lips. 'Why did the archaeologist go bankrupt?'

He waited, but all he got from the boys was a bewildered shrug.

'Because his career was in ruins.'

The thinnest of smiles touched Fingers' lips, but Jay remained stony-faced. Hutch let it go.

'Why would someone want to bury a bunch of boats, anyway?' Jay asked.

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

Hutch had removed his Nikon from its bag and hung it around his neck. He recalled the first draft of Emma's article, which he'd read before he left the city.

'Captain Devlin made his money running a fleet of riverboats up and down this part of the Hawkesbury in the eighteen sixties, but when the roads came through, they killed his business.' He pointed beyond the levee. 'Devlin scuttled the useless fleet here, at the point, reclaimed the land on top of them, with the intention of developing Devlins Reach with his money, but the first major flood broke the banks and wiped out his fledgling town. That's when he established it to the south – you know, higher ground – where it stands today.'

'Still seems like a stupid idea,' said Jay.

'A stupid idea that makes a great story.' Hutch considered the limited space he might have in the hulks and swapped his standard camera lens for a wide angle, but slipped the moderate zoom lens in his jacket pocket just in case. He tested the flash. 'San Francisco Bay is partially reclaimed land, atop hundreds of scuttled ships and barges that were abandoned to rot after the gold rush there.'

Fingers rubbed his watering eyes, no doubt still seeing spots from the camera's flash.

'You know something else,' continued Hutch. 'Those concealed boats in the States were often stumbled across by the tunnelling teams that built the subway system in the sixties, and now the trains run right through some of them.'

'That's kinda cool,' said Jay. 'But our boats are better.'

THE REACH

‘Yeah, it’s not as cool as this twenty-dollar note I’m holding for you,’ Hutch said. ‘So, how about we see these boats of yours?’

Jay’s eyes lit up at the reminder of his money. ‘This way,’ he said, brushing past Hutch towards the fence. ‘A sinkhole opened up above one of them a few weeks back.’ He hugged the shade of the tree line. The wind, as slight as it was, had begun to whistle through the she-oaks’ slender foliage.

The boys stopped at a drop-away in the earth, encircled by a cluster of poplar trees, a tangle of exposed roots crisscrossing the cavity. Hutch kneeled at the opening.

‘There you go,’ said Jay, his hand out, thumb and forefinger pinched together. ‘You owe me twenty.’

‘Nice try,’ said Hutch. ‘But we’re not *in* yet.’

Jay rolled his eyes. He sat on the edge, legs dangling into the hole. ‘Okay. I’ll go first, then you, then Fingers.’ Having signed the conversation for his brother’s benefit, he slid into the opening with a dull thud.

Hutch could see the boy’s face staring up at him in the dim light. It looked like a two-metre drop.

‘You coming down or what?’ Jay asked.

Hutch held the Nikon over his head and slid down, a thin stream of dirt and stones following behind. The floor felt solid but a little spongy underfoot. A pungent, earthy dampness filled his nostrils. Jay pulled Hutch aside to make way for his brother. Fingers clutched the webbing of tree roots, hung there a moment, then dropped down beside them.

Swirls of dust danced through the spear of dappled light at their feet. Hutch retrieved his iPhone and turned on the

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

torch. He stepped into the darkness, which dissolved to a grey gloom as the torchlight burst to life. It exposed the vessel's ribcage, arching upwards from the floor as if in the belly of a whale, the walls glistening like damp stone, the floor growing progressively damper leading to a pool of water at the far end. He felt like Carter opening Tutankhamun's tomb.

Something pulled at Hutch's jacket, startling him.

It was Jay, holding out his hand. Hutch sighed, took out the twenty and handed it to him. 'Here,' he said. 'You earned it.' He expected them to leave him there, but they hung around in the newfound light, the floorboards creaking beneath each step.

The weight of the camera around his neck reminded Hutch why he was there. He turned. First, a photo of the opening, no flash. Then a balanced picture, forwards, down the centre of the keel line, the flash casting shadows off the ribs and beams. Hutch checked the image on the screen, breathed out a single word: 'Perfect.' Then he frowned; the flash having reached further than his phone's torchlight, he'd noticed something in the picture: a closed hatch in the far wall.

'You kids know what's behind that door?' he asked.

Jay looked over Hutch's shoulder at the screen. 'Hadn't noticed it before,' he said. 'We never venture too far from the light.'

Hutch held the phone high, careful of each step he took as he walked within the illuminated halo to the door. The pooled water was ankle deep and cold. *We never venture too*

THE REACH

far from the light. It was one of those statements that lodged firmly under your skin.

The door had a simple latch, its brass tarnished green. From the direction of the hull, Hutch guessed that it would lead them to the university-built entrances topside. It took considerable force to lift the latch, the handle dangerously close to tearing from the timber before the door peeled open with a faint sucking sound. The smell was pungent. He grimaced, his eyes watering as if he'd been slapped in the face. 'Shit!' He waved the boys back.

'Oh, man,' said Jay, lifting the hem of his hoodie to his mouth and nose.

Fingers backed further away, grimacing as he signed something to his brother, then pulled his windcheater up to cover his face.

Satisfied the boys were safe, Hutch breathed through his mouth to stifle the smell and gestured to Fingers. 'What did he say?'

Jay dropped his mask just long enough to reply. 'He said it's the mother of all farts.'

Hutch shook his head, a smile shaping his lips. *Mother of all farts, indeed.* He forced the door open as far as it would go and held the phone through the cavity, but the darkness there was even hungrier, the water like a black mirror.

'What do you see?' Jay and his brother had retreated to the fresh air of the sinkhole.

'A whole lot of nothing,' Hutch replied.

He held up his Nikon and took a random picture. The flash revealed a split second of disorder, a clutter of shapes

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

that made little sense. He reviewed the image on the screen. It was slightly out of focus. Beams and a staircase, perhaps; crates and what could be upturned furniture floating in the water; and ... he couldn't quite make it out. Something at the far end, squeezed between shadows, no more than a silhouette. Then Hutch's hands trembled as he reached into his jacket pocket for the zoom lens, eyes fixed unblinkingly through the doorway. What he had seen, or thought he saw, just couldn't be. His practical side reassured him that it was a trick of the light, but the repulsive smell screamed otherwise.

The lens slid into place with a satisfying click. He held the Nikon against the doorframe to steady his trembling hands. Its cyclopean eye pointed into the centre of the cabin, blinked open with a press of the shutter button. The flash filled the cabin. Hutch fell back onto his haunches on unsteady legs as he drew the Nikon into his lap. He pressed preview. The screen filled with a crisp, clear image from the far wall. This time there was no mistaking it. The three figures sat crossed-legged against the far wall, shoulder to shoulder.

'What is it?' Jay cried. 'What did you see?'

Hutch looked up and, in a whisper, said, 'The picture that roared.'

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The afternoon shadows reached across the clearing where a mob of kangaroos had gathered to graze. A tall grey with haunches of silver streaks glanced towards the east, ears forwards; perhaps in response to the leaves that rustled at the inkling of a breeze, or perhaps sensing nightfall creeping over the horizon. Taylor Bridges watched them from the fire trail and smiled. *Eat up*, he thought, realising that in another month or so the frosts would turn the grass auburn and brittle. He brushed dirt from the Parks Victoria emblem on his shirt and walked over to the damaged signpost he was there to mend.

MURPHY'S CORNER **Red Hands Cave – 400 metres →**

It was the third repair this month; another SUV taking the corner too fast and too wide. He winced as he lifted the

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

trail sign from the ditch, the sudden movement pinching the damaged nerve in his shoulder.

On days like this, Taylor felt his body betraying him, aching where it shouldn't for his forty-first year. He looked at his hands clutching the sign. They were rough and grimy from the day in the park, dirt under his fingernails. But, more than that, his life had slipped through them like sand. He had loved with those hands; fought with them. They had held his firstborn, and held her body in an alpine ice cave seven years ago. He trembled at the memory, always lurking, keen to remind him of that tragedy; his penance.

Enough, Taylor thought. He closed his eyes as the memory surfaced; pressed it back down with all his emotional might. Fireflies danced in the darkness behind his eyes. He opened them wide, let the sunlight surge in. 'Enough,' he whispered to the breeze.

Taylor propped the sign against the upright and wiped his hands down the front of his pants. A crow cawed overhead as he walked back to his Parks HiLux. He paused when he saw the *RANGER* roof sign flicker on and off. Then a grin inched across his face as his daughter beamed at him through the dusty windscreen. Her deep brown eyes, like her mother's – like her late sister's – met his own.

'You'll drain the battery,' he called as he approached. 'You want to spend the night out here with the roos?' He rubbed the day-old bristle on his face, then brushed his fringe from his forehead; he was overdue for a haircut.

The roof light extinguished, Erin wriggled across the seat to meet him at the open window. She looked weary after her

THE REACH

long day with him in the field. Her summer tan had begun to fade, freckles reappearing across her six-year-old face. The passenger-side door opened, and she eased herself down from the seat with a dainty grunt. She flattened her shirt with both hands. Taylor felt a burst of love for her, like the first rays of sunlight at dawn. She wore a khaki ranger's top that Brian Ross, the district chief ranger, had made especially for her birthday.

'Can we go home soon?' she asked.

Taylor stepped past, playfully tugging Erin's honey-blond ponytail. 'I need to fix this sign first,' he said. He lifted his canvas tool bag from the Toyota's rear tray. 'You want to help?'

She shrugged, then picked up a stick and dragged it in the dust behind her. 'Okay.'

He nodded to the sandstone shell of the homestead across the fire trail. 'Why don't you check out the ruins for me? Let me know if those graffiti bandits have come back.'

He watched as she trailed her stick to the stone ruins. The building was one of the original convict selections – the Murphy family's – and now heritage listed. It wasn't much more than a fireplace and three walls, and the ground around it was covered in a layer of red and gold leaves from the maple trees the Murphys had planted nearly a hundred and fifty years ago. Erin swept at the leaves with her stick as she passed, and the scent of damp earth charged the air.

Taylor kneeled at the upright. He'd nailed one end of the sign when he heard a vehicle approaching. He looked over his shoulder and recognised the district chief ranger's Land

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

Cruiser rattling towards the corner. It pulled up beside him, stirring up the dust. Brian Ross stepped out, combed his fingers through his short beard and placed his Parks Victoria cap over his dark, thinning hair, hiding the sun spots that rimmed his forehead.

He smiled, but Taylor recognised a darkness in his eyes that he hadn't seen since Brian's daughter was abducted two years ago. Taylor had been involved in that case, a chain of murders in a nearby national park, as a Parks consultant. Brian's daughter, Aroha, was found before she became another of the other dead girls, but not before scars were left on Brian and his family. And Taylor knew all too well that not all scars lay on the surface. Like the roots of an old tree, each led to a memory sustained by grief. The vehicle accident on his watch. Claire disappearing in the blizzard, stark red parka dissolving into a curtain of white.

Taylor had to shake off the wave of grief as he stood to meet his boss. 'What's up?' he asked.

Brian looked towards Erin, who was playing in the ruins, making sure she was out of earshot. He then glanced at his shoes like a shy schoolboy, hands slipping into his pockets as he kicked a stone away. 'I had a call for you back at the station.'

Taylor frowned. 'You could have patched it through the radio. Why come all the way out here?'

Brian met Taylor's eyes. 'It's an open channel, and the call was no one else's business.'

Taylor felt the blood drain from his face. *Maggie!* 'Is she okay?'

THE REACH

Brian held his hands up. 'Your wife's fine, buddy. The call was from the police north of the border. Three bodies were found in the Dharug National Park near Sydney.'

Relieved that Maggie was okay, Taylor felt the blood return to his face, then grasped what Brian had told him.

'What's that got to do with Parks Victoria? With me?'

'I guess you're getting a reputation, Taylor. Glorys Crossing, Eldritch Falls. The local ranger up there put your name forward to the investigating cops.'

Taylor nodded. 'Anyone I know?'

'Don't think so,' said Brian. 'A James Barlow. You'll be working with him up there.' He paused. 'The police see similarities with the locations, and acknowledge the sensitivities associated with national parks. They think you can help.'

'Who did the request come from?' Taylor asked. 'Parks and Wildlife, or the cops?'

'The cops ... Like I said, you're getting a reputation.'

Taylor looked towards Erin. She had stopped playing and was standing in a pile of leaves, watching him and Brian. 'What did you tell them?'

Brian shrugged. 'I told them Parks Victoria could arrange the loan, but that it was entirely up to you.'

Taylor sighed. 'Okay, give me a day. Send the case details to my home email. I'll talk to Maggie tonight. Let you know in the morning.'

'Fair enough,' Brian said. His gaze returned to Erin, now creating a mound of autumn leaves beside the sandstone wall. She was talking to herself in muttered tones. 'How is she going? Does she still ...'

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

‘Talk to her dead sister?’ Taylor finished for him. ‘Yeah, she does. We don’t encourage it. I figure lots of kids have imaginary friends but, sometimes, the things she says ... are things only Claire could have known.’ He shook his head. ‘We don’t know what to do about it.’

Brian patted Taylor’s arm. ‘Don’t turn it into something supernatural, buddy. You’d be surprised what kids pick up from their parents’ conversations. I’m sure she’ll grow out of it someday.’

‘I hope so.’ Taylor watched his daughter playing, and it occurred to him that maybe he didn’t want that at all; that Erin’s connection with her sister was the last straw in holding on to Claire.

‘Okay,’ Brian said. ‘I’ll leave you be.’ He gave Erin a hearty wave and she waved back. ‘We’ll talk tomorrow,’ he said as he stepped up into his Land Cruiser. ‘Don’t work too late, okay?’

‘I won’t.’ Taylor watched him drive away, then returned to the sign, pausing to look back at Erin and her mound of autumn leaves.

He reached around to his jeans back pocket, retrieved his ragged brown wallet and opened the photo sleeve. He, Maggie and Erin in front of last year’s Christmas tree. He smiled, then pinched the photo behind it, slipped it out enough to see the faded image of him and Claire, knee deep in snow. *Miss you.* The thought drifted around him like a cold wind. He pushed it back, his eyes a little misty.

Taylor began thinking about the interstate request as he returned the wallet to his pocket. The last case at Eldritch

THE REACH

Falls had left with him a satisfying feeling of justice done. National parks were about preserving the wilderness, not providing dumping grounds for murderers.

Taylor felt a tug at his shirt sleeve. He drew a breath, startled.

‘What did Uncle Brian want?’

He knew better than to lie to Erin, and stroked her cheek affectionately. ‘He wants me to help the police catch some bad men again.’

She looked concerned. ‘Mum’s not gonna like it.’

Taylor smiled. ‘I know, sweetheart.’

Taylor’s phone sounded from his pocket. *Probably Maggie.* He opened his email and smiled at the eBay congratulations message. His bid for the 1974 Winnebago engine grille had been successful. He didn’t know what would be toughest: telling Maggie about the request from the cops up north, or about the two hundred and fifty dollars he’d just blown.

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The evening air sent a shiver through Taylor as he stepped down from the Winnebago he’d squeezed into his driveway a year ago. He brushed sawdust from his shirt sleeves and rested the wood saw against the wheel arch. The RV’s door closed with a rattle, and he had to jiggle the handle to ensure the latch engaged. He took the key from the door, the red and chrome Winnebago badge hanging from the key ring, and pulled the corner of the tarp down to cover the iconic *W* symbol on the side panels. Despite his best efforts, the roof

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

still leaked. He could smell the timber dust in his nostrils as he stepped back, arms crossed.

Another year, he thought, and she'll be ready for the road. He smiled.

Taylor turned off the porch light as he walked inside and closed the front door, careful not to wake Erin. The day in the park had worn her out. Him too.

The study door was open and the glow of the computer screen spilled out into the hall. He paused in the doorway, the RV keys still in hand, the laptop's screensaver dancing on the monitor. Despite the distraction of the Winnebago restoration, the case notes the police had sent were still in a corner of his mind. He stepped over to the study window and slid it closed, kicking a cardboard box beside the desk as he turned. He recognised it at once, *TASMANIA* written across the open lid. He looked up at the gap on the bookcase where it belonged and sighed. He wasn't surprised Maggie was digging up old memories at a time like this.

He lifted it onto the corner of the desk, about to close the lid, when he saw the headline on the top newspaper: *TAYLOR BRIDGES – the father who never gave up.* It was the first article published after he found Claire's body in the summer of 2011. 'Never gave up,' he whispered. He closed the lid and returned the box to his other archives on the bookcase, where it perched like Poe's Raven. 'Nevermore,' Taylor murmured, then settled back into the office chair, placing the keys beside his computer. They landed between two photos. One of Erin, the other of Claire.

THE REACH

The laptop's fan whirred to life as he tapped the space bar to wake it up. He opened Google, typed *James Barlow* and pressed enter. Taylor was naturally curious about the man who had recommended him for this investigation. The search results showed a standard social media presence: Facebook, Twitter, and various National Parks and Wildlife links. He wasn't all that different from Taylor. Family man, two decades of field service and a short stint at the head office in Sydney. He was probably as qualified as Taylor was to help the cops.

But they didn't call him, did they? They called you.

Taylor closed the page, noticing that the case files the cops sent were still open. He pressed print. The document was only three pages, but it was the full-page photograph of the crime scene that held Taylor captive. He leaned closer to the screen, looking at the three bodies in varying degrees of decay.

'The thing I hate most,' came Maggie's voice from over his shoulder, 'is that you bring this into our home.'

It surprised him, a startled *huff* escaping his lips. Taylor closed the image and swung the chair around to meet his wife's stare. She looked mildly annoyed, the computer screen reflected in her black-rimmed glasses. Taylor paused, then noted the beginnings of a forgiving smirk. He felt his cheeks flush, relieved.

'Sorry,' he offered.

She placed one of the glasses of red wine she was holding on the desk beside Taylor. 'What if I was Erin?' she said. 'I don't want her seeing any of this.'

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

‘She’s sleeping.’

‘This time,’ Maggie added as she closed the study door. She sat on the corner of the desk and sipped her wine. He reached up and curled a strand of her hair around his finger, then cupped her cheek affectionately. The dim light softened her features, her hair framing her face. *So beautiful*, he thought.

‘It won’t happen again.’

She nodded at the screen. ‘Show me,’ she said. ‘I want to see what you’re getting into.’

He sipped his wine, the taste mixing with the lingering hint of the chicken curry they had eaten earlier. ‘I haven’t decided yet.’

She chuckled and playfully smacked the back of his head. ‘Yes you have. Now, show me.’

He clicked on the image. ‘Three men found in an archaeology dig site up north,’ he said.

She frowned at the image. ‘What makes them think it’s a murder? Maybe they were trapped down there.’

Taylor opened a minimised *Herald* story, the picture showing the exposed ribcage of a boat protruding from the riverbank. The headline read: *Bodies found in ship graveyard*.

‘The story corresponds with the police brief I was sent,’ he said. ‘Bodies placed beside each other, several months apart. Any further details will be offered if I take the job.’

‘This is becoming a regular event,’ she pointed out. ‘You thinking of changing careers?’

‘It’s not a change,’ he said. ‘It’s a ... variation.’

‘Last time you went for this *variation*, you let that murderer

THE REACH

in Eldritch Falls get pretty close. Are you up for that kind of thing again?’

He clenched his teeth, trying to mask his frustration. ‘Brian’s daughter could have been that monster’s next victim, Maggie. This isn’t the same. I don’t have any stakes in this case, emotional or otherwise.’

‘Not yet,’ offered Maggie.

He switched the computer off and turned to her. ‘Three dead men in a buried boat,’ he said. ‘I’m intrigued, aren’t you?’

‘Sure, but not enough to leave my family for weeks.’

‘It’ll be a few days, tops. There’s no guarantee I can help, it just depends what the police want from me.’

She smiled and kissed his cheek. ‘Like I said. You’ve already made up your mind.’ Then her face became sober. ‘Same deal as before,’ she said.

‘Huh?’

‘Family first,’ she said. ‘If things get too hot, you walk away.’ She took his hand and guided him out into the hall. ‘And when it’s done, leave it out there.’

Taylor stopped and slipped his arms around her waist. She resisted but only for a moment before they kissed.

‘I’m serious,’ Maggie said, pulling away. She gently tapped his forehead. ‘Don’t bring it home.’

‘Daddy?’

The call came from Erin’s room, and Taylor felt Maggie draw away further.

‘Go tuck your daughter in,’ she said, smiling. ‘I’ll make some coffee. Maybe start the fire. It’s getting cold.’

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

'Daddy?'

'Coming, sweetheart.'

Erin was sitting up, hugging her brown teddy bear, Smiley, the lamp casting soft light across them both. She rubbed her eyes.

'You okay?' he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

'Can I have some milk?'

'Sure,' he said. 'I'll warm some up for you.' He guided her back between the blankets and tucked Smiley in beside her. She rolled over and held the bear close with a contented sigh.

Taylor stood to leave.

'Daddy?'

Her eyes were closed, her breathing light and steady.

'Yeah?'

'Can a person be born bad? Or do you have to *learn* how to be bad?'

Taylor struggled to reply. 'That's a strange question,' he managed. 'Why do you want to know?'

'No reason.' She yawned deeply. 'Claire said that you need to be careful.'

Taylor felt the usual wave of grief at hearing Claire's name, more intensely when it came from Erin's lips. 'Careful?' He stroked her silken cheek. 'Careful of what?'

But she was asleep and didn't reply.

2

Taylor could feel traveller's fatigue setting in after the morning's journey. The red-eye out of Tullamarine and the two-hour drive from Sydney to the ferry crossing outside Devlins Reach had taken their toll. He felt as if he had already done a day's work as he pulled the white Camry rental up at the stop sign. The ferry was halfway across the river, inching closer, leaning slightly under the weight of the two logging trucks on board. Taylor stepped out of the rental with a mild groan and scanned the road. He was the only one waiting.

The noonday sun, warm on his face, cast few shadows, stark in a clear blue sky. There was no wind, just the steady drum of the winch and the gentle lapping of water on the concrete ramp. He could smell burned diesel in the air as the ferry approached, its exhaust plume dark, cascading to the deck and dispersing across the water in elusive rainbow swirls.

Taylor, feeling a craving for caffeine, licked his lips and returned to his car as the ferry's hull milled against the concrete

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

ramp and its winch motor condensed to a dull idle. A small-statured man wearing oversized blue overalls and a weathered canvas hat limped out of the cab, his eyes in a perpetual squint from too many days on the river. The trucks started their engines as the ferryman opened the gates and looped a rope tether around the roadside bollard. He tipped his hat as the last semi left, and the ferry lifted out of the water, free of their weight. Pointing at Taylor, he waved him on board.

The Camry bottomed out on the ramp with a crunch. *Glad it's a rental*, Taylor thought. The ferryman guided him into the centre of the deck, then made a cutthroat sign with his hand. Taylor killed the engine and watched through the rear-view mirror as the little man untethered the rope. He sat for a moment, considering the papers scattered over the passenger seat; the top sheet was a Bureau of Meteorology radar image showing the deep reds and purples of a dense weather front moving down from the north. He looked out at the blue sky, realising its splendour would be short-lived.

Taylor gathered up the papers and slipped them into his shoulder bag, then tucked it into the footwell. He stepped onto the deck as the ferryman ambled past the car.

'Hello,' Taylor greeted him. 'Beautiful day.'

The ferryman nodded and grinned as he closed the gates. He had a missing front tooth, and looked to be in his early forties. 'That it is,' he replied as he shuffled to the winch house and pushed the throttle, with a plume of acrid exhaust smoke.

Taylor propped himself against the Camry, content to be outside, somewhere new, although the western high ground

THE REACH

was not unlike the hinterlands that bordered his home in Victoria, and he felt every mile between him and his family. The hills and mountains in the distance were a patchwork of ironbark and pine forest, the riverbank lined with she-oaks. Beyond them, downstream, a clock tower peaked above the tree canopy, and there was a scattering of houses on the escarpment, their chimneys wisping white smoke into the clear skies. *Has to be Devlins Reach*, he thought.

‘You’re a long way from home.’

The comment startled Taylor – he didn’t need the reminder right now. The ferryman, standing beside him, tapped the Parks Victoria patch on Taylor’s shoulder. He took off his hat, revealing cropped hair and tanned scalp, and folded it into his pants pocket. With a raspy cough, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pouch of Drum tobacco.

‘I’m doing some work with Parks and Wildlife across the way,’ Taylor said.

Chin down, the ferryman focused on rolling his cigarette. ‘That work got anything to do with those bodies they found in the boats?’

There was a hint of a Scottish accent in his speech, surfacing with the odd upward inflection. Taylor wasn’t surprised by how much he knew. The smaller the town, the faster news travelled.

‘Yeah.’ Taylor watched the ferry inch across the deeper, darker waters. ‘I suppose the whole town knows about it by now.’

‘Uh-huh ... It was my boys who found them.’

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

‘That so?’ He gestured with a nod to the clock tower downstream. ‘I suppose the place is crawling with cops by now.’

The ferryman licked the edge of the cigarette paper and rolled a near-perfect cylinder. Taylor noticed how small his hands were, almost petite, but hardened from years on the ropes.

‘Nope.’ The man lit the cigarette and drew on it deeply, skimming ash off the tip with a flick of his little finger. ‘There’s a constable on loan from Windsor and a detective from the city.’ He shrugged nonchalantly. ‘I expect more will follow, though.’

Taylor frowned. One inspector was playing it lean, but then, if the bodies had been there as long as they seemed to have, the forensic trail would be cold. ‘What about your local police?’

The ferryman laughed, which progressed into a wet smoker’s cough. He recovered, spat over the side. ‘The Reach hasn’t had a policeman since 1989.’ He drew in another lungful of smoke. ‘Policing is handled from outside. But you’re dealing with loggers here, and they tend to sort out their differences long before the cops can get involved.’

Taylor waved the rich smoke from his face and noticed the ferryman wince as he rubbed his right knee. ‘How did you hurt your leg?’ he asked.

‘You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,’ the ferryman replied.

Taylor shrugged. ‘Try me.’
‘Afghanistan.’

THE REACH

Taylor felt a twinge of guilt about his flippant question. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It must have been tough over there.' He held his hand out to shake. 'Thank you for your service.'

The ferryman looked at Taylor's outstretched hand, chuckled, and pressed his tongue between his wet lips. The chuckle again turned into a horrid cough. 'Put it away. I wasn't in the war; I hurt my leg protesting.'

Taylor frowned. 'Okay ... So, what's not to believe? You fall over? Roughed up by the police?'

The ferryman took a minute before replying. 'My twin brother,' he said, 'was over there fighting while I was protesting in Macquarie Street. He was a career soldier, a lieutenant. We were on different sides of that line, you see, but I loved him nevertheless. Then, in the middle of a rally, at the stroke of noon, I felt a tremendous pain in my right knee and fell to the ground. Doctors couldn't find anything wrong, and I've been living with the pain ever since.'

'That *is* strange,' offered Taylor.

'Damn right. Turns out my brother lost his right leg stepping on a mine that very same moment. He later died of complications.'

An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

'I said you wouldn't believe me.' The ferryman turned and limped away.

Taylor watched him step up into the winch house, and noticed the long, slender knife and leather sheath hanging from his wide belt. 'Pig sticker', the hunters called them. He shook his head in mild amusement. *What does a ferryman need with a knife like that?*

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

The diesel slowed as the west bank drew closer. Another logging truck was idling at the ramp. Taylor stepped back inside the Camry and waited for the gates to open. He waved as the ferryman tipped his hat, stumpy cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, then glanced in the mirror one last time, a small knot cramping in his gut. For the briefest of moments, he wanted to turn the car around and drive through the night back to Maggie and Erin – to home.

*

There was still a lot of working day ahead of him, and Taylor was keen to meet with the ranger, James Barlow, before touching base with the police. The marina service station lay opposite the ferry ramp; two boys sitting on a bench watched Taylor drive by. At the intersection was a sign for the national park gates; on the right, another for Big River Logging. He turned left. The sealed road climbed through a forest of ironbark trees but deteriorated to a dirt track two kilometres from the town where it hugged the surrounding hills as it flanked the western side of Devlins Reach below. Taylor noticed the tributary that cut through the hills, craning to see if he could make out the clearing where the riverboats were buried. Then he saw the park gates ahead.

A wrought-iron portal arched between two sandstone columns, *Dharug National Park* incorporated in its design. History was present in every moss-covered stone and rust-pitted swirl of iron. A timber gatehouse, with the Parks and Wildlife lyrebird emblem below the ticket windows,

THE REACH

divided the road. He pulled up next to it and saw a handwritten note taped to the glass.

Back in 30 minutes – please proceed to the
Ranger Cottage to pay entry fee.

Taylor wondered how well the honour system worked out here, but then, he hadn't seen another car since leaving the ferry. The cottage was to the left of the gates, surrounded by shoulder-high grass trees. He turned into a gravel clearing beside the front porch, and stopped next to a Parks Land Rover. When he stepped out of the car, a brush turkey peered out from behind the nearest grass tree and trotted away into the bush. Taylor paused. The building was familiar, and he didn't have to dig too deep to recognise why. It was in a similar cottage in the Tasmanian wilderness that his life had changed forever.

He thought of those tree roots and their pathway to his memories. *It's never far away.* It was like someone whispering in his ear.

A crow cawed in the trees and he shook off the sensation like cold water from warm skin. He stepped up onto the porch and knocked on the frame of the propped-open door. Inside was a Formica-topped counter with a chorus line of mismatched chairs fringing the walls. The musty scent of rising damp met him as he stepped up to the bench. It was as if the place had just been opened after years of closure.

Old photos beneath grimy glass covered the walls. They were of sepia men in three-piece suits and women dressed

B. MICHAEL RADBURN

neck to toe playing croquet and archery on the river banks while overdressed children floundered in canoes and splashed in the shallows. The images were not of this time, but definitely of this place. Several dog-eared copies of *National Geographic* were scattered beside a guest register, a pair of glasses with thin black rims folded on the cover. Beside them was a tarnished brass bell.

Taylor returned his attention to the glasses, which were in a similar style to Maggie's. He palmed the bell. 'Hello?' he called. 'Anyone home back there?' The sound echoed off the stone walls.

He heard a shuffle of furniture before a petite blond woman stepped into the counter area, a half-eaten sandwich in hand. She paused, staring at him stony-faced for a moment, then shifted to a more cheerful expression, which seemed almost forced.

Taylor nodded a greeting. 'Could you let James Barlow know I'm here?' he said. 'I'm Taylor Bridges from Parks Victoria.' He watched her swallow the last portion of her sandwich. 'He's expecting me.'

She suddenly looked annoyed.

'Something wrong?' Taylor asked.

'I should be used to it by now,' she said. 'I'm Ranger Barlow ... *Jaimie* Barlow.'

'Oh shit.' Taylor flushed slightly, confused by the memory of the James Barlow he'd seen on the Parks website. 'Sorry. Must have been a typo in my instructions.'

'No typo,' she said, now smiling warmly. 'There is a *James* Barlow in the service, but I'm not him ... obviously.'

THE REACH

I get his emails sent to me by mistake all the time. Thanks for coming, Mr Bridges.’ She gestured around the cabin. ‘Welcome to our park.’

‘Please, call me Taylor.’ He scanned the reception room and the office beyond. ‘Pretty quiet posting you’ve got here.’

She followed his gaze. ‘We don’t get much traffic here at the southern gate. Most visitors enter through Wisemans Ferry, further west. That’s where a lot of hikers pick up the convict-built Old Great North Road walk. The rangers rotate through here monthly.’ She waved her hand dismissively. ‘I don’t mind the solitude. Would you like to rest up, or head straight out to the crime scene?’ she asked, glancing at her watch. ‘Detective Everett is out there now, if you’d like to touch base.’

He checked his own watch. As tired as he was from the travelling, every minute was another minute away from Maggie and Erin. ‘There’s plenty of daylight left,’ he said. ‘Let’s get started.’

‘Not a problem.’ She stepped through the counter barrier, then doubled back for the glasses lying on the guest register. ‘Can’t see a thing without them,’ she added, and slipped them on.

Taylor let her lead the way. ‘My wife has a similar pair,’ he told her.

‘She has good taste,’ Jaimie said. ‘Come on, we’ll take my Land Rover.’