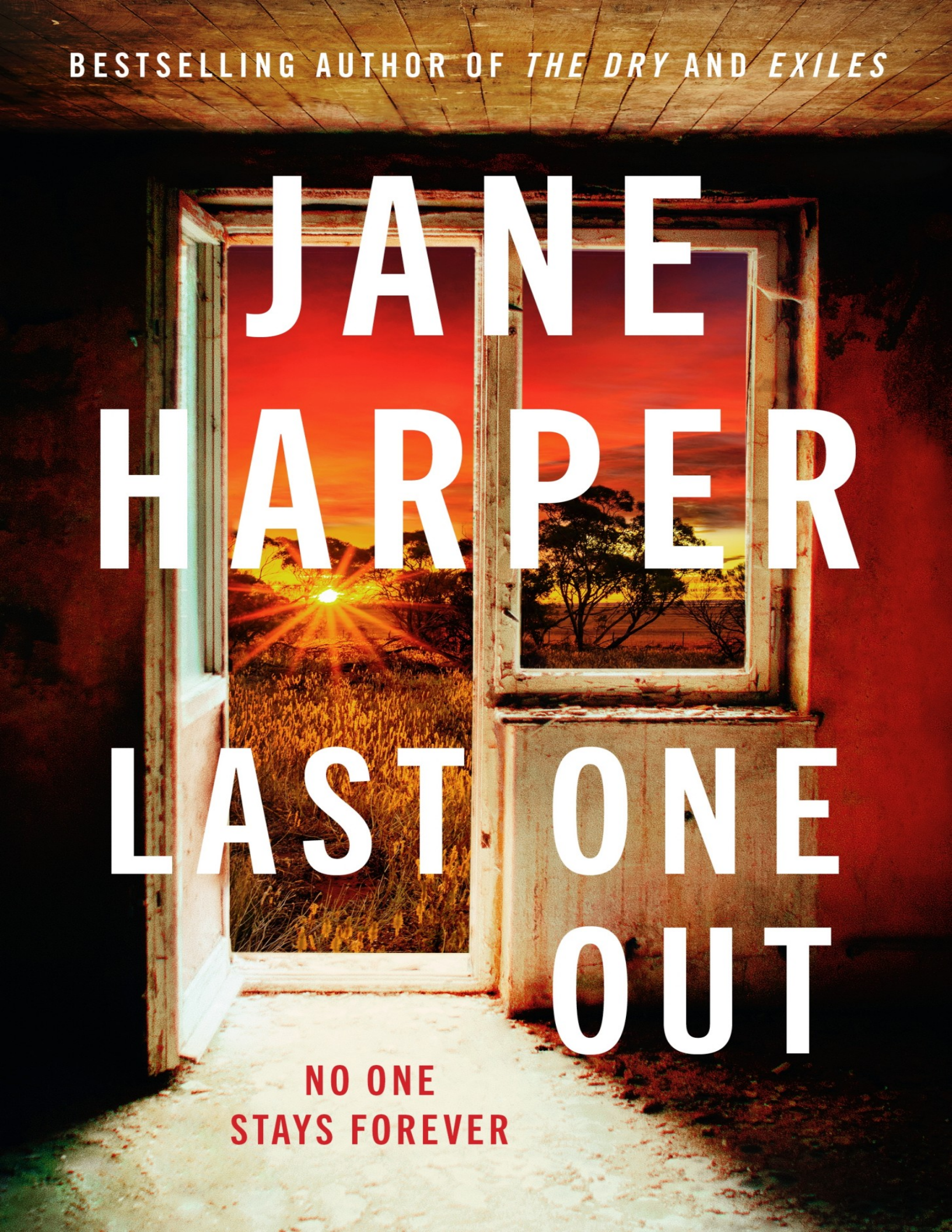


BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE DRY* AND *EXILES*



JANE HARPER LAST ONE OUT

NO ONE
STAYS FOREVER

About Last One Out

THE DAZZLING NEW NOVEL FROM THE MASTER OF CRIME

He had been here, that was clear from the marks in the dust. And he had been alone.

In a dying town, Ro Crowley waits for her son on the evening of his 21st birthday.

But Sam never comes home. His footprints in the dust of three abandoned houses offer the only clue to his final movements. One set in. One set out.

Five long years later, Ro returns to Carralon Ridge for the annual memorial of Sam's disappearance. The skeletal community is now an echo of itself, having fractured under the pressure of the coal mine operating on its outskirts.

But Ro still wants answers. Only a few people remain. If the truth is to be found in that town, does it lie among them?

Also by Jane Harper

The Dry
Force of Nature
The Lost Man
The Survivors
Exiles

**JANE
HARPER**

**LAST ONE
OUT**



Contents

[Cover](#)

[About *Last One Out*](#)

[Also by Jane Harper](#)

[Title page](#)

[Contents](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About Jane Harper](#)

[End Ads](#)

[Copyright page](#)

[Newsletter](#)

*For all the wonderful librarians and booksellers
of my childhood and now, with my ongoing
gratitude as both a reader and a writer.*

Prologue

He had been here, that was clear from the marks in the dust. And he had been alone. That, too, was evident in the boot prints at each of the three houses. His movements could be traced with some precision, the scuffs and scrapes showing where he had walked. Along the length of a verandah, up a hallway and then back again, into a kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom. The dust showed where he had arrived and where he had left. One set of prints in, one set out.

It was almost believable from a distance that someone could still be living in the houses, but up close the illusion quickly crumbled. The truth was revealed in the detail.

The white cottage that looked so postcard-pretty perched at the top of a winding track, with its green coat of ivy reaching up towards the roof, had an odd quality on nearer inspection. The snaking vines smothered the exterior, binding the walls tight and choking the features. Hungry for more space, the growth had wormed its way through the cracks in the windowsills and doorways and was now slowly consuming the rooms inside.

To the west, a kilometre down the hillside, the Hillary farmhouse appeared more hospitable, but only at first glance. The broad wooden gate that used to swing open and closed smoothly and often had, for several years now, been wedged permanently ajar with leaves and debris gathering in dunes at the bottom of the posts. The home's weatherboard façade was barely clinging on to its last coat of paint, the cream colour flaking away like a scab to show the

raw, grey wood beneath. Three sagging steps led to an empty covered porch. The front door was missing. Where it had once stood firm and solid, painted a warm yellow, there was now a vacant rectangle of space. The home gaped open, its threshold unguarded, vulnerable and exposed to the elements.

The third house, across the paddocks to the east this time, did not look inviting even from a distance. The low sandstone bungalow had been decisively boarded up and was now sealed firm and tight, wooden panels nailed across its windows like a blindfold.

Each of the three houses had its own curving track. All were wide enough for a vehicle and all still carried a vague suggestion of having once been welcoming, but the surfaces now lay uneven and rough, overgrown in places with creeping weeds. The three tracks forged their own routes from the front of each home and down through the paddocks, until they met near the southern fence line. There, they converged for a short stretch to form a single access point from a country road. It had always been known as a quiet route, but now the road could often sit wholly undisturbed as a full day slipped away, morning to night.

The monotony had been broken that afternoon, though.

The bright red hatchback that had trundled up to the access point was small, with compact tyres and a suspension designed for city motoring. It was a rental car, chosen for its affordability above anything else. From inside the vehicle, the chip and ping of small stones bouncing off the paintwork could be heard over the frantic whir of the air conditioner.

The driver, a reluctant owner of the cheapest legal level of motor insurance, had winced from behind the wheel at each sound. It was his birthday; he had turned twenty-one years old that morning. His laptop bag jiggled on the passenger seat as he turned off the asphalted country road and onto the dirt track leading to the three houses. The small car immediately laboured and complained, and in the back he heard his water bottle and a thick notebook branded with the name of his university in Sydney slide from the seat and hit the footwell with a pair of rhythmic thumps. He swore lightly and glanced over his shoulder, only to snap his head back around immediately as the front right tyre hit a pothole, sending the car lurching. His hands gripped the wheel tighter as he frowned through the juddering windshield and efficiently guided the vehicle to the side of the track, where he brought it to a stop.

The grass alongside grew tall and yellow, and it shuddered in the hot wind as he opened the driver's door and stepped out of the cool, contained atmosphere and into the cloying heat of the February afternoon. He paused for a moment, then reached back to grab his broad-brimmed hat from the passenger-side footwell. Of medium height and stocky build, his hair and eyes a matching shade of brown, he slapped his hat on his head before leaning down to check the car. No harm done to the front tyre, he was relieved to see. He licked his thumb and ran it over the metal on the wing panel. A little damage to the paintwork, though. He swore again, silently under his breath, then straightened and turned his attention outwards. He let his eyes wander over each of the three properties in the distance and felt a familiar uneasy prickle of guilt.

When he'd been younger, this view had been pleasant, impressive even. Now the paddocks that used to be a blend of greens were brown and patchy, dotted in places by the odd sparse copse of sickly eucalyptus trees. He adjusted the brim of his hat to shield his eyes as he squinted against the angle of the sun and pushed the car door closed. He hesitated, then clicked the lock on the key fob. He wouldn't have bothered if it hadn't been a rental. In front of him lay empty paddocks; behind was only the deserted road and a dense stretch of bushland. There was no-one else in sight.

The boy turned back to the vehicle track. The long grass obscured sections from where he stood, but he didn't need to see it. He knew this track very well, knew exactly where it divided from one into three, each path leading to a different door. His gaze slid to the end of the trails and once again across the three outlying structures, left to right.

The weatherboard farmhouse, the ivy cottage, the stone bungalow.

The air that afternoon was carrying its strange tang that always seemed to coat his mouth and tongue, and he cleared his throat. The sound felt loud in the stillness. The only noise other than the rustle of the wind was an unnatural droning, distant but constant. The frequency was low enough that at times he could feel it more than he could hear it. Loud or quiet, he could always sense it though, rattling in his head.

He stood for another minute, debating with himself as the air grew hotter, and he felt an unpleasant feathery sensation where the skin of his neck met his hairline. He swatted impatiently at the bead of sweat sliding down and glanced over at the car. It winked back at him, the metallic tint blinding

where it caught the sunlight. Somewhere out of sight, the deep murmur continued.

The young man breathed in, sucking in the tainted air, feeling its bitter flavour rolling around his teeth and gums. He exhaled, emptying his lungs. The wind sent the dust at his feet swirling up, dancing and floating in the light as it latched on to his clothes and skin, and only then, at last, did he move.

Above, the sun slowly crawled across the sky.

It was low on the horizon and the light was fading when his parents finally found the small red rental car, more than five hours later, parked near the point where the three tracks converged into one. The car was locked and seemingly undamaged beyond some minor chips to the paintwork. Its metallic sheen appeared dull now as the last of the daylight dwindled. A laptop lay undisturbed on the front seat, a water bottle and notebook in the rear. On the counter of his family's kitchen, six kilometres away on the south-eastern side of town, the young man's twenty-first birthday dinner waited for him, cold and untouched.

His parents stood beside the car, looking first to each other for answers and then out, at the horizon, the houses, the road, the bushland. They called their son's name into the twilight, perhaps a little self-consciously to start with and then, when there was no response, with mounting urgency. Straining their ears for a reply. Beneath the distant low rumbling there was only silence. At the end of the tracks, the three houses stood empty and still as they in turn were swallowed by shadow.

The weatherboard farmhouse. The ivy cottage. The stone bungalow.

Exposed, strangled, blinded, they sat quietly in the growing dark, waiting for whatever would come next.

Chapter 1

Five years later

Ro Crowley couldn't say she hadn't been warned, because she had. And by now she shouldn't have been surprised, and yet still she found she was.

The radio crackled in the dashboard, the sound fading in and out as she drove along the deserted country road, choosing her own speed because she could. There were no other cars, no-one else around to inconvenience or endanger when every now and again she would slow to a halt in the middle of the cracked asphalt, engine idling as she stared through the window at something else that made her face go slack with disbelief. Driving through this place was like being administered with a series of small, unpleasant electric shocks.

The Hewetts had gone, and they'd taken the orchard arch.

It was this absence that made Ro jam her foot hard on the brake, jerking forward against her seatbelt as the car lurched to a stop beside the gravel shoulder.

The Hewetts' place was deep within the town limits, well beyond the road sign that had once clearly welcomed visitors to Carralon Ridge. The same sign now barely whispered its message in paint that had peeled and faded away.

The Hewetts' neat little house with its wrought-iron lacework was set well

back on a generous acreage that had once been lush with rows of fruit trees. The home was still in good condition, externally at least, but every window was dark and the driveway empty. They'd left the trampoline, Ro could see from the road. The one that the Hewett grandchildren could be found tussling on most days in summer, the warm air punctuated by the creak of the springs and the muffled yelps of sibling arguments. Dead leaves covered the mat now, and the grass around the base, which Doug Hewett had kept permanently short and stubby so the grandkids wouldn't be bothered by snakes and vice versa, was tall enough to scrape the springs.

Ro peered at the property through the windshield, a stone of disbelief and dismay turning in her chest, as she switched off the engine. She climbed out of her car, leaving it where she'd stopped in the road and walked over to the fence. She put both hands on a post, her gaze sliding past the house, ignoring the vacant windows and the abandoned trampoline, and instead settling on the north-facing orchard, now growing rambling and wild.

An intricate archway made of woven steel had once stood at the entrance to that orchard. And on a spring day, what felt like a long twenty-seven years ago, Ro had helped thread the arch with boughs of native greenery and handfuls of garden flowers and then she'd been married beneath it. Now, though, the archway was gone. In its place stood nothing but tufts of dry grass and sagging trees, groaning under the weight of their unpruned limbs. Ro stared at the void for another minute, then pushed herself away from the fence and went back to her car. She climbed in, restarted the engine and drove away, not looking in the rear-view mirror.

She didn't stop again, instead simply noting any changes as she caught them. There was a padlocked chain on the door of the community hall. That had been added since her last visit twelve months earlier. The windows of the former medical centre were entirely covered with yellowing newspaper pages, but that was not new; the stories printed on the pages were three-and-a-half years out of date. Ro touched the brake gently as she drew near. The paper was peeling in the corner of the farthest window, the one she used to glance out of between patients' visits to her clinic room for close to two decades.

As she approached, she considered pulling over, walking up to the blacked-out window and pressing her eye to the gap. She was tall enough that she'd be able to peek through, but there'd be nothing much to see on the other

side. The practice manager had sold most of the furniture and equipment after the centre had closed. No-one worked there anymore. Ro drew level but kept moving, driving by slowly and only tearing her gaze away when the building fell behind her, out of sight.

Something was very different here, though, she sensed as she approached the crossroads that over the years had served as the centre of Carralon. Once the heart and hub of the place, the commercial land on the four corners used to be prime real estate, but now the former bank was boarded up. Its official branding had long since been torn down but had left such a distinct shadow on the hoarding that the name of the branch was still clearly legible from the other end of the street. Diagonally opposite had stood Greeves & Son, where Ro used to buy her children's clothes and school uniforms. Its doors had permanently closed four years ago and twelve months later what remained of the school followed in its wake.

Now, only two of the four corner sites were occupied. On the north-eastern spot, the struggling general store was still limping along, Ro could see. Supplying basics to a handful of residents who barely numbered enough to support the business but also couldn't do without it.

And on the south-western corner stood the pub.

There was an abnormality in the air, though. Ro could feel it as she brought the car to a stop at the crossroads, the junction as quiet in either direction as the long country roads leading up to it. The sun was low, bathing the town in a warm orange light. Ro tapped her fingers against the steering wheel and looked around. The answer was right in front of her, but even then the sheer peculiarity of it meant it took a moment longer to register.

The pub lights were off.

Ro gaped, only dragging her eyes away to check the time on the dashboard. It was just after six o'clock on a Thursday night. A warm, clear evening in summer, on a day that had traditionally been observed by all in Carralon as the gateway to the weekend, and the Black Creek Inn was closed.

Feeling almost light-headed with disorientation, Ro pulled into the deserted pub car park and got out. A crinkled sheet of paper with a handwritten notice had been stuck to the inside of the glass door, the letters faded in the sunlight to the point that the note may as well have been blank. She squinted at it, trying to get a sense of the message. Giving up, she used her thumb to wipe a clear square in the dirty glass then put her face to it,

cupping her hands to shield out the daylight as she peered in.

The place hadn't been gutted at least. That surely meant something. A single fluorescent exit light flickered at the end of the room, illuminating the battered wooden bar top. The familiar collections of old hats and faded postcards were still pinned to the wall above the shelves behind the bar. Ro couldn't imagine Sylvie leaving them behind, and besides, Ro felt absolutely certain she would have heard about it if the woman had gone. A couple of tall circular tables still stood by the window, the odd barstool scattered around. Behind the countertop, though, the glass fridges were almost empty. A few lonely bottles and cans barely filled a single shelf. The Black Creek Inn still looked technically operational, Ro decided, but that was probably the best that could be said for it.

She eased away from the door, her blurred reflection staring back at her from the murky glass. It was both like her and not. Her eyes fell somewhere between grey and green but appeared in the glass as dark hollows in her face, her straight nose and gently rounded face without definition in the mirrored image. Ro's hair had always been a warm golden brown when she'd lived here before, but now it looked flat and colourless, tied back from her face in a way that didn't suit her but felt more comfortable in the heat. Ro had lived in this town for so many years as a younger woman that she almost half-expected on returning that she'd somehow slip back into the more youthful body that had walked these same streets, tap into that less-burdened mind and lighter spirit. She waited a moment, and when once again it didn't happen, Ro simply turned away.

She looked back down the road, her ears straining instinctively for the typical sounds of life. The distant rumbling had stopped, for now, leaving the air so quiet that Ro felt she could be standing alone in a wide, open paddock rather than loitering in a car park in the alleged heart of town. The streets seemed to almost sing their own mournful, lonely song. It was the creak and settle of unused spaces, the sound surprisingly loud when not muffled by movement and bodies and chatter.

Ro walked back to her car and was reaching for the door when she heard something else. She paused, fingers grazing the handle, and tilted her head to listen. A clanging noise, metal on metal. And then again, this time possibly metal on wood, or the other way around. It had an unpredictable rhythm, frequent but irregular. Odd gaps of silence filled the space between the

pockets of sound. Ro listened for a moment longer, then let her hand slip from the car. The noise had a different quality to the natural cracks and groans of the derelict buildings, and she wandered out onto the street, turning as she tried to pinpoint the source. It stopped, then started again, and somewhere underneath she caught a different noise. A faint gurgle of laughter.

Ro stopped where she stood. She had once known everyone in town, but things changed. Instead, she stayed where she was, outside the old hairdressers' salon and a storefront that had been dark for so long she couldn't remember what it had ever been, and listened as the banging started again. It was unexpectedly loud at times, but she had the impression the sound was carrying in the warm, still air. Ro could not tell if she was close or far away when all at once it stopped dead. She stood unmoving in the middle of the street, her own breath in her ears now the loudest noise to be heard. The silence stretched long enough that she began to wonder if she'd been mistaken.

Her phone twitched in her jeans pocket, making her jump a little, and she pulled it out. Ro held it in her palm, letting it ring twice, three times, as she looked at her former husband's name on the screen, then tapped the button to answer the call.

'Hi, Griff.'

'Hi.' His voice was flat, the end of the word cut off. She could hear the rustle of him swapping the phone over in his hands. 'I'm up on the ridge. Saw your car.'

Ro pivoted, turning towards the north and shielding her eyes as she looked past the roofline of the town to the hills beyond. It took her longer than it ever had before to find the spot she was looking for. The place where the bushland broke, giving way to a craggy outcrop forming the ridge for which the town had been named. It must have been prominent in the past but the trees had all but swallowed it now. Catching sight of it at last, she scoured the space for a flash of the binoculars that would be trained on her. She couldn't see them, couldn't make out Griff at all, and after a few moments she gave up, dropping her hand and turning to make her way back to her car.

'Found a parking spot at the pub with no problem,' she said drily into her phone as she walked. 'It's closed?'

'Yeah.' The word came down the line heavy with emotion. 'A lot of the time,