

BENEATH A BURNING HEART

BOOK 1: FAMILY SECRETS

By

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CHAPTER 1

Hattie wiped her hands on her hips as the removalist loaded the last two cardboard cartons into the dusty truck.

‘Twenty-one boxes.’ She signed the electronic form thrust at her, trying not to wrinkle her nose at the waft of young man sweat that accompanied it.

Twenty-one boxes of her old life heading north to her new life. Kind of small. Not much to be starting with. Still, her Mum had hoarded enough crap to last them both a lifetime. Hattie had that mess to look forward to. ‘How long will it take do you reckon?’ she asked, perching her reading glasses on her head.

The twenty-something bearded bloke took back the tablet and sighed. The impatience in his glance reminded Hattie of David. So keen to get everything done yesterday and to experience all life offered right now. So dismissive of his mother’s generation and their measure twice, cut once mantra. Or maybe her son was just dismissive of her years of careful planning, an anathema to his spontaneous and adventurous spirit. She’d always watched every penny and exploited every possibility. As she made a wish for David’s safety—backpacking on the other side of the world—Hattie realised she’d missed the beginning of the removalist’s response.

‘Sorry, I didn’t catch that. So many things to think of when you’re moving. I’m a bit distracted.’

He accepted her apology with a terse nod and reset the grubby peaked cap on his wayward black curls as he re-started the well-worn company line. ‘On the standard rate, we take your lot to our main storage in Campbellfield. When they get the big truck full, they’ll head up north. Usually only takes a week, but could take up to three. After that, they go anyway, full or not. Once they get to the New South depot, it’ll be a couple of days to get your stuff out to your new place, depending on how far out you are. You can keep track of it online. Just use the consignment number they gave you.’ His information delivered; the young man edged away before Hattie could delay him further.

She smiled and nodded her thanks, not trusting her voice, feeling so forlorn standing there on the dusty nature strip. Her hands trembled; a churn of anxiety wormed into her belly. Hattie’s mental dialogue mirrored her physical unease. Am I doing the right thing? Leaving all I’ve known for more than a decade? I’ll have to start all over again, make new friends. Though, it’s not like anyone down here will miss me. ‘Twenty-one boxes. It’s not much, is it?’

The removalist stalled his speedy exit and peered back to see if Hattie was speaking to him. It was Friday afternoon, and she suspected he was angling for an early finish. Despite his reluctance, he turned towards her and planted his feet. ‘I’ve had smaller loads,’ he said.

Hattie blinked back tears at his comment—and his continued presence. They stood awkwardly at either end of the kerb. Her short, fine fingers folded the consignment paper neatly in half, and in half again, while she swallowed the lump in her throat that his kindness had generated.

He tried another tack. ‘So where are you heading?’ His voice was deeper, softer now, with a hint of second-generation Mediterranean accent.

Hattie gathered herself, tucking one side of her shoulder-length, cinnamon brown hair behind her ear. She took a deep breath. ‘Clarence Valley. My mum left me her bungalow at Iluka, up past Grafton in New South Wales. Have you heard of Iluka? Apparently, it’s only got about seventeen hundred people there. Big change from Melbourne,’ she smiled.

He shook his head, and an answering smile raised the ends of his moustache.

What was it with the bushranger fashion these days? Hattie wondered. Was it laziness? They didn’t want to waste time shaving? But this facial hair looked trimmed and cared for, the moustache curled with a life of its own.

‘Mum passed recently,’ she added. Hattie barely stumbled over those words now, though her traitorous eyes moistened again.

The removalist’s grin melted. ‘Oh, jeez, sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.’ He half raised a hand as if to pat her shoulder, then thought better of it. His hand dropped.

‘It’s okay,’ Hattie assured him. ‘It’s been a few weeks now. I’m good. She’d had a severe stroke. It was the best thing, really. Just catches me now and then, that’s all.’

Relieved at her words, he backed away. ‘Well, I reckon the weather’ll be better up there, eh.’ He gestured to the blue, cloudless sky, realised his comment missed the mark, and with a nervous bob of his Adam’s apple, gave up on his unplanned foray into compassion. ‘Good luck with everything.’ He scarpered. There was no other word for it. Ground the truck into gear and left in a cloud of exhaust.

Hattie watched his abrupt departure, shaking her head and dislodging her glasses as she did. She managed a juggling one-handed rescue and shoved them into her pocket. Her contention that the removalist was very much like David was spot on. One hint of emotion and he took off like a scalded cat. So not like Lauren. Her daughter was first in line when they handed out emotion. Full of anger and frustration, bitter with her lot most days. An accidental victim of life’s vicissitudes. Hattie sent a wish to Lauren’s girlfriend for luck and patience. And then, guiltily, one more wish to her daughter for happiness.

Am I any better than Lauren? Should I have let the kids see me crying more? Shared the tough times? Perhaps she might have seen the positive side more herself then. Been able to share the good times with more joie de vivre. She’d been the tough one for so many years. It had been hard to let go of the habit, still was. Someone had to hold all the strings, hold everything together for them. Adrian, her ex, had been the dreamer, the fun one. Easy for him when he only showed up once in a while, and always at the exciting times like birthdays and Christmas. For her there’d been no time for dreams, no time for fun when bills needed paying, and kids needed feeding and clothing.

‘Stop, just stop,’ Hattie chided herself, and stomped her feet in the dust of the nature strip. You don’t need to carry the freaking worries of the world on your shoulders anymore. They’re adults, living their own life. A life you enabled them to have. She shook herself and stomped her feet again, trying to find the grounding core in her belly.

Hattie closed her eyes, tilted her face up and let the warm autumn sunshine soak through her lids. Indian Mynas were briskly turning over the dried leaves she'd dutifully swept into the garden bed yesterday. Their gardening efforts stuttered Autumn's debris across the concrete path. The dog at number three was in the backyard, barking at another avian interloper. Traffic droned by on the main road at the end of her street. She breathed in the fragrance of change, let it fill some of the space held by loneliness.

As she calmed, letting the sounds and smells wash over her, she sensed another hum under the street noise. The buzz of five million people in Melbourne, breathing, thinking, and feeling. And everybody busy doing something. A little body shiver rippled through her torso; goose bumps chilled her arms. Her mum used to tell her they were a sign that a goose had run over her grave. Her lips curved at the memory, and she blinked to stop the tears.

Janet would tell me to let them flow.

One of the better things to come from nursing her mother after the stroke had been meeting Janet, her mother's hippie neighbour. Janet was a decade older than Hattie and a force of nature who wouldn't take no for an answer—to anything. She'd insisted on coming over to see if Hattie was all right, a lot. Janet became the peaceful refuge between the emotional storms of Hattie's visits to the hospital. A shoulder to cry on, a comforting hug, and a receptive sounding board as Hattie negotiated the legal, ethical, and spiritual hurdles of her mum's deterioration. Over the weeks, and lubricated by gallons of tea, their chats covered a plethora of topics, from tame to taboo. Eventually Hattie loosened the reins of her self-sufficiency. She let her lifelong guard down, albeit only a little, and embraced the promise of a deeper friendship.

Janet had persuaded her to attend a local women's group. From listening to the discussions held around the various kitchen tables, the light had gradually come on. Hattie realised she wasn't the only woman lonely in her life. More importantly, she discovered a sense of hope. It didn't have to be that way. She could learn to put herself first. Follow your dreams, they'd told her. Well, that part was a bit depressing at first. I didn't have any dreams. For too many years to count, the kids had been her entire life; her work was a means to an end, friendships were work colleagues, and lately her mother had filled in the rest of her time.

But now? Now, a glimmer of silver at the edge of the cloud had emerged. Though still slippery in her hand, with this shining thread, Hattie had woven herself a brand new future. It began with an ending. A clearing out of the old.

Twenty-one boxes. Plenty of space for a dream to take root. She wiped her damp cheeks with the back of her hand and slipped the twice-folded consignment sheet into the pocket of her jeans. Right, adventure awaits. A surreptitious glance up and down the street to see if anyone had spotted her being a loon in public revealed she was alone. Lucky. She headed inside.

Hattie allowed herself one more nostalgic peek into each room, each cupboard.

Clean.

Empty.

Done.

As she gathered her keys and handbag, she heard the postie pull up on her bike. The doorbell jangled as she drew the front curtains closed and opened the door. The high viz-ed woman pushed another electronic signing device towards her. Hattie retrieved her glasses from her pocket and signed.

In return, she received a thick, registered post package and a smile.

‘Have a good one,’ the postie said.

‘Thanks.’ Hattie’s return smile was preoccupied, her brow furrowed as she turned the bulky package over. She’d had all her mail forwarded to Iluka from tomorrow, so this particular piece was lucky to have reached her. Another few minutes and it may have been weeks before she received it. The sender was her mother’s solicitor. I thought we’d settled all the probate. She stood on the front step, feeling the contents through the padded cover; some hard covered books, and a fist-sized boxy shape. Probably just some old work stuff. Her phone pinged. She tucked the package under her arm to read the text. Her own workplace, an aged care facility, had sent her a reminder to hand in her security badge or they couldn’t release her final pay. The package would have to wait, the personnel office was only open for another twenty minutes. She’d have to scarp her herself.

Hattie closed and locked the door behind her for the last time. This last place had been home for ten tumultuous years. She stopped at the gate to say thanks and goodbye. The house snuggled between its showier neighbours, a small single storey, grey and white cottage in a group of three. The others were owner occupied, their paint fresher, and their fences fancier. Likely their bathrooms much more functional too, she thought wryly.

Her pocket hanky front yard was neat, a picture postcard for the season. The last of the autumn roses dying off, the leaves on the single weeping Japanese maple deepening to fire red. She loved gardening, her hands deep in the moist and fragrant soil. But she couldn’t justify spending heaps on a rental that she may have to leave at any moment. Her heart gave a gallop. She wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore. She could spend as much as she wanted on her garden. Her garden. I’m a homeowner now.

‘Thanks, Mum.’ Her breath caught, the tears brimming again. She shoved her glasses to the top of her head and scrubbed at her eyes. She hadn’t realised until the reading of the will that her mum had owned the tiny shack on the beach. It’d never crossed Hattie’s mind because she herself had lived in rentals since she left home at nineteen to get married, twenty-five years ago. Her mum and dad had bought the property years ago when their landlord decided to sell up. They’d finished paying for the place with her dad’s super payout when he retired. At least he’d had five years to enjoy being mortgage-free.

‘Get a grip, woman.’ One more glance. ‘Thanks house. Thanks for keeping us safe.’ A stack of wonderful memories had been born within those walls. Time to make some fresh ones.

Hattie closed the gate behind her. Its familiar creaky clang brought a smile and startled the cat next door. The feline took off like a rocket. The Willy Wagtail that the cat had been stalking, danced along the fence line then fluttered onto the gate close to her hand, his fantail spread for balance. Hattie held her breath. She loved the bird’s excited chirrups and comical tail wagging. Now he was so close she could easily see the white eyebrows and whisker marks on his dark face. His tiny eyes seemed to have an odd luminous blue flare. She didn’t dare move her hand to put her glasses on in case she frightened him away. So, so cute. Wonder if his eyes are damaged or a throwback or something. The little bird tilted his head at her, issued what sounded very much like instructions, and flew off.

With an unexpected lightness of heart, she flung her handbag onto the already crowded passenger seat of her car and the solicitor’s package onto the floor. This was her first solo adventure, and a cheeky bird had blessed it. She checked her watch. After she raced to the aged care facility,

there was still plenty of time to drop the keys at the real estate agent and spend the rest of the day on a leisurely drive to Paynesville.

She'd only planned day one of the drive north. Though the fifteen hundred kilometres could be driven in two long days following the inland highway, the scenic A1 that hugged Australia's eastern coastline would be better for winding down and indulging herself a little. A quaint bed-and-breakfast overlooking the beach awaited her tonight. They'd told her the place was quiet and available for a longer stay if she wanted. With her twenty-one boxes ten days or more away from arriving, there was no hurry. Might even spoil myself and drop into some art galleries along the way. Hattie's smile broadened. I can please myself. She had her own home waiting, with time and money to spare for the first time in, well, in forever. She'd even accepted a part-time job at the Grafton Base Hospital, and though it didn't start for another four weeks, her future finances were in great shape too.

'Right, let's get on then.' Hattie started the car and plugged in her daughter's old iPod. She cranked up the travelling playlist, adjusted her mirrors, and with growing excitement drove north to her new life.

CHAPTER 2

Four easy days later, Hattie treated herself to fish and chips on the beach at Nambucca Heads. Blissfully alone, she had no one to tell her off for making a bad food choice, and no dishes to do. The ubiquitous seagulls squabbled for her attention as the only picnicker braving the blustery evening. Her fine brown hair whipped around wildly, and her eyes streamed from the salt-laden air. Sensing the entire flock's outrage at being denied any beneficence, she wrapped the last few chips and deposited the greasy papers into the bin.

'Find yourselves something better to eat than this. I am,' Hattie told them. She headed to the supermarket for a bottle of champagne and a block of her favourite rum and raisin dark chocolate.

'Quiet night in?' The female cashier nodded at the items on the counter.

'I'm determined to get my money's worth at the B-and-B.' Hattie smiled, then leant forward to whisper. 'They have a spa bath.'

'You must be staying at Maggie's,' the woman laughed. 'She's a friend of mine. Says that spa was the best thing she ever bought. I've stayed in the place myself a couple of times. Though I prefer the ocean for a proper swim.'

'Any kind of water will do me,' Hattie said. 'I've got a big walk along the beach planned for tomorrow and I wanted to pamper myself tonight.'

'Well, you've got the right ingredients. Have a good night.'

Hattie drove the few kilometres out of the main township to her accommodation. As she retrieved her water bottle, which had fallen onto the passenger side floor, the solicitor's package poking out under the seat snagged her attention. She knew she'd been procrastinating, but she was well and truly over being the responsible adult, and hadn't wanted to rub salt into a barely healing wound; a few days without feeling so sad. Time to open Pandora's box.

Glass of wine at hand, and the first piece of chocolate melting its deliciousness in her mouth, Hattie undid the package and tipped the contents onto the coffee table. A letter from the solicitor, a safe deposit box receipt, four bulky A4 day-to-a-page journals, a plastic document folder jammed with old letters, magazine articles and photos. And one fist-sized jeweller's box.

Hattie stroked the nap of the maroon velvet exterior with her thumb. The soft pile was worn along the edges, the silver metal clasp discoloured with a patina of age, and the base bore dark stains.

Melancholy moistened her eyes as she wondered when her mother had last held the box.
Requiescat in pace.

She sniffed back tears and lifted the lid. Nestled on a bed of black satin was a creamy stone half as big as her palm. She blinked; a flash of colour blinked back. She plucked the gem out and rolled it around in her hand, watching the rainbow twinkle in the fluorescent light. This was opal; polished and shaped on all except one side. That side looked as if someone or something had broken it—as though this was part of a larger piece. There was nothing else in the box.

Hattie read the solicitor's letter as the stone slowly warmed in her hand. Apparently, her mother had kept a safe deposit box at a bank in Sydney. She'd opened the account a week before her stroke. When the bank had been notified of her mother's death, their instructions were to pass the contents of the box along to Hattie. The letter closed with best wishes for her new life and hopes that she would call on their law firm if she needed any legal advice or service in the future.

Very nice. Thank you, Dominic. I'll let you know. She dropped the letter onto the pile and took a sip of champagne.

'Mmm, bath or papers?' Hattie contemplated the assortment of bits and pieces in front of her. Secrets about her mother's life. Glimpses into a woman who'd often been distracted by work or world affairs and had little time for playing with her daughter.

Hattie felt disloyal thinking ill of the dead, especially one that now offered her a better life than the one she'd built on her own. She wrapped her arms around herself as the tears sprang to her eyes again. An audible sob lurched from her tight chest. She let herself wallow for a few minutes until the wave of grief and misery eased.

'Enough already,' Hattie scolded herself, wanting to shake off her mournfulness. She should've been grateful, not angry. Her mother's estate was giving Hattie a new start. She may not've been the best mother in the world, but she was your mother. And now she's gone. Move on. Besides, if you're talking distracted mothering, you're the pot calling the kettle black. 'Stop!' For goodness' sake, you did the best you could. Now get a grip.

Hattie placed the opal on the coffee table, got up to start the bath, and poured in a good dollop of bubbles. While she waited for the tub to fill, she shuffled through the loose papers in the plastic folder and drew out one at random.

'An Explanatory Statement on Elementary Particle Physics by M.A. Ruderman and A.H. Rosenfeld.' It was from an American Science magazine. Someone had highlighted a passage discussing neutrinos. They'd added half a dozen exclamation marks after one particular sentence.

"Every second, hundreds of billions of these neutrinos pass through each square inch of our bodies, coming from above during the day and from below at night, when the sun is shining on the other side of the earth," she read.

'Huh?' The pencilled note beside the quote read, "STONE ABSORBS NEUTRINOS!!!"

Hattie's skin prickled. She rubbed the goose bumps that pebbled her arms before taking another gulp of champagne.

Why would her mother keep an article on neutrinos in a safe deposit box? She'd thought her mother worked for a government infrastructure department that dealt with rural water supply, right up until her retirement years ago. The same department that her dad had worked at. That's where they'd met. She'd never heard them discuss science though; they'd always left that at work. Dialogue around the dinner table had—almost invariably—been about politics. There was always a fresh frustration related to the government running the country, or the world, that had her parents haranguing each

other. The constant arguments were one reason Hattie had chosen to work in health, as far away from politics as she could get.

And why the piece of broken opal? She picked the stone up again, turning it with the fingers of one hand while she sipped at her wine. She had a vague idea they found the best opal in Australia. Hattie had never seen opal this big or shaped this way, though she was no expert. A quick scan of the plastic document folder had revealed nothing specifically related to her mother's gift. There were scientific documents on quantum mechanics, astronomy, and geography, as well as newspaper and internet articles on government corruption and corporate takeovers. Her curiosity had her reaching for her phone to Google for more information.

Before the pages could load, a sixth sense pinged a warning in her mind; the sound of the bath filling loomed loud. She left the gem and her phone on the bed and hurried to check the water level.

Ensnared neck deep in watery warmth, Hattie relaxed and let the past take care of itself. Her mother's papers had waited this long, another few minutes wouldn't make any difference.

Yet, ever dutiful and efficient, when she got into bed almost an hour later, Hattie propped herself against the backboard on an extravagant stack of pillows and began the examination. Her mother's journals were ordinary dark blue hardcovers, bloated with added pages and article cut outs. Each one was held closed by a thick elastic band, the kind of elastic her mother had used in waistbands of skirts and pyjamas when the old stuff needed replacing. Each cover had the date, covering a few months each, handwritten on a slip of paper, then sticky-taped to the front. The four journals spanned eight months, starting a little over a year ago.

With a sigh, Hattie dragged the earliest journal closer and took up her fresh glass of champagne. As she tried to juggle bubbles and book, she realised she needed both hands to hold the leaves open and stop the added material escaping. She took two large gulps and set the glass down on the bedside table. As she re-opened the cover, she grimaced at her mother's cursive scribble. This would not be an easy read.

What she deciphered on the first page had her frowning. She switched to the most recent journal and found the last entry. It was dated only two days before her mum's stroke. The words made absolutely no sense and had no connection to the chatty earlier entries. Dipping in and out of all four journals and scanning the extra documents only increased her bewilderment.

Hattie rested against her pillows and took another sip of champagne. Regret for the interruption to her indulgent evening surfaced; she vacillated between the need for sleep and the allure of sleuthing. An irritable shuffle of her legs disturbed the sea of papers and the opal tumbled into view. She picked it up and held it in her free hand.

'Where did you come from, and what the hell was Mum doing with you?' The gem glittered in the lamplight, displaying its spectrum of beautiful colours as she rolled it around her palm. More importantly, what am I going to do with you?

Hattie had always fancied that she was good at solving puzzles and mysteries, adept at gathering clues and fitting odd pieces of data together to complete a picture. The plethora of information spread before her presented a monumental challenge, and with the added contribution of being personal and purposeful, the conundrum became doubly enticing. This wasn't a made up game, this was her mum. There were answers here—somewhere—she just needed to find a place to begin. She slid reluctantly out of bed and gathered a pen and blank paper from the coffee table. Suitably

equipped, she nestled amongst her clues.

Right! What would Miss Marple do? Hattie put down her wine and placed the opal next to it. She'd get busy, that's what she'd do; start gathering facts and asking questions. On that thought, she reached for the first journal again and re-read the opening lines. On closer inspection, these few paragraphs looked as though they'd been written in haste, the writing was untidy, and the last few lines were particularly cramped as though she'd run out of space.

"If anything should happen to me, these notes will form the case to prosecute those responsible."

A squirm of unease tapped at Hattie's mind. She dismissed it. Her mother had a stroke, not something you could fake, and quite common for someone of her age group. Surely her mother was talking about being embroiled in some kind of public relations gaffe about politically sensitive stuff up in the government's water department.

"There's no one I can trust now. Been feeling a little paranoid, but with good reason. My email is being monitored and they might be tapping my phone."

Hattie snorted at how far-fetched it sounded. 'How on earth did she know her phone was being tapped?'

"The report I got from Chris F on the initial analysis of the stone has gone missing from the dept system. Anyone I ask for help to locate it starts off being helpful, then gets super busy and can't find the time to get around to it. Even Chris has gone on a sudden sabbatical somewhere in Europe. He must be avoiding me - he doesn't even like travelling from Sydney to Newcastle!!!

I can only hope that H still has the copy I posted to him. From what I can remember, this is part what Chris found..."

What followed seemed to be a composition analysis of the opal, a list of properties that Hattie had no idea if they were normal or not, though "water content = 7.5%" was underlined several times. Her mother had written that most NSW opal is hosted in sedimentary rock and is without crystal form.

What on earth does any of that mean?

The main thrust of the journals had started out routinely with dated entries of her mother's travels. But additional notes around particular paragraphs seemed to have been added once her mother experienced several odd occurrences and did more research. With each passage Hattie became more and more incredulous at the accusations, and more and more confused at the bizarre directions of the writing. Her mum's state of mind surged to the forefront. If any shred of what she'd read was true, then it was no wonder her mum had become distant over the last year. Over the next hour, she carefully perused her mum's entries, wrote copious notes, flicked through the other three journals, and sifted through the loose documents. There was too much to process in one sitting.

Even Miss Marple would struggle to make sense of all of this. Besides, Miss Marple always enlisted lots of help to get the answers. She never solved stuff on her own. Eyes gritty with fatigue,

and her brain full to bursting, Hattie closed her eyes to think. *Lightning Ridge. It looks like the chaos began in Lightning Ridge with a bloke called H. He gave her the opal. Why?*

In the early hours of the morning, Hattie jerked awake as the journal on her knee slipped to the floor with a thump. She retrieved it, gathered the documents, tucked them under the pillow on the other side of the queen-sized bed, and flicked off the light. Champagne and sea air trumped her mother's meanderings. She slept.

The morning brought the crispness of clarity and reality. What she'd read last night couldn't possibly be true. The neurologist had mentioned that her mother may have been having minor strokes for months, or even years before she died. TIAs, she'd called them. Transient ischaemic attacks.

Did these attacks leave her mother's mental health vulnerable as well as her body? Hattie resolved to research them later and scribbled herself a note to that effect. She'd heard the nurses speak of TIAs in their bedside handovers, but didn't know much more. It was the best explanation she had for now. Was it possible her mum had been having them months ago, maybe around the time of the first journal entry? Or were her mum's fears of being caught in a global conspiracy real? Hattie's thoughts skittered away from jumping to that conclusion about her mum's death. *No! She died of a stroke; that's what the doctor had told her.*

Wrung out from a combination of tears, champagne, and late night reading, she'd slept in and missed the breakfast being offered in the hostess's dining room. Even after a long shower, she was still twitchy; unsettled by the random facts and crazy theories on perpetual repeat in her mind. She left Nambucca Heads with a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich and a cup of peppermint tea purchased from the bakery. Her long nature walk would have to wait for another day. Her carefree mood had dissipated with the unboxing of the mysterious stone and its accompanying baggage.

Hattie felt a weird churn in her gut as she merged onto the Pacific Highway and headed north towards Grafton. She wanted to go west, over the mountains to Lightning Ridge. That's where she'd find answers. She wanted to meet the elusive H and ask him about Chris's report, and why he'd given her mother the stone.

But she was only two-and-a-half hours from her shiny, new, independent life. She'd be better off getting sorted into her new home and taking the time to read all the information in the package. Perhaps even get the stone independently appraised. She settled herself by counting the white posts on the highway. Counting always helped. Numbers never lied or cheated. Every one hundred posts, she reset to zero and began again. Once she felt calmer, she let herself take in the countryside. Paddocks, hills, and valleys on an endless repeat.

Signs for the B78 indicated the first opportunity to turn west, and Hattie had her blinker on before she realised. With a start, she checked her mirror and swerved back onto the highway.

Jeez, woman. Don't start being stupid now. You'll end up like Auntie Shirl, seeing conspiracy theories in the menu stains. Huh, maybe it runs in the family. As a counterpoint, she heard Janet's voice telling her to trust her gut. To let go of the "shoulds" and follow her instinct. She scoffed at herself. *Well, my instinct says don't be an idiot. Coff's Harbour for petrol and lunch.* She straightened in her seat, put Lightning Ridge out of her mind, and gripped the steering wheel firmly.

Hattie didn't believe in fairy tales and fantasies. *Wishes and wealth are for other people.* So why would she believe the ranting of a woman who was suddenly imagining an enemy under every

bush? Her mother had never hinted at any of this in the few occasions she and Hattie had spoken over the last twelve months. Tears of regret welled. It had taken a life-threatening illness to get her to spend time at her mother's side. By then it was too late. The stroke had taken the power of speech from her mother. A mother it looked as though she knew even less than she'd thought. A mother with a slew of strange secrets. *What's that quote? A riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma?*

Ten minutes later, her palms were slick with sweat and her head was pounding. Each minute she drove north increased the sense of impending doom in her gut. Her hands began to shake as she approached the next exit sign. She pulled off onto the road shoulder, grabbed her water bottle, and got out of the car.

Hattie wracked her brain for answers to her physical discomfort and wondered if last night's fish and chips had been dodgy. *Surely not.* The shop girl had assured her they'd caught the fish that morning. She rested against the passenger side of the car and stared into the forest beside the road, counting the trees, and willing away the swirl in her belly. When she got to twenty-one, she stopped. This was way beyond the help of counting.

What was I thinking driving all this way on my own? I should have flown and got the car shipped. Or bought myself a new one. The Corolla was past its best before anyway and had been secondhand when she'd purchased it a decade ago. She turned to pat her trusty vehicle then stepped away, reaching to move her glasses from her head to her nose.

What the?

It looked as if someone had tried to jimmy the passenger door, and recently. The scratches were shiny. It must have happened overnight at the bed-and-breakfast. Hattie downed a few mouthfuls of water and taking two slow breaths tried not to imagine a shady character breaking into her car while she was sleeping, and with her only a few steps away behind a flimsy plywood door. Her imagination erupted with horrifying and violent possibilities.

'Stop. Nothing happened.' She took another deep breath of fresh air and considered that it could have happened in Melbourne before she left. Wouldn't she have noticed it earlier? *Does Nambucca Heads have a high criminal element? But I've got nothing of value, anyway.* The opal and journals flashed into her mind in vibrant technicolour. Were they valuable enough to steal? Was the story she read real? Government conspiracies? Unexplained deaths? Bizarre gemstones?

Hattie's body had cooled in the fresh air and she contemplated her options. She was a free agent. Her sensible mind told her to leave this nonsense and continue north. But the nascent rebel, the woman who wanted a chance at a dream, an extraordinary life? She said west. Go over the mountains. Channel Miss Marple. Find answers. Begin at the beginning.

Lightning Ridge.

It sounded so exotic. And so far away. She pulled out her phone and checked the distance. A little backtracking would see her arriving in eight or nine hours. Only seven hundred clicks. Her finger traced the route, and she spotted a familiar name on the map. Walgett. At least she'd heard of that. Okay, she'd aim for there and regroup.

Her hands steadied, and her head cleared as soon as the decision was made.

'Fine, I get it, Mum. I'm going west for goodness' sake.' *Besides, I have time, plenty of time.* She got back into the car, turned off the highway and U-turned south. Towards Lightning Ridge and the unknown. To chase down the source of the bizarre scribblings in her mum's journal.

Hattie eased out of the car, her muscles stiff from the long hours behind the wheel. A hot shower and a soft bed were top of her list, and the Golden Palm Motel would have to do. The Motel's golden hue was restricted to the dull glow of the courtyard lights. She'd almost driven past but had seen an oncoming car's headlights illuminate a rusty sign. Hattie suspected the daylight would reveal a less than salubrious façade, but she was too tired to go elsewhere, and this looked cheap. Thriftiness was second nature, even now that there was a small cushion of extra zeros at the end of her bank balance.

Lightning Ridge was within cooee, but not tonight. Tonight, she'd gather her thoughts and plan for tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

What the hell am I doing? Chasing elusive whispers, listening to odd feelings. She was usually so much more sensible than that. And that is exactly why you're here, she told herself. It's time to do something nonsensical. Just because you want to. No one to tell you what to do. Do what you wanna do, be what you wanna be, yeah.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, she reached into the car for her handbag. As she straightened, Hattie noticed a man standing beside his navy blue BMW staring at the approaching sunset. The ochre shades deepening over the tin roof of the motel had softened the sharp angles of the concrete courtyard. Dust tickled her nose, redolent of the parched plains she'd spent the last few hours traversing. Her neck prickled, heralding a vague sense of disquiet. She could see tension in the man's shoulders, his hands planted firmly on his hips. He ticked the angry and frustrated boxes on her catalogue of character traits.

Hattie had developed superb skills for reading people over the years. It paid to anticipate when you could; even though she'd worked mostly in accounts in the health sector, some days were fraught with angry, frustrated people. She wouldn't want to get on this man's wrong side. Those shoulders could do damage. She shrugged off her unease. *Jeez, I don't even know him.* He'd probably had a terrible day selling insurance or something.

Her hope of a quiet night dampened at the count of thirteen cars parked tidily in front of their temporary homes. She slammed her car door and followed the sunset man, who was now walking towards the dimly lit reception.

He must have been deep in thought as he started when she stepped into the light beside him. After a brief glance at her, he opened the wire screen and waved her through.

Chivalry isn't dead then, nor wasted on the young. She clocked him around mid to late thirties, short dark hair lightly peppered with grey. Hattie revised her opinion of his mood as she glanced at his face. He was sad as well as angry, a troubled combination. Probably wondering what the hell he was doing in this place, just like she was. His perfunctory smile to her "*thank you*" didn't quite reach his green eyes.

The reception desk was tidy and deserted, if not very clean. Hattie re-thought putting her bag on the counter and slung it over her shoulder. A sharp ting on the bell brought a young man sporting a perky Golden Palm Motel logo embroidered on his polo shirt. He and the neat shirt seemed at odds to the tired and dated architecture.

After a brief exchange, Hattie swapped signature and credit card for a key. She let herself into

the deepening night, leaving the clerk chatting to the sunset man.

She shifted her car to the allocated space outside room number eight and dragged her suitcase from the boot. Enough of a novice traveller remained for a sense of discovery to brighten her thoughts before she opened the door. Her eyebrows rose. It wasn't the Rialto, but clean and not too smelly was a good start. She pressed her palm into the mattress hopefully; it had as much give as a piece of wood. She grimaced.

'Here's hoping the water's hot at least.'

CHAPTER 3

Cohen stepped out of the night and into the roadhouse. Empty tables draped in decades old plastic quietly waited for nobody as moon chasing bugs crackled against fluorescent lights. A small maze of half empty shelves offered dust covered magazines and the kind of snacks that would never be eaten by the light of day. If there was air conditioning, he sure as hell couldn't feel it. Alone for the moment, he perused the old road maps on the walls, feeling every bit as though he'd stepped into another world.

While silently studying the faded road ahead to New South Wales, he counted each crackle that signalled another bug's journey to the floor. He reached seventeen and could've easily reached twenty, but movement behind the counter diverted his attention when saloon styled wooden doors parted open accompanied by a long dramatic creak. A sleepy eyed man appeared, tufts of grey hair poking out from a faded baseball cap, the edges of his mouth not yet quite awake as he looked Cohen up and down.

'Not too many people on the road nights like this,' he said, scratching at his stubble.

'Nights like this?' Cohen asked.

'Gettin' on full moon. Sends the roos funny in the head and they end up bouncing all over the damn road.' The man was starting to wake now. 'You headed north or south?'

'North.'

'Yep, you'll find out soon enough. So what can I do you for?'

'Something hot to eat should keep me going,' Cohen replied.

'Nah,' the man shook his head. 'Sandwiches is what I got.'

Cohen glanced around the empty dining area and then back at the old man. *No doubt about it*, he thought, *it's another world all right*.

'They're good mate,' the man continued, 'I made 'em myself.'

'Sandwich it is then.'

Cohen paid with a crisp hundred-dollar bill and headed for the exit with a parcel that felt hard even through the plastic coating. Realising he'd just wasted money on a possibly toxic outback sculpture, he shook his head and reached for the door handle. He heard the old man call out.

'Watch out for them roos!'

The sultry night air was still. Every stone that crunched beneath his feet echoed up to stars that seemed more like snowflakes suspended in flight than the balls of fire they really were. His car was parked just beyond the lights of the roadhouse, the only structure he'd come across in what

seemed like forever, and as he strolled with sandwich in hand, he did his best to ignore the voice in his head telling him to forget the whole thing and head back to the city.

With a sigh, he leant against the bonnet to dare a bite. Here he was, out in the middle of goddamn nowhere with a three-day-old sandwich and an endless road ahead—supposedly filled with crazy roos. It was bad enough that until now the closest he'd been to the outback was a documentary here or there when he couldn't sleep, especially considering his choice of holiday was a business class ticket to another city, never the country, always concrete and glass. A crazy old man spooking him with warnings about animals on a night with an almost full moon was just the icing on the cake.

He spat what was left of the second bite to the ground, took a few steps and dumped the culinary crime into the bin. Then, as if the smell of discarded trash triggered a sudden moment of clarity, he grabbed the ring from his pocket and threw that in too. There was a split second desire to snatch it back, but thankfully his hand refused to listen.

The ring landed on a crinkled wrapper and somehow captured the fluorescent glow of the roadhouse, sparkling in the bin like a firefly resting on the edge of a dark cave. A hundred and fifty-four facets. Fifty-eight spread across the crown and pavilion, and ninety-six along the girdle. Three carats. Seven thousand, three hundred and twenty-six dollars a carat. He'd selected the stone from a private collection and had crunched the numbers before the dealer could lay a finger on the calculator. Twenty-one thousand, nine hundred and seventy-eight dollars, and as far as diamonds went, it looked pretty good sitting in the bin. Kind of fitting really, considering that wasn't the only thing in his life that had turned to trash.

Cohen sucked in the night air and let it whistle through his teeth as he contemplated his predicament. The journey ahead and everything it represented left his stomach twisted and tight, but turning around just wasn't an option. There was nothing to go back to. At least, nothing in the form of what he'd thought a normal life was supposed to be. He should have known better anyway, should have known that having someone to love in his life was always going to be a bitter dream. A long road ahead it was then, deep into New South Wales and a dusty forgotten town called Lightning Ridge.

He settled back in behind the wheel, and before he knew it, the roadhouse with sandwiches that could crack teeth was a mere twinkle in his mirrors. Looking forward, the limits of the headlights were all that was, that's if you didn't count the canopy of stars vying for his attention whenever he leant forward to stretch the muscles in his back. If what the old man had said was true, then a kangaroo dancing onto the road wouldn't exactly leave much time to make a calculated adjustment. Then again, based on the roadhouse chef's sandwich making skills, there was every chance the supposed road hopping roos were merely a late night spooky tale for out-of-town tourists. If that was the case, maybe there was nothing to worry about at all.

The kilometres ticked by. There was little to do but lean his head back, steady the wheel, and watch the endless road as it emerged from the darkness. The monotony of broken white lines appearing then disappearing created an almost meditative state that quietened his thoughts, and it wasn't long before his eyes grew heavy. Not wanting to stop in the middle of nowhere, he powered down the window for some fresh air, squeezed fresh blood into his fingers then reached down to flick on the radio.

Nothing.

He scanned for different stations, but static was all there was. *Damn*, he thought, *I really am in the middle of nowhere*. With the sense of isolation growing stronger and stronger, he drummed his fingers against the wheel and glanced at the folder resting on the passenger seat. If his initial instinct had trumped the moment just days before, the folder would have been torched in the sink back in his apartment like the trash he thought it was. But here it sat. Plain looking, clipped together with a cheap pin, and holding nothing but a USB and a couple of legal documents that he'd barely skimmed over. It was hard to imagine the contents had the power to rip a hole straight back through time—like a steel spike being driven into concrete. The package had weighed the car down from the moment he'd thrown it in, and now in the cocooned darkness it taunted him, called for him to take things a step further.

Giving in to a long yawn, he eased back on the engine a little and rolled his neck until it clicked. Who was he kidding? Deep down he knew he wasn't about to throw it out the window and turn around, so he might as well...

Shit!

Up ahead the shadows suddenly came alive, and in the blink of an eye a silver-grey shape bounced straight into his path. Adrenaline surged and Cohen slammed on the brakes, sending the tyres squealing like angry seagulls as his fingertips dug deep into the hard leather. The car struggled for traction. Through the windscreen a pair of emotionless gold white eyes stared straight back at him, illuminated by his headlights and completely ignorant of what the impending impact would mean. Instinctively, he threw a hand down and ripped on the handbrake. The now smoking tyres screamed one last time as the seatbelt pinched into his skin, and the car bounced to a sudden stop.

For a moment there was just Cohen and the kangaroo sharing a moment beneath the stars. While his heart settled down, the animal casually hopped off into the gloom as though the moment had become boring already.

Knowing how close he'd come to being stranded in the middle of nowhere should have shaken him up a little, but instead a strange feeling surged through his body and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Beneath the canopy of stars, and all alone, Cohen began to laugh. Whether it was out of surprise, frustration or just a reaction to the absurdity of the situation he was in didn't matter, it just felt *good* to laugh. It had been so damn long that the whole sensation felt brand new, so much so that when his composure finally returned, he had to wipe the tears from his eyes.

Still resting with two tyres on the road and two in the dirt, he checked his mirrors then reached down to the folder.

No point letting an absurd moment go to waste. He took a deep breath, fumbled in the dark until he found the USB and slipped it into the slot on the dash. Almost instantly the stereo warmed to life with glowing blue lights, followed by the somewhat distorted recording of a voice that belonged to a time he'd all but forgotten. The words were haunting as they crackled from the speakers, words that seemed intent on awakening unwanted memories, and as the hairs bristled along the back of his neck, the dark of the night felt almost stifling.

'Hey there, son.'

Cohen felt the blood rush from his stomach.

'Don't know where you might be when ya here this, if ya hear it at all, and I reckon ya won't exactly be happy about hearing my voice. But it means my old bones are turning to dust. I don't really

expect ya to be sad about it or nothing like that, but it's about bloody time I did the right thing, and I reckon this is the right thing to do.'

Sitting there beneath the stars with a strange chill descending, Cohen couldn't help but shake his head in disbelief. *Do the right thing?* It just didn't seem possible for those words to come from a voice that had no place in the present, particularly one built on doing the wrong thing over and over again. It was, he figured, about as dignified as robbing a bank, then returning to open an account to hold the stolen money.

He reached out to snatch the USB, but paused with hand mid-air, reminding himself that the whole reason he was out here in the middle of nowhere was to close the damn chapter on a story he should never have been a part of. *Might as well hear the last of the lies*, he figured. Who knows? Maybe they'd float out through the window to echo across the emptiness, lost forever amongst endless plains where they could never again stir anger.

'I know I wasn't much of a dad for ya before they took me down. Hell, I wasn't much of anything for anyone. Couldn't make a day right, even if I stayed in bed. But that don't change what's what, that I'm ya dad and you're my son.'

'Don't use that word,' Cohen whispered with a shudder.

'Now I ain't afraid of no man or no thing,' his dad's voice continued, *'and all that time in the joint I never backed down when things went toe to toe, not once. But I can tell ya this. When I got out, I was scared, and that ain't nothing I felt before because it wasn't something I could fix with my hands. I wasn't the same man that went in. I wanted to find ya. Wanted to show ya I was ready to try being somebody ya might wanna talk to. Like I said though, I was scared. Figured ya'd just spit in my face and walk away. So I packed the few things I had and went where no one would care who the hell I was. Now, here I am talking to ya, my boy, with something to say that I promise will change your life.'*

Cohen realised he was gripping the steering wheel and slowly released his fingers. There was something in the recording that was raising the hairs on the back of his neck, something in the way it was becoming rushed and excited.

'If ya come out here, and I hope ya do, there's something waiting for ya. Something important. Ya'll find it in a pair of me old boots next to the washing machine. The other half is in the hands of a special kinda lady, a lady who was doing some sorta government work here in town. She said she was gonna run some tests on it then bring it back personally, but looks like I won't be here when she does. Huh, just goes to show even when I get lucky, I find a way to screw it up. The lawyer will give ya her details. Anyway, this stone ain't like anything else I found, and it's got the kinda shape ya won't forget—even though I busted the bloody thing in half getting it out.'

'Here's the thing. A year or so after I got up here, I'm scratching around in an old mine the townfolk reckon's cursed and won't go near, and I ended up punching a hole through to some cave that's been sealed for god knows how long. I know it ain't no mining cave cause there's real old paintings along the walls, and I'm talking a helluva lot older than this damn town, that's for sure.'

The blue light flickered and the idling engine whined a little as the fan kicked in to regulate the temperature. On the other side of the window, bugs danced in the headlight beams as if restless to hear what the mysterious voice had to say next. Cohen felt his pulse quicken; he too was ready for the ghost of his past to continue.

'Until ya roll into the Ridge, none of this will make any sense. But when ya get here and dig into my boots, ya'll at least see I might be a worthless son of a bitch, but I ain't tellin' no tales. That stone ain't no normal stone, and that cave ain't no normal cave, but they sure as hell have something to do with each other. I was gonna grab the stone and head back in there, but... it's this damn sickness in my bones. Got me so quick it's like I woke up and couldn't even wash meself. Don't reckon I'll have more than a day or two in me after this. Probably don't deserve any more than that either, so this is my only chance to say goodbye.'

A sudden silence fell from the speakers and Cohen adjusted the volume, wondering if the recording might have stopped. He wiggled the USB, leant back into the seat with a sigh, and checked the mirrors for any signs of life. His mind was racing with the jolting speech he'd just absorbed, but it snapped back to attention at the sound of a coarse cough.

'There's something special in that cave, something that has to do with that stone. Now I know I ain't worth nothing more than a busted radio, but maybe this is something I can give to ya that might mean something. The lawyer said he'd put a couple of files on this thing as well, so have a dig around and see what ya can make of 'em. Anyway, if ya can get the stone back to the cave, there's a chance ya can find out what those paintings mean. I'll die knowing I finally did something worthwhile, something a father would do for his son. I stumbled into the mystery. Maybe ya can finish it, so we've at least done one good thing together.'

'Ya need to know I've always carried a love for ya, even if it's true I was never there for ya...'

What followed next was the sound of buttons being clicked and then... nothing. Cohen looked up from the shadows of the floor to discover three kangaroos staring back at him from the front of the car. It must have been a trick of the light, but he swore they looked like they were smiling. *Do they know something I don't?* Actually, he thought, that wouldn't exactly be hard considering the words now echoing across the outback left him even more confused than when he had first hit the road, and that was saying something.

A stone in a boot? A cave with ancient paintings? Love ya son? Maybe some mischievous aliens had hijacked his stereo for a bit of a laugh to break up a boring space flight across the galaxy. After all, he'd heard plenty of stories about strange lights and supposed abductions on roads just like this one in the desolate belly of Australia. Though he enjoyed a tall tale just as much as the next guy, no matter how ridiculous, it sure would bring some sense to the surreal message he'd just been delivered.

Yeah, that's it. He laughed while shifting the car into gear. *This is a cosmic joke, and these grinning roos are in on it.*

He edged forward and the curious animals bounced off into the night, clearing the way to get back on the empty road. Still, as he picked up speed, he couldn't help but steal a glance up at the stars just in case. There were no aliens up there though, just burning balls of chemical reactions, sending leftover light signals that followed the same rules as solid investment strategies, the rules of numbers. Cohen knew the simplicity of numbers not only never lied, but revealed a logic that cut through the emotional mess that so many people got lost in. Not him, though. Numbers and logic had got him out of the mess, and it was going to stay that way, so message or no message he would stick to the plan. Get to the town, tidy up a dead man's affairs, list the property for sale and head back to the city with

chapter closed. Simple and logical.

He drove through the night until the stars faded into the blue light of dawn. Still he pushed on, and soon the dawn fell away and left him racing beneath the searing heat of the sun dealing with road trains that thundered alongside far too close, forcing him to straddle the edges of the slippery gravel with knuckles white at the wheel. The achingly long journey was mercifully broken up with tiny towns that gave him a chance to stretch his legs, towns like Wilcannia, Cobar and Bourke, towns that he had never known existed.

It felt as if he'd been driving forever, and he was shocked when he realised the sun was already setting once again. His arms ached, his lower back was on fire and a quick check in the mirror confirmed stinging red eyes, so when he spotted the battered sign for Walgett, he knew it was time for a motel. Any more driving and he was all but certain he'd fall asleep at the wheel and become just another outback statistic, another number for a government report to be shuffled away into boxes never again to be opened.

Finally, he eased off the accelerator as weather-beaten houses started to appear along the horizon. The town was awash in the orange glow of the sunset, and a warm breeze kicked up dust to swirl along the streets. To Cohen it looked like the kind of place that was best viewed in a rear-view mirror, but the need for a hot shower and bed trumped any first impressions. He was physically and mentally exhausted. After the distance he'd just travelled, it wouldn't matter if he'd stumbled into the worst town in Australia—if it had a bed with a half decent pillow, then it was already five stars as far as he was concerned. *Any port in a storm*, he reminded himself.

With heavy eyes, he trawled the main street until he stumbled across the first motel. *The Golden Palm*. It was a nondescript building with overgrown bushes pushing up through the dirt and torn shade cloth across the veranda. He would have driven straight past it were it not for the sheer luck of spotting the word *MOTEL* on a rusted old signpost that had somehow been bent almost to the ground. Feeling a strange sense of victory, he turned into a space in the car park and switched off the engine, revealing nothing but the sound of a soft warm breeze that whistled along the curves of the car. He stepped out and could see that the deepening twilight had brought the return of the stars, and with them a sense of calm at the prospect of sleep. That sense of calm was quickly interrupted, however, by the crunching sounds of another vehicle making its way across the gravel.

No point just standing here then, he figured, and so reached for his wallet and headed for the entrance. As he neared, a woman stepped out of the darkening red dusk and into the soft glow of the motel lights. His thoughts had been somewhere, nowhere, and though jolted at the sudden meeting, he nonetheless opened the wire screen to let her pass. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, and with it a shared glance that left him sure she was just as surprised at winding up in a town like this as he was.

The atmosphere inside was dim and stale, and though the small counter appeared tidy, not even the early evening shadows could hide years of greasy stains. He quietly waited while the woman dinged the bell for attention and booked her room, his eyes watching the ritual with mild interest. The young man behind the counter seemed polite enough, even if he did have an expression that made it clear there were other places he'd rather be. Once the transaction was completed, the woman glanced his way once more with a smile and then exited into the night. Finally, after sitting behind the wheel for what surely felt like an eternity, it was his turn to secure a shower and a comfortable bed.

‘What can I do for you, mate?’ the clerk asked, as though there were more than one answer to the question.

‘A room for the night,’ he replied.

‘Yeah, I’d love to help you out, but we got no rooms left? Lady that just passed you got the last one.’

Cohen felt a rush of frustration warm the back of his neck and couldn’t help but sigh at the ridiculous situation he’d just stepped into.

Guess this is what being polite gets you, he figured.

‘What other motels are there?’

‘Only two of ‘em in town, but you’re out of luck there as well,’ the clerk informed him with a shrug of his shoulders, ‘they’re all full for the Easter Festival up at the Ridge.’

‘Well, that’s just bloody great.’

‘I guess if you’ve packed a tent, I could find a quiet patch to drop your head for the night.’

‘No mate,’ Cohen replied with a raised eyebrow, ‘it’s not something I thought I’d need in the twenty-first century.’

‘Long road to nowhere to be travelling without a tent, don’t you think?’

‘Thanks for the tip.’

The rusty bell hanging from the door jingled once more when he stepped back outside, the last remnants of dusk rolling across the horizon like ethereal lava, carrying with it all the anticipation and hope he’d had for a comfortable bed for the night. If ever he needed proof that modern cities and first-class seats were the only way to travel, this was surely it.

It was all but dark when he slid back behind the wheel, where heavy blinks born of exhaustion quickly softened any urge to start the engine. Sure, Lightning Ridge was only another hour or so away, but it was an hour he just didn’t have the energy to take on. With one last sigh, he lowered the seat back as far as it would go, curled over onto his shoulder, and stared out the side window to the back of the motel where light from an open door halfway down the row shone teasingly. He watched the woman who’d beaten him to the last room drag her suitcase out of an old Corolla. She bumped it over the threshold and closed the door.

One thing was for sure, a forgettable town had just become *unforgettable*, and as sleep took hold, he couldn’t help but wonder if things could get much worse.

CHAPTER 4

Hot.

Sunrise had only just begun. Cohen's eyes were barely open, but already the inside of the car was like an oven. Every muscle ached and his cheek was numb where it had rested against the seat all night. Adding to his waking discomfort was the pool of sweat that soaked his clothes and warmed his skin, a stark reminder that five star accommodation was a world away.

It took a moment to remember where he was, and there was certainly no satisfaction when he did. There was determination though, a sudden heat-soaked push to finish what he had to do and put the harsh landscape behind him. The sooner he could put an exclamation mark on this strange jaunt, the sooner he could begin trying to put his life back together. At least, what was left of it, anyway.

Vanessa was gone. The ring was in a dusty bin somewhere along the lonely highway, and his apartment back in the city was once again empty. Numbers and patterns would return to being his only companions, and all things considered, it was perhaps the only way it was ever meant to be. One more hurdle and his life didn't need to be on hold any more.

Shares in Hong Kong's telcos are probably going through the roof right now and I'm out here, he thought. *Every drop of sweat is a thousand bucks down the drain.*

Not wanting to spend another minute in the town that had shown him such forgettable hospitality, he fired up the engine and pushed towards the rising sun until the motel was a blur in the rear-view mirror. It didn't take long for the wide expanse of nothing to return like an awful movie being played again, leaving little to garner his attention as the heat continued to rise. The terrain seemed allergic to trees or shade, and the road ahead held a constant shimmer that ensured things would only get hotter.

Nothing much changed for what seemed like an eternity. Then, like a splash of paint on a wedding dress, he saw a sign declaring his destination. He turned right and the rubber of the tyres shuddered along a broken dirt road. It was a rough introduction to the town of Lightning Ridge. The welcome party comprised two heat dazed flies that bounced off his windscreen.

Cohen pulled up on the side of the road and checked the directions given to him by the lawyer. The property he was looking for was on an isolated patch of dirt lying just beyond the official town limit, and now that he was almost there an unfamiliar nervousness crept in. Would he really find closure nestled out here in the middle of nowhere?

Slapped together shacks and weather-beaten sheds baked in the sun as he rolled along the dirt. Looking towards the horizon, he could see the outlines of countless mounds that marked the opal mines, each a testament to blood, sweat, tears, and dreams of striking it rich. Unlike diamonds, when

it came to opal, he didn't know the numbers too well. Diamonds carried a pretty simple valuation formula, but opals? He had no idea how the pricing rules worked, except that colour seemed to play a big role, and that meant personal taste came into the equation. Subjectivity, he had learnt time and time again, was never a good addition to numbers.

He pushed through the centre of town along a sun-baked bitumen road with quaint motels, dusty windowed bars and opal stores patiently waiting for someone to step in from the heat. There was a moment of temptation to pull over and hunt down a strong coffee but, considering how far he'd travelled, he couldn't see much point in stopping now. Besides, if the key sitting on the passenger seat meant anything, it was his chance to take a much needed shower.

It didn't take long to reach the other side of town. With the printed directions resting against the wheel, he made a couple of turns before rumbling along yet another cracked and broken dirt road, dust kicking up all around him as a ramshackle homestead came into view. The driveway ushered him to a rusting graveyard of long neglected machinery and car parts that seemed a fitting decoration for the barren surface. Beneath the struggling shade of the porch, a sleepy kangaroo lifted its head with curiosity about who had broken the desert silence. An ear twitched, a paw scratched, though it didn't seem overly bothered by the unexpected visitor.

Cohen grabbed the key and stepped out into the sun. Besides ticks from the now cooling engine and the squeak of loose tin in the soft wind, all was quiet. The smell of rust was strong in the air, a smell foreign to his city developed palette, and the instant feeling of isolation had him sure the visit was going to be a quick one.

Unsure of whether he should be worried about the slumbering roo or not, he eased up onto the porch and spotted a well weathered generator. *Guess electricity out here isn't a guarantee*, he figured while giving it a soft kick. The hollow impact that came from the impact all but assured an empty tank, and as he turned to the door, he was glad he hadn't arrived at night. After a little wiggling and finesse with the key, the lock eventually gave way, and the door creaked open.

'Well,' he muttered down to the marsupial who clearly hadn't a care in the world, 'this is what I'm here for I guess.'

The room was large and sparse, and came with a rushing scent of stale coffee and dirt. Mismatched lounge furniture and rickety tables covered with collections of rocks made up the living area, while at the far end he could just make out a dishevelled kitchen thanks to the sunlight that streamed in through a grimy window. There was a faint smell in the room that reminded him of a city park on a rainy day, which was odd considering he was in the middle of a sunburnt nowhere. The floor supported a thick layer of dust that looked as though it had always been there. Everything, he surmised, seemed to support the lack of expectations he'd had when he'd pushed open the door.

He stepped into the musty kitchen area and spotted two tattered pictures taped to the wall, and a single frame resting by a kettle. Though he did his best to fight it, there was no ignoring the subtle yet jarring cracks forming along the emotional wall he'd so carefully built as the photo in the frame came into focus. There was the man who was legally his father, broad shouldered and oddly handsome considering he was posing with other inmates on a featureless prison oval; all of them stared into the lens as only caged animals could. As far as happy snaps went, it was a Pyrrhic display in every way.

The first picture taped to the wall was of a woman he didn't recognise, though that didn't

really mean anything considering he was standing in the kitchen of a virtual stranger and everything was new and unknown, even if it was also old and useless.

But the second picture...

Cohen leant in for a closer look. The image was faded and the details grainy, and yet it tore open a recess into the deepest of memories. How old had he been? Five? Six? It had been the one and only time they'd tried for a typical day of father and son fishing, a trip to the beach to cast a line and pretend life was normal. For a while it almost had been until, Cohen remembered as dust flickered through the sunbeams to land on his wrist, a strange man had strolled up to their secluded spot and handed over a gun. The day had never been about family or fishing. No, it had just been a way to sort out some business without the worry of cops.

He replaced the picture and sighed. It was a long way to come for three pictures and a filthy lounge room full of rocks, but at least he knew now that closure wasn't coming anytime soon. He'd stifled any emotion about his father long ago and, although cracks had made their presence felt, stepping into a mining shack guarded by a lazy kangaroo wasn't a magical wand that would somehow make right all that was wrong. *This isn't about closing an emotional door*, he reminded himself, *this is a business transaction*.

Relieved to find the reality of the situation expectedly underwhelming, he figured the only thing left to do was re-lock the door, hammer in a 'FOR SALE' sign, and put the dusty town behind him. The rush of the number dance and the comforts of the city were calling, that was for damn sure, and he had no intention of ignoring it.

He turned from the kitchen counter and was about to head back through the lounge when he noticed an old wooden door to the left. It was slightly ajar and moved ever so slightly, as if a breeze had suddenly whispered through the room, which it hadn't. The air was still and hot.

Curiosity drew his feet across the aching floorboards and, when he eased the door open, an explosion of vivid green in what was a barely recognizable laundry confronted him. Two ceramic pots sat perched on a small windowsill, and though it must've been weeks since their last drink, thick green leafy vines stretched across the walls and carpeted the floor; like a greenhouse left for years with nothing but time and water. The only problem was that this was no greenhouse, and there sure as hell wasn't any water.

The fresh floral smell was strong and inviting, obviously what he'd picked up when he'd first entered, only this time it reminded him more of what he thought a rainforest might smell like. He'd never actually *been* in a rain forest, of course, so imagination was his only guide for the potent scent awakening his senses.

Shrugging his shoulders at the oddity, he prepared to step away when a pair of old boots caught his eye. Someone had discreetly positioned them beside an ancient washing machine. They were well-worn and tattered, with chunks of dirt still clinging to the leather, and in an instant the memory of the recording came rushing back. Didn't the old man say something about a rock in one of the boots? There were plenty of rocks on the tables in the lounge. What made this one so different?

'Okay,' he muttered, 'might as well see if this is all some hollow joke.'

He stepped onto the strange, rich flora and gently shook the first boot. Nothing. He did the same to the second and immediately felt something heavy rattling inside. Opening his left hand, he tipped the boot over and watched as a dazzling rock nearly half the size of his palm came tumbling

out, followed by a neatly folded piece of paper that fluttered its way to the floor. The rock was smooth to the touch. Now exposed by the soft light of the room, it erupted in a kaleidoscope of colours that shimmered and shifted as he gently rolled his hand. To call it stunningly beautiful was an understatement. Cohen studied the intricate rainbow-like patterns, and couldn't help but admit it made even the finest cut of diamond look pedestrian and plain.

Then there was the shape. It curved to a point at one end and widened out to where it'd been broken at the other, giving the powerful impression that it might have once been some kind of three-dimensional eye. While he knew little to nothing about opal, he had no doubt a piece like this would be worth far more than the sale price of a handful of mining shacks like this one.

When the decision was made to journey into the outback, he'd spent a little time researching opals and their different grades, more out of curiosity than anything, but he'd still come out none the wiser. What he'd noticed, however, was the stones with the most eye watering price tags were always larger than normal and were always exploding with stunning colour. Nothing he'd seen, however, came close to the size of the rock pushing down in the palm of his hand with a weight not much different to that of a cricket ball. As he continued to admire the patterns, he felt a familiar rush of anticipation. Number wise he had to guess there was at least close to a hundred thousand dollars sitting in his hand, hell maybe even more. Even more amazing, it'd been left in an old boot by a career bank robber who probably hadn't made a tenth of that amount with combined scores that had peaked prior to countless years behind bars.

The entire atmosphere of the shack electrified. This was a serious twist in the road. A whirlwind shift in what seconds before had been almost finished business. *Maybe*, he thought, *this is why the man who called himself a father wanted me to come out here. Maybe a very sudden and very sizable inheritance was a way of trying to make peace on his deathbed for all the wrongs that had scarred his life—unless of course the stone was stolen.*

But then another thought surfaced.

What if the old man had been telling the truth about the rock? What if his rumblings about some ancient cave actually had a basis in reality? If that was the case, then what the hell was really going on here?

He scooped up the tattered piece of paper and unfolded it as carefully as he could. It was a hand-drawn map, marked with a squiggly line travelling from a crude square that must represent the shack to a scratched circle indicating an old mine. Judging by the rough guide scrawled at the bottom, its location rested somewhere along the fringes of old opal mines that scarred the landscape beyond the edges of the town. His head reeled at the mystery taking hold. He brought the paper closer and read the note scratched in the top right corner.

Don't listen to anyone and don't trust anyone son. There's nothing normal about this opal. Certain kinds of people will do anything to get their hands on it. Find the cave, stay safe, and know one thing... I love ya.

Cohen folded the map, slid the rock into his pocket and retreated into the kitchen. Thoughts were rushing thick and fast. Should he stick with the original plan, lock the place up after a quick survey, and hit the road back to the city? Or should he delve a little deeper into whatever the map hinted at? There was of course a third option, but waltzing through the town asking folk about the stone didn't quite seem like the smartest of ideas and would probably only lead to trouble. Sudden

wealth in the middle of the outback, he assumed, could easily lead to suspicion and unwanted jealousy.

Maybe the best idea would be to slink his way back onto the main street and find somewhere that served a good, strong coffee. There'd been little chance of sleep hunched down behind the wheel in the motel car park. The heat was reaching deep into his bones and he was sure a little air conditioning and a well-ground double shot would sharpen up his decision making. He needed time to think, that was for sure. The original plan had been simply to come to the shack and see what sort of cleanup it required, but now things had taken such a strange turn he just wasn't sure what the next move should be. Somewhere neutral to gather his thoughts was what he needed, a place that didn't want to pry open distant memories, and he was pretty certain a quiet cafe back in town would be the best bet.

He strolled to the front door and flicked on the lights to check there was still an electricity supply—there wasn't—then stepped out onto the porch while his head buzzed with questions and riddles. Still savouring the cool of the shade, the lazy roo perked up its ears and looked up. For the briefest moment a hint of electric blue flashed across its eyes as if reflecting the enormity of the surrounding skies, but before Cohen could be sure he'd actually seen the strange display, it was gone. The kangaroo's eyes had returned to a deep earthy brown and besides, the porch was bathed in shadows so it couldn't have been a reflection. *Just the mind playing tricks.*

'Not exactly the hopping type, are you?' Cohen laughed whilst assuring himself the azure flash must have been a trick of the mind.

It scratched at its ear, then dipped his head once more, seemingly more concerned with whatever dream had been playing out than the simmering heat of the morning. Cohen turned to survey the parched landscape and a horizon that stretched forever. The hypnotic silence, broken only by the sound of scattered dead leaves rustling in the soft desert breeze, felt dreamlike and was a stark reminder of how far he was from the hustle and bustle of the city.

With a slow shake of his head he headed back to the car, quietly wondering what might drive a man to finally obtain freedom only to settle down in a hostile, alien like landscape that promised nothing but loneliness and relentless heat. Perhaps digging for opal and hoping to strike it rich brought a similar rush to robbing banks? Then again, he mused as the engine started, maybe it was a strange form of self-punishment. If that was the case, then striking it rich only to die seemed a little too harsh, even for an ex-con. More questions with little in the way of answers, and so it was time to head back to town.

It seemed a small forever before he finally rumbled from the dirt back onto the bitumen, and as the tension in his arms and shoulders eased, he brought the car to a slow roll along the main street. When he spotted a shop front around a corner that looked open and able to brew a coffee, he pulled over. Now that the day was well underway, there were signs of life to be found here and there. Sun-drenched figures drifted slowly to destinations that required no rush, and cars rattled by with occupants that flashed cursory glances at yet another strange face in town. For Cohen though, it was the unusual weight in his pocket that held his thoughts, as did questions of where the map might lead. It was time for some serious caffeine and a quiet moment to work out his strategy. After all, if he knew anything, it was that without a decent strategy anything could happen... and usually did.
