

**THE  
RIVER  
MOUTH**  
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# CHAPTER 1

Sandra

This is what Sandra knows.

She is forty-nine years old and she can see the river mouth from her kitchen.

When the sandbar is open, the river stains the sea brown for as far as she can see.

Ten years ago, her son was killed below the limestone cliffs at the riverbank.

Last week, her best friend's body was found off a remote road in the Pilbara.

Her friend's DNA matches the DNA scraped from under her son's fingernails.

## CHAPTER 2

Colin

Twenty-five days before Darren dies

Colin's last class was tech drawing, so he got to the bus stop first. He put his bag next to the stop sign to claim his place at the front of the line and retreated to the basketball court fence to wait in the shade. The bus would be a while. It had to pick up the little kids from the primary school. He watched the other students as they dribbled across the school oval. Some of the first years still thought it was fun to run headlong down the grassed slope from the quadrangle to the ovals. No-one had shamed it out of them yet, at least not the boys. Colin doesn't know how girls work that kind of thing out. He couldn't see them beating each other up but he couldn't see them politely taking each other aside and explaining the rules of high school either. He sniggered as he saw two first year girls run down the slope, lose their balance, and go tumbling, skirts up and pink knickers on show. A group of boys whistled and jeered, and the girls picked themselves up and dashed for the bus stop, laughing and bags flying.

'Look at that ranga!'

The voice came from the opposite direction and Colin turned his head and saw Darren and Tim walking down from the English block, their shirts untucked and their bags dragging halfway down their backs.

'Who let you out of the zoo?' Darren put his fists up and danced at Colin as he approached. He was in a good mood, thought Colin, and then remembered Darren's last class was woodwork. Of course he was in a good mood. Anything that didn't involve putting pen to paper made Darren happy. Colin, taller by five centimetres, took him in a headlock.

'Your mum. She thought you needed some company in the wild.' He rubbed his knuckles into the top of Darren's head. 'Why's your head so small, Daz? You can tell you're descended from monkeys.'

Darren wrestled out of his grasp and punched him in the shoulder for his efforts.

'Ouch,' Colin protested, 'you're strong for a little squirt, aren't you?' He feinted at him and Darren ducked, laughing.

'Stronger than you, ya big orange ape.'

'Says the kid who gets sunburnt watching the telly.'

Darren and Tim took their bags to the line forming behind Colin's and walked back to the basketball fence.

'How's tech drawing?' asked Tim, looking down at his feet, his hands shoved into his pockets.

'Good.' Colin glanced at Tim and saw his face redden. It wasn't the tech drawing he was interested in.

'You gonna ace it again this term?' Darren, this time.

'Yep.'

'Fucking nerd.' He punched him in the arm, just hard enough to feel it.

'Fuck off, Darren.' Colin smiled anyway.

'Did you sit with Amy?' asked Tim, still examining his shoes.

'Yep.'

'Course he did; that's how he gets the marks,' said Darren.

'Yeah, right.'

The boys looked up and fell silent as four girls from their year walked past. Like the boys, they had untucked their shirts from their waistbands after the last bell sounded. As they passed, one of them hooked a finger into the elastic holding her hair and dragged it out, shaking her head. Her white hair fell to her shoulders and Colin caught the sharp smell of chlorine. He blushed and, like Tim, looked down at his feet.

'Want to go down to the river?' he asked, bending down to pick up a stick. He broke it in half and in half again.

'What, now?'

'Yeah.'

'No bathers,' said Tim.

'Go in your shorts.'

'Mum'll be pissed off,' Tim protested.

‘They’ll dry before you get home.’

That was true. It wasn’t summer yet, but the afternoon was hot enough. The river hadn’t broken through since it last rained, and the water level was high enough for bombies off the rope swing. They hadn’t been down there for a swim since last summer. The water would be cool. Colin’s mum worked Wednesdays and expected him to be home to put on dinner, but he’d have time if they were quick.

‘I’ll come,’ said Darren.

The bus arrived and the three boys levered themselves off the fence. Instead of taking their places in line, they waited while the other kids boarded, forcing them to step over their bags. When they got on, they went straight to the back seat. The younger kids knew to leave it free for the year tens and this year the boys didn’t need to defer to any senior school students. The ones from their bus had all left to do year eleven and twelve at private schools in the city. Colin would join them next year. Not Darren and Tim though. They would stay at the local high school.

The bus circled around the school grounds and turned toward the centre of town, passing car yards and the low white government administration building with its rose beds and lawns. A group of pre-school age children splashed barefoot in the shallow ornamental pool while their mothers sat on the grass under a jacaranda tree. Blooms were scattered on the lawn around them. Colin remembered begging to be allowed to play in that pool when he was a little kid and his mother flat out refusing. He wouldn’t be seen dead doing it now. At the traffic lights, the bus turned right into the main street and the boys scooted across the seat to the windows.

‘Oh my God, it’s Mr Johnson.’

‘He’s carrying toilet paper! A twenty pack!’

They hollered out of the window.

‘Well done, Mr Johnson, keep your bum clean!’

Mr Johnson, their maths teacher and local sporting legend, obliged by holding the bagged toilet rolls above his head in both hands and doing a victory lap around himself.

‘You boys settle down back there.’ The bus driver eyeballed them in the rear-view mirror.

‘Yes Mr Stevens,’ they chorused. The bus reached the end of the main street and they dropped back in the seat to watch the windsurfers in

the bay. The southerly was pumping, and the blue water was washed out with white caps. Bulk carriers anchored out near the horizon. Colin could see three sails scudding in and out from the shore. He turned to Tim.

‘Did you see Johnno in the paper on the weekend?’

Tim tore his eyes from the water, where a windsurfer had just stacked it attempting an aerial turn. He blinked before answering. ‘No, what’s he done now?’

‘He won some state title for windsurfing.’

‘Cool.’

‘I thought he was Amy’s swimming coach,’ said Darren.

‘Swimming, windsurfing. He’s in the gun club with Dad too,’ said Colin.

‘What else is he going to do around here?’ said Tim, sinking further into the seat and stretching his legs down the aisle. ‘You can play sport, or play sport, or, I dunno, how about play sport. You might as well mix it up.’

The bus passed the fish and chip shop and the tennis courts, and bumped over the Wey River bridge. Tim led them down the aisle to the front door. The bus driver frowned at them.

‘You know you’re not supposed to stand up until the bus has come to a complete stop, boys.’

‘Sorry, Mr Stevens,’ said Tim.

The driver shook his head at Colin, who was the last to get off. Colin grinned at him and the driver reached across to swat the side of his head, a smile on his lips. Colin ducked and they both laughed as he swung off the bus.

‘Tell your dad I want to see you at the club on the weekend.’

‘Will do, Mr Stevens,’ he replied. Mr Stevens was president of his dad’s running club. His determination to get Colin to join was a standing joke. Wiry, and getting tall with it, Colin had an easy gait that ate up the ground. Mr Stevens wanted him to compete in the next regional competition, but Colin preferred team sports where he could hang out with his mates.

The boys shouldered their bags and walked back toward the bridge. Road trains thundered past them on the highway and they didn’t speak until they turned down the road that ran along the river to the beach.

‘So, are we swimming or not?’ asked Darren.

‘Not me,’ Tim replied. ‘Bring your boardies tomorrow. We’ll all go after school.’ Tim turned to cut across the vacant block and into his street. ‘See you round.’

Colin looked up at the sky and shrugged, now indifferent. ‘Nah, it’s getting a bit windy now.’ He felt Darren slump next to him and felt bad. He knew he was thinking Colin had backed out because Tim wasn’t coming. They walked in silence toward Darren’s house, shunning the new footpath on the other side of the road to walk on the grassed verges. They crested the last ridge before the beach and stopped, looking out at the sea and the choppy waves.

‘Dad said I could take the tinnie out on the weekend if the wind dies down,’ said Darren. ‘Do you want to come? Saturday morning. Early.’

‘Where are you gonna go?’

‘Other end of the reef. Maybe up to North Point a bit.’

‘Sure.’ It would make up for him not going swimming this afternoon.

‘Cool. See you tomorrow.’

Darren shot him a grin before he walked up to the front door of his house and pushed it open, a swagger in his hips. Through the open door, Colin could hear Darren’s dad calling to his mum.

‘Sandra! We’re out of milk.’

Colin continued down the road. He didn’t have to come this way to get home from school. He could have crossed back over the bridge and walked down the track on the south side of the river. It would take him straight down to his house but could get muddy if the water was high. This route took him across the sandbar at the river mouth to get home, which was hard going with a heavy school bag, but it meant he got to walk with Darren and Tim for a bit and there was always the possibility of stopping off for a while if none of them had been told to go straight home. Colin reached the beach, thought for a moment, then bent down, and took off his shoes. It was easier to go barefoot across the sand.

## CHAPTER 3

Sandra

The two officers are Sandra's age. They stand side by side at the front door, the hard light of the afternoon behind them and the wind from the sea making their shirt sleeves flap. Their presence makes time stop and Sandra stands there, unmoving, taking them in while the south-westerly rattles down her hallway making the vertical blinds at the back of the house clatter. Her brain all at once is tired and she doesn't want to think about why they are at her door again after all these years. She can see from the way they stand there looking back at her that they share her weariness, the legacy of long working lives of patching up and admonishing the broken and the bad among them. Younger people – people at the start of their careers – stand taller, she thinks, unbowed by the burdens they have yet to carry, or even realise are in front of them. She looks over the officers' shoulders at the sea. It is choppy under the wind and the swell has picked up. Despite the hard-blue sky overhead, a bank of cloud has formed on the horizon. There is a cold front forecast. She pulls her cardigan tighter around her and, without speaking, stands aside and motions for them to come in.

Out of the wind and under the indoor light where they are not backlit by the sun, Sandra realises she knows one of the officers from high school. He was in the year above her and played in the school football team. As a teenager he'd matured early, she remembers, and came back from the summer holidays in year ten with a man's thighs and a head taller than his classmates. He was the first year ten to play in the Country Week team and everyone said the state league teams had their eye on him. He dated her friend's older sister, which at the time ruffled feathers among the parents. Sandra remembers the school ball photo at her friend's house and the dress her sister wore. It had a high



lace collar around her throat, which Sandra coveted to the point of pain. She asked her mum if she could have one for her own ball but by the next year fashions had changed, and they couldn't find one the same. She settled for leg of mutton sleeves and lace gloves. The police officer – his name is Keith, she remembers now – is thicker around the waist than when he played football, but he has avoided the tight, hard belly of most working-class men of his age. His hair and skin are dark, and her memory flashes with the name they used to call him on the playing field. You wouldn't get away with calling someone that now. He asks if they can sit and she realises she hasn't said a word to them yet.

'Of course.'

She leads them to the couches by the back windows and watches them take in the garden and the shed that spans the width of the block. The shed dominates. It is too big for a suburban home, and these days mostly empty. Sandra has tried to mask it from the house with bushes and garden beds but there is no denying its glum, industrial presence. Keith, she realises, must already be familiar with her shed; he would've been there, back in the day. She turns away from it, goes back into the kitchen and returns with a jug of cold water from the fridge. She pours for both men, sliding the glasses across the table and leaving two trails of condensation.

Keith tells her Barbara Russell's body has been found out in the bush, near Wittenoom in the Pilbara. It was only one hundred metres from her car. She had broken down and wandered off. Two local kids found the body.

Sandra feels her face sink. Her cheeks hollow and her jaw tightens. Her thoughts go everywhere and nowhere, and she bites her lower lip against the tingling. She is conscious that the second officer is watching her reaction. She doesn't know him; he must have been posted up here just recently. Working in the hospital emergency department, she gets to know all the local police after a while, and she hasn't met this one yet. Now she can see his face, she realises he is younger than she first thought, maybe early thirties. Ten years older than her son would have been, at most. She does know Barbara, though. She has known her for years, since Barbara and Stuart moved up from Perth. She was her best friend.

The emptiness in her face tracks down through her neck and into

her chest and she gasps to refill her lungs. With the air comes the first prickle of tears and she blinks hard to push them away. She feels numb and so very tired. She could, she thinks, put her head down on the couch and fall asleep, block out the two officers and their awful message.

Keith is explaining that Barbara had been missing for three days. Keith did go to the state league in the end, Sandra remembers, and played three seasons before he joined the police service and returned home, injured and unimpressed with city life. She thinks he still umpires for the local league. She can't recall if he ever married. She figures he is the one doing the talking because he is supposed to have the local connection. It is usual, Keith says, for the coroner to investigate and take a DNA sample in missing persons cases. Sandra nods and tries to focus. She hadn't known Barbara was missing, although she wouldn't expect to after three days. Barbara had been promoted to area coordinator and then district manager over the last five years and Sandra no longer saw her every day on the wards. She knew, of course, that Barbara had been away this week. They had been discussing the trip for six months now. Barbara was nervous, which was understandable. It seems reasonable under the circumstances, she thinks, that the coroner would be involved, but she doesn't understand why the police are telling her.

'We ran the sample through the database and got a match,' he says.

She nods again, trying to make sense of what he is saying. Then her brain clicks over, and she feels her heart thud. A buzzing starts up in her head. Her throat tightens again, this time against the bile rising up from her stomach and she wishes she had brought a glass of water for herself. The urge to lie down and close her eyes is overwhelming.

'Mrs Russell's DNA is a match with the DNA under Darren's fingernails.'

Sandra looks him. Keith is looking back at her with a face she can't read. His expression is too neutral to call apologetic, and too kind to call impassive. His face is just there. She supposes that is what they teach them in the academy. Stick to the facts. Keep it professional. Don't show emotion. She wonders what it is like for him, to come into her home and give such horrible news. At least he is not telling her that her son is dead. Another police officer did that ten years ago. In the scheme of things, she guesses today's chore is easy. She looks

down at her hands. They are still and polite, folded in her lap. Her heart is hammering. She sees Barbara as she was that day, standing outside the nursing home, her bag over her arm, sweating in the heat and eyes dark with anxiety.

‘What does this mean for the investigation?’ she asks him. ‘I mean, I know the case is not active, but ...’ She trails off, no longer familiar with the jargon and not knowing what words to use.

Keith steps in. ‘We will review the case file, look at her movements on the day, probably interview a few people.’

‘But finding Barbara’s DNA doesn’t mean she did it. The shooter would have been a hundred metres away. You can’t scratch someone from a distance.’ Sandra frowns as she tries to gather all her thoughts back to her. They won’t come together. Everything is flying away.

‘No, it is not conclusive, but it does raise questions. We’ll need to reopen the investigation, I’m afraid, Mrs Davies,’ he says. ‘I’ll keep you in the loop and let you know if anything comes up.’ He passes her a business card. ‘Please call me if you have any questions.’

The two men stand to leave. Keith drains his water and puts the glass on the sideboard next to a photo of father and son. They are standing on the wharf in front of the boat.

‘Good-looking kid,’ he says. ‘Do you see much of Greg?’

She tries to group her mind together for a smile but only half manages and feels herself grimace instead. People expect acrimony when it comes to her and Greg. She supposes it will all start again now. ‘I do, yes. He’s doing well.’

Keith smiles back at her, gently sympathetic. ‘Good to hear.’ As his partner walks down the hallway, he looks out at the yard, squinting as though he is trying to picture a scene one thousand kilometres away. ‘You wouldn’t have any idea what Mrs Russell was doing in the Pilbara, would you?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘No idea at all.’

‘It’s just she was supposed to be at a conference in the city.’ He looks back at the photos on the wall. ‘At least, that’s what her husband thought.’

Sandra stands at the front door as the police car backs out of the driveway. She lifts her hand as it heads down the road, away from the beach. Back inside the house, she pulls her mobile phone out of her pocket and dials a Pilbara number, looking out to sea as she waits for

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the other end to pick up. Her fingers tap on the rim of the photo and she glances down at it. Keith is right; he was a good-looking kid, in his own way.

## CHAPTER 4

### Colin

Twenty-four days before Darren dies

Tim swung high out above the river while Darren and Colin watched. At the top of the swing, he let go of the rope, tucked himself into a spinning ball as he flew an extra two metres and dropped with a smack into the water. The spray reached the riverbank and splattered the flat rocks that created the ledge where Colin stood, jutting over the water. Tim surfaced and shook his head like a dog.

‘Who!’

‘Mate!’

Colin reached out and hauled him onto the rocks.

‘Legendary, man. You were as high as the bridge.’

‘Your turn.’

Colin grabbed for the rope and wrapped his hands around the float they had knotted into the end. He walked backwards as far as the rope would allow, ran across the wet rock ledge, feet slapping, and launched himself across the water. The other end of the rope was attached to a solitary tree left to stand when the council had made a clearing on the south bank of the river, on the downstream side of the bridge. Like most kids who lived north of town, Colin and his friends spent long afternoons there, swimming in the river, riding their bikes on the tracks that cut along the river reserve, and, when the river was high, doing bombies into the water off the rope swing. At the top of the swing, you could see down the river toward the bend. Further on, and masked by bush, the river continued toward the sea before reaching the sandbar and making a last turn into the saltwater. The sandbar was another hangout. It was where they dumped their gear when they surfed the reef-break, and on the river side, the warm, tea-coloured

water was good for mucking about when the surf was too choppy.

Colin swung out over the water as a double road train roared past on the bridge. The highway was the main route north and ended back where it started, circling all of Australia in a bitumen belt. The truck was travelling south, red dust on its undercarriage, and a sunburnt forearm leaning out of the driver's window. Colin turned his head away from the hot air and grit that blasted at him as it passed. Downstream, he caught a flash of movement under the trees near the bend and forgot to let go at the top. On the downward swing, he turned himself around, held his feet together and flexed. Darren and Tim cheered him on.

'Do it!'

He reached the tree trunk with a thud and pushed off hard with his feet, sending himself soaring back out above the water. He looked back down the river and called out. 'Amy!'

He missed the drop again and swung back down, feet out, ready to push off. This time, his left foot was too far to one side and didn't make a solid connection with the trunk. It slipped, scraping the knuckle on his big toe and sending him on a wobbling course out into the river. He released the rope early and let himself fall backwards into the water; his arms punched out in a victory V.

'Maaate!' called Tim as he came to the surface. Darren walked over to the rock ledge and pulled him out. 'Good save.'

'Hey.' The three of them looked down the path to the beach. It was Amy Jenkins, walking up the track under the trees.

'Hey,' she called again, raising one arm.

'Hey.'

'Hey, Amy.'

'Having fun?'

'You bet. D'you want a go?' Darren jumped to his feet and grabbed the rope, holding it out to her.

'I'd love to, but I don't have my bathers.'

'Go in your undies.'

'Yeah, as if, Darren,' Amy laughed. 'I see you haven't got your special ones on today.'

Colin snorted and Darren scowled. Amy's mum had a photo of Amy and Darren as toddlers, playing in the river near the sandbar in their underwear. Darren's undies had Superman on the front, and they all teased him whenever they were at Amy's house.

Amy sat down in the shade, plucking sourgrass. She'd changed out of her school uniform and was wearing shorts and thongs and Colin eyed her legs, envious of her tan. Even though it was late afternoon by the time they got to the river, his own skin was already turning pink. He found a dry spot out of the sun and investigated his toe. Red blood and river water ran together on the rock. Darren prepared to swing out.

'Watch this, losers.'

They watched him run up and launch, shading their eyes against the sun. He swung back down, pale soles upturned, and thudded his feet against the tree, copying Colin's move. At the top of the second swing he called out – *Geronimo!* – and swanned out away from the rope, arms wide and back arched, his hollow belly stretched tight under the lines of his ribs.

'Shit, he's not going to dive, is he?' Tim jumped to his feet. 'It's too shallow.'

Amy sucked in her breath and she and Colin joined Tim at the water's edge.

'Fuck, Darren. Darren! Roll!'

Darren continued his arc into the air, his body curving up and then downwards toward water. At the last minute, he flipped them the finger and tucked his knees to his chest, smacking into the water bum first with a spray that reached all of them as they stood, hearts thumping, on the bank. He surfaced, laughing.

'Gotcha, you dumb shits!'

'Fuck you, Darren,' Tim was angry. 'That wasn't funny.'

'Don't be such a pussy.'

'Fuck off, I'm going home.' Tim reached for his bag and slid his thongs onto his feet.

'Aw, come on, mate. It was just a joke. I was only fooling around.' Darren hauled himself out of the water and tipped his head to the right, shaking water out of his ear.

'Yeah, well I'm out anyway. See you tomorrow.'

Tim stalked back up the track. Darren shrugged, looking to Colin for support. Colin shook his head. *Let him go.* They watched as Tim climbed the embankment up to the highway. He didn't look back at them as he walked across the bridge.

'Right. I'm going again.' Darren grabbed the rope, ran out, and launched. This time, he curled and somersaulted, copying Tim's first

jump. Colin helped him out of the water and grinned at him.

‘That was a triple. Cool.’

‘I know, right?’ Darren grinned back. He shot a look over his shoulder at the bridge, but Tim was gone.

‘Nice.’

Darren climbed onto the rock and found a dry spot in the sun. He stretched out with his eyes closed to the glare, goosebumps pimpling across his thighs.

‘I was just having a bit of fun; why’d he have to get angry?’

‘I know you were, mate. He was just worried about you, that’s all. He really thought you were going to dive.’

Colin joined him in the sun to dry off. He’d need to go home soon; his mum had told him not to be late. Amy was back under the tree, plucking at the sourgrass again. She twisted off a piece and nibbled at the stem, screwing up her face as the juice hit the back of her tongue. Darren rolled onto his stomach to face her.

‘You should be careful, walking down here by yourself, especially in those creepy trees over there.’ He looked toward the bush where the track disappeared along the riverbank.

‘Careful?’ she screwed up face and looked back along the track. ‘Why?’

‘You know.’

‘No, Darren, I don’t.’

‘The homeless guy. What if something happened in there? No-one would hear you.’

‘Mr Arthur?’ She snorted. ‘He’ll talk your head off, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

‘You never know.’

‘You never know what’s going to happen anywhere,’ she retorted. ‘I’m safer down here with Mr Arthur than I am in my mum’s car.’

‘How do you figure that one out?’

‘More people get killed in car accidents than by old drunk homeless guys. Statistically, I’m safer here.’

‘Better not tell your mum that.’

‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘you’re more likely to get hurt than I am.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘It’s true. Men are more likely to be assaulted by random strangers and women are more likely to be assaulted in their own homes.’



‘That’s crap. What about the Weymouth rapist?’

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. ‘Case in point, dumb arse.’

‘No, I mean, he’s a random stranger.’

‘We don’t know that, though, do we?’

‘So, you’re saying it’s someone we know?’ Darren’s voice rose at the end of his sentence.

‘I’m saying it is more likely than the random truck driver theory,’ Amy replied.

‘That’s enough, you two can have your lovers’ quarrel, but I’m going home.’ Colin reached for his socks and used them to clean his feet before putting his sneakers back on.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ asked Darren, poking Colin in the leg with his foot.

Colin kicked him away. ‘Nothing, I just have to be home.’

Darren was right. The she-oaks between the clearing and the river mouth was creepy. They made a whirring sound that sounded nothing like what leaves were supposed to sound like, rustling agreeably in the breeze. The she-oaks made the wind sound like it was heralding the onset of winter; a vicious one where wolves howled, and vegetables froze in the ground like in a little kids’ book. And there were spiders in there. Big ones. The track to the beach ran right through the she-oaks and Colin always picked up his pace when he walked that way home. He caught Darren smirking at Amy and knew he was making fun of him. He stuffed his school clothes into his bag and stood up.

‘I’ll come too,’ Darren said, jumping to his feet as well and gathering his own gear. ‘Is the river mouth open?’

‘It’s shallow,’ said Amy, who’d just walked up from the beach. ‘You can get through it if you want to cross there instead of the bridge.’

‘Not me, mate,’ said Colin. ‘I have to get milk for Mum on the way home. See you tomorrow at the bus stop.’

Amy said she would walk home with Colin and they both left, following the track up the embankment to the highway. Darren walked back toward the beach alone. By the time Colin turned to look back, he’d disappeared down the path and into the trees.

## CHAPTER 5

Sandra

Sandra is on the floor of the sitting room upstairs, an archive box and a stack of files next to her. She sits cross-legged like she used to do at school assemblies on the quadrangle, the backs of her legs burning on the tarmac. Now she sits on carpet and has placed a wine glass on the upturned box lid. She stretches over and lifts it to her mouth as she flips a stack of papers with the other hand. She is looking for any mention of Barbara Russell. Barbara's son, Colin, comes up a lot, of course. He was at the river that day. Sandra has made notes about what Colin said he saw, what he did, and what the other people at the scene were doing. In her timeline of Darren's movements during the month before he died, Colin appears almost every day, catching the school bus, swimming in the river, hanging out at the tennis club. Some of these events she still remembers herself, like the afternoon the three boys came over after school and ate their way through an entire loaf of bread and finished her milk. She had to go to the supermarket afterwards or there would have been nothing for breakfast the next day. It was only two weeks before Darren died.

Barbara barely appears in her notes; it is like she had temporarily ceased to exist. Looking through the papers, Sandra finds little mention of her usual involvement in the boys' weekly routines. In those two weeks, there is no record of sleepovers at Colin's house, or lifts home from training in Barbara's car. She was preoccupied, Sandra knew, and she guesses that explains why there is just one mention of Barbara being at the club for the tennis finals on the day of the murder. Sandra had been on shift that morning. Barbara had been at that awful school assembly, of course, where the local police came to talk to the students about personal safety. That was three weeks before. Barbara

and Sandra had both taken time off work and sat to one side of the students with the other parents while the police effectively imposed an after-dark curfew. No-one had paid any attention, of course, and all it had done was fuel some of the more outlandish rumours that were doing the rounds at the time.

Sandra uncrosses her legs and stretches her back. The black-and-white record doesn't capture a friendship, she thinks. Not even photo albums record the real stuff of life, only the good times, the picnics on the beach and the barbeques in the backyard. They don't bear witness to the chats at the school gate, the discovery of shared head lice, or the wine drunk after receiving negative blood tests. It was Barbara who was with her in the doctor's surgery – Greg was out on the boat – when Sandra was given the all-clear, and Sandra's arms that held Barbara when she started bleeding at work. What will happen when Sandra forgets the million kindnesses; will they vanish as though they never happened? She remembers a story about a man walking down the street, smiling. Eventually, he looks up, and sees that people walking toward him are smiling at him smiling. He looks over his shoulder and sees that the people walking behind him are smiling at the people who are smiling at him, and he realises that smiling is infectious. Sandra wonders if Barbara's kindness will also keep existing, passed on to strangers, uncredited but doing good in the world somewhere.

Sandra needs a break from sitting on the floor and takes her wine to the windows. Outside, the sea is pale blue and churning under the south-westerly. Windsurfers skitter across the waves. The she-oaks along the riverbank bend away from the coast. Underneath her window, a four-wheel drive ute heads for the beach, two boards on the tray. She watches it pull onto the gravel shoulder and nose its way down the track to park on the sand bar. Barbara died a long way from the ocean, she thinks, and grimaces at the thought. The vast inland hectares of the Pilbara are as foreign to Sandra as snow-covered mountains. She wouldn't know what to do with herself among the red rocks and spinifex grass. Barbara and Stuart had a painting on their lounge room wall that Barbara said showed the waterholes and meeting places of the local people. The land, she said, was criss-crossed with tracks and studded with landforms – breakaways, valleys, and ancient rivers – that had their own unique stories and meaning. But when Sandra and Greg went camping up there, Sandra been appalled by the

dry emptiness and night-time silence. There was no body of water and no sea breeze to cross over it, to bring its briny smell and deposit flecks of salt on her skin. In her own home, she sleeps with a window open to the sound of the waves and walks along the beach every day, her toes in the water. She can't bear to be away from the sea.

Sandra takes another mouthful of wine and considers what she knows. Most of her records from the investigation are about the three suspects: Arthur Zelinski, her own husband, and the Weymouth rapist. The local police questioned Arthur about every crime committed in the town as a matter of course, and no-one Sandra knew had thought he'd done it. He might have been poor and known to every law and order and health and human services agency in town, but he wasn't a murderer, or even a petty thief. And anyway, he was in the nursing home dying of cancer on the day of the shooting. Sandra knew he was because she'd seen him there.

Sandra's money was on the Weymouth rapist. They never found him, and the assaults stopped after Darren died. Sandra thinks the murder rattled him, and he left town. He's probably somewhere in far north Queensland, she figures, torturing kittens and watching porn on the internet. She returns to the floor and pulls out another stack of papers bound together with a fat bulldog clip. At the top of the bundle is a cold-case story run in the state-wide daily newspaper on the fifth anniversary of Darren's death.

*Did the Weymouth rapist kill Darren?*

*Weymouth schoolboy, Darren Davies, might have been the last and most tragic victim of the Weymouth rapist, sources close to the five-year-old investigation told The Daily News this week. Darren (15) was killed by an unknown shooter five years ago on the bank of the Wey River in broad daylight. None of the witnesses to the shooting saw the killer, who is thought to have been hiding in bushes downstream from the popular local playground when he fired the gun. A witness says Darren may have been shot by the Weymouth rapist after Darren disturbed him climbing out of a potential victim's window, just one week before Darren was killed. The assaults ended after Darren's tragic death.*

The witness, of course, was Colin, who rang Sandra in tears after the article came out. The reporter had been waiting outside the city office tower where he worked and had gone straight to the Weymouth rapist theory. Did Colin think it was possible? Hadn't one of Darren's friends been a victim? Was it true that Darren had seen an intruder trying to break into a house in the week before he was killed? Could he have identified the man? Colin had given him one-word answers and bolted back upstairs. Later that day, police officers had come to the building to question him. They were sympathetic, they said; they'd been contacted by the same reporter. Did Colin want to add anything to his statement from five years ago? Colin's colleagues, who hadn't known about Colin's connection with the shooting, were quiet for the rest of the day.

Sandra puts the article aside. It had reopened the investigation but failed to create any useful leads and there was still no trace of the Weymouth rapist. There had been assaults in the town since then, of course, but nothing to link them to the previous crimes. There had been three, all in the space of six months. Each victim was a teenager, two were schoolgirls, and all had been asleep in their childhood beds when they were attacked. In each case, the assailant climbed through the window, gagged them with a scarf, and left again the way he came in. He wore gloves and a balaclava and left no fingerprints, just the scarves, which the police traced to the pharmacy on the main street. His DNA was not on any police database.

It was true, what the article said about Darren, if Sandra's notes from the second investigation were correct. The three boys slept the night at Darren's house and had walked to the fish and chip shop on the highway for late night chips and gravy. They never told anyone about it because they weren't supposed to be out after dark. They'd chatted to Amy – who was working that night and who Sandra suspected was the real reason for their need for a snack – ate their chips in the park and then walked home. In a street two blocks back from the beach, Colin and Tim went for a pee in a vacant block. While he was waiting, Darren saw a security light come on at the side of a house. When the story broke five years later, Colin told the police Darren said there was a man standing on a chair, levering a window open with a crowbar. He was dressed in black and wearing gloves.

It all tallied with police records, although it was a mystery how the press found out. The residents of the house, a family with teenage children, had heard the noise and investigated. The mother found a window open and the father, who'd leapt to the front door swinging a cricket bat, had seen someone running away. The information he gave police produced an identity sketch that looked like any trades apprentice or farm worker in the district. At the press conference, the police commissioner explained that the information had been passed on to the investigating team at the time of the first investigation and they had been unable to establish any link between the incident and the sexual assaults. The local investigating officers concluded the incident was just an attempted robbery. The window opened out from the lounge room, not the girl's bedroom, and the family had recently bought a new television from the store on the main street. The intruder was probably after that, looking to sell it for drug money.

Still, it felt too neat for Sandra. She thought it could easily be a coincidence the family had just bought the TV, and as for the window, even intruders can make mistakes. It was entirely possible the Weymouth rapist discovered Darren's identity and decided he had to be silenced. Despite what the police said, she had no doubt about how he got the gun.