

TO THE RIVER

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SABINE

The cliffs at Shallow Bend are painted red and gold; the willows sweep the water with loose limbs as the river brings Sabine home.

It's the last day of summer and change is coming. Time moves slowly on the river—she hasn't seen her grandfather since late winter, but it seems like longer. Pop keeps an eye out for her, but his hearing isn't what it used to be and he sleeps like the dead. Sabine has mastered the art of cutting the houseboat's engine, reading the current—her last visit, he didn't know she was there until she had steeped a pot of tea and set the mug in his hand. He won't call her, won't pick up if she calls. It's for her protection, he says. She thinks it has more to do with his distrust of technology. They have that in common. Pop believes microwave ovens can record conversations—he blames his cancer on the one she gave him. The cancer has gone and he stashed the microwave in the shed, its inner parts buried in

the midden for good measure. He eats his meals cold, straight from the can.

Blue sits in his usual spot at the helm. He turns his back on the land and stares wistfully at the water, as if to say *this can't be right*. He's more seal than dog. Won't eat red meat, only fish and occasionally chicken. Kibble is an abomination. Sabine often catches him nosing biscuits over the side of the houseboat for the carp.

She looks around.

Pop's tinny rocks gently in her wake and the orange flag tied to the jetty post reassures her the area is clear of surveillance. The houseboat drifts into a space near the opening of the backwater; a soft bump and the rear swings around.

Blue loses his balance, his claws scrabbling on the deck.

Sabine laughs and Blue, indignant, barks once. She shushes him with one finger. His bark sets off the kennel dogs across the river and for the first time he shows interest in going ashore.

'Leave it,' Sabine says softly, and he settles on his mat.

She leans over to scratch at the peeling lettering on the side of the houseboat. *Kirralee*. She had wanted to rename her, but Pop said there were at least five other boats he knew called *Kirralee* and that was a good thing. Keep it simple, hide in plain sight and all that.

She would've named her *Aria* if things weren't the way they are.

As houseboats go, this one is no beauty: a single cabin with a double bed, kitchenette and couch, some cupboards for storage and a toilet cubicle. Utilitarian. She floats. The deck is rotting in places and a section of railing broke away last week, but it has near-new pontoons and the engine runs like a dream.

The railing needs to be fixed. Non-compliance can draw attention from the water police, particularly during the last days of summer, when the townies are out and about in their speedboats

and on their jetskis, stirring up mud. In a couple of days, there'll be fewer patrols—she'll be able to relax her vigilance.

Smoking a rollie cigarette, her hand cupped over the glowing tip, Sabine waits until the sun slips away. She doesn't smoke often and the tobacco is stale, fizzing like a sparkler. Sometimes she has to travel well after sunset to find the right place to moor, which can be risky. Tonight her timing was just right.

Blue dozes, head nodding, slit-eyed.

Pop's property isn't as secluded as it used to be. His triangle of land, five or so acres with a hundred metres of frontage, has been squeezed by development on either side: two- and three-storey mansions, sloping lawns, towering lights that send fragmented beams across the water. Pop's riverfront is a black expanse in the centre. No glimpse of the green weatherboard shack from here, apart from the aerial on the roof. He has let the blackberry grow wild to form a wicked hedge, like something from a fairytale.

Pop likes to point his rifle at the kids who sneak through the fence to pick berries. Wouldn't shoot nobody, he says. The rifle is never loaded. He just gets a kick out of taking aim. Little bastards deserve it—they can read the signs. PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT. GUARD DOGS ON PREMISES. NO VISITORS. TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT. GO AHEAD, MAKE MY DAY.

Sabine smiles grimly, worried this might be the time she turns up to find he's incarcerated, or dead in his chair. Three, maybe four times a year she checks in: although there have been fewer raids over the years, the risk of surveillance is ever-present.

The light turns deep blue and quiet falls. There's always a brief hush at this hour, changeover, when the daytime creatures clock off and the nocturnal animals start creeping about. She spots movement—a feral deer drinking at the river's edge—and claps

her hands to scare it away before Blue takes off on a chase.

She checks the horizon. Dark enough now.

In the cabin she stuffs a bag with toiletries and a change of clothes; it'll be a luxury to take a bath. She locks the door behind her and disembarks to tie off. Blue hits the bank without getting his paws wet, but Sabine misjudges—her feet sink into the grainy sand and her shoes suck in water.

'Fuck it,' she says under her breath.

'Mind your mouth and stay where you are.'

Sabine's heart misses a beat before settling. 'You gonna shoot at me too, you old bastard? I thought you were deaf?'

'Can read your lips all right,' Pop mutters, emerging from the murk. 'Watch where you step—tiger snake's claimed that spot.'

Sabine pulls her foot from the sand with a squelch. 'He'll be curled up asleep, probably.'

'The devil don't sleep,' Pop says. He flicks on a torch and plays the beam over the bank to check. Just as quickly, he turns it off. 'Come on, then.'

Blue waits. When Sabine clicks her fingers he follows at her heels.

Pop leads the way. After seventy years on the same patch he finds the path easily, even in the dark. The shack is on Crown land and his is a life-tenure lease, but at seventy-two his life is running out. No Kelly in recent memory has lived past seventy-five. Sabine knows that's the thing bugging him lately: he's got nothing to leave her, apart from meagre belongings and an ugly boat, and even if he did own the land she wouldn't be able to claim it.

'Can't cark it. Those vultures are waiting,' he said once, narrowing his eyes at her. 'Can't die peaceful-like until you get your shit together.'

For Pop, getting her shit together would mean to properly

disappear—obliterate her name, find a real man to take care of her, never come back here again. To Sabine, it means something else entirely. She has managed just fine for twelve years. Why stick your head up when you have everything you need in the hole? For now, she's just happy Pop's mean old heart is still beating.

'Sorry it's been a while,' she says.

'The river takes, the river brings back. That's how it is.' He stumbles and rights himself.

He's thinking of Nan. Sometimes the river only takes.

The shack looms ahead: an unfriendly building with a drunken lean to it, painted dark green without any bogging up or sanding back—every five years or so Pop just adds another layer to glue the place back together. He has a single propane lantern burning in the front window and three solar lights staked near the steps. Electricity's too expensive, he says, so now he runs gas and a generator only when he needs it, and he's going to need it now because Sabine has been dreaming of the bath for months.

'You'll want to soak yourself,' he says, as if he can read her mind. 'I'll crank the gas. Leave that dog out.' He heads off to the shed.

Sabine settles Blue on the porch, slips off her wet boots and lets herself inside.

Nothing has changed. The ancient floorboards throughout the cramped kitchen and living area have been mended in patchwork over the years, and she trips on a new section inside the door. The old couch is shaped like a hammock—Pop keeps it covered with layers of tartan blankets, not unlike the way he uses paint to keep the shack from falling apart. A film of coarse hair and dust coats everything. Pop only opens one window and the air is stifling, flavoured with the lingering odour of dog.

Blue's dam Polly died a few years back—she crawled under the rainwater tank after being bitten by a tiger snake. Pushing

seven years old and scarred from the previous litter, she shouldn't have had her last: four fat pups, stillborn, and Blue the runt, barely breathing. Sabine blew in his lungs and claimed him as hers, lest he go the way of Pop's bucket. Polly had been bitten twice before and survived. The last litter had drained the fight out of her, which accounted for Pop's hatred of tigers and his intolerance for Blue.

Sabine enters the bathroom. It's tidy but not clean, and the enamel is cracking. She wonders if the bath will hold water. Pop wouldn't know since he only ever uses the outdoor shower. She plugs the drain, runs the hot tap, hopes.

Steam rises. She adds more cold—it's still thirty degrees outside—but not too much. It's not really a bath unless you nearly poach yourself. When she looks for the shampoo to make bubbles, she finds a neatly folded towel and a lavender-scented bath bomb resting on the sink.

So Pop knew she was coming. *Fucking river telegraph*. Her eyes water, and it has nothing to do with the steam.

She closes the door and strips. The mirror is spackled with grime; she wipes a clean spot with a corner of the towel and peers at her blurred reflection. Lately her close vision isn't great. She can't read a book or a map without holding them at arm's length. Too many years scanning the horizon. She probably needs glasses. She bares her teeth: straight and white against her tanned skin, but with a chipped incisor that makes her look as if she has been in a bar fight. Her cropped brown hair is showing blonde at the roots again. Is the suspicious mole on her collarbone turning black?

She shrugs. Couldn't be any more malignant than the past she keeps put away. Optometrist, dentist, hairdresser—add those to the list of ordinary tasks she avoids. She can manage a razor, scissors and a pharmacy dye kit, but not doctor visits, beauty treatments or any kind of appointment that might enter a system. Her skin is

tanned and dry and her muscles have become ropy from heaving and hauling, from riding the sway of the boat. She has too many scars to remember how they all got there, old cuts left unstitched.

She settles in the tub, shoulders submerged, knees protruding. The bath bomb fizzes on her belly. Pop will leave her as long as she needs, but she wants enough time with him to talk business and he gets jumpy if she stays too long. Plus Blue needs feeding. And she forgot to bring the batteries up for a decent recharge.

She pinches her nose and ducks her head under. When she comes up, Pop is rapping on the door.

‘Just a minute!’

‘*Now*, Beenie,’ he says.

It’s been so long since she’s heard him call her that. She experiences the conflicting sensation of heat in her extremities and, deep inside, a cold spike of fear.

‘What is it?’

She lurches from the water and levers her body over the side of the bath to sit on the mat, struggling to pull her underwear and shorts over her wet skin.

Blue’s barking his head off. For some reason he’s in the house.

Pop’s slamming cupboard doors. Looking for something.

She snaps her bra, yanks a T-shirt over her head and scrambles to her feet. Where are her boots? Outside.

She opens the door a crack. ‘Pop?’

‘Out the back. Take the dog and go.’

He’s cradling the gun. The ammunition box is on the kitchen counter, bullets spilling across the Formica. Blue’s barking has reached a pitch and tempo he reserves for pelicans and unwelcome guests.

‘Go!’

Pop raises the gun and walks steadily towards the door, aiming

through the screen at chest height. He won't let the person on the other side come in. She is terrified he won't let them leave.

Sabine enters the kitchen on all fours, spidering across the floorboards. She crouches behind the counter.

'Leave it,' she hisses, and runs her hand past Blue's nose.

On command, he drops and falls quiet. His eyes stay fixed on the screen door, still swinging after Pop barged through.

Outside the window, Sabine can see the silhouettes of two bodies, one pressing forward and the other backing away. Her palms are slick; water drips from her hair to pool on the floor, dark as blood. The air is heavy with humidity and danger. All signs are telling her to leave, like Pop said, but the realisation that the trespasser is a woman makes her pause. A long-dormant instinct is taking over, one that goes back to childhood—distract, de-escalate, protect.

With her hand, she stays Blue.

She crosses the room to the door and peers through the screen.

Her grandfather and the woman are moving slowly towards the far end of the porch. Yellow light from the lantern on the sill passes briefly over Pop's features before he fades into shadows.

Sabine reels in shock.

The woman's presence is disturbing enough, but Pop's appearance takes her breath away. In the dark she hadn't noticed the new lines and hollows, and his eyes, always bright, are now sunken and dull. In less than three months he appears to have lost a quarter of his body weight, and he's moving as if each step is agonising. Compared to the woman, Pop seems the lesser threat.

The cancer. It's back.

'Face the wall,' Pop says through gritted teeth.

The woman does as he says. Her mid-length dark hair is tied in a low ponytail, and she's wearing a white blouse and navy skirt. Her stockinged feet are coated in mud. Everything about her screams

desk job, government or cop. Pop has her by the back of the neck, the barrel of the gun pressed between her shoulder blades. She's trembling, her head ducked in a show of submission.

'Don't turn around,' Pop says.

'Okay,' the woman answers. 'Okay.'

'You've seen the signs,' Pop growls.

She nods.

'Then you knew what you were getting into.'

Sabine knows whatever happens next, they'll be coming for her. She can't let them take him too.

'Pop.'

He freezes, then jerks his head. 'It's her.'

The neighbour.

'Go back inside,' Pop mutters.

But it's pointless—the woman has turned her head.

The tension inside Sabine releases. Pop is sick again. By the look of him, he's never been closer to death. There's only the inevitability of what will come.

She goes to her grandfather and presses down on the gun barrel, lowering it. For a moment he resists, but she puts her other hand on his shoulder and squeezes.

He's shaking. There's blood on his lips.

'Pop,' she says. 'Enough.'