

BITTER WASH ROAD

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VIPER

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On a Monday morning in September, three weeks into the job, the new cop at Tiverton took a call from his sergeant: shots fired on Bitter Wash Road.

‘Know it?’

‘Vaguely, Sarge,’ Hirsch said.

‘Vaguely. You been sitting on your arse for three weeks, or have you been poking around like I asked?’

‘Poking around, Sarge.’

‘You can cover a lot of ground in that time.’

‘Sarge.’

‘I told you, didn’t I, no dropkicks?’

‘Loud and clear, Sarge.’

‘No dropkicks on my watch,’ Sergeant Kropp said, ‘and no smartarses.’

He switched gears, telling Hirsch that a woman motorist had called it in. ‘No name mentioned, tourist on her way to look at the wildflowers. Heard shots when she pulled over to photograph the Tin Hut.’ Kropp paused. ‘You with me, the Tin Hut?’

Hirsch didn't have a clue. 'Sarge.'

'So get your arse out there, let me know what you find.'

'Sarge.'

'This is farming country,' the sergeant said, in case Hirsch hadn't worked it out yet, 'the sheep-shaggers like to take pot-shots at rabbits. But you never know.'

Wheat and wool country, in fact, three hours north of Adelaide. Hirsch's new posting was a single-officer police station in a blink-and-you'd-miss-it town on the Barrier Highway. Tiverton. There were still a few of these little cop shops around the state, the department knowing not to call them one-*man* stations, not in this day and age, or not within range of a microphone, but it didn't place female officers in them all the same, citing safety and operational concerns. So, single guys were sent to Tiverton—the wives of married officers would take one look and say no thanks—often, or especially, guys with a stink clinging to them.

Like Hirsch.

The police station was the front room of a small brick house right on the highway, where flies droned and sluggish winds stirred the yellowed community notices. Hirsch lived in the three rooms behind it: bathroom, sitting room with alcove kitchen, bedroom. He also enjoyed a parched front lawn and a narrow driveway for his own aged Nissan and the SA Police fleet vehicle, a four-wheel-drive Toyota HiLux mounted with a rear cage. There was a storeroom at the back, its barred window and reinforced door dating from the good old days before the deaths-in-custody inquiry, when

it had been the lockup. For all of these luxurious appointments the department screwed him on the rent.

Hirsch finished the call with Sergeant Kropp, then he located Bitter Wash Road on the wall map, locked up, pinned his mobile number to the front door and backed out of the driveway. He passed the general store first, just along from the police station and opposite the primary school, the playground still and silent, the kids on holiday. Then a couple of old stone houses, the Institute with its weathered cannon and memorial to the dead of the world wars, more houses, two churches, an agricultural supplier, a signpost to the grain dealer's down a side street . . . and that was Tiverton. No bank, chemist, GP, lawyer, dentist, accountant or high school.

He drove south along the floor of a shallow valley, undulating and partly cultivated hills on his left, a more dramatic and distant range on his right—blue today, scarred here and there by scrubby trees and shadows among erupted rocks, a foretaste of the Flinders Ranges, three hours further north. Following the custom of the locals, Hirsch lifted one finger from the steering wheel to greet the oncoming cars. Both of them. Nothing else moved, although he was travelling through a land poised for movement. Birds, sitting as if snipped from tin, watched him from the power lines. Farmhouses crouched mutely behind cypress hedges and farm vehicles sat immobile in paddocks, waiting for him to pass.

Five kilometres south of Tiverton he turned left at the Bitter Wash turnoff, heading east into the hills, and here there was some movement in the world. Stones smacked

the chassis. Skinny sheep fled, a dog snarled across a fence line, crows rose untidily from a flattened lizard. The road turned and rose and fell, taking him deeper into hard-scrabble country, just inside the rain shadow. He passed a tumbled stone wall dating from the 1880s and a wind farm turbine. Someone had been planting trees against erosion up and down one of the gullies. He remembered to check kilometres travelled since the turnoff, and wondered how far along the track this tin hut was.

He slowed for a dip in the road, water running shallowly across it from last night's storm, and accelerated uphill, over a peak and around a blind corner. And jammed on the brakes. Slewed to a shuddering halt in a hail of gravel.

A gumtree branch the length of a power pole lay across Bitter Wash Road. Hirsch switched off, his heart hammering. Close shave. Beyond, the road dipped again, bottoming out where a creek in weak, muddy flood had scored a shallow trench in the gravel, then it climbed to another blind corner. And there, in a little cleared area inside the fence and angled alongside a bend in the creek, was Sergeant Kropp's Tin Hut: corrugated iron walls and roof, mostly rust, and a crooked chimney. On a flat above it he glimpsed trees and the suggestion of a green farmhouse roof.

Hirsch got out. He was reaching to drag the branch off the road when a bullet snapped past his head.

His first reflex was to duck, his second to scuttle around to the lee side of the HiLux drawing his service pistol, an S&W .40 calibre semi-automatic. His first *thought* was that Kropp's anonymous caller had got it right. But then,

crouched there beside the grubby rear wheel, Hirsch began to have a second thought: two days ago, some asshole placed a pistol cartridge in his letterbox. It occurred to him now that it hadn't been a joke or a threat, but a promise.

He weighed his options: call for backup; tackle the shooter; get the hell out.

Options? They had him trapped where the road dipped between a canola crop and a stony hill. As soon as he showed himself—as soon as he got behind the wheel or clambered uphill to find the shooter or climbed the fence to run through the canola—he'd be shot. Meanwhile, police backup was in Redruth, forty kilometres away.

Hang on. Like fuck it was. The shooters were the very officers he hoped might back him up. They were not forty kilometres but forty metres away, up there on the hillside, positioned for crossfire, their radios conveniently switched off. Redruth was a three-man station, Kropp and two constables, and when Hirsch had called in to introduce himself three weeks ago, they'd called him a dog, a maggot. A silent *pow!* as they finger-shot their temples, grins as they finger-sliced their throats.

Placed a pistol cartridge in his letterbox when his back was turned.

Hirsch thought about it some more. Even if he managed to climb back in the HiLux, the tree was still across the road and there was nowhere to turn around. They'd shoot him through the glass. Discounting a full-on, up-hill assault, that left a zigzagging escape into the canola crop, a broad yellow swathe stretching to the smoky hills on the other side of the

valley—but to reach it he'd have to climb the bank and then tangle himself in a wire fence. And how much cover would the crop provide?

Hirsch began to feel a strange, jittery discordance. He might have put it down to fear, but he knew what fear felt like. Was it some emanation from the wind farm? He was very close to one of the turbines. It sat on the stony hill where the shooter was hiding, the first of a ragged line stretching along this side of the valley, the blades cutting the air in a steady, rhythmic whooshing that reached deep in his guts. To Hirsch, it was all of a piece with ending his days where the world was unlovely, at the base of a scruffy slope of grass tussocks, rabbit holes and lichenized stone reefs.

He glanced both ways along the road. He didn't know where the next farmhouses were or how much traffic to expect, or . . .

Christ, traffic. Hirsch cocked an ear, listening for vehicles he'd have to warn off, or protect, or mop the collateral blood from. Or run like hell from.

Which raised the question: why would the bastards ambush him here, within cooee of town? Why not somewhere more remote? 'Out east,' as the locals called it. According to the calendar hanging above Hirsch's desk, out east was a region of undernourished mallee scrub, red dirt, nude stone chimneys, mine shafts and September wildflowers. One jagged hill named the Razorback.

September school holidays, wildflowers blooming . . . Hirsch listened again, imagining he could hear a busload of tourists trundling along Bitter Wash Road.

He risked a quick glance over the passenger door windowsill. The radio handset jutted from a cradle on the dashboard. His phone sat in a drinks holder between the front seats. He wasn't obliged to call the Redruth station. He could call Peterborough, Clare, even Adelaide . . .

He heard another shot.

He froze, fingers on the door handle.

Then he relaxed minutely. What was it he'd actually heard? Not a high-powered crack but something flat, puny. Small calibre, dampened further by the huge sky and the whoosh of the wind turbine. Hardly a sniper's rifle. There had been a weak howl, too, as the bullet hit something—a stone?—and whanged away across the creek.

Nowhere near him.

A second ricochet came. He stiffened again, relaxed again. Not a ricochet at all. A kid's voice saying *peeowwww*.

Hirsch did what he should have done from the start and checked out the fallen branch. No drag marks in the gravel, no saw or axe cuts, no foliage removed. He eyed the tree itself, found the break halfway up the trunk. He recalled camping trips from his childhood, teachers warning the kids not to pitch their tents under gumtrees. All that sinewy health on the outside and quiet decay within.

A bit like the police, really.

He holstered his handgun. Hunching his shoulders a little, he stepped into the middle of the road and dragged the branch into the ditch. Then he parked the HiLux on a narrow verge, leaving room for passing vehicles, and climbed the scabby hill to see who might have put him in his grave if his luck hadn't been running.

They didn't hear his approach, the boy and the girl: the wind, the rhythmic rush of the turbine above their heads, their absolute absorption as one kid aimed a .22 at a jam tin on a rock and the other stood by to watch.

Hirsch knew he should pounce on them before they sent another ricochet over the road, but he paused. The view from the base of the turbine was panoramic, exhilarating. Bitter Wash Road was clear in both directions, so he took a moment to get his bearings. The broad valley, the vigorous crops, the road running up and down the folds in the earth. And that khaki smudge back there was Tiverton with its pale grain silos poking into the haze.

There was a farmhouse above the Tin Hut, the green roof clearly visible now, and on the other side of the road was a red-roofed house. Both hedged in by cypresses, the shrubberies, garden beds and lawns quarantined: the usual landscaping out here in the wheat and wool country. The green-roofed property was extensive, with a number of sheds, a set of stockyards and farm vehicles parked on a dirt clearing beside a haystack. The place with the red roof was smaller, faded, only an attached carport and one small garden shed to brag about. Hirsch wondered at the relationship between the two properties. Maybe a farm manager lived in the smaller house. Or a couple, a man to do the gardening, his wife to cook and clean—the shit work. If those feudal relationships still existed.

Hirsch shaded his eyes. The sun passed in and out of the scrappy clouds as a few sheep trotted nose to tail across a nearby hillside.

Otherwise only the children moved, and Hirsch was betting they belonged to one of the houses. No school for two weeks and, with or without the blessing of their parents, they'd taken the .22 out for some target shooting. The location was perfect: nothing here but grass and stones, sloping down to the creek, nothing with blood in its veins. You could pretend you were in a shootout with the bad guys, and when the rifle got too heavy you could prop the barrel on a rock.

Except that bullets strike objects and howl off in unexpected directions. Or you might forget where you are and take a pot-shot at a crow or a rabbit just when a policeman is stepping out of his HiLux to shift a fallen tree.

Yeah, well, wasn't this just great? A couple of adults he could deal with: clear regulations, clear offences and penalties. But kids . . . He'd have to involve the parents; he'd maybe have to charge the parents. Jesus.

The children didn't hear him, not at first. Not until, side-stepping down the slope, he skidded and fell. Now they heard him, his curses and the tock and rattle of stones tumbling over one another, Hirsch cursing because he'd startled himself, torn his trousers and barked the skin on palm and elbow.

The children whirled around in shared alarm, mouths open, eyes shocked. They were caught in the act and they knew it, but it was how they managed it that was interesting. Hirsch forgot his discomfort and watched. The boy dropped his eyes like a beaten dog, already surrendering, but the girl grew tense. Her eyes darted to the empty hill, the boy alongside her, possible escape routes. She didn't run, but that

didn't mean she wouldn't. The gaze she fixed on Hirsch was working it all out.

He held up his palm, not quite a warning, not quite a greeting. 'Don't,' he said mildly.

A faint relaxing. She was about twelve years old, skinny, contained, unblinkingly solemn, with scratched bare legs and arms under shorts and a T-shirt, her dark hair hanging to the shoulders and cropped at her forehead. Scruffy, but someday soon she'd have the looks to light dark places.

Disconcerted, Hirsch eyed the boy. Thin, similarly dressed, he could have been her brother, but his hair was straw-coloured, full of tufts and tangles, and his pale skin was flushed and mottled. Where the girl seemed to be looking for the angles, he was ready to be told what to do. But he was the one holding the rifle, and he was practised at it, keeping the barrel down, the stock in the crook of his arm, the bolt open. Hirsch counted five .22 shell casings glinting dully in the grass.

'My name,' he said, 'is Constable Hirschhausen. I'm stationed at Tiverton.'

The girl remained expressionless but Hirsch sensed hostility, and he scratched around in his head for the best way to go on.

'How about we start with your names?'

The girl's voice piped up above the whoosh of the turbines. 'I'm Katie and he's Jack.'

Katie Street and Jackson Latimer, and Katie lived with her mother in the smaller, red-roofed house that Hirsch had seen, and Jackson with his parents and older brother in the

larger green-roofed house. In fact, Grampa Latimer lived on the property, too, in a house half a kilometre in from the road. 'You can't see it from here.'

Even Hirsch had heard of the Latimers. 'This is your land?' he asked, indicating the hill they were standing on, the turbine above them, the ragged line of turbines stretching away along the ridge.

Jack shook his head. 'Mrs Armstrong's.'

'Where does she live?'

He pointed to where Bitter Wash Road disappeared around a distant bend.

'Won't she be cross if she knows you're trespassing?'

They were puzzled, as if the concept hadn't much currency out here. 'It's the best spot,' Katie reasoned.

Right, thought Hirsch. 'Look, the thing is, one of your shots went wild. It nearly hit me.'

He gestured in the direction of the road. Putting some hardness into it he added, 'It's dangerous to shoot a gun so close to a road. You could hurt someone.'

He didn't say kill someone. He didn't know if the severity would work. He didn't know if he should be gentle, stern, pissed off, touchy-feely or full-on tyrant. He took the easy way: 'Do your parents know you're up here shooting a gun?'

No response. Hirsch said, 'I'm afraid I'll need to talk to—'

The girl cut in. 'Don't tell Mr Latimer.'

Hirsch cocked his head.

'Please,' she insisted.

'Why?'

‘My dad will kill me,’ the boy muttered. ‘Anyway he’s not home.’

‘Okay, I’ll speak to your mothers.’

‘They’re out, too.’

‘My mum took Jack’s mum shopping,’ Katie said.

Hirsch glanced at his watch: almost noon. ‘Where?’

‘Redruth,’ she said reluctantly.

Meaning they hadn’t gone down to Adelaide for the day and would probably be home to make lunch. ‘Okay, let’s go.’

‘Are you taking us to jail?’

Hirsch laughed, saw that the girl was serious, and grew serious himself. ‘Nothing like that. I’ll drive you home and we’ll wait until someone comes.’

Keeping it low-key, no sudden movements, he eased the rifle—a Ruger—from Jack’s hands. He’d disarmed people before, but not like this. He wondered if police work ever got chancy, out here in the middle of nowhere. He walked the children back over the ridge and down to the HiLux. The girl moved with a quick, nervy energy; the boy trudged, his spine and spindly arms and legs moving in a curious counterpoint, a kind of pulling back on the reins. Hirsch saw that his left shoe was chunkier than the right, the sole and heel built up.

The girl caught Hirsch looking. Her eyes glittered. ‘You’ve got a hole in your pants.’

The kids strapped in, Katie in the passenger seat, Jack in the rear, Hirsch said, ‘So, we wait at Jackson’s house?’

‘Whatever,’ Katie said. She added: ‘You could be looking for that black car instead of hassling us.’

The police were looking for hundreds, thousands, of cars at any given moment. But Hirsch knew exactly which one she meant: the Pullar and Hanson Chrysler, last seen heading for Longreach, over two thousand kilometres away. He said, 'I doubt it's in our neck of the woods.'

Katie shot him down with a look, swung her gaze away from him. 'That's what you think.'

Hirsch was fascinated by her. Dusty olive skin, a tiny gold hoop in each ear, a strand of hair pasted damply to her neck, and entirely self-contained. One of those kids who is determined, tireless, mostly right and often a pain in the arse. He tried to remember what he'd been like at that age. When it was clear that she didn't intend to elaborate, he slotted the key in the ignition.

'We saw it go past our school,' said Jack in the back seat.

Slowly, Hirsch removed his hand from the key. Had some guy waved his cock at the kids? Tried to snatch one of them? 'The primary school in town?'

'Yes.'

'When was this?'

'Yesterday.'

'A black Chrysler?'

'Yes.'

'But what were you doing at school on a Sunday?'

'A working bee. Cleaning up and planting trees.'

'Did this car stop?'

Katie shook her head. 'It drove past.'

'What time was this?'

'Nearly lunchtime.'

Hirsch pictured it. The little primary school was opposite the police station, with a large playing field fronting Barrier Highway. The entrance, car park and classrooms were off a side street. The speed limit was fifty kilometres per hour through the town, giving an observant child time to mark details. But what details had marked this vehicle out from the others that passed the school every day, the farm utes, family cars, grain trucks, interstate buses?

It was a black Chrysler, that's what. A car in the news, driven by a pair of killers.

Not a common car—but not rare either, and Hirsch said so. 'I think those men are still in Queensland.'

'Whatever. Can we just go?'

Hirsch glanced at the rearview mirror, seeking Jack's face. The boy shrank away.

'Suit yourselves,' Hirsch said, checking the wing mirror and pulling onto the road.

Speaking of observant children . . .

'Did you kids happen to see anyone hanging around outside the police station late last week? Maybe putting something in the letterbox?'

They stared at him blankly, and he was thinking he'd mystified them, when the girl said, 'There was a lady.'

'A lady.'

'But I didn't see her putting anything in the letterbox.'

'Was she waiting to see me, do you think?'

'She looked in your car.'

Hirsch went very still and braked the HiLux. He said lightly, 'When was this?'

‘Morning recess.’

Hirsch went out on patrol every morning, and someone would have known that. ‘What day?’

Katie conferred with Jack and said, ‘Our last day.’

‘Last day of term? Friday?’

‘Yes.’

Hirsch nodded slowly and removed his foot from the brake pedal, steering slowly past the fallen branch. Seeing Katie Street peer at it, he had a sense of her mind working, putting the story together—him stopping the HiLux, getting out, and hearing a stray bullet fly past his head. As if to check that he wasn’t sporting a bullet hole, she glanced across. He smiled. She scowled, looked away.

Then she said tensely, ‘We’re not lying.’

‘You saw a woman near my car.’

Now she was flustered. ‘No. I mean yes. I mean we saw the black car.’

‘I believe you.’

She’d heard that before. ‘It’s true!’

‘What direction?’

She got her bearings, pointed her finger. ‘That way.’

North. Which made little sense if Pullar and Hanson had been in the car she saw—not that Hirsch could see that pair of psychopaths breaking cover to drive all the way down here to Sheepshit West, South Australia.

Still sensing Hirsch’s doubt, Katie grew viperish: ‘It was black, it was a station wagon and it had yellow and black New South Wales numberplates, just like in the news.’

Hirsch had to look away. ‘Okay.’

‘And it was a Chrysler,’ said Jack.

Feeling lame, Hirsch said, ‘Well, it’s long gone now.’

Or perhaps not, if it had been the Pullar and Hanson car. The men liked to target farms on dirt roads off the beaten track. Suddenly Hirsch understood what the children were doing with the Ruger: they were shooting Pullar and Hanson.

He steered gamely down through the washaway and up around the next bend, to where Bitter Wash Road ran straight and flat for a short distance, the children mute and tense. But as he neared the red roof and the green, Katie came alive, snapping, ‘That’s Jack’s place.’

A pair of stone pillars, the name *Vimy Ridge* on one, 1919 on the other, the oiled wooden gates ajar. Imposing. Hirsch supposed that a lot had occurred since 1919, though, for everything was weatherworn now, as if the money had dried up. A curving gravel driveway took him past rose-bordered lawns and a palm tree, all of the road dust dampened by last night’s rain, ending at a lovely stone farmhouse. Local stonework in shades of honey, a steep green roof sloping down to deep verandas, in that mid-north regional style not quite duplicated elsewhere in the country, and sitting there as though it belonged. Hirsch eyed it appreciatively. He’d spent his early years in a poky terrace on the baked streets of Brompton—not that the miserable little suburb was miserable any longer, now the young urbanites had gentrified it.

He pocketed his phone, got out, stretched his bones and gazed at the house. It was less lovely closer up. Careworn, the paintwork faded and peeling, a fringe of salt damp showing on the walls, a fringe of rust along the edges of the

corrugated iron roof. Weeds grew in the veranda cracks. He didn't think it was neglect, exactly. It was as if the inhabitants were distracted; no longer saw the faults, or blinked and muttered, 'I must take care of that next week.'

The children joined him, Jack a little agitated, as though unsure of the proprieties. Hirsch contemplated phoning one or other of the mothers but mobile reception was dicey. Anyway, nobody reacted well to a call from a policeman, and the women would return soon. So, how to fill in the time . . . He didn't think he should enter the house uninvited, and he didn't want to wander around the yard and sheds uninvited either. Meanwhile, he needed to keep an eye on the kids.

He stepped onto the veranda and indicated a huddle of directors' chairs. 'Let's wait over here.'

When they were seated he asked, 'Who owns the .22?'

'My dad,' whispered the boy.

'What does he use it for?'

'Rabbits and things.'

'Does he own any other guns?'

'Another .22, a .303 and a twelve-gauge.'

'Where are they kept?'

'In his study.'

Hirsch asked the questions casually, keeping his voice low and pleasant, but he was scanning the dusty yard, taking note of the sheds, a scatter of fuel drums, an unoccupied kennel, stockyards, a field bin in a side paddock. A ute and a truck, but no car. A plough and harrows tangled in grass next to a tractor shed. A working farm but no one working it today, or not around the house.

‘So anyone could take the guns out and shoot them?’

‘He locks them in a cupboard.’

Hirsch threw Jack a wink. ‘And I bet you know where the key is, right?’

Jack shook his head violently. ‘No, honest.’

‘He’s not lying,’ Katie said. ‘We used the gun that’s kept in the ute. It’s just a little gun, for shooting rabbits.’

Little and overlooked and forgotten, thought Hirsch. Not even a proper gun to some people.

He was guessing the kids had done it a few times now, waited until the adults were out then grabbed the Ruger and headed down the creek for some target practice. Bullets? No problem. They’d be rolling around in a glove box or coat pocket or cupboard drawer, also overlooked and forgotten.

To ease the atmosphere, Hirsch said, ‘So, school holidays for the next two weeks.’

‘Yes.’

A silence threatened. Hirsch said, ‘May I see the gun case?’

Jack took him indoors to a study furnished with a heavy wooden desk and chair, an armchair draped with a pair of overalls, a filing cabinet, computer and printer, bookshelves. It smelled of furniture polish and gun oil. The gun cabinet was glass-faced, bolted to the wall, locked. A gleaming Brno .22, a .303 fitted with a sight, a shotgun, a couple of cartridge packets and an envelope marked ‘licences’.

Hirsch thanked the boy and they returned to the veranda in time to hear a crunch of gravel. A boxy white Volvo came creeping up to the house as if wary to see a police vehicle parked there. Katie’s mother at the wheel, reasoned Hirsch,

and Jack's mother in the passenger seat, and he didn't know what the hell he should tell them. He removed the phone from his pocket. The shutter sound already muted, he got ready to photograph them. Habit, after everything that had happened to him.