

CHAPTER 1

HELEN BECAME AWARE OF THE MOVEMENT, a sinuous undulation on the periphery of her vision as she turned her head to read the right-hand page of the book.

She knew she must not move. She tried to slow her breathing as her body struggled to pump adrenalin to muscles already tightening ready for flight.

She must not move.

The snake paused, swayed its head from side to side as its tongue tested the air: as if it knew there was a difference here. Helen wondered if it could smell her skin or her fear.

She sat still, her eyes on the snake's head. Was a snake like a dog and did not like eye contact? Should she look away? Could she look away? She was wearing Blundstone boots but she wished that her socks were longer. The skin of her ankle was vulnerable and so close to where the snake lay almost as still as she was.

To calm herself, Helen tried to be scientific about it; to watch this close contact with another species. To admire its glossy skin, its length. *God! The creature must be nearly two metres long!* The trail it had made in the red sandy soil looked like the track of a finger drawn through spilt sugar.

Helen thought calm thoughts. She tried to be still. A nerve twitched in her face and she wondered if the snake could hear it, see it, sense it.

It was still very cool and at this early hour cold-blooded animals are lethargic. Until the heat of the sun gave it energy, the snake would probably do no more than move slowly

around, sensing what was new or different in its familiar territory.

It seemed to have finished checking Helen out; with a slow swirl in the sand it turned away and glided through the red sugar to another rock, several metres away. Helen watched it go behind the rock and stayed perfectly still until she saw it emerge from the other side and continue its journey down the slight slope of the scree. When she could see it no more, she breathed deeply, and stretched out one leg at a time until her muscles relaxed and she could stand up.

This was her territory too and Helen should not have been taken by surprise by the snake. She had been coming to the north west of Western Australia for several years and was used to animals coming close. She always enjoyed the curiosity of kangaroos and wallabies, the ponderous emus, and birds so brilliant that they sometimes glittered like jewels on the naked branches of parched gum trees. Helen loved everything this isolated corner of the world could offer – and still she could forget to be wary of snakes. Especially King Brown snakes – the deadliest in Australia.

She picked up the book and went – very cautiously – down the scree and into the tent. She checked it carefully; no snakes, thank Heaven.

Somehow the book had lost its appeal. A thriller – a murder story – which had been her bedtime and early morning reading for a couple of weeks. Now its excitement had palled. *You can't beat an encounter with a snake for excitement.* She put the book away in the metal-cornered wooden box where Jack had packed their chess set, a few other books and her working papers.

If she wasn't going to read, maybe she should write to someone – it wouldn't be put in the post for a while but it

would be welcome when it arrived. She would let Teresa know that everything was going well, even if they hadn't found the cave. Helen fished a postcard out of the box and sat on the camp bed to write. The postcard was a photograph of Montana; she looked at it for a moment, remembering when she had spent a sabbatical there. Her mind drifted back to Teresa and the last time they had been together.

The planned farewell party had been low-key, at Helen's insistence and much against Teresa Vandenburg's exuberant suggestions.

It came at the end of a year that Helen enjoyed but, since making up her mind to retire, the time seemed to pass slowly. She was asked to reconsider her decision to leave the job. However, now there was a reason to leave so compelling that she could no longer ignore it.

She was still young enough at sixty-two, and fit enough, for a few more trips to the desert. The Western Australian climate was hot and very hard on people. Temperatures could be below freezing in winter and over fifty degrees Centigrade in summer. In the north, far away from the State's few cities and country towns, people never bothered to talk about drought. What was there to say? It was almost always bone dry. There was an occasional flurry of rain; every few years, there might be enough to say it was raining.

Helen was accustomed to the outback's excesses, and so was her husband, Jack. Sometimes they combined her professional interests with trips to less demanding places, but most of their holidays were spent on the inhospitable fringe of the desert.

Now was the time to prove that her guess was right. Guess? How she resisted that word – ‘informed guess’ was the closest she allowed.

After ten years at the Fremantle laboratory of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, her job provided a fascinating conclusion to her career.

The advent of remote sensing using satellite imagery added a dimension beyond her earlier research experience. She left a comfortable university teaching post for CSIRO when she was promised access to the latest equipment and the time to follow her own ‘line of inquiry’.

For the last couple of years one small discovery – if it was a discovery – had grown into a powerful belief, an irresistible urge.

Perhaps her boss, Rod Ackroyd, the Chief of the Division of Land and Soil Investigations, smiled a little when she talked of finding an ancient water course in the heart of the desert, but the idea was intriguing and not totally beyond possibility. So Helen was given the job with the mapping team and enjoyed it until she was almost sixty-three.

For Helen’s last day at Fremantle, Teresa organized a low-key, minimalistic, almost invisible, farewell lunch (the adjectives were Teresa’s litany of disappointment) and the Chief had invited Jack to join them.

They ate in the canteen. People drifted in to sit four at a table, with cold roast chicken, ham and salad provided by the canteen manager. The centre piece was a huge fruit salad barely contained in the hollowed halves of a watermelon. The fruit salad was the gift – and the creation – of Teresa, who loved Helen dearly. Teresa was American and somewhat self-indulgent when it came to people and fruit salad.

Helen became aware during the last couple of weeks that there was real affection in the relationships she enjoyed at the research centre. She was surprised to find herself reluctant to close down her end of the laboratory, to say goodbye to the two scientists who shared the space.

At the farewell lunch, Charlie Lennard made a graceful speech, teasing her as he often had for poaching on his end of the lab, which he now intended to take back. Rob Woods made virtually the same comments.

Collusion, the Chief called it. 'A rare case of genuine collaboration,' he said in his speech.

Then it was Teresa's turn to say something.

'I am so happy that you all came to say goodbye to Helen. I can't say that I understand exactly what she does in the lab... '

'It's called "work", Teresa,' the Chief said.

'Yeah, well. What I do understand is that Helen is – well, great. She explains Australia to foreigners like me really well. I mean, up there is just like Arizona, she says. But different, right? She was telling me yesterday that everything up there has changed, that once there may have been a sort of Garden of Eden – '

Helen squirmed as most of the people in the canteen looked at her with amusement.

'Garden of *Where?*' A colleague said as he offered to fill Helen's glass, an offer which she refused.

'Anyway, I think her ideas about what the deserts of Australia might have been like are poetic, exciting and – very interesting. Yes.'

When Helen stood to say her farewells, she allowed herself a little sentiment, thanks to Teresa's coaching. Helen had meant simply to thank the Chief and her colleagues for their support, say how much she had enjoyed her time with CSIRO,

and that now she intended to work even harder in her retirement. Brief, grateful, amusing. Just the ticket.

As she looked around the friendly people she had known little about, so preoccupied had she been with her work, she felt a need to express some of these thoughts. Teresa had offered to write something for her, but Helen had her own ideas and was glad she had turned down the offer.

‘I don’t know about a Garden of Eden, Teresa. I think I was a bit carried away there.’ She smiled at Teresa, who was eating another bowl of fruit salad.

‘The geography has changed, of course; and I do think there might have been more water around within the last few hundred years – more recently than has been believed. I hope to find out about that in the next few weeks.’ Helen took a sip of wine, glanced at Jack, who nodded.

‘I have a very supportive husband – thank you Jack – who has been the stronger partner in my life. I tend to be very single-minded. What I want I usually try to get without fuss. Jack understands that and organises me accordingly. It’s the same here at work. I do my job and hope that other people won’t mind if I seem to take little interest in them or their work, their lives. I do care, but work has always been too exciting to ignore. I am grateful for everything you have given me; professional support, trust, friendship. I leave the lab with – well, affection for all of you.’

In the rest of her speech, Helen reflected on the years she had spent studying the structures and idiosyncrasies of landforms, and how much her work owed to Landsat imagery, the photographs taken by cameras mounted on distant satellites.

‘Once I was able to study the wider perspective of landforms, through the use of satellite mapping, my work

advanced by leaps and bounds. What we know about Australia's historical geography leapt ahead too, especially as so much of the country is still untouched, not buried beneath cities and agricultural change.

'I want to thank all of you for your friendship and support.'

Helen's speech was more gracious, more personal than she had intended.

She sat down. Jack passed her a glass of wine. Helen thanked him with a brief smile. Her husband knew she wouldn't want to show too much emotion in front of her colleagues.

Conversations started up: football, the weather, funding for research (never enough), Helen's work and where it had ended.

Rod Ackroyd walked over to Helen and sat down at the table across from her. 'We shall miss Dr Lytton.' He smiled at Jack as he spoke.

'I shall miss all of you,' Helen said. 'I'm a bit surprised by that. I mean – you know.'

'When are you setting off on the field trip, then?'

'Tomorrow. We'd be off today if Helen had her way.'

Jack reached across to the next table and helped himself to a wineglass which was still upside down. He filled it from the bottle of dry white wine in front of him and passed it to Ackroyd, who took a couple of sips.

Helen was looking off across the canteen, watching her former laboratory mates tease a young woman, an assistant in the Divisional Library. It had been like that for her when she was in her first job.

'They have to be more careful now, don't they?' She brought her attention back to Jack and Rod. 'I'm sorry – I was

just thinking that girls aren't fair game any more, are they? And a damn good thing they aren't.'

'If you're under forty the rules don't seem too difficult. It's the old blokes like me and Jack that have to watch ourselves.' Rod finished his drink quickly and stood up.

'I must go. Good luck, Helen. Keep us posted. And don't forget to pack your bathers.' He grinned, to make the point that he was teasing her.

Helen smiled and shook her head.

A shriek of laughter erupted from the girl Rob and Charlie were tormenting. As she backed away from him, Rob held his hands to his head like antlers and moved in mock threat towards her.

'Some young women don't know the rules, either. Let's go, Jack.'

Jack picked up the gifts and the graceful sheaf of wild flowers which had been presented to his wife.

Teresa saw them stand up and came hurrying across. She was almost as thin as Helen, but dressed in such a way that she seemed larger, more sensuous. She was thirty years younger, but they had been as close as Helen's reserve had allowed.

'Don't leave yet! I haven't had a chance to talk to you!'

Helen gave Teresa's arm a squeeze, but didn't pause in loading Jack with packages.

They left the canteen with smiles and good wishes on all sides.

Teresa opened the door of the old Commodore and helped Jack put the flowers on the back seat. Helen got into the front seat. Teresa stuck her head in and gave Helen a kiss on the cheek.

'I'll be waiting for a call. If you're right, it's going to be great news.'

She stood back as Jack started the engine and slowly drove the car out into Kerferd Street. Teresa waved, Helen waved. In the rear view mirror, Jack saw Teresa watching the car as it left the laboratory grounds, and vanished from her sight around the corner.

Inside the car, Helen was already talking about getting an early start the next day.

Everything was packed, of course. Packed and set out on the lounge room floor in apple-pie order. They didn't really need a list after so many field trips over the years, but practice made perfect and Jack rather enjoyed going over everything and ticking items off the list. *'Shorts: Jack 6. Shorts: Helen 6. Underpants: Jack 4. Underpants: Helen 4. Bras: Helen 2. Shirts, assorted: Jack 6 ...'*

After checking, he would load the LandCruiser and the trailer, never an easy task when they were going off for several weeks.

He occasionally reminded Helen that when he was a young civil engineer, working for a bridge-building company, this had been his first allotted responsibility and he had never left anything essential behind. Now it was a matter of pride that he would forget nothing, nor overlook anything. Helen could, and did, leave it to him.

They were going a long way this time; on a journey that had started almost a year ago.

By the time she made the decision to retire, Helen had been studying the Landsat images for five hours at a stretch, for some months. She had compared this with that, like with like, unlike with unlike. She had matched artificially-enhanced colours, contours, shapes and shadows. She had made allowances for discrepancies, time, mechanical twitches – everything she could think of. And still, at the corner of the

tiniest portion of the least significant and most minute area of the high-resolution images, almost on the edge of the desert, there was – this blip. This infinitesimal slip, this nudge. Helen had asked her colleagues to have a look for it, and neither Rob nor Charlie could find anything disconcerting. Rod Ackroyd had been asked to look, and he couldn't see anything either. No matter how carefully Helen enlarged the image with the computer, definition was soon lost. Only on the small image was the hint of a structural change visible. Visible only to Helen.

Even when she pointed out exactly where she could see it, and what she could see, the other scientists were blind to it. They fetched in other eyes, younger eyes, eyes used to looking through microscopes. Nobody but Helen could see the almost invisible – or quite invisible – mark, the equivalent of a stroke of a butterfly's antenna. Helen was quite sure it existed. She studied it over and over again, using the differing angles of the satellite's passage through the sky to provide her with subtle changes in the image. It was not always there; just sometimes. But those 'some times' were enough to persuade her that in a remote part of Western Australia, not deep into the desert but far enough to discourage people from going, there was a rock formation forming a cave. And in that cave was a black, shallow pit.

The pit did not contain the red sand of the desert. The blackness she could see in the images was the blackness of long-rotted vegetation, now solid like peat. Helen believed she had discovered the remnant of an unknown and ancient waterhole in an area where any rivers had dried up centuries ago, where no flood had ever been recorded.

Beneath that rock, Helen was convinced, inside the cave whose darkness was penetrated only when the satellite flew

low in the sky and the sun was just right, lay a dry marsh. A bog. This was evidence that water had covered even this arid corner of a long-dry continent, and more recently than had ever been imagined by scientists.

Now they were off to prove it.

They got off with a minimum of delay early the next morning. Jack checked the LandCruiser, the trailer, the tyres. He walked around the house checking that all the windows and doors were secure then, with a satisfied nod, he got in beside Helen and started the engine.

'Well, we're off, dear,' he said.

'Yes, we're off.'

After two overnight breaks at motels, the tired travellers came in sight of their first destination, the small town of Barwick. Jack had looked it up in the Royal Automobile Club's book and they were not at all surprised to find that there were few buildings other than the Primary School, which consisted of a transportable classroom alongside a fibreboard house. A toilet block was tucked around the side under some scrubby trees.

'That must be him: David Collins.' Helen pointed to the man squatting on the concrete steps outside the classroom. As they drew near, he stood up and raised a hand in greeting. He wore shorts and long socks and his boots were as dusty as the school steps. Over a thin, faded shirt, he wore a sleeveless sweater, rather to Helen's surprise. It was already hotter than she found really comfortable.

The cloud of red dust that had swirled behind them since they turned off the highway subsided when they stopped, settling over their hair and clothes as they walked over to David. Helen tried to smile without opening her mouth wide so as to keep the sand out. It worked until she was almost

within a handshake's reach of David, when a willy-willy whisked through the schoolyard, spinning the sand into a choking spiral.

'Damn!' Jack had reached David and was shaking his hand as the willy-willy went by. 'I hate these things!'

'Get used to them up here,' David said. 'Early mornings, regular as sun up.'

David invited them inside for a drink, but they chose to stay outside, standing under the solitary tree by the gate, stretching tired muscles while they drank a tin of beer, cold from the fridge. Behind the exchange of names and civilities, Helen was aware that they were sizing each other up.

'Get many visitors up here, do you?' Jack said.

'Not many. A few holiday makers: they stop for a break – use the toilet block if the gate's open, as it usually is. Japanese tourists sometimes find their way through Barwick. Can't think how. Nothing here.'

The cold tin felt good in the early heat of the day. Helen sipped the beer and held the tin between her hands. A couple of times Jack rolled his tin across his forehead.

'The Japanese don't know what to make of me. I reckon I'm the first aboriginal they have spoken to. Even when they speak English, they seem surprised that I do. Sometimes one of them will try to talk to me in a sort of Pidgin English.' David laughed, a loud, infectious kind of laugh that made Helen and Jack smile with him.

'Maybe it was Pidgin Japanese?'

Helen enjoyed David's story; he told it well, with gestures that seemed to sum up a Japanese being abundantly courteous but baffled.

'Whatever it was, they went away smiling.'

'Do you speak – anything else?' There were so many indigenous languages and Helen had no idea what was the local one.

'A bit. Not much.'

There was companionable silence for a while as they drank their beer and enjoyed the cold condensation on the tins. The quiet pleased Helen; she had never liked the social pressure to make conversation.

'Had some African-Americans through a year back,' David said. 'Family of them; a couple of kids, Mum, Dad, Grandpa. The kids were obviously dying to ask about me – about being black like them – but their parents were very circumspect. They were careful not to ask anything to do with race. Too careful, really. You know?'

Jack nodded.

'The youngest kid – she'd be about four – kept putting a finger on my arm. Just checking.' The memory clearly amused David; he grinned at Helen and shook his head. 'Just checking, eh?'

'Have you lived here long?' Jack's voice was tired, polite.

'Few years now. Came to teach here when I graduated. Back home, I suppose. Came from these parts.'

'You're the only teacher here?' Helen said.

'With seventeen kids in town, Barwick Primary School rates no more than one.'

They lapsed again into silence. Jack leant against the gate post while David squatted down on one haunch with a leg stuck straight out in front of him. They always do this, Helen thought, in films about Australia. Squatting down like that is a mark of 'typical' Australian behaviour. And it was comfortable. Not that she could quite manage it now. Not after a long drive.

Another willy-willy started up in the far corner of the schoolyard, spinning across on a random path, scattering scraps of dried grass as the swirl of dusty sand rose after it.

‘Going to be a hot one today,’ David said. ‘Probably going to hit a century again.’

When the willy-willy had passed, Helen went over to the schoolhouse steps and sat down.

‘Tell us about Barwick,’ she said. A nice, long rest was a good way to get her muscles working again. And Jack’s.

‘Not much to tell.’ David looked around. ‘The State government built the houses thirty years ago when the railway line went through. Basic stuff; two bedroom transportables, cyclone fencing round them, no grass of course. Not much anyway. Too hot. There were a few bigger houses for the bosses and some farmers retired here so their wives would be nearer to shops and facilities.’

‘Facilities?’ There were none in sight, that Helen could see.

‘Well, there used to be a shop here. Before they built better roads and closed the railway line. Now there’s just the garage round the back here. Barney sells petrol and diesel, of course, and flies his old Cessna to Meekatharra a couple of times a week for the papers, frozen milk, bread – stuff like that. Eggs – cigarettes. Brings fresh veggies and fruit with him; sometimes the odd passenger going to and from the doctor.’

‘That it?’ Jack finished his beer with the same finality as his question.

‘That’s it. Barwick.’ With a flourish worthy of an actor, David swept his arm around. It seemed to Helen like a good finale to their ‘getting to know you’ scene. She stood up, gave David the empty tin and dusted off her hands.

David led Jack inside the schoolhouse to see the shopping he had done on their behalf: fresh food for a few days and

provisions for a trip that could last five weeks. Everything was packed into margarine boxes, which the two started carrying out to the trailer, leaving the fresh food for last. There were plastic drums of water and steel jerrycans full of petrol; small gas cylinders for the cooking stove, lamps carefully packed into a case. Helen and Jack had brought with them all the canned and packaged food they would need.

'You've done well,' Jack said. He accepted another cold beer, and Helen did the same.

David smiled – a little tightly, Helen thought. She hoped he hadn't thought Jack's remark patronising. Jack always gave praise where he thought it due.

As though he sensed Helen's disquiet, David opened the classroom door and indicated an invitation for the Lyttons to go in.

'Have a look round?' he said. The memories of paint on doors and window frames on the outside of the building were blistered by the heat, and flaked at a touch.

'Thank you, yes.' Helen led the way in, amused to see how much like any other classroom this was. Even the chalky smell was familiar. There was a blackboard, there were desks, chairs, pictures on the walls. A bigger desk was on a platform at one end of the room. Four large fans hung from the ceiling. The big windows were flywired and had blinds halfway covering them.

'Seventeen children, David?' she said.

'On a good day, yes. Two of them are four years old; the rest are between six and fourteen. Then they have to go to the other school to finish off. Boarding school, of course. Too far to travel every day.'

'Seventeen,' Jack said. 'Not many, is it.'

'It's enough.' David shrugged.

'They'll benefit from all the extra attention you can give them,' Helen said. She was looking at the paintings by the children, hung up in a row along the back wall of the classroom. They were pictures of an imagined city: cars, trains, tall buildings eight stories high, and a traffic light figured in most of them.

'You must be glad of a break.' Jack spoke from the doorway, where he was looking along the unpaved, unmarked street. 'You don't mind spending the time working with us?'

'Of course not! You're scientists, right? Should be an interesting change for me, now the kids are on holiday.'

'I'm the scientist,' Helen said. 'Jack's the planner, organiser –'

'And general factotum,' said Jack.

Even to Helen, it sounded like a well-rehearsed exchange. Which it was.

'I'll be glad to get away for a while.' David pointed across the schoolyard to a gap in the peppermint trees. 'A bit sick of the scenery here.'

Children and dogs were playing on the dusty spaces between the houses and the school. The houses were a uniform grey; they had lost whatever colour they used to have.

'What's that, then?' Jack pointed down the road to a small, brightly-painted building.

'Oh, the Uniting Church used to be pretty strong here in its manifestation as the Methodists. It's their Hall. They have services there every fortnight, and the Catholic priest from Meeka comes over and says Mass once a month, on a Thursday night. There's a noticeboard outside with a sign on it: "Ring this number for pastoral care in any denomination." I've always liked that.'

Helen stood up and joined Jack at the door. Such grass as the residents of Barwick had tried to grow had dried up to a brittle, yellow stubble. A few pot plants added a splash of brave colour in pots outside front doors. They were mostly geraniums and a few natives. Helen noticed the flowers were red, all of them.

'Best be making tracks, then,' said Jack, offering his empty tin to David.

Helen gave her tin to David as he held out his hand for it.

David didn't head off back to the schoolhouse; for a moment he leaned against the doorframe of the schoolroom, the empty tins clicking together in one hand.

'Sounds like an interesting trip, Dr Lytton.' He didn't sound at all interested, Helen thought with some amusement. Australian men seemed to think it inappropriate to sound enthused or curious. Laid-back, that was what Teresa called it, and it sometimes exasperated Teresa almost beyond endurance.

'I think it will be, David. I'm glad you're going to be with us.'

He nodded and went down the steps.

Helen was pleased with David. He was in his late twenties, she thought – a short and square man, with closely-cut hair, and with short stubby fingers. A practical man. He was dressed much like Jack. Like both Helen and Jack, he carried a broad-brimmed hat. Nobody up here took risks with the sun.

Loading the LandCruiser took little time as Jack had left space for David's contributions. Helen was relieved to see that the men approved of each other; that David seemed to recognise that Jack knew what he was doing. Jack clearly liked the way David had done exactly what he had been asked to do, and the way he had given Jack the invoices without fuss.

Helen watched the loading, her mind elsewhere. She looked around the township; nobody was on the street. If you could call it a street.

Two children came around the corner, chasing a tennis ball. One was an aboriginal child with a cluster of surprisingly blonde curls; the other child had the olive skin and thick black hair that suggested a Mediterranean origin. There had been a lot of Italian and Greek migrants up here, Helen remembered. The kids looked at the visitors with curiosity but when Helen smiled at them, they scampered off and started to play cricket with the tennis ball and a stick.

'May I use your bathroom, David?' she said.

'Second on the left,' he said, pointing.

The building was prefabricated and had probably been transported to Barwick on the back of a couple of trucks, like the school itself. These buildings were designed to be moved from site to site, and had separable halves which workmen could fasten together in a few hours. Helen had seen a lot of them on her travels around the outback.

Through the bathroom window, Helen could see that a septic tank was buried off to one side under a load of imported gravel, with a vent pipe sticking up through the gravel. There was a water storage tank on a high platform beyond it; no doubt a water carrier came to refill it when the tank started to sound hollow if it was rapped with a knuckle. The house was a basic design with four rooms, and a verandah on three sides. She had noticed from the outside that, like the classroom, the paintwork was scraped almost to the colour of the sand by the abrasive action of wind and willy-willy.

The inside was painted a faded grey, not at all conducive to decorative touches. There were a couple of pictures on the wall of the living room, through which Helen had to go to

reach the bathroom. They were reproductions of familiar bush scenes by nineteenth century artists.

David Collins seemed to use only one of the two chairs which matched the brown leather sofa; there was a footstool in front of it, with a pile of magazines and a couple of books on a small table at its side. Pristine and plump, the cushions on the other chair and the sofa carried scenes of mediaeval jousting in faded colours. There were orange curtains, of a kind which Helen had seen before; they were like the curtains in the government flat she had lived in while working for three months in Canberra. Somebody must have bought a few kilometres of the stuff for the government. The curtains were pulled across the windows. They would keep the room cooler while David was away.

As she washed her hands, Helen looked at herself in the mirror over the washbasin. She saw the familiar thin face, hair which was a mixture of sandy ginger and white, and eyebrows too bristly now to lie down. For a fleeting moment, she was reminded of her father. She combed her hair back and flipped the rubber band around the short pigtail at the back.

After two nights in motels on the way up here, it would be good to sleep in a sleeping bag again, maybe under the stars if the tent were too hot. The bathroom was neat and clean, she noticed. One towel, no clutter. Good, they would have little time for niceties on the trip. A man living alone could be much more messy than this and make camping out uncomfortable.

She walked slowly through the hallway to the front door, glancing around. The house was scattered with books, but nothing else.

Just like home, she thought. A reasonable degree of mess.

Helen paused in the doorway and watched Jack and David for a moment, fanning herself with her straw hat. Her husband

was only a little taller than David, and a mite overweight now. He was almost the same age as Helen and, like her, was reasonably fit although there was a bit of a scare last year when his heart developed a murmur, whatever that was. Their doctor said that Jack should take life a bit more easily, so he had given up golf.

Now he was engrossed in studying a map with this man who was to be their guide for a few weeks. David certainly looked all right, Helen thought. That was one uncertainty resolved. Now she could forget about it and get on with the other uncertainties.

She walked across to the men, who had spread a couple of maps along the bonnet of the LandCruiser.

When they had planned the field trip, Jack had pointed out that although the Landsat map seemed sharply detailed, the scale was so large that in fact they could be wandering around in circles for days unless a local guide could understand the shapes and shadows of landforms well enough to identify the details exactly. That was why David was here.

They had waited for the school holidays, so that David would be available, although it would mean travelling in the hottest season. January and February in this part of the world were always hot.

As Helen reached them, the men turned one of the maps sideways so that she could read it with them. Jack had already unrolled the Landsat map that most nearly matched the scale of the road map, but of course they looked totally different. For half an hour Helen explained about landforms, shadows, shapes and the absence of tracks. At last David said he had a pretty good idea where they should look for the rock formation, but it might take some days to find. If it existed. Helen didn't mention that she was looking for signs of an old

water system; she didn't want David to be dulled with scepticism like her colleagues at the laboratory. David's job was to locate the structure which was something like a cave. Her job was to find out what was in it.

'You don't actually know it, then?' Helen had entertained little hope, but there had been just a small hope, that David would know this part of the desert well enough to identify the place straight away.

'No; but if it's there, we'll find it.'

'You know this country very well, we were told.' Jack sounded a little too bright and optimistic, Helen thought; maybe he wasn't all that confident.

David smiled. 'Like the back of my hand. Well, nearly. It's Arundijilaba country; my family. My uncle's uncle took me through this country all the time; taught me its history, our history. I know the place pretty well.'

'You're an Arundi - ; I'm sorry, what was it?' Helen made a gesture of apology.

'Arundijilaba, yes. Hardly any of us left now. A family or two in Perth, some moved to country towns and married local people. We've all left the traditional ways behind, of course.'

'Well, that should make it easier to find what we're looking for, shouldn't it? You being so familiar with the place?'

He nodded, smiling.

Helen was not entirely sanguine about it; she had done enough field trips into the desert in pursuit of particular landforms to know that it could take weeks to narrow down a search for the cave.

David locked up the house and put the key under a flowerpot by the front door. It seemed rather too obvious a hiding place to Helen as the pot, and there was only one, held no plant. David must feel secure up here, so far from the city.

Within a few moments they were on their way.

They drove on the highway for a few kilometres. The road was well constructed because heavy rigs came through Barwick on the way to the far North, where the mining companies had built their own towns. There were no kerbs, no cambers. Just a straight black line vanishing to a point in both directions. About six kilometres out of Barwick, David pointed to the right and Jack turned the LandCruiser off the road.

The desert they were driving across was not like the sand dune deserts of other parts of the country. The ground was flinty, red soil with little vegetation. Rain was scarce, measured not in centimetres but in months, even years, between falls. A lot of rocks were scattered about; over time the rocks exploded shards in the heat, making it tricky to walk about unless you were sure-footed. You could not afford a ricked ankle out here.

There were a lot of small hillocks, scree-sided hills up to twenty metres high, with larger slabs of rock flung across the tops during ancient upheavals of the earth, slabs now scraped smooth by centuries of abrasive sand-laden wind. This kind of desert was rough and red, the rocky sand seemed to go on for ever with little plant life, and hundreds of rocky outcrops fooled the eye into seeing shapes that vanished as you drew close to them.

There were no tracks; vehicles had to make their own way and as soon as the dust settled behind them, there was no trace of their passage.

The LandCruiser was tough in design and famously good at coping with this kind of landscape. Jack drove slowly, not stopping while they ate the ham and cheese sandwiches the last motel had made for their lunch, and David's, but stopping frequently to take their bearings. Helen used a compass and

David seemed to be marking off certain landforms in his mind, as though he carried a memory of what he was seeing.

They had reached a small billabong when dusk came, suddenly as always in the desert, and briefly. Jack and David put up the tents alongside the LandCruiser, first sweeping the ground free of sharp rock fragments. The tents were bright green, to ensure visibility from a distance.

David said he would use his sleeping bag, but sleep outside the tent. 'Make more room for the provisions,' he said.

The men anchored the guy-ropes with heavy rocks, in case of willy willies. Helen threw a couple of sleeping bags onto the camp beds Jack had set up in the tent she and Jack shared.

While Jack assembled the camp stove, David lit a fire, not always necessary at night but a pleasant place to sit around and chat. Helen fetched the three fold-up chairs, made from aluminium and canvas, from the LandCruiser and set them up around the fire.

Jack cooked steak kept cool in the fridge plugged into the LandCruiser, and they ate salad with it – the last salad they would have as it was too bulky to make space for in the fridge; out of the fridge in the desert heat it would be limp and lifeless in no time at all. A bottle of white burgundy was shared among three plastic cups.

David fetched a spade from the LandCruiser and dug a small depression in the ground for the bones and other remnants of the meal. There were no cans as yet to pack into plastic bags to take back with them.

He covered the remains neatly with the removed earth, and put a few stones on top. He picked up his cup and sipped the wine.

'This is a really great trip for me. I'm a single man, you know? So I had planned nothing for the school holidays except,

perhaps, a trip to Perth to see Allan Broadley – you talked to him – and maybe a couple of other old school friends.’ He sat down, poking the ash in the fire under the kettle.

Jack asked him gently prodding questions; David admitted that he would probably not have gone south – somehow the attraction of the city faded when the time came to pack up and go. He would probably have done exactly what he was about to do, but alone and with no particular objective.

‘I would have gone bush, probably. When I was wondering what to do in the holidays – stay in Barwick, or go to the city – Allan rang from the Aboriginal Centre in Perth. This scientist was looking for someone to help find a particular spot in the desert within a couple of hundred kilometres of Barwick. Would I like the job? Yeah, OK, I would, I told him. So here I am, acting as a sort of guide. Allan said the scientist was bringing her husband along, and they would share the cooking. I made sure of that; I wasn’t going to be perceived as a black servant, not me.’

He must be feeling comfortable with us to say that, Helen thought. Comfortable with us and the wine.

In the near-dark, Helen saw David’s broad smile as a double row of white teeth. She smiled back; they were all feeling relaxed, thank goodness.

The evening was very warm. Insects swarmed around the lamp. The billabong was still; the stars reflected in it made Helen feel as if she was floating with them, stars above and below.

They drank Nescafé and enjoyed the silence.

Helen was thinking about the problems a man like David would have; a primary school teacher, an aboriginal, unmarried and living alone. Bluntly, so bluntly that Jack shifted his position abruptly and she knew he was embarrassed, Helen

asked David if being black and living in a remote country township created problems for him. David poked again at the ash.

Sometimes, he told them, he wondered if he would marry – there were few educated black women up here in the country and he had experienced enough racist attacks, many of them physical, to shy clear of white women.

Still, it was his country, and he loved living here. He would spend the school holiday in the bush with Helen and Jack, and get back that feeling of belonging. His grandfather had been right about that; the feeling is there if you look for it.

They dug a hole for scraps and washed up, using water from the billabong and a towel which they hung on the LandCruiser to dry. Another hole, dug further away and with a pile of earth to scatter on top, provided the lavatory. Another handful of water was used to wash hands and faces and for cleaning teeth.

In their tent, Helen and Jack held hands for a little while, until Jack drifted off to sleep. David was snoring loudly within a few minutes. Helen thought about the farewell party and wondered briefly if she had forgotten to thank someone.

She turned over inside her sleeping bag and went to sleep.

Helen woke slowly, more slowly than usual. Usually, she would suddenly be awake and get out of bed almost at once. Today was different; not just because she was sleeping in a tent at the start of a new venture, there was something else. The dream re-formed; a hazy recollection of a conversation – an argument – a feeling of great anger; with a catch of breath Helen saw again her father's face. It was much like her own in colour and shape. She remembered how she had suddenly thought of him when she was looking in the mirror in David's

bathroom. That must be why she had dreamed about him. She rarely even thought about him these days; he had been dead since she was twenty. At the time she had needed him most, he had a heart attack and died in his sleep.

It was time to get up.

For two weeks the search went on. They moved camp three times as the search area narrowed. Helen was quite flattered that David seemed fascinated by the way she went about the job, scientifically dividing the land on the road map into squares, measuring the squares against the Landsat image, trying to equate the one with the other.

'It's a bit like trying to find a small black car in a car park as big as Victoria,' she said one day, a bit exasperated.

'A car park full of small black cars,' Jack said. Perhaps he intended to be funny, but his voice was tired.

On the sixteenth day, it was really hot. Over 39 degrees and not yet noon. They arrived back at the camp, after another unsuccessful foray. Helen sighed as she pulled off her hat, and rubbed the back of her neck. She rubbed it carefully, remembering that the sweat and dust could act like fine sandpaper and make her skin tender and sore.

'Are you all right, Jack love?' Helen watched her husband lean on the door of the LandCruiser, tired, with a mess of red dust and sweat in his hair and on his face. In fact, his whole body looked red and sweaty, what she could see of it, barely clothed in red-dusted and sweaty shorts and boots.

Jack smiled and said he was fine, just hot. Helen looked down at herself; Jack wasn't the only one who looked a mess. Only David managed to look reasonably cool after a day in the sun; he was really used to this climate. After all, he lived way up here.

She persuaded Jack to take it easy for the rest of the day. His way of resting was to take inventory of the supplies, which were in good shape and lasting well, he reported, just as he had planned.

For a brief time, maybe half an hour, she wondered if the excursion would end in failure. She knew that David was having problems relating the oddly-coloured Landsat images to the country around them. He said he understood that the colours of the map were created by the computer, to make differences apparent, but it confused him. Helen had been hiding her impatience, knowing that Jack sympathised with David; about all Jack could ever see was the difference between agricultural land and the rest. Still, as the days went on, David had become more familiar with the maps and sometimes set off at high speed in pursuit of something, some rock shape, of which he was suddenly reminded. He would end the chase shaking his head and saying that his uncle's uncle would have found what they were seeking on the first day.

Helen shook herself out of anxiety. They knew that if the particular rock formation existed, if the cave existed, it was somewhere hereabouts. It must be here, and they would find it. The trouble was, as Helen said over dinner that night – canned curry from Campbell's factory in Shepparton, specially sent over to Perth at her request – the trouble was that at ground level everything always looks different. She drew a circle on the ground with a stick, and a smaller circle in its centre; alongside it she drew a figure resembling a capital M with very broad serifs. 'Look at these. From up there, the circle could be anything. But if you knew it looked like this –' She jabbed the capital M. 'From the side – you'd know straight away what it was.'

She threw the stick aside. Jack and David went on looking at the circle and the letter M.

'Well, I don't know.' Jack looked at David, who shook his head.

'Oh, for goodness sake, it's a hat, isn't it.' Helen picked up her straw hat, which had been at the side of her chair since the sun went down, and dropped it between the two men. 'See?'

'I was thinking you meant something much bigger,' Jack said. 'You know, more like a mountain or a lake.'

'A place to keep cattle in,' David said, but without much enthusiasm.

'A hat. Just a hat.' Helen stood up; stretched her arms above her head and yawned. 'I'm for bed.'

She watched as Jack and David checked that the fire was completely dead and they cleaned up the few dishes that had been used.

She was inside the tent when she heard David speak.

'You know what, Jack, I've really been looking for something big. Do you think I've been missing something?'

'I doubt it. I mean, a cave isn't all that small, is it?'

Something in David's voice, a quiet excitement, an agitation, had caught Helen's attention and she listened as the two men moved closer together, talking quickly and quietly, no doubt not wanting to disturb Helen.

'I don't know. Maybe I wasn't watching carefully enough. How big is a cave? How high are the rocks that hide it? I've had an idea of its size; you know – just an idea – but I can't read Helen's maps. Maybe I've been wrong all this time.'

'Let's not get too involved in this.' Jack's voice was anxious now. She could imagine him making that familiar gesture, patting the air down with his hands, as though it would keep their voices low. 'We'll talk to Helen about it in the morning.'

Thinking she might join in the conversation, Helen opened the flap of the tent.

'There's that low ridge of hills fifty kilometres from here.' David pointed, his arm a black arrow against the rising moon. 'I didn't think they were what we wanted because there wasn't much of them and they aren't very high.'

'Were they on Helen's map? A ridge sounds like a pretty noticeable feature to me.'

'Not really. They're like these over here, not much to them.' He pointed to a low group of hillocks a hundred metres away, little more prominent above the flat sand than the ridges of a crocodile's back above its body. 'From above they probably don't show up at all, and even from the side they aren't very prominent. I just called them a ridge because my uncle's uncle did.'

'Not very noticeable from above or ground level, eh? Not like Helen's hat – noticeable from both?' Jack picked up the hat, turning it slowly in his hands.

'Well, it was to the Arundijilaba. If they called it a ridge, they must have seen it clearly enough.'

'I doubt if it's what we want, David. But we'll tell Helen in the morning, eh?'

Jack patted David on the shoulder. David looked off for a moment in the direction of the 'ridge' and then went into his tent. Jack too stared off into the night, before turning towards the tent.

'Did you hear that?' Helen nodded.

'Could be our search is over, dear,' he said.

'Maybe.'

Jack seemed keen to talk about it, but the possibility of a new phase in their search was, Helen decided, too nebulous. They could talk about it tomorrow.

They didn't leave for the ridge until after breakfast the next morning. But by six o'clock, in the bright light of morning, the two men had set off in the LandCruiser, heading east.

Helen watched them go, with a little regret that she had chosen to wait for them while they explored the ridge. The trouble was, she thought, that where she was right now seemed 'right'. This was the point she had pinpointed, as closely as it was possible to pinpoint the 'black car in the car park the size of Victoria', the place where the black car should be. Right here.

As the dust from the LandCruiser's trail settled and Helen could no longer see it, she went into the tent and studied again the maps. There is no such thing as women's intuition, she thought. Nonsense. So maybe Jack and David would find the cave after all.

She didn't hear the whisper of the willy-willy until it suddenly rose to a screech. The tent was held down by big rocks, so she knew she was safe, but the small tornado seemed to hover around the campsite for minutes, spinning faster and faster, picking up more and more small, sharp rocks which it hurled against the green canvas until Helen was sure that at any second a rip would appear, a rip which would allow the wind to fling the tent, its contents and her along the ground until everything was destroyed.

She held tight to the frame of the tent, its metal flexing and bowing as the whirlwind tightened its grip. Suddenly, as suddenly as it had started, the willy-willy spun away.

Helen opened the flap of the tent, pushing away a drift of sand.

She watched the spiral of wind move rapidly away from her, inside a tube of red earth which twisted as it rose. Willy willies were always disconcerting. They started up as soon as the sun became hot enough and nobody could predict when

one would come or how powerful it might be. Most of them were small flurries that did nothing more than coat the surface of a mug of tea with fine red dust, or make your eyes water. This kind of willy-willy was a rarity.

Both the tents were undamaged, although there was nothing to show where the fire had been last night. The ground in the vicinity of the campsite was swept smooth. Thanks to their good housekeeping habits, all the tools and dishes were safely stowed on the LandCruiser, or in the big packing case behind the rock. Helen walked over to check that the case had survived. It should be there still; it was built for this kind of journey and any kind of extreme weather. And indeed the case, although threequarters buried in sand and rocks, seemed to be intact. The men could dig it out when they returned.

In the distance, Helen could see the dust cloud of the retreating willy-willy still making a slight disturbance on the horizon. It could be the LandCruiser; maybe the men were on the way back, but she thought it was the willy-willy.

She turned around to go back to the tent and attempt to clean it up; a lot of dust had blown in during the storm.

She raised her eyes briefly, and saw that the willy-willy had made a change to the nearby low hills. They were only a few metres high, chosen to be the site of the latest camp because they would provide a visible landmark when they were off in the LandCruiser. Now the sand had been blown from the top and what had seemed no more than a pile of loose rocks was changed. A huge slab of rock lay across other, smaller ones. Even as she watched, a rockfall poured small stones down from the top, down the face of the hill she was looking at.

Below the rock slab, among the big rocks, wasn't it possible that she would find the cave? Helen broke into a run, slowed down as she remembered how dangerous it was to hurry through these sharp and unsettled rock fragments, left behind after the passage of the willy-willy. Slowly she drew closer to the hill.

Yes. Yes! Now she could see it. There was a blackness, an absence of light right in the centre, under the great slab of rock. It was not far above ground level. She started to climb, slipped down, started to climb again. After half a dozen scrambling attempts, Helen reached a small ledge from which she could get a foothold and haul herself up to a narrow platform at the entrance to a cave, only a couple of metres above the ground. Just inside the entrance, the floor of the cave dropped; it was a metre and a half lower than the flat shelf at the entrance on which Helen was standing. The air was thick with dust; hot and stale. It was almost dark. Helen stepped gently down to the floor. She regretted that she had not brought a torch with her.

Silly to forget that, she had no right to be here if she forgot the most basic of tools. She ticked herself off for carelessness, mumbling crossly while she felt around the floor of the cave, near the entrance.

The ground was not smooth, of course, there were fragments of rock, some of them possibly having just been split from the body of the cave by the willy-willy's furious beating.

She should go no further. Only a fool would go further alone, and without light. Nobody knew where she was. This wasn't a safe place for a sensible woman to be. Only yesterday she had encountered that snake.

Helen took the high step back to the entrance cautiously. She stood in the entrance to the cave until she saw the dust cloud in the distance. It had to be Jack in the LandCruiser. Willy willies don't come back.

Helen scrambled to the top of the hill and waved. She stripped off her shirt and shorts and waved them until she got a wave in response. Then she pulled her clothes back on and raced across the hot sand to meet them.

'I was right! I was right! It's here!'