

**DAVE
WARNER
WHEN IT
RAINS**



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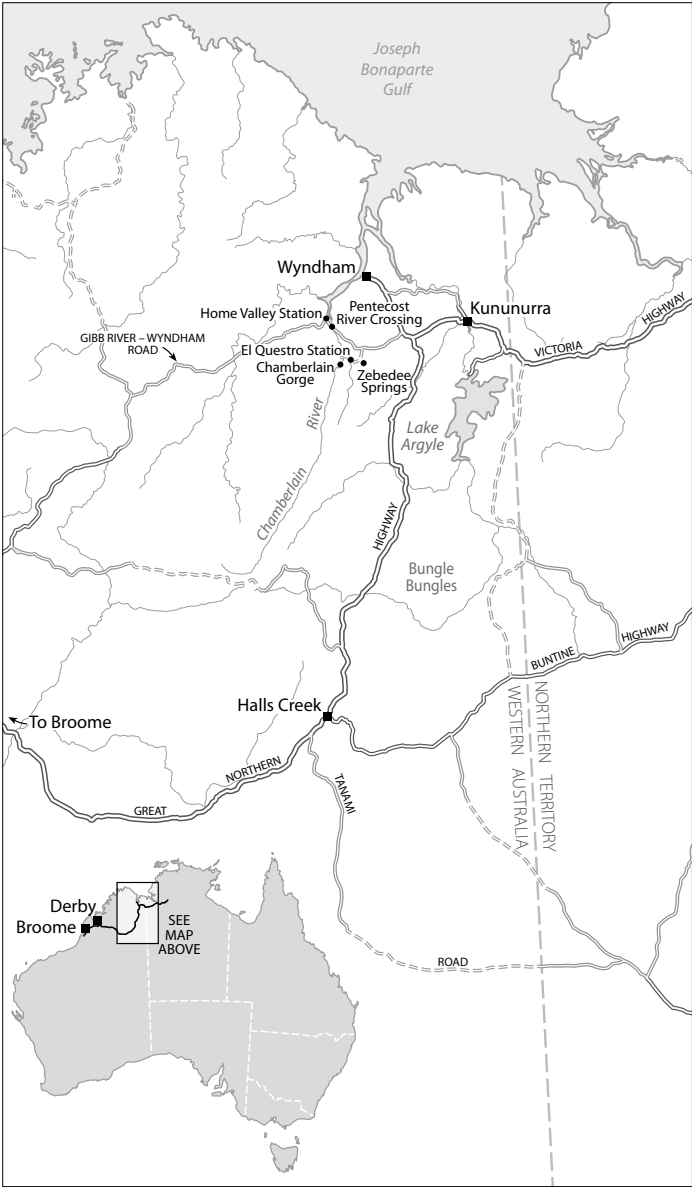
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THE KIMBERLEY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

1

Her first conscious thought is diffuse, shaded by a sarong, like she used to do to the lamp back in the Surry Hills flat when she was expecting a ‘gentleman caller’ as Bronny her actor-flatmate would joke. She hasn’t thought of Bronwyn in years. Wonders what she is doing now. Aspirations of playing Sydney Theatre Company, scored a couple of ads. Lives diverge. Best friends are gone from the radar. Nobody can be bothered with the upkeep. Weeds in a rental’s garden ...

She drifts in dark grey mist for a while, then the bulb in her head brightens. Where is she? A vehicle of some kind. With who?

She tries to sit up but can’t. Her legs are bound together, and her hands. Panic floods her.

‘Let me go!’ she screams as the vehicle bumps over rough ground. When there is no answer, she bellows, ‘Helllp!’, drawing out the sound as long as her breath can hold. Fear is sprouting by the millisecond, wrapping her up, strangling her. She has had too much to drink anyway. Plus, those joints. Tonight, just one more in life’s spilled ashtray.

Dancing at the pub: she remembers that. Then – what? It’s blank as the sheet of paper noting her lifetime achievements. She screams at least three more times. Then stops. It is pointless.

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Light from a half moon spills into the back of the vehicle but otherwise it's pitch out there. This is as far from artificial light as you can be. No roads, no petrol stations. No people. She envisages the car's headlights probing a black, endless belly. No chance of confirmation possible from here on the gritty surface she's lying on. Has to be a four-wheel drive, for out here where there are only tracks, even gravel is a rare luxury. She understands now, in some ethereal way, that this night has long been promised her.

She should never have listened to him. Wasn't doom squatting in her heart the moment she heard his message?

Despite her bound feet and her hands tied behind her back she manages to roll on her side. She fights to get her torso off the deck, stretches her neck up at a weird angle.

'Please, I'll do anything you want.'

Her words are soaked in desperation, but she can't bring herself to believe they will change anything. The bullet had been fired long ago. All this time it has been travelling unerringly to the target she'd painted on her own chest.

The driver pays no heed to her, does not tell her to shut up, does not slow down, or even reach around to clip her. For all she knows he has earphones in, listening to music.

Perhaps it is the drugs, but she feels an inability to offer any further physical resistance. Hers is a resignation, near total. For eight years her life has been a shadowland. It seems that will soon come to an end: the creeping anxiety, the paranoia, leaves whispering in accusation, the derisive hiss of combers on even the most deserted of beaches.

Another wave of anguish surges through her.

'Anything!' she screams, going through the motions, but

deep inside knowing the torpedo tube door is already welded shut. The lassitude settles over her again. Bronwyn got a part in a mini-series, didn't she? She'd forgotten that. Remembers now a wrap party somewhere near Taylor Square, genuine coke off toilet lids. They'd gone their separate ways when the lease ran out. Nine years. Bronny might be a mother by now.

—

That first trip to the west had been a high point ... no pun intended ... opportunities stretched in front of her like ... like endless lines of coke. Shitty analogy. There is no invention in her now. Hasn't been for years. Her mouth opens to cry out but this time all she manages are sobs.

An image of a long-ago Christmas Eve comes to her: satin pyjamas and coloured lights around her family garage, snacks laid out for visitors; white Christmas, nuts, pretzels. She'd helped her mum. It made her feel grown up. She'd waited in bed long after the guests had gone, and her little brother had stopped chattering and plunged into dreamland. She'd waited full of determination and expectation, alert for the sound of reindeer hooves. And then she'd drifted towards oblivion, just like now.

Finally, she had capitulated, her vigil unsuccessful.

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The car slows and stops. Her muscles tighten. Terror has formed a mould around her, a full-body death mask.

A back panel opens, air blows in and she smells the bush and ... moisture. A river or a creek. She feels a presence looming over her.

'Please,' she starts before something pricks her neck. A thought struggles out: maybe this is for the best ...

The veil descends over her ...

—

Her next conscious thought is she has wet herself. It is dismissed almost the same instant. She is in water, waist deep. Her hands remain bound, only now they are looped around a rough wooden post at her back. She yells into the cavernous night, her eyes adjusting to the moonlight, picking out wooden stumps encircling her like cricket fielders, perhaps the remnants of a jetty. But her legs, what's with them? She tries to lift her feet. They are heavy as lead. Suddenly she understands what has happened to her, the situation in which she finds herself, the awful symmetry of what has been prepared for her.

This time when she screams, it is with a power that can only be generated by the most intense, primal dread.

They are out there, those prehistoric creatures. Her galloping heart taps out its telegram: 'Not this death, anything but this'. Before she can wail again, she hears that slight suction sound when the massive reptile pulls itself from a muddy bank. She does not hear it enter the water but even as she screams anew, she can feel the resultant ripples running up under her ribs.

Her cry is still thrusting from her throat towards the moon, her tongue still trilling when the monster strikes, severing her body in two.

2

Of all the Friday-night drinking holes Josh Shepherd would have chosen to spend his Friday night in, the Picador ran last. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd been called out here as a young uniform. The pool cues had higher IQs than the blokes wielding them, and a large portion of whatever brains they had wound up spilled on the sticky carpet, or on the bitumen in the carpark because of a dumb argument over house rules on the eight ball.

Now he was a detective sergeant, Shepherd didn't have to bother with that crap, but what do you do when you are nominated best man, and Robbo, the upcoming groom, wants to get a few of his mates together for a drink, and suggests the Picador because Robbo feels quite at home here? Okay, normally you tell your mate, 'Sorry, no can do,' and suggest some other venue. Or you make up an excuse, like your toe has gone gangrenous from where that turtle snapped it. Trouble was, Robbo was also captain of the footy team, and Josh was astute when it came to sucking up.

At the start of the last season Josh had initially been pissed off he'd been moved from the glamorous centre half-forward position to anchor the defence at centre halfback. He'd been mollified, however, when Dutchy, one of the committee, had leaked the news to him privately during a urinal visit at a Sunday recovery session, that he was leading the club best-and-fairest. This he had duly won. So, in the interests partly

of team unity, but more importantly of maintaining his status come the next season, and possibly winning back-to-back b&f medals, Josh hadn't said boo when Robbo nominated the Picador as venue for a pre-bucks'-night piss-up.

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It was around nine-thirty now and Shepherd was ready to head home. Saturdays he liked to rise early and polish off a ten-k run before a long and relaxed breakfast topped off with a swim. Most of the clientele of the Picador had been drinking since Friday early knock-off and things were getting untidy. A lot of FIFOs had absconded from their Pilbara and Kimberley dongas and headed to Broome for shore leave. That always made for a tinderbox. Even though the numbers of women working the mines had increased a lot over the last couple of years, most had the good sense to steer clear of here. He supposed those rare women who did venture here enjoyed having their drinks bought for them. Predictably, however, their scarcity encouraged claim-jumping. That, or arguments over the pool table were the matches that invariably set the tinderbox ablaze.

'Fellas, I'm off,' said Shepherd, rising from his bar stool. He parried the demands of 'one for the road' from his three remaining teammates, visited the gents and, having relieved himself, headed into the sultry October air to his car. A couple of bays from it, two blokes and a young woman, listing like boats in a marina, were in what passed for conversation.

'Come on. We can drop you back after.'

'I dunno. I mean youse nice and all but ...'

The bigger of the two blokes with a mass of curly hair

was doing the talking. ‘You’ll have the night of your life. I’m telling you the gear we got will blow your fucking—’

Shepherd’s head had turned at that and the big bloke had spotted him.

‘What are you staring at, dipshit?’ The big bloke.

See, this was why Shepherd hated the fucking Picador.

‘If you’re talking about illegal drugs, which is what it sounds like, then you best leave it.’

The big bloke advanced. Shepherd was taller but this bloke had the back and shoulders of a gorilla.

‘What’s it the fuck to you?’

‘Detective Sergeant Shepherd, Broome police. I know your numberplate. Enjoy the rest of your night. Legally.’

Shepherd turned back to his car and was about to zap it when he felt a tremendous blow to the back of his head. His knees buckled, then a fist powered into his kidney, and he sagged. He was hit in the side of the head and his knees dropped onto the bitumen. A boot struck him from the right, then he was hit somewhere near the eye. He was kneeling now, and the blows were still coming. He toppled, tried to shield his head. Kicks pummelled both sides of his body, at least two bastards going him. His ears rang. His head was light, empty, most of his consciousness had fled already but the waves of pain in the rest of his body were undiminished. Where was he? There was no land beneath his feet, no horizon, no beacon. An ocean swirled around him. He fought to stay afloat but wasn’t strong enough. The depths claimed him.

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These Friday nights at the Derby house had become a routine. A much better one, thought Clement, than the norm of the previous eight years: drinks at the Anglers, usually with Bill Seratono, a chicken curry takeaway finished off solo with a half-bottle of wine in his small pad above the chandler on the wharf, evocative Brian Wilson songs turning him to mush. Nostalgia, futility, an invasive sense of failure, dehydration, fitful sleep.

He looked across, admiring the curve of her naked right buttock, her long legs scissoring the sheet, one above, one below, so that only the right one with the tattoo of the archer on her calf was visible. Copied from an artist named Kirchner, she'd told him. The one on her left leg was of two blue horses. Apparently, it too was a copy of a famous painting by another German artist, but he couldn't remember the artist's name.

'Why did you pick those particular paintings?' Clement had asked.

Lena, in nothing but a leopard-skin thong at that moment, had stretched back, looked at him through those smoky green-grey eyes of hers and said, 'The tattooist graduated from the Berlin School of Fine Art and Design. His name was Manfred. He specialised in German expressionism. This kind of art. He is the best tattooist in Berlin, probably Germany, maybe the world, and ...'

'Why is he doing tattoos?'

'Why do you think? He makes a shitload of money. But you interrupt me.' Lena could be very blunt, very German. It was a lesson he'd learned early on in their near three-month relationship.

'I apologise.'

‘The other reason I pick them is the colour. Blue is the best tattoo colour, right? The horses are blue in the painting, so I figured why alter that? And the archer is blue, mainly. The archer aims for something. Maybe they hit it, maybe they don’t, but they are aiming, not searching. I like that.’

Yes, thought Clement, Lena was decisive. She doesn’t drift like me, the untethered rowboat. She’d ridden into town on her motorcycle like a movie cowboy. Her long finger tapped the tattoo on her left leg.

‘The horses are free. But still, they are together. Because they wish to be.’

The tattoos were quite large, and yes, very high quality compared to what Clement was used to, but he was pleased she had only the two. He asked her if she was going to get more.

‘I don’t think so. I don’t want to be defined by my tattoos. I don’t feel that need. Like people who need six sunglasses, or ten hats. That’s limiting.’

She revealed she had thought of getting a ‘tubist’ image on her arse. ‘A Franz Leger or Max Ernst. Like *Celebes*, you know?’

He didn’t. She found a photo on her phone. It looked like a large vacuum cleaner. He was glad she had decided against it. It was silent outside. She loved it here, the place in Derby that he’d originally bought as a weekend where he might play dad to Phoebe. How quickly the time had gone, how much of life he had squandered.

He continued to study her, dark hair fanning over the pillows. Most nights they were together he found himself contemplating if this was the inevitable midlife crisis playing

out as the cliff that was his fiftieth birthday loomed. Lena was, he believed thirty-six. He was worried about asking her for specifics in case it turned out she was younger still. He didn't believe her youth had anything much to do with his hooking up with her. If anything, that had acted as a deterrent.

I shouldn't be worried about people judging me, he thought, but I am. Especially, he'd been concerned what Phoebe might think if he began a relationship with a much younger woman. Phoebe was eighteen now, probably she didn't care but he didn't want to embarrass his daughter.

He had thought everything was under control with Susanna, his previous... what did you call them? 'Lady friend' sounded ridiculous and girlfriend sounded wrong. Whatever the word was, it had appeared he and Sue were going to work out. In a place like Broome the fact was most of the prospective love interests you met were young. It was a transient population: tourists, young people on gap years, young professionals on internships. When he'd finally motivated himself to look at meeting somebody single, he had discovered that there wasn't a big pool of available females close to his own age. Sue – she preferred Susanna – had in fact been older than him by two years, and that hadn't bothered him in the least. It had initially been refreshing to have the same cultural touchstones. Like movies: shared Maltesers, shared experiences of youthful love, holding hands watching the latest blockbuster. When he'd been courting Marilyn, *Runaway Bride* and *Notting Hill* made lasting impressions on him. According to Sue it had been the same with her ex, although they had already been married by then.

Of course, Sue had never heard of Doctor John – that

might have been expecting too much – but she loved Michael Jackson and ‘Horses’ and U2. Clement had let that slide but for the life of him he couldn’t match up those three. Did it just mean Sue’s music taste was whatever other people seemed to like? He’d behaved himself, tempted as he was to bemoan ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ as the most overrated song of the modern era. Sure, he thought it was an okay song, perhaps even a good song. He’d said nothing, and to be honest that had seemed the wise choice as the relationship had bloomed. Sue had replaced his threadbare towels with fluffy ones and decorated his bed with cushions. He had almost forgotten that part of living with a woman. It was comfortable, it was pleasant not being on your own, the house no longer smelling of sweat and worn runners. But. The strength of being the same age was also the problem. Sue’s twenty-four-year-old son carried on like he was sixteen. Jordan lived in Sydney and bled her for money. ‘Bludged’, Clement’s old man would have said. He couldn’t keep a job or girlfriend, did drugs, lied. This upset Sue greatly. Foolishly, Clement had stuck his nose in where it wasn’t wanted, said the boy needed tough love. Once, when Jordan rang, Clement picked up Sue’s phone and told him this to his face. And that was the end of Sue and him. It had crumbled quickly.

When you’re our age, ruminated Clement, there is too much history: spouses, kids, habits. At least though he had Sue to thank for making sure he now had decent manchester. She had headed back to Sydney, but the fluffy towels remained.

—

It was surprising how quickly after the demise of the relationship he had fallen back into the old ways. In fact, if his memory was correct, it was on a Friday night after the Anglers, in the midst of a curry and a large glass of one-too-many wines, that he had received an overseas call from Mathias Klendtwort, a former German policeman he'd come to call a friend even though they'd never met in person. Mathias' former colleague had been brutally murdered eight years back, and Clement had called him for background on the victim. The two had hit it off and every six months or so one would call the other, Klendtwort because he was a little bored, Clement because he was lonely. Clement found it so much easier to confide in somebody thousands of kilometres away than to an office colleague, even a good friend like Graeme Earle. They had shot the breeze for a while, then Mathias had come to the point.

'Listen, the reason I am calling is my niece, Lena, is coming to Australia, and when she said she was going to visit Broome, I mentioned you.'

Clement was already running through his brain where he might recommend that she stay. Di Rivi, he could ask her, she might have a few suggestions.

'I'm warning you well in advance,' chuckled Klendtwort.

Now Clement was imagining some young prima donna.

'How old is she?'

'Thirty-four, thirty-six, around there. I'm telling you, Dan, Lena is a real firecracker. She's got tattoos, she's smart as hell and she devours men. So, you've been warned.'

Clement readjusted his ideas. 'She can look after herself then.'

Mathias roared. ‘Dan, you’re the one who will need protection from her. She’s been working a bar in Bangkok, she’s ridden a motorcycle around America, she carries a flexible riot baton, she can take care of herself but even so, young people, especially young women, can get overconfident. You know what I’m saying?’

Clement did. Phoebe was just embarking on her parent-free life. No way was he paranoid but there was always a thin layer of silt at the bottom of his mind where concern could be stirred in an instant.

‘It is always good to have a friend who can help if things go bad.’ Klendwort coughed and lit a cigarette, Clement could tell.

‘If she needs anything, I’m here.’

That had been back in May. Clement had forgotten all about it by late July when she’d turned up at the station, black motorcycle leathers, a helmet in her hand, thick hair cascading over her shoulders. She’d been touring Australia on her own on her bike for five weeks and already had organised a place to stay in Broome, so Clement suggested he show her around the town and take her to dinner when he finished work.

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Mathias was right. Clement conceded it from that first moment he saw her standing there in her leathers. She would be able to claim dominion over most guys without a shot being fired. She was tall, taut, smoky eyes. Her chin was defined, slightly masculine, her face maybe a fraction long to have been the traditional cover girl. She was sexy as hell, but Clement

had no design to be anything but a good host.

She was waiting at the motel and had changed into shorts and singlet. You couldn't miss the tattoos. Clement took her to a Chinese meal and insisting on paying. He drove around town, peppering the drive with stories of notorious criminal interactions. They visited Cable Beach of course. Lena peeled off her top and had a dip despite Clement's warning of the temperature.

'I can live with hard nipples,' she laughed.

Clement tried to avert his eyes when she came running up to him. He offered the towel and she hit it like a runner breasting the tape, carried on into him.

'Don't worry, Mathias knows what I'm like,' she laughed, reading his mind.

On the way to the Roebuck, after she'd dried off a bit, though her hair was still wet, she pointed at the CD player in his car. He would resist Bluetooth as long as he could. You could pick used CDs up for nothing and his player was always loaded and pumping.

'What's this?'

She must be younger than he'd supposed. 'A CD player.'

'I know what it is. Hey, I'm not nineteen. I mean the music.'

'Charlie Haden, Liberation Music Orchestra.'

'It's super cool,' she said.

'You like it?'

'What sort of music do you think I like?' she turned, facing him, that set jaw demanding of him.

'Eminem?' Taking a pot shot. This millennium was a musical blackhole pretty much for him.

‘You’re right, I like Eminem but also Miles Davis, Beatles, Bowie.’

‘Doctor John?’

‘Shit yeah!’ She sang a line from ‘Right Place Wrong Time’. That was incredible. That was also dangerous.

—

At the Roebuck, she had joined him in a beer. ‘People look at me, they see the tattoos, the motorcycle, they think I’m some wild chick. Okay, I like sex, you got me, but I don’t do drugs, I don’t drink hardly. I’m conservative. Apart from the sex and travel, I could be a nun.’

Once more Clement cast his eye over her slumbering body. She wasn’t like any nun he’d ever known. Mind you, how many nuns were there these days? It had taken a little over a week before he’d succumbed to the inevitable. That first week he had caught up with her: a couple of lunches, a couple of dinners. Work was slow, his colleagues curious. Shepherd had naturally fancied his chances, though the difference in ages between Lena and him matched that between Lena and Clement, but in the opposite direction. Shepherd had got her into his gym. Like a criminal burying the bloodied shirt he’d worn and thinking that solved his problems, Clement tried to deny to himself he was jealous. He’d strongly suspected Lena saw through him.

‘You’re a good-looking guy, you know?’ she’d whispered out of nowhere, around about day eight, as they sipped a juice at a wobbly iron table.

‘Thank you.’ He’d tried to be neutral, like an umpire or a diligent journalist. These days he never really thought of

himself as attractive or not. He assumed that any women who would entertain the idea of him as a lover would be basing it on whether he might be loyal, attentive, interesting, and yes, earning enough. Middle-aged women don't want poor blokes, he'd decided. Not even hunky surfers or sensitive songwriters. That was strictly for young women.

'No, I mean it. Sexy. I'd like to fuck you.'

Firecracker. That was the word her uncle had used.

'I don't think that would work.'

'And you're such a good judge of what works for you.' She'd raised her eyebrows, licked her straw. 'How long now have you been living the high life?' Lacing those two words with deadly irony.

He'd already given her the basics of his life. He'd had nothing to hide. It hadn't been like he was trying to clean up a messy bedroom for a prospective lover. So, she knew the important stuff: Marilyn, a daughter, the Anglers Club.

'It's best we don't go there,' he'd eventually managed.

'Yes, best we don't talk. At least not about important stuff. I'll just say this: I like you, you like me. And if we try to judge what's best for us by using the same failed logic as what has proved in the past to be no good for us, well ...' She'd shrugged.

'And has sleeping with every guy you had the faintest fancy for worked for you?'

'When I was in my twenties, I made a lot of mistakes. I don't make those now. I learned. So now, I regret nothing.'

Yes, he thought, though she hadn't explained the archer tattoo to him at that stage; she loses her arrow, and strike or miss matters not to her, because she has determined that at least she knows what she's aiming for.

The inevitable moment came when her prepaid accommodation ran out and he told her she was welcome to stay at his house in Derby. He explained he only used it on weekends, and recently not very often at all. In fact, he'd not used it since Susanna, around three months back. Lena was grateful, looking forward to having the chance to explore out of Derby. She followed him to Derby on a Honda Africa she'd bought second-hand in Sydney for sixteen thousand dollars. She explained that she found it more economical to buy a vehicle and then sell it.

'I don't know how long I'll stay,' she said, and Clement realised it was the first time they'd canvassed in any way the duration of her trip, although he supposed they probably had talked about it that very first night. But how could you concentrate on anything with Lena there, after she'd just thrust her part-naked body into you?

Had he secretly hoped things would turn out how they did? Only now did he dare to peek under the tarpaulin he had been laying down for weeks, only now did he dare to scrutinise his behaviours, what they said about him. Had it been his plan all along for him and Lena to get together sexually? The nod and wink between his bodily desires and medulla, or whatever part of the brain controlled that stuff?

Or was it, as he preferred to believe, the inevitable outcome of the proximity of two personalities that was bound to manifest itself at some unpredictable point in history?

That point was reached when she stepped from the bathroom wrapped in nothing more than a towel, said, 'I love

these fluffy towels,' and, unhooking it, let it drop to the floor.

That's all she wrote.

—

At some point during that weekend, he realised that the negative team's arguments in his internal debate – that the age gap was too great, that he was being disloyal to Mathias, that he enjoyed her company and might jeopardise the friendship, that his colleagues would judge him poorly, et cetera – were all spurious.

There was only one true reason: he feared he might commit to Lena, only to discover he was no more than a challenge, another notch.

It was so pathetically simple, so unoriginal, so 1960s-teenage-girl, that his skin crawled when he was forced to own it. Though own it he must. For he had slept with women younger than her, he really didn't give a rat's arse what his colleagues thought, and Lena's and his friendship, nice as it was, was still nascent. So that left the impact on Mathias. Clement suspected Mathias knew what outcome might eventuate when he involved Clement.

He stroked her shoulder now, silently confessing: That's my problem, simple as that. The time might arrive when you have no use for me, and when you knock me down with the words 'we're over', I might not be able to get back up off the canvas.

However, he had come to admit that despite this fear, she was absolutely right when she'd told him that whatever compass he had been using these last ten years had been defective, leading him nowhere but in a large circle. Maybe he

would tip over the edge of the world, maybe he would strike the mother lode? At least he had ceased drifting ...

His phone buzzed. After eleven on a Friday night, any call could not be good news.