

THE VALLEY I

‘I think we need to do a burn-off,’ Rus said from the top of the steps. ‘I saw a crow this morning.’

Charlie stared up at him, his mouth dropping slightly. ‘Are you sure?’

Rus laughed and brushed damp hair from his face. It was early, but the humidity was rising quickly in the golden light of mid-morning. He pointed north of where they stood, to where the sugarcane fields bent closest to the house. ‘There’s one a few hundred metres from here.’

‘Shit,’ was all Charlie could say.

Charlie hadn’t expected this today, but there was little he could expect any day; going on was enough, so he did what he always did. He’d spent the morning keeping the farm ready in case the world became normal again, maintaining it the way his parents had. He’d checked the perimeter of the property for any obvious intrusions – since it had been subdivided a few years back, this was a simple task. He was glad nothing had been built around the farm before things changed. It still felt like the same place he’d grown up in. But the cane fields were smaller now, contained by dwindling boundaries, like his life with Rus. Life here was measured in sunrises, footsteps, and heartbeats.

Charlie had checked on the horses that lived on the neighbouring property. Their transformation to feral animals was almost complete, and he was relieved by it. The new foal was doing well. He'd tested the water tanks, visited the dam, avoided a snake that arced across a small track, and made sure the gates were shut. Not that the gates or fences could keep anything out. But they mimicked the signs of normalcy, and they would signal a point of intrusion.

The early morning had been normal, the world undisturbed. Charlie had moved through the quiet and made sure all was right with his home. The stillness suited the place, suited him, and he'd felt guilt at that thought. So many people gone. *How can this be a source of happiness for me?*

Now, it was warmer, and much had changed since he'd started his rounds. He hadn't seen signs of entry, hadn't noticed the crow, but part of the northern fence was half down. That must be where it had come through. He ran up the modified steps and into the house. It was instantly cooler inside. Darker, safer. Rus followed him and the wire door snapped shut behind them, locking out insects but little else.

'Did you recognise it?' Charlie asked, heading for the storeroom.

'No. I went to see what Fiddich was barking at – I almost ran into it. I didn't stay to get a better look.' Rus's tone was matter-of-fact, but there was a slight tremble in his hands. 'It may have been Farley. It kind of looked like him.'

Charlie nodded. 'We haven't heard from Ballock Station for a week.'

Rus sighed. 'Their defences were never good.'

'Damn. We always said we'd catch up, but I kept putting it off.' And then, a realisation. 'Did Fiddich go near it?'

'No, I called him back. And *I* didn't either, so we don't need to isolate.'

They entered the storeroom. It was always kept ready for such events. It had been a bedroom once: Charlie's, when he was young, then a guest bedroom. They had renamed it to suit the utilitarian needs of a strange time. Not that many guests had stayed when things were normal. Still, they'd had more than Charlie's parents had when they lived, and when the property had functioned fully as a sugarcane farm.

Charlie often thought back to when he first brought Rus to visit. Rus had got to see into Charlie's existence, away from university and life in a southern city, to experience a working station of the tropics – this was no five-star accommodation. Or even three, or two. And Charlie's parents had got to see who their son was, not just understand it from the perspective of being told. Everyone had struggled during that week of letting others in. Rus, Charlie, his parents. None more than the other, and none exactly as might've been expected. Expectations had been flimsy things even back then. Flimsier now.

The storeroom contained the means to stay alive when expectations failed. Charlie connected a gas cylinder and a hose in the semi-dark. Rus stood in the doorway, his tall frame blocking out the light.

'Sorry,' Rus said, and moved into the room, bringing light with him. He switched the flashlight he was holding from a focussed beam to a cool, radiating glow.

Charlie held Rus's gaze only briefly. His eyes flickered blue, down and away, like oil dropped in water. Slippery. Charlie thought of words of reassurance, went to utter them, but they fell away before they formed.

They continued their ritual of protection. Rus helped Charlie strap one of the gas cylinders to his back: their mini flamethrower, their only reliable weapon. Charlie looked around the shuttered room. There were plenty of cylinders still, but only half as many as a year ago, and they had yet to find more. He couldn't think

about that right now. Reality was sometimes best denied, at least when alternatives didn't exist and when hope was in retreat.

When Charlie was sufficiently armed, they left the storeroom and returned to the brightness of the kitchen. Fiddich followed. The German shepherd knew the ritual too; he wagged his tail and whined, his eyes alert. *Trouble is here, or someone is coming. Exciting things might happen. Be ready.*

'I'll take a look, see if I can find other crows,' Charlie said. 'Then we can work out what to do. A partial burn-off or a full one.'

'Hopefully not a full one.'

'Does it matter?'

'The cane fields hide our lights at night.'

Charlie stared down at Fiddich, watching him circle the kitchen. 'Not from the ridge. People can see there's life here.' *Life is still here.*

'It's the wanderers I worry about. They move more along the road; the cane shields us from them.'

'There aren't many of them now, and wanderers can still find plenty of supplies in other houses if that's what they need. They'll leave us alone.'

Rus nodded. 'The virus has done its work.'

Silence fell, broken only by the tapping of Fiddich's claws upon the tile.

'And we've got the rifles and guns. We've got each other,' Charlie ventured at last, wary of what that may provoke.

'We do.' Rus smiled in that elegant way of his and moved to the CB radio sitting on the kitchen bench. 'I like the look of the cane fields,' he said quietly, flipping a switch on the radio. 'They cocoon this house.' A high whistle started to build.

Charlie placed a hand on Rus's shoulder, held it there for

comfort. *Mine or his?* he wondered. He turned towards the wire door.

‘Don’t disturb it until we know how many there are.’ Rus made another adjustment on the radio. ‘It’s standing just beyond the old bath – you’ll see the track I followed. I’ll keep Fiddich here and see if I can contact Issy or Grant or Adam. Find out if they know anything.’

The wind had picked up, and the door was rattling slightly, but outside the day remained bright and golden. Charlie walked out of their home – it still felt like that, to him at least – and into the incongruent warmth. He stood briefly on the veranda that encircled the house, made sure the wire door was shut firmly so Fiddich couldn’t follow.

Down in the yard, the hens scratched and bathed in dust. The guineafowl, their alert system, gave him wary glances, two of them perched in the Moreton Bay fig. Charlie smiled at the simplicity of this life, its gentle beauty.

He walked down the steps. The sound of the door opening made him turn back. Rus stood there silently, always so elegant and composed despite the life they lived. *He doesn’t suit this place*, Charlie thought. More guilt for him to deal with. But sometimes, when the sun hit Rus’s copper hair and magnified its colour, when his eyes merged with the sky or the nearby ocean, then the tropical north had full claim on him, made him Arcturus once again. The south drained him.

RUS I

NINE YEARS AGO

They caught up with Rus's sister in Hobart. It was Charlie's first visit to Tasmania, the first time in his life he'd experienced such cold, and even wrapped in a coat and scarf – Rus had insisted on both – the wind bit into him, blowing clear and strong from the Antarctic. They sat by the waterfront, Charlie, Rus and Astrid, unfolding fish and chips from white paper.

'You call him Rus?' Astrid asked Charlie, teasingly.

'Yeah, I do. Icarus, if I'm being serious, but that's all I've known him as.'

She tilted her head at her brother. 'Icca, when did you become Rus?'

'Icca?' Charlie asked. There was always something more to learn about his new partner.

'That's what my family and friends here call me.'

'Mum and Dad would be disappointed that you deny your true identity!'

'Like you can talk.' Rus turned to Charlie. 'Her birth name is Skadi, but she hated it so much growing up our parents agreed to let her use Astrid.'

Astrid laughed. ‘I had to keep to the Norse theme, though.’ She nudged Charlie. ‘You haven’t met our parents yet, have you? You’ll understand once you do. They’re *quirky*.’

‘So unusual,’ Rus added. ‘You should see their house – full of artefacts and books and esoteric crap. They sold up here to buy a bigger place along the north-east coast just so they could store it all.’

‘I’d like to meet them. When can I?’

‘One family member at a time, Charlie. It’s safest that way.’ Rus arched a brow at Astrid. ‘And our brother, will he be making an appearance?’

‘I doubt it. Nathan only appears when he needs something. He’s finished his hiking phase and is now into a partying one... or the other way around, it’s hard to keep up. Either way, I rarely see him.’

‘Nathan? Is that his real name?’ Charlie asked, already beginning to understand one of the primal beats of this family.

‘Of course not,’ Astrid said, with a smile as luxurious as Rus’s. ‘His name is Nethuns, from the Etruscan god of water, but he shed it a long time ago.’

‘The nomenclature of our family – or I suppose you could call it our semiotics – is a complex thing,’ Rus explained. ‘Sun, winter, water, mythology. Best not to try to make sense of it.’

Astrid, sitting cross-legged but oddly graceful, said: ‘But you, Icca, I didn’t think you would lose your name.’

‘I abbreviated it. I didn’t lose it. Easier to fit in, that’s all. And it’s always been shortened, just at the other end.’ Rus chuckled quietly and shook his head. ‘Well, I did lose it when I went by Arcturus for a few months.’

Astrid laughed. ‘Oh, God, that’s right, when you were around ten. Mum and Dad made you keep it Greek! But if I remember correctly, you liked the reference to the star, not the myth...’

‘Our parents sure fucked us up, didn’t they?’

Astrid looked at her brother for a long time, smiling. She was shorter than him, but just as handsome, and she had similar ways – a warmth of expression, an opulence of manner – and wore the same crown of wavy copper hair.

‘Rus is so *common*,’ she said, and Rus raised his hand and turned away with a dramatic flourish. The two siblings laughed in the way people always did at an in-joke.

‘Common isn’t so bad,’ he said. ‘And even Arcturus had Rus in it.’

Astrid wrapped her arms around her brother and squeezed him tightly.

‘Do you have siblings?’ she asked Charlie.

‘I had an older brother. He died when I was twelve.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay, it’s part of life. It just means my parents expect more from me.’

Rus wiped his hands on the crisp white paper, forming greasy windows. ‘Don’t get me started on parental expectations.’ He glanced at his sister, then back to Charlie. In the late winter afternoon, his eyes had changed from the blue of a clear sky to the pallid, shifting grey of a deep forest mist. ‘I can’t imagine you could get over that, no matter your age.’

The wind rippled the sea below them. There was no warmth in that water. The clouds were light, but the afternoon sun couldn’t fully break through. Instead, it shot mournful rays across the harbour and up to Mount Wellington, kunanyi, gilding the snow.

Charlie was happy to be here, to have a glimpse into the lives of such charmingly eccentric people, so different to the ones he’d grown up with. He looked at Rus. Icarus. *This one’s a keeper*, his friends had told him, but they hadn’t needed to. He knew it

to be true. Suddenly, he wanted to learn more about mythology – Greek, Norse, Etruscan – to understand the symbolism that had shaped this man before him. All he knew was that the mythical Icarus had flown too close to the sun. He was sure his Icarus would never do that.

‘Do you like what you’re studying, Charlie?’ Astrid asked.

‘The course is okay, but I’m not loving it,’ he said. ‘Finance seemed like a smart choice, but I’m thinking about changing degrees at the end of the year. Doing something I’m more passionate about.’

‘I was a little surprised when Icca chose architecture. Our family always assumed he’d go into the arts. Be an actor, maybe.’

Rus shrugged. ‘I like design, and I like order. My course allows me to be creative – just in a different way.’

‘And how are you enjoying Sydney?’

‘It’s great. I like being away from home to study,’ Charlie said, and Rus nodded. ‘But it’s pricey, very pricey.’

Rus pointed at their meal. ‘Hence the fish and chips. And the city is much bigger.’

‘More tolerant,’ Charlie said.

Rus shrugged. ‘Easier to disappear into.’

They finished eating and headed back towards Rus and Charlie’s hotel. It was extravagant, for two university students, but worth it for Charlie’s first visit to this island. His first visit to Rus’s home.

Astrid moves like a model, he thought, as the two siblings walked ahead, chatting and laughing. She turned back to Charlie. ‘Your family’s farm is in Cairns, right?’

‘Nah, it’s a little further north, in the Mossman valley. You’ll have to visit.’

‘I’d love to. I’ve only been as far as the Whitsundays.’

‘I’d also love to, but you haven’t asked me yet,’ Rus said.

‘Family intros, Icarus. You know they need careful planning.’

Rus smiled. ‘I do, I really do. But I’m glad you got to meet part of mine.’

‘The best part,’ Astrid added.

‘The most normal part,’ Rus said. ‘The best, or the worst, is yet to come.’