

Prologue

It wasn't as though the farm hadn't seen death before, and the blowflies didn't discriminate. To them there was little difference between a carcass and a corpse.

The drought had left the flies spoiled for choice that summer. They sought out unblinking eyes and sticky wounds as the farmers of Kiewarra levelled their rifles at skinny livestock. No rain meant no feed. And no feed made for difficult decisions, as the tiny town shimmered under day after day of burning blue sky.

'It'll break,' the farmers said as the months ticked over into a second year. They repeated the words out loud to each other like a mantra, and under their breath to themselves like a prayer.

But the weathermen in Melbourne disagreed. Besuited and sympathetic in air-conditioned studios, they made a passing reference most nights at six. Officially the worst conditions in a century. The weather pattern had a name, the pronunciation of which was never quite settled. *El Niño*.

At least the blowflies were happy. The finds that day were unusual, though. Smaller and with a smoothness to the flesh. Not that it mattered. They were the same where it counted. The glassy eyes. The wet wounds.

The body in the clearing was the freshest. It took the flies slightly longer to discover the two in the farmhouse, despite the front door swinging open like an invitation. Those that ventured beyond the initial offering in the hallway were rewarded with another, this time in the bedroom. This one was smaller, but less engulfed by competition.

First on the scene, the flies swarmed contentedly in the heat as the blood pooled black over tiles and carpet. Outside, washing hung still on the rotary line, bone dry and stiff from the sun. A child's scooter lay abandoned on the stepping stone path. Just one human heart beat within a kilometre radius of the farm.

So nothing reacted when deep inside the house, the baby started crying.

Chapter One

Even those who didn't darken the door of the church from one Christmas to the next could tell there would be more mourners than seats. A bottleneck of black and grey was already forming at the entrance as Aaron Falk drove up, trailing a cloud of dust and cracked leaves.

Neighbours, determined but trying not to appear so, jostled each other for the advantage as the scrum trickled through the doors. Across the road the media circled.

Falk parked his sedan next to a ute that had also seen better days and killed the engine. The air conditioner rattled into silence and the interior began to warm immediately. He allowed himself a moment to scan the crowd, although he didn't really have time. He'd dragged his heels the whole way from Melbourne, blowing out the five-hour drive to more than six. Satisfied no-one looked familiar, he stepped out of the car.

The late afternoon heat draped itself around him like a blanket. He snatched open the back-seat door to get his jacket, searing his hand in the process. After the briefest hesitation, he grabbed his hat from the seat. Wide-brimmed in stiff brown canvas, it didn't go with his funeral suit. But with skin the blue hue of skimmed milk for half the year and a cancerous-looking cluster of freckles the rest, Falk was prepared to risk the fashion faux pas.

Pale from birth with close-cropped white-blond hair and invisible eyelashes, he'd often felt during his thirty-six years that the Australian sun was trying to tell him something. It was a message easier to ignore in the tall shadows of Melbourne than in Kiewarra, where shade was a fleeting commodity.

Falk glanced once at the road leading back out of town, then at his watch. The funeral, the wake, one night and he was gone. *Eighteen hours*, he calculated. No more. Keeping that firmly in mind, he loped towards the crowd, one hand on his hat as a sudden hot gust sent hems flying.

Inside, the church was even smaller than he remembered. Shoulder to shoulder with strangers, Falk allowed himself to be ferried deeper into the congregation. He noticed a free spot along the wall and darted in, carving out a space next to a farmer whose cotton shirt strained taut across his belly. The man gave him a nod, and went back to staring straight ahead. Falk could see creases at his elbows where the shirt sleeves had until recently been rolled up.

Falk removed his hat and discreetly fanned himself. He couldn't help glancing around. Faces that at first had seemed unfamiliar came more sharply into focus and he felt an illogical rush of surprise at some of the crows' feet, silver-streaked hair and gained kilos sprinkled throughout the crowd.

An older man two rows back caught Falk's eye with a nod and they exchanged a sad smile of recognition. What was his

name? Falk tried to remember. He couldn't focus. The man had been a teacher. Falk could just about picture him at the front of a classroom, gamely attempting to bring geography or woodwork or something else alive for bored teenagers, but the memory kept flitting away.

The man nodded at the bench beside him, indicating he would make space, but Falk shook his head politely and turned back to the front. He avoided small talk at the best of times and this, unquestionably, was a million horrific miles from the best of times.

God, that middle coffin was small. Lying between the two full-size ones only made it look worse. If that were possible. Tiny kids with combed hair plastered to their skulls pointed it out: *Dad, look. That box is in football colours.* Those old enough to know what was inside stared in appalled silence, fidgeting in their school uniforms as they edged a little closer to their mothers.

Above the three coffins, a family of four stared down from a blown-up photograph. Their static smiles were overlarge and pixelated. Falk recognised the picture from the news. It had been used a lot.

Beneath, the names of the dead were spelled out in native flowers. *Luke. Karen. Billy.*

Falk stared at Luke's picture. The thick black hair had the odd grey line now, but he still looked fitter than most men on the wrong side of thirty-five. His face seemed older than Falk remembered, but then it had been nearly five years. The confident grin was unchanged, as was the slightly knowing look in his eyes. *Still the same,* were the words that sprang to mind. Three coffins said differently.

'Bloody tragic.' The farmer at Falk's side spoke out of nowhere. His arms were crossed, fists wedged tightly under his armpits.

'It is,' Falk said.

'You knew 'em well?'

'Not really. Only Luke, the —' For a dizzy moment Falk couldn't think of a word to describe the man in the largest coffin. He mentally grasped about but could only find clichéd tabloid descriptions.

'The father,' he landed on finally. 'We were friends when we were younger.'

'Yeah. I know who Luke Hadler is.'

'I think everyone does now.'

'You still live round this way, do you?' The farmer shifted his large body slightly and fixed Falk properly in his gaze for the first time.

'No. Not for a long time.'

'Right. Feels like I've seen you, though.' The farmer frowned, trying to place him. 'Hey, you're not one of them bloody TV journos, are you?'

'No. Police. In Melbourne.'

'That right? You lot should be investigating the bloody government for letting things get this bad.' The man nodded to where Luke's body lay alongside those of his wife and six-year-old son. 'We're out here trying to feed this country, worst weather in a hundred years, and they're crapping on about scrap-ping the subsidies. In some ways you can hardly blame the poor bastard. It's a fu—'

He stopped. Looked around the church. 'It's an effing scandal, that's what it is.'

Falk said nothing as they both reflected on the incompetencies of Canberra. The potential sources of blame for the dead Hadler family had been thrashed out at length over newspaper pages.

'You looking into this then?' The man nodded his head towards the coffins.

‘No. Just here as a friend,’ Falk said. ‘I’m not sure there’s anything still to look into.’

He knew only what he’d heard on the news along with everyone else. But it was straightforward according to the commentary. The shotgun had belonged to Luke. It was the same one later found clamped into what had been left of his mouth.

‘No. I suppose not,’ the farmer said. ‘I just thought, with him being your friend and all.’

‘I’m not that kind of officer anyway. Federal. With the financial intelligence unit.’

‘Means nothing to me, mate.’

‘Just means I chase the money. Anything ending with a few zeros that’s not where it should be. Laundered, embezzled, that sort of thing.’

The man said something in reply but Falk didn’t hear him. His gaze had shifted from the three coffins to the mourners in the front pew. The space reserved for family. So they could sit in front of all their friends and neighbours, who could in turn stare at the backs of their heads and thank God it wasn’t them.

It had been twenty years, but Falk recognised Luke’s father straight away. Gerry Hadler’s face was grey. His eyes appeared sunken into his head. He was sitting dutifully in his spot in the front row, but his head was turned. He was ignoring his wife sobbing by his side and the three wooden boxes holding the remains of his son, daughter-in-law and grandson. Instead, he was staring directly at Falk.

Somewhere up the back, a few notes of music piped out from speakers. The funeral was starting. Gerry inclined his head in a tiny nod and Falk unconsciously put his hand in his pocket. He felt the letter that had landed on his desk two days ago. From Gerry Hadler, eight words written with a heavy hand:

Luke lied. You lied. Be at the funeral.

It was Falk who looked away first.

It was hard to watch the photographs. They flashed up on a screen at the front of the church in a relentless montage. Luke celebrating as an under-tens footballer; a young Karen jumping a pony over a fence. There was something grotesque now about the frozen grins, and Falk saw he wasn't the only one averting his gaze.

The photo changed again and Falk was surprised to recognise himself. A fuzzy image of his eleven-year-old face looked out at him. He and Luke were side by side, bare-chested and open-mouthed as they displayed a small fish on a line. They seemed happy. Falk tried to remember the picture being taken. He couldn't.

The slideshow continued. Pictures of Luke, then Karen, each smiling like they'd never stop, and then there was Falk again. This time, he felt his lungs squeeze. From the low murmur that rippled through the crowd, he knew he wasn't the only one shaken by the image.

A younger version of himself stood with Luke, now both long-limbed and freckled with acne. Still smiling, but this time part of a foursome. Luke's arm was slung around the slim teenage waist of a girl with baby-blond hair. Falk's hand hovered more cautiously over the shoulder of a second girl with long black hair and darker eyes.

Falk could not believe that photo was being shown. He shot a look at Gerry Hadler, who was staring straight ahead, his jaw set. Falk felt the farmer next to him shift his weight and move a calculated half-step away. The penny had dropped for him, Falk thought.

He forced himself to look back at the image. At the foursome. At the girl by his side. He watched those eyes until they faded from the screen. Falk remembered that picture being taken. One afternoon near the end of a long summer. It had been a good day. And it had been one of the last photos of the four of them together. Two months later the dark-eyed girl was dead.

Luke lied. You lied.

Falk stared down at the floor for a full minute. When he looked back, time had moved on and Luke and Karen were smiling with stiff formality on their wedding day. Falk had been invited. He tried to remember what excuse he'd offered for not attending. Work, almost certainly.

The first pictures of Billy began to appear. Red-faced as a baby, then with a full head of hair as a toddler. Already looking a bit like his dad. Standing in shorts by a Christmas tree. The family dressed up as a trio of monsters, their face paint cracking around their smiles. Fast-forward a few years, and an older Karen was cradling another newborn to her breast.

Charlotte. The lucky one. No name spelled out in flowers for her. As if on cue Charlotte, now thirteen months old, began to wail from her front-row spot on her grandmother's lap. Barb Hadler clutched the girl tighter to her chest with one arm, jiggling with a nervous rhythm. With her other hand she pressed a tissue to her face.

Falk, no expert on babies, wasn't sure if Charlotte recognised her mother on the screen. Or perhaps she was just pissed off at being included in the memorial when she was still very much alive. She'd get used to it, he realised. She didn't have much choice. Not many places to hide for a kid destined to grow up with the label 'lone survivor'.

The last strains of music faded away and the final photos flashed up to an awkward silence. There was a feeling of

collective relief when someone turned on the lights. As an overweight chaplain struggled up the two steps to the lectern, Falk stared again at those dreadful coffins. He thought about the dark-eyed girl, and a lie forged and agreed on twenty years ago as fear and teenage hormones pounded through his veins.

Luke lied. You lied.

How short was the road from that decision to this moment? The question ached like a bruise.

As an older woman in the crowd turned her gaze away from the front, her eyes landed on Falk. He didn't know her, but she gave an automatic nod of polite recognition. Falk looked away. When he glanced back, she was still staring. Her eyebrows suddenly puckered into a frown, and she turned to the elderly woman next to her. Falk didn't need to be able to lip-read to know what she whispered.

The Falk boy's back.

The second woman's eyes darted to his face then immediately away. With a tiny nod she confirmed her friend's suspicion. She leaned over and whispered something to the woman on her other side. An uneasy weight settled in Falk's chest. He checked his watch. *Seventeen hours.* Then he was gone. Again. Thank God.