DAY'S END

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Peace
Consolation
The Way It Is Now

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GARRY DISHER

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For Sue Turnbull and Graeme Blundell

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Out in that country, if you owned a sheep station the size of a European principality you stood tall. If you were a rent-paying public servant, like Hirsch, you stood on the summit of Desolation Hill.

Not much of a hill – but it was desolate. It overlooked patches of saltbush and mallee scrub and a broad, red-ochre gibber plain that stretched to the horizon; wilted wildflowers here and there, deceived by a rare spring shower.

It also overlooked an image of Wildu, the spirit eagle, carved into the plain: spanning three kilometres from wingtip to wingtip and poised to strike. And Desolation Hill was one of the last places Willi Van Sant had visited before he disappeared.

'The urge to launch oneself,' Willi's mother said, hugging her daypack to her thin body, 'is irresistible.'

Hirsch agreed and they stood silent at the guardrail for a while, that Thursday morning in spring. The urge to launch oneself and ride the air currents above the plain – as an

actual wedge-tailed eagle was doing just then, along with a distant, buzzing ultralight plane that Hirsch guessed was photographing the geoglyph for some calendar or postcard publisher.

He was reading a sun-faded sign bolted to the rail – *Wildu is a Ngadjuri word referring to the stars of the Southern Cross, their arrangement here represented by the tips of an eagle's talons* – when Dr Van Sant gave a dismissive sniff and pointed to the carven eagle below them. 'Appropriation?'

'Sure is,' he agreed cheerily, wondering if her son had expressed that thought in an email home.

He gazed again at the geoglyph – or artwork; or graffiti, homage to the Ngadjuri or instance of cultural appropriation, depending upon your point of view. Some hero with a grader had scored the eagle into the ground in the mid-1980s. No one had ever said who; the overseer, station hands and absentee property owner denied all knowledge. When Hirsch first noticed it, on one of his long-range patrols of the rain-shadow sheep stations, it was obscured by decades of sand drifts, desert shrubs and the churning tyres of hunters' four-wheel drives. Then last year a grazier named Russ Fanning had bought the place, restored the motif with a pair of GPS-guided excavators and created the lookout on the peak of Desolation Hill.

Strange guy, Fanning. Contradictory. He wasn't after sightseeing dollars, just wanted to acknowledge the Ngadjuri people, and had met with some of the local elders, intent on getting the mythology right. They'd had reservations, but he'd gone ahead anyway. Hirsch wasn't sure if

that made Fanning a bad guy or not, but elsewhere on his property, where the soil was less marginal and enjoyed a better chance of rain, he'd set up revegetation and conservation programmes, installed solar panels and batteries; he conserved and recycled water. A guy who liked to yarn with Hirsch, show him around the property. Who admitted one day that he voted Labor.

And twice in the past month he'd called Hirsch to ask if he was any closer to identifying who'd shot his merino stud ram, valued at forty-five thousand dollars. A high-powered long-range-rifle bullet to the head. Hirsch clenched with guilt. Short answer, no. He'd knocked on doors – a round trip of three hundred kilometres out in that country – and got nowhere. Maybe 'roo shooters, someone suggested. Maybe wild-goat shooters, said another. Maybe mischievous, maybe malign. And maybe accidental, the ram resembling a goat if he'd been caught in the tricky shadows of a saltbush twilight.

Hirsch shook off the guilt and turned to Janne Van Sant, dismayed to see tears, a twist of sadness or anxiety. He tried a smile. 'Shall we move on?'

'One moment please, Constable Hirschhausen.'

She dug in the front pocket of her tan canvas pack and retrieved one of the photographs she'd shown Hirsch ninety minutes earlier, in the front room of the little brick building that housed the Tiverton police station. Printed from a message sent by her son, it showed a tall, slim kid with blond dreadlocks, smiling for the camera, Wildu the eagle spread behind and below him. Twenty-one years old. Backpacking around Australia, taking a job here and there.

It occurred to Hirsch at that moment: the photo was not framed like a selfie. Someone had been with the kid, here on the summit of Desolation Hill.

As to who, he thought – that was a question to ask the station owners Willi had been working for.

He watched Dr Van Sant hold the photo at head height with both hands, adjusting until she knew exactly where Willi had been standing all those months ago. She was a slightly shorter and less tanned version of her son. A cap of cropped fair hair. A similar smile – what Hirsch had seen of it in the past hour and a half.

And hours to go yet: another thirty minutes over chopped and powdery back roads to reach Dryden Downs; a conversation with the Drydens; the trip back to the police station and her rented Camry.

She had dumped the daypack on the bonnet of the SA Police Toyota. A handful of other photographs spilled out.

'May I?' Hirsch asked, gathering them up.

Her response was a shrug that he thought of as very European. It said: 'If you must.' And so, with some hesitation, he neatened the photos and flipped through them. Warm from the Toyota's duco, it was almost as if they were straight off the printer.

Willi on a horse; Willi swimming in a dam; Willi with a sheepdog, on a claypan, pointing down at the tracks of a solitary sheep; Willi beside a Cessna marked *Dryden Downs Pastoral*; Willi crouched next to a gravestone, gesturing comically at the inscription: *Here lies Tom Sewell, who shot himself accidentally on purpose, 25 September 1923*.

Hirsch got a kick out of it, too. He shoved the photos back into the daypack and checked his watch.

'Yes, yes,' Dr Van Sant said, her tone at odds with her air of containment.

Hirsch steered the rattling Hilux down through the switchback bends, then left at the T-intersection at the base of Desolation Hill and onto a corrugated dirt track named Manna Soak Highway.

'Irony,' Dr Van Sant said.

'Yes,' Hirsch said, accelerating. Drive too slowly on these roads and your teeth shook out; too quickly and you might lose traction on a curve, roll your vehicle, lie pinned in the wreckage for hours, even days, before another vehicle happened along. You needed skill with a dash of nonchalance. Hirsch had been making these back-country ventures for three years now and was getting better at it.

Right now he was concentrating on the road, not Willi's mother, who was saying, with an air of carefully testing her words and pitching her voice above the rattles: 'A national trait, do you think? A reluctance to take anything seriously?' She'd been in the country exactly four days: two in Sydney, then the drive to Tiverton, in wheat and wool country halfway between Adelaide and the Flinders Ranges.

Hirsch decelerated for an eroded incline washed free of topsoil; more the spine of a stone reef than a road. He topped the rise at walking pace, slowly increased speed on the downslope and said, 'Yes, partly that.'

Slim and straight-backed in the seat beside him, and

perhaps testy that he'd taken so long to answer, Janne Van Sant said, 'And the other part, or parts?'

She's picturing her son out here, Hirsch thought; how he might have fared – how he might be faring – in a land where no one took anything seriously. 'Isn't being ironic a sign that you take something seriously? You're trying to stop it swamping you?'

Dr Van Sant gestured beyond her window at the saltbush and mulga struggling to survive on the red dirt plains. 'Manna Soak, is that irony, too? The bread of heaven?'

Hirsch braked gently and pulled to the side, letting an oncoming Land Rover with Western Australian plates pass by. His mind raced, distracted from answering by the presence out here of an interstate vehicle with two averted faces on board.

Dust roiled; tiny stones pinged along the flank of the Toyota. The air cleared and he drove on. 'The naming isn't always ironical. Some names are quite frank.'

'Mm,' Dr Van Sant said. 'They trace the faltering march of white progress. Hope Hill,' she added, a name they'd seen on a signpost on the road from Tiverton. 'Mischance Creek – what mischance, and why did it matter enough to name something? Desolation Hill.'

Hirsch pointed to where a couple of acres of red dirt surrounded a lone chimney amid a pile of stones. 'We're in a rain shadow,' he said. 'People came out here in the mid-1800s, saw running creeks and spring grasses, and built a house. They didn't know they might wait twenty years for the next rainfall.'

‘One hopes,’ Dr Van Sant said, ‘but suffers misfortune – and so is desolate.’

This isn’t really about the place names, Hirsch thought; she’s thinking of Willi. The journey he may have made from hope to despair. Not wanting to say anything trite to buck up her feelings, he lowered his side window. Dust lingered, but so did perfumed traces of plants, soil released by the attentions of sun and wind.

He said, ‘Manna Soak is an actual place. That photo of Willi pointing at the sheep tracks? A big, dry claypan most of the time but a shallow lake when there’s been rain. You should see the birds when that happens,’ he added brightly. He wanted her to take some goodness with her when she left this place.

‘And now?’

‘Dry, I’m afraid.’ Not that Hirsch had ever seen the birds flocking at Manna Soak, only the photo on the Tiverton general-store calendar, which hung in the police-station waiting room.

Twenty minutes later he slowed, turning off the track and rumbling over a stock ramp between a pair of massive stone pillars. An old sign on one pillar, sun-faded and dust-abraded, read: *Dryden Downs, est. 1865, 560,000 acres, please close gates after you*.

Hirsch had called in at the property once before. Crime waves permitting, he made two long-range patrols every week, the first taking in areas east and north of the Barrier Highway, the second west and south. Mostly it was responding to reports – of stock theft, for example – and welfare

checks: a farming widow here, teenage kids with a bedridden mother there.

A place like Dryden Downs, with its own plane and airstrip and a large, capable staff, could cope without a regular visit just so long as they knew he was around. The Drydens – Sam and Mia – had been out the day he'd dropped in, but he'd left his card with the station cook and that evening Sam had called him, apologising, appreciative, his voice a soft, precise rasp.

The sign on the other pillar was new: *Unvaccinated visitors welcome here*, and, in smaller type, *We refuse to enforce unlawful directions from a government that would microchip its people*. As Hirsch accelerated along the immaculate white-gravel driveway, passing a third sign – *Homestead 15 km* – and a fourth indicating a fifty k speed limit, Dr Van Sant said, 'Vaccinated visitors, on the other hand, are not welcome?'

Hirsch barked a laugh. 'You strike it in Belgium, too?'

'Oh yes.' She paused. 'A government that would microchip its people. It's age-old, isn't it, the fear that powerful, malicious figures are working against us through invisible means? Like witches.'

'Yes,' agreed Hirsch, thinking: *who are you?*

Dryden Downs was large enough to encompass a range of soil types, from gibber plains to undulating bushland and grazing country. The homestead driveway took them through grassland with Angus cattle on the left, black-faced Dorper sheep on the right. At the fourteen-kilometre mark,

the track climbed a low rise. Visible on the other side was a broad, shallow depression spread with as many rooftops as an English village: main house, overseer's house, cottages, implement sheds, workshop, shearing shed, stable block, hayshed, hangar and station hands' accommodation. Scattered among these buildings were stockyards, lawns, extensive gardens, concrete water tanks and a horse-riding enclosure.

'The hope doesn't seem quite so faint here,' Dr Van Sant muttered.

Hirsch pulled the Hilux onto a turning circle beside the main house, a long, elegantly proportioned structure built of local stone and deeply shaded on all sides by verandas hung with grapevines. He parked in the shade of a massive ghost gum, switched off and got out, closing his door with a soft click, feeling oddly that a slam would be out of place.

The silence after the bone-shaking drive was a blessing, and the spring sun was balmier here than up on Desolation Hill. A deep stillness, too: the airstrip windsock limp and no one gunning an engine, shearing a fleece or yelling at a sheepdog. The only movement was a woman on a black horse circling the riding arena intently, as if the world consisted solely of her, her horse and this small, hoof-churned yard. Mia Dryden, guessed Hirsch, hooking his face mask on.

Dr Van Sant joined him, also masked. 'Willi told me that she is horse mad,' she murmured.

As they were about to cross to the enclosure, the rider dragged on the reins, walked her horse to the railing fence

and called, 'Hello, there. Sam's inside, doing the books. Give him a shout at the front door. I'll join you as soon as I've cleaned up.'

Then she wheeled away and made for the gate closest to the stable block. Dr Van Sant had insisted on an unannounced visit – an old cop's tactic, and fine by Hirsch – but if Mia Dryden was unsettled or curious, there was no sign of it. A practical, horsey blonde in her forties, a little heavy, full of smiling good-neighbourliness, that's all. But that sign at the driveway entrance . . .

Hirsch turned to Dr Van Sant, who was looking at him flatly. He tried to read her: *Almost as if she had been expecting us*. Or maybe: *The effortless grace of the very rich*.

He gave a whisper of a smile and a nod, and together they crossed a lawn to the main entrance of the station homestead. The inner door was open, revealing a long, broad corridor hung with paintings and light sconces. Hirsch knocked on the external screen door. It rattled feebly. After a few seconds he knocked again and called, 'Mr Dryden?'

A distant scrape and thump, as of a desk chair on a wooden floor, and a tall man stepped out of a doorway halfway along the corridor. 'Yes?'

'Police, Mr Dryden. We met your wife; she said it was okay to knock.'

'Police?' Dryden said, ambling towards them. He stepped out onto the veranda, a lean, ramrod-straight man in his late forties, wearing khaki cargo shorts, a baggy blue polo shirt and cracked leather sandals: weekend or day-off mucking-around gear. Beneath it lay a hard authority. He was a man

poised for action, generating in Hirsch an absurd desire to snap to attention. Ex-military?

He stuck out his hand. 'Paul Hirschhausen, from the Tiverton police station, and this is Doctor Van Sant.'

'Janne,' she said, offering her hand. 'Willi's mother.'

Dryden shook, gravely courteous, even bending slightly at the waist, before stepping back, head cocked, his frown a little knot between his brows. 'I'm afraid Willi's not here, Doctor Van Sant. Janne. He left us two or three months ago.'

She stepped towards him impulsively, about to speak, and he breathed in and stood straighter. 'I suggest you talk to my wife. She knows more than I do. Here she is now.'

Thinking, *That was quick, she must have got a stable-hand to take the horse*, Hirsch turned and watched Mia Dryden approach the house.

Still wearing jodhpurs and a perspiration-damp black T-shirt, she called, 'Darling. They found you, I see.'

Where her husband's energy lay coiled, hers vibrated. Her eyes were bright; her teeth flashed; she was a ripple of movement; her words poured out as she skipped up the steps in an eddy of hot-day and horse-riding odours. 'Give me five minutes to change, would you? Darling, how about cold drinks on the veranda? Or if either of you would prefer tea or coffee? And you may remove your masks, you know.'

'We'll keep them on, thanks,' Hirsch said, but she was already through the screen door, touching her husband's wrist on the way. She's still not curious, he thought, shifting his attention to Sam Dryden, who was regarding Dr Van Sant: preoccupied but not unfriendly.

Then Dryden snapped out of it, gesturing along the veranda to a gathering of cane chairs around a glass-topped cane table. 'Please do make yourselves at home. What can I get you?'

They asked for mineral water and shortly after that an aproned man appeared, carrying a tray of glasses and bottled San Pellegrino, with Sam Dryden in his wake. Hirsch recognised the station cook from his first visit. Shorter than Dryden, with cropped hair and the same military bearing. 'Barry, is it?' Hirsch said. 'Barry . . . McGain?'

McGain nodded; left silently.

When he was gone, Sam Dryden filled each glass, then sat. 'I expect you cover a lot of ground in your job, Constable Hirschhausen?'

Hirsch nodded. 'Quite a lot – two patrols a week. Call me Hirsch, by the way.'

Dryden tried it: 'Hirsch. You're familiar with everything by now?'

'There are still a few out-of-the-way properties I'm yet to call at, but I'll get to them eventually.'

'The face of the law.'

'Sort of.' Hirsch shifted uncomfortably. He didn't want to get into it, his twin roles, law-upholder and welfare worker.

'If it's any help,' Dryden said, 'you've reached the end of the road here. Nothing but scrub and semi-desert beyond my driveway.'

Hirsch wasn't sure how to take that, detecting an edge to Dryden's tone. The weight of age and privilege, as though the pastoralist were issuing an order, not offering advice.

Hirsch said, 'Fair enough.' Fully intending to venture further along Manna Soak Highway one day.

'Did you know my son well, Mr Dryden?' Janne said.

Dryden turned to her; seemed to study her. 'Sam, please. Not well. I'm often away, you see – business. My wife can help you.'

As if answering a signal, Mia Dryden stepped onto the veranda. She'd had a hurried shower; her hair, heavily damp, had darkened a sleeveless, collarless blue cotton shirt. With bare feet striding and a filmy knee-length skirt swishing, she approached on a tide of delight, as if no one had visited the homestead for months, before pausing behind her husband, a hand on each shoulder and brushing his neck with her lips. Dryden closed his eyes; his whole body relaxed.

Mia straightened again. 'I see my grouch of a husband has been looking after you! Cold drinks, just what the doctor ordered,' she said, stepping away from Dryden and swivelling neatly onto the fourth chair. She reached across the table and touched Dryden's wrist. 'Darling, I know you're super-busy.'

He stood, nodded gravely, strode along the veranda and vanished into the house. Watching him go with the clear gaze of a young girl in love, Mia turned her attention to Hirsch and smiled. 'Now, what brings you to our door?'

'I'm stationed at Tiverton,' he began.

'I thought it might be you.'

'And this is Doctor Van Sant. She's very concerned for the welfare of her son, Willi. I understand he worked here?'

'Willi!' Mia said. 'Such a lovely boy, always smiling, a

pleasure to have around.' She leaned towards Dr Van Sant. 'You know, you needn't wear your mask here. And I would so love to see your face. Already I can see a resemblance to Willi around the eyes.'

'It's best if I keep it on,' Janne said. 'Omicron-riddled Europe, two long flights, airports, you know . . .'

'As you wish,' Mia said, erect again. 'Willi. As I said, a lovely boy. There was nothing he couldn't do, if he put his mind to it.' She leaned forward. 'Did you know we had him mustering sheep like a pro by the time he left here?' She sat back. 'Everyone loved Willi. Our one and only jillaroo was head over heels.'

The person with the camera, Hirsch thought.

'That is as may be,' Janne Van Sant said crisply, 'but he stopped contacting me four months ago. Quite suddenly. One day there he was, on his bunk bed, talking to me on Viber, and the next day, nothing.'

Mia was troubled. 'I don't know what I can tell you,' she said with a helpless gesture. 'He and the girl he was seeing just packed their bags and drove off into the sunset. It left us in quite a pickle, work-wise. But, you know, young ones . . .'

Dr Van Sant eyed her stonily. 'My calls and emails have gone unanswered.'

'As I said, he's young, in love . . . he's probably still in Noosa, living it up.'

'My calls and emails to *you*,' Janne said.

Mia sat back with a pretty frown of concern. 'To me?' Her hand went over her chest. 'Are you sure? I mean, we are very remote out here . . .'

Hirsch glanced across the yard at an impressive antenna array. He said, 'Willi and his girlfriend went to Noosa?'

'Well, yes,' Mia said. 'Stay there, I'll be right back.'

She returned with a postcard. Addressed to Sam and Mia Dryden, it showed a curve of beach dotted with swimmers and sunbathers, with a biro scrawl and an arrow: *Us in the shallows!*

On the other side, in a looping, breathless hand: *Hi Sam and Mia! Just to let you know we're missing you – kind of! – and thanks so much for the experience! Love, Eve and Willi xxooxx.*

'When did this arrive?'

'Oh, ages ago. Weeks. A couple of months, at least.'

'Do you have contact details for this Eve?'

Mia took a phone from her skirt pocket and scrolled through her contacts. Turned the screen to Hirsch. He saw the name Eve Tilling and a mobile number.

Using his own phone, he called it. It rang out. 'Did either of them leave anything behind?'

'Not a skerrick.'

'Do you know where Ms Tilling grew up? Has her family been in touch?'

'In touch? With us? No. She grew up in Sydney, but where, exactly, I couldn't tell you.' Mia shifted uncomfortably, as if reluctant to let a cloud dim her sunniness. 'She didn't get on with her stepfather, though, I do remember her saying that. An old story, as I expect you know.'

The story suggested abuse, and Mia Dryden seemed to struggle against the image until her smile burst out again. She said, 'You must be so *worried*, Janne. But I'm sure the Department of Foreign Affairs will be of some help.'

‘Idiots,’ Janne Van Sant said.

‘Oh,’ Mia said. She seemed to think about it. ‘A government bureaucracy,’ she said darkly.

Hirsch said, ‘If we could have a quick word with the people Willi and Eve worked with day by day? The other station hands?’

Mia put a hand over her heart again. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, spring is a busy time for us. They’re all out mustering.’

‘Maybe on another occasion?’

Mia said nothing. She shifted her gaze to Janne. ‘I shall ask each and every one of them for information when they get back tomorrow. Do you have a card?’

Janne Van Sant reached for Mia’s phone. ‘May I enter my details?’

‘Of course.’

Hirsch watched Janne’s fingers fly over the screen, and then she was tugging down her mask, draining her mineral water and saying, ‘Thank you for your hospitality,’ and heading for the Toyota.

She was halfway there before Hirsch could gather himself. He stood, nodded to Mia Dryden, and said his thanks, his hand extended.

She shook it hard, a jolly up-and-down. ‘I understand you’re fond of the term “Covid moron”, Constable Hirschhausen,’ she said with hostile relish. ‘Tell me – do you think I’m a Covid moron, too?’

2

Had she overheard him last month? At the medical clinic, arguing with that guy trying to stop his wife getting vaccinated? Hirsch thought it was just as well that he'd said 'Covid moron' and not what he'd almost said: 'Too stupid to live.' He was badly rattled as he picked up speed on the long driveway, and did not at first register what Dr Van Sant was saying, except that it sounded like an observation. 'Uh-huh,' he replied, hoping he'd struck the right note.

'You noticed it, too?' she said. Snorting, she added, 'A double act. He disarms with his air of elegance and polish, and she with her, what's the word, airhead routine. I cannot quite work him out, but she wears the trousers. Deep down she is not a silly woman.'

'I agree,' Hirsch said.

They had reached the gateposts. He turned left onto Manna Soak Highway and so they began the long drive back to Tiverton.

*

The Hilux pitched, tilted, juddered and sometimes rolled along smoothly, but the variations seemed not to bother Dr Van Sant. Gazing out of her side window, head pillowed by the headrest, she spoke more about her son, her tone mild, wistful and reflective. Soccer mad. Popular, with a mutually supportive group of friends. Adventurous: loved camping, climbing, rafting. Belonged to a garage band. A racing cyclist almost good enough to enter the Tour de France. A BA in hotel management from a college in Bruges – and this backpacking holiday was a hiatus between study and career and possibly a drawcard on his CV.

'*In Bruges*,' Hirsch said. 'One of my favourite films.'

Dr Van Sant slumped a little, as if she'd heard those same words from every English-speaking numbskull she'd ever met. 'Is that so?'

'A beautiful city.'

She turned to him, still disappointed. 'You have been?'

'Yes.'

He'd travelled through France, Belgium, Germany and Italy with Wendy and her daughter Katie – Kate, as she expected to be called now – a few weeks before Covid hit. 'Briefly,' he added.

Dr Van Sant looked away. 'A beautiful city. But Willi grew up in Brussels, where my home is.'

'What do you do?'

She looked at him searchingly, as if to assess how deserving he was. 'A public servant, like you.'

They fell into a troubled silence now, as they turned onto the Tiverton Road and eventually broke through the

rain shadow into better country, with vivid yellow canola crops spreading along shallow valleys and over hillslopes, threaded here and there with dirt roads lined with equally vivid springtime weeds and grasses. Loftier, better nourished gum trees. Farmhouse cypress hedges. Wildflowers.

Pointing to a patch of purple, Dr Van Sant said, 'What plant is that?'

'A weed,' Hirsch said, 'called Salvation Jane.'

Kate had shown him how to pluck the little flowers and suck the base; taste the honey.

With a grin in his voice, he added: 'Also called Paterson's curse in other parts of Australia.'

Eyes triumphant, Dr Van Sant swung around on him, ready with another quip about naming practices; saw his face, and subsided. If she'd been a friend, he might have said, 'Gotcha: you smiled.'

Tiverton was ten minutes away now. He said, 'I've been thinking about your next moves. If you like, I'll contact the police in Noosa and ask them to check hostels and Airbnbs. And the police in Sydney, to see if they have anything on the girl Willi's travelling with. Otherwise, try social media appeals.'

'Thank you,' Janne Van Sant said, just as Hirsch's mobile rang. The phone, in a cradle on the dash, showed that the caller was Bob Muir.

'Where are you?' Bob said.

'A few minutes from town,' Hirsch said.

'We've got a little fire. The Cobb kids were flying a drone, and Laura says they saw something burning near the town paddock.'

The town paddock was twenty-five acres of wheat on the northern approach to Tiverton, between the Barrier Highway and a vast lucerne property. Once a segment of an old stock route – its width allowed for the turning-around of bullock teams and the droving and overnight penning of sheep and cattle – it was now ploughed, sown and harvested by volunteers, the profits benefiting the town's primary school, sporting clubs and annual strawberry fete.

'Which side of it?'

'The access track. I told them to stay away.'

'Good,' Hirsch said. 'Thanks.'

Laura Cobb and her older brother, Daryl, were the sole carers of their mother, who had bipolar disorder. Or rather, sharp-witted Laura cared for them both. Daryl was a big, floppy kid, easily led, and he'd have been drawn to the flames. Likely to burn himself or post phone footage on Instagram or trample over evidence that might explain the fire.

'I'll be there in five,' Hirsch said.

It was more like four. As Tiverton's rooftops, gum trees and grain silos appeared in the distance, he turned left onto a side road and then right onto the town paddock's narrow, rutted access track, wondering if he should have delivered Dr Van Sant to her car first.

He could see smoke now. It was coming from the ditch at the base of a deceptive rise in the track that briefly concealed the town from view. Just a wisp of smoke. Something was smouldering. Not the springtime grass – too moist and green.

Pulling closer, he realised that the source of the smoke was down in a culvert. Saying, 'Please stay here for your own safety, Doctor Van Sant,' he got out, and had barely stepped away from the Hilux when he saw the district's Country Fire Service truck come over the rise, Bob Muir at the wheel.

Muir, an electrician and Hirsch's friend, was alone, which probably meant he'd been on a job in town when the call came, and the other volunteers were unavailable.

Now Bob stepped down from the cabin, leaving the motor running, and they shook hands in the middle of the road. Bob, a quiet, burly, practical man in grey overalls and cracked tan work boots, tipped his head to the side, looking past Hirsch. 'Who's your passenger?'

Hirsch turned: Dr Van Sant was heading towards them. He made the introductions helplessly and said again, 'It would be best if you waited in the car, Janne.'

'I have experience,' she said, marching off to view the fire.

Bob exchanged a glance with Hirsch, shrugged and returned to the truck, calling, 'I'll get the pump going.'

Hirsch joined Dr Van Sant and together they peered down into the ditch. A massive old canvas suitcase, bulging here and there, with a weak creep of smoky flame in one corner. Tossed in, Hirsch guessed, and the sudden jolt had caused the contents to shift, and strain the zip or the fabric so that a pale, hooked, tubular shape was exposed.

And just as realisation hit Hirsch, Dr Van Sant got there first. 'A human elbow.'

'My first body in a suitcase,' Hirsch said, but it fell flat.

Dr Van Sant scowled. 'Diesel fuel,' she said.

She was right: he could smell it now, a dense layer under the weak acridity of the smoke.

Hirsch turned, saw that Bob was trotting over with the hose. 'Ah, good.'

Alerted by his tone, Dr Van Sant turned also, and promptly stepped into Bob's path, both hands up, pushing at the air. 'No! No, please, Mr Muir.'

Bob halted, confused, the metal nozzle dripping water and heavy in his hands. 'What?'

'Evidence,' Dr Van Sant said. She turned to Hirsch. 'Fetch our water bottles, please. We apply one cupful of water at a time, to preserve the evidence. This is not a fast or a dangerous blaze, but it will destroy evidence over time – as a powerful jet of water will do in a very short time.'

She spoke with such assurance that Hirsch found he'd let her into his crime scene – for surely that's what it was – with barely a second thought. He stood with Bob on the lip of the culvert and watched her grow flushed and grimy as she flipped little gouts of water onto the flames, until they were extinguished. Satisfied, she swiped her hands on her thighs and climbed out, and Hirsch reached for her when she slid on the slick grass.

'Thank you. Diesel has been splashed everywhere,' she said. She narrowed her gaze at the two men. 'Diesel is combustible, not flammable, and not a good fire source in cases of arson. You may even extinguish a cigarette in diesel fuel.' She gestured: 'And so we have here a fire retarded by its very accelerant. The suitcase is saturated in diesel, but there is evidence' – she pointed to the scorched corner – 'that

your culprit realised his mistake and employed a secondary source, a rag soaked in some other substance, possibly lighter fluid. Either there was not so much diesel in that area, or the two fluids combined to effect a better flash point.'

Hirsch cocked his head. 'You are some public servant, Doctor Van Sant.'

She made one of her impatient gestures: first things first. 'Your crime-scene officers will now have a better chance of obtaining useable evidence.'

'Thank you.'

'The body is that of an adult male. I cannot determine the age, but I did glimpse a faded forearm tattoo.' She looked intensely at Hirsch, and he saw there deep sadness. 'I conclude therefore that it is not my son.'

He winced internally. He should have anticipated her hopes and fears. He reached out, in his own sadness, and reflexively touched her forearm.

She swayed towards him, as if for an embrace, then recovered and said, 'I am employed by the National Institute of Criminalistics and Criminology in Brussels.'

'Forensics.'

'I am attached to two working groups,' she said. 'Paint and glass, and fire and explosions.' She paused. 'Of course, the two are often linked.'

Hirsch nodded. He'd attended his share of house fires, hit-and-runs and cars wrapped around trees. Paint, glass, smoke, destructive forces. He looked at her again, this time professionally sad. 'I'm afraid I'm going to be stuck here for

the rest of the day – and most of it will be waiting for detectives and crime-scene officers to arrive.'

She put up a hand to forestall him. 'Of course. My being here would not be appropriate, and nor will I be needed.'

She was looking up at him searchingly. He saw in her face regret, respect, a day of shared adventures. 'Good luck,' he said, shaking her hand. 'Bob will take you to your car. Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?'

'The Woolpack Hotel in Redruth. After that . . .?' She shrugged eloquently.

'If I learn anything from the police in Noosa or Sydney, I'll let you know.'

'Thank you,' she said, striding towards the truck, at the last moment veering right as she remembered which was the passenger side. That made Hirsch even sadder for her.

He called it in and daydreamed through the next ninety minutes. The sun, high in a cloudless sky and tipping towards mid-afternoon, baked the interior of the Hilux, even though the temperature was only twenty-six degrees, so, after checking the on-board computer, he chose some meagre shade and sat in the dirt for a while, his spine against a tyre. He monitored his phone, checked the suitcase a couple of times, watched a sleepy lizard waddle across the road.

And he listened to the hum of the universe, drawing in the odours of warm soil, lucerne and spring grasses. He itched to open the suitcase. He got no further with thinking he should study for the sergeant's exam. He was looking forward to tennis starting again – so long as he wasn't the

club treasurer this time. On that note, did wanting tennis to start again make him a local now, or still only a city guy trying to be a local? Which led to thoughts of Wendy Street, and love, and the future, and – so far – steering a deft course with Kate, her daughter. There were complicating factors. Kate had saved his life within a few months of his posting to Tiverton; he'd started going out with her mother; she didn't resent his presence in their lives; they'd developed a mutually pleasing code of wisecracks and teasing; and now she was at high school and outgrowing all of that.

And she was a target of online bullying, and she wanted to deal with it herself. Wanted Hirsch and her mother to butt out.

Hirsch had offered to call in a cybercrimes specialist, but Wendy had scotched that idea: 'We're just talking about other kids,' she said. 'We need to be supportive, that's all. She's got a good head on her shoulders. We teach her how to be strong and avoid engaging with these bullies, and how to wean herself off Instagram and so on.'

Thinking about online matters led Hirsch to thinking about Mia Dryden, and he was about to google her on his phone when he heard a vehicle tearing towards him from the direction of the town. A crime-scene van? Detectives from Port Pirie? Going too fast, anyway, and likely to plough into the Toyota, so he stepped out into the middle of the road, ready to intercept the driver. Then realised it was a poorly tuned motor he could hear. A loose or badly holed exhaust.

A sun-faded white Holden station wagon breasted the rise. Braked abruptly, its rear end twitching in the dirt, and

Jacob Maher was gaping at him through the windscreen. The kid hunched, grinned in embarrassment, waved, made a panicky five-point turn and trundled back over the rise.

Idiot, thought Hirsch. Maher and his mother had arrived in Tiverton with a handful of other people shortly after Easter. They said they'd been priced out of the Adelaide housing market by Covid, and bought a wreck of a place near the grain silos. Then they'd immediately attracted the attention of Hirsch and his colleagues down in Redruth: possible shoplifting; a dog barking all day; car hooning; loud music at 2 a.m. Their high achiever was Jacob. Arrested for stealing a car, he'd arrived at his magistrate's hearing in a car he'd stolen to get himself there.

Hirsch hadn't seen the station wagon before. Also stolen? If not, perhaps unregistered? Unroadworthy? He made a note to call at the kid's house as soon as reinforcements arrived to release him from the scene.

Meanwhile other motorists might decide to use the track, so he set about placing traffic cones at the top of the rise and around the culvert. Then he drove the police Toyota into the paddock, wincing to think of the delicate new wheat shoots being crushed. Finally he waited in the meagre shade again, checked his phone, watched an eagle, wished, selfishly, that he could chat with Wendy, who'd be fronting a maths class.

And so time passed, and presently his sergeant arrived, followed by a crime-scene van, followed by a Port Pirie detective named Comyn. One of that motley crew even said, 'What have we got here?'

3

Hirsch stood by with Comyn and Sergeant Brandl as the crime-scene officers debated the pros and cons of examining the body in situ or transporting it, undisturbed in the suitcase, to the lab.

Comyn rode over that, in his stolid way. He was squat and humourless as a beer barrel, and always apparently irritated by Hirsch's very existence whenever they met. He said, 'Clearly there's been a crime of some kind. But was the victim scraped up off the road by his friends after an accident, or was he murdered? If somebody offed him I need to get onto the Homicide Squad right now. So let's have a look.'

'You're the boss.'

Not quite; Sergeant Brandl outranked him. But she wasn't a detective, and she settled in with Hirsch to watch as the crime-scene officers photographed the case, made two shoeprint plaster casts – a left heel and a right toecap barely apparent in the soil – and finally teased open the suitcase's main zip and folded back the lid.

The dead man was skinny, heavily inked above and below a pair of blue boxer shorts. His face was an unrecognisable pulp, his hair stiff with blood.

He could still have been an accident victim, until one of the crime-scene officers said, 'We have lacerations and cigarette burns.'

'Okay,' Comyn said, fishing out his phone.

The other officer had leaned her face close to the blood-matted hair. She swung back, fetched a pair of tweezers from her evidence-collecting case, leaned in again and plucked out a chip of something terracotta-coloured. 'Maybe bashed with a house brick,' she said.

'Lovely,' Comyn said. 'Okay, seal it up again and take the whole thing, as is, to the lab.'

He walked a short distance up the road, phone to his ear. Calling Homicide, Hirsch thought.

Meanwhile Sergeant Brandl was looking at him with pity. 'You're in for a circus tomorrow.'

'If not tonight,' Hirsch said glumly. Media. Carloads of suits. 'With any luck the guy was killed in the city and carted up here.'

'A long way to cart a body.'

'Yeah.'

'How did it go this morning?'

It had been the sergeant's idea that Hirsch take Dr Van Sant out east. He knew the area; Brandl and the young Redruth constables she called 'the children' didn't. But she would take care of the missing-person paperwork.

'Good and bad,' Hirsch answered. He told her about

Willi Van Sant's photographs, the Drydens, the Noosa postcard.

And Janne Van Sant's gentle dousing of the suitcase fire.

'Really?' Brandl said, stepping back as if to examine Hirsch for exaggeration. She was lean, no-nonsense, with fuss-free hair.

'Yep. And lucky for us,' Hirsch said.

'Huh.'

She stood beside him again and they watched the loading and driving-away of the suitcase. Comyn joined them and said Hirsch should expect a team of detectives by late afternoon. 'Where can they set up?'

Hirsch thought about it. 'The CWA meeting room. In the Institute.'

'Who do I talk to?'

This year the Country Women's Association president was Nan Washburn. Hirsch gave him the details.

'Okay, I'm off,' Comyn said.

Then Sergeant Brandl left. 'Good luck for tomorrow,' she said as she got behind the wheel of her car.

There was a tinge of worry in it. She didn't mean his day with detectives and media hounds; she meant his Zoom bollocking from Inspector Alwin.

Hirsch spent a moment planning the next few hours.

Follow-up calls on behalf of Dr Van Sant. Check the town's CCTV, what there was of it. Talk to the Cobb kids. Ascertain if suspended-driver's-licence-holder Jacob Maher was driving around in another stolen car. First, though, preserve

the town's little wheat crop from the churning wheels of police, media and stickybeak vehicles.

He found a padlock and chain in the crate of odds and ends he kept in the Toyota – towrope, hatchet, rubber boots, hand tools, evidence bags – and secured the paddock gate. Then he drove south along the track, around the oval and down First Street to the Barrier Highway. Just as he reached the intersection, the Redruth High School bus rolled past, heading north on the highway with a last handful of farm kids. Lifting a hand in greeting to the driver, Hirsch turned left and drove two blocks to the police station.

Almost on autopilot, he took stock of that stretch of the town. Dr Van Sant's rental car was gone; the primary school across the road had finished for the day; a few of Tiverton's Redruth High kids were slopping around beneath the general-store veranda. Huge kids, with Cokes, crisps and mobile phones in their hands, massive backpacks at their feet. Ed Tennant, the shopkeeper, was torn: they spent their money in his shop; they made a racket and other customers had to step around them. Hirsch's response had been, 'It's only a few minutes a day,' which was greeted with the disdain that Ed thought it deserved.

Both men knew that these kids would eventually graduate and head for the big city, though. A country-town story. Other town kids, like Daryl and Laura Cobb, were trapped – Daryl because he wouldn't do well on his own and Laura because she couldn't abandon him or their mother. The kids' father, a beer thug with the vicious bloat of ignorance, had abandoned them long ago.

They lived a hundred metres from the police station, and it was Laura who answered Hirsch's back-door knock – no one much used front doors in this town. Pale, with long dark hair falling around thin cheeks, she wore an apron over faded jeans and a yellow T-shirt with a misshapen neck. Shy, guarded, she had a curious white flash half a centimetre wide across one eyebrow. Hirsch had asked her about it once, chit-chat to ease the tension after one of her mother's manic episodes, but he'd misstepped badly. She'd touched the eyebrow and said, in a dead voice, 'Mum did it when I was ten. Seven stitches.'

'Hi, Laura,' he said now.

Barely meeting his eye, she whispered, 'Come in,' her back against the wall, one arm holding the screen door open for him. 'Making spag bol for tonight,' she added.

Her days would be like this, Hirsch thought. She had completed Year 12 – top marks – and now worked odd jobs around the town, sometimes at awkward hours, meaning she might cook up a big pot of something in the middle of the day, do the laundry at night, grab sleep when she could.

She took him into the kitchen, a cramped region of chipped appliances and scuffed cupboards. The chrome and laminate table might fetch a few dollars at a retro place in Adelaide, but you'd need the time, the energy, the transport.

'Sit,' she said, turning away from him to stir the sauce in a pan on the stove.

'Smells great.'

She swivelled around, looking pleased. Maybe praise was

scarce in her life. 'Would you like to take some home with you?'

'Actually,' Hirsch said, 'that would be great.'

The alternative was frozen crumbed fish fillets from the shop. Baked beans on toast. He watched her bend neatly, ferret in a drawer beneath the bench for a takeaway container, fill it and plonk it at his elbow. 'You might need salt and pepper, or try a dash of sugar. I always find tomato paste sharpens the flavour too much.'

'Thank you.'

She checked the sauce again and sat opposite, still shy with him. 'I guess you want to know about the drone.'

'Didn't know you kids had one.'

She looked worried. 'It's Daryl's. Mrs Washburn gave it to him for his birthday.'

'Great present,' Hirsch said, realising it was true. Anything to get Daryl off his console and out of the house.

Laura flicked him an anxious look. 'Are we in trouble? Are there like regulations about flying a drone near houses? We weren't, really. We were on the oval.'

'You're fine,' Hirsch said. 'I just need to know what you saw on the video feed – it's got a camera, right?'

Laura nodded. 'We took it in turns and I saw what looked like smoke – not much smoke, though – so I sent it over to have a look.' She shrugged. 'There wasn't much to see, just this thing smoking in the ditch. Then Daryl started losing it, you know how he gets.'

Hirsch guessed. 'He was worried the smoke might get into the motor or something?'

‘He thought it was going to catch fire, so I flew it back again and called Mr Muir.’

‘Did you see anyone there? Parked car? Or driving away?’

‘Nothing.’

‘How about earlier, when you were walking towards the oval?’

She shook her head. ‘Wasn’t really looking.’

‘Could I have a quick word with Daryl?’

‘He can’t tell you anything more than that. And he’s in with Mum, reading to her.’

And that sad little loving picture undid Hirsch for a while.

Now to tackle Jacob Maher.

Hirsch walked back to the police station, climbed into the Toyota again and headed to the southern edge of the town. The westering sun blazed on the ram’s head painted on one of the silos, the structure itself throwing a thick band of shadow across the highway. Right turn onto Wirrabara, a side street that took him over the railway line and in a return sweep past disused stockyards to three cowering stone cottages set about fifty metres apart. The smaller two, ruins now, had housed linesmen back when the rail system was flourishing. The larger had housed the stationmaster. A shearer had been living in it when Hirsch first arrived in the district. Since he’d died it had sat unoccupied, neglected and open to the sun and the rain until six months ago, when Jacob’s mother and a mob of relatives and hangers-on had moved in.

They hadn’t improved the place. Weeds thrived in the drooping veranda gutter and choked the surviving shrubs

and rosebushes. Lichen bloomed on the rust-fringed corrugated iron of the roof. Cobwebs hung from the eaves. A listing grey VW diesel van was parked in the driveway and a car rested on blocks on the front lawn.

Somehow, motor vehicles were at the heart of everything this crowd got up to. Hirsch had proof they drove unregistered, unroadworthy, stolen and speeding vehicles – with or without the benefit of a licence – and suspected that these same vehicles sometimes transported stolen goods.

This crowd . . . Hirsch still hadn't quite worked them out. Apart from Jacob, there was his mother, Brenda, and her boyfriend, a weedy guy named David Hillcock, who had brought his stepdaughters with him to the menagerie and had had a baby with Brenda. Toby, about eighteen months old, something like that.

Hirsch parked beside a defeated-looking wrought-iron gate in a low, collapsing wall, locked up and stepped onto the veranda. Rapped his knuckles on the door and waited. Did it again.

No answer, so he headed around to the backyard, reasoning that Jacob, banned from driving for six months and knowing he'd been seen on the town paddock road, would head home and hope for the best. The Holden station wagon would be behind the house.

Hirsch rounded the back corner and there was the car, along with a battered old caravan and a kind of white-trash-mountain-people-zombie-apocalypse tableau. Brenda Maher, lavish and vast, was lolling topless in a brand-new vinyl recliner, the baby boy suckling at one pillowy breast;

David Hillcock, in oil-stained biker boots, jeans and T-shirt, lay on an adjacent recliner, holding her hand. No sign of the younger stepdaughter but the older one, Alice – McNamara, was it? – skinny, inked and pierced, was draped over the station wagon, watching Jacob. He was kneeling at the front bumper with three numberplates and a screwdriver.

'Guys,' Hirsch said. 'Lovely day for it.'

Hillcock's eyes slid away. Then the man himself slid away, swinging his boots to the ground and sidling into the house. Brenda, watching him go, shrugged and turned a lazy, off-colour smile on Hirsch as she briefly adjusted the unsuckled breast.

'Knock it off, Brenda.'

She covered herself, cackling, and set the baby down on a blanket, where it sat wobbling and trying to outstare a Rottweiler that was straining and choking on a kennel chain. Hirsch squatted beside the blanket. 'How's it going, Tobes?'

Rewarded with a gummy smile from the baby, he beamed back, creaked upright again and approached the station wagon. 'Guys.'

Alice McNamara shied away. 'Wasn't doin' nothin'.'

'I can see that. Jacob, on the other hand . . .'

Jacob, on the other hand, had kicked the numberplates under the car and seemed to be tossing up between flight and fight. He turned a wondering look at the screwdriver in his right hand. Let it fall onto the weedy dirt.

'Fucken bought this car,' he said.

A skinny kid with meth-hollow cheeks who affected a trademark black glove on one hand, along with ripped jeans

and the grimy Megadeth T-shirt he'd worn to his car-theft court appearance a month earlier – only to be told by the magistrate to go away and reappear in a mask, and clothing that showed 'respect for the court'. Seeing Jacob at an utter loss that day, Hirsch had taken him down the street to the Redruth Emporium and forked out sixty dollars for a polyester shirt more yellow than white and a pair of gaberdine trousers. Sixty bucks he wouldn't see again.

'I can show you the papers,' Jacob went on.

'That would be good, thanks, Jake.'

Jacob jerked his head at Alice, and Hirsch had to step aside so that she could slide past him and climb into the caravan. A moment later she reappeared clutching a slip of paper and proffered it to Jacob, who said, 'Not me, him.'

Hirsch took it from her. The sum of $999.99 had been received from Jacob A. Maher on 10 September, according to Martina Golos of 6 Bundaleer Street, Muncowie.

Muncowie was a depressed collection of mostly empty fibro houses half an hour north of Tiverton. Hirsch had the contact details of every mid-north publican stored in his phone – along with doctors, ministers of religion, school principals, mail carriers and busybodies. He stepped away from the car and called the Muncowie pub: there was a Bundaleer Street, but as to who lived at number six, 'couldn't tell ya'.

Next Hirsch photographed the rear numberplate and called it in, then knelt to fish the plates out from under the car. Two were a pair; the third matched the rear plate. He ran them.

The rear plate belonged to the Holden station wagon, but

the registration – in the name of Martina Golos of Bundaleer Street in Muncowie – had recently lapsed. The other plates were from a written-off Kia Cerato.

Watched glumly by Jacob and Alice, Hirsch walked around the car. A broken tail-light. Rust. Bald tyres. Cracked windscreen. And, as if to offset the misery, a shiny new dashcam unit.

'Jacob,' he said, 'I don't know how you got this car – at least it's not stolen, or I hope not – but it's unregistered and unroadworthy, and you've been driving it around without a licence. What if you'd hit a Rolls-Royce? What if you'd run over a kid?'

'Haven't been driving it around.'

'I just saw you an hour ago.'

'Nup.'

Hirsch didn't want to get into it. Putting his phone away, he said, 'You know I'll have to write this up. Give me the keys and I'll fetch the paperwork.'

Jacob jerked his head again. Alice fished the keys from the ignition, and . . . something in Jacob's eyes.

There are spare keys, Hirsch thought.

He pocketed the keys, saying, 'Thank you. I'll arrange the tow in a minute. In the meantime I—'

'What fucken tow?'

'Jacob, I'm impounding this car.'

'You can't fucken do that.'

Behind them Maher shrieked, 'Leave him alone, ya prick.'

Hirsch turned, said, 'Stay out of it, Brenda,' wondering why he'd let himself engage with her, and turned back to the

son who, emboldened by Brenda, was shaping up now, feet apart, fists raised, chin jutting.

'Wow,' Hirsch said. 'Warrior chook pose.'

Jacob flushed. He flung a weak punch and the clenched black glove sailed past Hirsch's jaw. Overbalanced now, Jacob recovered and ducked back, fists up, feet dancing.

'Oh, for fuck's sake.' Hirsch stepped in and clapped his hands smartly against the kid's ears. Not hard.

Jacob reeled back. 'Fucken do that for?'

'Police brutality,' shrieked Brenda, echoed with less conviction by Alice.

'As a police officer in the execution of my duties,' Hirsch said, 'I perceived a clear and present danger to my person and took swift, appropriate and non-injurious steps to defuse that threat.'

'Clear and present danger' was pure Hollywood, but maybe this bunch would swallow it. Or maybe, thought Hirsch as he removed the station wagon's distributor cap, I've stepped in it again.

He found Alice studying him. 'You doing Jake for assault?' she demanded, and he saw a hard intelligence in her eyes. She's smarter than the others, he thought.

'Frankly, I'm just too tired,' he replied. 'But he needs to stop being an idiot.'

A helicopter passed overhead: Channel 7. And so it starts, Hirsch thought, returning to the Hilux to call a tow truck. Passing a side window of the house, he saw the glow of a massive wide-screen TV. Hillcock was watching it from the corner of a sofa, beer in hand.

4

Almost 5 p.m. now, Hirsch gearing up for a few hours of mind-numbing paperwork as he drove back through the town. First, though, he checked the culvert – the forensic team had finished – then the CWA clubroom at the institute, a fine colonial-era stone building on the highway, with a World War II field cannon and a memorial to the war dead at the front. Here Comyn and another Port Pirie detective were installing computers, desks and phones, and told Hirsch to piss off, he'd be contacted in due course. Finally, the police station. He'd barely pulled on the handbrake when the Channel 7 team raced across the road from the shop, bristling with cables, camera and microphone. Trotting out his 'Can't comment on an ongoing investigation' line, but helpfully pointing them to the institute, he unpinned his mobile number from the front door – thank Christ the media hadn't found it – and went in. They'll be frustrated, he thought. No help from me, no help from the suits. And probably no help from the good folk of Tiverton,