

**DAVE
WARNER
AFTER THE
FLOOD**



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PROLOGUE

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It would be pork tonight he was pretty sure. When they spoke earlier, before she finished her shift, Gabrielly wouldn't tell him, having some fun, teasing it out, but it was Thursday so he figured pork. He liked the way she cooked it. In fact, her mother cooked it even better but he wouldn't tell his girlfriend that. Back in Australia his family had never eaten much pork – lamb and chicken was more the go.

'Are they our people?' From the porch of the hut where his office was located, he could see a cluster of hi-vis vests down at the wall of the tailings dam.

'No. Engineering bring them in.'

His assistant Victor leant his forearms on the railing and blew a stream of smoke into the thick, warm air. The sky was pale blue today but that didn't mean it wouldn't rain. It rained at the drop of a hat here, heavy, like somebody had tipped a bucket of nuts and bolts out of the sky. He'd not worked Far North Queensland but he'd had stints in the Kimberley and the Pilbara back home and he'd seen a cyclone or two but that was more sheeting rain. 'Slovakia,' he thought to himself. They ate a lot of pork in Slovakia. He'd gone there late '90s after he'd been retrenched in Kalgoorlie. Jobs were thin on the ground, especially for HR in the mining industry and he'd been lucky to snare a job at all. It had been brutally cold. He couldn't do that again. Well of course he wouldn't anyway, not with Gabrielly. He'd never leave her. As soon as they were married, he would see about getting her back to Australia, some place with this kind of climate, up north.

He now liked humidity, had come to see it as a balm. There was no rush though. He wouldn't want to uproot Gabrielly from the village, her family, her friends. But in six months there would be another family member to consider. Better his kid was born in Australia. Somebody had said that you can't fly when more than five months pregnant or something, so, there wasn't oodles of time. They would need to organise things. Well, he would need to organise things. Gabrielly was worried about her family, her mother in particular. Her father worked at one of the local farms and before Gabrielly's job, his pay had barely supported the family. Gabrielly had two younger brothers still at school. Her wages had improved the family's life dramatically. Her father had not taken him up on his offer of a job at the site. Mainly by sign language he'd explained to 'Paulo' as they called him here, that he had worked his whole life on farms. He'd poked himself in the chest, jutted his chin as if to say, that's who I am and I'm not changing now. It was a man-to-man discussion, no women around, but later Gabrielly had confirmed he'd got it right.

'He's worked his whole life, digging, harvesting vegetables and helping with livestock. The machinery at the plant is a different world to him. He doesn't fit there.'

So, unable to help the family in that way, 'Paulo' had assisted by buying the boys shoes and clothes. He also made sure he always brought some sought-after delicacy to the house.

It was funny how your life could turn so quickly. He'd begun to think he would never find that special partner. You hit forty-one, still single, barely had a girlfriend your entire life and you're in an industry with ninety percent men. You don't rate your chances of finding somebody. He could have still been playing cards with the other loners, thinking wistfully about girls he almost dated back in his uni days. Instead, he'd taken the punt and decided to risk egg on his face. Truly he didn't give himself much of a chance, big-boned, and let's face it, pudgy, while she was slim with the most beautiful brown eyes. They had flashed at him when he'd confirmed her for the cleaning job, so happy, like he'd tossed in a car as a bonus. That's

the first indelible impression she had made upon him. You had to be careful these days too, especially in HR. There were a lot more women in the industry than when he'd started but still only a handful, so personally he'd never been in this situation before, where you actually fancied an employee. But he knew guys from his uni class who had gone into retailing and insurance and had risked getting themselves into hot water because they'd asked a fellow employee out on a date. It was unfair and stupid really. Where were you supposed to meet anyone if you weren't a social kind of person? In the end he'd decided he didn't have that much to lose. It was Brazil, middle of nowhere and he was the highest ranked HR employee.

And he was lonely.

And she seemed to like him, smiled at him when their paths crossed and so he'd asked her out to lunch one weekend and she'd said yes. Then everything had fallen into place. And tonight, they'd be having pork for dinner – bet on it.

Something, a shout or some other sound, drew his gaze past the smoking Victor and back across the sloping valley to the tailings dam whose wall was built in an S shape. Did he imagine it or did it just move? No, something was up, the men were scattering, shouting now, running back up the slope towards the offices. And then the dam wall just dissolved and red sludge began to pour out like lava and slide down the mountain. His brain calculated in that scintilla of a second it was his future happiness pouring out of that broken dam, his blood, his plasma, the life of Gabrielly. His insides were hollowed out as if readying his body to be embalmed in grief. Everything was slow motion, unreal. He turned and dashed back into the office. Even as he shouted that the dam had burst, he was realising that there was no phone to connect with the village. His eyes lit on the two-way.

'Martha, Martha are you there? Over.' Martha was in the motor-pool five hundred metres down.

Her crackly voice came on the line. 'This is Martha. Over.'

He blurted out what had happened. Luckily, she was already on her little motorbike. It wasn't necessary to tell her to ride for the village

and raise the alarm, she took that initiative the instant she knew but all she had was a small bike on the dirt backroads that led to the village. The fall from the dam into the valley was steep and it would move as rapidly as a crocodile after an unwary bird. He stood there shaking. As the level of the watery brown fluid in the dam rapidly dropped, his fears raced to this throat.

It was hours before he could get to what was left of the village, and then only because he was able to hitchhike on one of the company choppers. The dirt roads one usually accessed the village from had all been washed away. Martha had been forced to pull up about two kilometres short on the main road that was high enough to become a virtual bank of the new brown, muddy river. The fall from the tailings dam, down the mountain to the valley was steep and the goo had moved with surprising rapidity. He prayed that Gabrielly would be spared but when he heard the early reports from those flying over the scene he had thrown up in the basin, his legs trembling, his jaw quivering. All but a gram of hope had been crushed. Then came news that many villagers had got to higher ground or to upper floors and roofs of houses that had survived, and he had dared hope.

But as the helicopter made that first pass over what was left of the village, he felt both despair and bile rising. The houses looked like shavings on top of a chocolate mousse. Some dwellings had gone entirely, many more were nothing but a façade, their walls dissolved back into the clay whence they had been extracted and baked. Where the little grocery and supermarket had stood was a mud flat. Gabrielly would always be in there, gaily chatting with other locals. Cars were strewn around, mostly pushed to the perimeter of the village, nothing of them visible below the windscreen.

Rescuers in fluoro vests and gumboots were wading through the shallower areas. He caught a glimpse of one person, so covered in mud he could not tell if it was a man or woman, their arm around the neck of the rescuer guiding them out. Where the helicopter was landing on higher ground, a makeshift triage had been set up.

Other helicopters were arriving or evacuating the injured. It was like a Vietnam movie. Villagers stood aimlessly, soaked, muddy, some clean as one of his freshly laundered shirts Gabrielly would insist on doing for him, but all with haunted faces so they looked more like a painting than real life. Right as the chopper put down, he spied Gabrielly's mother clinging to one of her neighbours for comfort. For an instant relief flared.

Yet there was no sign of her. He swivelled and pivoted.

'Gabrielly!' he yelled through the open hatch but of course it was drowned by the noise of the blades. He was still yelling it as he charged out of the stationary helicopter but he didn't realise that. How could he experience anything in the present when his life was now doomed to be forever hostage to the past?

1 THE KIMBERLEY

Wednesday 10 November 2021

‘Look at this lot. Guarantee you they’re all on a government handout.’

Shepherd shut the door of the paddy wagon with extra force and pulled his belt up higher like he meant business, which he guessed he probably did. His promotion to detective sergeant did not reflect any shortening of the traditional gap between Shepherd’s actions and his thoughts. Uniform constable Nat Restoff followed in his wake. Already Shepherd was missing the car air-conditioning. The earth was dry, hard as a London mailbox and almost as red. So far this spring, the rain had fallen in thimbles. Each year your body had to get used to the wheezing humidity all over again. There were less than twenty protesters, chanting with placards, vegans out to make you feel guilty for enjoying a steak. Well, they were going to be disappointed. Not much in life made Josh Shepherd feel guilty. Potentially the biggest problem here was the abattoir workers. Corralled behind their supervisor, a few of them were brandishing boning knives at the protesters. The supervisor was trying to calm them but threats and swearing were breaking ranks.

‘Go and suck on your ice, you deadshits,’ one of them yelled at the protesters.

The cameraman immediately swung towards the hothead.

This job could have been left to the uniforms in Shepherd’s not-so-humble opinion. It did not need anybody from the detective squad but Clement had told him that Scott Risely, the boss, wanted a detective presence. A month or so back somebody had torched

the cars of the night-shift workers but no progress had been made on the case. Jo di Rivi and Graeme Earle had run that one, maybe that was why? Now that di Rivi was a detective you couldn't turn around without bumping into her. She was getting all the good jobs. 'It's terrific to have a woman's perspective' and all that crap. She and Earle had flown up to Halls Creek on some mining site break-in. Cushy. Most of the day you spent in the plane there and back with a few questions at the crime scene and a free lunch in between. They'd probably strike out there just like they did at the abattoir.

But this job did have its compensations like the fact this was going to be on local TV. Never hurt to have your mug flashed around the place. Even better, the reporter Amy was very, very attractive.

Whenever their paths crossed Shepherd took the opportunity to strike up a conversation. He'd heard she was single. Well so was he, and in Shepherd's world view, a reporter on the crime beat and a newly promoted detective sergeant was just a natural fit. Amy – he wasn't sure of her second name, it was long and complicated like a Sri Lankan leg spinner's – had given no indication that she found him of the slightest interest but he wasn't rushing this one, he was going slowly, slowly, not giving her a chance of a pre-emptive strike.

He'd learned that lesson.

Let them acquire a taste for Shepherd before you put them on the spot and asked them out, because once they've rejected you, that's it, there could be no going back. See, if you tried a second time and got rejected again you were just a fool or a nuisance. Every time Amy covered one of his cases at the court, he would throw out a line hoping to get her to nibble, and every time she would smile politely and then move off as if she had urgent work to do. Her short yellow skirt contrasted against her dark skin. Today she was looking especially alluring.

'Animals ... Deserve ... Better,' chanted a core of protesters. Shepherd felt their eyes turning his way. He liked the attention. Placing himself somewhere equidistant between the warring factions, he planted his feet and held out his hands as if pushing down their invisible anger.

He was mirroring as closely as possible what he'd seen the Roman centurion do on the Netflix show he'd been watching this week when the Roman peasants had been causing a stink.

'Hey,' he said. 'Calm down, the lot of you.'

'We're calm. They're the ones threatening us with knives,' said one of those seventy-year-old greybeard types from underneath his akubra. Every rally had one of these: rimless glasses, short-sleeved check shirt, Pommy accent. Used to be a professor of something at some uni, odds-on. They'd always have the wife there too in a big sunhat. Yep, there she was. The rest of them looked like they'd crawled out of the same sleeping-bag at a music festival. Young, scraggy, unwashed.

'How'd you like it if we threatened your jobs? Oh, that's right, none of you work!' An angry young worker, saliva flying. Shepherd would like to have seconded that but then Amy was watching and he was on camera.

'That's enough.' This time he scuffed his feet, imagining Roman sandals on them. In fact, he was wearing his near-new shiny black leather shoes he'd bought to go with his promotion. He remembered this, regrettably, a fraction too late after he had already done the scuffing. Damn, a whole month and they hadn't a mark on them till then. This increased his anger towards both parties over whom he was presiding.

'You lot,' he pointed his finger at the protesters, 'have got your pictures,' a gesture at the cameraman. 'You're interfering with work being this close to the shed.'

'We're not stopping them working.'

Hmm, a bearded layabout. Shepherd gave him his best 'I've-got-your-number' look.

'You are an OH and S hazard.' Shepherd had practised the words Mal Gross had drummed into him as he was climbing into the wagon. 'If you want to protest, you can do it two hundred and fifty metres away. Over there, away from traffic.' He pointed to a patch of sand with no protection from the blazing sun. He swivelled towards the workers behind him. 'You lot get back to work.'

He couldn't help throwing a glance at Amy and was impressed to

see she was actually watching him with some interest.

‘We’re doing nothing wrong.’ A woman this time. Long straggly hair, singlet, tattoos, shell-necklet. Probably sold scented candles at one of the markets and declared nothing on her dole form.

‘If you don’t move, we will have to arrest you and nobody wants that, right?’

He looked at the camera. The very reasonable request of Detective Sergeant Josh Shepherd would be clear for all to see.

‘We’re not moving. If you want us over there, you’ll have to carry us.’

It was the frau of greybeard. She sounded like the Queen. Shepherd was about to lose his cool when he felt Restoff touch his elbow. He looked around. Restoff gestured that he wanted a quiet word. Shepherd moved a pace back and lowered his ear.

‘You see the kid at the back?’ Restoff kept his hands on his hips but he tried to point with his chin. Shepherd turned back to the protesters. His gaze focussed on one of them wearing a t-shirt with a picture of a sheep above some greenie slogan.

Shit.

Sitting in his office confronted by the deflating sight of a stack of unfinished reports, the void in Clement’s life was laid bare. The football season had ended and with it had gone the best way to soak up those gap minutes when you didn’t want to think about your life and its futility, or at least everything that it ought to have but didn’t. Instead of confronting those big questions you could divert your waking thoughts to football selections. He had finished runner-up in the footy tipping comp this year. Two weeks out he’d been sitting in second position and had been faced with the eternal question: should he go for broke and try and win the big prize and the accolades but maybe miss out on second? First prize was three hundred bucks but the bragging rights were immeasurable. Second prize was eighty bucks, basically your entry fee back from this year and your fee for next year. Clement wrestled with the dilemma for the whole week

before playing safe. Result: overall second, eighty bucks and months of regret. And worse, now that he didn't have that psychological polyfilla of the tipping comp the cracks had opened up like they were this minute.

Obsessing about the tipping comp is what occupies lonely single men, he reflected. That's precisely what you are, Clement. It had been his old schoolfriend Bill Seratono who had convinced him to sign on. The first month or two of the season, he had not taken seriously. Back then he still had a life, was dating two women, not on the sly either. Dating was a polite word. He was sleeping with them, sometimes even the whole night. For Clement this was a novel experience. There had been previous times where he'd dated a flurry of women to try and forget Marilyn, his ex-wife, but not simultaneously. It wasn't like he was trying to play the field, it just happened. He had been, to use an old-fashioned word, courting Lucinda, a divorced doctor. They'd had some dinners and canvassed sex. It was pretty well accepted they would go to his seldom-used house in Derby and enjoy a consummation weekend in the imminent future. But just days before the long-awaited event was scheduled, he got a little drunk at the Anglers and so did Melissa, a petite blonde tour guide. Bill Seratono offered to drop them both home. Clement got out at Melissa's determined to walk the thirty minutes back to his own place. He never made it. He woke in Melissa's bed beside a furry toy bear. She asked him if he was in a relationship and he said he was, though that was, he supposed, an exaggeration. She didn't care. After wrangling with various options, including silence, he came clean to Lucinda, expecting her to toss away their planned lovers' weekend like old fish heads. Instead, she gave him a long spiel about how she wasn't falling into the same trap she had in her marriage where her husband had wanted to control her. She didn't want to control Clement, but she needed sex. She pretty much demanded their hours of groundwork reach fruition in the cot.

And it was a very enjoyable weekend. Somewhere in the midst of it Clement studied himself in the mirror and wondered if this could

be real: two women, great sex, and he still had to put out nobody's garbage but his own. Lucinda had told him it was up to him if he still felt the need to see 'other women' – like he had a string of them. Of course, she meant Melissa but Clement was too blind to see that or deliberately chose not to interpret it that way. Actually, he had no plans to see Melissa again but then she called him and invited him over and Clement found himself wanting to explore the road less taken. Or maybe both roads at the same time. The situation hadn't lasted a month, or in football parlance, four rounds, when Melissa had given him the ultimatum: Make me exclusive or I walk.

She walked.

Almost immediately Lucinda became less and less agreeable in following any suggestion of his as to how they should spend their shared time. If he wanted to go out, she wanted to stay in. If he was tired and fancied a night in, she would want to head out. The decline was swift and the parting far from sweet.

Deep down Clement accepted that it was never going to last. Not for him. In those dangerous hours when it was too early to kick back with a beer and a loved album, football became his lifeline. It was amazing how much you could avoid thinking about, if you just restricted yourself to nine all-important games of football each week. Those long stretches waiting for a DNA test to come back or to give evidence at a trial would see him studying the teams' ins and outs, and their win rates at particular venues. It made life tolerable. There would always be a scar to show where he had finally ripped Marilyn from his heart but he no longer brooded about her, just experienced the occasional dream where they were together still. He would wake and assure himself that there was nobody in his bed but him, nobody in his life but his daughter, his parents, his old mate Bill and those with whom he worked. He accepted he was solo now. It frightened him that he may never again be part of a couple. He wondered if that solitary month of his life with two lovers was a final gift of the gods before he was expelled to a barren island. More and more often he would catch himself studying some shuffling old fella on his way

around the supermart with a small shopping basket bereft of anything but milk, bread and sausages.

That image disturbed him and made him determined to resist that outcome. He had taken the challenge to cook for himself something more adventurous than pasta or a barbecue. Now prawn and fish, in curries or wok, had become his specialty, albeit closely guarded. He wasn't yet ready to go public.

I really should concentrate on these reports, he urged himself, trying to avoid looking too closely at the stack of boring paperwork waiting to be written up. He gave up and reached for the first file with resignation.

'Just had Josh on the phone.' Mal Gross, the senior sergeant who ran the station's administration, was bustling over. Those words were enough to get Clement tense.

'Tell me he didn't arrest the protesters.'

'No, but there's a problem. You heard from Graeme?'

Graeme Earle, Clement's usual partner, was at Halls Creek with Jo di Rivi following up on a theft of explosives from a mine site. Halls Creek was seven hundred k east of Broome, too far to drive but less than two hours flying, so Earle and di Rivi had left early in a light plane.

'No I haven't. Why do you want Graeme?'

Outside it was steamy but Clement had the air-con blasting full as he drove. The kid had pulled a jacket over his t-shirt and sat huddled as far away from Clement as he could squeeze himself. Clement had left a message for Graeme Earle to call but he hadn't yet. According to Mal Gross, he and di Rivi would still be in the air. The boy stared sullenly ahead through the windscreen, avoiding eye contact.

'You can't just skip school you know.'

'I know. It would look bad for Dad.'

Smart-arse. Rhys Earle was only a year or so older than Clement's daughter. He was glad Phoebe had never been a problem kid. Then again, up till now neither, so far as Clement knew, had Rhys.

'Animals have rights,' said Rhys.

‘The abattoir wasn’t breaking the law. They weren’t maltreating the animals.’

‘Tell that to the animals. I reckon being slaughtered isn’t exactly a life choice.’

Clement tried to ease around the subject. ‘I didn’t know you were vegetarian.’

‘Vegan. Why would you? Dad wouldn’t say anything. He doesn’t even want to acknowledge it.’

‘There are other ways to protest, you know.’

‘Write an essay?’

Clement fought the temptation to snap back. ‘Sure. Instagram or whatever.’

Rhys Earle shook his head the way a soccer fan does when his team misses a penalty.

‘You guys are always on the side of the rich and powerful.’

You guys? Clement felt sorry for Earle. At least Phoebe respected the work her father did.

‘We’re on the side of the law.’

‘Which always favours the rich and powerful.’

‘I don’t know that the abattoir is that rich or powerful.’

Rhys stared ahead, letting the silence smother them like a dust storm.

Clement’s phone buzzed. He saw it was Graeme.

‘Yes,’ he answered.

The boy knew who it was and didn’t move a muscle.

‘Is he with you?’

Clement could hear the tension in his friend’s voice.

‘Yes, we’re five minutes away.’

‘Bring him to the station. We’re back. I’ll take it from there. Thanks.’

From the back door of the station Clement watched the heated exchange between Earle and his son in the staff parking area. Then the boy climbed unhappily into the vehicle and Graeme Earle shut the door and walked around to the driver side. Kids. Clement didn’t believe he’d given his own parents grief. Well, not at that age. He recalled how upset they had been when he’d told them Marilyn

and he were separating. He noticed the way his mother had wrung her hands, and how his father, rather than meet his gaze, directed it down to an ants' nest in the back paving. They loved Marilyn. It occurred to Clement at that moment this was the first time he thought about how it must have devastated them. Up till now, he'd only ever thought of it from his point of view, how embarrassing it was to him to have to tell them. But now he imagined what had happened when his car had disappeared from their driveway, how their arms would have gone around one another, his mother likely tearing up, his father anxious for his grand-daughter's welfare and for his son.

He turned back inside. Jo di Rivi was at her desk. He was proud she had made detective. She deserved it and every one of the staff was equally pleased for her. Well, with the probable exception of Shepherd. Clement knew the basics of the case she'd been in Halls Creek for. Lizard Minerals was a small mining operation. Their bulk storage shed had been broken into and a bag of ammonium nitrate taken.

'How did it go up at Halls?' he asked. Neither felt inclined to address Graeme Earle's family issues.

'Bit more complicated than we realised at first. Besides the bulk storage, a booster was taken from one of the two portable magazines.'

Clement wasn't a mining man but he knew a booster was a TNT charge that would trigger the ammonium nitrate. He presumed the other magazine had contained the detonators. The magazines and the bulk storage shed were separated to prevent accidental explosions.

'Inside man?' he postulated.

'Our first thought. There are only two possibles: the explosives handler and the mine supervisor. They don't have criminal records and we didn't get any vibes from either of them. The keys were locked in a safe. There is a working camera at the perimeter fence pointing at the shed and it shows nothing untoward. You know how they got in?'

'Siegfried and Roy,' said Clement and then realised di Rivi had no idea he was talking about magicians. He waved her continue.

'Dug underneath and came up through the floor.'

Criminals did not lack for ingenuity.

‘No concrete apron?’

‘No. They’re those portable magazines that sit a few centimetres off the ground on chocks. Couple of shovels and you’re underneath it in fifteen minutes. They cut a square out of the aluminium floor to get in, then covered it with boxes when they left. Nobody noticed till Graeme and me moved the boxes away. They’d already done a stocktake. One bag of ammonium nitrate missing. They weigh about four kilos so they’re easy to haul. We thought we better check the other sheds too. Detonators weren’t touched but they did the same thing to get the boosters. Filled in the hole when they left and nobody was any the wiser. Could have been up to a month ago.’

‘Did the thieves risk blowing themselves up?’

‘Not without detonators. It would have been noisy getting in, but at night there’s nobody around except goannas.’

Clement was thinking somebody had to know a little about the operation.

‘Get a list of past and present employees and check for criminal records.’

‘Graeme’s already got a list of current employees. I was about to get onto that.’

‘It might be a long shot. Anybody who worked there could have innocently mentioned stuff at a pub, but check anyway.’

Di Rivi said, ‘We took prints too but I reckon if the culprits are in the system, they’re not going to leave us anything.’

‘That’s true. But have a look and see if there is anybody whose prints ought to be there but aren’t. Sometimes these dummies wipe off their prints and it’s like a neon sign.’

‘Will do.’

So much for a day of investigative excitement. Clement was bored. Maybe he should never have left Perth. At least he would be close to Phoebe. Perhaps he should go back to the city? He shoved that thought aside, replaced it with an easier dilemma: what to cook for tonight’s solo dinner?

Clement saw her too late. He'd been focussed on the meats in the supermarket freezer still tossing up, chicken or beef. One of each, he decided, but as the styrofoam trays hit the bottom of his plastic basket, he looked up and there she was, staring at him from the other end of the freezer.

'Hello, Lucinda.'

Her eyes levelled at him reminding Clement of a black-and-white movie he'd watched a couple of nights ago when the German battleship *Bismarck's* guns trained on the British cruiser *Hood*.

'Hello, Dan.'

If you took a sea sponge from the ocean and laid it on a hot rock where ants could swarm over it and denude it, it might eventually become as dry and hollow as the tone with which she imbued those two words.

'How have you been?' he asked, the uncomfortable plastic basket swinging off his wrist.

'As if you give a damn.'

She turned her back to him and pushed her trolley in a different direction.

It left Clement shaken, guilty. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He wanted to tell himself that he hadn't realised she had invested in him but was that really true? Didn't he sense a vulnerability within her, way back at the beginning? She'd come on as gung-ho and he thought he'd bought her grab-you-by-the-balls act as genuine but now he wasn't so sure. Dating was a mined sea lane that he'd believed he'd long safely traversed until Marilyn cast him adrift.

He waited several minutes, loitering by the dairy section. Only when he saw Lucinda disappear into dusk did he progress to the checkout. At least tonight there would be nobody to offend but himself.

2 THURSDAY MORNING

A layer of fine glass covered the floor like jelly crystals, the only exception being what remained of the window that had been smashed after they had sawn away the outside bars. The small secure medical fridge had been forced open to get at the vials. The crime-scene crew had already been through and fingerprint powder was all around. Josh Shepherd was thinking that between the glass and the powder, his shoes were going to suffer further. He was also thinking that Saturday was a big game coming up and the skipper had better make more use of his bowling than he had so far. Last season Shepherd had taken the second most wickets and more often than not he had been one of the opening bowlers. This year he was being called on as first-change. 'Relegated' to first-change was how Shepherd thought of it.

'The nurse found the mess when she came to open up,' said Daryl Hagan. Two uniforms, Hagan and Beck Lalor, had called it in. Clement had told Shepherd to take charge.

'After the drugs,' reckoned Shepherd.

'Not to use,' said Beck Lalor, heading over from where she had been talking to the community nurse.

There had been a time Shepherd had set his sights on Lalor. She had a wide-face with large eyes and curly light-brown hair that he liked. She'd never responded positively to his overtures though and so Shepherd, true to his code, had backed off. Shepherd had no desire to make a nuisance of himself if there was no likely payoff.

Still, it was a pity, those curls were attractive.

Lalor continued. 'The nurse, Claire, tells me that this whole batch

that has been destroyed is for vaccinations: whooping cough, measles et cetera.’

‘They didn’t take any drugs?’

Shepherd couldn’t keep the incredulity out of his voice.

‘They keep no addictive drugs here,’ said Lalor.

‘So they went to all that trouble – cutting the power to the alarm, sawing through the bars, for nothing. They got in a funk and smashed all the vials up. Dipsticks,’ said Shepherd, placing them in the same bag as his cricket captain who was too stupid to use Shepherd to his best advantage.

Hagan raised his eyebrows to Lalor to show he understood the significance of the destruction.

Lalor said, ‘I’d say there’s a fair chance that they’re anti-vaxxers.’

‘Crazies who reckon that vaccinating kids gives them major diseases,’ translated Hagan.

‘I know that,’ snapped Shepherd.

But Hagan didn’t think he had known it.

‘They got a camera anywhere?’ Shepherd scanned the ceiling, hoping.

‘No,’ said Lalor. ‘But Claire says they had a young woman a little over a week ago standing outside lecturing the people coming in that they were threatening their kids’ futures.’

‘Local?’ Shepherd was poking here and there as if he might uncover a killer clue.

‘Claire didn’t actually see her. One of the clients reported it to Claire and by the time she went out the woman had gone. She’s getting us a list together of the clients who were in that day.’

‘Good work,’ said Shepherd. He didn’t want to be one of those fault-finding superiors, he could afford to be magnanimous. ‘I want you guys to check the witnesses out, see if any can give us a description. We can get an artist if we need.’

‘Fair chance they’ll get a print.’ Hagan nodded at the dusted drug-safe.

‘But if they don’t, I want to have some other avenues. This could be related to the abattoir.’

Shepherd enjoyed demonstrating to the uniforms that there was a

gap between the respective abilities of them and him. The last thing Shepherd wanted was to have to interview a bunch of snotty-nosed kids and their mothers. The uniforms could do that. Meanwhile, he would slip over to the local TV station and get a copy of the footage Amy and her crew had taken the day before at the abattoir protest because, let's face it, it was going to be one of them who had done this. Quite likely the tattooed one who probably sold scented candles, or the no-hoper bloke who looked like his occupation was dealing eccies at open-air rock concerts. And how good was it going to look when he cracked this case and the hitherto unsolved torching of the workers' cars. That would make everybody sit up and take notice. From his pocket he extracted his wallet and then the business card he had made Amy hand over the previous day before he had taken his leave of the abattoir. He tried to read her name. Amy Wickramasinghe. Nope, he'd never remember that surname or would offend her getting it wrong. It would just be Amy. He dialled.

'Yes?'

She had a nice, deep voice for such a slim young woman.

'Amy, it's Josh?'

'Josh who?'

'Detective Josh Shepherd.'

'Oh.'

'I think we might be of mutual benefit to one another.'

There was a long pause.

'How?'

'Why don't you come to the early childhood clinic and you'll see. You may want to bring your cameraman.'

It had not taken Beck Lalor long to locate the witnesses recommended by Claire from the clinic. They confirmed what Claire had said. A young woman, probably early twenties with long dark hair, had been standing outside the clinic as parents were going in, haranguing them that they were poisoning their kids and being puppets of multinational pharmaceutical companies. The young woman had been wearing a t-shirt and jeans and was 'kind of grimy'. Savannah

Duggan, a young mother with two little kids crawling over her, was sitting in the station-house kitchen while their sometime artist, Lilly, drew the woman from Savannah's description.

'She was full-on,' said Savannah, who like many Broome locals, had an incredible delicacy about her features, with high cheekbones and sharp chin. She paused to study the drawing. 'I couldn't see her ears. Her hair was kind of covering them.'

'Are her eyes right now?' asked Beck Lalor, munching on a biscuit. Might as well get something out of putting in the effort that Shepherd had conveniently avoided.

'Yeah. That's better. Angry. She was real angry.'

Lilly worked fast. Clement had found her making pocket money drawing tourists and suggested she offer her services to his department. There were lots of times when a sketch artist would come in handy. Lilly had agreed. It was a smart move by Clement because the town itself was bereft of the kind of constant CCTV monitoring you might find in the cities.

'Is that close?' asked Lilly turning the sketch for Savannah to study. Savannah nodded. 'That's the bitch.'

Things had worked out perfectly, thought Shepherd. Amy had arrived and got her cameraman to shoot footage, then done a report on the spot. He'd hung about with the excuse he was waiting in case the techs came back with something, though truly it would be a while before they had any information.

When Amy was done, he'd said, 'Did you bring what I asked?'

She had. She handed across the thumb drive.

'That has all the footage we took at the abattoir yesterday.'

'Terrific. Did you take names?'

'A few,' she said. 'Not everybody would give their name.'

'Nah, probably on the run from somewhere or illegal entries.' Her expression at his quip was not reassuring. 'Just joking. I might need to check with you. I mean chances are it's one of the protesters.'

‘You want to say that on camera?’

He was about to commit wholeheartedly but seeing as he hadn’t run it past Clement yet, a faraway bell sounded.

‘Not just yet. After all, it may not be them. It could be some stupid junkie. I’ll bring you back the USB when I’ve downloaded.’

‘Don’t bother,’ she said in a tone that called upon Shepherd’s deeper layers of skin to withstand.

‘No bother,’ he’d countered.

Now he was back in the station and the first person he saw was Beck Lalor brandishing a large pencil sketch.

‘This is our clinic suspect. No name, only seen her the once so may not be local.’

Lalor tried to hand it to him. Shepherd kept his hands low like he was facing a clever medium pacer on a zippy wicket. One thing he hated was photocopying.

‘Could you get copies done and bring me one? Thanks.’

A few minutes later he was at his desk carefully checking all the protesters who had been filmed against the sketch. He couldn’t spy her. That didn’t mean she wasn’t associated with this lot. He called Amy again. She was busy cutting her story on the clinic break-in but he was pleased she hung five to give him the names she’d taken. There were only a few.

‘I think your best chance might be the older couple, the Meadows. They seemed to know most of the others there.’

He remembered those two, the professor and his wife who spoke like the Queen.

The cheap electric fans had done their best but they had not cooled Clement sufficiently to allow him a decent sleep. This time of the year he always found tough, coming out of the more pleasant winter and early spring. Or maybe it had been the encounter with Lucinda that had made him restless. At least as far as he could recall he hadn’t dreamt about her. Sitting at his desk, he felt hungover, although

without the comfort of knowing an alcohol-fuelled good time had preceded it. He wasn't drinking much these days, just a few beers. Graeme Earle was working away on the mine heist and this morning they'd not yet chatted socially. Clement wanted to offer support to his partner as regards the Rhys situation but he wouldn't push. If Earle wanted to seek advice or comfort, he would. Clement was bored out of his skull. He noticed Shepherd heading out.

'Where are you off to?'

Shepherd explained. Clement was pleased that Shepherd had thought of going through the TV footage looking for the culprit but he suspected there might have been a base motive as well. He'd overheard Shepherd waxing lyrical about the reporter's looks to one of his mates during a phone call.

'I'll come with you,' he said. It annoyed him that they'd not cleared the earlier incident of the workers' cars being torched and it seemed possible that the break-in was related.

The townhouse was recently built, one of a small development near Cable Beach. A Hyundai sat in the driveway. The garden was a colourful mix, mainly native hibiscus and wattle, a couple of English-garden type plants. Clement rang the spotless doorbell beside the metal flywire door. The interior was in shadow. A tall man with thin bony legs in faded shorts, a natural stoop and a crown of thinning white hair came to the door and opened it with curiosity painted on his long face.

'Mr Meadows?' asked Clement.

'Yes.'

Clement introduced himself and Shepherd. Meadows was patently concerned to find police at his threshold. Clement heard a shuffling from within, possibly the wife trying to overhear what it was about.

'You were at the rally yesterday,' said Clement.

'We did not break the law.' Meadows looked accusingly at Shepherd as if he'd lied.

'No, we are grateful for the protesters' cooperation,' said Clement diplomatically. 'But somebody did break into the early childhood

centre overnight and smashed it up fairly badly. We think it might be anti-vaxxers and we hoped you might be able to help us.'

Clement finished with a polite upwards inflection and gazed at Meadows with the look of a villager asking a favour of the squire.

'Please, come in,' said Meadows.

The interior of the Meadows' house was a weird hybrid, as if they'd been shipwrecked and furnished their home from the contents of other passengers' trunks that had floated onto their beach. From the middle-class British trunk there was a small floral sofa and matching armchair, a blue-and-white striped Doulton teapot, an Edwardian sideboard topped with bric-a-brac including a Di and Charles mug, and several high-glaze rustic pieces including a miniature thatched cottage and a pig. The imaginary trunk of the local crew that had washed up on their beach included a Tiwi design throw rug, a cane coffee table, several watercolours of mangroves, ceiling fans and the clothes on their backs. In his youth Clement had been surrounded by this kind of mix, unofficial aunties and uncles who had drifted to Western Australia after years in Malaya or Singapore. They would all come back to Australia after their time abroad but their possessions and clothes were forever altered.

Stephen Meadows, who had quickly introduced himself and his wife Hazel, wore a batik short-sleeved shirt. His long feet were encased in sandals. Hazel wore a kind of cotton kaftan in vivid colours.

Stephen Meadows poured tea from the Doulton. Clement was aware that he and Shepherd looked odd jammed into the two-seater sofa side-by-side but that's where the Meadows had directed them. Hazel hovered in front of them with a plate of slice that looked healthy. Clement was happy to indulge, even though caraway seeds and semolina weren't high on his wishlist. Shepherd made do with the tea and extra sugar. Clement had run through the witnesses' account of the young woman harassing the mothers.

'Well, Inspector, we are not anti-vaxxers, quite the opposite,' said Stephen Meadows. 'You'll appreciate that people who might oppose

the abattoir can come from very different streams into one large river.’

Hazel said, ‘While we believe everybody – loggers, meat-workers, you name it – is entitled to freely express their opinion, I’m afraid the anti-vaxxers talk a lot of stuff and nonsense. They get all this rubbish off the internet and treat it as gospel.’

‘This is the woman we’d like to speak with,’ said Clement producing a copy of the sketch. Stephen Meadows bent forward and frowned at it as Hazel peered over his shoulder.

‘I’ll get my glasses,’ announced Meadows. He appeared to find them beneath a large barometer that once again echoed with Clement. His mother’s family had been in shipping and, in that circle, a barometer on the lounge room wall was common.

‘Yes, I’m sure I have seen her,’ said Hazel. ‘Take one,’ she urged Shepherd, poking the plate of slice under his nose. This time he obliged.

Stephen Meadows now with eyewear got close to the sketch before announcing, ‘Hazel’s far better at faces than I am. She looks familiar but then, lots of young women look similar.’

‘No, I’ve seen her.’ Hazel held up a finger as if to silence her husband while she thought. She nibbled on her slice. ‘The mangroves?’ She turned to her husband for confirmation. His mouth formed an O.

‘Yes, could be.’ He pointed at the watercolours. ‘Hazel did those.’

‘They’re excellent,’ said Clement. He was not trying to curry favour, he was genuine.

Hazel beamed. ‘Thank you. It’s just a hobby. There was a marina planned that would have affected the mangroves. We protested. I think that’s where ...’ She immediately turned back to the matter at hand. ‘Or am I making it up? No, I’m sure she was there. Yes with, I presume, her boyfriend. You know, the fellow with the Trotsky beard,’ she prompted her husband.

Stephen Meadows’ eyes lit in recognition. ‘Oh, right. Yes, I remember.’

‘Do you know their names?’ asked Shepherd who had already demolished the slice and wanted to get a run on the board in front of his boss.

‘No,’ answered Hazel Meadows for both. ‘We just, to one another, called him Trotsky and a few of the others picked up on it. I don’t

think we've seen them at any of the recent rallies.'

'Did you happen to notice their vehicle?'

The Meadows looked at one another then shook their heads.

'Would you know if they are local?' asked Clement. 'Have you seen them around Broome?'

'Not recently,' said Hazel Meadows. 'Not for at least a month and only ever once or twice. They were in town selling t-shirts; animal rights slogans and things. Not in a shop or anything, just on the street.'

'Was this around the time the abattoir workers' cars were set on fire?' asked Shepherd with all the lightness of a Clydesdale. Clement wanted to wrap gaffer tape around his junior's mouth. That was the sort of question you built to after some real rapport had been established. Their hosts almost physically recoiled and Clement wondered if the barometer showed a plunge in air pressure to meet their mood.

'I'm not sure,' said Hazel Meadows and for the first time refused to make eye contact.

'I only remember them at the mangroves and we didn't speak a lot,' said her husband. Clement had the sense that if this wasn't a lie it was at least a prevarication. He tried to retrieve the situation.

'Look, I'm all for peaceful protests but sometimes they cross over ...'

'And sometimes, Inspector, young people get passionate in the cause of those who are unable to speak for themselves. Yes, sometimes they do get frustrated and yes, can make a mistake. Should their lives be ruined for that?'

'We're only trying to find out ...' began Shepherd with far too much heat, and Clement was forced to pointedly widen his eyes as a signal to quit. Fortunately Shepherd read it and halted.

'Perhaps you might be able to give us the names of some of your circle,' said Clement. 'They may have had closer contact with this woman.' He turned attention back to the sketch. 'We can't just abandon a line of inquiry. I'm sure you understand that. Substantial damage was done and I wouldn't want somebody's child to wind up with whooping cough while we stood by.'

The little speech helped.

'We wouldn't want that either,' said Stephen Meadows. 'But we don't

want people made an easy target for every crime in the Kimberley.’

Clement said nothing and was relieved that Shepherd remained silent too. A short time later they had extracted a half-dozen names. Many of the other protesters were transient, they explained.

‘These are the people we know who live in the area,’ said Stephen Meadows as Shepherd jotted notes on an iPad.

Clement thanked them for their time.

‘That tea and slice was absolutely delicious,’ he said as they stood to go and was pleased to see a smile rise at the corner of Hazel Meadows’ mouth. He wasn’t playing her. It had refreshed him.

When they were barely outside, Shepherd muttered, ‘They could have told us more.’

‘They might have,’ said Clement opening the car, ‘but these kind of interviews are a dance, not a wrestling match. You have to let them get to know and respect you as a person, not just a cop.’

Shepherd yanked his seatbelt with the force he might have liked to have used on the Meadows.

‘We never even got a name,’ he sulked.

‘No, but we found out she has a boyfriend and we got a description. And we got more names you can follow up. We didn’t come away completely empty-handed.’ Clement drove out slowly. ‘See if any of those people can identify the girl or her boyfriend or their vehicle. Then run the descriptions past all police stations in the Kimberley and Pilbara. In fact, I’d go as far south as Geraldton. And try Perth. More protests there, they might pop up.’

Seeing Phoebe on a computer screen was no substitute for the real thing but better than not at all. It was a little after six in the evening, likely not so hot and stifling in Perth as in the small room above the chandler’s where Clement sat scooping out his takeaway curry with a plastic spoon. The day had been a disappointment and he’d avoided the supermarket in case he bumped into Lucinda again. I don’t have to cook for myself every night, he’d told himself.

‘How was squad?’ he asked.

He had made notes of Phoebe's schedule so that in the times they got to talk he could show he was taking an interest. Today was her swim squad.

'Hard,' she said munching on an apple. They had around twenty minutes before she would have to leave for dinner at her expensive boarding school. While he paid half her school fees, her mother insisted he should not be burdened with the considerable ancillary costs when her grandmother was dying to splash her money out on her only grandchild. Clement never asked if Marilyn's new husband contributed. He hoped he did not have anything to do with paying for the upbringing of Phoebe and did not want to be disappointed by finding out that he did. Phoebe's room looked typically neat although he noted with a pang that the pony poster that had hung on her wall since she was about seven had been replaced by some fresh-faced pop star. At least it wasn't a rapper. Clement himself preferred rap to the kind of music this poster suggested but this was an area where he was quite happy to let his fourteen-year-old daughter wander a different path.

'Vegetarian korma?' she asked as she watched him devour the food.
'Chicken.'

She grunted. For the last few months, she'd been subtly trying to push him away from a meat diet.

'You nailed butterfly?' he asked, distracting her cross-examination.

'Getting better,' she said, chewing. 'But I'm not going to make top two for interschool in anything. Emma and Marnie are way faster.'

'Even breaststroke?'

'Dad, they're like state level at everything. I might be reserve, maybe the relay if I'm lucky.'

Phoebe never seemed neurotic about not being the best. That was reassuring.

Since the incident with Rhys Earle, Clement had found himself feeling uneasy. Was he really devoting enough time to Phoebe? Would their special bond fade swiftly like the image on a TV suddenly unplugged? 'I spoke to Bill Seratono. He said I could borrow his boat for a week for the holidays. It's a ripper. We could check out the islands,

camp. That gear I bought for last time is almost new.’

‘Mum didn’t tell you?’

If the emotion those words engendered was a sound, it would be the metal wheels of a train skidding on rails after its brakes have been slammed on. He tensed for the inevitable carnage.

‘Tell me what?’

Even from this distance bouncing off a satellite he sensed his daughter’s disappointment that she had been forced into being the bearer of bad news. Her eyes looked down before tilting up and meeting his gaze again.

‘Our school band is going on a trip to Boston and Philadelphia first week of December. Two weeks. I’ll be back for Christmas. That’s alright isn’t it?’

What was he going to say? It was the kind of wonderful opportunity that these schools could provide. Phoebe loved her music, and she was very talented at all the woodwinds. Of course, the selfish part of him, the flesh and blood Daniel Clement, wanted to object, and say that sailing around the Kimberley coast with your dad, camping on hard ground and showering with a bucket of cold water was a far more enriching experience. But he allowed the palimpsest Clement to hold sway.

‘Of course.’

‘We can do the trip in January.’

No, they couldn’t. Not with Bill’s boat. Bill had his own plans from Christmas on. It might be possible to hire a replacement but the cost would blow a hole in his finances.

‘Sure. We’ll do something, anyway. Everything is going well there?’

‘Uh-huh.’

He missed that poster of the beautiful pony in the wild heather. In a blink, Phoebe would be a woman. He wanted to tell her: a pony never breaks your heart. A cuddly toy never cuts with a cruel word or a lustful glance. But some streams we have to cross for ourselves. He didn’t think until that instant that he’d ever regretted not having more children but he spied for a flash of a second, a crevice, and wedged in there a thought: how wonderful it would be to have another child to play dad to.

'If you ever had any problems, you would tell me, right?'

She shrugged. 'Sure.'

He wasn't reassured, reading the response as somewhere between maybe and possibly. Rhys was that little bit older, and further along the crumbling path.

'Graeme Earle is having a few problems with Rhys.'

She knew Rhys, not as a close friend but through the odd get-together they were well and truly acquainted. A couple of weekends, a year or two back, Graeme and Rhys had stayed with Clement and Phoebe in his Derby house.

She didn't ask him to elaborate.

'He was protesting at the abattoir up here.'

'Good for him,' said Phoebe.

'He was pretty resentful of his dad. Being a cop.'

'That's not fair. It's his job.'

'It doesn't bother you what I do?'

She shook her head. 'Some people are just unhappy and want to blame everyone. Like Antigone. She's always blaming the teachers. All of them. I mean, Mrs Schaffer is hopeless, she just tells us to open a book and copy what's in there but most of them are really good.'

'We could talk though, right? If you ever had a problem like that?'

'I don't. I'm good. I should be getting ready for dinner.'

He said he understood. 'I love you,' he said.

'Love you too.'

He killed the feed, then sat there finishing off his curry. I'm lucky, he thought. Phoebe has a good head on her shoulders. She didn't seem to resent him like Rhys did his father. He'd not noticed any obvious bad parenting from Graeme. Whatever 'bad parenting' might entail. Hell, none of us know how to be a great parent, he thought. Solving a murder was simple in comparison. He'd never had any problems with his own parents, but then perhaps that was because he was a shallow person. He didn't question, he just did. The times he'd spent with Rhys didn't equip Clement to be an expert on the kid's psychology. Rhys had seemed like a normal boy. But he didn't live with the kid. Sure, he'd seen him most weeks over the years but those weekends

with Phoebe were the only time he'd spent more than a few hours in his company. When was that exactly that they enjoyed those family weekends away? Nearly two years ago. Rhys was just a boy back then. Now hormones were kicking in. Rhys would be stumbling towards manhood like we all do, he thought. We're worried if there will be a place for us in an adult world. How will we fit? How will we survive? It's easier when you're young to focus on macro questions: the environment, equality, freedom. The other questions are too scary. Is there somebody out there for me? Do I have a role in life? At that age Clement hadn't a clue about anything but he had not forgotten his teenage anxiety.

Marilyn should have told him about the music trip. He was pissed off. He resisted the impulse to call her right then. A while back he would have, an opportunity too tempting to pass up, a self-righteous spray on her responsibilities to inform him of their child's plans. Caught dead-to-rights, him the innocent party. But he would not do that yet. He would calm. It wasn't the end of the world. Marilyn didn't know he had organised the boat. She should have considered that but he figured he was a long way down her ladder of concern.

He binned the now empty container which neatly topped off the rubbish bag. He tied it and hauled that downstairs and into the large garbage bin. Then he took a moment to soak himself in the warm air and study the night sky. He would miss this space if he went back to Perth. But the truth was here he was not just in space but in a void, in his personal and professional life. In Perth at least he'd be close to Phoebe. It was a sure sign he needed a challenge when he had to involve himself in a clinic break-in. He needed to keep his brain occupied. He needed a big, juicy case, and though he'd jagged a couple of those in the past up here, logic told him that wasn't going to happen again. Not anytime soon.