

DAVE WARNER  
**BEFORE IT  
BREAKS**



FREMANTLE PRESS

## PROLOGUE

In his bright blue windbreaker the boy was clearly visible to his father, who dawdled behind, allowing the little girl the opportunity to try to walk on her own. She would manage about five steps before tumbling, her round thighs cushioned by soft grass. The boy was lead scout up the steeply rising fairway that signalled the last stretch before turning home. Summer was losing its grasp, the air significantly cooler than even a week ago but still pleasant. After a day staring at a computer screen the father enjoyed this little pre-dinner ramble with his children across broad swards of park, over the little wooden bridge where the boy would run fast to avoid the troll hiding below, through the mini forest of slender trunks ideal for hide-and-seek. Refreshed by this exercise the trio would return home where, beneath a sub-strata of television news and the delightful smell of roast pork, his wife's demands for dirty shoes to be removed would ring in their ears. There would be baths, books read, some tears from the boy wanting to stay up late, a compromise offer to read a story which involved robots and the destruction of the planet, at first rejected, later begrudgingly accepted. After around twenty minutes the boy would grow sleepy, his eyes would shut, his blond hair fanning over the pillow. Mother and father would kiss him goodnight, retreat quietly to a glass of wine and perhaps a favoured television show or some music.

The father glanced up. The boy had disappeared from sight. The father was not concerned. It was a steep rise and anybody over the crest of the hill was momentarily absent from the view of those following. Even so, he called out the boy's name, yelling for him to wait. The girl, perhaps feeling she'd lost her father's attention tripped over a little too deliberately. She was giggling, golden curls framing her angelic face. After righting her once again her father

called for the boy to come back but when he did not appear at the top of the hill, the father scooped up the little girl, threw her over his shoulder and, much to her amusement, began jogging up the incline. He was still not worried, the only reason he was jogging was to entertain her. By the time he began to crest the rise however a scintilla of anxiety had worked its way into his pragmatic soul, for the boy was still invisible. Surely he had heard him?

He hit the top of the rise and immediately looked to the right, which was their route back. His heart cramped. There was nothing but a narrow strip of grass and widely spaced trees. Reflexively he threw to the left and relief swept through him. The boy stood twenty metres ahead looking at something on the ground. His father took three quick strides towards him and any mystery evaporated. It was obvious why he had not responded. His whole attention had been snared by a cute black cocker spaniel. The boy adored dogs and his father would have loved to give him one but the apartment block where they lived had rules about pets.

Now as he drew closer, however, the father saw something about the scene was not right. Tail down, fretting, torn between sitting and pacing, the whimpering spaniel was wearing a collar and lead. His son was not even looking at the dog. A man was prostrate, a quite large man with a shock of white hair. The father put down the girl without breaking stride. His first thought was that the man had collapsed. Even as he pulled his phone from his pocket he was regretting he had not signed up for one of those CPR courses. So often he had told himself it might be critical, the kids could somehow touch a live wire, it could be the difference between life and death, but the impetus always drifted away like smoke in the opposite direction.

Then he froze as if somebody had punched a pause button.

He was looking down at the man's face. It was clear he had not suffered a heart attack. An arrow bisected his throat, the fin somewhere under his chin, the arrowhead protruding through the back of his neck. There was no question about it, the man was dead.

## 1

## BROOME, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Clang, clang, clang. There he was, that guy with the hammer, five fifty-five every morning. Had to be illegal. The sound of metal on metal carried any time but over water it echoed and bounced exponentially. Clement supposed he could put on some shorts, stagger down to the wharf, find the culprit, play the heavy. I'm Detective Inspector Daniel Clement and you're out of line, mate. By the time he did all that he would have to get ready for work anyway. Sure, it might discourage the guy in the future but what if the fellow kicked up, asked where Clement was living and happened to know by some chance that this apartment above the chandler's contravened the industrial zoning for the wharf?

Clement swung up and sat sideways on the mattress. He rubbed his face as if that might make the place tidier. Okay, it wasn't exactly what you wanted to wake up to but it could be worse: a bottle of white which had lasted three days; three longnecks which had lasted around ninety minutes last night, not so good. Already the air was thick and sticky, no breeze yet. Clement scooped up the empties and dumped them in a large green garbage bag. He walked to the window and stared out over the ocean, which always seemed greener here in the north-west. The place was small and devoid of luxury but it had a great view. He'd been lucky to find it, or maybe fate had handed it to him, a special token from one estranged husband to another. The chandler's marriage had broken down and he'd taken to sleeping in his office above the workshop. It already had a toilet, so one weekend the chandler had shoved in a kit bathroom and kitchen and made it his home. Unlike Clement, he had eventually patched up differences with his wife and moved back with her. Realising he had a potential earner in his bachelor quarters, he relocated the minimal office equipment downstairs and began renting the 'apartment' for cash. Clement

found out about it by word of mouth and snapped it up. At night it was tranquil and isolated, but during the day it was like living inside an axle and totally inappropriate for a nine year old. Instead, for his weekends with Phoebe, Clement maintained a second property in Derby over two hundred k to the east. He loved Derby. It was open, untouched and unfashionable, and he'd found a gem of a property, a genuine stilt house looking north over mangroves, the famous Derby jetty visible in the distance. The loan to buy it wiped out any other lifestyle but what lifestyle did he desire anyway? He had a small runabout and Phoebe loved spending time with him on the water.

After dousing himself in the cold shower for all of two minutes, Clement dried himself and threw on his clothes. His system was to rotate shirts and pants, two of each, which gave him three days' wear before washing, four at a pinch. The place didn't have a machine so he handwashed in the basin or used the laundromat near the station.

A couple of months earlier, in the prime of his career as one of Perth's go-to Homicide cops, Dan Clement had brought down the cleaver and cut clean through to the bone, amputated his prospects, his professional standing, his minor celebrity even. Not that he ever wanted that part of it; the press conferences, the six p.m. news grabs, that wasn't him. He was no show pony but a smart, hard-working detective who had toiled a long time and sacrificed too much to get to the top of the heap.

And that really was the nub of it, the paradox, he thought you called it. You were good at something, you excelled, it was what you were meant to do with your life and you clawed your way to its peak losing pieces of yourself along the way, first small nips, then progressively larger chunks. There was no avoiding it, no best of both worlds. There you were, part of a crack team, clever colleagues, the latest in crime detection paid for by the trainloads of iron ore being shipped out from deserts to the north. You had pretty much a murder a week to put away. You had restaurants and bars and colleagues' patios where you could talk about the cases to the gentle click of an articulated sprinkler. You had honed yourself, you were elite. But, and here's the paradox, you discover that's not enough, that those things you had to discard were things you should have kept. Like a marriage. And no, you're not taking all the blame here but it's too late to apportion blame because it has happened and now, on the eve of your forty-first birthday, Marilyn's

heading back to her ancestral home with your daughter and you have a simple choice: stay and say goodbye, or keep close to the only thing you wouldn't dare screw up.

Clement had chosen the latter. So here he was counting flies in that desolate country near where the ore was shipped, working junior cases with rookie detectives or jaded colleagues who would rather drink beer and fish.

And no washing machine.

There was nothing to eat in the bar fridge except a block of cheese and an apple but as he had no bread, only crackers, he decided he'd leave the cheese for an evening meal. He took the apple and was halfway through it before he'd reached the bottom of the rickety external staircase at the foot of which was his car. He climbed in, put his hands on the wheel and sat there, already feeling stale. The day promised little. There was a domestic violence case going to trial tomorrow and he'd have to make sure there was nothing to let the bastard slip off. Apart from that it would be an array of minor dope charges and grog-induced assaults. He would have pushed to go north with Hagan and Lalor where there'd been some clan strife but this weekend he had Phoebe and he didn't want to risk cancelling.

Having delayed as long as he could, he turned over the engine and drove slowly out. Though it was Wednesday peakhour, there was hardly any traffic, not much more than when as a ten year old he'd ridden his pushbike around these streets with a playing card attached to the back wheel by a peg so it clattered, allowing him to imagine he was on a motorcycle. He switched on the police radio and caught Mal Gross, the desk sergeant, directing a car to a suspected break-in at the old abattoir. He was minutes away. The turn-off was dead ahead. Clement eased left. Of course he should have radioed Gross but then he'd be told there was no need for him. The approach, a pitted feeder road with low scrub either side, was not too different to how he remembered it thirty years ago. The smell which used to waft toward school on the inland breeze was there in his nostrils as if the long-dormant slaughterhouse were still operating, so real, so clear that Clement was forced to consider if the place had been reactivated. But by the time that thought had run, the smell was gone and he knew it was just memory, just a trick like those mornings when he woke and felt certain he heard Marilyn's soft breathing beside him.

The outline of the slaughterhouse showed up ahead, nothing

much more than a flat group of tin sheds. A police car was pulled up at a rusted perimeter fence, the uniforms clambering out. The dark-haired female constable he recognised as di Rivi. Jo? He'd only been there around nine weeks and his retention of names of those in the lower ranks was poor. The uniforms paused and watched his car pull in. He saw puzzlement, suspicion, then, when they identified him, a kind of vague fear that they must have done something wrong.

'Hi, sir.'

It was di Rivi who found the words. The partner, a young guy about her age, was frozen.

Clement put them at ease. 'It's okay, I was on my way in and I heard the call. You're di Rivi?'

'Yes, sir.'

She must have twigged he didn't know her partner's name and indicated him. 'Nathan Restoff.'

The men nodded a greeting. Restoff, slim for a cop up this way, filled him in.

A person from the historical society, a Mr Symonds, had driven out to take a photograph for his 'Old Broome' Facebook page, but had heard sounds inside and what might have been somebody crying in pain. He'd called the station.

While Restoff was talking di Rivi examined the padlocked gate. 'No one got in this way.'

Clement jerked a thumb. 'It's hardly Fort Knox. Let's check the perimeter.'

It took them about three minutes to find an unsecured part of the fence that had probably been used for years as a doorway. Jo di Rivi held up the wire for him to crawl under.

'You armed, sir?'

'No.'

Restoff offered him a taser. He was worried he'd use it incorrectly, look an idiot so he waved it off.

'I'll be right. I'll stay out of it.'

A gaping doorway led into gloom. Restoff and di Rivi approached cautiously and in a firm but calm voice Restoff called, 'It's the police. Anybody there?'

When there was no answer they edged inside. Already Clement was regretting his decision to reject the taser. He couldn't very well follow them now.

Standing outside he heard them call again. Both had torches but

there was enough tin ripped off the roof that they wouldn't need them. Then Clement heard a quiet shuffling footfall which seemed to come from around the corner of the building where he stood. He edged over and peeked. In the middle of what had been a space between this larger shed and a smaller one was mound of dirt, as if a bulldozer had pushed everything into a lazy heap, sand, old brick, rotten wood and wire. The mound was just high enough to prevent him being able to see what might lie behind it. Arming himself with a crumbling half brick, he edged carefully around the heap.

The intruder turned and looked at him with the cold glare of one who has absolutely nothing to lose.

Clement put out his left hand to placate her. 'Easy.'

She was lean, her hair matted, her teeth bared, her wiry tail low but taut. She could have been part dingo, part shepherd, but she was fully alert.

'I'm not going to hurt you.'

His calming words had about the same effect they had on Marilyn. She snarled and sprinted at him and leapt for his throat. Only his years as a very average opening batsman saved Clement. He pivoted inside her arc and swung his right hand, the one holding the half brick. It hit the bitch's head with a crack. The dog dropped at his feet.

Restoff and di Rivi came running, weapons drawn, which only made him feel worse standing over the prone body. What kind of man starts his day by clubbing a starving dog with a brick?

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In what was otherwise a large open-plan space Clement had managed to secure himself one of three discrete offices. The others belonged to his boss, Scott Risely, and Anna Warren, the Assistant Regional Commander. She was on long service leave and rarely in Broome anyway, usually flying between the mining camps and far-flung communities. It was as well Clement was afforded privacy, for three hours on from the abattoir, he still sat staring at his desk. His blow had not killed the dog but it may as well have. It hadn't had much of a life but it had been something, a living organism. Maybe it was a mother trying to fend for her pups and now it had been hauled away to a pound, most likely with a fractured skull. It would be euthanised for sure. And it had all been for nothing. There had been no sign of any other intruder, just that one skinny hound which maybe had uncovered some long-buried cattle bones.

Clement was thirsty. Even in the air-conditioning the heat dried you out. He left his office and headed to the water cooler. The Major Crime section was near deserted. Mal Gross appeared to be taking a statement from an aboriginal couple. It sounded like their place had been burgled. Even paradise has its thieves. Clement drank the cold water. It made his tooth ache and he remembered that was something else he'd been putting off.

'What kind of axe?' Gross was asking.

'You know, for chopping wood,' the man answered, like Gross was an idiot. The woman, who seemed around fifty, slightly younger than her husband, said she thought she heard something Sunday night. Gross made a note. 'We didn't know it was missing till he went to chop wood this morning.'

Stolen tools, bicycles and mobile phones, this was what the crime landscape looked like all the way to the horizon. Clement ditched the plastic cup and headed out the back door to the carpark.

He thought he'd drive to the shops and get some proper food into him but once he was driving he admitted to himself he had no appetite so he kept going, no destination in mind. At some point the car began heading out of town as if of its own will. Around five k on, past the servo, he swung right. Whether he actually recognised these trees he wasn't sure but he definitely felt he did. This grove had been the boundary of his early years, the geographical zone beyond which 'home' became 'elsewhere', or more correctly, as he was heading in the opposite direction right now, where elsewhere became home. Marilyn was happy to overlook the fact he'd grown up here too. Sure his lineage was far less grand, no pearl farm, just the caravan park his mum and dad worked up from scratch but this had been his home for fifteen years. He had almost escaped it.

Almost.

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The bush hadn't changed at all in thirty years but up the road was a different story. The caravan park started by his parents was gone and in its place was an industrial complex: two large pre-fab-type buildings, some sort of muffler centre and several smaller units, spray shops, a tyre place. He pulled in on the crumbling bitumen lip of the road and tried to remember it how it was. This was the first time he'd returned since he'd been back, first time in fact since he'd left all those years ago. His parents now lived in Albany near the southern tip of the state. He'd lost track of friends. There'd been

nothing to pull him back here to the heat and dirt. He wasn't sure exactly why he'd chosen now to visit his heritage location but knew it had something to do with the dog and Phoebe and all the things in his life he'd messed up. From the look of them, the buildings were a decade old. How long after his parents had sold up had the caravan park survived, he wondered? He had expected they would have at least kept the old shower block but he couldn't spy it, not from here. It could be behind the units but he was not inclined to get out for a stroll.

Not for the first time he felt a stranger in what had been his homeland, and he sensed a swell within him to act, to turn the car onto the main road and head south all the way back to Perth. He quelled it easily enough but knew it had not left him anymore than that sour feeling over the dog, knew it would linger and eventually may prove stronger than his ability to resist.

## 2

### JASPER'S CREEK, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

As if exhausted from an arduous day keeping itself aloft and baking the earth below the dull, rusty red of blood, the sun plummeted quickly. This was the way up here, night falling more like a guillotine than a handkerchief. Almost every night for the last thirty years he had gone to sleep alone. He could seek company and usually did, at least for a few hours, normally in a bar, sometimes in a café, very infrequently over dinner at the home of an acquaintance. There had even been the occasional night he had slept with a woman but not for a while now. Human company he had discovered was no longer effective in reducing his sense of being an island. Indeed, the opposite was true. He felt less isolated here on the other side of the world than those last years in his hometown. Solitude was the natural state here. A man could stand silent knowing no other heart was beating within a hundred kilometres. But isolation did not equate to loneliness.

Back then he'd had real friends, not just people you met in a bar, men he had gone to school with, worked with, but especially in their company he had felt a desperate loneliness. It was as if it were his avatar interacting with them while his real self skulked in a dungeon. But, you make your bed, you lie in it ... alone.

His fingertips travelled over his whiskers. If he really willed it he could remember his wife's fingers doing that. She had eventually grown tired of his detachment and struck out for a new life free of the burden of what he had become.

And why had he become that again?

The voice asking him was always there, asking in the same measured tones, dragging him back to smoky bars, leather jackets, a crackling radio somewhere in a corner. Funny, a face could slowly erase over time but not a voice, a voice did not age. He did not offer an answer to the question—what was the point? It was a long time

ago and it was too late now to change anything. All life after forty was regret.

A sound that did not belong to nature pulled him from his contemplation. It was a vehicle somewhere on the other side of the creek, which really wasn't that far away. It was probably twenty metres from his little camp here to the water's edge, and no more than fifty across the span of the creek, so less than a hundred metres all up. As long as they kept to themselves, what did he care?

He set up the small tent with great facility, sat back on the front seat of the car and popped a beer can. Warm, but so what? He was after the faint buzz, not the taste. The creek was still, only shadows created an illusion of movement. He drained the can quickly and tossed it on the floor in back with the others. At the roadhouse he'd bought a cooked chicken. Now he pulled it from its foil wrapper and ripped off a drumstick. Mosquitoes buzzed around him but for some reason they never bothered with him much. There were flies but only a fraction of what there would have been in daylight. He chewed the chicken meat slowly and thought about South America. That was one place he had always wanted to visit. Another failed aspiration, along with a boat trip through Alaska and a hotel romp involving Britt Ekland. His life was a series of joined dots that drew the picture of a fat zero. It was fortunate how things had fallen into place here, remarkable in fact. He had taken a gamble which could have backfired badly but then there was not so much to lose, was there. He had owed money all over Hamburg, HSV were playing like crap, staying there was validation of his failure. Even so, at least he was alive there. His gamble could have cost him that life, miserable as it was. But it had proved the right move. This was where all the tributaries of his life were destined to pool. It was where he would die.

He turned the key far enough to ignite the CD player. Country music, what else for a single man who could no longer lie to himself he was even middle-aged?

He sat for a long time listening to the music, drifting. A memory would constitute itself: his parents, his father's braces worn even at dinner-time. That memory would crumble but reconstitute as another, and another: the street where he grew up, a school friend, a shopkeeper who was particularly generous, a girl he fancied who preferred one of his friends, the game of handball where he broke his little finger. What had become of those whose lives had intersected his? Some would be dead but others might be sitting

in a little flat, or hunched over a campfire on a sweeping plain in Argentina eating roast beef, the strum of a guitar in the background floating over a starry sky like the one above him now. And they might be reflecting on their parents, generous shopkeepers and maybe even him.

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His legs had stiffened by the time he swung back out of the car and pulled the aluminium dinghy, the tinny, off the roof of his old Pajero. Still strong, he enjoyed the weight of the boat on his arms for it confirmed he was real, not just one of his memories. He placed the boat by the muddy bank then dragged the outboard from the back of the Pajero. Fishing and drinking beer, two worthy occupations to pass the time until the next sunset. The proximity of crocodiles did not worry him though he would take no foolish risks. While he had heard stories of crocs flipping over tinnies in the Territory, nobody he knew here had ever witnessed it, and given that men exaggerate any such brush with death, he had to wonder if this absence was proof such things were myth. As he attached the outboard his thoughts meandered back to last night, those two fresh-faced women laughing with him as he spun tales. The young fellows with them were pissed off, he could tell, but that was just the way the world worked. He had what the women wanted, so they'd sat with him and drank his beer and laughed at his stories, genuinely, he believed, for he wasn't one to dissemble. He caught sight of himself in the wing mirror. The last year or so the lines had deepened, the brightness in his eyes had dulled. He was drifting inevitably towards old age and death. Not yet though, there were still beers to drink and fish to catch.

He caught a sound back in the bush towards the track down which he'd driven. He turned the radio right down and strained to hear.

Nothing. Yet he felt it out there, a presence. There were many feral pigs in these parts. He'd shot and eaten more than his fair share. In fact he'd toyed with the idea of sending them back home where boar was a delicacy but then discovered somebody else was already doing that. Whenever he came up with some exciting idea it was inevitable he would discover he was too late. His ears stayed alert for any sound but there was nothing more.

He wrapped his chicken back in the foil and slid it into the tent. He would have it later after a spot of fishing. As he was about to

zip up the tent, he heard something approaching rapidly through scrub from behind and swung around fast. Before he could identify what it was, white sizzled his eyes.

'Who's that?' he said trying to block the torch beam. The answer was something heavy and cold, slicing into his head. His knees hit hard ground, his body throbbed, his head ached yet seemed distant at the same time. Through all this he understood he was being murdered. A voice came from the darkness. The voice from before, as if like the serpent spirit of the aborigines, it had slithered over continents and through years to find him.

Reason told him it was not possible, it could not be the voice, so he must already be dead. Yet the pain was intense and multiplying. Blows rained on his body, he fell to the ground and tried to call out but it was beyond him. Hell, which he had postponed for so long, had taken him to its bosom. The choice he'd made had stalked him as efficiently as any reptile of the deep and was destroying him now. He comprehended in some distant way the absolute rightness of this.

'I'm sorry,' he heard himself gasp but that was a trick of the brain.

He was dead before the thought had moved his tongue.

### 3

The report of shots fired came from some adventurous tourists who had foregone ceiling fans, sachets of hair conditioner, soft sheets and high-priced grog to brave bush, crocs and mosquitoes and thereby experience the True Australia. If he'd ever had any idea what the True Australia was, Clement had long since admitted defeat in capturing it. So far as he could tell, True Australia was Maoris and Sri Lankans singing their lungs out on TV to impress a bunch of overseas judges to win a career singing American songs someplace other than here. True Australia definitely wasn't the front bar of the Picador late on Saturday night. At least he hoped it wasn't. Yet people had it in their heads that drunk losers breaking pool cues over one another's heads was a link in a chain that stretched all the way back to Anzac Cove.

'True Australia.'

He gave a bitter grunt and pushed the accelerator flat. He wished the Net had never been invented. He longed for a return to the days of high-cost air-travel when only the wealthy could afford to see another country. Then these adventurous tourists from Tokyo or Oslo or Rio would never have had a clue about the Kimberley region in the north-west of the Great Southland and he wouldn't have to worry about shots fired and the possibility somebody was illegally taking crocodiles, a job that should have been left to Fisheries or Parks and Wildlife. Unfortunately they were thin on the ground, the call had come to the station and the tourists were probably tweeting now about their 'brush with death'. Somebody had to take the trouble to check it out. He could have left it, but the uniforms were all run off their feet. Hagan and Lalor were still hours inland sorting out the tribal stoush, and di Rivi and Restoff had their hands full processing a grand final party that had got out of hand. As for his fellow detectives, his sergeant, Graeme Earle, was off fishing and

his junior, Josh Shepherd, tied up in court on the domestic violence case so, senior detective or not, he was left to do the dirty work.

As well, that dog yesterday was still at the back of his mind, his tooth continued to flare, and the bloke with the hammer had been at it again before six, none of which helped his disposition. He forced himself to take a deep breath. Phoebe had taken to referring to him as Mr Cranky though he had no doubt the words were her mother's. Marilyn still hadn't forgiven him for transferring here. 'Chasing us' had been the phrase she'd used. Marilyn was angry because she believed he'd made the kind of sacrifice for their daughter he never would have for her. She was probably right but he would always love her, part of him anyway, the part you couldn't explain any more than the part of him that wedged itself between them like a crowbar. And she wasn't snow-white, this wasn't all at his feet. Surprisingly, she hadn't married that turkey, Brian, yet. Maybe Brian hadn't asked or maybe she treated him the same way she'd treated Dan, like he never quite measured up. If her old man had still been alive Clement would have had an ally. Nick might have died a rich pearl farmer but he started as a bloody boat mechanic. Geraldine was the problem, she always had been. She loved to play the Lady of the Manor, and Clement had been the stablehand, never good enough for her daughter. It had taken a dozen years, but Marilyn had eventually synched with her mother on that. Sometimes Clement toyed with the idea she might be having second thoughts, might have at least understood her role in their demise and that's why she hadn't walked down the aisle again.

He had calmed now. This wasn't so bad, getting out of the office and away from petty crap a rookie could handle. The low, dry scrub either side of the road reminded him of those baking hot days when, as a boy, he'd played at being a soldier sliding towards his imagined enemy. Experience had taught him the enemy was generally not where you thought or even who you thought.

The turn-off was up ahead. Australians signposted their roads in the same laconic style they spoke. For a hundred years nobody visited Australia except English cricket teams or Russian circus performers, and no circus performers or cricketers ever bothered to come to places like this. So signs were a waste of time. If you weren't local you wouldn't be here, simple as that. If you weren't local and you were here, you shouldn't be. You were a freak, not the kind of person desired and therefore not to be encouraged by signage.

Many things might have changed but that attitude was buried so deep in the national psyche that it persisted. Unless you knew there was a track about to come up on your left that led down to the waterhole you'd eventually be in Darwin still looking for the non-existent sign that said Jasper's Creek.

But Clement knew.

He braked and turned easily down the wide dirt track. A four-wheel drive was as necessary as insect repellent up here. Clement passed a bullet-riddled Parks and Wildlife sign showing a crocodile and the word DANGER. They couldn't signpost a road but the odd spectacular death by croc had put the wind up the bureaucrats in the Tourism department enough to get every little creek for five hundred k covered. He could see rust around the edges of the bullet holes so he knew they weren't anything to do with the shots reported as coming from here in the early hours. Over the phone the tourists had given him a precise location for where they were when they heard the gunshots so Clement drove towards a waterhole he'd always known as Jasper's. Who the hell Jasper was, nobody had been able to tell him. The waterhole wasn't named on any map, it was too small down in mangrove territory. The bush was denser here, with paperbark, blackboy, even a few big gums. Clement pulled up at the point where the car-trail narrowed.

No matter how long you lived up here you never got used to the dry blast of hot air that hit you the moment you stepped out of air-conditioning. Clement felt it now, that morbid, unfriendly heat. He began walking through bush toward the creek bank. Flies greeted him like a lost king.

Having read up thoroughly about crocs, the tourists had slept on the roof of their camper van for safety. It was a practice Clement didn't recommend. Already since he'd transferred he'd dealt with two incidents of people falling from their perch during the night and cracking bones in the dirt below. One bloke was pissed and had overbalanced. The other had woken up at dawn, forgotten where he was and rolled straight off the roof. Better to scrunch up in your car or move further away from the water. Still, they'd been wise to be cautious. There'd recently been reports of a large croc in the area that had taken a pig-dog.

It took only a few minutes to find the car tracks and the broken scrub from where the tourists had driven out. According to them the shots had come from the west side of the creek but as it was night, they'd seen nothing and simply hightailed it out of there. Clement

didn't blame them. He suspected it was probably a couple of drunk hoons firing at the stars but it could have been some dickhead after a croc. Close to the creek, the trees bent in and leaned over the dark water, boughs sprawled across the muddy bank like a party-goer who'd never made it home. The light was dappled, the smell of rotting weeds and dead wood bringing to mind dragonflies and mosquitoes. Here Clement was extremely careful. Coming out of the bright light into this shadowy grove your eyes took time to adjust and you could literally trip over a big croc lazing in its muddy bed. He made sure the logs near the bank were logs then advanced close enough to be able to look west to the other bank, a distance he estimated might be a swimming pool and a half, say eighty metres. His first scan registered nothing out of the ordinary but when he looked again, he sensed rather than saw something wasn't right. His focus narrowed to a shag levitating above the water but without its wings extended. Closer inspection revealed it was sitting on something curved and silver, the bottom of an upturned tinny. It was in shallow water right near the edge of the opposite bank. Despite the proximity there was no way Clement was swimming across. Foreboding thudded in Clement's chest, not a salvo, not a flurry, just one solid thump. He started around to the other side of the creek.

'Anybody there?'

His words spun around the empty space and slapped him.

No reply.

The bush was thick and spikey through here. Sharp, stiff foliage poked into his neck and the backs of his legs, tangled branches scratched his arms. It was as if the bush was saying, keep away, leave me alone, I don't want you here. Even pushing as quickly as he could it took him a good ten minutes to circumnavigate the creek and get to the opposite side from where he'd started. His position now was about twenty-five metres from the water, in bush but directly in line with the partly submerged tinny. A gap in the foliage surrounding the creek at this point meant there were no trees obstructing his line of sight. He guessed the easy access might be why you'd launch your tinny from here. No outboard motor was visible on the tinny, and alarms bells sounded a fraction louder. Every tinny up here had some kind of motor.

He called out again but heard only the ghost of his own voice. He continued on his arc, shoving his way through a tight screen of bush, sweating like a pig, moving sideways rather than down

to the water because he was after the vehicle that had carried the tinny. About ten metres on, in a small clearing, was an early model Pajero, the driver door open. A low hum turned him around to a one-man tent that looked like somebody had poured a sack of tea over it: bush flies, thousands of them. Off the nearest tree, Clement snapped a small branch and waved its dead leaves around near the tent. The flies scattered long enough for him to recognise they'd been feasting on blood, quite a deal of it from the looks, tacky, not fresh but relatively recent, over the nylon tent and in the dark earth.

Steeling himself, Clement flipped back the tent flap.

Another dense army of flies. Fifty or so launched themselves at his eyes and nostrils, the rest remained undisturbed, clumped on what had once been a cooked chicken. Apart from a sleeping bag, a couple of utensils and plastic drinking cup, nothing else was in the tent. No blood from what he could see. If the blood on the tent was from an animal killed on a hunt, there was no sign of the carcass. His guts tightened fractionally. Something bad had happened to somebody here.

'Hello. Is there anybody here?'

He yelled it as loud as he could but all tone was flattened by the vast emptiness around him. He yelled again. And again. There was no response. He turned his attention to the vehicle, put it at eight to ten years old, small dents in the body and paintwork, scratches spanning a few years. His guess: either bought second-hand in this condition cheap, or the owner was a drinker who preferred to save his money for grog. The roof bore racks for transporting the tinny. Through the back window he could see fishing rods and tackle, a bucket, esky, various crap, old towels and a tarp. Making sure to touch nothing he peered down at the back seat. A pair of wading boots, shoes, three empty cans of VB. He moved to the open driver door and was surprised to find the key in the ignition. Closer inspection showed the lights were switched to on but the car headlights weren't illuminated. He carefully twisted the key in the ignition with as little grip as possible already aware fingerprints might be important.

Not a kick, flat battery his diagnosis. The glove box was open and disturbed. In the crack where the hinges sat was a live cartridge, twenty-two by the looks. There was another on the floor where it might have spilled. No weapon though.

It was looking more and more like a crime-scene. No blood in the car. No obvious sign of more than one person, no women's clothing,

anything like that. Clement slowly circumnavigated the vehicle. A bumper sticker extolled the virtues of Broome Anglers.

Clement used his phone to take photos of the scene and record the car's number plate and odometer setting. A phone burst into life somewhere close by. Generic ringtone. Clement tracked the sound to the dirt a few metres from the edge of the creek. Using his shirt over his fingers, Clement carefully picked up an older model smart phone. Number Withheld flashed on the screen. Clement answered.

'Hello?'

No answer but somebody was on the other end.

'This is Detective Inspector Daniel Clement...'

The line went dead. Clement stared at the phone. His police car was equipped with a computer that would enable him to trace the Pajero plates but to get back to it through the bush was going to take another twenty minutes slog. He scrolled through the phone's last calls. The most recent out was identified as 'Rudi'.

He dialled, using his own phone.

Voicemail. A man, foreign accent, something European. "I'm not available. Leave a message.'

Clement left a brief message asking Rudi to call him. He scrolled to the next entry which was labelled 'AngClub'. Clement had never been inside the Anglers Club but he'd passed it often enough, a small modern brick building at the industrial end of town, so indistinguishable it could as easily have been a public dunny or scout headquarters. Broome was a small town and he doubted there would be more than fifty members of the Anglers. He gave it a try. The phone rang for some time. He was about to give up when a woman answered.

'Anglers.'

'This is Detective Inspector Daniel Clement.' He ran through his spiel. He was at an abandoned vehicle he thought might belong to one of the members. After eliciting the woman's name was Jill he described the car.

'Just a sec,' Jill said. He heard her calling to somebody in the background. She came back on. 'Sounds like Dieter's.'

'Dieter who?'

A further bout of offline consultation was followed by 'Schaffer. Don't ask me how you spell it. Is everything okay?'

That was the question, wasn't it?

Apparently Dieter Schaffer was about sixty-five, retired and unmarried. He generally fished alone. The only number they had

for him was the mobile. He lived way out on Cape Leveque Road somewhere. Jill didn't know who Rudi was. Clement got off the phone and considered his options. His gut said it was a probable crime scene but there could be many explanations for what he'd found. Schaffer could have accidentally shot or cut himself, then called Rudi or some other mate to come get him. Clement rang Derby Hospital, and got Karen who had made it abundantly clear to him several times that there was always a bed ready for him there, with her in it. Karen was late forties and it showed in her face but she had the taut body of a woman half her age.

'You finally asking me out?'

Clement sidestepped.

'You have a Dieter Schaffer there? Sixty-five, German accent, emergency admittance most likely?'

'We got a twenty-something idiot who blew himself up with his barbecue gas-bottle.'

'Anybody admitted with any sort of gunshot or other wound, the last twenty hours?'

'No. And you still haven't answered my first question.'

'I'm not dating.'

'I'm not asking for a date.'

He had to extricate. 'I'll buy you a beer at The Banksia.'

'She's not coming back to you, Dan. Sooner you understand that, the better off you'll be.'

'Thank you, Karen.'

'My pleasure. I'll call you if Mr Schaffer turns up here.'

He'd never slept around on Marilyn. Once or twice he'd kissed women, a greeting or farewell, felt that jolt, knew that if he wanted it anything was on the table but he always pulled back, no matter how bad it was with Marilyn at the time. He was never sure if this was any testament to his morality, he liked to think so, but maybe he just wanted the high ground. It was eighteen months since they'd split. It took him eight months before he slept with another woman and it was strange, not unpleasant, not earth shattering, but like wearing new shoes. He slept with two other women in quick succession and knew he shouldn't compare them to Marilyn but couldn't help it. He resented this weakness in himself. She's not coming back; even if she did, it would be a mistake so you're more the fool for protracting the inevitable. Karen is right, he thought, but she's wrong too. Marilyn and he were a conundrum, a circular square, yet he was still unable to move on with his life. As a

boy he'd been fascinated by the story of Scott of the Antarctic who must have known he was pushing on to his doom. Clement had not meant it to act as a template for his behaviour but sometimes he felt it did.

The buzz of the flies drummed in his ears, the bored or weak ones who couldn't get to the blood were attracted to his sweat.

Clement made his way back to his vehicle through the same unwelcoming bush and the same over-friendly flies. They crawled up your nose and were in the back of your throat before you could blow them back out. En route he tried Graeme Earle. As expected the call went dead. Earle was the kind of bloke who loved this life, fishing, drinking, blue skies, wide open space and malevolent heat. You could never reach him on a rostered day off. Clement didn't rate him highly as a detective but to be fair it wasn't like he was basing this on a great sample. They'd worked assaults, rapes and one tribal spat that turned into attempted murder. Earle's work was solid, he wasn't incompetent. It was more that while this might be a massive region of thousands of ks, the crime garden was very small and there was nowhere to hone real detective skills so they stayed unborn or undeveloped. Earle had lived here fifteen years and in him Clement saw the traits more of a small-town sheriff than a detective. He dialled Shepherd next. The detective constable answered his phone promptly.

'Guilty. Course the beak's given him a slap on the wrist. Three months.'

Shepherd couldn't finish a speech without some complaint. On this occasion Clement sympathised. They'd gone after an inveterate wife-beater. Those cases were hard to get to court and when they got a sentence lighter than a cicada shell you felt you were in the wrong job on the wrong side of the planet. The women looked at you like you were the one who had given them the black eye or split lip.

Clement explained where he was and what he'd found, or rather hadn't. He told Shepherd they'd be setting up a crime scene.

'Bring Jared. And those guys who trapped the Callum Creek crocs. See if they're available.'

He opened his car and risked his bum on the scorching seat. He tapped the Pajero's plates into his computer. Bingo. Dieter Schaffer. DOB 14.04.48. As Jill had warned, the address was a lot number on Cape Leveque Road, a strip of bitumen that ran a hundred k north-south in a wilderness of mainly low scrub. The only phone number

was the mobile he had. He did all this while Shepherd whinged about how hard it was going to be to do each of the tasks set. He ignored him. 'See you soon, Shep.'

Clement called the station and asked Mal Gross if he knew a Dieter Schaffer. Of course he did. Gross knew most everybody in the Kimberley.

'Dieter. They call him "Schultz". Used to be a cop in Germany.'

So far as Gross was aware Schaffer lived alone in what was little more than a bush shack. Gross said he would get a car out there to look over the house but it was a good hundred k so Clement should not expect anything for a while.

Typical.

Clement fought his way back to the locus of his investigation. The missing outboard worried him but he began constructing plausible alternatives to murder-robbery. Dieter could have taken it with him in a mate's car. In fact he could have injured himself on it if the boat capsized. Against that, things about the scene jarred. You could lose your phone in the accident but would you leave keys in the ignition? No, surely even if the battery had already run flat, you'd take the keys. Clement wondered if he should drive out and around to the yet-to-be-pegged crime scene but he was worried about driving over evidence so he was forced to yet again retrace his steps to the other side of the creek. Before leaving he took a swig of water, you could dehydrate fast out here. On the way the flies harassed him again. They bit him this time. He flicked them off as best he could.

Using the tent as the centre of the target, Clement began searching out in bands of about five metres thick. After around thirty minutes he found an area of flattened bush as if a vehicle had recently been there. He estimated it was about sixty metres north-west of the tent and would not have been visible from it. There was a bush track leading out from there, clearly used by vehicles for access. He'd always approached the creek from the eastern side, as the tourists had, but clearly some regular traffic came this way too. He followed the path for another hundred metres calling out Schaffer's name over the incessant insect buzz but received no reply and doubled back.

Gradually he worked his way anti-clockwise around the entire creek. There was the usual kind of litter, chocolate and chip wrappers, plastic bottles, beer cartons. He took photos of everything he encountered. The only piece of recent technology he gave credit

to was a phone with a camera in it. So much easier than logging everything with a biro that wouldn't write on a cheap pad. Karen's comment needled him. It wasn't like he was trying to get back with Marilyn. Was he just terrified of another relationship, the unknown?

The dissolution of their relationship had caught him by surprise even though he supposed it had all the classic pointers. They'd both let it go too far. It was like a DVD on your shelf you look over at every day still in its case, telling yourself tonight was the night you'd watch it. But you never got around to it. There was always something more at hand, more demanding of your time. Until she announced she was leaving, and of course he said that's ridiculous. That's how it starts, he thought, the end. Every grievance is dredged out. Pride flares. He offers to move out, the martyr. And before you know it, what is just bravado, a sympathy play, turns into the real thing and when you drag your sorry arse back and apologise, it's too late, she's 'discovered' herself and how much you've 'inhibited' her.

Back to where he started in more ways than one. His phone rang. Mal Gross. One of his mates had family near Dieter's shack. They'd driven over and taken a gander. Nobody was there. He had di Rivi and Restoff heading there too but he thought the sooner Clement knew, the better. Clement thanked him and looked up to see a swirl of dust announce Shepherd's arrival. Jared Taylor, the aboriginal police aide, was with him towing the trailer on which was mounted an inflatable boat. A tinny was lashed to the roof as back up. Shepherd stepped out wearing the plastic white-framed sunnies Shane Warne had made famous in the late nineties. They looked ridiculous then and worse now. Shepherd was around one eighty-eight centimetres and fit, the build of a centre-half-back, de rigueur tattoos just poking out from under short sleeves. Jared Taylor was shorter with a gut and, at forty, around twelve years older than Shepherd. Unlike Shepherd, he had a sunny disposition. They'd sparred in the ring once as part of Shepherd's training for the annual Kimberley v Gascoyne police comp. Naturally Shepherd fancied himself. Taylor's punches had nearly sent poor Shepherd through the ropes.

'What's the plan, Skip?'

Shepherd's vocabulary reduced everything to a footy match.

'I guess we need to poke around for a body.'

Both of them looked at him, hoping he was joking. They didn't need to mention the croc. If it had overturned one tinny, why not another?

'Let's get to it.'

'Serious?'

'Yeah, Shep. Come on.'

'Shouldn't we wait for the croc blokes?'

'No time for that.'

They lifted the tinny off the roof of the vehicle and walked it to the water's edge, keeping a wary eye. The creek was only shoulder-deep but too muddy to see into. Taylor had thought ahead and brought a couple of thin plastic rigid electrician's tubes, perfect as probes. He stayed on the bank, rifle ready, just in case. The little motor shattered the default static of bush noise. Clement guided the tinny to the far bank near Dieter's upturned tinny, cut the motor and they began probing the waters close to the shore. Gradually they worked their way out.

'Fucking flies,' grumbled Shepherd for the fiftieth time.

About twenty minutes in, Clement's pole struck something just below the surface firmer than mud but too soft to be a rock or tree.

'Pass me the gaff.'

While he held the position, Shepherd passed over one of two gaff hooks. Clement sank it down, let it find purchase and pulled hard. The unmistakable shape of a body broke the surface.