

OPAL

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Prologue

Kanpara, Queensland
Sunday night

It's gone 8 p.m. and fully dark when Mark knocks on Karen's door. He's nothing more than a shadow in the gloom. The street lights are sparse - one at the junction with the highway half a kilometre away and another, slightly closer, at the junction with Victoria Road. Once night falls, the only real light comes from neighbouring houses, each one sitting on its half-acre block, strands of gum trees between them and Karen's place. The block behind her house is vacant and the place on the left already in darkness, the truckie who lives there either on the road or early in bed. The artist who lives on the right is awake, his house ablaze with light, but thanks to the shadow of the trees even that nosy git would struggle to see a man arriving, much less name him.

He can hear the TV on inside, the upbeat voice of a male presenter, the lift in volume as an ad break kicks in. He knocks harder and this time she hears him; the TV goes off, he hears

her footsteps approach. She opens the door, stands silhouetted behind the screen, the light behind her. He steps forward and she opens the screen door, a smile travelling from her lips to her eyes.

'Hello, you,' she says. She waits until he's closed the door before she reaches her arms up around his neck, and he pulls her close, kisses her. They stand like that, entwined, close, warm, kissing for a minute before he pulls away, strokes her hair off her face, sees the swollen cheek and eye, the red mark that will bruise to blue and purple.

'That fucker,' he says. 'I should fucking kill him . . .'

Her smile fades. 'Please, let's not talk about him,' she says, turning away so he can't see the bruise. He pulls her back, close to him, and she leans into his chest.

'You have to leave him,' he says.

'I know.' Her voice is muffled against his shirt.

'Why don't you leave right now? You can stay in my caravan at the workshop. I'll take you there, right now, and then you can decide what you want to do in the morning.'

She looks up at him. 'What? Stay there with you? The two of us? What about Vero?'

He hesitates; that's not exactly what he'd meant.

She sees the indecision in his eyes and steps back. 'Not so easy, is it,' she says, her voice not bitter, just resigned. 'Look. It is what it is. I'll be OK. I just needed some company tonight, that's why I texted. You don't have to fix this, I just didn't want to be alone.' A thought occurs to her: 'You didn't bring your car, did you?'

'No, course not,' he says. 'I left it down the road at Blair's. I need to see him later.'

'I thought he was leaving?'

'Yeah, tomorrow morning. But someone told Dean Wilson that we found opal, and Wilson started hassling me at the pub about selling it to him. Must have been Blair, mouthing off.'

‘But you haven’t been finding anything . . .’

‘Yeah, nah, I guess Blair was big-noting himself. And then Stewie Charles had a pop at me. Pulled a knife, threatened to kill me . . .’

‘Oh my god!’ She looks at him, eyes wide. ‘Are you OK? Did he hurt you?’

‘I’m fine. Some cop broke it up.’

‘Was Todd there? In the pub?’

Mark nods. ‘Yeah. Halfway pissed already.’

‘I figured,’ she says. ‘He’ll be there all night. He always feels like shit after we have a fight, gets pissed. He’ll be apologetic as hell tomorrow. I’ll be OK.’ She pauses, steps closer to him again, pulls his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans, runs her fingers along his bare stomach. ‘Todd won’t be back till late, if he comes home at all. He usually sleeps it off in his vehicle. Why don’t you stay for a while . . .’

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Afterwards, Karen asleep, her head on his shoulder, her arm flung across his chest, Mark suppresses a sigh. He’s lying in another man’s bed, with another man’s wife, a man who was once a friend, maybe even his best friend. He owes Todd no favours – the bloke’s a drunkard and a wife-basher and he’s pretty sure that when they were mining together Todd stole from him too. But still, he doesn’t feel good about it.

And then there’s Vero. Marrying her was a mistake. They’re too different, want different things from life, and he’s working up to telling her that it’s over. She can sense it – that’s why she’s up here this season, not living it large on the coast as usual. And he knows that one reason he hasn’t actually gone through with the advice his divorce lawyer gave him is that Karen might expect the two of them to get together, and though he likes being with her he doesn’t want that either, doesn’t need the aggro of it.

He suppresses another sigh. He doesn’t understand why he

isn't happy. Last week he'd found a huge opal, the kind of stone he's been looking for all his life. He's kept it quiet, told only Blair, a bloke he'd thought he could trust. But now Dean Wilson knows about it. Wilson wasn't even due in town but he can smell opal from a hundred miles away. And it must be Blair who opened his trap, probably trying to sell the opal himself, take what isn't his, which means he can't trust him and needs to reconsider his plans for the stone. He'd thought the plan he'd cooked up was the best possible solution, keeping everyone else out of it. But now - well, he's already told Blair that he wants the stone back, is going to sort this himself. He'll drop by Blair's after he leaves here.

This opal is the stone that means he's set for life. If he keeps it quiet, then when he divorces Vero she won't take everything he's worked for away from him. The opal is perfect, but he can't find the kind of joy in it that he'd expected. Maybe he's lost his passion for mining, for this life. Used to be a time when as early as January he'd be itching to leave the city and get back out bush. He'd be making plans and studying maps and counting the days till the worst of the heat was gone, the wet done for another season, and he could be back out here, living in the camp, working long days, looking for opal.

He'd always said that, no matter how much money he made, you'd still find him here. Not just because of the spine-tingling pleasure of breaking open a nondescript boulder to reveal the veined iridescence of an opal, but also for the peace of being out here. The romance of it. The timelessness of it. Of surviving the elements, of communing with the land. No one bothering him, no one breathing down his neck telling him what to do, just wide blue skies, hard yakka and a couple of old-timers on the neighbouring claims to have a beer with when he was in the mood for company. The kind of blokes who didn't feel the need to fill a silence with pointless words but who could tell you yarns of the old days, when shifting

gear needed bullocks, when mining was a bloke with a shovel, and when roughing it was proper rough, before solar-powered fridges and TVs and fucking Wi-Fi and all the rest of it.

But now, coming up on fifty, the heat and the dust are wearing him down. The old-timers like his grandad are all dead and gone and he doesn't like the blokes who've taken their place. They're either crims hiding out from cops or other gangsters, or chancers and cheats, no idea about opals and likely to snort any money they make back up their noses. No stories, no love for it, just bullshit and aggro. Nah, he can't see the poetry out here anymore.

He thinks back to the day he'd found the opal, trying to feel the passion, the old magic. He'd bought the claim from the Charles brothers at the end of last season, getting a good deal because they were neck-deep in shit. They've got no clue about mining - he's got no idea why they're out here. Running from trouble, is his guess. He's never asked, and they've never said, but he can smell trouble on blokes a mile off, he's seen that much of it on the opal fields, even back in the day. Last winter, the two brothers had been running out of cash so fast they couldn't afford fuel for their drills and excavator, let alone booze or drugs. They'd been happy enough to sell the land to him. Had spent the money on coke and women, no doubt, then crept back this season looking as thin and broke and rough as ever.

He'd had a look at the site, quietly, on the sly, long before he'd offered to buy it from them. Given the chance, it would have been the first part of their claim he'd have mined. The curve of the land, the way it rises and falls, the faults and seams, the way the rock and clay layers. All of it screamed opal to him. But the clueless Charles brothers had started mining in a gully closest to their camp, probably out of convenience as much as anything. They hadn't been finding any colour and by Mark's reckoning they'd have been lucky to hit pay dirt there. But this ridge . . . He'd been

certain, really certain, that it would yield.

They'd been working the site all season, him and Blair, day after day, week after week, putting down drill holes, starting a cut, working methodically from left to right, digging out boulders, crushing them and seeing nothing but red dirt and dust. Endless red dirt and dust. The clay was wet enough, the shape of the land was right, the depth was right, but they hadn't found even a glimmer of colour. He'd set himself a target of the end of the month before he wrote the cut off. He was about as deep as he would ever go to find opal and it's not worth throwing good money after bad.

He'd been sitting in the excavator, digging out shovel after shovel of red earth on autopilot, mired in gloom, when he'd felt the digger judder and slow as it hit stone. Boulder's a good sign, especially at this depth. He'd dug in and under, and when the rock emerged he'd been vindicated. It was shot through with colour: blue, green, red, the palest of yellow, all shimmering in the sun.

His heart had caught at the sight. Even after all these years, opal still has the power to move him. Out in the heat, among the dirt, the dust, the flies, comes this beautiful gem, this rainbow captured in stone. Formed over millions of years, and him the first human being to ever see it. He'd climbed out of the excavator for a better look, and up close it had stopped him dead. He could tell that he'd found a huge one. Not yet broken from its stony shell, not yet cut, not yet cleaned, but he could tell. He'd excavated an enormous stone of beautiful harlequin-like colours. The size of it gave him a tremble of something in his stomach. He'd felt his mouth stretch into an incredulous grin. The find of a lifetime. A million dollars. That's what he's looking at: a million fucking dollars.

He'd wanted to shout out to someone, 'I've found a stone that means I'll never have to work again!' But he'd been alone, deep in the cut, the sun ferocious, the air still. The walls of rock and clay climbing high above his head, a hawk turning lazy circles in

the sky above, perhaps attracted by the bright colours of the opal he'd uncovered.

His mind was racing to match his heartbeat: he'd already cut the stone, seen the buyers lining up, spent the money. A second later, other implications came to him. This was a find that could attract envy and greed and potentially violence. An opal this size, a gem like this, could turn anyone to covetousness - it was the kind of stone people would kill for. Vero couldn't know, she'd only take half of it when they divorced; he hadn't even told Karen, he's not sure why. Told himself it was best to keep it on the quiet.

But when Blair had announced that he'd had enough, was quitting for the season, Mark had decided to confide in him. Had asked Blair to take the stone with him. To keep it for a few weeks until he could get Vero on a plane home and come and collect it. He'd trusted the bloke. Blair's the quiet sort and he'd thought of him as honest. He'd promised Blair a cut if he kept his mouth shut and helped him out. Blair had been more than happy, even a small cut of a million bucks enough to set him up.

But, somehow, the news has leaked out. First the camp was turned over, reinforcing his desire to get the stone out of here and far away. When Blair was insistent that it had nothing to do with him, he thought it might have been chance timing, the Charles brothers trying their luck while he wasn't around. But now Wilson knows about it - even Vero's heard rumours and is getting suspicious. And Stewie Charles is upping the aggro, trying to scare him into giving them more dough, spreading stories that he found it on their claim, that he didn't pay them enough, has stolen it from them.

All of it can only mean that Blair has opened his big trap. Been big-noting himself or worse, getting greedy, getting envious, trying to take more than the share he's been promised. It proves what his dad and grandad always said: you can't trust anyone around opals.

The gloom that he hasn't been able to shake returns. The

highlight of his career, of his life, and not one person he trusts enough to celebrate with. Everyone out to backstab, to steal from him.

At the thought, the sigh he's been holding finally slides out of him. Karen shifts at the sound, turns to face the window, pushes her back against his torso, wraps her legs around his. He should go, collect the opal from Blair, get out of here before Todd comes home and he has to leg it out the back door like a guilty teenager. He's lying on the side of the bed closest to the door; he could easily slip out and leave without waking Karen. But he's exhausted from a long week, and the beers he had at the pub - drinking to make the night go faster - are making him sleepy. The bed is comfortable, and Karen is warm beside him. He turns towards her, pulls her close, puts his arm around her, closes his eyes. Just five more minutes, he thinks.

He wakes with a start sometime later. He's not sure how long he's been sleeping but the room is pitch-dark. Karen must have switched off the bedside lamp. And something is wrong, he can feel it. He's about to move, to turn on the light, when he hears a terrible thwack and Karen makes an unnatural gurgling sound. He flings his arm out, touching the base of the bedside lamp to switch it on. It casts a murky pool of light across the bed. He doesn't have time to think, to even properly register the shape of a person, dressed all in black, standing at his side of the bed, arm raised. He catches the light glittering on the blade of a hatchet as it descends, instinctively puts his arm up to block it. It plunges into his forearm, the pain instant and overwhelming, and he falls back in shock, screaming with pain. The hatchet comes down again. It's the last thing he ever sees, his mind too confused for any clear thought, just terror and pain as the hatchet crashes into his head, a blow struck with such force that his skull splits like a ripe melon.

Chapter 1

AFP HQ, Canberra

Two days earlier: Friday

DS Lucas Walker is sitting at his desk in the organised crime unit at AFP headquarters in Canberra when the email alert pings on his desktop. It's June, early winter, the last light of what has been a miserable day fading to gloomy grey. Rain is lashing the windows of the building; the sky is low and dark. The weather matches his mood. He's feeling restless and more than a bit frustrated. Since his cover was blown on his last case, his boss, DCI Dan Rutherford, won't risk putting him back out on the street. Not now that Walker's ID is in the hands of the Vandals motorcycle gang and, presumably, a host of other villains too. He's still part of the team, but desk-based, using his hard-won intel on the Vandals to help prosecute its members and put a stop to the gang's drug importation business. The problem is, Walker knows he isn't cut out for office work. His real skills lie in being on the ground, undercover, running investigations. He'd requested to join a new unit, one

specialising in domestic extremists. He'd begun researching his new subject, learning about the networks of conspiracy theorists, religious hardliners and Freedom Movement groups, born of various ideological and religious influences but holding in common a preoccupation with an imminent apocalypse and a hatred of society and its authorities. These beliefs are starting to lead to violence, as the recent ambush-style killing of two young uniformed cops, along with a civilian bystander, by three Freedom Movement adherents living on a remote Queensland property has shown. Walker had been looking forward to working on something new, itching to get away from his desk and back on the ground, but Rutherford was having none of it. He'd given Walker a flat-out 'no', not willing to reduce the team's resources, at least not until the Markovich case is sewn up.

The email alert pings again and Walker clicks to open the message. He doesn't recognise the sender's name - Carlos Aguilar - but the subject line, *Stefan Markovich*, gets him interested. It's not just Rutherford that wants Markovich in custody. Walker, too, has unfinished business with the bikie, an old nemesis. It's only a few months since Markovich put a bounty on Walker's head, almost succeeding in having him killed. As a result, Aaron Adams and Nick Mitchell, two of Markovich's key lieutenants, are in custody, awaiting trial. Mitchell has turned government witness and offered valuable insights into the organisation and its allies, but Markovich himself has disappeared, fled the country, and in the last few months they've been unable to trace him. And with Markovich on the run, they're nowhere near breaking the Vandals or, more importantly, identifying the people behind the financing of the club's drug operations. Walker knows that in order to rid the streets of the lethal fentanyl and other drugs the Vandals supply, they need Markovich in custody. With Markovich still out there, there's every chance the gang can and will rebuild.

He opens the message, scans it, his heart quickening.

‘Finally!’ he says out loud.

‘What’s got you so excited?’ asks DS Sophie Bragg, poking her head over the pale-blue desk divider that separates her workspace from his.

‘Stefan Markovich. I think we’ve finally found him.’ As always, Walker feels his throat constrict at the bokie’s name. He can’t separate his rage from his fear when it comes to Markovich. ‘One of our undercover guys heard a rumour on the street that he’d gone to South America. I put some call-outs through the international teams and a guy in Guayaquil, in Ecuador, thinks he might have someone that fits the bill.’

‘Ecuador . . . ?’

‘Long way from home, right? But this cop’ – he pauses, looks again at the email he’s received – ‘a Major Carlos Aguilar, focuses on cases involving organised transnational crime and he says there’s a new player in town, working with the Serbian mafia. An Australian going by the name of Milan Pejovic, who Aguilar thinks might be Markovich. Hang on, he’s sent me a surveillance image of Pejovic . . .’

He pulls up the picture. The image is grainy, fuzzy, pixelated, but Walker’s shiver of recognition is instant. The details of Markovich’s features, his huge build, his tattoos, all permanently imprinted on his memory.

‘It’s Markovich alright,’ he says.

‘Yes! Nice one,’ says Sophie.

He reads the rest of the email. Background on the entrenchment of the Serbian mafia in Ecuador, surveillance of Jocić, the gang’s bigwig, and the arrival of Markovich aka Pejovic as a new enforcer. ‘According to Aguilar, the Serbian mafia is almost untouchable in Ecuador because they have family ties with one of the main Mexican cartels,’ he says. ‘The Mexicans run cocaine from there

to the US. The Serbs handle the European distribution. Guayaquil's a port city, the country's biggest, and they haven't got much in the way of border or port security so it's become a regional hub for drug distribution.'

'I remember reading about it - crazy violence, a state of emergency,' says Sophie. 'Wasn't that where they had that attack on a TV station?'

'Yeah, that's right.' Walker thinks back on what he knows about Ecuador. Sandwiched between Colombia and Peru, two big cocaine-producing countries; systemic corruption, a prison system more or less the domain of local gangs, and embedded international organised crime, particularly in Guayaquil, leading to a huge escalation of violence around the country. 'It's pretty much a narco state,' he says.

'Sounds like Markovich's kind of place.' Sophie's voice is grim. 'Right, what next. Do we have extradition treaties with Ecuador?'

'Yeah, but we'll need to work with Aguilar. He needs to get Markovich into custody. According to his email it won't be easy - he says corruption is endemic, even in his own department, and if Markovich gets wind of it we'll lose him.'

'You have to run this past Rutherford,' says Sophie. 'He has to sign off on how we move forward.'

She's right. Walker looks at the time on his screen: 17:05. And it's Friday, the end of the week, and with spectacularly bad timing he's away next week. His half-sister Grace is over from Boston to visit him. She's been in Sydney for a few days, partying with friends and getting over her jet lag, but he's picking her up at Canberra Airport in a couple of hours and they'll be driving the 1,100 kilometres to Caloodie tomorrow. They're due to spend a week up there. He wonders how Grace would feel if he cancelled their plans. If they spent the weekend together, then he came back to work on Monday. He considers the idea, reluctantly discards it. She's come

all this way to see him, to meet his side of the family, and is beyond excited about this trip. She's never met Michelle or Blair. He can't cancel. Since his grandma died, a passing that he missed because of work, he's promised himself that he won't always prioritise the job over everything else. That he'll make time for the people he loves. Time to make true on that. Much as he wants to be the one who brings Markovich in, this is a team effort and Sophie is more than capable of leading the search while he's away.

'I'm on holiday next week,' he reminds her. 'Will you be OK to run with this while I'm off?'

'Yeah, of course,' she says. He sees the light of ambition come into her eyes. He and Sophie are the same rank, but he's been a part of the team for longer, has nominal seniority. She's probably looking forward to his being away. It'll give her more influence, more access to Rutherford. He understands - he'd probably have felt the same in her place.

'We should brief Rutherford together, then,' he says.

She looks across the room. They can see the DCI standing in the meeting room, studying the Vandals org chart, the arrests that have been made and those still outstanding. 'Looks like he's available now,' she says.

As they head over, Walker says, 'You'll keep me in the loop, yeah, while I'm away? Let me know what's going on? I want to be part of it when they pull him in.'

'Of course,' she says. 'I'll make sure of it.'

Chapter 2

Saturday, 9 a.m.

Grace has pushed the passenger seat of the ute back as far as she can, stretching her legs out. Lucas is driving; Ginger, on the back seat, panting doggy breaths into Grace's right ear. She's so happy to be here, in this foreign place with her older brother, enjoying an Australian winter that feels more like a Boston summer. She's glad she made the decision to come. She needs this break from Boston and from her mom hassling her about making choices for grad school. Needs time away from decisions about next year and the rest of her life. The options are so overwhelming that taking this vacation on the other side of the world and extending it maybe forever is very appealing. The road spooling ahead of them, the wide horizons, nowhere to be, no applications to fill in, no job to go to . . . She feels more relaxed than she's done for months.

'Mom's on my back about grad school,' she tells Lucas, enjoying how distant that all feels right now. 'I don't know what I should choose. She's all for me doing applied math but it's not really my thing. I want to do something more impactful.'

Environmental studies or something like that . . .’

He’s watching the road, thinks about it before he answers. ‘I did applied maths,’ he says. ‘Mum was pretty happy about it and it got me my first job as an analyst in the AFP. But I reckon you don’t have to decide yet. Why not take a year out, see how you feel afterwards?’

Grace relishes the thought of some time out but knows it will be a battle to convince her mother, who thinks academic achievement is more important than any other. Her father, Richard, Lucas’s stepfather, is also a mathematics professor but he has more balance to his life. He loves sailing, dancing. ‘I might enlist Dad’s help,’ she says. ‘Remember how he signed me up for karate a few years ago? Well, I got my black belt this year.’

Walker looks over at her. She can tell he’s surprised – she’s slim, and not that tall either; both her mom and dad are slight. Lucas gets his height and broad shoulders from his dad’s side of the family. She laughs. ‘Can’t you just see me on a karate mat, throwing down the big guys?’

‘I reckon I can.’ He laughs. ‘Good job, sis!’ After a pause he asks, ‘Does your dad do karate too, then? I wouldn’t have picked Richard for the type . . .’

‘Oh, no, not Dad. But he thinks it’s good for girls to feel confident in their strength. He encouraged me to start and then I was kind of a natural. You don’t have to be a big strong guy – in fact sometimes it helps if you’re not.’

‘When I was living in Boston during high school your dad tried to convince me to learn to dance,’ says Lucas. ‘He said all women love a man who can dance, but I never took to it. We ended up going sailing together instead.’

‘That sounds about right,’ says Grace. ‘Dad’s a really good dancer, better than Mom. He’s learning ballroom dancing now.’

This time Lucas laughs out loud. ‘Richard is such a good bloke,’ he says. ‘I’ve always liked him. He’s the reason I survived when

I first went to Boston, before you were born. I didn't want to be there, but he made me feel like I belonged, like I was family.'

By midday, the sky above is an inverted bowl of deep vivid blue. Grace has never seen so much sky. It hangs above them in every direction, flowing down to a horizon so wide it seems endless. The sun is warm through the passenger-side window, mirages of heat shimmering on the road ahead. They've been underway for seven hours, having climbed into the ute – a new addition to her vocab, one of many she's picking up from Lucas – in the dark of a bitter winter morning in Canberra. The air frosty, the windscreen icy, and the sky first dark and then grey, no visible sunrise. When Lucas had said, 'We'll get going early, beat the heat of the day', she'd laughed, heat being one thing sorely lacking on a June morning in Canberra.

They've driven north-west, through green fields, woods and farmland, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, found themselves in the great Australian outback. The sky opening up above them, pale grasslands shimmering in the sun, occasional farmhouses surrounded by trees: tiny verdant islands marooned in an ocean of grain fields. They stop for lunch in a small town with tall concrete grain silos standing sentry at its edge, a main street with a little wooden church, a general store with a shaded veranda and a couple of businesses – saddlers and farm equipment suppliers. It's a typical country town, she thinks. It looks a little different, but the vibe is like the towns you find in the Midwest back home. Lucas finds the bakery, which serves coffee and food she doesn't see at home: meat pies, a savoury pastry with meat inside called a sausage roll, and sweet buns with pink icing. The other patrons, farmers wearing shorts and work boots and cowboy hats, nod and say 'G'day' as if they know them. She tries a g'day herself but it sounds wrong in her mouth so she sticks with hi.

In the afternoon, the country around them gets drier and the earth gets redder, with shades ranging from russet to deep wine. She

falls asleep, the endless straight road soporific, only waking when the ute's wheels hit the gravel verge – Lucas pulling to the left to let one of the huge trucks – road trains, he calls them – pass the other way. Four long carriages sway as it speeds by, huge wheels kicking up stones and gravel that bounce off the bonnet. They cross a wide mud-coloured river. The road gets slimmer, barely enough room for two cars to pass, and bumpy and uneven with deep potholes. Lucas pulls over at a rest stop – a gravel square on the edge of the road with a basic bathroom and a metal picnic table under a big tree. They get out of the car, Lucas taking a long drink of water, Ginger stretching a downward dog and sniffing around the base of the table, while she uses the bathroom to change out of her jeans into shorts. It's 3 p.m. The heat has a physical presence, the sun bright with a burning edge. It's difficult to believe it's winter, impossible to imagine how hot it might be in summer. It's quiet, everything resting in the heat of the day, and there's a sharp menthol scent on the air that Lucas says comes from the eucalypt trees. Shortly afterwards, back in the car, snacking on a share-pack of Cherry Ripe – a dark chocolate, cherry and coconut candy that Lucas says is his favourite – she sees the first signpost for Caloodie, 197 kilometres ahead.

'Caloodie!' she says, pointing it out, and Walker laughs.

'Yep, almost home.'

The landscape changes again. Nothing familiar, nothing resembling the wheat plains of the Midwest now. The earth here is a burnt red colour and the trees that line the highway are black-barked with silvery-green foliage. Birds of prey turn lazy circles in the sky above and occasional flocks of grey-and-pink parrots rise from the grassy verges as they pass. With Caloodie almost in sight, she notices something in her older brother unwinding. As the vistas get bigger and the sky gets bluer and the roads get straighter and emptier, Lucas's shoulders relax, his Aussie accent broadens, the

lines around his eyes and forehead smooth away, and his smile, always ready, comes even easier. He's heading home. Home to Caloodie, the town she's heard so much about, the town she's envied for the place it holds in her brother's heart. Home to his family, the cousins and aunts that she's never met but who are as much a part of him, perhaps even more, than she and their mother are.

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As he pulls off the highway and drives into Caloodie proper, Walker feels the familiar sense of calm that coming home always gives him. He's tired - the drive took almost thirteen hours because he made more stops than usual to give Grace a chance to see a bit of the country, and Ginger a break from sitting in the ute. The town is lit by the setting sun, buildings and trees casting long shadows onto the quiet streets. Grandma's house, now his aunt Michelle's, looks the same as always but his heart feels heavy as he parks on the street outside. Grandma isn't here to hug, to make him laugh, to welcome him home.

But as he opens the car door and sees Michelle striding along the balcony, the pain subsides a little. Caloodie is still home, his family is still here, and Grandma is still with them, alive in their hearts. Ginger pushes her way out of the car as soon as the door opens, bounds over to Michelle, barking and ecstatic, her tail going so fast it's a blur.

Michelle says, 'Hello, Lucas, love, welcome home' and holds him close. She's inherited Grandma's hugging skills. When he introduces Grace, Michelle steps over and hugs her in exactly the same way. 'I can't believe we're finally meeting you after all these years,' says Michelle, pulling back a little and looking at Grace. 'Lucas talks about you so much that I feel like I know you. Look at you, you're so beautiful! You take after your mum - I can really see your mum in you.'

Walker looks at his beaming sister, sees her through Michelle's

eyes. With her slim frame, denim shorts and fitted t-shirt, her dark hair tied back in a ponytail, Grace is a mix of sporty and feminine. She was always a cute, goofy kid, but now she's growing up she's more graceful and, if not assured, more confident too. He doesn't see much of his mum in her: Grace is less complicated and cerebral, more direct and outgoing. But then he didn't know his mum when she was as young as Grace is now.

The screen door opens with a bang and a small person runs along the veranda and throws themselves into his arms. Ruby, his cousin Blair's youngest daughter, almost ten years old but still young enough to want a spin in the air and a hug from her favourite uncle. Zoe, her older sister, stays standing at the screen door. She's fourteen, getting shy with adolescence. He gives her a hug then introduces her to Grace and smiles to himself at the way Zoe looks at Grace, open admiration filling her eyes at her twenty-one-year-old cousin's sophistication.

'Where's your dad, then?' he asks. After Grandma, it's Blair he always misses the most when he's away. More like brothers than cousins, they're less than a year apart in age and grew up together. He's been looking forward to having a coldie and a laugh with him.

'He's away. He's mining opals,' says Ruby, still holding his hand.

Surprised, Walker looks at Michelle, notices a shadow pass across her face. He lets Ruby walk ahead and go inside with Zoe and Grace, then turns to Michelle.

'Blair's alright, is he?' he asks. 'What's he doing mining opals?'

Michelle sighs. 'Him and Tracy needed the money. The tourism business is a bit slower than they'd hoped and you can make a decent bob out there. But I don't think it's worked out. He called a couple of weeks ago and said he wants out, but he can't get home. He left the car here for Tracy and the girls and he can't find a lift back. He wanted Tracy to come collect him, but she can't get the days off work.'

‘Where is he, then?’ he asks. ‘How far is it?’

‘Oh, not far. Maybe four hundred kilometres, something like that. Kanpara - it’s out west, past Wulina.’

‘Righto,’ Walker says, decision made instantly. ‘I’ll go and collect him. If I drive up tomorrow, we’ll be home on Monday.’ He’s tired from today’s long drive but knows Blair would do the same for him in a heartbeat. And it’s not like Blair to be a quitter, or to ask for help. If he wants to get out, he must have good reason.

Chapter 3

Sunday, 12 p.m.

The drive to Kanpara takes longer than Walker expects. The road is bad from the get-go – a single lane of bitumen, no markings, just one car-width of tar with gravel verges on each side. Then the bitumen turns from black to pale orange, as if the road crew had run out of tar and begun mixing it with the fine red dust that blankets the ground, and shortly after a signpost saying *Kanpara 297km* the bitumen peters out completely and they're on a gravel track that hasn't been levelled for a long while, juddering over deep ruts and corrugations, a plume of red dust and tiny stones spitting into the air behind them. The earth gets progressively redder, changing from iron red to an almost fluorescent orange as they head west, the trees spindlier and shorter until there's only a few thirsty-looking shrubs dotted across the dusty plains.

Leaving Grace in Caloodie had proved impossible. 'It'll be tiring and boring, a long drive up, just a quick overnight and a long drive back,' he'd said, but she'd been insistent on coming with.

'I don't mind,' she'd said, a stubborn set to her mouth that he

remembered from when she was a toddler, and that had made him smile. 'I'm here to see you. I don't care if we're driving or whatever, I want to hang out with you.'

So he'd given in as he always did with Grace and brought Ginger along too. Ginger's been sleeping on the back seat but, as they approach Kanpara, the juddering of the gravel finally replaced by a stretch of bitumen, she stands and pushes her head over his shoulder. He cranks the window down a notch and she sticks her nose out, sniffing this new air. It's almost noon when they cross a bridge spanning a sluggish muddy river and arrive in the town.

Kanpara is tiny, much smaller than Caloodie, and unprepossessing at first glance. They drive along the main street, the continuation of the highway west, passing the post office, a shop with an *Opal for Sale* sign that looks shut down, a big tin shed with *Rural Fire Service* written above the door, a dusty rugby pitch - all gravel, no grass - and then they're through the town and out the other side, heading west. Another low bridge lies just ahead - the town must sit in the curve of the river - and the highway stretches beyond that into the far distance. He slows, chucks a U-ey and drives back, past the only modern looking building in town - a roadhouse, opposite the rugby pitch, then a little park - the grass yellow and dry. After that, a small bungalow with Queensland Police signage and then, almost back at the first bridge, the pub, fronted by a dusty car park and a wide veranda. He pulls up in the car park and chucks another U-ey.

He'd seen two side streets coming off the left as they'd driven through, one before the post office, the other just after the fire service shed. 'Blair's place must be on one of those two side streets,' he says to Grace, and sure enough the first street, almost opposite the pub, is Albert Road, Blair's address. He turns and immediately they're off the bitumen again, on graded gravel, no people or other vehicles in sight. There are houses on either side of the street,

set wide apart on huge blocks. A couple have sprinklers on, the grass almost green, fences lined with pink bougainvillea, flowering wattles and acacia trees. But most, including the place where Blair is staying, which is halfway along, look uncared-for and unkempt. Low, cheaply made bungalows with carports to the side, dusty driveways and gardens that are nothing more than patches of long dry grass and spinifex bounded by sagging chicken-wire fences.

They pull up in front of number 3 and get out, Grace stretching her arms above her head and bending from side to side. Walker, relieved to be out of the driver's seat - his bad leg, still not fully recovered from the bullet it took last year, is aching and stiff from the two days' driving - enjoys the warmth of the sun on the back of his neck, calls Ginger to heel.

'Cuz!' Blair is standing on the veranda, beaming. 'Bloody great to see you.'

Walker goes over and they hug, Ginger nudging her way in between them. Walker feels a smile come to his face. It's been too long, many months, since he's seen Blair.

'This is Grace,' Walker says, pulling Grace forward, introducing her, noticing Blair's smile falter for an almost imperceptible second before it lights up again.

'Well, whaddaya know, after all these years, finally I get to meet my youngest cuz. I can see you got the looks of the family,' he says, laughing. 'Come in, come in, how was the drive? Are you thirsty? You want a tea or a bevvie?'

The inside of the house is gloomy and uninviting. The front door leads directly into an open-plan living room and tiny kitchen and there are three rooms running off the hall ahead.

'Tea'd be good,' says Walker, and Grace nods in assent. Walker goes to use the bathroom at the end of the corridor, passing the three bedrooms. Two are messy with unmade beds, clothes thrown over the back of a chair in one, hanging out of the wardrobe in the

other. The third, Blair's by the look, is tidy. His bed made, overnight bags on the floor, packed and waiting. When Walker gets back, Grace is perched on the sofa, a fake leather thing that faces a big TV, looking a bit uncomfortable. Blair is standing in the little kitchen, pulling milk from the fridge, the kettle boiling noisily.

'Who you living with here, then?' asks Walker.

'There's two other blokes working for Telstra that stay here,' says Blair. 'They're working somewhere else this week, won't be back until Wednesday, so I thought you could sleep here. But I reckon, seeing as Grace is with you, it's probably better if you stay at the pub. They've got tourist cabins that are pretty comfy.'

'Can I use the restroom?' asks Grace.

Blair looks slightly baffled. 'The toilet,' clarifies Walker.

'Ahh, the dunny. Why didn't you say so.' Blair is laughing again. Then he looks concerned. 'Not sure how clean it is. Maybe we should go over to the pub. You can get settled in and we can have lunch and a beer.'

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Walker and Blair are sitting in companionable silence, drinking their beers while they wait for their steak sandwiches and chips. He and Grace have checked into one of three little self-contained tourist cabins situated a short walk behind the pub. Walker hadn't had high hopes, but it's surprisingly modern, with a living area and sparkling-clean kitchen, two bedrooms with comfy-looking beds and a gleaming bathroom. It's a definite step up from Blair's place and when she'd heard there was Wi-Fi, Grace decided to take a rest. 'I'll take a shower and check my phone and then I'll come over for lunch in a while,' she'd said. They'd left her lying on the bed, phone in hand, distant look in her eyes.

The publican, a heavily built woman in her mid-thirties wearing jeans, a black Jack Daniel's t-shirt and battered Blundstone boots, has delivered two schooners, the glasses icy from the fridge, the

beer so cold it hurts your teeth. Walker takes a long drink. After two days on the road, the beer is welcome.

The bar is empty, only the two of them perched on their stools, Ginger resting at their feet and the publican messing about on her phone at the other end of the long wooden bar. It's not a bad little pub, thinks Walker. The main room is a long rectangle, with the bar running most of the length and two doors opening onto the veranda out front. At the right there's a small dining area with a handful of tables. A bunch of cowboy hats, used and worn, have been hung high on the wall behind the bar and two big frames filled with pictures of locals partying and celebrating take up the space between the two doors. A blackboard advertises meal specials – Walker has his eye on the sixteen-ounce rump with Diane sauce and chips for dinner – and another has a list of shots, with names like Wet Dreams, Orgy and the Squashed Frog, that he's doubtful he'll be sampling.

He takes another long drink of his beer and turns to Blair. 'What brought you out this way? I thought the business was doing OK?'

'Nah, well, it's getting going slowly but last winter we didn't make enough and summer is always dead. Things got a bit tight. A friend of mine was up this way for a few years, doing some mining, said there was good money in it. He put me in touch with the bloke I work with, Mark Bailey. We're sort of partners. He pays me a wage, but I get a cut of what we find too. Not that we've been finding much . . .'

'So what's happened, then?' he asks. 'Why are you so keen to get home?'

Blair sighs and glances down. 'It's Mark.' He pauses. 'He's a nightmare. Changeable as the bloody weather. Good as gold one day, moody miserable bugger the next. Him and his missus are falling out and I'm caught between them half the time. I was gonna stick it out till the end of the season but the last couple of weeks it's

gotten crazy. A rumour started that Mark found a massive opal and someone went through our camp while we were in town, made a real mess of it. First Mark accused me. He went ballistic, said I was trying to rob him. That's when I knew I was done. Can't work for someone who doesn't trust ya. I told him to fuck off, walked out. He came and apologised afterwards but I've had enough. Apparently he was in here too, same day, accusing other miners of stealing from him. There was a huge blue and now the whole town thinks Mark has a million-buck opal stashed somewhere.'

He takes a drink of his beer, Walker silently commiserating. A suspicious partner wouldn't suit Blair - he's honest and up-front and doesn't play games.

Blair puts his glass down. 'To be honest, I was ready to go anyway. This town is fucked up. There's hardly no one lives here but everyone talks about everyone else, and half the town won't sit with the other half for a drink. If there's something happening, the country races or whatnot, there's some welcome and others who aren't. Most of 'em hate the miners, wouldn't piss on them if they were on fire. The miners don't do themselves any favours. Half of 'em are dodgy, the others are mad as cut snakes and worse with a drink on them. I'll be bloody happy when we're back in Caloodie.'

On the back of this long speech, the most words Walker has heard his cousin say in a very long time, Blair picks up his beer and empties it. He's hardly set it down when the publican walks over and picks it up. 'Having another, Blair?' she asks.

'Yeah, go on, then,' he says. 'This is my cousin Lucas; Lucas, this is Susie Smith.'

Walker reaches over the bar and shakes Susie's hand. Her hair is cut short and spiky, which, when combined with her outfit, gives her an androgynous look.

'Susie runs the pub and she knows everyone and everything there is to know about Kanpara,' says Blair.

Susie laughs. 'Not that that's saying much since there's only about a hundred and fifty of us here and nothing happening ninety-nine per cent of the time. You staying long?' she asks Walker.

'Nah, just overnight. We're giving Blair a lift home.'

'You're leaving, Blair?' Susie looks surprised. 'Doesn't Mark need you anymore?'

'Ah, well . . .' Blair prevaricates. 'He hasn't had the easiest year, hasn't been finding any colour. He's fed up and I think he'll be closing the camp early, heading back to Sydney pretty soon . . .'

'Is that right. What about that million-dollar opal everyone's talking about?'

'I don't know nothing about that,' says Blair. 'Reckon it's a bit of bullshit.'

She brings them their fresh beers and leaves them to it, picking up her phone again and typing quickly. She's as bad as Grace, Walker thinks to himself, can't leave the phone alone for five minutes.

'I didn't know you'd be bringing Grace,' says Blair, as if reading his mind.

'I didn't want to,' he says, 'but she was dead set. Couldn't talk her out of it.'

'Well, I suppose it's only for one night . . .' Blair's voice trails off. 'We'll all be better off when we get away from this place.'