

# DEATH LEAVES THE STATION

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FREMANTLE PRESS

## PROLOGUE

The house at Halfwell Station smelled of dust and dirt and heat.

It hulked over sparse grasses, a heavy thing of corrugated iron and jarrah forced into foreign shapes. Making no concession to the climate, the house had been fashioned from distant memories of Lancashire, a world away, and left to collect dust on the edge of the Western Australian outback. High, proud ceilings subjected the occupants to frigid winter months and summers of unbearable heat, while the wide hallways, built to be filled with the bustle of butlers and parlourmaids, made unwelcome echoes of even the smallest noise.

Through this hollow, half-sleeping world, on a dry November afternoon, three sharp knocks rang like the tolling of a bell.

The reverberations died away and after a long moment of silence, a series of answering sounds emerged from the heart of the house: the scrape of a chair on aged floorboards, the creaking of hardwood, the slow growth of unhurried footsteps.

Dull light swept into the hallway as the front door opened, bringing with it a hint of the dying day's heat. The lady of the house blinked out over the threshold to the grinning little man beyond.

'A very good evening to you,' he said, bobbing his head slightly.

Mrs Harris studied the caller.

He was clad in a singular brownish garment, something

like a cassock or shift, which fell almost to the ground, all but concealing the pair of battered sandals beneath. The man's face was warm, dark and weathered, shadowed by a slight beard and topped with a greying mop of curls. His eyes gleamed.

Beyond and behind him, the beaten dust stretched quietly to the horizon, punctuated here and there by stubble and scrubby stands of wattle.

There was no horse or vehicle in sight.

'I don't suppose I could trouble you,' the little man ventured, 'for a spot of tea?'

Following a moment's healthy hesitation, the front door swung wide to admit the stranger, then closed once more upon silence.

Somewhere in the mulga, a mile or two to the south, a corpse lay slowly cooling.

## CHAPTER ONE

The stalwart landholders at Halfwell had weathered decades in their remarkable building. Through drought and dust, they continued to hack and scrape away at the unwilling earth, more from habit than from any real hope of a yield. Hardship hadn't yet deterred them; dwindling returns seemed unable to sap their strength.

The gold rush of the late nineteenth century had lured the Harrises to the region, and the reports of those who had braved the Great War convinced them that there was nothing to be gained from looking further afield than Mullewa—the town which had, at a distance of some thirty miles, the dubious distinction of being the station's nearest neighbour. Aside from the occasional rotation of roving stockmen and domestic hands, the appearance of a new face at Halfwell was a rare affair.

Neville Harris was not a little surprised, then, to arrive home to an extra setting at the supper table.

Having spent the afternoon repairing and re-tensioning one of the property's more remote boundary fences, he was sunburned, sore and coated from foot to fingers in tenacious red dirt. It was his custom, upon returning from the paddocks, to enter the house from the rear, where the kitchen door hung perpetually open to a stony courtyard, shaded slightly from the sun.

After seeing his horse fed, watered and stabled, he treated

his own face and palms to a cursory splash from the precious, stagnant water in the wash trough and staggered wearily inside. The long sideboard—usually laden with bread, cheese and a pitcher of cordial in anticipation of his return—was bare but the clink of cutlery from the adjacent dining room promised that his hunger would be short-lived.

The dining room was somewhat inaccurately named, as the Harrises and their sole daughter usually took their meals in the small chamber immediately adjoining the kitchen, while the maid, stock-hands and roustabouts ate together in the courtyard. The dining room was reserved for those relatively rare occasions on which they were graced with a guest—as was the case, Mr Harris intuited, on this particular evening.

Whatever his expectations had been—the station's intermittent visitors could include anyone from regional officials conducting land surveys to peripatetic tinkers and fugitives—the master of the house was clearly surprised by the sight that awaited him. Against the backdrop of the stately (if slightly musty) dining room, with its well-preserved fleur-de-lis wallpaper and finely detailed plaster coving, the mysterious visitor's earthy aesthetic was thrown into particularly sharp relief.

The little man leapt from his chair, coarse shift billowing as he bounced across the room to shake the hand of his host. Mr Harris took an involuntary step backwards, somewhat alarmed by the force of the man's enthusiasm, but recovered quickly enough to return the handshake.

As the subsequent silence began to loom, Harris turned to his wife.

'Aren't you going to introduce me to our guest?' he asked.

Ruth Harris was a short, wiry woman of early middle age. Her slightly greying hair was pulled up into a high bun, lifting her eyebrows into an expression of perpetual bemusement which had never seemed more suitable than in the present circumstances.

‘That—that would be a little hard, love,’ she stammered, somewhat apologetically. ‘He hasn’t got a name, you see.’

Neville Harris’s gaze flickered from the eternally astonished face of his spouse to the visitor’s benevolent grin and back again.

‘Hasn’t got a name?’ he barked. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

This admonishment was directed, for some reason, at Mrs Harris but it was the visitor who answered.

‘Ridiculous it may be,’ he admitted, his smile unwavering, ‘but your wife is quite right. I gave it up.’

Harris snapped round to stare at the little man in disbelief.

‘Gave it up? Nonsense. What kind of man gives up his own name?’

Mrs Harris felt compelled to interject.

‘A friar,’ she said quickly, a note of warning in her tone. ‘Our guest is a *man of the cloth*.’

‘Ah.’ Her husband gave a little cough, glancing at the gilt crucifix which hung above the door.

The friar’s eyes sparkled.

‘A pleasure to meet you, Mr Harris,’ he laughed.

The three were seated, the teapot was lifted anew, and the conversation began slowly to find its feet, propelled by the potent combination of Earl Grey, shortbread and the grateful garrulousness with which Mrs Harris attacked any ambassador of the outside world. As she whittled away at the wooden silence, her husband looked the stranger up and down, waiting for a familiar pattern to emerge from the grain.

His name, it seemed, was not the only thing the man had given away.

In becoming a friar with one of the stricter mendicant orders, he had relinquished any claim to material wealth, all manner of fleshly pursuits and any semblance of personal vanity.

‘The robe, of course, is the one exception I allow myself.’ He winked, rubbing the coarse fabric between thumb and forefinger. ‘Savile Row.’

Mrs Harris tittered. 'He's come all the way down from Beagle Bay,' she told her husband, eager to exhibit the information she had gleaned prior to his arrival. 'On a sort of pilgrimage, you see. He started at the Trappist mission house up there and walked most of the way down—walked! And you'll never guess where he's headed next ...'

The question of whether or not her husband could, in fact, guess the friar's next destination would never be satisfactorily resolved, as the period of time which elapsed between Mrs Harris posing the challenge and providing the answer was so small as to defy measurement by even the most accurate of chronographs.

'He's off to Mullewa to see old Father Hawes!'

At the mention of this name, the mendicant noticed Mr Harris's brow smooth from its erstwhile expression of mild dissatisfaction to something almost approaching a smile and moved to take full advantage of the fact.

'It is my understanding,' the friar said, 'that Monsignor Hawes has undertaken the construction of a church in the continental style. It's something that I would very much like to see, and—if at all possible—to help construct.'

Mr Harris dipped his head about a quarter of an inch in what was, for him, an almost emphatic expression of approval.

'A good man, Hawes,' he said, gruffly.

'He designed the cathedral they're building down in Geraldton,' his wife added, 'and he's working on the Mullewa place himself. The main building's done, but Hawes isn't. He's started on the priest house now, carting stones all about the place. Doesn't let it get in the way of his services, mind—even holds mass just out of town for the natives!'

As if on cue, there was a soft knock at the door and a young woman entered, carrying a tray laden with dishes which she began to arrange on the table with studied precision. The Harrises barely looked up but their guest jumped to his feet to greet her.

‘Unless I’m very much mistaken,’ he smiled, ‘I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Mariana Harris.’

He was indeed, as it transpired, very much mistaken.

Had the serving woman understood him, she would have laughed, but knowing only a few words outside of her native Wajarri—mostly related to the execution of simple domestic drudgeries—she merely acknowledged the young mistress’s name with a shy smile and retreated to the kitchen, clutching the empty tray.

Puzzled, the mendicant looked to Mr Harris. ‘Your wife mentioned that you had an adopted daughter,’ he said. ‘I simply assumed ...’

Mrs Harris laid a placating hand on her husband’s tanned forearm. It was a few moments before the old farmer managed to attempt a smile.

‘Think nothing of it,’ he forced out.

‘That was Daisy, the serving girl,’ came Mrs Harris’s hurried explanation. ‘Our daughter, of course, is not a native. Her father was a Chilean, drawn to this country by the promise of gold—as were so many. It is my understanding that his wife was opposed to the move and followed in great distress, convinced that a terrible fate would befall them in some distant desert—and so it did.’

‘We’d do best not to speak of it now,’ put in Mr Harris in a low voice, inclining his head towards the wall opposite.

‘Her room is just next door,’ said Mrs Harris in a stage whisper. ‘Don’t want to distress the poor girl.’

‘Will Mariana not be joining us for tea?’ The mendicant’s tone was mild but his eyes were keen over the rim of his cup—keen enough to catch the rapid, loaded look that passed between husband and wife.

‘She will,’ said Mrs Harris.

‘She will not,’ said Mr Harris, at precisely the same moment.

A fraught pause gripped the room, but only for a second—

the lady of the house was quick to capitulate.

‘My husband is quite right, of course,’ she said quickly. ‘Our daughter has been ... somewhat indisposed this afternoon.’

‘It saddens me to hear that,’ the friar said. ‘Nothing serious, I trust?’

Mrs Harris returned her cup to the saucer a little too carelessly, making the china ring like a cymbal in the silence. For the first time that evening, she seemed unwilling to speak, deferring to her spouse with an almost defiant turn of the head.

‘Just a cold,’ grumbled the farmer at last. ‘She’ll be right as rain in a day or two. We make ’em tough out here.’

Further efforts at conversation amounted to little, and the three presently set upon a subdued supper. The only communication of note from thereon in, aside from the utilitarian requests for salt and other condiments to be conducted about the table, dealt with the guest’s refusal to try Mrs Harris’s much-vaunted lamb chops. This he did politely but firmly, indicating that meat was another of the earthly vices he had vowed away. In doing so, the friar finally managed to alienate his sole known ally at Halfwell Station and from that point on, the lady of the house made no further pretence towards pleasantries.

Indeed, she exerted only a nominal effort to conceal her relief when, as dinner finally reached its end, the little man politely declined the offer of a bed for the night. Though her charitable Catholic soul did chafe sorely at the thought of anyone going without shelter—let alone a man of the faith—Mrs Harris knew that both she and her husband would sleep all the more soundly knowing that the itinerant friar lay without their walls; the guest himself cited a preference for sleeping beneath the open canopy of the stars.

Having provisioned him with flour and apples enough to see him to Mullewa, the Harrises indicated a small stand of eucalypts a half-mile distant as a suitable place to set up camp.

Their duty done, they retired unburdened to the starched comfort of their quarters while the mendicant traipsed away through the dust. Silence stole back through the dark to reclaim Halfwell Station, where it reigned until dawn, disturbed only briefly by the tired midnight protest of floorboards as an escape was effected.

## CHAPTER TWO

Though the night was far from cold, a small fire crackled beneath the trees, describing a flickering sphere within which the mendicant sat, testing the knots of a hempen hammock. He hummed aimlessly as he worked, buttressed by the roots of an ancient salmon gum. Around him, the shadows ebbed and flowed, a scrimshaw scene of red and gold. At length, one shadow broke from the wavelike rhythm of its fellows and slid steadily towards the fire.

The mendicant looked up into the face of a young woman.

Her pupils were wide, seeming to swallow the firelight, and her cheeks pulled taut with the work of controlling some wild emotion. She was clad in an old nightdress, the hem of which had been pulled to the side and knotted just below the left knee so as to keep it from dragging in the dirt. Boots of worn leather, far too large, engulfed a good portion of each leg; they must have been taken from the verandah outside the door at the last possible minute. It was clear that her flight into the dark had not been the result of extensive planning.

The little friar looked the newcomer up and down before nodding at the fire.

‘The billy’s boiled,’ he said calmly.

The woman’s reply was so direct as to sound harsh.

‘I didn’t come here for tea.’

Her lips twitched for a moment afterwards, and the mendicant could see what a constant effort it was to keep her expression steady. He offered no response, merely setting aside his hammock and opening a hand towards the fire. The woman made no move to sit.

‘You’re a priest,’ she said, heightened emotion placing the statement midway between a question and an accusation.

‘Of sorts,’ he replied. ‘And you, I can only assume, are Mariana.’

Her dark eyes flashed.

‘Ana,’ she said, toying with the silver locket that hung from her neck. ‘Just “Ana.”’

Suddenly, whatever power had propelled her out into the night was finally and abruptly exhausted—snuffed out by the simple reality of speaking her own name—and she sank to her knees, staring into the fire. Something escaped with that name; something that left a girl sitting where a woman had been moments earlier, and the mendicant realised that she couldn’t be much older than seventeen or eighteen.

He withdrew two tin mugs from his bag. Lifting the billy from the coals with a wire hook and a practised hand, he began to fill them.

Ana took the proffered tea without a word.

‘I’m afraid I can’t offer you any milk,’ said the friar. ‘It doesn’t keep long in this heat.’

She raised one corner of her mouth in an automatic gesture of acknowledgement.

For a long time, the fire’s ravenous crackle was the only sound. Setting aside his tea, the mendicant reached for the hammock and resumed his work, splicing and readjusting several of the outer strands.

‘Do you take confession?’

The words escaped her lips in a rush before she clamped them shut, seemingly betrayed by her own small voice. For the

first time, it was the mendicant who seemed to hesitate.

‘You may tell me anything you wish,’ he said at length, ‘without fear of judgement or reproach. Your words will not reach any other. In all good faith, though,’ he added, ‘I cannot offer you absolution.’

Ana looked up, puzzled. ‘Why?’ she asked.

The friar kept his gaze fixed steadily on the strands he was splicing.

‘In renouncing my name and position, I have also temporarily renounced my clerical office within the church. I am now a lay brother, no closer to the divine than the humblest among my fellow men—all of which means that I am no longer able to relay correspondence upstairs, so to speak.’ The smile with which he accompanied this remark was a grim imitation of his customary carefree grin.

Ana regarded him quietly, her hand rising to the silver locket that hung beneath the faded lace collar of her nightgown.

‘You’re a runaway!’ she gasped.

The erstwhile priest made no move to react or repudiate but Mariana had already made her decision. Her face was set with grim purpose once more but the fear that tugged at the corners of her eyes was gone. She drained her tea and stood.

‘Come with me,’ she said, quietly. ‘I have to show you something.’

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They walked in silence for the most part, Ana leading the way. Beyond the trees lay wide fields of stubble—testament to the volume of the recent wheat harvest—which gave way at intervals to small shrubs, balga and flannel bush. The sand was hard and cool, swallowing the sound of their footsteps. The slender moon hung low above the horizon, its meagre light more than matched by the wild, careless brushstrokes of the Milky Way as

it arced across the southern sky. Soft clicks and rustles sounded occasionally from the surrounding darkness, hinting at the scurrying things that made the night their home.

‘Not long now,’ Ana said.

By the mendicant’s reckoning, they had been walking for about twenty minutes. The set of the stars told him that they were travelling in a more-or-less southerly direction, but other than that, he could make out no obvious landmarks. Beyond the stubble, the scrub around them looked much the same as the landscape through which he had been walking for the past few weeks: dry, flat and open.

To Mariana Harris, evidently, things had a different hue. She stopped here and there to note indeterminate patches of desert grass, or stooped in passing to check a certain rock (how it differed from its thousands of reddish-brown brethren, the friar was unable to discern), making a small noise of approval as she did so. At one point, she paused to examine an improbable wreath-shaped clump of wildflowers, small and bright in the starlight, and seemed to steer slightly west as a result.

For the most part, however, their course stayed true.

Neither traveller made any overture towards conversation—the still night seeming to demand a reverential silence—but the mendicant noticed an increased agitation in his guide’s movements as they progressed. Her breath grew shallow and ever sharper, her steps uneven; at times it seemed as if she were about to break into a run, while at others she slowed almost to a halt, as if afraid of what lay ahead.

Then, catching sight of a low tumble of stones rising suddenly from the sand, she stopped dead.

‘Too far,’ she mumbled, pulling at the sleeves of her nightdress. She spun on a sandy heel and set off in the direction they had come, breaking into a frantic run.

Only twenty yards later, she pulled up short.

‘It was here,’ she panted. ‘He was *here*.’

With a panicked pirouette, she began to run back again.

‘He?’ asked the friar, taking a cautious step forward. ‘My dear, I’m not exactly sure —’

He broke off as Ana dropped to her knees in the sand.

‘Here,’ she said again, and before the mendicant could press any further, he saw it.

The sand before them gave way to a low, haphazard row of stones, about two feet high and perhaps three times that in length. In the darkness, the mendicant could not discern much in the way of geological detail, but even the heavy curtain of night could not hide the swathe of blood which slicked the surface of the nearest stone, reaching darkly out across the sand.

‘*Madre de Dios*, he was here,’ Ana said. ‘Just a moment ago, he was here.’

The friar peered past her into the gloom. Beyond the rocks, the sand was scuffed and furrowed. A series of irregular indentations—almost akin to the track of some strange beast—meandered about the rocks, mired at intervals by blood and shadows. The trail, if a trail it was, extended only a few feet before being swallowed up by the darkness.

Ana’s voice was weaker now, an echo of itself. ‘He’s gone.’