

**THE
RIVER
MOUTH**
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For Joanne and Katie, my sisters.

CHAPTER 1

Sandra

This is what Sandra knows.

She is forty-nine years old and she can see the river mouth from her kitchen.

When the sandbar is open, the river stains the sea brown for as far as she can see.

Ten years ago, her son was killed below the limestone cliffs at the riverbank.

Last week, her best friend's body was found off a remote road in the Pilbara.

Her friend's DNA matches the DNA scraped from under her son's fingernails.

CHAPTER 2

Colin

Twenty-five days before Darren dies

Colin's last class was tech drawing, so he got to the bus stop first. He put his bag next to the stop sign to claim his place at the front of the line and retreated to the basketball court fence to wait in the shade. The bus would be a while. It had to pick up the little kids from the primary school. He watched the other students as they dribbled across the school oval. Some of the first years still thought it was fun to run headlong down the grassed slope from the quadrangle to the ovals. No-one had shamed it out of them yet, at least not the boys. Colin doesn't know how girls work that kind of thing out. He couldn't see them beating each other up but he couldn't see them politely taking each other aside and explaining the rules of high school either. He sniggered as he saw two first year girls run down the slope, lose their balance, and go tumbling, skirts up and pink knickers on show. A group of boys whistled and jeered, and the girls picked themselves up and dashed for the bus stop, laughing and bags flying.

'Look at that ranga!'

The voice came from the opposite direction and Colin turned his head and saw Darren and Tim walking down from the English block, their shirts untucked and their bags dragging halfway down their backs.

'Who let you out of the zoo?' Darren put his fists up and danced at Colin as he approached. He was in a good mood, thought Colin, and then remembered Darren's last class was woodwork. Of course he was in a good mood. Anything that didn't involve putting pen to paper made Darren happy. Colin, taller by five centimetres, took him in a headlock.

'Your mum. She thought you needed some company in the wild.' He rubbed his knuckles into the top of Darren's head. 'Why's your head so small, Daz? You can tell you're descended from monkeys.'

Darren wrestled out of his grasp and punched him in the shoulder for his efforts.

'Ouch,' Colin protested, 'you're strong for a little squirt, aren't you?' He feinted at him and Darren ducked, laughing.

'Stronger than you, ya big orange ape.'

'Says the kid who gets sunburnt watching the telly.'

Darren and Tim took their bags to the line forming behind Colin's and walked back to the basketball fence.

'How's tech drawing?' asked Tim, looking down at his feet, his hands shoved into his pockets.

'Good.' Colin glanced at Tim and saw his face redden. It wasn't the tech drawing he was interested in.

'You gonna ace it again this term?' Darren, this time.

'Yep.'

'Fucking nerd.' He punched him in the arm, just hard enough to feel it.

'Fuck off, Darren.' Colin smiled anyway.

'Did you sit with Amy?' asked Tim, still examining his shoes.

'Yep.'

'Course he did; that's how he gets the marks,' said Darren.

'Yeah, right.'

The boys looked up and fell silent as four girls from their year walked past. Like the boys, they had untucked their shirts from their waistbands after the last bell sounded. As they passed, one of them hooked a finger into the elastic holding her hair and dragged it out, shaking her head. Her white hair fell to her shoulders and Colin caught the sharp smell of chlorine. He blushed and, like Tim, looked down at his feet.

'Want to go down to the river?' he asked, bending down to pick up a stick. He broke it in half and in half again.

'What, now?'

'Yeah.'

'No bathers,' said Tim.

'Go in your shorts.'

'Mum'll be pissed off,' Tim protested.

‘They’ll dry before you get home.’

That was true. It wasn’t summer yet, but the afternoon was hot enough. The river hadn’t broken through since it last rained, and the water level was high enough for bombies off the rope swing. They hadn’t been down there for a swim since last summer. The water would be cool. Colin’s mum worked Wednesdays and expected him to be home to put on dinner, but he’d have time if they were quick.

‘I’ll come,’ said Darren.

The bus arrived and the three boys levered themselves off the fence. Instead of taking their places in line, they waited while the other kids boarded, forcing them to step over their bags. When they got on, they went straight to the back seat. The younger kids knew to leave it free for the year tens and this year the boys didn’t need to defer to any senior school students. The ones from their bus had all left to do year eleven and twelve at private schools in the city. Colin would join them next year. Not Darren and Tim though. They would stay at the local high school.

The bus circled around the school grounds and turned toward the centre of town, passing car yards and the low white government administration building with its rose beds and lawns. A group of pre-school age children splashed barefoot in the shallow ornamental pool while their mothers sat on the grass under a jacaranda tree. Blooms were scattered on the lawn around them. Colin remembered begging to be allowed to play in that pool when he was a little kid and his mother flat out refusing. He wouldn’t be seen dead doing it now. At the traffic lights, the bus turned right into the main street and the boys scooted across the seat to the windows.

‘Oh my God, it’s Mr Johnson.’

‘He’s carrying toilet paper! A twenty pack!’

They hollered out of the window.

‘Well done, Mr Johnson, keep your bum clean!’

Mr Johnson, their maths teacher and local sporting legend, obliged by holding the bagged toilet rolls above his head in both hands and doing a victory lap around himself.

‘You boys settle down back there.’ The bus driver eyeballed them in the rear-view mirror.

‘Yes Mr Stevens,’ they chorused. The bus reached the end of the main street and they dropped back in the seat to watch the windsurfers in

the bay. The southerly was pumping, and the blue water was washed out with white caps. Bulk carriers anchored out near the horizon. Colin could see three sails scudding in and out from the shore. He turned to Tim.

‘Did you see Johnno in the paper on the weekend?’

Tim tore his eyes from the water, where a windsurfer had just stacked it attempting an aerial turn. He blinked before answering. ‘No, what’s he done now?’

‘He won some state title for windsurfing.’

‘Cool.’

‘I thought he was Amy’s swimming coach,’ said Darren.

‘Swimming, windsurfing. He’s in the gun club with Dad too,’ said Colin.

‘What else is he going to do around here?’ said Tim, sinking further into the seat and stretching his legs down the aisle. ‘You can play sport, or play sport, or, I dunno, how about play sport. You might as well mix it up.’

The bus passed the fish and chip shop and the tennis courts, and bumped over the Wey River bridge. Tim led them down the aisle to the front door. The bus driver frowned at them.

‘You know you’re not supposed to stand up until the bus has come to a complete stop, boys.’

‘Sorry, Mr Stevens,’ said Tim.

The driver shook his head at Colin, who was the last to get off. Colin grinned at him and the driver reached across to swat the side of his head, a smile on his lips. Colin ducked and they both laughed as he swung off the bus.

‘Tell your dad I want to see you at the club on the weekend.’

‘Will do, Mr Stevens,’ he replied. Mr Stevens was president of his dad’s running club. His determination to get Colin to join was a standing joke. Wiry, and getting tall with it, Colin had an easy gait that ate up the ground. Mr Stevens wanted him to compete in the next regional competition, but Colin preferred team sports where he could hang out with his mates.

The boys shouldered their bags and walked back toward the bridge. Road trains thundered past them on the highway and they didn’t speak until they turned down the road that ran along the river to the beach.

‘So, are we swimming or not?’ asked Darren.

‘Not me,’ Tim replied. ‘Bring your boardies tomorrow. We’ll all go after school.’ Tim turned to cut across the vacant block and into his street. ‘See you round.’

Colin looked up at the sky and shrugged, now indifferent. ‘Nah, it’s getting a bit windy now.’ He felt Darren slump next to him and felt bad. He knew he was thinking Colin had backed out because Tim wasn’t coming. They walked in silence toward Darren’s house, shunning the new footpath on the other side of the road to walk on the grassed verges. They crested the last ridge before the beach and stopped, looking out at the sea and the choppy waves.

‘Dad said I could take the tinnie out on the weekend if the wind dies down,’ said Darren. ‘Do you want to come? Saturday morning. Early.’

‘Where are you gonna go?’

‘Other end of the reef. Maybe up to North Point a bit.’

‘Sure.’ It would make up for him not going swimming this afternoon.

‘Cool. See you tomorrow.’

Darren shot him a grin before he walked up to the front door of his house and pushed it open, a swagger in his hips. Through the open door, Colin could hear Darren’s dad calling to his mum.

‘Sandra! We’re out of milk.’

Colin continued down the road. He didn’t have to come this way to get home from school. He could have crossed back over the bridge and walked down the track on the south side of the river. It would take him straight down to his house but could get muddy if the water was high. This route took him across the sandbar at the river mouth to get home, which was hard going with a heavy school bag, but it meant he got to walk with Darren and Tim for a bit and there was always the possibility of stopping off for a while if none of them had been told to go straight home. Colin reached the beach, thought for a moment, then bent down, and took off his shoes. It was easier to go barefoot across the sand.

CHAPTER 3

Sandra

The two officers are Sandra's age. They stand side by side at the front door, the hard light of the afternoon behind them and the wind from the sea making their shirt sleeves flap. Their presence makes time stop and Sandra stands there, unmoving, taking them in while the south-westerly rattles down her hallway making the vertical blinds at the back of the house clatter. Her brain all at once is tired and she doesn't want to think about why they are at her door again after all these years. She can see from the way they stand there looking back at her that they share her weariness, the legacy of long working lives of patching up and admonishing the broken and the bad among them. Younger people – people at the start of their careers – stand taller, she thinks, unbowed by the burdens they have yet to carry, or even realise are in front of them. She looks over the officers' shoulders at the sea. It is choppy under the wind and the swell has picked up. Despite the hard-blue sky overhead, a bank of cloud has formed on the horizon. There is a cold front forecast. She pulls her cardigan tighter around her and, without speaking, stands aside and motions for them to come in.

Out of the wind and under the indoor light where they are not backlit by the sun, Sandra realises she knows one of the officers from high school. He was in the year above her and played in the school football team. As a teenager he'd matured early, she remembers, and came back from the summer holidays in year ten with a man's thighs and a head taller than his classmates. He was the first year ten to play in the Country Week team and everyone said the state league teams had their eye on him. He dated her friend's older sister, which at the time ruffled feathers among the parents. Sandra remembers the school ball photo at her friend's house and the dress her sister wore. It had a high

lace collar around her throat, which Sandra coveted to the point of pain. She asked her mum if she could have one for her own ball but by the next year fashions had changed, and they couldn't find one the same. She settled for leg of mutton sleeves and lace gloves. The police officer – his name is Keith, she remembers now – is thicker around the waist than when he played football, but he has avoided the tight, hard belly of most working-class men of his age. His hair and skin are dark, and her memory flashes with the name they used to call him on the playing field. You wouldn't get away with calling someone that now. He asks if they can sit and she realises she hasn't said a word to them yet.

'Of course.'

She leads them to the couches by the back windows and watches them take in the garden and the shed that spans the width of the block. The shed dominates. It is too big for a suburban home, and these days mostly empty. Sandra has tried to mask it from the house with bushes and garden beds but there is no denying its glum, industrial presence. Keith, she realises, must already be familiar with her shed; he would've been there, back in the day. She turns away from it, goes back into the kitchen and returns with a jug of cold water from the fridge. She pours for both men, sliding the glasses across the table and leaving two trails of condensation.

Keith tells her Barbara Russell's body has been found out in the bush, near Wittenoom in the Pilbara. It was only one hundred metres from her car. She had broken down and wandered off. Two local kids found the body.

Sandra feels her face sink. Her cheeks hollow and her jaw tightens. Her thoughts go everywhere and nowhere, and she bites her lower lip against the tingling. She is conscious that the second officer is watching her reaction. She doesn't know him; he must have been posted up here just recently. Working in the hospital emergency department, she gets to know all the local police after a while, and she hasn't met this one yet. Now she can see his face, she realises he is younger than she first thought, maybe early thirties. Ten years older than her son would have been, at most. She does know Barbara, though. She has known her for years, since Barbara and Stuart moved up from Perth. She was her best friend.

The emptiness in her face tracks down through her neck and into

her chest and she gasps to refill her lungs. With the air comes the first prickle of tears and she blinks hard to push them away. She feels numb and so very tired. She could, she thinks, put her head down on the couch and fall asleep, block out the two officers and their awful message.

Keith is explaining that Barbara had been missing for three days. Keith did go to the state league in the end, Sandra remembers, and played three seasons before he joined the police service and returned home, injured and unimpressed with city life. She thinks he still umpires for the local league. She can't recall if he ever married. She figures he is the one doing the talking because he is supposed to have the local connection. It is usual, Keith says, for the coroner to investigate and take a DNA sample in missing persons cases. Sandra nods and tries to focus. She hadn't known Barbara was missing, although she wouldn't expect to after three days. Barbara had been promoted to area coordinator and then district manager over the last five years and Sandra no longer saw her every day on the wards. She knew, of course, that Barbara had been away this week. They had been discussing the trip for six months now. Barbara was nervous, which was understandable. It seems reasonable under the circumstances, she thinks, that the coroner would be involved, but she doesn't understand why the police are telling her.

'We ran the sample through the database and got a match,' he says.

She nods again, trying to make sense of what he is saying. Then her brain clicks over, and she feels her heart thud. A buzzing starts up in her head. Her throat tightens again, this time against the bile rising up from her stomach and she wishes she had brought a glass of water for herself. The urge to lie down and close her eyes is overwhelming.

'Mrs Russell's DNA is a match with the DNA under Darren's fingernails.'

Sandra looks him. Keith is looking back at her with a face she can't read. His expression is too neutral to call apologetic, and too kind to call impassive. His face is just there. She supposes that is what they teach them in the academy. Stick to the facts. Keep it professional. Don't show emotion. She wonders what it is like for him, to come into her home and give such horrible news. At least he is not telling her that her son is dead. Another police officer did that ten years ago. In the scheme of things, she guesses today's chore is easy. She looks

down at her hands. They are still and polite, folded in her lap. Her heart is hammering. She sees Barbara as she was that day, standing outside the nursing home, her bag over her arm, sweating in the heat and eyes dark with anxiety.

‘What does this mean for the investigation?’ she asks him. ‘I mean, I know the case is not active, but ...’ She trails off, no longer familiar with the jargon and not knowing what words to use.

Keith steps in. ‘We will review the case file, look at her movements on the day, probably interview a few people.’

‘But finding Barbara’s DNA doesn’t mean she did it. The shooter would have been a hundred metres away. You can’t scratch someone from a distance.’ Sandra frowns as she tries to gather all her thoughts back to her. They won’t come together. Everything is flying away.

‘No, it is not conclusive, but it does raise questions. We’ll need to reopen the investigation, I’m afraid, Mrs Davies,’ he says. ‘I’ll keep you in the loop and let you know if anything comes up.’ He passes her a business card. ‘Please call me if you have any questions.’

The two men stand to leave. Keith drains his water and puts the glass on the sideboard next to a photo of father and son. They are standing on the wharf in front of the boat.

‘Good-looking kid,’ he says. ‘Do you see much of Greg?’

She tries to group her mind together for a smile but only half manages and feels herself grimace instead. People expect acrimony when it comes to her and Greg. She supposes it will all start again now. ‘I do, yes. He’s doing well.’

Keith smiles back at her, gently sympathetic. ‘Good to hear.’ As his partner walks down the hallway, he looks out at the yard, squinting as though he is trying to picture a scene one thousand kilometres away. ‘You wouldn’t have any idea what Mrs Russell was doing in the Pilbara, would you?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘No idea at all.’

‘It’s just she was supposed to be at a conference in the city.’ He looks back at the photos on the wall. ‘At least, that’s what her husband thought.’

Sandra stands at the front door as the police car backs out of the driveway. She lifts her hand as it heads down the road, away from the beach. Back inside the house, she pulls her mobile phone out of her pocket and dials a Pilbara number, looking out to sea as she waits for

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the other end to pick up. Her fingers tap on the rim of the photo and she glances down at it. Keith is right; he was a good-looking kid, in his own way.