

Prologue

From above, from a distance, the marks in the dust formed a tight circle. The circle was far from perfect, with a distorted edge that grew thick, then thin and broke completely in places. It also wasn't empty.

In the centre was a headstone, blasted smooth by a hundred-year assault from sand, wind and sun. The headstone stood a metre tall and was still perfectly straight. It faced west, towards the desert, which was unusual out there. West was rarely anyone's first choice.

The name of the man buried beneath had long since vanished and the landmark was known to locals – all sixty-five of them, plus 100,000 head of cattle – simply as the stockman's grave. That piece of land had never been a cemetery; the stockman had been put into the ground where he had died, and in more than a century no-one had joined him.

If a visitor were to run their hands over the worn stone, a partial date could be detected in the indentations. A one and an eight and a nine, maybe – 1890-something. Only

three words were still visible. They had been carved lower down, where they had better shelter from the elements. Or perhaps they had been chiselled more deeply to start with; the message deemed more important than the man. They read:

who went astray

Months, up to a year even, could slip away without a single visitor passing by, let alone stopping to read the faded inscription or squint west into the afternoon sun. Even the cattle didn't linger. The ground was typically sandy and sparse for eleven months of the year and hidden under murky floodwater for the rest. The cows preferred to wander north, where the pickings were better and trees offered shade.

So the grave stood mostly alone, next to a thin three-wire cattle fence. The fence stretched a dozen kilometres east to a road and a few hundred west to the desert, where the horizon was so flat it seemed possible to detect the curvature of the earth. It was a land of mirages, where the few tiny trees in the far distance shimmered and floated on non-existent lakes.

There was a single homestead somewhere to the north of the fence, and another to the south. Next-door neighbours, three hours apart. The road to the east was invisible from the grave itself. And road was a generous description. The wide dirt track could sit silent for days without being troubled by a vehicle.

The track eventually led to the town of Balamara – a single street, really – which catered loosely for a scattered population that could almost fit into one large room when

gathered together. Fifteen hundred kilometres further east lay Brisbane and the coast.

At scheduled times during the year, the sky above the stockman's grave would vibrate with the roar of a helicopter. The pilots worked the land from the air, using noise and movement to herd cattle over distances the size of small European countries. For now, though, the sky loomed empty and large.

Later – too late – a helicopter would fly over, deliberately low and slow. The pilot would spot the car first, with its hot metal winking. The grave, some distance away, would draw his attention only by chance as he circled around and back in search of a suitable landing site.

The pilot would not see the dust circle. It was the flash of blue material against the red ground that would catch his eye. A work shirt, unbuttoned and partially removed. The temperature the past few days had hit forty-five degrees at the afternoon peak. The exposed skin was sun-cracked.

Later, those on the ground would see the thick and thin marks in the dust and would fix their eyes on the distant horizon, trying not to think about how they had been made.

The headstone threw a small shadow. It was the only shade in sight and its blackness was slippery, swelling and shrinking as it ticked around like a sundial. The man had crawled, then dragged himself as it moved. He had squeezed into that shade, contorting his body into desperate shapes, kicking and scuffing the ground as fear and thirst took hold.

He had a brief respite as night fell, before the sun rose and the terrible rotation started again. It didn't last as long on the second day, as the sun moved higher in the sky. The man had tried though. He had chased the shade until he couldn't anymore.

The circle in the dust fell just short of one full revolution. Just short of twenty-four hours. And then, at last, the stockman finally had company, as the earth turned and the shadow moved on alone, and the man lay still in the centre of a dusty grave under a monstrous sky.

Chapter 1

Nathan Bright could see nothing, and then everything all at once.

He had crested the rise, gripping the steering wheel as the off-road terrain tried to snatch control from his hands, and suddenly it was all there in front of him. Visible, but still miles away, giving him too many minutes to absorb the scene as it loomed larger. He glanced over at the passenger seat.

‘Don’t look,’ he was tempted to say, but didn’t bother. There was no point. The sight dragged the gaze.

Still, he stopped the car further from the fence than he needed to. He pulled on the handbrake, leaving the engine and the air conditioner running. Both protested the Queensland December heat with discordant squeals.

‘Stay in the car,’ he said.

‘But —’

Nathan slammed the door before he heard the rest. He walked to the fence line, pulled the top wires apart and climbed through from his side to his brothers’.

A four-wheel drive was parked near the stockman's grave, its own engine still running and its air conditioner also spinning full pelt, no doubt. Nathan cleared the fence as the driver's door opened and his youngest brother stepped out.

'G'day,' Bub called, when Nathan was close enough to hear.

'G'day.'

They met by the headstone. Nathan knew he would have to look down at some point. He delayed the moment by opening his mouth.

'When did you –' He heard movement behind him and pointed. 'Oi! Stay in the bloody car!' He had to shout to cover the distance and it came out more harshly than he'd intended. He tried again. 'Stay in the car.'

Not much better, but at least his son listened.

'I forgot you had Xander with you,' Bub said.

'Yeah.' Nathan waited until the car door clicked shut. He could see Xander's outline through the windshield; at sixteen, more man than boy these days. He turned back to his brother. The one standing in front of him, at least. Their third sibling, middle-born Cameron Bright, lay at their feet at the base of the headstone. He had been covered, thank God, by a faded tarp.

Nathan tried again. 'How long have you been here?'

Bub thought for a moment, the way he often did, before answering. His eyes were slightly hooded under the brim of his hat, and his words fell a fraction of a beat slower than average speaking pace. 'Since last night, just before dark.'

'Uncle Harry's not coming?'

Another beat, then a shake of the head.

‘Where is he? Back home with Mum?’

‘And Ilse and the girls,’ Bub said. ‘He offered, but I said you were on your way.’

‘Probably better someone’s with Mum. You have any trouble?’ Nathan finally looked at the bundle at his feet. Something like that would draw out the scavengers.

‘You mean dingoes?’

‘Yeah, mate.’ Of course. What else? There wasn’t a huge amount of choice out there.

‘Had to take a couple of shots.’ Bub scratched his collar-bone and Nathan could see the edge of the western star of his Southern Cross tattoo. ‘But it was okay.’

‘Good. All right.’ Nathan recognised the familiar frustration that came with talking to Bub. He wished Cameron were there to smooth the waters and felt a sudden sharp jab of realisation under his ribs. He made himself take a deep breath, the air hot in his throat and lungs. This was difficult for everyone.

Bub’s eyes were red and his face unshaven and heavy with shock, as was Nathan’s own, he imagined. They looked a bit, but not a lot, alike. The sibling relationship was clearer with Cameron in the middle, bridging the gap in more ways than one. Bub looked tired and, as always these days, older than Nathan remembered. With twelve years between them, Nathan still found himself faintly surprised to see his brother edging into his thirties rather than still in nappies.

Nathan crouched beside the tarp. It was weather-bleached and had been tucked tight in places, like a bedsheet.

‘Have you looked?’

‘No. I was told not to touch anything.’

Nathan instantly disbelieved him. It was his tone, or perhaps the way the sheet lay at the top end. Sure enough, as he reached out, Bub made a noise in his throat.

‘Don’t, Nate. It’s not good.’

Bub had never been good at lying. Nathan withdrew his hand and stood. ‘What happened to him?’

‘I don’t know. Just what was said on the radio.’

‘Yeah, I missed a lot of it.’ Nathan didn’t quite meet Bub’s eye.

Bub shifted. ‘Thought you promised Mum you’d keep it on, mate.’

Nathan didn’t reply and Bub didn’t push it. Nathan looked back across the fence to his own land. He could see Xander, restless, in the passenger seat. They’d spent the past week moving along the southern boundary, working by day, camping by night. They had been on the brink of downing tools the previous evening when the air around had vibrated as a helicopter swooped overhead. A black bird against the indigo death throes of the day.

‘Why is he flying so late?’ Xander had said, squinting upwards. Nathan hadn’t answered. Night flying. A dangerous choice and an ominous sign. Something was wrong. They’d turned on the radio, but by then it was already too late.

Nathan looked now at Bub. ‘Look, I heard enough. Doesn’t mean I understand it.’

Bub’s unshaven jaw twitched. *Join the club.* ‘I don’t know what happened, mate,’ he said again.

‘That’s okay, tell me what you do know.’

Nathan tried to tone down his impatience. He’d spoken to Bub on the radio briefly the previous evening, as dark fell, to say he would drive over at first light. He’d had a hundred more questions, but hadn’t asked any of them. Not on an open frequency where anyone who wanted to listen could tune in.

‘When did Cam head out from home?’ Nathan prompted when Bub seemed at a loss as to where to start.

‘Morning the day before yesterday, Harry said. Around eight.’

‘So, Wednesday.’

‘Yeah, I guess. But I didn’t see him ’cause I’d headed out myself on Tuesday.’

‘Where to?’

‘Check a couple of those water bores way up in the north paddock. Plan was for me to camp up there, then drive over to Lehmann’s Hill on Wednesday and meet Cam.’

‘What for?’

‘Fix the repeater mast.’

Well, so Cam could fix it, Nathan thought. Bub would mostly have been there to pass the spanner. And for safety in numbers. Lehmann’s Hill was on the western edge of the property, a four-hour drive from home. If the repeater mast was out in that area, so was long-range radio contact.

‘What went wrong?’ Nathan said.

Bub was staring at the tarp. ‘I got there late. We were supposed to meet at around one but I got stuck on the way. Didn’t get to Lehmann’s until a couple of hours later.’

Nathan waited.

‘Cam wasn’t there,’ Bub went on. ‘Wondered if he’d been and gone but the mast was still out so I thought probably not. Tried the radio but he never came into range. So I waited a bit, then headed towards the track. Thinking I’d run into him.’

‘But you didn’t.’

‘Nup. I kept trying the radio but no sign of him.’ Bub frowned. ‘Drove for about an hour but I still hadn’t made the track so I had to stop. Getting dark, you know?’

Under the brim of his hat, his eyes looked for reassurance and Nathan nodded.

‘Not much else you could do.’ It was true. The night was a perfect shroud of black out at Lehmann’s Hill. Driving in the dark, it was only a question of whether the car would crash into a rock or a cow or roll off the road. And then Nathan would have had two brothers covered by a tarp.

‘But you were getting worried?’ Nathan said, although he could guess the answer.

Bub shrugged. ‘Yeah and no. You know how it is.’

‘Yeah.’ Nathan did. They lived in a land of extremes in more ways than one. People were either completely fine, or very not. There was little middle ground. And Cam wasn’t some tourist. He knew how to handle himself, and that meant he could well have been half an hour up the road, slowed down by the dark and out of range, but snug in his swag with a cool beer from the fridge in his boot. Or he might not.

‘No-one was picking up the radio,’ Bub was saying. ‘No-one’s ever bloody up there this time of year, and with the tower out —’ He gave a grunt of frustration.

‘So what did you do?’

‘Started driving in at dawn, but it still took ages before anyone picked up.’

‘How long?’

‘I dunno.’ Bub hesitated. ‘Probably a half-hour to get to the track, then another hour after that. Even then, it was only a couple of those idiot jackaroos over at Atherton. Took them bloody ages to get hold of the manager.’

‘They always hire dickheads at Atherton,’ Nathan said, thinking of the neighbouring property to the north-east. It sprawled over an area the size of Sydney. It was, as he’d said, staffed by dickheads, but was still the best chance around there of connecting with anyone. ‘So they raised the alarm?’

‘Yeah, but by then . . .’ Bub stopped.

By then no-one had seen or heard from their brother for about twenty-four hours, Nathan calculated. The search was well into the urgent phase before it had even started. As per protocol, every surrounding property would be informed and it was all hands on deck, for what it was worth. Over those distances, hands were few and far between and it could take a long time to reach the deck.

‘The pilot spotted him?’

‘Yeah,’ Bub said. ‘Eventually.’

‘Anyone you know?’

‘Nah, contractor based down near Adelaide. Been working on Atherton for the season. Some cop got him on the flight comms, told him to do a flyover and check the roads.’

‘Glenn?’

‘No. Someone else. From police dispatch or something.’

‘Right,’ Nathan said. It was lucky the pilot had seen

Cameron at all. The stockman's grave was two hundred kilometres from Lehmann's Hill and the main search area. 'When did he call it in?'

'Mid-arvo, so most people hadn't even made it to Lehmann's by then. It was pretty much only me and Harry out there still, but I was about an hour closer so I said I'd drive over.'

'And Cam was definitely dead?'

'That's what the pilot said. Had been for a few hours, by the sound of it. Cop still got on the radio and made him do all these checks.' Bub grimaced. 'I got here near sunset. The bloke had covered Cam over like he was told to but he was pretty keen to get going. Didn't want to lose the light and get stuck here.'

Fair enough, Nathan thought. He wouldn't have wanted to stay either. He felt bad that the task had fallen to Bub.

'If Cam was supposed to be meeting you at Lehmann's Hill, what was he doing out here?'

'Don't know. Harry said he'd written in the planner that he was heading out to Lehmann's.'

'Nothing else?'

'Not that Harry said.'

Nathan thought about that planner. He knew where it was kept, next to the phone, inside the back door of the house that had once been their dad's and had then become Cameron's. Nathan had written in it himself plenty of times growing up. He'd also not written in it plenty of times, when he'd forgotten or couldn't be bothered, or didn't want anyone to know where he was going, or couldn't find a pen.

He could feel the heat bearing down on his neck and he

looked at his watch. The digital numbers were covered in fine red dust and he wiped his thumb across them.

‘What time are they due?’ *They* meaning police and medical. *They* also meaning two people. One of each. Not a team, not out there.

‘Not sure. They’re on their way.’

That didn’t mean it would be soon, though. Nathan looked down at the tarp again. The marks in the dust.

‘Did he look injured?’

‘Don’t think so. Not that I could see. Just hot and thirsty.’ Bub’s face was tilted down as he touched the edge of the dust circle with the toe of his boot. Neither brother mentioned it. They both knew what it meant. They had seen similar patterns made by dying animals. A thought struck Nathan and he looked around.

‘Where’s all his stuff?’

‘His hat’s under the tarp. He didn’t have anything else.’

‘What, nothing?’

‘Pilot said not. He was told to check, take some pics. Reckoned he couldn’t see anything else.’

‘But –’ Nathan scanned the ground again. ‘Not *anything*? Not even an empty water bottle?’

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Did you have a proper look?’

‘You can see for yourself, mate. You’ve got eyes.’

‘But –’

‘I don’t know, all right? I don’t have any answers. Stop asking me.’

‘Yeah, okay.’ Nathan took a deep breath. ‘But I thought the pilot found the car?’

‘He did.’

‘So where is it?’ He didn’t bother to hide his frustration now. *Get more sense from the cows than from bloody Bub*, as their dad used to say.

‘Near the road.’

Nathan stared at him. ‘Which road?’

‘How many roads are there? Our one. This side of the boundary, a bit north of your cattle grid. Jesus, this was all on the radio, mate.’

‘It can’t be. That’s ten kilometres away.’

‘Eight, I reckon, but yeah.’

There was a long silence. The sun was high and the slice of shade thrown by the headstone had shrunk to almost nothing.

‘So Cam left his car?’ Beneath Nathan’s feet, the earth tilted very slightly on its axis. He saw the look on his younger brother’s face and shook his head. ‘Sorry, I know you don’t know, it’s just —’

He looked past his brother, to where the horizon lay long and still. The only movement he could see was Bub’s chest, expanding in and out as he breathed.

‘Have you been out to the car?’ Nathan said, finally.

‘No.’

Telling the truth this time, Nathan thought. He glanced over his shoulder. Xander was a dark shape hunched forward in his seat.

‘Let’s go.’