

After The Deluge

1

A grey and black cat huddled, terrified, on a support beam under the old rowing club built upon the bank of the McDermott River. The town of Clarkston's flood levee had just been breached, and the height of the river had grown by several meters within minutes. To the right of the trapped cat, an old, dilapidated lounge, several mismatched, broken chairs, and twenty or so years of rubbish, joined the procession of debris flowing south. The only resistance to the relentless storm surge was an old storage shed unused for almost two decades. However, that too began to buckle and bend under the weight and speed of the raging torrent.

Above, inside the condemned building, two houseless men — previously lulled to sleep by the relentless rain and toxins of choice — were jolted awake by the sudden thud of a falling tree as it crashed into one of the rotting pylons embedded into the slanted, softening riverbank. The two dishevelled men stumbled to a window, hoping to identify the cause of the disruption to their night's sleep. However, the impenetrable darkness of this egregious night concealed the perils that soon would lay bare the misdeeds of *this* unsuspecting town.

The taller of the two looked at his smaller but just-as-gaunt friend and frowned. "Can't see a dam thing!"

"Time to leave, Jack?"

A fire engine siren filtered through the deafening din, drawing the men's attention to the semi-attached large front doors. Jack looked down at his companion, then to his

left, where several other men slept amongst the wavering, silhouetted light cast by several half-burnt candles. “Yeah, might be flooded in by morn.”

Suddenly, one corner of the large building dropped several inches, knocking the two men off balance.

“Shit,” the smaller man said. “Let’s get the fuck out-a-here.”

Jack glanced at his frightened companion, then to the others woken by the sudden jolt. “Everybody out... now!”

By the time he made it to the door, all but one remained: Eric Whitmore, a man barely into his thirties, lay in the corner staring at the wall. He was of average height, with thinning black hair, pale skin with a grey hue like a city building stained by exhaust fumes, and, beneath his dirty T-shirt and oversized track pants, a frame sculptured by a decade living on the streets. Eric knew the building would soon be gone, but at that moment, he wasn’t scared. A life of abuse, a life of drugs and alcohol, and a life of a semi-diagnosed mental illness have inevitably led him to this moment: a short moment to decide if his time on this earth is over; a decision twenty years in the making.

He looked to the shadows dancing across the wall as though they were remnants from terrible moments that happened to him and others in and under this very building: a shadow-puppet show re-enacting a shared but terrible unspoken past. During his first year at high school, Eric could see the pain reflected in the eyes of others; those who, too, were irrevocably changed by men who couldn’t see past their own desires. He understood that there was something fundamentally wrong with these so-called fathers, brothers, sons; something missing. Something that allowed them to rationalise their behaviour, even though society — rectitude — told them otherwise. There were moments when he felt sorry for them. Maybe they had no choice; they were born that way. But those moments were fleeting. Just like the moments when he didn’t feel revolting or unworthy of happiness. His compassion, smothered by the angry voice of a long-forgotten child: they don’t deserve your compassion; humans can choose; that’s what makes us different from all other desire-driven animals.

The building rocked once more.

He closed his eyes and waited.

Maybe he should go down with this building! Perhaps the water will wash away all the terrible moments from his soul as he takes his last breath. And he will finally be

happy. One moment of contentment; a moment he's been seeking since his mother first dropped him out the front of this very building.

The opposite corner from where he lay dropped further into the water, extinguishing the last of the candles giving off light.

He was glad he couldn't see; darkness is what he deserves.

Eric heard the grind of a cigarette lighter, then felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Now's not the time, Eric," Jack pleaded, holding a short, relit candle. "Tomorrow could be a better day."

For a moment, Eric just stared into the eyes of his friend of convenience.

"Don't make me come with you." Jack held out his hand. "Trust me. You still have a purpose."

Part of him wanted to roll over and face the other way, but instead, he reached up and took his hand.

"That's the spirit."

The moment they stepped out the door, the back wall of the large hall disappeared into the darkness, barely making a sound amongst the torrential rain and thundering river. Two further steps, and the roof joined the floor in the quick descent into the fast-moving waters. And before they made it to the corner, all that remained were a few pylons and the now-damaged cement slab where the storage shed once stood; Nature, slamming the gavel down on the ongoing local debate about whether to demolish or restore the historic but invisibly scarred old building.

Five minutes after the last of the exiled men disappeared into the darkened streets of Clarkston, the State Emergency Service (SES) siren echoed around the town, waking those residents lulled into a deep sleep by the relentless rain, warning them that they didn't have much time before their business centre would be completely underwater. And although the people of this large Northern New South Wales town were once accustomed to the almost biannual flood event, the previous decade of low rainfall and drought had made them complacent: unprepared for the *unnatural* natural disaster coming their way.

The town's shopping district — barely twenty meters from where the rowing club once stood, and withstood, for the past fifty or so years — quickly filled with bleary-eyed business owners and employees dragged from their slumber by distressed calls for help. Joined by friends and neighbours, they desperately tried to get their merchandise and valuable equipment to known safe, dry levels.

However, in the days to come, the residents of Clarkston will find out that no matter how high they stored their valuables, nothing will survive the hungry, unrelenting torrent sent to them by their *unforgiving* and *vengeful* god.

Eric slipped away from the other displaced men and returned to the corner and stood under the awning of a bookstore, staring towards the missing rowing club, just as another siren rang out. He knew the second siren meant the insatiable river would soon swallow the town's centre. He watched as the inexperienced or desperate continued to try to save their possessions until they were reluctantly dragged away by apologetic SES personnel.

The soft touch of Jack's hand on his shoulder barely registered.

“Don't worry, we'll find a better place to sleep.”

Eric didn't reply. He just turned away from the desperation with the ghosts of his past following..., whispering..., taunting, closely behind.

2

On the opposite side of town, out of reach of the relentless, rising river, Nathan Turner woke in a single bed with the dreadful memories from his early teenage years slowly fading into the sound of heavy rain on his mother's corrugated iron roof. The thirty-five-year-old recently widowed reporter had only moved back to his childhood home from Brisbane the week before. It's not as though he planned to return to his hometown; however, his choices were limited: the death of his wife, being fired from a major newspaper for multiple disciplinary violations, and the expulsion from his 2-bedroom apartment for not paying his rent had forced him to re-evaluate his life and return to the place he had worked so hard to escape.

His energetic, ever-young, sixty-five-year-old mother knocked gently on his childhood bedroom door, then slowly opened it. "Would you like eggs for breakfast?"

For a moment, Nathan just looked into the dark brown eyes of his petite and well-groomed mother and refrained from saying that he could get his own breakfast.

I won't be staying long, He thought. I only need a few weeks to work out my next move, so I would appreciate it if you would leave me the-fuck-alone to think.

"Yes, Mum, that would be great."

"It will be ready in five." Nellie Turner turned, heading back to the kitchen. "And someone named Felix called. He said it was urgent. I left his number on the counter next to the phone."

The moment the door closed, Nathan pulled the pillow out from under his head, then covered his face, while dozens of *creepy* porcelain dolls stared at him from every flat surface of his once-stylish room, accusing him of being a failure: a failure to his chosen career, and a failure to his deceased wife.

The ever-present thoughts of his dead wife forced the memories of his missing childhood friend back into the dark recesses of his mind. At first, he couldn't understand what Sara was doing over in Bowen Hills near the Royal Brisbane hospital when she was crushed inside her car by a falling tree during a wild out-of-season thunderstorm. It made

no sense to Nathan. Any sign of a thunderstorm, and she wouldn't leave the apartment or her office in the city where she was a paralegal. At home during a storm, she would shut herself inside their bedroom with the blinds drawn until the last sounds of the storm faded over the horizon. It didn't take an investigative reporter to work out that her disproportionate fear came from her childhood living in Townsville, Northern Queensland, where regular summer storms and cyclones had left their mark. The death of a childhood friend during one of those cyclones was most likely the origin, but Sara refused to talk about it. After the first time Nathan witnessed her inconsolable anxiety as a storm approached, he tried to get her to see a psychologist. Maybe they could give her something to calm her nerves. After all, they do it for dogs.

The last comment just made Sara angry; apparently, comparing her to a dog wasn't one of his greatest loving moments.

The memory of the last time he found her, huddled, shivering in the closet, made him both happy and sad. Did she somehow know what was going to happen, at least on a subconscious level? Or was it just a cruel twist of fate?

In the months after her death, he thought he was doing okay with his grief. After only a month, he was back at work investigating the potential fraud by a prominent businessman, doing his best to get his life back on track. Considering there were no children to care for, he soon slipped into single life. At times, he wondered whether the end of his relationship due to Sara's death was better than the fallout from a messy divorce, at least in the long term. Before they got married, they decided that for the first ten or so years, they would concentrate on their respective careers until they were financially secure before having children. That was twelve years ago. Before her death, Sara was back studying to become a full-fledged lawyer. Over the last decade working in the industry, her ambition had only grown. And although they occasionally discussed children, Nathan never pushed her because his career was going exceptionally well, and having children wasn't something he thought would fit with his erratic hours. However, in the months before Sara died, he began to feel the pull of fatherhood. Or maybe it was just the desire to prove to himself that he could be a better father than his own. During those moments, he wondered whether it was too late; whether they had grown too far apart.

And it was those very thoughts that drove him to apply for access to Sara's private email accounts. Maybe she had the same feelings and shared them with her friends? Either way, he wanted to know before putting that part of his life behind him.

The approval from her service provider took a few months.

Most of the correspondence he received was with her family, friends, or related to her university studies: notes and conversations with her project partners Cc'd to her private email account for backup. However, he was ill-prepared for the moment when he opened the email titled 'Follow-up Care' from a Brisbane abortion and contraception clinic in Bowen Hills. He can't be sure if he would have agreed to the abortion — he was in a different frame of mind back then — but in those moments after he first read the pamphlet, he shifted between feelings of intense hatred towards her for killing his unborn child, to the guilt for being the reason she was out in the storm alone. And in the weeks and months that followed, Nathan blamed himself for putting his career before their relationship. Maybe if he were more attentive instead of chasing the next story — there was always another story — she would have spoken to him and wouldn't have been out in the storm alone. He spent a month locked up in the apartment, trying to understand his wife's mindset: maybe, she thought he wanted to have children and that's why she did it in secret; maybe, she believed a baby would ruin her chance of becoming a lawyer; maybe, she thought he was too self-centred to be a father; maybe, she just didn't want to have a baby with him.

Or maybe the baby wasn't his!

Before he knew it, he was weeks behind in the rent, and his boss had given him an ultimatum at work. Although he forced himself back into the office, his apathy caused his dismissal barely three months later.

"Hurry up, Nathan. Your eggs are almost ready."

The image of his editor came to him as he rolled out of bed. Why would Felix Davenport be calling him only a few weeks after firing him? The last time they spoke, the cranky old bastard said he didn't want to see his ugly face in the building ever again. Nathan didn't take the insult personally, especially since he hadn't shared the reason for the depth of his grief. Felix may have been more compassionate if he knew, but Nathan had trouble verbalising it. He hadn't even told his mother until he got home. And even then, he just handed her the clinic's bill and walked away.

The words just wouldn't come.

Maybe he just wants his stapler back.

Nathan grabbed his neatly folded clothes from the drawer — with numerous pairs of unmoving eyes warning him to thank his mother for doing his laundry, or they would jump down from the dressing table and stab him to death in his sleep — then headed for the shower. He had to resist the urge to turn the army of sadistic dolls around so they stared at the wall, but he knew his mother would have a fit. He had already been warned every day for the past week that if he touched them, he would be put across her knee. He laughed the first time she said it, but the glare he received in return soon took his smile away. He considered asking if she would move them to his older sister's room, but one glance in there quashed that idea: another larger regiment lay in wait for their turn on the front line.

When Nathan entered the kitchen, Nellie had her mobile phone to her ear.

"I've got to go," she said as she glanced at Nathan. "My son wants his breakfast. I will call you this evening to see how you go."

Nathan looked from his mother's short, subtly styled, grey-dyed hair to the suspected guilt in her eyes. "New boyfriend?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Just talking to one of my *many* friends."

Something told him there was more to it, but he just rolled his eyes, then looked through the blurry kitchen window. "It's going to be a big one."

Nellie followed his gaze. "They're saying '74 will look like a fishpond in comparison. Everything in town is already lost."

Although the 1974 flood happened before Nathan was born, everyone who has lived in the area for more than a few months has heard about the *biggest flood in history*. The local old-timers talk as though Noah himself rowed by to pick up a couple of kangaroos on the way to Mount Ararat. After that year, all the flood depth indicators had to be replaced. Some locals still regard anyone who moved to Clarkston after '74 as tourists.

Perhaps, Nathan thought, after this flood, everyone will be considered locals, even those tolerated only for their desirable cuisine....

He pulled out the same kitchen chair he sat on every day as a child. “What are they predicting?”

Nellie walked to the end of the bench, then turned on the same radio she had listened to for the past thirty years. “They haven’t committed to a height yet, but it’s expected to eclipse 74 by ten this morning.”

“Crap,” he replied as his gaze shifted back to the window. “And it’s still pouring.”

“It’s up to God now,” Nellie said as she made the sign of the cross. “Many will need our prayers.”

The ritual blessing brought Nathan’s teenage years back to mind, along with the terrible feelings from the dreams that recently replaced the just-as-terrible dreams of his dead wife. Until his 2nd year at the local catholic high school, his life had been typical. Just like generations of boys who had grown up in Clarkston before him, he had many friends from both his neighbourhood and school and would spend his afternoons and weekends out in the streets getting up to mischief, as his deceased grandmother used to say. However, his idealistic childhood ended abruptly when his best friend suddenly disappeared without a trace. Apparently, Nathan was the last to see him alive, but the memory of that afternoon is still mostly lost due to a severe concussion that happened that same day. Unfortunately, not long after leaving the hospital, the town turned against him without any evidence, circumstantial or otherwise. He quickly became the boy who killed his friend, then put himself in the hospital to cover up his fatal act. The next four years before leaving for university became a time of isolation and survival. Although he has been home several times over the years, most of that time was spent with his head down, and anus clenched. And the occasions when he was forced to go out into the community, he made sure his beard was long and always wore a cap. Many of his old school classmates still call this town home, and no doubt, still remember it like it was yesterday. In Nathan’s opinion, people of country towns have long memories to go with their unforgiving nature. The only time he didn’t care if he was seen was when he attended his father’s funeral. However, he’s sure the only reason he wasn’t chased out of town with pitchforks and burning torches was that the people of this town would be scared that their

Almighty God would put a *red-devil mark* next to their names, especially if seen harassing someone in their time of grief, even if that person was a murderer.

He left the next day before his stay of execution ran out....

Nathan has vague memories of meeting up with his friend on that fateful day. However, they met up most days, so there's a chance he's mixing them up. According to the police report, he was found unconscious next to his BMX bike on the dirt track — that is now covered by another housing estate — between his home and the back road to the town centre. No one saw what happened. At least, no one who came forward.

Chris McDermott, the son of the current mayor, but at the time, a newly appointed councilman, was the apple of his father's eye. Or at least that's how his father portrayed it when they were out in public, but Nathan knew better. Chris despised his father for reasons he never really articulated apart from the occasionally disparaging remark about the size of his head or the length of his penis. Although they were best friends, Chris believed only girls and sissies talked about anything other than fishing or the approaching game of football.

Nathan rubbed the scar on the back of his head as he tried his best to recall the moments before he woke in hospital 48 hours after his accident. He has no memory of the accident itself or whether Chris was with him. He occasionally has flashes or glimpses of the day preceding, but what happened that Friday afternoon has been a source of consternation for the past 20 or so years. And about a week after Chris disappeared, when the investigation had no leads or suspects, people began to look to him with suspicion. And that's when the terrible dreams started. Several years of therapy and many different medications couldn't help him remember what was real and what was imagined. And when he left for university, he just decided to put it behind him.

It was working okay for him until his wife died on the day she ended her pregnancy....

“A penny for your thoughts.”

He looked up from the table. “Huh?”

“You have been staring at those eggs as though you're expecting them to jump into your mouth on their own.”

“Sorry, didn't sleep well.”

“Still having the dreams?”

“They come and go, but coming home has given them extra oomph.”

“Chris or Sara?”

“Both, but mainly Chris, lately.”

His mother sat down across from him. “Maybe God has brought you home for a reason.”

Nathan glared at her. “And what would that be?”

“I don’t know. You’re the bigshot reporter. Maybe you could put those skills to good use.”

“Geez, what happened to letting sleeping dogs lie?”

His mother reached across the table and rested her hand on his. “Now that your father is no longer with us, we don’t have to worry about what anyone thinks. I just don’t want you getting to my age with regrets. And it’s obvious your friend’s disappearance is weighing you down.”

“And what would the Catholic Women’s Society have to say about me poking around in old wounds?”

“They’re not all *pious pistols*.”

A small laugh escaped his lips. “Pious pistols! Can I quote you on that?”

“Only if you eat those eggs before they get cold.”

Nathan picked up his fork and broke one of the yokes while imagining several older women walking around town, like Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday, gunning down all the evildoers with their fire-and-brimstone quotes.

“Pious Pistols,” he repeated. “You never cease to amaze me.”

“Maybe I should’ve been a writer too.”

Nathan rolled his eyes.

After finishing his eggs, Nathan glanced at the notepad next to the old phone.

Maybe I shouldn’t call Felix. The last thing I need right now is someone screaming into my ear about something as unimportant as borrowed stationery.

When he first arrived home, he considered ringing his ex-boss with his new mobile number after losing his last phone during his final bender before deciding to

return, but he didn't want to sound desperate. He had already been humiliated enough by his one-time mentor.

After a large sigh, he retrieved his phone from his back pocket, then dialled the number.

Felix answered after the first ring.

"Hi Felix, it's me."

"About *fucking* time. I was about to call your local rag and see if they could help me?"

"Surprised you didn't. What do you want?"

"Your town is all over the news up here. The one-in-a-thousand-year flood is the hottest topic in Australia. How would you like to do some freelancing for us?"

"So, my face is no longer a disgusting sight?"

"I was just having a moment. Anyway, you deserved it. Maybe this is your chance to get back into my good books. From what I hear, you are on the wagon."

"You mean, what my mother has told you?"

"She seems like a lovely lady."

"She won't be so nice if I tell her you were the one who insulted me while throwing me out the door."

"Do you want the job or not?"

Nathan's chest tightened at the thought of showing his face to everyone in town. "What are you thinking?"

"I think we can start with a two-page spread, and depending on what you get, increase it if the stories are there. The more pain and suffering, the better."

"I will leave that part out when talking to the locals."

"Do you still have that camera of yours? I would send Peter your way, but the roads south are flooded, and your airport is already underwater."

"Peter?"

"Yeah, he's our new photography intern. He's in his final year at uni and is very enthusiastic."

"That's a shame; I was looking forward to babysitting!" Nathan thought for a moment. "Now I get it, you only rang me because none of your reporters could get here."

"Are you going to do it or not?"

“It would have been Clint, right?”

“He is our best.”

“Only because I’m not there. Besides, the locals would eat him alive.”

“From what I’ve heard, you’re not on their Christmas list either.”

Nathan paused. He has never told anyone since leaving Clarkston — except for his dead wife — the reason he couldn’t wait to leave his hometown behind.

“It seems you and my mother are now best friends.”

“Not the source. What sort of an editor would I be if we didn’t do our due diligence before we hired you?”

“You were just a senior reporter when I joined.”

“Let’s just leave the past where it belongs. Can you send me some preliminary shots tonight with some catchy headlines?”

Nathan let out an exasperated sigh. “The river hasn’t even peeked yet?”

“Excellent, that means we can carry this story for days. Remember, the more tragic the stories, the better.”

“Your empathy is inspiring.”

“Empathy is *your* job. My job is to sell papers.”

After hanging up, Nathan just stared at the orange streaks winding across his plate as though studying a map of the local catchment, working out the best place to record the destruction of the town without being recognised..., or blamed.

Maybe I can shave my head and change my name!

His mother took the plate out from under him, then just stood there staring.

He looked up. “It seems I’m not fired after all.”

“As I said, you’re back for a reason. Maybe you can kill two birds with one pen.”

Nathan raised his eyebrows. “I think you peaked with *pious pistols*.”

“Give me a break. I didn’t attend a fancy university.” Nellie stared at the deep creases in her son’s forehead. “Maybe, a few well-crafted empathetic words will go a long way in healing old wounds.”

“Old wounds! You make it sound as though I *did* do something wrong.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. I have always believed in you.”

“And what about Dad?”

“Your father was a floored man. He only saw himself in others. However, no matter what doubts he had, he would always stand up for you. He loved you more than he showed.”

Nathan stood and kissed his mother on the cheek. “Thanks for breakfast, Mum, but I have work to do.”

“Good luck, and remember, there are a lot of people hurting, so be careful.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t want to give them any more reasons to hate me.”

“They don’t hate you. They just don’t handle uncertainty very well.”

Nathan snickered. “That’s an understatement.”

“If you’re after a good spot to take photos, Ainsworth Street is probably the best.”

Nathan looked at her with suspicion. “Yes, Mum.”

3

The rain had all but stopped when Nathan slowed his 2012 Toyota Corolla to a stop to the left of the flood barriers blocking the intersection of Ainsworth and Main. In the last hour, the air temperature had risen to almost 30 degrees; however, the sudden return of February's stifling humidity, due to the engorged river, has made the temperature feel closer to mid-to-late 30s. He suddenly wished he had taken his car to get the air conditioner re-gassed.

He wiped his brow with an old T-shirt sitting on his backseat, then sat there taking in the amazing but terrible sight. To his left, the shadow of the Great Dividing Range framed the tops of the houses like a distant army, warning everyone that this is just a small taste of what Mother Nature can dish out to the wicked. In front of him, water licked the side of the homes as though savouring the meal, anticipating the delicacy that lay within. Birds landed and took off from rooftops, eels momentarily surfaced, insects hovered just above the water, and the sound of frogs announced that they had returned to take back what is rightfully theirs.

Nathan sighed as he retrieved his umbrella and camera from his shoulder bag, then got out of his car and walked towards the approaching, grubby water, with sympathetic thoughts for the town in direct conflict with the angry voice of his younger, dispirited self: *Don't you dare feel sorry for them! They have forsaken you and don't deserve your empathy....*

The municipality of Clarkston is situated about 5 hours from the Queensland border and 2 hours as the crow flies from the east coast, on the lands of the Bundjalung Nation, and is home to approximately 17,000 residents. There are people in the area who will happily tell you that their family has called this area of New South Wales home for over a century, and their hard work and sacrifice have built this town into what it is today. In Nathan's opinion, it's not something they should be proud of, considering the local First Nation's people have been around for so much longer, and no doubt, would be the majority if it wasn't for the British invasion....

Clarkstonians — as they commonly refer to themselves — have a view of the world that is likely a decade or two behind their city counterparts. When it came to the referendum on same-sex marriages, the results showed that the local attitudes were more *beige* than *rainbow*. And according to Nathan, they aren't afraid to post their unresearched opinions with their newly acquired, but somewhat limited, technical skills for anyone to see. He speculates that in this mostly blue-collar town, sentiments are passed around freely and usually accepted as fact.

A local man steering a small tinnie appeared from a side street with an old couple sitting at the front, hanging on for dear life; a couple of old-style suitcases filled the gap between the driver and the two rescued retirees. From behind an unhooked caravan, Nathan took photos as several others helped the old couple out onto solid ground before the boat headed back into the flooded streetscape, no doubt, looking for the next desperate denizen. In the distance, standing over the tinnie as if in judgment, he could see the bell tower of the Catholic church he attended religiously as a child. Or at least until Chris disappeared. He has only gone to Mass once since. Partly because he couldn't stand all the glares and silent innuendoes, but mostly because he no longer believed in the Catholic view of life, death, and the afterlife. Nathan can't say for sure that nothing is waiting on the other side once the body decays into the earth. But a utopia for the chosen few, who get to lie around in the sun, eating grapes and smiling, while winged protectors watch over them from the skies above, seems like the imaginings of a child.

To his left, a local news van pulled up to the edge of the road.

The side door opened, and an overly dressed blond woman holding a microphone stepped out onto the wet path. A moment later, her colleague from the passenger side appeared, opening an umbrella with one hand while applying makeup and brushing lint from the well-known reporter's shoulder with the other.

Madeline Foster from the regional Channel 10 station pushed her assistant away when two expensive cars slowed to a stop behind them.

Nathan took a photo of the cars, then several of the three individuals as they stepped out into the street. To him, they looked out of place: better suited to a movie premiere or an election campaign rather than a news segment about a natural disaster. Out of the three, one seemed more important. The tall, well-dressed woman headed directly

for the reporter while the other two walked behind, juggling notepads and phones, ready to obey at a moment's notice.

The moment Nathan zoomed in on the woman's familiar pout, a wave of all-but-forgotten desire washed over him.

"Fuck." He took her photo before bringing the shot up on the viewing screen.

The image of his first high school crush — and for a while before his life fell apart, the full lips of the girl he hoped would be his first real kiss — filled the screen, inciting desires from a boy who had long ceased to exist. Unfortunately, for that awkward teenage boy, his first kiss didn't happen until university. Any chemistry that may have been between them evaporated the moment he returned to school after that fateful, terrible day he lost his best friend.

A siren echoed in the distance, dragging him back to the adult version of his teenage desires. Gabrielle Southern turned and lifted a hand towards the car she arrived in. She stood about 175 cm tall — approximately 6 cm shorter than Nathan — with a Mediterranean complexion softened slightly by an infusion from her Scottish roots, and a figure that could start a war. And he could see, even from his current position, that she hadn't lost that undefinable quality that demanded attention no matter the room she entered.

The back door of the expensive car opened, and a tall man, dressed not-so-importantly but somehow carrying the importance of someone in command, got out and walked purposefully towards the small group. It was evident to Nathan that the mayor (the father of his missing friend) had dressed down for the occasion, and he wouldn't be surprised if the clothes on his back didn't still carry the creases from the packages they came in. Out of all the times he slept over at the man's house in those early high-school years, he never once saw him in anything but a long-sleeve, button-up shirt that came from a box, and well-pressed slacks that matched the suit jacket he carried over his shoulder. Considering the upcoming mayoral election will be held in the stain of the still-rising river, Francis McDermott — Frank to his limited friends — is doing what he must to show he is the best and only man to drag Clarkston out of the depths of ruin.

Images from the time when the then councilman came to see him in hospital after his accident still haunt him today. Back then, the man's forehead was smaller, his hair thicker and lighter, and his eyes less prominent; a time before two decades of worry

carved a permanent scowl deep into his square, rugged features. However, even back then, his authority was a given. That day when Nathan first woke in the hospital, he turned up at the same time as the police for the interview about Chris's disappearance. To Nathan, it felt as though Frank controlled the interrogation, and the officers taking his statement often referred to him during the hour-long grilling. If not for the doctor stopping the interview, Nathan thought it would have gone on for many more hours. His own father was no help. It felt as though he was just as much a part of the inquisition as the police.

Nathan took one last photo of the group, then headed closer to the edge of the rising waters. The flood had already entered the top floor of the businesses in the main shopping area. It was obvious no one was prepared for a flood of this size. The residents of Clarkston have always speculated that their record river level would one day be surpassed, but not one, not even the most ardent climate change supporter, could have predicted the speed and destruction of this natural disaster.

The local rescue helicopter flew overhead, heading towards the low-lying parts of West Clarkston, where the poorest of residents live and struggle. No doubt the speed of the rising river caught many off guard, and rescuing the most vulnerable from balconies, roofs, or the highest part of the house they could reach, would continue throughout the day and into the night. Before Chris disappeared, he liked living in Clarkston, but since moving away, he sees the town in a different light. This disaster will affect lower and middle-class residents due to the town's topology. In recent years, Nathan has come to refer to his hometown as *The Toilet*, where the more well-off you are, the further and higher you can afford to live from the stained water. And everyone knows the direction shit flows, and who suffers when those in charge pay most attention to keeping the rim clean.

For the next couple of hours, Nathan walked the streets around the flooded town, taking photos and talking to locals, many of whom had been rescued themselves and had come to watch as their homes and belongings disappeared further underwater. Many times, Nathan had to hold back tears as they recounted their terrifying night of survival.

However, not all were ready to share their harrowing stories. Some just glared at him, called him a murderer, then told him to *fuck off!*

When he returned to his car, he felt spent, as though the terrible ordeals of the locals had somehow been transferred to him. Or maybe his long-suppressed feelings of anger and disappointment towards the town for forsaking him had somehow been released by the pain of others. Either way, he couldn't wait to get home and hide.

After putting his camera and umbrella on the passenger seat, he stood at the open driver's door, with gentle rain cooling his face, while staring at the devastating, but somehow beautiful, dreamscape. Only the mayor's car remained, and he felt both disappointed and relieved that Gabrielle was nowhere in sight. Although part of him hoped they would meet again, he wasn't ready to explain to anyone why he had returned to Clarkston with his last published byline long decomposing under the excrement of a pet rat, especially to someone whose big brown eyes still have the knack of tying his tongue in knots with one wanton glance.

From the west, the helicopter reappeared, this time heading towards the hospital situated high on the eastern side of town, out of reach of the floodwaters. Nathan made a mental note to visit up there later to see if there are stories better or more tragic than those he had already gathered.

The mayor walked out from behind the makeshift tent, stopping to speak to several recently rescued locals and the emergency workers, who were taking a break from a long, hard night of evacuations. They appeared to be talking about the rising water that had moved at least ten meters closer to the temporary tent since he arrived.

Nathan looked up as the sun finally broke through, offering a glimmer of hope that the peak of the flood was in sight.

“Well, look what the flood has washed up.”

Nathan jumped slightly, then turned. “Geez, Gabrielle, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“I'm surprised you recognise me. Last time you were in town, you didn't even acknowledge my existence.” Gabrielle took a step closer. “Do you have a hug for an old school friend?”

Friend, Nathan thought. *That's a bit of a stretch.*

After the awkward but somewhat stimulating embrace, she stood back and gave his car the once-over. “I see you’re still driving the same old bomb. Time for an upgrade, don’t you think?”

Nathan considered the Audi that became his wife’s coffin. “It’s reliable.”

“I didn’t take you for the reliable type.”

“A lot has changed over the years.”

“Yes, it has. How come you’re in town covering our little disaster? I thought you were a big-city reporter?”

Nathan paused as he realised that the camera lens failed to justify her aging beauty. As a teenager, she always had a glimmer of that old European movie-star quality, like Sophia Loren or Vivien Lee, but now she wouldn’t look out of place in a commercial for the latest exotic perfume. The small reddish freckles across her nose, visible through the modest makeup, only added to her beguile. “Your little disaster is all over the national news.”

“How did you manage to get into town? I thought all the roads north were blocked, and our airport is *definitely* out of commission.”

Nathan looked at her suspiciously. “If you must know, I have been home for a little over a week.”

She smiled. “That must be nice for your mother.”

Nathan looked towards the mayor’s car, trying to think of something to steer the conversation away from his pathetic life. “So, I see you are working for the mayor now. Is he still the same condescending prick he has always been?”

“You forgot to mention misogynistic.”

“Well, I haven’t been in his presence since....”

The image of Chris’s father standing over his hospital bed like Pontius Pilate tightened the muscles in his chest.

“Since Chris’s disappearance,” Gabrielle added as her complexion suddenly softened, bringing forth the cute girl Nathan drooled over at school. “I never believed you had anything to do with it.”

Nathan stared into the eyes of his high-school crush, then looked at his watch. “Well, that took less than a minute to bring up Chris.”

“I did try, you know.”

“Try what?”

“To help you, but you shut everyone out. And after a while it became obvious that you didn’t want any help..., or friends, for that matter.”

“I was only fourteen, and the whole school and the town blamed me for what happened.”

“Not everyone.” Gabrielle looked over Nathan’s shoulder towards the tent. “Anyway, I must go: the mayor beckons. Maybe we could go out for a drink and continue this conversation?”

Another surge of desire washed the malaise of the day from Nathan’s veins.

“What about your husband? I’m sure he wouldn’t want you talking with the town murderer.”

“Divorced! Besides, Ken didn’t grow up in this town. I doubt he knows anything about you.”

Ken? Nathan thought. No Ken deserves to be in the same room as you, let alone in the same bed.

“I’m sure when word gets around that I’m back, someone will fill him in on all the gory details.”

“He moved to Adelaide.” Gabrielle retrieved her phone, opened the address book, then held it out for Nathan. “If I gave you my number, I have a feeling you will talk yourself out of it. I will call you when I’m free.”

After typing in his name and number, he noticed his mother’s name in her contacts but decided against mentioning it.

Gabrielle leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “I like the beard. Makes you look like Chris Hemsworth out of Thor.”

“Thanks,” he said awkwardly. “But without all the muscles, money, and fame.”

She winked as she turned away.

Nathan watched her as she crossed the road heading for the mayor’s car. It was then he realised Chris’s father would be in the back watching.

He focused on the rear tinted window.

Inside his head, Frank McDermott stared back with the same disdain he had for him that day in the hospital all those years before.

The moment Frank closed the back door, he took the phone out from his pocket and selected the number at the top of his recent contacts list.

While the phone rang, he stared over the shoulder of his approaching personal assistant. “I have another job for you. I need you to keep tabs on someone.” The creases between the mayor’s eyebrows deepened. “I’ll send you the details. And don’t talk to anyone about this.”

Outside, Gabrielle stopped at the door and retrieved her keys from her bag.

“Not over the phone. And Allan, I want to know why he’s here and track his every move. There’s no budget limit on this one.”

He hung up as the driver’s side door opened.

“Back to the office, please, Gabrielle.”

“Don’t you want to go home and change?”

Frank looked towards the road where the television station van had driven down minutes before. “No, I don’t trust Foster not to follow me home. That bitch would like nothing more than to make up some story about how my empathy only shows for the cameras.”

Gabrielle hid her concurrence.

“Yes, Mayor, but you have a meeting with our State Member at eleven.”

“I thought Lancaster was at a Labour conference in Canberra. Besides, the airport is closed.”

“He arrived by helicopter an hour ago.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sorry, sir. I didn’t want to upset you before the interview.”

Frank stared at his assistant’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “That prick only wants to appear sympathetic to our people’s plight just to get re-elected.”

“Probably, but I think it can work in our favour.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Before she could respond, her work phone rang.

“Mayor McDermott’s office. Gabrielle speaking.”

While Gabrielle spoke quietly, Frank's thoughts drifted back to Nathan Turner and the events surrounding his son's disappearance. Over the years, he has hired several private detectives to investigate the case. But just like the original investigation, they didn't uncover anything new. Although there was no direct evidence linking Nathan Turner to the disappearance, the investigators all came to the same conclusion: considering the lack of any other suspect or motive, Turner is the most likely culprit. And a fight between friends that somehow turned deadly is the most likely scenario.

Gabrielle put her phone into the cradle on the dashboard and then turned. "They're expecting the flood to peak a little over two meters above 74."

"When?"

"Around 8 pm tonight."

He pictured the 74 markers around the town centre, then did a quick calculation. "Shit! No businesses will be spared. Our town is fucked."

"Yes, it's going to be a long recovery," Gabrielle replied.

"When is the next meeting with Carter?"

"It's scheduled for 4 pm this afternoon."

"I want to speak to him now."

Gabrielle retrieved her phone and dialled the most senior SES officer in Clarkston. "Hi Richard, the mayor needs to talk to you." She glanced at the time. "We will have to drive the long way, but we can be there in about twenty minutes."

The moment she hung up, Frank leaned forward. "Where is he?"

"Up at the Cathedral, coordinating the local volunteers for the evacuations, but he won't be there for long. The floodwaters are expected to enter the church sometime late this afternoon. They are just securing all the valuable religious items, then relocating to the Rugby Club."

"Fuck. What about our meeting with Lancaster?"

"I think we can kill two birds with one stone." Gabrielle smiled. "I hope you don't mind getting those new clothes dirty."

"Not if it means showing up that prick!"

Once on the back road to the Cathedral, Frank's thoughts drifted to the sight of Nathan Turner talking with his PA. He knew they went to school together, but he didn't think they were friends, let alone on hugging terms.

"Who was that reporter you were just talking to?"

Gabrielle glanced at her boss from the rearview mirror. "Nathan Turner."

Frank had prepared himself for the response. "What's he doing back in town? I thought he had put our little city in the rear view."

Gabrielle knew the real reason Nathan was home, but she didn't let on to Nathan that she often talked to his mother about his life, and she was in no way going to pass that information on to her sociopathic boss. "He was already in town visiting his mother before the rain. Now he's working on an article for the Courier Mail about our little disaster. Apparently, we are all over the news up there."

"That's just great. Our phones will be running off the hook." Frank considered the last time he saw Nathan Turner. "I didn't know you two were close?"

"We were for a time before Chris went missing, but after that, he kept mostly to himself until he left for university." She glanced in the rearview mirror, trying to get a glimpse of Frank's reaction to the mention of his son. "Chris, Nathan, and I were part of the same study group. There weren't many in our year who aspired to go to university."

Frank was surprised that his son had joined a study group....

"I don't suppose you can do a little digging for me. I don't want you spying on him, but see if he remembers anything else about that day."

"We may get together for a catch-up drink."

"Well, I would appreciate anything. My son's case is still open, and it wouldn't be the first case to be solved decades later due to some small, seemingly insignificant detail."

Gabrielle forced another smile. "I'll see if it comes up in conversation."

4

Nathan took out his phone, then looked into the distressed eyes of the dishevelled elderly man sitting in the waiting room while his wife was being x-rayed for a possible fracture to her right arm. The thickset, sun-hardened, and blading retiree looked shell-shocked from his ordeal, and there was something in his eyes that brought back the day Nathan waited to identify his wife's body. Although their situations are different — and one could argue that Mr Sharpe's ordeal wasn't anywhere close to his heartache — the look in the man's eyes carried the pain of a harrowing experience that felt no less painful than he endured on that fateful day. Nathan has come to realise that there is no order or measure to one's sorrow.

“Mr Sharpe, do you mind if I record this. It will help me write the story.”

“The Courier Mail, you say? What do big city folk care about our little town?”

“Unfortunately, stories like yours and many others in Clarkston will sell newspapers and website subscriptions.”

Barry Sharpe looked towards the elevator doors. “People seem to like the pain of others.”

“A minority do, but many will empathise. However, it will shine a light on the devastation happening now in Clarkston and put pressure on the federal and state governments to provide better relief.”

Barry glanced at Nathan's phone, then cleared his throat. “What do you want to know?”

“Just start when you first realised the water would enter your home.”

For the next few minutes, Nathan listened to Barry's traumatic night. He could tell he was reliving every moment. And when he got to the part about getting his wife onto their corrugated-iron roof via the manhole cover in their living room, tears flowed freely down the sun-hardened, exhausted but resolute man's eyes.

“I'm sorry I made you relive that. Do you need a moment before I ask the last couple of questions?”

He wiped his eyes with an old-fashioned embroidered handkerchief. “No, I’m okay.”

“Sorry about this next question, but I must ask. What do you think of your council’s response to the rising waters? Do you think you were fairly warned?”

“Obviously not, but as much as I would like to blame someone for what happened, we have never had rain like this before. It would be foolhardy to point the finger this early. I’m sure there will be enough time for that after they have saved everyone, and our emotions aren’t running so high.”

“That’s a perfect response.” Nathan looked to the sound of the elevator. “Last question: when your wife is free, would it be okay if I took your photo for the story?”

“If Claire is okay with it.”

He handed Barry his old but slightly modified business card. “Call me if or when you’re ready.”

Barry glanced at the crossed-out phone number and handwritten replacement. “Lose your phone?”

“Something like that.”

“Big city paper can’t afford to print some new ones?”

“Tight budgets these days.”

“I guess so with the internet and whatnot.”

Nathan smiled and held out his hand. “Thank you again, Barry. Your story will inspire many.”

Barry Sharpe shook his hand but didn’t immediately let go.

For a moment, Nathan thought he was going to pull him into an embrace.

“I know who you are.”

“Sorry?”

“You’re the boy they blamed for the mayor’s missing son.”

Nathan took a deep breath. “Well, we all have our own harrowing story.”

“It must have been hard for you to come back?”

“How hard is yet to be determined.”

“Good luck. Unfortunately, many won’t be as accommodating as I am.”

Nathan winked. “I will just have to prove them wrong.”

“Will this story be in the local paper?”

“Not one written by me.”

“Probably for the best.” He smiled and let go of Nathan’s hand. “For both of us.”

Nathan returned the smile. “Probably.”

By the time Nathan arrived home, the wind had all but vanished, and the sun had just dropped below the horizon, creating a surreal feel to the coming night, like a scene from an old black-and-white Alfred Hitchcock movie. The clouds had mostly cleared, and the stars in the night sky seemed brighter than usual, as though somehow cleansed by the torrential rain. However, beneath the wonderment and awe he felt the unease of a town on the brink; a town whose destiny had yet to be written....

A large crow swept across the sky, landing in a large lemon-scented gumtree in the neighbour’s backyard. He could see the scavenger’s silhouette against the darkening sky, looking out towards the shopping district as though *too* waiting for the answers to his many questions. Nathan looked from the self-professed harbinger downwards towards the darkness of the town centre. After all he has seen and heard today, he couldn’t help but worry about the battle to come: would the facets of Clarkston untouched by the grubby water slowly filter downwards and reclaim the town, bringing forth a venerated future for all? Or would the soon-to-be decaying landscape slowly spread outwards, infecting all in its path with over a century of struggle, greed, and manipulation, released from the manmade environment by the unforgiving purgative spate sent from the heavens?

The crow squawked his answer, then took to the sky.

Nathan took a long, slow breath, then walked to the front door.

The door opened before he had the chance to put the key in the lock.

Nellie looked him up and down. “Are you okay?”

“Just tired.”

“Tough day?”

“Yeah, in more ways than one.”

“I saw you on the local news. You were in the background taking photos.”

“That’s just great,” Nathan replied as he walked inside. “Could you tell it was me?”

“I could, but it wasn’t a close-up.”

“It will only take one. The grapevine in this town is faster than the internet.”

“Well, it’s best to rip that Band-Aid off in one go.”

“I was hoping it would just slowly fall off in the shower without me noticing.”

Nathan put his laptop down on the kitchen table, then took out his camera and plugged the cable into the side. “You will never guess who I ran into downtown.”

“Gabrielle Southern.”

He looked up with suspicion. “What made you say that?”

“I saw her on the news. And she was one of the few who came to visit when you were recovering from your accident before....”

“Before the town turned against me.”

“Yes, and she is a lovely girl. Maybe she can help you with your investigation. She is Chris’s father’s personal assistant, after all.”

“Well done, Nancy Drew. Do you have a strategy already planned out?”

“Do you need one?”

“I think I can manage.” Nathan glared at his mother. “But I will come to you if I have any complex problems I can’t solve.”

“I’m smarter than you give me credit for.” Nellie smiled. “You and your sister had to get your brains from someone. Your father wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed.”

“I’m starting to wonder what attracted you in the first place.”

“He had great hair and a cute butt.”

Nathan’s face suddenly resembled a pug. “That’s gross.”

“Pickings were slim back in the day. So, what did you and Gabrielle talk about?”

“Didn’t really have time, but we might catch up for a drink soon. I gave her my number.”

Nellie turned away with a smile. “That sounds good.”

“Does it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Mum. I know you have been talking with her. I saw your name in her contacts.”

“Well, I am friends with her mother. Grace is probably the only one who didn’t hold the *incident* against me. Gabrielle is cut from the same dough.”

“I think we need to cut back on the metaphors. I will get barred from writing if word gets out that I talk in *clichés* with my mother.”

“Now, you’re just being silly.”

“So, how often do you talk with Gabrielle?”

“She rings up occasionally to see how I’m doing.” Nellie looked into her son’s eyes, wondering where he was going with it. “Up until now, you’ve always been too busy with work. And with your sister being on the other side of the world, leading her best life, I have to find connections where I can.”

Nathan’s eyebrows narrowed. “I see what you did there: using my guilt to change the subject. I didn’t just wash ashore with the flood. Your diversion tactics won’t work on me. Do you and your best friend talk about me?”

“Sometimes.”

He relived his conversation with Gabrielle. “Did she know I was already back in town?”

“Might have come up in a conversation a few days back.”

“So, she already knows all about my....”

“Not everything,” Nellie said, sensing his unease. “Some things should only be shared by those involved.”

Nathan just stared at his mother, his tongue numb.

“Don’t look at me like that. We have become close. I helped her through her divorce.”

“She was the one on the phone this morning?”

Nellie smiled again. “Possibly.”

“That explains why you sent me to Ainsworth Street.”

“You were always a shy boy when it came to the opposite sex. I just thought a little help would go a long way.”

Nathan brought up the photos and began scrolling through them, making notes as he went. “Man, I thought the mayor was manipulative.”

Nellie giggled. “I didn’t realise how much I missed our banter. Even as a child, you could argue with the best of them. Do you want a cup of tea?”

Nathan winked. “That would be great. Do you know the Sharpe’s from West Clarkston?”

“Barry and Claire. Are they okay?”

“Claire broke her arm while climbing up into the ceiling and out onto the roof. They had to be rescued by the helicopter.”

“That’s terrible. How is she?”

“Doing okay under the circumstances. I just got off a call from Barry. The doctor wanted to keep her overnight, but she insisted she was fine and didn’t want to take up a valuable bed. Apparently, they are in short supply. They will be staying at their daughter’s home for the near future. I will be going around there tomorrow for a photo to go with the article about their experience.”

“Did he recognise you?”

“Yep. But didn’t seem perturbed by it.”

“I told you: not everyone thinks you are responsible.”

“It’s funny, he didn’t say he didn’t think I did it, he just didn’t seem bothered.”

“He did just survive a terrible ordeal. Probably puts things into perspective.”

“Probably.”

Nellie walked around to Nathan’s side of the table. “Can I see the pictures?”

He put them on a slideshow and sat back.

“Oh my god. There is so much water. I never thought the flood could reach the church’s front steps. Our school must be swallowed up.”

“I couldn’t get close enough for a photo, but judging by the level at the church, I would say school won’t be resuming for quite some time.”

“At least there will be some pleased about the flood.”

“We used to be.”

When the slideshow finished, Nathan closed the laptop lid and packed up the camera. “I must start on the Sharpe’s story. I will be in my room with my creepy little friends.”

Nellie gave him the evil eye, then smiled as she turned away. “Cup of tea coming up. Oh, and I have invited Gabrielle for dinner. Hope you don’t mind.”

Nathan stopped at his door with a surge of desire replacing his apathy. “I guess I don’t have any choice.”

“Maybe you can go out for drinks afterwards.”

Nathan suddenly felt the nerves of his fourteen-year-old self.

5

The mayor's private car turned onto the dirt road leading up to the sandstone quarry just northwest of Clarkston. The quarry is set against the beginnings of the mountain range that separates the semi-tropical region along the east coast and the agricultural plains and arid to semi-arid areas spread out across the western side of New South Wales, and is just one of several businesses in which the McDermott Family Trust has a controlling interest. The family's wealth has grown steadily over the last century, but has increased significantly in the previous few decades due to Frank's savvy business acumen. However, considering he has no direct heir, he no longer sees his legacy in terms of wealth.

The McDermott's family roots go back to the original landowners who settled in the area after arriving from Ireland during the mid-19th Century, long before Clarkston became a town — hence the river's name. And if you ask Frank, he will happily tell you that his family is descended from an Irish King who ruled over several counties during the 12th Century. It's one of the many reasons he sees Clarkston as *his* town, and he alone should have control over its destiny. He's not the first McDermott to be Clarkston's mayor, but considering the other men born from his family tree have moved away, or don't seem to care about the town and its history, he wants to leave a mark that'll be prevalent for years to come.

And he will do his utmost to realise his goals....

The light from the car faded just before it stopped in a darkened shadow below the steep cliff-face of an old, no-longer-worked area of the quarry. Frank rarely drives his own car, opting to be driven around in the car that comes with the mayorship by Gabrielle or one of the other two assistants in the mayor's office. However, tonight he has driven his own personal car to this non-work-related meeting.

Barely a minute later, the lights of another car washed across the quarry face before pulling alongside Frank's car.

A tall late-sixties ex-police detective with thick grey hair and a stomach that hid the leather belt holding up his plain grey slacks got out of his six-year-old BMW, then got into the back seat behind Frank.

Frank adjusted his rearview mirror. "What have you got for me, Allan?"

"Evening, Frank," the semi-retired private detective said sarcastically as he opened his notepad. "Nathan Turner's wife was killed in her car by a falling tree during an out-of-season thunderstorm almost a year ago. At first, according to his editor, he seemed to take it in his stride and put his energy into his work, but suddenly, about six months later, he began to spiral out of control. He took several weeks of sick leave, and when he did return to work, he was always either hungover or still drunk. And a few months later, he was fired for shoddy work and late submissions and was evicted from his two-bedroom apartment for not paying the rent." Allan looked in the mirror. "Which is a little odd since he seems to have quite a bit of savings tucked away."

"Maybe, his guilt finally caught up to him."

"Something must have happened, but no one seems to know what."

"Karma's a bitch," Frank said with a smile. "So, if he's unemployed, why is he going around our town interviewing victims of our flood, saying he works for the Courier Mail?"

"His editor had a sudden change of heart when our town became newsworthy."

"Great, our misery is helping that prick get back on track. Do you know how long he's been in town?"

"He's been hiding out in his mother's home for the past week and a bit."

"I don't want him settling here."

"Not sure I can do anything about that."

"Don't you worry, I will make sure he doesn't."

Allan briefly wondered what that meant, but decided it's best not to know.

"So, is that it for this assignment?"

"He's not going anywhere in the short-term, so just keep monitoring his movements."

"Maybe he will head back to Brisbane after our town becomes less interesting."

"We can only hope." Frank's thoughts shifted to the town. "I've heard the rowing club took significant damage?"

“There is no rowing club. From those first responders I spoke to, the rowing club was completely washed away by the initial surge of water after the levee was breached. I also spoke to a homeless man up at the West Clarkston Rugby Club. He said he was woken by something large hitting the building, and less than a minute later, it was completely gone. They were lucky to escape with their lives.”

“As soon as the water recedes, I want photos of the whole area. Just because the old building is gone doesn’t mean we don’t want to rebuild something in its place. This may be the opportunity to reflect on the past while creating something our town can be proud of.”

Allan looked to the rearview mirror and wondered why the mayor was preaching his rhetoric to him. He’s not the town’s photographer, and he doesn’t give a rat’s arse what they do with the site. He has his vote as long as he continues to bring work his way.

“Anything else?”

“Don’t breathe a word about Turner to anyone, not even your wife. Understand!”

“Of course.”

Frank started the engine, signalling the end of the conversation.

Allan Harvey got out and watched the mayor drive away. He then waited another few minutes while he smoked a cigarette before heading back to his wife in East Clarkston, in one of the small pockets of newly built homes out of reach of the flood. For an ex-police detective, he lives well in semi-retirement.

Nathan placed his fork down on his mostly empty plate, then wiped his mouth with one of his mother’s special-occasion napkins. “That was delicious, Mum.”

“Nothing special, but thank you.”

“Yes, Nellie, it was very nice,” Gabrielle said. “I hardly ever have a home-cooked meal these days. I usually just pick something up on the way home or have toast.”

“You know you are always welcome here. Next time, you can bring your mother.”

“Thank you. She would love that.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve spoken to her.”

“For someone who has retired, she is always on the go. She is on more committees than I can count.”

“Yes, the last time I spoke to her, she was handing out pamphlets and drumming up support to save the rowing club.”

“Well, she won’t be doing that anymore,” Gabrielle said. “The rowing club got washed into the river right before the town flooded. The sheer force of the rising water took the pylons right out from under it. Some homeless people sleeping inside just managed to get out just before it collapsed.”

“Your boss was keen on saving it as well, from what I’ve heard,” Nellie said.

“Yeah, thought it was a bit weird he put his support behind that one. His attention is normally focused on the future.”

“Unless he’s talking about his family lineage,” Nathan added. “Whenever I stayed there, and on the rare occasion he was home, he would manage to talk it into the conversation. He’s descended from an Irish king, apparently.”

Gabrielle giggled. “Yes, I’ve heard that story more times than I care to remember.”

“Maybe he was supporting your mother because of the great job you do for him,” Nellie added.

“I’m not so sure he’s built that way.”

Nathan snickered. “Not unless there is something in it for him. Always playing an angle.”

Nellie stood and began to clear the table. “While I clean up, why don’t you two take a bottle of wine out onto the balcony?”

“Mum, maybe Gabrielle is tired.”

“Shit, no! Sounds like a great idea. You can fill me in on all your great stories from the big smoke.”

Nathan was taken aback by Gabrielle’s language in front of his mother. They seemed very comfortable together.

“I think you’ll be disappointed there,” he replied.

Nellie returned with two wine glasses and a bottle of red.

“That looks nice.” Gabrielle looked to Nathan. “I thought you were on the wagon?”

He glared at his mother. "I will be fine. Alcohol was never a problem before."

Gabrielle resisted the urge to ask, before what?

Nathan turned away from the sudden awkwardness and headed for the back balcony.

Gabrielle leant against the railing, staring out upon Clarkston, or at least the part she could see. Without power to the business district and the eastern side of town, it looked as though a giant sinkhole had opened up and swallowed seventy per cent of the populated area. She lifted her eyes to the distant spattering of lights and man-made bonfires across the farmlands beneath the western mountain range. Although she cannot see the farms lucky enough to be on high ground, she knows from previous floods that the hills and ridges out of reach of the flood waters would now be home to cattle and other farm animals herded from the lower properties, secured by farmhands and ringers who now would be basking under the brilliant night sky only seen when Mother Nature has temporarily taken back control of her landscape. Between the high ground and the edge of town, the temporary great lake spreading across the lower farmlands will no doubt reenergise the landscape for years to come. Natural resources and wildlife will soon become abundant in this part of New South Wales.

The sound of a helicopter added context to the beautiful, surreal but temporary nightscape....

"The sky is amazing without the lights from town," Nathan said as he opened the bottle of wine. "I've never seen so many stars out here."

Gabrielle looked up to the moonless night. "Maybe there should be a rule that all lights should be turned off after nine. That way, we can enjoy the sky like this every night."

Nathan handed Gabrielle her glass. "Yeah, it's strange how nature can be so cruel one moment and so beautiful the next."

Gabrielle tapped her glass against his. "Cheers to a beautiful night."

The awkward silence returned.

“I owe you an apology,” Gabrielle finally said. “I knew there was a chance you would be there this morning. Your mother gave me the heads-up.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. I saw her name in your contacts.”

“Your mother and I have become good friends. Nellie doesn’t judge me like *my* mother does. She helped me make the right decision to leave Ken.”

“Ken? You don’t look like the Ken type.”

“Don’t I, now! What type do I look like?”

Nathan thought for a moment. “More the Dillon or Caleb type.”

“Really. That is probably the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever said.”

“You obviously haven’t spoken to my editor.”

“At least you didn’t say the *Francis* type.”

Nathan giggled. “I’m not sure anyone is a *Francis* type.”

The former but obvious sexual tension between the Mayor and Channel 10’s Madeline Foster came to Gabrielle’s mind. “You’d be surprised.”

“Are you saying he has a mistress?”

“That depends on whom I’m talking to: the writer, or the boy who used to crush on me.”

Nathan’s eyes narrowed. “Well, I don’t have my laptop or camera with me.”

“Yeah, but you could be recording this conversation with your phone.”

He took a small step closer and spoke softly. “My phone is in the kitchen, but you’re welcome to frisk me.”

The piquant moment was suddenly interrupted by another siren.

“Speaking of philandering King Frank,” Nathan added when his voice of reason told him to take a step back. “How is Mrs McDermott? Sandra was a bit of an alcoholic even when we were kids.”

“Same as always: rarely goes out but does attend the occasional official function with Frank. However, she usually drinks too much and is sent home in a taxi before she can make a fool of herself — according to Frank.”

“From what I remember, she always had a glass of wine in her hand.”

“I guess you knew her better back then.”

“Yeah, she was always nice to me, but even back then, their marriage seemed staged. Sometimes I expected canned laughter to echo throughout their enormous mansion.”

“If I were married to Frank, I would be drunk all the time as well. No wonder Chris was never home.”

A sudden image of Chris sitting on the edge of his bed looking through a surfing magazine brought a tightness to Nathan’s chest and a tear to his eye, forcing him to turn away and look northwest in the direction of their old school.

Gabrielle moved closer so their shoulders touched. “The water would almost be up to the ceiling in the 2nd-level classrooms. Didn’t even make it to the windows on the ground level in ‘74.”

“Yeah, from what I was told, it only took a couple of days to hose out the rooms before the school reopened.” Nathan turned and faced Gabrielle. “Did Chris ever say anything to you that seemed odd in the weeks leading up to his disappearance?”

“We didn’t really talk that much outside of our study group.” Gabrielle rested her hand on his shoulder. “It’s hard to believe it’s been 20 years since he disappeared. Someone must know what happened to him. Do you think he could still be alive somewhere?”

“I ask myself the same question every day. My mother thinks I have been brought back here to solve it. She believes everything that happened to me in the past year has led me to this point, and it’s up to me to uncover the truth.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think, if I don’t get some closure, his disappearance will continue to harm all aspects of my life.”

“Do you want some help?”

“I’m not sure you want to be associated with me if I rattle Clarkston’s *perfidious cage*.”

Gabrielle laughed. “Perfidious Cage? That sounds like a name of a pretentious writer.”

Nathan smiled. “It was yesterday’s word of the day. It means to be faithless or deceitful.”

“Really? I don’t think Clarkston can be accused of being faithless.”

“Don’t mistake their sanctimony for righteousness.” Nathan sighed. “All I’m saying: I know how cruel this town can be. I wouldn’t want their vitriol aimed at you because of me.”

“My life has stagnated a bit. I have been thinking about making a move soon anyway.”

“Besides, I’m not sure how to start.”

“Start the way you would if it were a story you were investigating.”

“Well, I would probably interview his parents first.”

“Maybe I could help you with that.” Gabrielle paused when the conversation with Frank came to mind. “But I have another confession to make.”

“The mayor asked you to spy on me.”

“What, you’re psychic now?”

“No, but I am good at my job. Frank would have asked about me when he saw us talking today. It’s only natural he’d ask you to find out if I know anything that didn’t come out at the time.”

“I had no plans on spying on you. It’s one of the reasons I wanted to see you again. I wouldn’t have been able to sleep until I told you.”

“Even if you hadn’t told me, it wouldn’t have bothered me.”

“Yeah, but it would have bothered me. I will only tell him what you want him to know.”

“It’s better if it comes from you rather than one of his other spies.”

“You make it sound as though he’s a crime boss.”

Nathan glanced at Gabrielle’s empty glass. “Do you want a refill?”

“Yes, but I’d better not. I have an early start tomorrow. And I want to be fresh in case King Frank lets us speak with Sandra. How about we meet up for a drink tomorrow night? I’m not officially working Saturday, so we can discuss strategy for as long as we like.”

“Only the East Clarkston Rugby Club would be open, and I am sure their conference rooms will be full of displaced residents. And considering it will be the only place serving alcohol, every man and his dog will be there.”

“We could meet at my place. My mother dropped off some lasagne this morning. She thinks I’m too skinny.”

“Come on, you still have the same great figure you had at school.”

Gabrielle giggled. “Great figure, eh?”

“You know what I mean. I’m sure you knew most of the boys at school would have given anything to go out with you.”

It was Gabrielle’s turn to take a small step forward. “Well, I didn’t want to go out with all the boys..., just one.”

A surge of regret washed over Nathan.

“I know I didn’t handle the situation very well.”

“No one should have to deal with that sort of pressure, especially at the age of fourteen.”

“I could have at least reached out to those I cared about.”

“That’s in the past. I agree with your mother. Even if we don’t work out what happened to Chris, at least you would have tried, and that’s all anyone can do.”

“Are you sure you want to jeopardise your *standing* in the community?”

Gabrielle laughed. “Standing in the community. What does that even mean?”

“Doesn’t someone in your office keep a list of every resident of Clarkston and where they fit in the pecking order?”

“Hey, don’t mention that to Frank. He would think it’s a great idea.”

“Yeah. So, he can see his name at the top of the list.”

Gabrielle turned back to the view of Clarkston and took a deep breath. “It’s strange without the lights of town.”

“It sure is. And I think it is going to be some time before they return.”

The rescue helicopter flew overhead, heading south.

“The towns downriver will be copping it now,” Gabrielle said. “The effects of this flood will be felt for a long time to come.”

“Yeah,” Nathan replied, but not really understanding how understated that point would become in the coming days....