

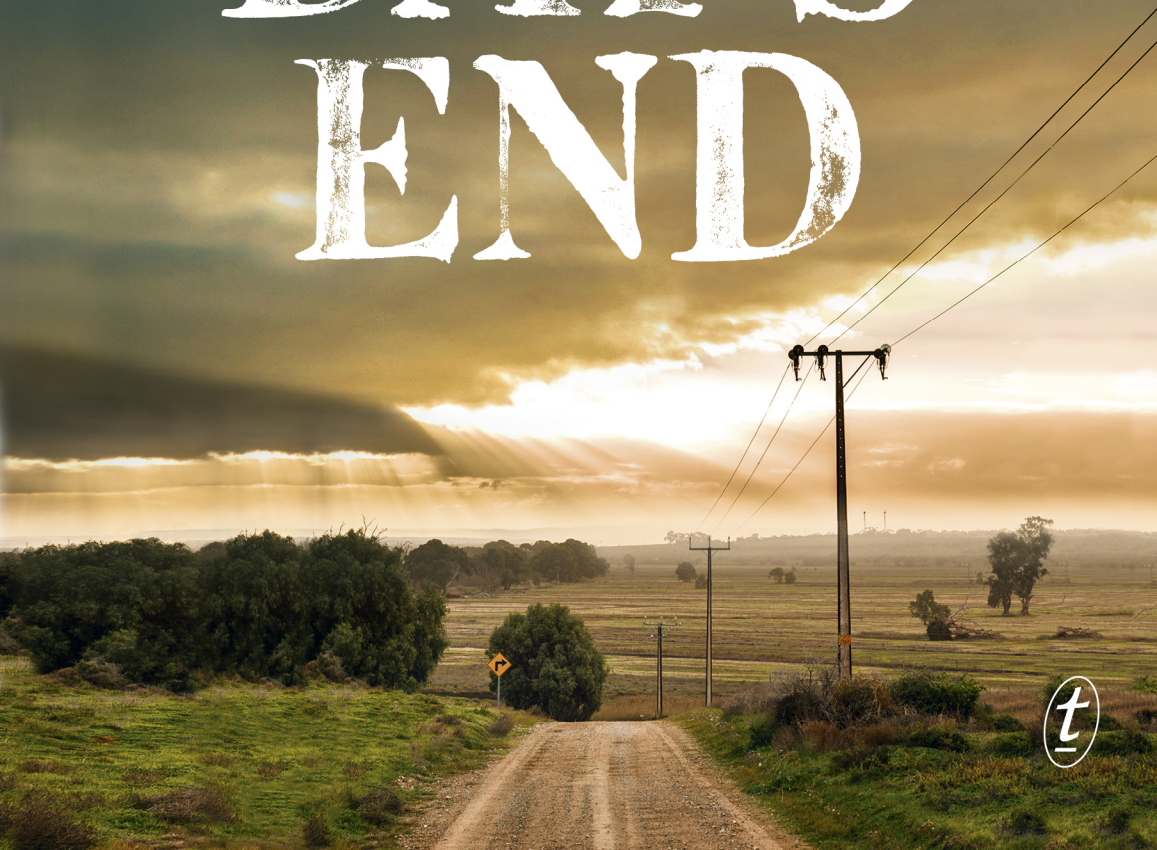
# GARRY DISHIER

'Hirsch is one of my favourite characters.

*Day's End* is unmissable.'

HAYLEY SCRIVENOR, author of *Dirt Town*

# DAY'S END



# 1

OUT IN THAT country, if you owned a sheep station the size of a European principality you stood tall. If you were a rent-paying public servant, like Hirsch, you stood on the summit of Desolation Hill.

Not much of a hill—but it was desolate. It overlooked patches of saltbush and mallee scrub and a broad, red-ochre gibber plain that stretched to the horizon; wilted wildflowers here and there, deceived by a rare spring shower.

It also overlooked an image of Wildu, the spirit eagle, carved into the plain: spanning three kilometres from

wingtip to wingtip and poised to strike. And Desolation Hill was one of the last places Willi Van Sant had visited before he disappeared.

‘The urge to launch oneself,’ Willi’s mother said, hugging her daypack to her thin body, ‘is irresistible.’

Hirsch agreed and they stood silent at the guardrail for a while, that Thursday morning in spring. The urge to launch oneself and ride the air currents above the plain—as an actual wedge-tailed eagle was doing just then, along with a distant, buzzing ultralight plane that Hirsch guessed was photographing the geoglyph for some calendar or post-card publisher.

He was reading a sun-faded sign bolted to the rail—*Wildu is a Ngadjuri word referring to the stars of the Southern Cross, their arrangement here represented by the tips of an eagle’s talons*—when Dr Van Sant gave a dismissive sniff and pointed to the carven eagle below them. ‘Appropriation?’

‘Sure is,’ he agreed cheerily, wondering if her son had expressed that thought in an email home.

He gazed again at the geoglyph—or artwork; or graffiti, homage to the Ngadjuri or instance of cultural appropriation, depending upon your point of view. Some hero with a grader had scored the eagle into the ground in the mid-1980s. No one had ever said who; the overseer, station hands and absentee property owner denied all knowledge. When Hirsch first noticed it, on one of his long-range patrols of the rain-shadow sheep stations, it was obscured by decades of sand drifts, desert shrubs and the churning

tyres of hunters' four-wheel drives. Then last year a grazier named Russ Fanning had bought the place, restored the motif with a pair of GPS-guided excavators and created the lookout on the peak of Desolation Hill.

Strange guy, Fanning. Contradictory. He wasn't after sightseeing dollars, just wanted to acknowledge the Ngadjuri people, and had met with some of the local elders, intent on getting the mythology right. They'd had reservations, but he'd gone ahead anyway. Hirsch wasn't sure if that made Fanning a bad guy or not, but elsewhere on his property, where the soil was less marginal and enjoyed a better chance of rain, he'd set up revegetation and conservation programs, installed solar panels and batteries; he conserved and recycled water. A guy who liked to yarn with Hirsch, show him around the property. Who admitted one day that he voted Labor.

And twice in the past month he'd called Hirsch to ask if he was any closer to identifying who'd shot his merino stud ram, valued at forty-five thousand dollars. A high-powered long-range-rifle bullet to the head. Hirsch clenched with guilt. Short answer, no. He'd knocked on doors—a round trip of three hundred kilometres out in that country—and got nowhere. Maybe 'roo shooters, someone suggested. Maybe wild-goat shooters, said another. Maybe mischievous, maybe malign. And maybe accidental, the ram resembling a goat if he'd been caught in the tricky shadows of a saltbush twilight.

Hirsch shook off the guilt and turned to Janne Van

Sant, dismayed to see tears, a twist of sadness or anxiety. He tried a smile. ‘Shall we move on?’

‘One moment please, Constable Hirschhausen.’

She dug in the front pocket of her tan canvas pack and retrieved one of the photographs she’d shown Hirsch ninety minutes earlier, in the front room of the little brick building that housed the Tiverton police station. Printed from a message sent by her son, it showed a tall, slim kid with blond dreadlocks, smiling for the camera, Wildu the eagle spread behind and below him. Twenty-one years old. Backpacking around Australia, taking a job here and there.

It occurred to Hirsch at that moment: the photo was not framed like a selfie. Someone had been with the kid, here on the summit of Desolation Hill.

As to who, he thought—that was a question to ask the station owners Willi had been working for.

He watched Dr Van Sant hold the photo at head height with both hands, adjusting until she knew exactly where Willi had been standing all those months ago. She was a slightly shorter and less tanned version of her son. A cap of cropped fair hair. A similar smile—what Hirsch had seen of it in the past hour and a half.

And hours to go yet: another thirty minutes over chopped and powdery back roads to reach Dryden Downs; a conversation with the Drydens; the trip back to the police station and her rented Camry.

She had dumped the daypack on the bonnet of the SA Police Toyota. A handful of other photographs spilled out.

‘May I?’ Hirsch asked, gathering them up.

Her response was a shrug that he thought of as very European. It said: ‘If you must.’ And so, with some hesitation, he neatened the photos and flipped through them. Warm from the Toyota’s duco, it was almost as if they were straight off the printer.

Willi on a horse; Willi swimming in a dam; Willi with a sheepdog, on a claypan, pointing down at the tracks of a solitary sheep; Willi beside a Cessna marked *Dryden Downs Pastoral*; Willi crouched next to a gravestone, gesturing comically at the inscription: *Here lies Tom Sewell, who shot himself accidentally on purpose, 25 September 1923.*

Hirsch got a kick out of it, too. He shoved the photos back into the daypack and checked his watch.

‘Yes, yes,’ Dr Van Sant said, her tone at odds with her air of containment.

Hirsch steered the rattling Hilux down through the switch-back bends, then left at the T-intersection at the base of Desolation Hill and onto a corrugated dirt track named Manna Soak Highway.

‘Irony,’ Dr Van Sant said.

‘Yes,’ Hirsch said, accelerating. Drive too slowly on these roads and your teeth shook out; too quickly and you might lose traction on a curve, roll your vehicle, lie pinned in the wreckage for hours, even days, before another vehicle happened along. You needed skill with a dash of nonchalance. Hirsch had been making these back-country

ventures for three years now and was getting better at it.

Right now he was concentrating on the road, not Willi's mother, who was saying, with an air of carefully testing her words and pitching her voice above the rattles: 'A national trait, do you think? A reluctance to take anything seriously?' She'd been in the country exactly four days: two in Sydney, then the drive to Tiverton, in wheat and wool country halfway between Adelaide and the Flinders Ranges.

Hirsch decelerated for an eroded incline washed free of topsoil; more the spine of a stone reef than a road. He topped the rise at walking pace, slowly increased speed on the downslope and said, 'Yes, partly that.'

Slim and straight-backed in the seat beside him, and perhaps testy that he'd taken so long to answer, Janne Van Sant said, 'And the other part, or parts?'

She's picturing her son out here, Hirsch thought; how he might have fared—how he might be faring—in a land where no one took anything seriously. 'Isn't being ironic a sign that you take something seriously? You're trying to stop it swamping you?'

Dr Van Sant gestured beyond her window at the salt-bush and mulga struggling to survive on the red dirt plains. 'Manna Soak, is that irony, too? The bread of heaven?'

Hirsch braked gently and pulled to the side, letting an oncoming Land Rover with Western Australian plates pass by. His mind raced, distracted from answering by the presence out here of an interstate vehicle with two averted faces on board.

Dust roiled; tiny stones pinged along the flank of the Toyota. The air cleared and he drove on. ‘The naming isn’t always ironical. Some names are quite frank.’

‘Mm,’ Dr Van Sant said. ‘They trace the faltering march of white progress. Hope Hill,’ she added, a name they’d seen on a signpost on the road from Tiverton. ‘Mischance Creek—what mischance, and why did it matter enough to name something? Desolation Hill.’

Hirsch pointed to where a couple of acres of red dirt surrounded a lone chimney amid a pile of stones. ‘We’re in a rain shadow,’ he said. ‘People came out here in the mid-1800s, saw running creeks and spring grasses, and built a house. They didn’t know they might wait twenty years for the next rainfall.’

‘One hopes,’ Dr Van Sant said, ‘but suffers misfortune—and so is desolate.’

This isn’t really about the place names, Hirsch thought; she’s thinking of Willi. The journey he may have made from hope to despair. Not wanting to say anything trite to buck up her feelings, he lowered his side window. Dust lingered, but so did perfumed traces of plants, soil released by the attentions of sun and wind.

He said, ‘Manna Soak is an actual place. That photo of Willi pointing at the sheep tracks? A big, dry claypan most of the time but a shallow lake when there’s been rain. You should see the birds when that happens,’ he added brightly. He wanted her to take some goodness with her when she left this place.



‘And now?’

‘Dry, I’m afraid.’ Not that Hirsch had ever seen the birds flocking at Manna Soak, only the photo on the Tiverton general-store calendar, which hung in the police-station waiting room.

Twenty minutes later he slowed, turning off the track and rumbling over a stock ramp between a pair of massive stone pillars. An old sign on one pillar, sun-faded and dust-abraded, read: *Dryden Downs, est. 1865, 560,000 acres, please close gates after you.*

Hirsch had called in at the property once before. Crime waves permitting, he made two long-range patrols every week, the first taking in areas east and north of the Barrier Highway, the second west and south. Mostly it was responding to reports—of stock theft, for example—and welfare checks: a farming widow here, teenage kids with a bedridden mother there.

A place like Dryden Downs, with its own plane and airstrip and a large, capable staff, could cope without a regular visit just so long as they knew he was around. The Drydens—Sam and Mia—had been out the day he’d dropped in, but he’d left his card with the station cook and that evening Sam had called him, apologising, appreciative, his voice a soft, precise rasp.

The sign on the other pillar was new: *Unvaccinated visitors welcome here*, and, in smaller type, *We refuse to enforce unlawful directions from a government that would microchip its people.* As Hirsch accelerated along the immaculate

white-gravel driveway, passing a third sign—*Homestead 15 km*—and a fourth indicating a fifty k speed limit, Dr Van Sant said, ‘Vaccinated visitors, on the other hand, are not welcome?’

Hirsch barked a laugh. ‘You strike it in Belgium, too?’

‘Oh yes.’ She paused. ‘A government that would microchip its people. It’s age-old, isn’t it, the fear that powerful, malicious figures are working against us through invisible means? Like witches.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Hirsch, thinking: *who are you?*

Dryden Downs was large enough to encompass a range of soil types, from gibber plains to undulating bushland and grazing country. The homestead driveway took them through grassland with Angus cattle on the left, black-faced Dorper sheep on the right. At the fourteen-kilometre mark, the track climbed a low rise. Visible on the other side was a broad, shallow depression spread with as many rooftops as an English village: main house, overseer’s house, cottages, implement sheds, workshop, shearing shed, stable block, hayshed, hangar and station hands’ accommodation. Scattered among these buildings were stockyards, lawns, extensive gardens, concrete water tanks and a horse-riding enclosure.

‘The hope doesn’t seem quite so faint here,’ Dr Van Sant muttered.

Hirsch pulled the Hilux onto a turning circle beside the main house, a long, elegantly proportioned structure built

of local stone and deeply shaded on all sides by verandas hung with grapevines. He parked in the shade of a massive ghost gum, switched off and got out, closing his door with a soft click, feeling oddly that a slam would be out of place.

The silence after the bone-shaking drive was a blessing, and the spring sun was balmier here than up on Desolation Hill. A deep stillness, too: the airstrip windsock limp and no one gunning an engine, shearing a fleece or yelling at a sheepdog. The only movement was a woman on a black horse circling the riding arena intently, as if the world consisted solely of her, her horse and this small, hoof-churned yard. Mia Dryden, guessed Hirsch, hooking his face mask on.

Dr Van Sant joined him, also masked. ‘Willi told me that she is horse mad,’ she murmured.

As they were about to cross to the enclosure, the rider dragged on the reins, walked her horse to the railing fence and called, ‘Hello, there. Sam’s inside, doing the books. Give him a shout at the front door. I’ll join you as soon as I’ve cleaned up.’

Then she wheeled away and made for the gate closest to the stable block. Dr Van Sant had insisted on an unannounced visit—an old cop’s tactic, and fine by Hirsch—but if Mia Dryden was unsettled or curious, there was no sign of it. A practical, horsey blonde in her forties, a little heavy, full of smiling good-neighbourliness, that’s all. But that sign at the driveway entrance...

Hirsch turned to Dr Van Sant, who was looking at

him flatly. He tried to read her: *Almost as if she had been expecting us.* Or maybe: *The effortless grace of the very rich.*

He gave a whisper of a smile and a nod, and together they crossed a lawn to the main entrance of the station homestead. The inner door was open, revealing a long, broad corridor hung with paintings and light sconces. Hirsch knocked on the external screen door. It rattled feebly. After a few seconds he knocked again and called, 'Mr Dryden?'

A distant scrape and thump, as of a desk chair on a wooden floor, and a tall man stepped out of a doorway halfway along the corridor. 'Yes?'

'Police, Mr Dryden. We met your wife; she said it was okay to knock.'

'Police?' Dryden said, ambling towards them. He stepped out onto the veranda, a lean, ramrod-straight man in his late forties, wearing khaki cargo shorts, a baggy blue polo shirt and cracked leather sandals: weekend or day-off mucking-around gear. Beneath it lay a hard authority. He was a man poised for action, generating in Hirsch an absurd desire to snap to attention. Ex-military?

He stuck out his hand. 'Paul Hirschhausen, from the Tiverton police station, and this is Doctor Van Sant.'

'Janne,' she said, offering her hand. 'Willi's mother.'

Dryden shook, gravely courteous, even bending slightly at the waist, before stepping back, head cocked, his frown a little knot between his brows. 'I'm afraid Willi's not here, Doctor Van Sant. Janne. He left us two or three months ago.'

She stepped towards him impulsively, about to speak, and he breathed in and stood straighter. 'I suggest you talk to my wife. She knows more than I do. Here she is now.'

Thinking, *That was quick, she must have got a stable-hand to take the horse*, Hirsch turned and watched Mia Dryden approach the house.

Still wearing jodhpurs and a perspiration-damp black T-shirt, she called, 'Darling. They found you, I see.'

Where her husband's energy lay coiled, hers vibrated. Her eyes were bright; her teeth flashed; she was a ripple of movement; her words poured out as she skipped up the steps in an eddy of hot-day and horse-riding odours. 'Give me five minutes to change, would you? Darling, how about cold drinks on the veranda? Or if either of you would prefer tea or coffee? And you may remove your masks, you know.'

'We'll keep them on, thanks,' Hirsch said, but she was already through the screen door, touching her husband's wrist on the way. She's still not curious, he thought, shifting his attention to Sam Dryden, who was regarding Dr Van Sant: preoccupied but not unfriendly.

Then Dryden snapped out of it, gesturing along the veranda to a gathering of cane chairs around a glass-topped cane table. 'Please do make yourselves at home. What can I get you?'

They asked for mineral water and shortly after that an aproned man appeared, carrying a tray of glasses and bottled San Pellegrino, with Sam Dryden in his wake. Hirsch recognised the station cook from his first visit. Shorter than

Dryden, with cropped hair and the same military bearing. 'Barry, is it?' Hirsch said. 'Barry...McGain?'

McGain nodded; left silently.

When he was gone, Sam Dryden filled each glass, then sat. 'I expect you cover a lot of ground in your job, Constable Hirschhausen?'

Hirsch nodded. 'Quite a lot—two patrols a week. Call me Hirsch, by the way.'

Dryden tried it: 'Hirsch. You're familiar with everything by now?'

'There are still a few out-of-the-way properties I'm yet to call at, but I'll get to them eventually.'

'The face of the law.'

'Sort of.' Hirsch shifted uncomfortably. He didn't want to get into it, his twin roles, law-upholder and welfare worker.

'If it's any help,' Dryden said, 'you've reached the end of the road here. Nothing but scrub and semi-desert beyond my driveway.'

Hirsch wasn't sure how to take that, detecting an edge to Dryden's tone. The weight of age and privilege, as though the pastoralist were issuing an order, not offering advice. Hirsch said, 'Fair enough.' Fully intending to venture further along Manna Soak Highway one day.

'Did you know my son well, Mr Dryden?' Janne said.

Dryden turned to her; seemed to study her. 'Sam, please. Not well. I'm often away, you see—business. My wife can help you.'

As if answering a signal, Mia Dryden stepped onto the veranda. She'd had a hurried shower; her hair, heavily damp, had darkened a sleeveless, collarless blue cotton shirt. With bare feet striding and a filmy knee-length skirt swishing, she approached on a tide of delight, as if no one had visited the homestead for months, before pausing behind her husband, a hand on each shoulder and brushing his neck with her lips. Dryden closed his eyes; his whole body relaxed.

Mia straightened again. 'I see my grouch of a husband has been looking after you! Cold drinks, just what the doctor ordered,' she said, stepping away from Dryden and swivelling neatly onto the fourth chair. She reached across the table and touched Dryden's wrist. 'Darling, I know you're super busy.'

He stood, nodded gravely, strode along the veranda and vanished into the house. Watching him go with the clear gaze of a young girl in love, Mia turned her attention to Hirsch and smiled. 'Now, what brings you to our door?'

'I'm stationed at Tiverton,' he began.

'I thought it might be you.'

'And this is Doctor Van Sant. She's very concerned for the welfare of her son, Willi. I understand he worked here?'

'Willi!' Mia said. 'Such a lovely boy, always smiling, a pleasure to have around.' She leaned towards Dr Van Sant. 'You know, you needn't wear your mask here. And I would so love to see your face. Already I can see a resemblance to Willi around the eyes.'

‘It’s best if I keep it on,’ Janne said. ‘Omicron-riddled Europe, two long flights, airports, you know...’

‘As you wish,’ Mia said, erect again. ‘Willi. As I said, a lovely boy. There was nothing he couldn’t do, if he put his mind to it.’ She leaned forward. ‘Did you know we had him mustering sheep like a pro by the time he left here?’ She sat back. ‘Everyone loved Willi. Our one and only jillaroo was head over heels.’

The person with the camera, Hirsch thought.

‘That is as may be,’ Janne Van Sant said crisply, ‘but he stopped contacting me four months ago. Quite suddenly. One day there he was, on his bunk bed, talking to me on Viber, and the next day, nothing.’

Mia was troubled. ‘I don’t know what I can tell you,’ she said with a helpless gesture. ‘He and the girl he was seeing just packed their bags and drove off into the sunset. It left us in quite a pickle, work-wise. But, you know, young ones...’

Dr Van Sant eyed her stonily. ‘My calls and emails have gone unanswered.’

‘As I said, he’s young, in love...he’s probably still in Noosa, living it up.’

‘My calls and emails to *you*,’ Janne said.

Mia sat back with a pretty frown of concern. ‘To me?’ Her hand went over her chest. ‘Are you sure? I mean, we are very remote out here...’

Hirsch glanced across the yard at an impressive antenna array. He said, ‘Willi and his girlfriend went to Noosa?’

‘Well, yes,’ Mia said. ‘Stay there, I’ll be right back.’



She returned with a postcard. Addressed to Sam and Mia Dryden, it showed a curve of beach dotted with swimmers and sunbathers, with a biro scrawl and an arrow: *Us in the shallows!*

On the other side, in a looping, breathless hand: *Hi Sam and Mia! Just to let you know we're missing you—kind of!—and thanks so much for the experience! Love, Eve and Willi xxooxx.*

‘When did this arrive?’

‘Oh, ages ago. Weeks. A couple of months, at least.’

‘Do you have contact details for this Eve?’

Mia took a phone from her skirt pocket and scrolled through her contacts. Turned the screen to Hirsch. He saw the name Eve Tilling and a mobile number.

Using his own phone, he called it. It rang out. ‘Did either of them leave anything behind?’

‘Not a skerrick.’

‘Do you know where Ms Tilling grew up? Has her family been in touch?’

‘In touch? With us? No. She grew up in Sydney, but where, exactly, I couldn’t tell you.’ Mia shifted uncomfortably, as if reluctant to let a cloud dim her sunniness. ‘She didn’t get on with her stepfather though, I do remember her saying that. An old story, as I expect you know.’

The story suggested abuse, and Mia Dryden seemed to struggle against the image until her smile burst out again. She said, ‘You must be so *worried*, Janne. But I’m sure the Department of Foreign Affairs will be of some help.’

‘Idiots,’ Janne Van Sant said.

‘Oh,’ Mia said. She seemed to think about it. ‘A government bureaucracy,’ she said darkly.

Hirsch said, ‘If we could have a quick word with the people Willi and Eve worked with day by day? The other station hands?’

Mia put a hand over her heart again. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, spring is a busy time for us. They’re all out mustering.’

‘Maybe on another occasion?’

Mia said nothing. She shifted her gaze to Janne. ‘I shall ask each and every one of them for information when they get back tomorrow. Do you have a card?’

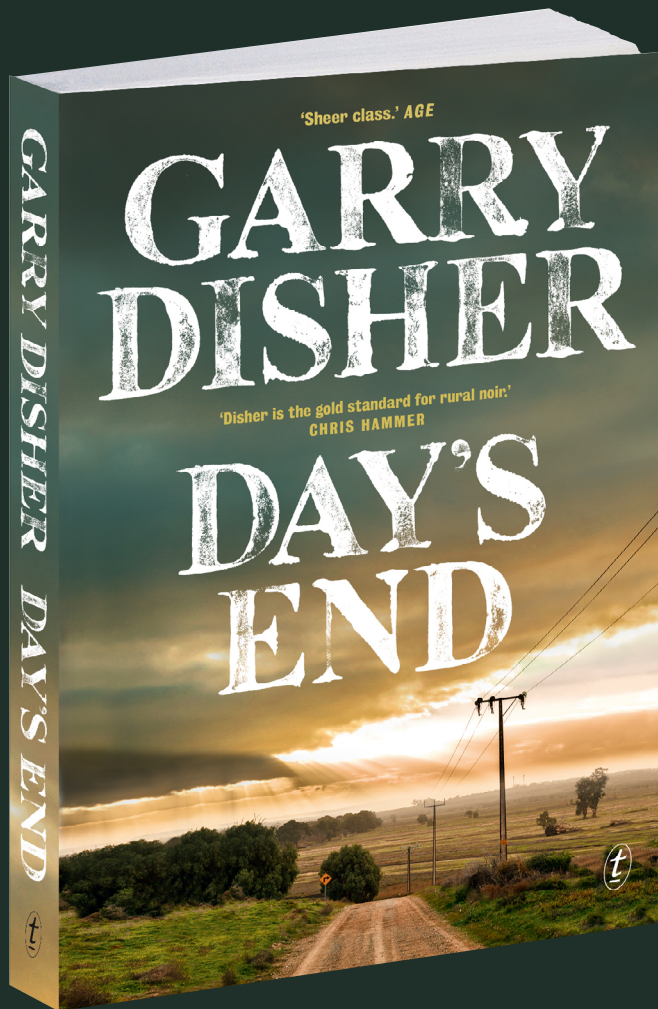
Janne Van Sant reached for Mia’s phone. ‘May I enter my details?’

‘Of course.’

Hirsch watched Janne’s fingers fly over the screen, and then she was tugging down her mask, draining her mineral water and saying, ‘Thank you for your hospitality,’ and heading for the Toyota.

She was halfway there before Hirsch could gather himself. He stood, nodded to Mia Dryden, and said his thanks, his hand extended.

She shook it hard, a jolly up-and-down. ‘I understand you’re fond of the term “Covid moron”, Constable Hirschhausen,’ she said with hostile relish. ‘Tell me—do you think I’m a Covid moron too?’



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