

**THE  
MAP  
OF  
NIGHT**

**KIMBERLEY  
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**PANTERA  
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# PROLOGUE

Inside their giant domes, the telescopes Lucy Rutherford worked with were nocturnal creatures with their eyes on other worlds. She spent as much of her life as she could looking upwards. Once she held her daughter, Gabby, a squirming toddler, up to a small telescope at her bedroom window. They were visiting Bowness in the Yarra Valley, where Lucy grew up. The sky was darker here, over an hour from Melbourne, and the stars shone brighter than fairy lights. Gabby, chubby legs dangling into empty space, peeked into the eyepiece and gasped. She shoved the telescope out of the way and pressed her face against the window. Then she cried; her two human eyes could not equal the simple mechanical one. She fiddled desperately with the window catch, as if all that stopped her from reaching Saturn's rings was a sheet of glass.

Lucy closed her hand over her daughter's fingers. 'Not safe,' she admonished. Hardy Street, a very faintly lit reflection of the Milky Way, ran past at the end of their long drive. 'You don't want to fall.'

Gabby pointed at the sky. 'Pity,' she lisped, for *pretty*, probably.

'They're a long way off,' Lucy replied. 'Far further than you can reach.'

Gabby looked disconsolate.

‘But you *can* see them. Look.’ Lucy refocussed and held Gabby close, reliving the joy of seeing it all for the first time. Through the lens, Jupiter’s moons surrounded their mother like kittens, some nuzzling for milk, others wandering out to explore.

‘Our sun is one of billions of stars in our galaxy. And we’re in one of billions of galaxies.’

She showed Gabby how to measure the distance visible between stars using her pinkie fingertip. Gabby’s own curiosity grew with her. ‘Why isn’t the moon always round?’ she’d asked more recently.

‘It always is. Even when you can’t see all of it. Planets and moons and stars spin, their gravity turns them all into spheres, the most compact shape.’ Like the human mind, like Gabby’s brain, restricted by the size of her skull, by the function of blood vessels, by the birth canal.

There was so much to share. Later, in books, Lucy showed Gabby photos of constellations that had been discovered in cave art. Star maps. Awe-inspiring ‘I exist’ messages in rock from many, many generations ago. Those ancient paintings of the Pleiades and Taurus only appeared inaccurate now because stars have moved relative to each other over thousands of years. Everything in the universe exists in a state of change and movement.

# ONE

## **FRIDAY LUCY**

‘The Bowness Observatory is home to the first telescope I ever looked through,’ Lucy might begin, tonight. Aware of her reputation for saying the wrong thing, she had laboured over her speech all afternoon. ‘I’m excited to share the unveiling of its refurbishment with my daughter, who represents the future of this town and of science.’

Five years ago, Justin had inherited the family house and the three of them, along with Justin’s ophthalmology practice, had all moved to Bowness. Since then, Gabby had metamorphosed into a lanky eleven-year-old. And now Lucy and Justin agreed she could come with them to the opening, even though Gabby wasn’t meant to stay up late. Their lives were about to change again. For Gabby, seeing the result of Lucy’s long-term project would be a significant, happy memory.

Lucy looked up from her computer. Where was Gabby? Hours had passed since Lucy, still working from home when she could, walked down the street to collect her from school.

Knowing Gabby—the kitchen. And sure enough, auburn head bent over the notebook she called her Observations Journal, beside Lucy’s iPad on the marble bench, there she was. Their elderly Labrador, Kepler, always as close to her as he could possibly get, had arranged himself into a black hole beneath her stool.

Gabby took one bite from her pizza before returning to writing. Her tongue was visible, pink at the side of her mouth; she was concentrating.

‘I’m sorry I’ve been distracted this afternoon,’ Lucy said. ‘I’ll finish my speech soon.’

Gabby didn’t reply. Beside her, a tall pile of political brochures needed stuffing into envelopes for delivery before next Saturday’s election.

‘Gabby?’

More tongue poked out and Gabby wrote more quickly. Gabby kept a lot of lists, not just about the stars that were the journal’s intended subjects, but also about other interests: her favourite insects; her classmates. Why was she upset? Perhaps she’d been embarrassed enough last time her mother gave a public address.

Lucy, usually careful about breaching her privacy, rested a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, narrow inside her school tunic. ‘Gabby, what are you doing?’

She read one of Gabby’s lists upside down.

*Eggs*

*Olives*

*Fetta*

Then, on the adjacent page,

*THINGS MUM FORGETS*

Eggs! Olives! Fetta! Gabby needed them for an Ancient Greek school presentation next week. Lucy glanced around the kitchen. Hoping for helpful elves? A guardian spirit of good-enough mothering? She *had* forgotten. ‘We’ll get the Greek food,’ she promised. ‘They sell some at the new cafe in Eagansville. I’ll take you there.’

Gabby looked up. Her eyes were the clear blue they’d always been, though her skin had the shine and pimples of adolescence. ‘When?’

‘Tomorrow,’ Lucy said, brightly. ‘We’ll find time.’

Gabby continued frowning, as she picked up her pizza.

Lucy brushed a hand over her own forehead. There was risotto to prepare, that speech to finish. And—her stomach knotted—Justin was wrong; they had to tell Gabby about their imminent separation, before she discovered it for herself.

‘Something else on your mind? Gabby?’

Gabby’s hand stilled. She gazed behind Lucy as though the stove or splashback might help her formulate a question using only consonants she didn’t stutter over.

‘What is it?’ Lucy prompted.

Gabby looked down at her page and sucked in a huge breath. ‘What exactly *is* D-Dark Matter?’

‘It’s—’ Lucy cut herself off. ‘Is that really what you’re worried about?’

‘One thing. You wrote those articles...’

‘I did.’ Could Gabby’s mood possibly be as simple as this?

Gabby jumped off her stool and, despite the pizza, stretched her arms out to spin like in a dance class. ‘You asked why stars at the end of our galaxy’s arms don’t get flung off into space. Like my pizza would, if I let go.’

Lucy laughed. ‘I wish I’d thought to describe it with pizza.’

‘It would fly out and... hit D-Daddy on the head.’

‘If he were here. Yes, Gabby. Dark Matter probably does stop stars being flung into space.’

‘Why do you call it Dark Matter?’

‘Because we know it exists, but we can’t see it.’ Physics was simpler to explain than so much that Gabby needed to understand.

Gabby peered through the kitchen window, as if the universe existed out there, separate from their private space. ‘Like God?’

God? Gabby’s teacher was religious. Lucy really had to do something about her. Politics was bad enough. ‘Not quite like God,’ she said. ‘We haven’t seen Dark Matter but we know it exists.’

‘How?’

Lucy found a sharp knife to chop the mushrooms. ‘We’ve seen what it does.’

‘Ms Jones says that’s how you can tell God exists.’

Were teachers even allowed to say such things?

Gabby grabbed her notebook. ‘I want to watch Netflix.’

On her way to the adjacent TV room, Gabby paused at a hanging tapestry of Australian flowers and insects. Justin’s mother won prizes at long-ago Bowness Shows for her realistic embroidery, perhaps the origin of Gabby’s fascination with bugs. Now, Gabby caressed a green and blue woollen cicada with a narrow fingertip. Stitched from bulky knots, with tiny white glass beads for eyes, the insect appeared to be pulling itself out of the backing canvas. Beside it blossomed the pale red threads of bottlebrush flower spikes and clusters of yellow wattle fleece, realistic enough to inspire a sneeze.

‘I have another question. Can I have a cicada farm?’

‘People don’t really keep cicada farms,’ Lucy said gently. ‘Not like ants. Aren’t you still interested in them?’ With the blade of her knife, she pointed at the acrylic nest on the kitchen windowsill. Nearly a year ago, they’d populated it with a handful of ants kidnapped from the garden. Despite initial fears that the colony wouldn’t last (surely they’d crave a queen?), it flourished, its members always busy tunnelling and storing food.

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

‘Cicadas also live underground. For most of their lives. Australian ones only come out after *seven* years.’

Lucy approached her daughter and ruffled her soft hair. Was Gabby trying to imagine their life in another seven years? She was only eleven. Much would change over the next seven *days*. Lucy had already moved a few changes of clothes and a bag stuffed with toiletries into the cupboard of her office up in Parkes.

‘I suppose this backyard already is my cicada farm,’ Gabby said, thoughtfully.

More guilt. Lucy would be removing Gabby from her home. ‘Love is as strong as death,’ Justin had quoted to Lucy, once upon a more affectionate time. ‘And jealousy is as cruel as the grave.’

‘Gravity again!’ Lucy had laughed. ‘You’re always pulling me down.’

‘When I was a child, we collected Black Princes and Greengrocers,’ she told Gabby now, pulling her into a hug. ‘Not for farms. Researchers paid money for them.’

Gabby dug her chin into Lucy’s chest nodding, then pushed away. ‘En-to-molo-gists?’ she enunciated, carefully. She had a remarkable vocabulary.

Something crunched between Lucy’s sandal and the floorboards. A couple of green beads. Lucy slipped them into her jeans pocket. Repairs could wait. ‘Do your ants need water?’

Back in the kitchen, Gabby filled a medicine dropper with water and stood on tiptoes to reach the windowsill. ‘I’m their weather god,’ she remarked, removing the lid.

Her little Stockholm sufferers teamed up to push protective pebbles over tunnel entrances and receive necessary liquid. ‘Ants have light receptors in the backs of their heads,’ Gabby recalled.

‘Are you learning about ants at school?’

‘No. School is... other things. D-don’t you remember?’

‘I remember your Ancient Greek food presentation. You want exotic eggs.’

‘That’s what Ancient Greeks used to eat. Eggs from quail and ducks and ostriches.’

‘I remember.’ Lucy smiled. ‘I also remember you need to get ready for tonight. Perhaps Netflix should wait. Do you have maths homework?’

‘Can I wear my new dress?’

‘You can.’

Gabby retreated to her room and Lucy continued preparing their meal. She swayed slightly to the music seeping beneath Gabby’s door. Of course, Gabby wouldn’t be doing her maths, but they couldn’t have the same argument every single night.

Food sliced, diced and ready to cook, Lucy retreated to their living room. A little later, through the wide front window she watched Justin’s car slide around their front hedge and past the heritage-listed outbuilding that was the original Fairfield House. Now used for storage, it was slowly crumbling.

Justin climbed out of his car and straightened his tie. He must be the last man in the valley still wearing one. Wind pulsed like solar waves and blew soil into the air; it turned to a skim of mud when it settled on his sweaty skin. He grabbed a briefcase and a white coat from his boot. He stared back through the window and waved. Coming home was a performance as much as any other part of his life. When he opened the front door, Kepler raced out, rounding him up.

‘Hello, Lucy!’

She stood. Justin brushed his cheek against hers, like they were still lovers. His hair was the same auburn as Gabby’s, slightly greyed, and his shape carefully gym-honed. Whiskery, his skin had the spicy warmth of hours-ago aftershave. ‘Sorry I’m late. A few people I had to talk to.’ The election was just over a week away, and anyone who came into Justin’s orbit represented a potential vote.

Lucy smiled. 'How was your last day as a doctor?'

'I'll still be a doctor, even without patients. The day was OK. One final glaucoma. Inspected a road we need to rebuild.' Justin crossed towards the kitchen without enquiring about her day; even more so since the preselection, his activities must be more interesting than hers.

'Hello, Gabby,' he said, at Gabby's closed door.

There was no answer.

He returned to the living room with a beer and pulled his laptop from its embossed leather case. 'Have a newspaper interview tomorrow evening,' he announced. 'It'll need some preparation. Is Gabby OK?'

'She's worried—'

Justin's phone beeped.

'I mean,' Lucy tried again, 'there's a chance she guesses. About us.'

Gabby would worry that their separation was her own fault.

'Justin, we have to talk to her.'

He showed her his phone screen. 'Tonight is Parent-Teacher conferences. They're catching up after Covid. It's just not the right time to talk to her, Lucy.'

Parent-Teacher conferences? 'We couldn't have postponed them?'

'I suppose we could have.'

*Things Mummy Forgets.*

'We'll talk to Ms Jones Monday week,' Justin decided. 'After the election. I'm worried about Gabby's maths. She's not doing well enough. And her school does too much biology. You need chemistry to get anywhere.'

At least they agreed that getting somewhere was important. It was time for Lucy to do just that. 'It's primary school,' she said. 'And science isn't her favourite subject, apart from biology.'

Justin grunted and finally loosened his tie. He thought Lucy was wasting her own scientific mind. Salaries were significant to Justin; like IQ or NAPLAN or a price tag, they were numbers that assigned a value to a person. 'It's chemistry you need to study biology in uni. Is Gabby ready to go?'

Lucy prowled through the coat cupboard, seeking her black pumps. 'To uni?'

'To go tonight.'

'I think so. There's risotto for afterwards. If we're late, I'll save it for tomorrow.'

The freezer was full of microwavable packages, saved for tomorrows or in case Gabby got hungry.

Lucy went upstairs to get dressed. The observatory reopening would be a chance to drink beer and discuss the damp summer, and whether it was time for Betelgeuse to go supernova, and how after the election, no matter who won, Victoria would still be governed by politicians. Just about everyone she knew in Bowness would be there. Even her department head, Heather Reed, whose stellar academic career was based on making a colony on Mars sound plausible to billionaires. And Fatima Khalil, who worked with both of them. And every member of the restoration committees that had managed to work together for two years. Bowness had been the centre of Lucy's childhood: its school; the shopping mall where she worked as a teen; the churchyard where her parents were buried. Although only Justin knew she'd accepted a full-time New South Wales job, tonight felt like a send-off.

## **JUSTIN**

Lucy wasn't always fleeing from him; she still walked towards him, sometimes. Like now, Lucy on the stairs, stylish with her long sleek blonde bob, a leather belt tightly cinched around her black suit. Attractive, although these days she wouldn't thank him for saying

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

so. Fulfilled, although these days that would have nothing to do with him.

She caught his glance. If she realised he'd been watching her, Lucy didn't mind. Care. 'Nearly time to go.' She shook out her hair and blotted her lips with a tissue.

Their relationship couldn't be altogether dead. Death horrified him. He looked away. 'I'll get Gabby.'

'OK. See if you can talk to her.'

She still trusted him. Enough to know he wouldn't speak to Gabby tonight. Not about the only thing that needed to be said. They needed to be a *united front*, Lucy said. They needed to *protect* Gabby.

Bullshit.

The only way to look after Gabby properly was to stay together. Lucy couldn't see it. They needed, she said, to be *friendly* in front of Gabby. They needed to show they were *mature* and would still both be her parents even when they were no longer each other's spouses. Bullshit.

But he shouldn't, couldn't be angry.

He couldn't help himself. His idea of Lucy was split: the Lucy he had known forever, who he loved and wanted to stay with; and a new incarnation, irrationally determined to leave. It was his own old Lucy getting ready tonight. Pretty. Confident. Amusing. She would make an excellent political wife, like Jill Biden surrounding the White House lawn with enormous Valentine hearts.

Would have made. But for her plans.

They didn't need to talk to Gabby. Not yet. Not until there was absolutely no chance they could work this out.

Lucy walked into Gabby's room and came out again, Gabby's hand in hers. Justin's anger faded. Lucy and Gabby, hands joined. It was an image he'd think of again and again. Loving them was one thing to be sure about.

The three walked outside, the family they'd always been. Justin was designated driver, because the observatory was Lucy's project and she'd be celebrating. And because he enjoyed driving his car, a Mercedes that rarely took him further than the two kilometres to his office.

'Nice weather for it,' Justin observed.

Lucy fastened her seatbelt. 'Yep.' She looked at him with a slow blink, nearly a smile. Happy to share her success. He loved that generosity in her.

'You ready for tonight?' he asked. Lucy usually presented lectures for students, rather than public addresses, and he knew she always worried. With reason. 'Sure you don't want me to check your speech? We'll still have a few minutes when we get there.'

'I'll be fine. I've found some interesting anecdotes.'

'Oh dear.'

Gabby looked happy enough in the back seat. He started the engine. They drove out, Fairfield reflected in his rear-vision mirror, the Old House looking vaguely ashamed of itself, with pine needles sticking out around broken gutters and drains like thick hairs on an old lady's chin. Nothing but a flimsy protection order saved the eyesore from destruction. His father had lived his entire life there, but once Justin had some influence over the state government's Rural Development Schedule, he'd drag Fairfield and Bowness into the future. Stage one: knock the old place down.

Turning a corner gave them a view down leafy Bailey Street, the centre of town, where grand old buildings were strung along a chain of electrical wires like feature stones on a necklace.

'How was your work with Cheryl Guthrie?' Lucy asked.

'Useful.' Cheryl was the retiring local member Justin hoped to replace. 'She's got plenty of ideas. She thinks I should have a better slogan. I'll work on that for next time.'

‘A slogan?’ Gabby repeated.

‘Like in ads,’ Justin began. ‘Something about me that people will remember. Cheryl had suggestions. What do you think of *Justin Rutherford, man of action?*’

Gabby giggled. Justin caught her eye in the rear-vision mirror and made a face.

‘Blake Bourke brought an Action Man to school. It didn’t look like Daddy.’

They all laughed together.

‘Was that Cheryl’s only suggestion?’ Lucy asked.

Justin shrugged. ‘She’s spent a long time paying other people to be creative. But Cleo had some ideas.’ Cleo Mounce was technically Cheryl’s advisor, but she had been on loan to Justin since he won preselection.

‘Ideas?’ Lucy prompted.

‘*They broke the mould when they made Justin Rutherford,*’ he said.

Gabby laughed again. ‘Sounds like you’re made of jelly.’

A laugh came from Lucy, warm and genuine. How much fun the three of them had! He’d known Lucy since they were children. Justin’s glance strayed from the road to her face. She had to still care.

‘How about, *Justin Rutherford, the best thing since sliced bread?*’ Gabby asked.

Gabby and her Nutella sandwiches.

‘*Give Justin Rutherford a shot,*’ he countered.

They all laughed again. Justin’s fingers tightened, involuntarily, on the steering wheel.

‘A shot? People might take that literally.’ Lucy tapped his arm with a fingertip and mimed holding a gun. But she smiled like she’d never fantasised about killing him, not even once. ‘Some people do have negative thoughts about you, Justin.’

‘Who?’ asked Gabby.

Bailey Street buildings loomed over them, ornate nineteenth-century facades fully twice the heights of the buildings they fronted. Many generations of Justin's family had known this street.

'Mummy's joking,' Justin told Gabby.

Lucy was still talking. 'At least the other six candidates.'

In the rear-vision mirror, Justin watched Gabby lean back in her seat and get back to the serious business of staring out the car window. Lucy checked her phone.

'We had some serious ideas. How about *A self-made man to remake Victoria?*' Justin suggested. It was the version of his life story that he most liked to share with other people, and he rarely thought, even to himself, that it wasn't quite true. 'I've got a slogan for you, Lucy. You're *The brains behind Justin Rutherford.*'

Gabby giggled again. 'Only zombies want brains.'

'Maybe none of us is destined for big careers in PR,' Lucy said.

The Bowness Observatory stood near the old hospital at the edge of town. It had already been boarded up for many years when a teenaged Justin used to speed past on his bicycle. Back then, the old hospital had been far more intriguing to him. Both buildings had decayed, rotting and vandalised for decades, before restoration groups were established. Now, Bowness was coming back to life. And Justin—whose father had been instrumental in the town's decline—was proud and determined to be part of it. The old hospital was to be converted to a retirement village. People would be looked after there once again. And the observatory was ready again to open to the heavens. A difference was that, where it had once been cutting edge, now it was heritage. The Bowness Historical Society was every bit as invested as the Amateur Astronomers. The Mechanics Institute (a building grand enough for visitors to occasionally mistake for a church) had been hired for the evening, with the idea that social distancing could be maintained at a reception there, while small groups took it

in turns to cross the road to peer through the telescope on the corner.

‘Lucy!’ Evan Eliot, an engineer, called when they arrived at the grey stone building. ‘And Dr Rutherford.’

‘Dr Rutherford and Dr Rutherford,’ said his colleague Ryan Smith, and they spun off into predictable *two doctor* jokes.

They showed Gabby a room at the back of the hall where she could later settle in with an iPad loaded with games. Gabby would feel quite at home; a cupboard here even held jumpers and tracksuit pants of Lucy’s, left in case of cold weather when she stayed overnight to use the telescope.

The hall was full of voters. Justin watched Lucy speak with Heather Reed, who had the habit of treating this observatory like it was Lucy’s amusing little hobby. And with Fatima Khalil, who looked busy and happy to be here. He joined her, as she continued around the hall.

‘You’ve done a great job here,’ he complimented Evan and Ryan. ‘This telescope hasn’t been functional since my father was a boy. The neglect was shameful.’

The engineers nodded and returned to their jokes as if he hadn’t spoken.

Once Justin had decided to run for parliament, the implications of his decision multiplied. Staying to listen to these jokes, for instance. Everyone voted. He straightened his tie and tried to look like he understood them.

‘I’m a doctor,’ he wanted to say. ‘I’m going to be in parliament.’ Melbourne and maybe, one day, Canberra. But the two engineers wouldn’t be impressed. Governments met in cities where people could no longer even see the Milky Way.

‘Well, let’s go do it,’ Lucy said, finally. She checked her cue cards.

Only Justin knew just how manufactured, protective, was her confident stride, as Lucy, dark suit carving her shape, strode back

outside and crossed the road. Gabby and the engineers followed, along with Patrick Hocking, the town's disconcertingly young bank manager, who Justin had an appointment with the next day. Owing to branch closures, Patrick was responsible not only for the largest donation to the restoration project, but also for the finances of Justin and every business and farm in Bowness and for hundreds of kilometres around.

Other guests followed, and gathered into an audience near the round, red brick observatory building. Justin climbed the three shallow steps and turned.

'Good evening, Bowness.'

He paused, but of course the audience had no reason to applaud. After Colin Hill, an elder involved in reconstruction plans, welcomed them to Country, Justin introduced Lucy. 'I realise I'm here as a plus-one, as *Mister* Dr Lucy Rutherford, but I have my own connection to the telescope, which I'd like to share before I hand over to my wife. My great-grandfather, Francis Rutherford, brought this telescope over from Ireland back in the nineteenth century. It is a link between Bowness's past and its future. It's my heritage, *our* heritage. Restoration shows we value the history of Bowness, the history of science in Australia, yet we turn the telescope towards the heavens, towards tomorrow. I'm proud to share its unveiling with a scientist of tomorrow, my daughter, Miss Gabriella Rutherford,' he pointed to where Gabby was going pink, 'and of course to introduce you to the woman you've really come here to see, the astronomer who oversaw its restoration, my wife, Lucy Rutherford. First, a few words from Patrick Hocking, representing a major sponsor.'

Patrick Hocking pushed his way up the steps and mumbled something enthusiastic about banking and passed Lucy a key. People clapped again, this time in a more desultory fashion. Everyone knew someone the bank had foreclosed on. Patrick stepped away.

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

‘Thanks, Patrick.’ Lucy cleared her throat. The day was ending; the dome’s shadow fell over her. She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. Her eyes were somehow more expressive in the dimmer light, her face softer. She would say something appalling; Justin just didn’t know what. He knew what he’d like her to say. *Yes, my husband’s family was responsible for this telescope. Bringing it back to life is just one way Justin Rutherford looks after Bowness. Make sure you remember that when it’s time to vote!* She could pause for people to nod, agree, maybe to make notes in their calendars.

Elissa Dean, photographer for the *Bowness Times*, raised her camera. ‘Hey, Mrs Rutherford, can you move a bit to your left? For better lighting?’

Lucy moved. A low sunbeam set a spark in her hair. Justin hoped Elissa had caught her just like that.

‘People have used the stars to tell stories from the beginning of time,’ Lucy said. ‘They don’t often tell stories about telescopes themselves.’

This was promising.

‘And they should,’ Lucy continued. ‘Because stargazing can be dangerous. Eugene Shoemaker died in a car accident visiting a crater here in Australia. One American astronomy student, Michele Dufault, got her hair caught in a lathe while building a device to detect particles of Dark Matter, and was asphyxiated.’

Oh no, Lucy. Read the crowd.

‘Another astronomer, Marc Aaronson, was killed at his observatory, trying to prove the expansion of the universe. He left his building to check the weather and was crushed to death between a malfunctioning door and a hundred-and-fifty-ton telescope.’

Lucy paused and looked around. Justin held himself very still. One mother picked up her small child and whispered to her, as Justin whispered to Gabby to ward off nightmares. Perhaps Lucy did

sense the mood, as she awaited the laugh that didn't come. 'I guess what I'm trying to say is welcome but be careful.'

OK. You can stop now. There's still *some* applause.

'I want to tell you all something else,' Lucy continued. 'A secret about this telescope and two local families. Yes, the Rutherfords are one of them. The other is the Lisles. My own family. If my parents had lived long enough, they would have loved being here tonight. Meanwhile... here's a story about an early use I had for a telescope. The old Lisle house, on the slopes of Setback Mountain, had a back window looking over Bowness's sports fields. A younger me used her first telescope—you can see how I've slipped into third person to tell this story, because it's embarrassing—used her telescope to watch boys playing soccer in the distance. I didn't know this at the time, of course, but one of the boys I watched was my future husband, Justin Rutherford.'

People roared with laughter. All her silly comments about dead astronomers were forgotten. By god, she *could* learn how to be a political wife, how to charm people, if she tried. She got there eventually. It couldn't be too late. Justin had to find a way.

After a speech about the usefulness of telescopes, Lucy ceremoniously turned the key in the lock behind her and threw the small door open. To Justin, first. She took his arm and led him in.

Despite growing up in Bowness, this was actually the first time he had entered the observatory. Lucy's chatter had given him the fantastic impression that it was somehow bigger on the inside, like Doctor Who's space-time machine. But the inner dimensions completely matched the outer; he thought of how Bowness had seemed, on their return from early careers in Melbourne, so much smaller than he remembered.

He smiled at her. Lucy had given up a lot to accompany him back, far from a major university campus. Though wasn't this observatory itself some kind of compensation? Others squeezed in,

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

already forgetting the one-point-five-metre rule, and pushing Justin as close to Lucy as used to be natural, around the telescope.

‘It’s very... um... impressive,’ said Patrick Hocking, sounding distinctly unimpressed. ‘Isn’t it time to go back into the hall, out of the heat?’

A chorus of agreement.

‘Yeah.’

‘Let more people in here to have a look.’

Justin took Lucy’s arm as they walked back to the Mechanics Institute. They passed Patrick. He was checking his watch and looked like he wanted to leave. ‘The telescope wasn’t as big as you expected?’ Lucy asked.

He blushed beneath his shaving rash. ‘It did cost a lot of money.’

‘It can’t be bigger than the observatory that houses it.’ Lucy laughed.

Patrick considered. ‘Did you see that massive telescope collapse in Puerto Rico? Makes ours look like a children’s toy. It wasn’t looked after for years and collapsed like a national disaster.’

‘An anarchist once tried to blow up the Royal Observatory in Greenwich,’ Lucy said. ‘I thought about mentioning it in my speech.’

Of course she had.

Patrick looked confused. ‘I didn’t see that on the news.’ Periodically, he pulled his shirt collar away from his Adam’s apple like a prefect on school photo day.

‘It was a long time ago,’ Justin explained. Terrifying to consider how many lives Patrick could destroy with a flick of his pen (or lead pencil, if he was yet to earn his pen licence).

‘He didn’t kill anyone except himself,’ Lucy added, unstoppable. ‘Well, no one immediately. People died afterwards, inspired by him. Joseph Conrad based *The Secret Agent* on that guy, and the Unabomber was influenced by it. So quite a few deaths, actually.’

Justin would have to leave her to it.

He walked around the room—he *worked* the room, he thought, grimly. He'd begun thinking in these terms a year back when parliament was finally a realistic possibility. Everyone there was a possible supporter, a certain voter. He shook hands, praised Lucy, reminded people of his connection to her, felt guilty for taking advantage of her success, then took advantage again. Everything he said to them tonight was true. He *was* Lucy's husband. No one else had to know she didn't want him any more. Not yet.

Gabby was speaking to some other kids. He smiled at them. Pity they couldn't vote, but it was good to know Gabby had friends. They'd be reasons for her to stay in Bowness, should she ever face the choice. There was Renata, their neighbour, handing out business cards for her florist business. The trade had returned to life with a boom in wedding bouquets after the pandemic. He'd promised to help other local businesses thrive.

'Everyone's always known the Rutherfords,' Renata told another Bowness shopkeeper. She'd been a few years ahead of Justin and Lucy in school. 'They're farming royalty even without any farmland.'

'It's a big week for the Rutherfords,' the shopkeeper agreed.

'The flowers up front are all mine,' Renata said. 'To cheer on the telescope.'

'Hopefully on Saturday we'll all have something to celebrate.' Justin contributed.

A reporter, Gillian Barry, worked the room too, and made desultory notes in a spiral notebook. The *Bowness Times* reached voters, and some of her articles were syndicated via Consolidated Regional Press outside the valley. Although this seemed unlikely for such a local story. Justin was near Gillian when a hand grabbed his arm. He turned to face an elderly man whose baggy brown suit smelt of mould and cigarette smoke. The man's eyes were clouded. Justin put on his most professional smile. Glaucoma, he thought.

‘You’re the doctor who’s running for the election,’ the old man said, like Justin might not know. ‘Bernard Rutherford’s boy.’

Justin couldn’t make the diagnosis officially, but in a moment he’d mention the importance of regular eye checks. He’d make sure the man made an appointment, that he attended it. He would save the old man’s sight. Justin could serve his voters in this way too. He felt positive about it.

‘I am,’ he said.

‘Didn’t think I’d live to see one of the Fairfield Rutherfords back in Bowness.’

Justin tried to take twenty years off the old man’s features and place them on a face somewhere in the Bowness of his childhood. He offered his hand. The man’s use of the word *see* could be a useful segue.

The old man refused to shake it. He stepped back. Still worried about Covid? Not immunised? Justin made a token gesture with his elbow, just in case.

The old man waved this away too.

‘Hello, Justin,’ Gillian Barry said, taking the initiative and approaching. ‘Good turnout.’

‘I’m here for the observatory,’ the old man said. There was no way to stop him. ‘Good to see life coming back to Bowness. We’ve been dying since your old man nearly wrecked the place. Fucking goats.’

For the first time, Gillian looked interested.

‘Though the boy doesn’t even recognise me. Bruce Waite. You remember.’

Justin coughed and tried to laugh it off. ‘Lucy is very happy,’ he said to Gillian. ‘It’s a great achievement.’

Those *fucking* goats. He’d been coughing and trying to laugh them off for a quarter of a century. His fucking *father*.

Gillian looked puzzled. ‘Goats?’

Justin couldn't explain. He didn't want to think about it. *Those goats killed your father.* His mother's words. Gillian could find out about them easily enough, but it wasn't the image he wanted to project, and she wouldn't find out from him. He took her arm and pointed at a collection of sepia photos on the nearby wall. Old Bowness: a gold mining tower, a team of bullocks on Main Street, a class of curly-haired schoolgirls in white smocks.

'Something about goats?' Gillian asked.

Justin laughed. 'Goats?' There could be nothing more ridiculous in the world. 'There's nothing about goats.'

Lucy approached. A lifesaver. 'Lucy.' He loved her. 'It's all gone so well. You're great at this.'

'Can we talk later?' Gillian asked him.

Justin laughed. Project confidence. 'We won't be able to help it. But it's Lucy's turn now.'

'Absolutely. So, Mrs Rutherford, please tell me how you manage to combine such a fascinating career with family life?'

Gabby was watching them through wide open eyes. Taking it all in. Lucy's success, the casual sexism, even from another professional woman.

'It's not an ideal life,' Lucy admitted. Any resentment at being asked *the family* question, while Justin was not, was carefully hidden. 'I tend to drift off to Parkes and sleep through all the hours it would be convenient to call home. A man would face the same difficulties.'



The evening was brighter when Lucy was there, directing the operation of the telescope so that Earth's moon, and Jupiter and its moons, put on a show for everybody. Hours later, they were alone in the back room gathering their bags before waking Gabby, who had fallen asleep on a pile of yoga mats in the corner.

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

‘Why Parkes?’ he’d asked Lucy, earlier in their negotiation.

‘You know why. It’s high, dry, mostly free from light pollution.’

‘But it’s so far from here.’

The conversation that went around in circles. Sometimes, Justin repeated her own case to her. He wanted to show he understood. Lucy had always wanted a career in astronomy. Every human being can experience the stars, but astronomers get close up, and learn. That was the appeal of Parkes, of the dark hills with their outcrops of white domes. If only... But Lucy would not stay with him just because he understood why she wanted to leave.

‘You don’t need to go there to work there,’ he now said. Again.

‘Plenty of astronomers work remotely.’

‘I want to go. Justin, this isn’t the time to talk.’

Bowness’s retired butcher, Bob Lee, was nearby, helping himself to another beer. ‘I can’t believe the job you’ve done on this place to get it going. I might be nearly blind now but I remember what it looked like. And I remember the lovely Lucy.’

‘Ha,’ said Lucy. ‘Back then I was the prickly Lucy. Then I was the pimply one. Soon I’ll be the wrinkly one. And I’ve always been too skinny.’

‘I’d have to feel you to offer an opinion on that.’

Any other man, and Justin would have gone ape. He simply shook Bob’s hand and led him to the door where a taxi was waiting, then returned to Lucy. ‘We’ve had some good times.’

Lucy looked happy. The night had been a success. ‘Lots of good times, Justin.’

‘It’s great that Gabby knows some of her family places.’

‘Family is important to her.’ Lucy touched her throat. She wore a scarf Justin’s mother had given her, a sheer chiffon triangle of dark blue hemmed with the paler blue of the horizon and embroidered with tiny silk stars in shades of gold and silver. ‘It’s important to me too, Justin.’

He swept his arm around the abandoned party room. 'This observatory. It's part of bringing Bowness back to life.'

She held his eye, unblinking. Did she actually pity him? That would be unendurable. 'Bringing Bowness back to life isn't... I know it's important to you. But it isn't what I want to do with my life. You heard about those deaths. It's dark humour, sure, but I've only got one life. I wish I was good with words.'

'You're fine.'

'My speech?'

Time for caution. 'Did you think it went well?' Justin asked.

'I thought it went OK. I looked at Heather Reed. I don't think she rolled her eyes. But I knew you wouldn't like it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Remember Gabby's goldfish? You're horrified by dead things.'

He looked away. 'I'm a doctor. Death is something I try to prevent.'

'You shudder at Gabby's ants when they die. Maybe it's not death. Maybe it's endings... Come on, Justin. We just have to get past next Saturday.'

He wiped his hand over his face. Why did he keep trying? It was time for them to go home. They returned to the back room. Gabby had woken up. She stared at them through wide eyes. Shit. How much had she heard? Understood?

Justin helped her to her feet then used his hand to smooth down her hair. His own had once been this brightly auburn. 'Are you all right, Gabby?'

'Fine.'

He wasn't used to this evasiveness. 'You had a good evening?'

She shrugged. Lucy, apparently also worried, picked up her bag.

'I saw you talking to some of your friends,' Justin said.

Gabby scowled. Oops. Whether or not she guessed about him and Lucy, plenty bothered her. 'They aren't m-my friends.'

They weren't? Why? He should have paid more attention to her tonight.

Justin held Gabby's hand, walking to the car. And when they were driving, while she stared out the window and Bowness rushed past, he tried again to engage her in conversation. 'A lot of that land used to belong to us.'

She looked at his reflection in the rear-view mirror.

'Our Rutherford ancestors came here because of the gold rush,' he added.

'Was that how they got rich?'

'In a manner of speaking.' Justin hadn't considered his family rich until he'd realised the difficulty of winning everything back.

'That sounds like a yes b-but is actually a no,' Gabby observed.

Justin laughed. Gabby was so clever. She would be fine. 'It's a no if you mean, did they get rich from digging up gold themselves,' he agreed. 'The Rutherfords got rich from selling things to gold hunters. They opened a shop. They traded in gold the miners found. They bought the land that had no gold in it and used it to plant orchards. When I was a little boy we owned nearly all the land this side of Bowness.'

'You said we own that now.'

Justin smiled. 'We're on our way. In those days when you owned land, you could do what you liked with it. Now there are so many regulations you have to run for parliament to get things done.'

Gabby nodded without seeming very interested. How interested in his own father had Justin been, before he felt the need to make amends for him? How could he ever know what Gabby really thought of him?

Once, it was a conversation he would have taken to bed with Lucy. He would have held her against him while they discussed their daughter and worked out what was best for her. But the best thing for Gabby was something they couldn't agree on any more. Neither of them could be sure what was on her mind.

## GABBY

Confetti, Gabby thought, as they sped down the main street into Bowness. Yes, that was exactly the right word. *Confetti*. She couldn't say it without stuttering but she could write it in her Observations Journal. She would once they'd stopped driving. *Report cards are like confetti*. People throw them away. Little bits of coloured paper.

Gabby stared out her window. The car's speed seemed to make electricity wires waft and sway like spider webs between streetlights. Above, the stars that looked stationary were actually moving; as the world spun, they were falling, very slowly. Juliet said: 'When he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars.' Gabby had watched Leo in Mum's favourite old movie. She imagined thrown confetti caught by a slow-motion camera, landing on a photo like the stars embroidered on Mum's scarf. It was easier to stop worrying when she remembered how disposable report cards were. Confetti. The word gave her power. It would fly in the air and catch the light like who-knew-how-many stars. 'And he will make the face of heaven so fine, that all the world will be in love with night.'

Confetti. Words worked for her. On her worst stuttering days, sometimes words had defeated her, but Gabby was in charge of them now. For just about every word that laid a trap with difficult consonants, she knew a synonym that was nearly as suitable (germane, relevant, apposite) and much easier to say. And she could use confetti to stop worrying, because report cards really were nearly exactly like it.

So why couldn't she stop worrying?

It was nearly the end of the year. Mum and Dad should know that Parent-Teacher conferences were happening *tonight* and report cards were coming. They should care more about how Gabby had gone at school. Eventually they'd remember. All their forgetting did was delay Gabby's misery. Postpone, she thought, put off. If she was braver, she'd remind them, get it over with. But she was not brave.

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

All she could do was sit in the car, remembering yesterday, when she'd unlocked Mum's iPad (*KEPLER* was an easy password to guess), and logged into the school's website as Mum, and discovered just how bad her Year Six report card was.

OK, she probably shouldn't have pretended to be Mum. But how else would she know?

Gabby's Year Five teacher, Mr Thorpe, had been much nicer than this year's Ms Jones. Mr Thorpe had given Gabby full marks in maths even when she didn't show her working out. And he understood that she was OK working on her own. That what she loved was words. But Ms Jones was mean. She was *hostile*. She talked to Mum about things that weren't a teacher's business. Like Gabby's social skills. Once, in front of Mum and Dad, Ms Jones had looked flustered, like when Christopher Williams said he could see her bra through her shirt. 'I thought there might be some way we can encourage her to make more friends. I know you're an astrologer—'

'*Astronomer*,' Mum had corrected her.

Social skills. Ha. *Social skills*. Gabby was not popular. Apparently this was meant to be her own fault. Ms Jones even mentioned it on her report card. But what did Ms Jones expect? As if group work itself wasn't bad enough, Gabby was put with the worst possible kids. Jing Zheng—who'd picked her nose in a class photo—and Blake Bourke, who once bashed Harry Pratt so bad he needed to go to hospital. It was a set-up. Jing and Blake didn't like Gabby any more and Gabby didn't care. She didn't. She'd told her notebook that. *I don't care. I don't mind. I don't give a stuff*. She knew she wasn't like the other kids. It wasn't just that she wore a new dress on casual clothes days when *normal* kids wore jeans because they knew a dress code that was mysterious to her. Also, she liked olives and oysters and reading. How could she possibly demonstrate *social skills* when she was inherently *weird*? At least Jing had been able to get out of their group, and Gabby only had to work with Blake.

He had spoken to her tonight.

‘Do you know how to use the telescope?’ he had asked.

‘I bet she doesn’t. You have to be a grown-up,’ Mia Cassidy said. She and Gabby had once been good friends.

‘I can show you,’ Gabby replied. ‘Follow me.’

Pressed between the two girls in the observatory, Blake had peered through the lens. Gabby showed them how to twiddle knobs, change focus.

‘It makes everything look so close,’ he breathed.

Gabby shook her head. ‘Not everything. Only a tiny fraction of everything.’

‘Fractions?’ Mia asked.

Gabby had to be careful. They already laughed at her *big* words. ‘There are lots of stars,’ she said.

Nothing about billions and trillions or light years, or anything. Mia blinked at her anyway.

‘Our sun is a star,’ Gabby added helpfully.

‘It’s a bit bigger than the others,’ Blake said with a laugh, because he was the biggest of the kids.

Gabby laughed too. ‘It just looks bigger cause it’s closer to us. Our sun is only a tiny little star.’

‘The sun is tiny?’ asked Mia, looking both sceptical and inclined to take this personally. ‘Mr Thorpe said it’s huge.’

‘That’s only compared with the Earth,’ Gabby explained quickly. She didn’t say, stars are so huge that if one girl is unhappy, it’s only a tiny thing.

Blake shuddered. He liked being big. Gabby knew that. He wanted to be a football player and reach the grand final. And maybe he would. Someone had to play football in the grand final. Quite a few someones.

They got home. Mum and Dad took Gabby to her bedroom, saying they knew she must be tired and leaving her to sleep. All

## THE MAP OF NIGHT

Mum said was that she might need to go out again to work, and that wasn't so strange. Maybe Mum and Dad really had forgotten Parent-Teacher conferences. Gabby's old friend Kaylee Burch used to complain that her parents were too uninvolved but what parents were mostly involved in was themselves, Gabby thought.

On Monday, Mia would find some reason to laugh about tonight, and show her pretty, white teeth in their new, sparkling braces. Magically, Mia could make even braces look cool. It was Mia and Blake and Jing (and Olivia, who wasn't even there tonight) who were the problem, not Gabby. Gabby didn't even want to be cool. She'd never have social skills. Neither, by the way, would Ms Jones. Ms Jones should stick to her job, which was teaching facts not social skills. And Gabby's report card should be better. Ms Jones shouldn't make Gabby's lack of success in the playground become a lack of success in the classroom. Stupid group work wasn't fair. Ms Jones hated her. It showed up all the time. For instance, Gabby had been instructed to tell her that Dad would be picking her up from school every afternoon next week.

'Won't that be great?' Ms Jones enthused, like Gabby's happiness mattered to her. But she'd quickly turned her attention to other kids. If she cared about Gabby, there'd be no group work, especially not that stupid Ancient Greek food presentation. Didn't Ms Jones know stress (anxiety, tension, worry) was bad for kids? Gabby should remind her. Imagine if students wrote reports about their teachers. She turned a page in her notebook. She'd started keeping astronomical observations in here, since Mum showed her how. Sitting by her window, she filled a report card in for Ms Jones.

*Geraldine Jones, she wrote. Report on Observations.*

*Letting students excel by working on their own. F*

*Caring about feelings. F*

*Kimberley Starr*

*COMMENT: Ms Jones has not been able to overcome the temptation to make students work in stupid groups, even with people who used to be their friends. She also tends to worry too much about social skills.*

Gabby paused. Had she been fair? And added:

*Explaining maths, especially long division and fractions. Satisfactory.*

It was important to be fair. She returned to an earlier list. *Things Mum forgets* and added, *Report Cards. But this might be a good thing.*