

MISCHANCE CREEK

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FRIDAY, EARLY, and there was already a foretaste of heat when Hirsch walked the town. The air was still and galahs called from the gumtrees: he thought of it as the siren song of summer in the bush. Apart from playing tennis for the town, walking around it was his only exercise. He needed it, with the amount of time he spent at his desk or at the wheel of the HiLux. Very rarely was he called on to scale cliffs, forge rivers, snatch drivers from burning wrecks or track suspects across the vast outback terrain. And dawn was the coolest part of the day just

now. Peaceful, as the shadows of night receded. Calming, apart from the guard dog tearing along the cyclone fence surrounding Mitch Stanyer's seed business. And no one about this morning except for Mr Cromer watering his roses, Mrs Lidstrom walking her fox terrier—a nasty little brick with fangs—and, at the edge of town, Nan Washburn pouring a line of oats into a cement trough for her miniature ponies.

He made a final loop to check on the town paddock, which was divided by a stand of gumtrees from the tennis courts and the oval on the northern edge of the town. A twenty-five-acre strip of land sandwiched between the highway and Mitch Stanyer's lucerne property, the paddock was a remnant of the colonial era when the highway had been a stock route wide enough for bullock teams and the droving and overnight penning of sheep and cattle. Now it was farmed by local volunteers, its harvest income generally enough to keep the community in tennis nets and playground equipment. But not this year. Only a sparse and unavailing strip of dead wheat stalks this year, the shrivelled heads not worth reaping, and the air of hopelessness had prompted some of the less town-proud locals to start using it as a tip.

Hirsch froze. A few garbage bags and tin cans was one thing: here was a mountain of new rubbish. With one eye open for snakes, he slipped through the fence and approached. A fridge, mattresses, the cabinetry guts of an old kitchen, and a massive pile of bricks and soil. You

didn't sneak in rubble like that via a cardboard box on the back seat of your car. He toed a brick, a few chips of asbestos sheeting. Given that he walked around the town every morning, he had a pretty good idea of who was doing what in Tiverton—painting the front room; putting up a granny flat—but no one was remodelling, to his knowledge. Maybe outsiders had somehow got wind of the town paddock tip; spotted it from the highway. A passing builder or rubbish removalist?

Fishing out his phone, he snapped half-a-dozen photos.

He was at his desk by eight. The leaflets in their wire racks, the police posters (drink and drug driving), the general store calendar (the September wildflowers along the base of the Tiverton Hills, photographed the year before the drought), his holstered Glock in the bottom drawer and his hat at a grabbable distance on an old wooden coatrack beside his desk.

His head filled with matters messily unresolved, he fired off yet another email to the district council's public works manager. A more urgent request for rubbish clean-up this time, photos attached.

Then he scrolled through emails. Too many of them, and too many SAPOL messages that appeared to be generic or repetitious but which might contain a sting in the tail—some small-print, final-paragraph demand that would land him with a sharp 'please explain' in a few weeks if he missed it.

It soured his mood so that he attacked the keyboard more as a release of aggression than a means of communication, and so the morning passed. He barely registered the highway traffic: the occasional semi-trailer passing through to Peterborough, Hawker or Broken Hill, the occasional minibus on its way to the Flinders Ranges; a salesman or two; a few local farm utes and family station wagons.

His mobile pinged: a text from his mother. Warm anticipation and hesitance in equal measure, as if she were granting him a last-minute police emergency or a better offer. She didn't play games, there was no hint of emotional blackmail, but life had dealt her a hard blow and she expected more of the same. She was floundering; Hirsch supposed her recovery would take a long time. So would his. And it would never be complete: that forever ache at the back of your soul.

He sighed; texted back: *See you tomorrow, can't wait.*

Meanwhile the heat was building. He switched on the air conditioner, which rattled as it began to stir the air. Then he checked the town and district WTF Facebook page. Mostly it was posts of stupefying triviality—trees down, haystack thefts and missing sheepdogs; typical social-media grievances—but occasionally some fuckwit would post video of himself spray-painting an ejaculating penis on a shop wall and be astounded when the police knocked on his door. Otherwise, the page was a barometer of the district's mood. Hirsch had noted more—and more desperate-sounding—*for sale* posts on Marketplace.

More pleas for rental properties. And more blame. Yes, the drought was bad, and the Mid North, like most places, had always been subject to decisions made over the horizon somewhere—Adelaide, Canberra, Wall Street—but now there were rumblings about forces closer to home. Hirsch recalled a post from last week, Mark Button ranting about a \$250 district council fine for failing to remove fire risks on his property. *Fire risks? There's nothing left to burn!* Two weeks earlier, Kev Henry the publican remarked that the local council hadn't needed to bring in a consultant on \$3,000 a month: *Hell, I'll do it for three bucks.* And now a new post, from Russ Fanning out near Desolation Hill: *Wish the council would sign off on a flash new road to my place.*

Hirsch paused. Was it his imagination, or were people getting stuck into the local council more often lately?

Back to the job: tackling abusive and legally problematic posts, bantering with a few of the ratbags, skimming the rest. The Best Christmas Lights competition was on again this year, first prize a dinner for two at the Dugout in Redruth, to which someone had added predictably that second prize was *two* dinners for two. A Penhale woman asking if anyone was interested in setting up a shopping ride-share to Clare every Monday. And another reminder from Rosie Llewellyn about her Peterborough exhibition, opening in seven days' time.

That jogged his memory: he needed to check Llewellyn's .22 rifle. Maybe a quick run out to her place after lunch?

Next he updated his own segment, *Plod POV*. Beware of haybale scams: never pay the full amount upfront; verify that the hay exists and the seller is legitimate before paying a deposit. Those with acreage, please remember to slash long grass and clear all fire hazards (or the council will fine you, he wanted to add), and avoid mowing, slashing and outdoor angle-grinding on high-fire-danger days. Please report instances of rubbish-dumping on the town paddock. And be alert for drivers playing chicken and tailgating on the highway: *Anyone with dashcam footage or further information please get in touch.*

He waited. Eventually, a handful of replies trickled in. The offending vehicle had been a white ute; a silver ute; silver, yes, but a station wagon. Plates obscured. And: *He came up close behind me and wouldn't pass and I was scared to pull over in case he stopped too. Eventually he overtook but it was too dark to get a good look.*

Dorrie Alkawaro? She didn't strike him as the type to use Facebook, or certainly not after she'd made a police report. He replied to each message: *Please get in touch*, and waited. The cursor winked. Nothing more.

He finished the morning by reviewing his keeping-tabs list. Husbands or partners on intervention orders; newcomers with a prison record; a handful of names on the Sex Offenders Register; upcoming court cases. Only one item of interest: Jerry Poulakis, facing trial on domestic violence offences, had, that morning, jumped from a Northern Expressway flyover into 110 km/h traffic.

Hirsch twisted himself into a familiar knot. His heart didn't bleed for the guy: Poulakis had caused a lot of misery. But he must've been in utter despair, at the limit of his endurance, and a part of Hirsch could get close to imagining that. At least there were no kids in the mix. No kids for Poulakis to annihilate along with himself.

He added Trent McRae to the keeping-tabs list and reached for the desk phone to call the house in Penhale. Audrey answered. No, Trent hadn't come home. He hadn't contacted her. She wasn't worried. She just wanted to be left alone.

He called the ex-wife: voicemail. She'd be at work.

Lunch, then he hit the road.

Rosie Llewellyn—.22 Ruger rifle—rented the renovated overseer's cottage of a working sheep station that moonlighted as tourist accommodation. A signpost in her front yard read *Rosie Llewellyn Photography* but Hirsch suspected that her real home was the caravan parked in the carport beside her LandCruiser. She spent several months a year in it, touring around the Mid North, the Flinders Ranges and central Australia, photographing hills, gumtrees, stone ruins, rock art and contemporary outback life. A woman travelling alone—snakes, human and animal—it made sense that she'd travel with a rifle.

She answered his knock, a stringy, sundried woman of sixty-five. 'Come in out of the heat. Is this a patrol visit? I don't have much time.'

‘Off on another jaunt?’

She shook her head, blew a strand of hair away from her left eye. ‘Sorting photos for the exhibition.’

Hirsch nodded. ‘Right: I saw your Facebook post.’

Lewellyn put her hands on her hips. Almost impatient.

Hirsch said hastily, ‘Firearms audit, Rosie. If I could have a quick look at your twenty-two?’

Almost a sigh this time. ‘Sure.’

She took him to the rear of the LandCruiser and showed him the Ruger locked in a purpose-built safe in the rear compartment. It was unloaded.

‘Ammunition?’

‘Glove box. I keep it locked.’

‘Thanks. All good,’ Hirsch said.

She cocked her head at him. ‘If I recall correctly, didn’t you buy a couple of photos from me last year?’

Hirsch nodded. ‘Your Clare show.’

‘Would you like a preview of the new show?’

‘Sure,’ said Hirsch, smiling inwardly. The locals had a saying: don’t step inside Rosie’s place or you’ll find yourself opening your wallet.

Then he thought: Mum. Take her something other than flowers tomorrow.

Rosie was crossing the yard in her determined way, expecting Hirsch to follow. Onto the veranda, through the door and straight down the hallway to her studio, a roomy expanse lined with benches and laced with the scent of chemicals, presumably from the darkroom in the far corner.

Hirsch took a moment to glance around at the walls. Men, women and children at work and play in arid landscapes. A man wearing his Akubra tipped back, his lower face brown, his brow starkly white. Two solemn children, just their heads and shoulders and a lonely range of hills behind them. A laughing woman, gleamingly half-naked, soap in one hand, caught mid-shock as water streamed over her from a perforated bucket hanging from a tree.

And a gaunt-faced woman of the inland, devoid of expectations but suspicious of the camera. Head and shoulders, a pinched, sharecropper face, a hint of pepper trees and a tank stand in the background.

‘Where was this taken?’

‘Those aren’t for sale,’ Rosie said impatiently.

‘I recognise her.’

‘Really?’ said Rosie, barely interested. ‘I did a series on schools. Kids, parents, grandparents.’

Hirsch nodded. Trent McRae’s mother, photographed in the grounds of the Penhale Primary School—back when it was viable.

He followed Rosie to a workbench, where she began removing unmounted photographs from plastic sleeves and arranging them on a bench. He gazed along and down, and one photo caught his attention: a scowling little girl staggering under the weight of a huge black cat. Furthermore, she was standing in the doorway of a falling-down barn where a black 1950s Mark V Jaguar was mouldering. A rich grazier’s folly: the roof of the old sedan had been cut

off and a tray mounted to the rear half to convert it into a ute, and it had been left there—possibly since the 1950s—piled high with haybales.

‘This one.’

‘Good choice.’

Another photo caught his eye. Two juxtaposed vehicles, the old and the new. In the foreground an ancient, rusted-through tractor and, on the road beyond it, a man staring into the guts of a broken-down Isuzu truck loaded with fuel drums.

Recalling that he’d been seeing similar trucks for a while now, he asked, ‘Where was this taken?’

‘Up near End Point Park.’

‘Recently?’

Rosie shook her head; puffed at the errant strand of hair again. ‘God, ages ago. Two, three years?’

Hirsch shrugged. Fuel and other goods were always being delivered to the sheep properties of the Mid North. He folded Rosie’s invoice into his pocket, said goodbye and was halfway down the driveway when his phone rang. Sergeant Brandl, wanting him to attend to a distressed motorist, name of Annika Nordrum, out near Anna Gorge.