1

Driving up the hill near the back of their property, I can't help thinking about the many years I've spent heading up and down these quiet bush roads, visiting Alice, Crow and the kids, and how strange it will be to stay down there now that she's gone.

None of us handled Alice's death very well. Crow's been the most peculiar, but that's understandable. I'd have thought he'd turn to his friends, though; keep us close. I've heard him mention her death in interviews, and there was everything that came up during the police investigation, but he's never spoken about any of it with me. The past – myself included – has been shed like old skin. He's made it difficult to visit, always coming up with excuses, saying how busy he is. But he knows this will be the last time I'm able to get down for a while. Plus, I don't want to shy away any longer, which is what I've been doing, happy to go along with his recalcitrance.

The moon is not yet visible in the sky; I can't see more than a metre off the side of the road, just the poa grasses lining the edge of the dirt and the palsied limbs of the stringybarks jutting overhead,

bleached white in the headlights. Just like that night. I'd driven in the back way so missed all the traffic that would have been hurtling back and forth along their street. Horrific to think of me careering along, unwittingly, towards them: music blaring, a stubby of cider wedged between my knees.

I've just gone over the rise and down to hit their street. It was about here, about to turn right onto their road, that I first noticed anything. It looked like small snowflakes feathering down from the sky, but not many of them; not enough to cause alarm.

Something jumps out up ahead – my foot slams on the brake. Out of the blackness, and straight in front of my car's glare, appear a mob – no, a family – of grey kangaroos. The mum, strong but slight, stands side-on, turning her head to stare accusingly at me from the middle of the road, indifferent to the screech of my tyres. She turns, unhurriedly, and hops away, her tweens dutifully following. My car's stalled. I sit and watch them bound silently along the road in my spotlight, across the T-intersection, and into the bush on the other side of the road. Thank God, I say and close my eyes. I'm in no state to be hitting a roo.

It must have taken a couple of hours for them to put the fire out. Once the water pumps had been switched off, the quiet of the night was frightening. The other onlookers had left by that stage, and slowly, sometime after, sound returned: the trilling crickets and marsh frogs, the *roh-roh* of a barking owl, the police talking as they cordoned off the area, and the firefighters packing up to leave.

I start the ignition and crawl along so slowly that I can hear the crunch of gravel under my tyres.

It will be a year next week. I was driving down on a night just like this: the air the same viscid warmth as my skin, the sweet straw and dung reek of the earth, and the trees, still like cutouts against an unsuspecting deep violet sky.

I think about that night often. I dream about it too, always waking with the same feeling, irrational as I know it to be: that I could have done something. That it was, somehow, all my fault.

2

It's hard to get the measure of the house when I drive up in the darkness. The driveway is the same, with some new growth – leggy acacias, a brilliant olive green under the car's high beam – sprouting up where the old ones have been felled, a few blackened trunks visible in the mix. The front light is on, and I can make out an igloo-type building, rendered in the same mustard brown as the road. My first thought is that it looks like some crazy minority religion headquarters from an American Midwest desert. I helped construct these walls, filled the chicken wire with tyres and all manner of rubbish. But that was not long after Alice died, and it had felt like a kind of macabre art therapy. And now here it is, Crow's new house. I don't think I was prepared for the shock of seeing it here at the end of the driveway. Back to the present, Lara. Move on.

Crow is already standing at the front door with hands in his pockets, head to one side. As I waddle towards him he smiles, amused, then leans in to give me a hug. It's uncomfortable, the pressure of him on my abdomen, the jar of bones against organs, pushing up into my

lungs. 'Ha,' he says, 'the ol' A-frame.' He relaxes for a moment then gives me another squeeze, his cheek resting on my head, then slowly exhales. 'It's good to see you, Lars,' he says, then grabs my bag, ushers me inside and closes the door behind us.

He puts down my bag and walks towards the kitchen area, switches on the kettle then pulls out two beers. 'You drinking?'

The kitchen is just a few water pipes, exposed within the chicken-wire walls, and a sink that runs into a bucket – with some vintage cupboards, an old benchtop oven and gas burners on a trestle table, and a large butchers' block.

'I said, you drinking?'

'Have you got a light?'

He scoffs. 'Me? Just drink half.' He pops a beer and lands it on the bench next to me.

'So. Look at *you*!' He grins. 'Yummy mummy!'

I smile, knowing this not to be true. I'm fluid-filled and puffy. I walk like a penguin and look like I'm about to birth triplets. But of course, Crow's looking good – always does. It's jarring next to my transformation. He has one of those rugged Irish faces and rangy builds that age well. His hair is a little longer, nearing shoulder length; he's always been proud of his thick black locks, with not a grey in sight. And his eyes remain a shrill blue, almost unnerving in their clarity. Dorian Gray, we used to call him.

'Well, what do you think?' he says, waving his hand about. 'Impressive, isn't it? See what I mean I've been busy?' He gives me a long gaze and one of those toying smiles of his – hitching up one side

of his mouth – making his brusqueness seem playful.

Adjoining the kitchen area is a living room, a circular space with a cushioned pit in the centre. There's a Moorish influence: the round rooms, arched doorways, curved rendered walls and domed ceilings; also the deep blues, greens and maroons of the tapestry saddlebags, and of the glass bottles he's embedded into the walls. I feel as though I'll look outside in the morning to see camels sauntering by on the sand, rather than the smoky blue-green of the bush.

'It's beautiful,' I have to admit. But she's not here and there's nothing of their old house. Nothing for my eyes to rest upon – no 'ah yes, *that*' – the soothing furnishings of the familiar. And yet there's Crow, at the bench, drinking a beer, pointing to the door behind which their three children lie sleeping.

'Alice would love it,' I say, stumbling with my tenses. I don't know why I say this: nerves, struggling to be polite. I'm not even entirely sure it's true.

He presses his lips together for a moment, takes his time. 'Yeah, well, it was for her.' He crosses his arms then uncrosses them, rubs the bridge of his nose. 'It was always going to be for her. All of it was.'

A moment passes before I remember what to say. 'So show me around!'

Crow hands me my beer, then walks from the bench, his free hand brushing the air like a tour guide, pointing out various features and acquisitions – a pair of Tibetan prayer bells and an Eocene fossilised bird feather that were sent to him by sympathetic fans. Naturally, Crow is filling the house with his fancy fittings before finishing off

the necessities. Despite there being no proper oven or stove, there's a metre-long French iron pot rack, which he tells me he bought at a local auction, leaning against a wall and almost obstructing the way to the back door.

After going from room to room – poking our heads into the darkness where the kids sleep – we return to the pit and sit with our beers. Crow reclines with his arms resting along the top of the cushions, his feet elevated on a black-and-white leather ottoman. He grins. 'So I've run out of money. But did I tell you? I've got an admirer who's going to help me out.'

I shake my head as I take a sip. He hasn't asked me about the birth, the mental-health series I've just finished post-production on, Christian. And Alice – he hasn't spoken about her either.

'Thinks my contribution to music and modern architecture makes me a good recipient for her excess cashflow. So she's funding the album I've got coming out in April.'

'Great news.'

'I'll let you have a sneak preview.'

He gets up to fetch another beer for himself and switches the kettle on for me; returns, puts his beer down on the slab table in front of us, along with his rolling tobacco, then gets his guitar. I think about saying something, asking how the kids are coping without her, but I'm too tired. Easier to let him talk.

'In fact, you can be one of the first to hear my new song.' He sits down and starts picking at the strings. It's a new tune but the same old Crow, with his rasping lilt and the familiar modulations, achingly

simple and sad. I've read about studies that have used MRI scans to show that evocative music maps onto the same part of the brain as salient memory, creating a kind of soundtrack for parts of your life. That's what it feels like when Crow sings.

He finishes his song, lays his guitar next to him on the couch. 'Might roll a spliff.' He looks over at me, hands on thighs, about to get up. 'Oh Jesus, should have known. Invite a pregnant woman into your house, of course there's going to be tears.' He shifts over to sit next to me, puts his arm around my back, pulling me in.

'I just think about her all the time. I think about what happened.' I wipe away tears with my sleeve. 'I still can't believe it. And I can't help feeling, y'know – I just wonder if I could have—' I stop, remembering that I've never told Crow what happened between Alice and me, that last time she came to visit. His arm stiffens then drops to the couch. 'I don't know, just – been a better friend.'

He leans forward to put his elbows on his knees then shifts away a little so he can turn to face me. 'Lara. She was really unwell, you know that. I mean, you can ask her doctor. You heard about the toxicology report, yeah? She was off her bloody nut. Jesus, I can show you the coroner's report if you like, it's all there.'

'I know, I just,' I pause, thrown by his mention of the coroner's report. It hadn't occurred to me until now that there would be one. The silky smooth scar tissue from that time. And my immediate thought: *Am I in it?* 'I just keep thinking about it ...'

He doesn't respond, just looks off to the side.

'Don't you?'

He flicks his gaze back towards me, head cocked, squinting. 'What do you bloody well think?'

'I'm sorry.' I dry my face with my sleeve.

He stands and walks to the old kitchen dresser against the wall behind me, opens a drawer.

'I'm really sorry,' I say again as I stand. 'Hormones. And I'm tired, really tired.'

He's walking back towards the pit, holding the vintage Log Cabin tobacco tin he's always kept his pot in, and I'm just standing there, awkwardly, unsure whether to kiss him goodnight, or even how pleased he is to have me here. I put my arm around him, burying my head low, and give him a light squeeze. 'Goodnight.'

'You probably needed to get that out.' He lets me go, then goes to the door and picks up my bags. 'You can sleep in Caleb's room.'