

AFTER THE SMOKE CLEARS

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PANTERA
PRESS

Chapter 1

LOTTI, 2009

You have reached your destination.

I craned my neck, scanned the nothingness on all sides. ‘And where the hell would that be, exactly?’

Pulling over, loose gravel chinked beneath my tyres. I lowered the window. A stifling warmth wafted inside, as if I’d opened an oven door. There were no cows, no horses, but the air was thick with the smell of both. Further afield a wrought-iron gate was wedged permanently open to reveal a long crusher-dust driveway cutting a line through the bush and leading to a cluster of tiny houses squatting in a circle. I half-expected a cult of breatharians to appear between the trees, the vibe was so weird. What is this place? My car smelled like feet and was littered with evidence of carb-drenched meals-on-the-go. I’d driven all day with a talking fart machine in the back to rush *here*?

The first clue about where we were was an old, rust-bitten sign. Peeking through overgrown lantana, it was so bleached of colour I could barely make out the details. *Brightside*. The letters bled into a scene of a mother with a manic grin serving rosy-cheeked children; its wholesome goodness reminding me of a retro Vegemite commercial.

It had been thirty-six hours since August left. Left, in the dead of night without any explanation. And the bastard still hadn't even called to say he was okay, or to check on his son.

August being cagey about his past wasn't unexpected – besides the fact that I was inexplicably drawn to the man, all I knew for sure about August Silverfell was that he had a son, he was a mechanic and he liked to swear a lot. He never talked about himself, but it felt uncharted when August had said he couldn't take his son, Otto, with him – 'not for this' – and asked if I could have him 'for a bit'.

Otto was my favourite six-year-old ever. I met the kid when he walked himself into my classroom on the first day of school. He was a puzzle – always curious and engaged, polite and clean (even if his uniform was crumpled and two sizes too big), but he had a wildness to him. His naturally fair skin was a sun-kissed brown as if he spent his days mustering cattle, not smothered in sunscreen and rashies like most kids. He had a dark bob that reminded me of Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, and his eyes, I would come to learn, were the same deep chestnut as his father's.

August looked a little like an extra from *Underbelly*. Tall, muscular, and rough around the edges. He wore black ruggers with a black shirt and got away with it, probably because it fit with his no-fucks-given attitude, scruffy hair and goatee. His fingers were callused, he had stubble by morning tea, and anger was the only emotion he knew what to do with. My father would have described him as the type you'd be wise to run a background check on before getting involved with.

The man had something against owning stuff, about putting down roots – even his home was on wheels. But early on, there was an edge to him that woke something in me. Besides, we kissed the same. Surely, that was some biological marker for

assessing our genetic compatibility? Either way, that fact made me happy enough to wait around and find out. But this turn of events had me in a flurry, a flurry of doubt, with dirty clothes and a bad case of indigestion. I really didn't do impulsive decision-making well.

Deflated, I checked my iPhone. When August hadn't called, hadn't texted to let me or Otto know where he was or when he'd return, I had to resort to the only breadcrumb trail I had – destination tracking recorded in the location settings of his iPhone. He'd have no idea it was linked to my account, being my old phone. Neither did I until he left, and I was fumbling for evidence of why.

I was in the right place. This was it. The place August ran to.

I shook my head. 'Why here, Augie?'



Our impromptu road trip started with a text two nights earlier. I could tell by the way August's face fell in the millisecond after he received it, that it wasn't good. I had been at August's place all weekend, and I was just about to drag myself home to shower and fall asleep on a pile of class 2B's spelling tests when the text arrived, and the unravelling began.

'Is that your other life calling?' By life, I meant *wife*. He'd never provided the synopsis of his son's mother or his relationship with her, just withdrew a little when I'd asked, said that he'd loved her, and she was gone. Gone, except for the photo perched on the windowsill near Otto's bunk in her memory. I'd wondered what she knew that I didn't. Why she left.

'No other life. Just Brookes – my old mate.'

Mate. That didn't denote male or femaleness.

He had paced around after the message like a kid with attachment issues, waiting for a tardy parent. Scraping his stubbly chin with his hand, he thumped the door open and skipped down the front two stairs with his phone.

Skulking outside was the only option you had for privacy at his place. August and Otto lived in a bus, a giant converted school bus that was permanently parked near a shallow stream, and I was a sucker for shallow streams with ducks at your doorstep, along with the other quirks of tiny living. The stream was so close you could hear it burble if you kept the window open. A field of green surrounded his patch, which August kept short with a ride-on mower he'd built from parts, and a thicket of ferns separated the bus from the iron sheds and spare parts rusting on gravel at the industrial estate where Augie worked, so you could pretend you were in another world. But I was still getting used to some aspects, like the lack of hot water. The boys had no problem showering at August's garage. Said shower had a *Baywatch* poster on the door, and a window that was not nearly as frosted as it should have been given the clientele that smoked outside it.

The security light cast a dim shadow over Augie's features as he made a call. I peeked at him through the window, phone to his ear, eyes to the ground, trying to make out what the expression on that rugged face of his revealed. After a few minutes, he lowered the phone from his ear, squared his jaw as he looked at the mobile in his palm as if he was getting ready to fling it into the creek. He turned away to the creekbank, steadied himself with his hands on his knees before turning back and returning inside.

We'd only been dating a few months. We'd never navigated a personal emergency together. 'Is everything okay?'

He frowned, parted his lips, then hesitated, as if sizing up how much to say.

Even though Augie was two feet away, the distance between us felt wider now.

‘There’s, um, there’s just a bit of a shitstorm, back home ... We have this thing, me and Brookes. If we’re in trouble, we show up for each other,’ he muttered, distracted. More imprecise notions. August’s eyes flittered around as he found an old bag and shoved in socks, jocks and a wad of black shirts. I felt useless, standing off to the side like an extra as he rummaged around dealing with this personal emergency of an undisclosed nature.

‘Sorry to just piss off, but it’s a bit of a hike back home so I kinda gotta get my arse into gear.’ He didn’t look at me while he said it.

‘As in, *right now*?’

He packed his toothbrush, stopped to think. ‘Brookes’s in trouble ... it’s like a Camira with the “check engine” light on—’

My face pinched the way it did when he went on about internal combustion engines.

‘—an accident waiting to happen. You’re best to deal with it before it kills you.’ His thick brow furrowed, and he answered as if it was an afterthought to whatever worries were flooding through his mind. He placed his bag down, put in more socks, took pairs out, swore. I could feel his confusion, his pain, and I was surprised at how much it hurt to see this competent, unflappable man crumble from the inside. I fired questions – why the rush? Could I help? Should he start a long drive this late?

‘I’ll keep the windows down, play some Accadacca.’

I could see Otto’s sleepy face squashed into his pillow from the kitchen (which was also the living room). Was he just going

to wrench the kid from his bed without explanation? It was Otto's turn to read a chapter of *The Twits* to the class the next day. He'd been counting the days.

'What about school tomorrow?'

The lump of a man stared out the tiny porthole as if the answer was written in the stars, then decisively dumped his bag on the lino and looked at me, the earlier haste seemingly forgotten. 'I've kinda been meaning to show you something – it's not finished, but ...you might need it while I'm gone.' August's eyes met mine in the direct way that never failed to set off the flutter in my chest.

'What happened to the emergency crisis?'

He hooked one finger through mine. 'It'll just take a minute,' he said, then mumbled, 'Just in case ...'

'In case of what?' *Your secret wife takes you back?* August had never said it out loud, but given the sadness that overtook him whenever Otto's mum was mentioned it was clear she'd died, but Augie was thirty-five – plenty of time to stash another one somewhere by now.

Our bodies slipped sideways through the narrow folding door. He towed me along the row of ferns towards a thicket of trees and a pile of fresh dirt I hadn't noticed before. A pathway of cobblestones led to a bamboo hut hidden in the ferns. Flicking open the latch that secured the door, he led me inside. A string of naked bulbs illuminated an outdoor shower, complete with a slatted wooden floor, a side table and shelf.

'This better fucking work,' August said, fumbling to connect something overhead. August used pliers to turn the tap. 'That's temporary.'

An unsettling gurgle, a rush of water and a moment later the cubicle was clouded with steam and a waft of teatree. All it needed was towels shaped like elephants and it'd pass as a

Balinese spa. The moonlight cutting through branches, the string lights, the mist – it was enchanting.

‘You ... built me a shower?’ Except for the odd mangled clay pot or macaroni necklace, no one had ever made me anything. I loved it. My mum taught me that you had to know what you wanted in life – *how else could you ask the universe to give it to you?* – and I was the kind of girl who wanted a deep claw-footed bath, complete with bamboo bookrest, heated towel rack and Sheraton bath sheets. Was that wrong?

‘Easier than hearing you bitch about the workshop one,’ he said gruffly. I’d noticed the kinder the sentiment, the throatier his voice became. ‘Come here,’ he ordered in his gravel voice, stepping under the spray. We were still dressed. He dragged me under anyway.

I inhaled a mouthful of spray, hands waving, hair dripping, then squealed, claws out like a kitten in a rainstorm.

‘You’re such a princess.’ He smiled, spitting water on the wall, flicking wet hair from his eyes.

I swept water from my face and punched him on the arm. Perhaps I was a little pretentious. Maybe my father’s advice that his only daughter deserved nothing but five-star suites (August was more of a backpackers’ dorm) was misguided. Maybe that’s what was wrong with my life-compass, as it had only gotten me lost, until now.

He kissed my forehead with his wet lips. He smelled like an intoxicating mix of soap and spice. That heady feeling, that complete contentment I felt standing under the stream of water with his arms around me, our clothes soaked, his skin glistening beneath the moonlit sky; I’d never been more terrified. Drenched, on a floodplain behind a shop full of rusted wrecks, I felt as if I’d navigated towards something right.

Our clothes clinging, he yanked off his sodden shirt, then guided my dress over my head, discarding it at the side of the hut. I tensed as I heard it slosh in a muddy puddle. ‘My dress ...’ I said, not realising how pathetic it sounded until the words were outside my head.

His face pinched. ‘It’s just stuff.’

‘I know, it’s just ... dry-clean-only stuff.’ I was making it worse.

‘Stop speaking.’ Pulling me hard against him in a heady kiss, we rocked as one dripping mass, the water spraying our shoulders. When I came up for air, I trailed my fingers down the rivers flowing over his pecs, gazed up and said, ‘I thought you were in a hurry.’

He shrugged, his eyes on me as if I were the only thing that mattered, as if he was savouring the very look of me. I still didn’t know why – why he’d rushed to show me this, why he’d gotten so intense.

‘I made it for you, so you don’t have to leave.’

A lump lodged in my throat. I wanted to sink into this feeling of wanting and being wanted, but something stopped me. He was expert at pulling out the tricks just when things were getting weird. Tricks that made it impossible not to fall for him.

‘Is this thing, whatever it is, really that urgent? I mean, no one’s dying?’

The heat from the shower was dissipating.

‘What?’ He frowned. ‘Not me, well, no more than anyone else.’

I kinked my head. ‘Is your *mother* dying?’

‘Jesus – you’re as bad as Otto with your death talk.’ His eyes fell. ‘She did that already. Long ago.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I blinked at him through the drips. ‘Your father?’

‘Carked it, before her.’ He was less worried by that disclosure, but I added ‘orphan’ to the thumbnail-sized fact sheet I had on August Silverfell. ‘Look, my lot’s all gone. My sister, too. Everyone’s gone. Which pisses me off ’cause the people who have families take them for granted. Having people that belong to you is precious, but other than a scruffy deaf kid, there’s no one left.’

‘I’m sorry.’ My throat tightened, thinking of his life of pain, not to mention the chaos of his past. It triggered a few alarm bells. I understood loneliness, but didn’t want to equate being an only child living in boarding schools and three-storey homes with his experience.

Augie turned all sweet and serious, tucked a tendril of my dark hair behind my ear. ‘Yeah, well, you’re my family now.’

I ran the tip of my nose up the side of his, flattered but a little taken aback.

‘Can I ask a favour?’ He grazed his fingers over my damp cheek and grew serious. ‘Is there any chance you could keep an eye on the boy for a bit?’

August had just packed enough clothes for a week. ‘A bit?’

He squared his jaw. ‘A few days? Not exactly sure. I’ll call, let you know.’

I was silent. Otto and I had spent time together out of school off and on for months, I knew his reading fluency levels and numeracy gaps, but I wasn’t mother material. I spent all day with a bunch of small humans, but I’d never had to keep one alive overnight.

‘But I don’t know how he likes his eggs, whether he has his crusts cut off, whether he sleeps with the light on....and you know I kill house plants.’

He saw my hesitation and huffed, turned to get out of the misted room. ‘Forget I asked ...’

‘Wait – Augie, I just – you can’t take him?’

We stood, the unspoken between us. *Otto*. Quirky, literal, big-hearted Otto. Not to mention the other thing about Otto.

He shook his head. ‘Not for this.’

‘Is it drugs, or money trouble or ... ?’ August did take a particular interest in True Crime documentaries.

‘What? Jesus, no.’ He slicked water off his arms, naked in front of me with no self-consciousness. He turned off the water and the cool night air infiltrated the warmth. ‘Fuck.’ He looked around. ‘Forgot the fucking towels.’ He opened the door and did a nudie-run to the clothesline, returning with two scratchy beach towels.

He threaded one behind my shoulders and tucked it under my arms like he was folding me up, warm and safe, but I didn’t feel either, and neither would Otto in the morning when he discovered his only parent missing.

‘I just know how much you ground him. You’re his hero.’

His eyebrows raised. ‘He already told me he likes you more than me. You’re a kid magnet. I’ve seen you crawling with that dinosaur tail strapped to your arse, roaring after the little rug rats – you couldn’t give a shit what anyone thought, or how crazy your hair flipped out of place. It was all about them. I knew you’d be like my mum – the kind that does the voices when you read bedtime stories.’

Mum? The word reverberated in my mind and hit a chord. I usually complained about August stalling on the commitment front, but now I felt the unease of things moving too quickly to process. ‘So why is it you can’t take him? Doesn’t your other girlfriend like kids,’ I mumbled.

‘What? Augie’s face pinched as he stifled a burst of anger. ‘You really think I could be fucked dealing with two chicks’ grief when I’m not exactly managing yours?’

I narrowed my eyes, pulled the towel tighter. 'I'm causing *you* grief?'

'That's not what I said.' He went cagey again.

I milked the water from the hair hanging loose over my shoulders that was already beginning to wave the way I hated. 'I'm getting cold.' I opened the bamboo door, which made a satisfying thud as it hit the wall.

A huge muddy puddle had formed outside the stall, a perfect pond for toads. My nose screwed up before I could hide it. I didn't *do* mud.

'How do expect me to get back to the van?'

'I told you. It's not a fucking van. It's a bus. And, for the record, drainage was next on the list. Wait fucking here.' He stomped into the bus that wasn't a van. I reached out and grabbed my sodden dress from the side of the hut without moving my feet, and he was already on his way back with a pair of glorious rainbow gumboots he'd had stashed in a side storage panel.

I checked the bottom as if it mattered. 'You know my size?'

He shrugged, gave me a look that said he knew every part of me, and the anger dissolved from his face. 'And I know you're an entitled upper-class princess who doesn't like to have creek mud *squelch* between your pretty little toes.'

'Don't say that grotesque word.' I balanced my hand on his broad shoulders as he slipped each boot on my wet feet. I looked at the mud again. 'But they're cute. I don't want to get them dirty. And what if there's toads?'

'Fucking women.' He picked me up, my colourful gumboots kicking as he carried me like a bride to his front door.

My arms around his neck, I admired his strong brow, his dark eyes. Was this first flush of lust going to fade? I'd expected it to, after months, but it showed no signs of waning. It was a

hunger, a primal need for my skin to be touching his. ‘You’re a sweet, infuriating man, you know that?’

He lowered me down and guided me inside, the rubber squeaking in the rhythm of our steps. We found dry clothes scattered around the van and a strange silence crept between us. The shower reveal ticked off his list, August regressed to panic mode and my mind followed. The reality of him leaving me with a kid hit me.

‘What do I do with Otto when I’m at work?’

He frowned. ‘You’re his teacher.’

‘There are rules. It’s weird.’

Otto was still asleep in his curtained-off bunk above the driver’s cavity. I knew Otto couldn’t hear us – we’d made enough noise behind the folding screen shutting off August’s room to know that for sure, but I still wasn’t comfortable arguing around a little kid, deaf or not.

He looked bemused. ‘Weird how? You need an excursion form signed?’

I glared. ‘I don’t think the school’s keen on staff babysitting students after hours.’

He glared back, the annoyance flickering again. ‘Babysitting? Is that what we’re doing? Shit, I must owe you some real coin by now.’ He turned away, dried his hair off and pulled on shoes. He began to fill a thermos with coffee as black as the night sky.

I gathered my things, then paused. I’d barely known him a few months. Did he expect me to move in here, with his kid, indefinitely? ‘What are we doing, Augie?’

Augie’s eyes narrowed and I regretted broaching the issue, now, when he obviously had priorities other than me. ‘Huh? I thought we were good now. I mean, I know it was a rocky start, but—’

‘We’re *good*?’ I’d done it now. We were finally talking. I was going to make it worth the angst that came with it. ‘You don’t talk about your past, your family, your childhood. If you were serious about me, you’d tell me all the messy bits, give me a chance to accept all the parts of you.’

‘You ... accept mess? You can’t even leave your bed without making it.’

‘You could try me.’

He squared his jaw, considered it. ‘You have no idea what a cluster-fuck I’m talking about. It’s not worth it.’

I’m not worth trusting? Perhaps this man was chronically unknowable. I swallowed. ‘Am I temporary? I just need to know because that’s not how I feel and I’m a real pain in the arse when I get hurt.’

‘Yeah, well some bastard musta really done a number on you already,’ he said.

‘Screw you!’ I blurted. I’d been aiming for assertive, but it came out all angsty and winey.

His face fell. ‘I’m sorry.’ He went to touch my shoulder, but I retreated, arms folded.

He exhaled, flopped on the thin bed, and grew still. ‘I’m not good with all the thoughts, explaining all the feelings, but I reckon you’re the first person to see me, to see who I am and stick around, so I’m trying my best here.’ He huffed out another long breath as if stringing together the words was physically exhausting. ‘That, and you’re ... I mean, I’m still pretty crap with all the talking stuff but I was always told actions speak louder than words. I joke that you’re a princess, but the way you devote yourself to those kids – the way you push them to be their best, push me to be better – you’re like a warrior.’ The sentiment was kind, but his delivery was laced with anger. ‘You’re smart. Do I have to say it? Can’t you tell I fucking love you?’

His eyes locked with mine, and I was back to smitten. I should have guessed the first time he said the word there'd be a 'fuck' before it. *Damn it, Augie.*

But he wasn't getting away again without an explanation. 'You disappear all the time,' I said.

'What do you mean?' he asked. 'I'm right here.'

'I mean from me. From us. You make me fall for you then you run from me. You're running right now, away to help this friend.' I used my hand to stage inverted commas over the word 'friend' even though it made me cringe. I hated myself like this. Insecure. Indecisive. Gesturing speech marks.

'It's not me freaking out this time – I have no choice. We have this thing, Brookesy and I – if either of us are up the creek we text SOS and turn up for each other ... I can't *not* turn up. That's who I am.'

'SOS? Like, like a pact?' This thing just got weirder. Was it some sort of cult?

'Look, if I don't sort this out now, the next time I see Otto he'll be shaving.' August blinked fast as if he had said too much.

I looked up at the boy in the bunk and my heart lurched. 'Is this a custody thing? Does his mother want him back? Do you still love her? Why won't you trust me enough to just tell me the truth?'

'Don't pin that on me – you're the one getting calls from some tosser you've never mentioned. What kind of name is Grayson, anyway? Sounds like a fucking tool.'

Changing the subject was an expert move that my father would be impressed by, but it left me rattled.

He scribbled something on an old envelope, then placed it under Otto's pillow and turned back to me. August's lips hovered over my forehead before he kissed it, turned to go, then hesitated. For one optimistic moment I felt the relief that

maybe he'd changed his mind, that this mysterious SOS call could wait. But he puffed up his chest and said, 'Maybe this break will be good for us. Maybe you need to take these few days to think about who you want to be, who you want to be *with*. See if I'm even close.' He left with his bag and an abrupt swing of the van door.

It clicked closed, robbing any right of reply. His truck skidded off, the ute's taillights two specks against the black-forever sky.

SOS. Those three letters are what started it all.



Otto's questions began the morning after August abandoned us, continued on the way to school, around playground duty and all the first night. *'Don't you usually sneak out when it gets light? How come you had a sleepover? Is it because of the shower that you didn't go away? When's Daddy coming back? Do I still have to go to school? Does that mean if Daddy dies you turn into my mum?'* The second night, we had brownies for dinner, tuckshop for lunch and he'd watched *Cars* on repeat that many times he really didn't need the subtitles. I was faking this parenting thing rather convincingly thus far and if it wasn't for the loud farts, the kid was okay company.

The disbelief that Miss Hill (I had a reputation for being mean as I 'always gave homework') would sanction a day off school caught him unawares. All I'd said was that we were going on a road trip to find Daddy; the trusting little goofball just smiled, grabbed his toothbrush, and proceeded to ambush me with more questions.

'A road trip? Like Lightning McQueen and Sally? Can we take Route 66? Can we visit Radiator Springs?'

‘That’s up to Daddy – we’re going to find him wherever he is.’

‘Like hide and seek?’ Otto had asked, wide-eyed.

‘Kind of,’ I’d said, a little guiltily. Otto and I were willing participants in the game, but August didn’t know he was playing.

August was suspicious of technology. He liked uncomplicated. He drove an old sixties Ford Falcon (which I’m sure had bullet-holes in the boot). He preferred engines he could fix with a wrench and spray of CRC. He boiled water for his tar-thick coffee in the microwave instead of the kettle (it was quicker and required one less appliance) and swore like a sailor despite mistrusting the sea. He’d have no clue his phone was transmitting his location, miles away. He only had a phone at all because my father got a box of them for his office and gave me a new one every few months and I gave Aug my old one.

Why would Augie have stopped here? The utopian grins on that sign – for whatever it was, or had been – felt creepy. Abandoned for a reason. I drove along the tree-lined avenue and entered the complex between two filagree gates left permanently open. By whom? And why?

‘You awake, Stink Bug?’ I whispered, forgetting again that Otto couldn’t hear me anyway. All his tools – lip-reading, signing, facial-expression decoding weren’t accessible when I was in the front seat, and he in the back. I’d even brought a white board to communicate when my Auslan fingerspelling was left wanting.

I touched his cheek, astonished part of me wanted him to stir – I’d been praying for a moment of peace the whole way to silence the kid’s dark tales of serial killers. He’d started to obsess over another wildly inappropriate library book he’d borrowed, reciting deathly facts as we drove, but now the little monster

was asleep, I missed the animation in his face, the wonder in his eyes. I never did do alone well.

Otto stirred, shuffled his feet in a sleepy kick. Dribble glossed his chin as he gave a wispy little-kid snore. His dark hair fell over his eyes and hadn't been stuck down with a mother's wet thumb in a while. Was that my job now? I'd always found the practice, often seen at the classroom door, kind of gross. It was one of the many reasons I didn't plan on having my own.

Otto stretched out, gave a loud yawn.

'Sleeping beauty awakes,' I said, and he screwed up his nose.

'I'm hungry. Can we go to Maccas?'

'None around here, kiddo. Roadkill, okay?' I half expected a tumbleweed to roll across my field of vision.

'Where are we?' Otto said as I drove down the driveway towards the buildings and stopped the car only a hundred metres from the Brightside sign and thought of The Killers song that I loved but Augie hated. I turned my head so Otto could see my lips and told him his guess was as good as mine. Temporary fencing circled acres of land, but with gaping holes between panels it was clear no one obeyed the signs zip-tied to the wire saying 'Construction site. Do not enter'. Other ugly signs warned of open mineshafts in the area. Excavation equipment sat dormant in the distance, waiting for instructions.

I craned my neck to get a better look at the cluster of buildings, then got out. There was no indication anyone was around, not even a parked car. My kitten heels crunched gravel. A row of graffitied weatherboard cabins flanked the valley. They all had broken windows, missing doors and rotten stumps, the sun-bleached paddocks surrounding them now bare but for ants' nests and thistles. A cricket pitch was now just fragments of cement held together by straw-like grass grown in clumps waist-high. Further afield, a steeple towered above

a stone church with rows of pews visible through the arch-shaped entry, the door stolen long ago. A shiver, something ominous, coursed through me, something I couldn't name but felt with every inch of me.

There was a gap in the rooflines, a cleared area with what was left of a large building – a grid of blackened concrete stumps with their heads exposed as if the buildings had been picked up like the house in *The Wizard of Oz* and set down in a better place.

'Why would Daddy stop here? It's not very nice,' Otto asked.

Perhaps it was once a holiday camp like Kellerman's from *Dirty Dancing* that went bust in the seventies? A cloud of something hovered in this valley like a scene from a *60 Minutes* promo – with replays of girls escaping some evil cult. 'Maybe he just got sleepy driving or had to change a tyre?'

A blue-eyed raven swooped towards me, settled on the brim of the rusty basketball hoop. The feathers on its hackles extended as it rasped loudly and dived towards our car, the only shiny new thing of interest in this forsaken place.

Otto unclicked his buckle and was out of the car a moment later, exploring.

I followed, hoping to find answers. All I discovered was a broken bottle of Bundy Rum, a dozen kinked cans of XXXX, and the stink of old wee reminiscent of the senior boys' toilets.

August and his school mate had camped here, I was sure.

Otto scampered ahead, and I extended my arm to stop him. 'Glass, Otto – get your shoes.'

He kept walking, exploring, couldn't 'hear' me in the dark.

I took his hand, veering wide to avoid the glass and a waft of earthy mustiness filled my nose. Muddy footprints led to the back of the cabin, and I followed them. A pile of freshly dug dirt, an abandoned shovel and a six-foot-deep open trench.

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We stumbled back from the pit, and both of us bum-planted into a soft mound of soil. The kid's long fringe had fallen over his eyes and was speckled with black. He spat out dirt.

'You okay?' I said, brushing off his fringe.

The kid nodded. 'This is awesome!'

I gazed into the trench. There was nothing but black. Nothing but a shallow hole the size and shape of an open grave.

Chapter 2

AUGIE, 2009

Two beams guided the Ford along the dark desert highway, with nothing but a few long-haul lorries and suicidal roos for company. The landscape changed from drought-stricken farms and scattered struggling towns, to stretches of fuck all. Nothing but road trains, bloated wallabies, potholes and time to think. I wasn't a big fan of that, as a rule. And if I had to, I shoulda been thinking about the pinhead forcing me down memory lane and the shitstorm waiting at the end of this road, not what *coulda been* with a highly strung daddy's girl. All I wanted was for her to be there, without question, but all she had were questions. Who, what, how, why? And, yet, she reckons *I'm* the one pussyfooting around this idea of having a proper grown-up thing.

Lotti buffed all the chips from my paintwork, made everything in my life run smoother, especially my kid. But she was what Billy Joel would call an Uptown Girl. I shoulda known better than to even try with a woman like Charlotte Hill. I knew that the first time I saw those big beautiful eyes of hers – she reminded me of that kooky, gorgeous chick out of *That 70s Show*. Telling Lotti about Brookes would have been like pouring four-stroke oil in a two-stroke engine – mixing

worlds that didn't go together. Besides, spilling the 'mess', as she called it, about Brookes would mean nothing without the context, and giving that would have meant coming clean about Becca, about Freya, about the woman who raised me. About what we all did.

But now that she had a whiff of who I really was, there was relief in it, knowing I was right about her being too good for me. Where would I even start trying to put it into words without the whole story erupting like an engine towed in gear?

Both sides of my AC/DC tape spooled through, and I was 600 k's west of the big smoke in under six hours. Even with the windows down, I kept having to sweep the side of my hand across my brow to stop the sweat dripping down my face, and it wasn't from the stifling heat.

SOS.

Three dots, three dashes, three more dots. That's all the message was, and all the message I needed to suck me down a wormhole to 1988. It ripped me back into reality, where I couldn't go on pretending Eldham was just the set of some old telemovie. That Brookes, his sister and Margo were actors, not real people I'd abandoned. Now, the distance between me and the living, breathing versions of that lot was shrinking with every minute. My guts felt as broken and wrong as after an all-night bender, with just the idea of what I'd find waiting at the end of this highway.

The 'check engine' light on the situation with Brookes back home had flickered a year or so back. I knew in my gut that it was a mistake, leaving him to his own devices now his sister had gotten her own life. I still remember the stabbing feeling when Brookes said his sister was 'up the duff'. Becca. She was something, a real-life version of Tamara from *The Henderson Kids* – even down to the Stackhat and roller skates. She got all

the smarts and the looks, while Brookes got the guts. They'd both got the auburn hair – the colour of fire, she used to say – but even that looked better on her. Becca having a rug rat (with that short-arsed bald bastard she was too good for) somehow felt more permanent than getting hitched to the putz. I was happy for her, knew she'd be good at it despite having a toxic old lady to learn from.

Brookes had SOS'd before. First time was as a scrawny twelve-year-old, sent from his van park on his walkie talkie when his mum was so plastered, she'd passed out (he couldn't lift her on his own, but together we kept her safe 'til the next bottle). But since we'd grown up, it was only twice. Once, at twenty-three, when his god-bothering wife left him. And once more, in the aftermath of his divorce, when he couldn't see any point in sticking it out any longer. This was the third strike.

The difference between then and now was those reasons weren't about me.

About an hour from where I had to meet Brookes, the denial I'd tried on faded. Even as I'd skulked outside after his text to call him properly, to get the details, I'd told myself it was just his ex-missus having another crack at getting full custody, not about what I feared. Hearing the panic in his voice made my legs go to jelly. Before I had a chance to even process what he'd said, I was chundering on the grass.

Lotti had distracted me for a while, but now the gravity of what I might face was on top of me. My breath felt like shattered glass in my lungs, and told me the not-too-shabby life was no longer guaranteed. Jesus, I had to get a grip. *Stay calm, stay clever.* That's what Lotti whispered to Otto when he started to melt down. I told myself I couldn't solve this shitstorm with my brain doing cartwheels. Cranking the window low, I stretched my forearm into the cool night air, extending my fingers in the

breeze and relaxing at the distraction until the steel-blue 'B' tattooed on my forearm from long ago, caught my eye. Stupid teenaged fool – I'd now lived enough to know you didn't need to inject ink beneath your skin for someone to be part of you. They just were.

I'd left them all eighteen years ago. Becca hadn't escaped like me. Now I had no choice but to be pulled back too, but I couldn't take my boy, and Becca was one of the few that knew why. I missed that about her when I asked Lotti to take Otto. I saw the look on Lotti's face – it said 'disappointment', confirming I was a shit dad as well as a shit boyfriend. Then I dug myself in further like a fool, spitting out the L word. That got the gears in that pretty head of hers going, the doubts about the loser she'd shackled up with festering, and I could see things between us were about to stall.

And she didn't know the half of it. Not yet. She said I made her feel temporary. That was the part that got me in the guts, that I made her feel like she was just a quick fix to survive through to the next service, not a quality repair to last a lifetime. Maybe her instincts were right. Girls like her don't end up with guys like me.

Didn't change the fact that I fucking loved her.



Growing up barefoot in the dusty six-street town of Eldham, when people called Brookes my 'special friend', I thought they were being nice. Even when the two of us lined up outside that wobbly demountable on the first day of grade one, me in those shiny shoes I tried my best to scuff, him in that too-big, faded uniform, I knew he was different. In a town full of fuckwits and arseholes, his straightforward honesty and glass-half-full

attitude was easy to be around. So was his fire-haired sister, keeping him out of child services down the track, despite being younger.

He couldn't read much, took everything at face value, and had a head like it'd been screwed on the wrong body, but Brookes was one of the few completely honest people I'd ever known – loyal, brave and, yeah, a little slow on the uptake. I don't know how many times I tried to teach the stupid bastard to wait for his change at the shop, make sure it was enough, but Brookes would offer up all his cash, and skip away with a goofy grin, without a care. There was a kind of beauty, being that innocent and carefree, that I was envious of.

My best mate's heart of gold wasn't enough to make me be a good person and stick around. But here I was, back in town, for my sins. The red-ringed signs slowed the speed limits, and there it was, the wonky electricity poles, the old smelters and abandoned mines, the outskirts of my hometown. *Welcome to Eldham, population 3145*. I knew the stories of all the lives that played out in those chamferboard shacks through the snippets I'd see through the front windows riding past. The Delaquas with the grandpa that wandered, the whore house with the twin sisters with hair so bleached it went green, the Schmitz with the angry arsehole who beat his wife every Friday night but was Mr Charm all the other days. Where were they all now?

My heart clawed its way into my throat as I approached the main drag. I braked for the corner that still had Stephen Mahoney's faded runners hanging from the powerlines. I could repaint the scene blindfolded: the IGA with the terracotta tiles specked with bird shit, the heritage-listed pub with its grand old verandah, Timmo's Bakery with my graffiti still on display – the messy apostrophe handpainted in the crowded letters above cartoon pies on the shop front. Every faded zebra

crossing, every rusted streetlamp unlocked another story, most of which involved Brookes. We'd built ourselves around each other, us two.

One heat-hazed night, the local lads (including Brookes and Becca's fuckwit cousins) had convinced the gullible fool that they were gonna all be mates now, took him under their wing, doubled him on their ten-speeds down the lake, shared their Sunny Boys and Redskins, even bought him potato scallops from the good shop, all the while plotting his humiliation.

After finding Brookes an hour later tied to a stop sign, starkers, those bullish Harris brothers pissing on his shoes, I promised Becca that I'd always be at his side and I was, for a while. Until I wasn't. I could still hear the Harris brothers cackle, laughing at their handiwork as Brookes blubbered, hunched over himself in a miserable attempt to hide his wanger from the scrum of Harris bastards. They circled in on him, perched on their shiny-rimmed bikes like the vultures they were. *'The funny thing is, Pinhead, the bike chain's not even locked, ya fuckin' retard!'*

They say it's not who you share blood with but who you'd shed it for. I was outnumbered four to one in that fight in '86, the one that took place beneath the powerlines dangling Stephen Mahoney's shoes, twenty seconds after I found Brookes, looking even scrawnier naked, cowering and in tears. The only reason I got out alive was thanks to the crowbar, still in my backpack after I discovered it with my metal detector that morning. All I can say about that was I felt no remorse about Joel Harris's scar.



Except for teeth a darker shade of nicotine-stain, Brookes looked exactly the same, sitting on the bonnet of his Hilux, smoking a durry, tapping his foot impatiently like he was warming his

engine. He'd always had that malnourished, unwashed look about him even before things got ballsed up. Marrying a nice Christian girl just out of school didn't end well. Employing substances as his coping mechanism didn't improve things. Nor did it help the custody battle for his daughter that he lost in a blaze of restraining orders he didn't understand. Only this man could get me back through the 'Brightside' gates of hell.

There was good reason we called this place Hotel California and, like the song, it had something to do with never getting to leave, but of course, we never said that out loud. A certain look between us had always confirmed we both knew.

'Still haven't fixed the bloody muffler, mate,' I said by way of greeting after I found his car at the end of that long drive and pulled up beside him.

He gave me the double forks, like his brain had been stunted for growth since 1982. 'Still haven't got a car from this century,' he shot back.

'That the best shit you could think to shovel on me in the two years since I've seen you?' I asked.

His chin trembled a bit, which had me worried. He slid down the bonnet and threw his arms around me and held them there for a long time. His mullet smelled like stale cigars. It felt good and bad at the same time. Good to see him, bad 'cause of the reason. He didn't let go.

'Mate, hope you're not pledging undying love 'cause I'm still into tacos, not hot dogs, if you know what I mean.'

'Calm your farm, bro.' Brookes pulled away, flicked me in the centre of my forehead just to lighten the mood. Bring us back to the fools we were.

I looked over the old place – it never had mirrors on the ceiling but, like us, it had seen better days. Hotel California, that's for fucking sure. I'd never left.

‘Are you into self-harm now or is there some other reason you chose to meet here?’

He didn’t answer.

Here I was again at Brightside; the backdrop of adolescence for this shitty town’s fuck-ups, and just a sweat-soaking BMX ride over from Main Street. The place still gave me the heebies. You wouldn’t know it. I’d spun a burnout over the cracked cricket pitch when I arrived back, driven over the fallen down fence palings of the horse paddock just because I could, but every memory fizzed in my throat. Other than this eyesore property, this side of the lake was for the normal folk, the farmers with money (that was before the drought), the boarding school kids with two parents and shiny shoes that fit and bikes they didn’t get from the dump.

Brookes shook his head, exhaled smoke into the night air. ‘Forgot how fucking chilly it gets out here at night. Freezing my balls off.’ He flicked a cigarette stub into the gravel, ground it in with the heel of his worn old sneakers. It reminded me when we’d do the same thing when we lived here, except with white Dunlop Volleys snuffing out stolen Winfield Reds. ‘Wasn’t sure making a fire was the best idea. Figured I’d wait, leave it to the expert.’

I exhaled through my nose. ‘Still an asshole.’ But he was right. With the day’s heat all but gone, we’d feel the pain if we stood around too much longer. I started gathering sticks, shards of memories hitting me like random sparks flying in the breeze, not all of them bad. The campfires. The dirt bikes. The horseriding. That’s if we didn’t get caught breaking pointless rules and lost our privileges, got thistle picking to ‘atone our sins’. I hated those goddamned thistles – spikey evil fuckers with their milky white juice that stung like fire. They used to make us ‘garden’ till our fingers bled. The irony was that those

bastard thorns, there to protect the damn thistle, blossomed somethin' beautiful. I was still waiting for that part to happen for me.

I lit the fire, and the roar of the flame, the intense heat stilled something within me, like it always had – stuffed if I know why. Flames got me into nothing but trouble, but we sat in silence, and even before the tinnies hit my bloodstream, I felt more relaxed than I had in months.

'Still got that flava-sava,' Brookes said, gesturing to my goatee. 'Ain't them things kind of a nineties trend, bro? At least you've got more hair on your head than your back.'

He crapped on, more small talk, like it wasn't me and him. It had been a long time but there was something about the people you shovelled shit with when you were growing up that made the gap shrink to nothin'. But he was as jittery as he was when we had to dry him out that year we don't speak of.

Hotel California in the flesh. Here we were, living it up.

'Your old lady's been naggin' me about ya,' Brookes said. 'I dunno what her problem is but she's been a bit off lately, but still good value – always up for a hot feed or a bed for the night when I's need it. Top Sheila. Would it fuck'n kill ya to pick up the phone, see how she's getting on?'

'Not my business,' I said, sculling another beer. I turned away. I'd had ten missed calls in the last week from the lady in question. All that was ancient history.

'She stood by you when you were in trouble, bro.'

'Oh, yeah? So, how'd I end up here, then.' I gestured to the dive surrounding us, or what was left of it. The church sat stout on the hill, the walls a little crumblier, the steeple a little worse for wear. I laughed. 'Remember stealing the Sunday-school moneybox?' I asked Brookes, his gaunt face across from me, the fire roaring between us.

He spat beer over his flanno, dripped froth on the dusty ground as the laughter came. ‘Fuck yeah. I felt so sick from them Snickers – but, God, the first few were ace before the pigs ruined it on us.’

I smiled. ‘Never been so grateful for the congregation’s generosity,’ I said. It felt good to hear him snort-laugh at the memory. Stealing the collection money and escaping this place was our ‘best day ever’. We’d called a Yellow Cab from the teacher’s quarters, got two towns over and when the driver stopped at the Shell for petrol, we stuffed our backpack full of all the junk food we’d missed and spent the rest of the trip scoffing what we could in the back before the cabbie got suss – two scruffy fourteen-year-olds with a bag of money – and called the cops. The slack bastards hadn’t even realised we’d escaped till the cops rang, asked if they’d lost anyone. ‘Never got such a hero’s welcome as when we got chauffeured back to Brightside in the good ol’ blue-and-white-checked XD Falcon.’ I glanced over to the stump remains of the amenities hall, and could hear the hoots and cheers from the motley crew of the lads, roar in my ears.

While downing the sixpack that followed, we summarised the last two years. Brookes filled me in about working on a cattle farm, and the fruit-picking Scandi girls he went through like socks. They seemed to like his goofy grin and adoring ways.

I wasn’t confident enough to mention Lotti at first – that could all be past tense anyway by the way it got left, but before we stuck into the Bundy rum, her name snuck out my lips. Lotti. Lotti. Lotti. Was I ever gonna be with her again? Why was I surprised? Everyone that mattered, left. I was a fucking fool to expect her to be any different. Brookes carried on like a pork chop about me being in a ‘relationship’ like it was a big

fucking joke. Maybe it was. He nagged me for intimate details about the shape of her tits as if we were still twelve, and I kept my mouth shut like I was ever a gentleman.

‘So, your bird, she knows?’ he asked.

‘Shit, no,’ I said. ‘That’s not what we agreed, right?’

‘Nah, I don’t mean about that. Just about, you know, Otto and all that.’

‘No. Not that either.’ I sniffed.

‘Fuck me.’ Brookes laughed his goofy laugh.

‘I will fucking tell her. About Otto.’

‘So, you haven’t like, *had a chance?*’ Brookes shook his head and grinned at my idiocy, did some rank gesture with his crotch as if I was busy doing something else. ‘You’ve been banging her for months. She’s stuck with the young fella now and she thinks—’

‘Yeah, I get it, mate, Jesus.’

‘You’re an old fart now.’ *Since when was thirty-five old?* ‘If she’s the real deal you gotta let her *in* man.’

‘Dude, I’m not taking advice from a guy who thought the salami circles on meatlovers pizza are called “lovers”, all right? So, go fuck yourself.’ Half of Brookes’ appeal was his lack of taking things seriously, and I wanted that version back. ‘And you’re forgetting I’ll probably be dead before I hit forty with the way things are in my family.’

‘Yeah, righto, asshole – you still buying that? Sounds like a bullshit excuse for not livin’ the life youse got.’

I shrugged. ‘Speaking of lives unlived,’ I asked, ‘how’s that younger sister of yours?’ I still couldn’t say her name without heat bristling my collar.

‘Becca’s good,’ Brookes said, lighting another fag. ‘She’s still keeping our fuck-knuckle uncle outta jail by ironing them books.’

‘You mean laundering?’ Breaking the law didn’t sound like the nice Catholic girl I knew, but saving face for her family did.

‘Yeah, that. I dunno. How else did she get such a big yuppie pad? But, mate, I’m an uncle! I told you she’s got a rug rat now with that putz.’

He was right about that part. Becca’s husband Peter was a putz – a salesman that pitched himself to her so well it took years for her to realise it was mostly spin. But at least she’d freed herself from the pattern of her mother’s life. Pete was as benign as a beige Magna and looked after her from what I’d gathered. Part of me just wondered what it was like to have what he had. Becca and I were gonna name our kids Scott and Charlene. I hope she grew outta that, for the kids’ sake.

The whole time Brookes and I caught up, I was distracted, wondering when he’d get to the point. To the reason we both knew he needed me. Nervous energy radiated off him. His foot tapped nervously.

‘I guess you’re wondering why I made you come back.’

‘That’d be a good start.’ I turned to make out the shadow to my right. Two long-handled shovels sloped against the splintery weatherboards of End Cabin that I hadn’t noticed before. ‘What’s with the spades, mate?’ I asked. ‘Too late to bury our secrets.’

He nodded to himself, winding up to say what we both knew he was trying to spit out.

There was a silence, and then he began.