

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a fence made of wooden posts and wire, partially obscured by a thick layer of orange dust or sand. The ground is a flat, sandy expanse. The sky is a mix of blue and green, with a bright sun in the upper left corner, creating a lens flare effect. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones of orange, yellow, and brown, contrasting with the cooler blues and greens of the sky.

THE LOST MAN

THREE BROTHERS, ONE DEATH, NO ANSWERS . . .

JANE
HARPER

AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *THE DRY*

THE

LOST

MAN

ALSO BY JANE HARPER

The Dry

Force of Nature

THE
LOST
MAN

JANE HARPER



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Pete and Charlotte, with love

THE

LOST

MAN

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

If a visitor were to run their hands over the worn stone, a partial date could be detected in the indentations. A "one" and an "eight" and a "nine," maybe—1890-something. Only three words were still visible. They had been carved lower down, where they had better shelter from the elements.

Or perhaps they had been chiseled more deeply to start with, the message deemed more important than the man. They read:

who went astray

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

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

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

The track eventually led to the town of Balamara—a single street, really—which catered loosely for a scattered population that could almost fit into one large room when gathered together. Fifteen hundred kilometers further east lay Brisbane and the coast.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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