

PROLOGUE

He shouldn't have brought them here.

It was hard to navigate the bush at night. He ran through the landmarks in his head; the edge of the road, the path by the stream into the bush, and then crossing over the tape the council had put up warning people to go no further. He'd been here less than a week ago and the hat he'd left behind must be here somewhere . . .

Slowly he turned 180 degrees, the phone torch shedding a jagged beam of light, making the trees jump out, appear too close. He took a deep breath, rubbed his free hand down his jeans. Despite the cold, he could feel a thin sheen of sweat rise on his forehead. He breathed out slowly, spun the torchlight again, this time behind him in a wide arc.

The girls' faces appeared ghost-white in the spear of light and they covered their eyes with their forearms.

'Are you lost?' the younger girl, Sarah, asked. 'Evan, are you lost?'
'Quiet,' he said. 'I need to listen.'

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'What even is this?' Sarah's older sister Emma, the one who mattered, asked. *'You bring us all the way out here with barely any light and you tell us we'll hear something cool, and now you don't know where we are?'*

'Quiet.'

'Jesus, Evan, I'm going. C'mon, Sez.'

Emma turned, but not before Evan heard the disgust in her voice. She probably thought he was making it up just to impress her, or worse, so that he could . . . well . . .

'Wait!'

'Enough, Evan.' Emma's voice was sharp and it made him shrink. *She'd probably tell everyone at school he was even more of a loser than she'd first thought.*

The girls began walking back in the direction they'd come.

'Wait!' he said again. 'I—'

And then they heard it. At first, a low moan. The girls turned back to him open-mouthed and in the light he could see their horror plainly written. He felt it too, a dark turning in the pit of his stomach. The moan grew louder and the girls rushed to him so the three were almost hugging. Louder still as Emma tried to pull them all back along the track.

'What is it?' she whispered. 'Who's out there?'

Abruptly – silence.

'I want to go home,' Sarah said, and the two girls started walking quickly along the darkened path.

'Is this some trick?' Emma turned, vicious, towards him. 'You think this is funny?'

Her face was not as he thought it would be. Instead of huddling up to him, she was as against him as always. He'd got it wrong again.

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'I'm sorry,' he said, faltering.

'What was that sound?'

Evan hesitated. 'I don't know.'

And then the screaming began. A high-pitched scream, from somewhere out in the bush, and all three started running blindly, away from the noise, the uneven torchlight making strange, panicked patterns on the spindly gums and shrubs. The screaming, it seemed, came from all around, and above it were their own breaths, ragged and panting.

They ran through the screaming bush for what may have been seconds but felt like years, the trees distorted, limbs reaching out and scratching at their faces.

And then, just as suddenly, it stopped.

The teenagers kept moving. Evan thought they must have passed the council lines and were back into familiar territory, when Sarah called out in pain. He turned to see the younger girl lying on her stomach and sobbing.

'Get up!' Evan cried, harsh against the wails, but the girl did not move. He gave the phone to Emma and reached down to grab Sarah. He pulled her up in one movement and she stood there, swallowing sobs and wiping snot across her face.

'Let's go,' Evan said, still rattled. The screams had been different tonight. More intense. Higher pitched.

But Emma had not moved. Instead, she was staring down the length of the torchlight's beam and the other two followed her gaze.

There, curled up in the brush, was the body of a man.

The rain, when it came, was torrential. Fat surges of it, racing into gutters, rivers and streams. No rain for three years, then this.

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Young kids marvelled at it, tree-changers had long baths outside in it, and the old farmers muttered about the strangeness of it; the timing, the intensity. Not a drop in winter; now it was almost the end of spring and the clouds were exploding with the stuff every few days.

Jacqueline Matteson lay awake, listening to it pelt on her tin roof. Even if it had come when they needed it, it still wouldn't have been the right sort. Too sudden, too damaging for pre-harvest. Gushing rain and now the berries ruined, the crops probably flattened.

A sound from outside – not the rain: sludging, running? The porch creaked. Jacqueline sat up in her bed and reached automatically at the empty space beside her. A sound at the front door now, a muffled shout and, was it . . .? Yes – low whispering. Frantic. Her first thought was the girls. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for the chair.

'Who is it?' she called, and with effort raised herself off the bed and lowered herself into the chair, manoeuvring the wheels around the bed. The sound was definitely her girls and now she felt a fear rise in her throat, because it's every farmer's nightmare: an accident on the farm. Before she could reach it, the door was flung open and her two youngest daughters, Emma and Sarah, stood there drenched. And who was that behind them? Evan?

Sarah was choking back sobs, the other two pale and shivering.

'What is it?' Jacqueline asked sharply.

'There's a man . . .' Emma said. *'Along Stoney Creek . . . he's . . .'*

'He's what?' Jacqueline felt a deep dread – she'd been through this before. 'Has there been an accident? Where? Tell me!'

'It's Aidan Sleeth,' Evan said. 'I think he's been shot.'

CHAPTER 1

Detective Senior Sergeant Mark Ariti stamped his feet hard on the front porch of Jacqueline Matteson's house. Outside was raven black, rain pelted hard. Inside, though it was barely 2 am, the living room was lit up like a showground and filled with people young and old. Mark recognised no one. Stone Town, barely twenty-five kilometres from where he lived in Booralama, may as well have been another universe. Consisting mainly of old farming families and an influx of tree-changers, the area was known for its mines, remnants of settler stone houses scattered about the bush, and significant wheat yield.

Riveting, Mark remembered thinking, in Year 10 local history. *Take that, Machu Picchu.*

But the gold from Stone Town was long gone and it had been years since farmers' sons returned from boarding schools to make a life on the land.

Stone Town now had a different footy team from Booralama, different netball team, different CFA, CWA. But not a different police station.

In the lounge, three girls sat huddled on a couch and a wiry older lady nursed a drink beside the fireplace.

Mark introduced himself to the tired-looking woman who opened the door to him.

‘Morning. Detective Senior Sergeant Ariti, Booralama. I’m here to speak to the three kids who found the body.’

The woman’s face was metal-grey in the bright light of the room. ‘Can’t it wait till the morning? We’re exhausted.’

Mark made an apologetic noise and indicated the notepaper and pen in his hand. ‘Procedures.’

The door from the kitchen swung open, and with a burst of energy an attractive woman in a wheelchair entered the room.

‘Jacqueline Matteson,’ she announced, holding out her hand.

He shook it. ‘Detective Senior Sergeant Mark Ariti.’

‘Well, Sergeant, do they need a lawyer?’ She tipped her head towards the girls, who were now staring up at him with tired and tear-stained eyes.

‘That’s up to you,’ Mark said. ‘But I’m just here to ask a few questions.’

The old lady with the drink piped up. ‘You’re Helen’s son, aren’t you?’ She didn’t wait for a reply. ‘I’m sorry for your loss, dear. Helen was a lovely lady.’

‘She was.’ Mark cleared his throat. ‘Thank you.’

Jacqueline’s face shifted, softened. ‘You can talk to them

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in the kitchen. Evan's just gone in there. Girls?' She nodded to her daughters, gave them an encouraging glance. 'The policeman here needs to speak to you about what you saw. I'll be just in here.'

Two of the girls untangled themselves from the couch and walked past Mark into the other room. He said his thanks to the women, and followed.

In the kitchen, a young boy sat at the table, head in hands. 'Evan?' Mark asked.

The boy looked up, red-faced and anguished. 'It *was* Aidan Sleeth, wasn't it?' he said.

'Yes, I'm afraid it was.'

'I thought it was, but – his head. It was . . .'

'Yes.'

The face remained Aidan Sleeth from the nose down, but the back of his head was an explosion of gore. Bits of brain, skin and bone matter on nearby shrubs and trees, blood soaking into the wet earth. The rest of the body appeared unharmed and strangely comfortable, huddled into the side of an acacia tree, knees up to the chest. Cream chinos, brown brogues, a light blue shirt and a navy Country Road jumper. Wallet in the jeans pocket. Aidan Sleeth, forty-one. Successful farmer and property investor. Ex-wife, on good terms. Beyond that, Mark knew little else. He'd safeguarded the crime scene, set up barriers, taken photos, arranged for the body to be taken away. Tomorrow, Forensics and Homicide would arrive from Adelaide.

The teenagers were frightened. Each had the look of a face not quite put together, features pained and uncertain.

‘Names and ages?’ he asked, pen held high. ‘Just for the official stuff.’

The older of the girls answered. ‘I’m Emma Matteson, fourteen. This is my sister, Sarah Matteson – she’s twelve – and our neighbour, Evan Williams. He’s fourteen too.’

‘That’s great. Now, can you tell me – and take your time – how you came to see the body?’

There was a slight pause, a shift in the air.

‘We just saw it there, in the torchlight – all crumpled up on the side of the path near the creek,’ Emma said.

‘Did you touch the body at all?’

‘No way! Why would we do that? No, we just came back here and woke Mum up. Then she called Sue – that’s Evan’s mum. My grandmother, Beth Matteson, lives in the house out the back, so she came in too.’

‘Was it only you three out there tonight?’

‘Yes, only us.’ Emma was firm.

Mark thought for a moment. ‘There was another girl in the lounge room. Was she not with you?’

Sarah gave a snort. ‘That’s Isabelle, our other sister. She only got out of bed when we came in.’

There was a silence and Mark wondered if their mothers had broached the subject yet.

‘What were you doing out there in the bush after midnight?’

Emma looked hard at the table. Sarah, the youngest one, mimicked her sister’s action, but not before she threw Evan a quick sideways glance.

‘You were sneaking out, weren’t you? I get that. But why?’

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‘Are we in trouble?’ Sarah asked in a small voice, eyes still cast downward.

‘Not by me you’re not. I’m only interested in the body – but still, I’d like to know why you were out there and if you saw or heard anything.’

At ‘heard’ the boy flinched.

‘Did you hear something, Evan?’

‘We heard screaming.’ Sarah spoke for him.

Mark straightened, tried to keep his voice casual. ‘Screaming?’

‘Yeah. I was so scared and we were running and running, and that’s when I fell over and we saw the dead man.’ Sarah’s face crumpled.

‘This screaming, was it like someone in pain, or someone frightened, or someone screaming, you know, for fun?’

‘For *fun*?’ Emma was scornful. ‘Yeah, the screaming was like fun, fun, fun. That’s why we were running in the opposite direction.’

The girl had a point. ‘Was it a woman’s scream?’

The three went quiet, then Evan muttered something.

‘What was that, Evan?’ Mark had to bend down towards him.

‘I said, it was a bird.’ Evan raised his head and looked blank-faced at Mark. ‘A Barking Owl. Their cry, it sounds like a woman screaming.’

‘It didn’t sound much like a bird,’ Emma said, doubtful.

‘It was.’

Barking Owls. Mark had heard the tales; the screaming bird that wakes you in the night thinking a woman is being

raped and murdered just outside your door. ‘Those birds common round here?’

‘Not really.’ Evan’s head was drooping. ‘But it’s breeding time and there are a few out there in the bush along the creek.’

‘You know a bit about birds, do you, Evan?’ Mark kept up his light, friendly tone. The one he used for kids and belligerent drunks. God, he was tired. And cold. He realised he hadn’t yet taken off his coat after standing outside in the dark, in the rain, staring at Aidan Sleeth’s shattered head.

The boy muttered in response.

‘What’s that?’ Harsher than what he was aiming for, but couldn’t the boy speak up? *Shoulders back, son!* he wanted to say. Mark repeated, ‘Could you say that again, mate?’

‘There’s this person who sometimes stays near here, he knows a bit.’

‘He’s a twitcher,’ Sarah said, and she mimicked a bird, her arms flapping, then cupping her hands to make binoculars. ‘Not Evan, I don’t mean him. I’m talking about the man from the co-op.’

Out of the three of them, she now appeared the brightest, eager to help, her little face aglow. She was probably overtired, bordering on hysterical. His two sons got like that after a party or a movie about superheros. He should go. His doona called like a beautiful siren.

‘Twitcher, okay.’

‘They’re people who watch birds, like *a lot*.’

‘Shut up, Sarah,’ Emma said, irritated. ‘He’s a twitcher, so what? There’s weirdos everywhere.’

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‘Nothing wrong with birdwatching,’ Mark said, and looked at Evan.

The boy shrugged, turning his face away.

‘That why you were out there? Listening for birds?’

Emma laughed, a short bark. ‘Evan said there was something cool in the bush and that we should go there with him to check it out. He made it sound really good and Sarah kept nagging me, so we met him at the bottom of the driveway and walked there, into the bush. It’s not like there’s anything else to do around here.’

‘Okay.’

‘Really cool, wasn’t it, Evan?’ Emma turned to the boy. ‘Thanks for that, arsehole.’

Evan’s face, anxious before, now sagged and his eyes welled up.

Mark reached out and patted the boy’s hand. ‘No need to blame anyone.’

Just then the door opened and Jacqueline Matteson entered, her eyes bright despite the hour.

‘Time for bed, kids,’ she said before turning her chair back into the lounge room. ‘Sue, want Isabelle to drive you home?’

Mark pretended not to hear. He’d only seen her briefly, but Isabelle did not look old enough to own a licence. That said, she was a farming girl, probably been driving since she was ten, and it *was* just next door. He said nothing. Went to say something. Said nothing.

Jacqueline caught the look. ‘She’s fifteen. And it’s just up the drive and across the paddocks. A track, not the road. I’d

never let her drive on that. It's okay. Issy knows to drive slow, I'm very strict about it.'

Mark raised his eyebrows in a helpless gesture, then gave a sigh. It was an act: Frustrated Rural Cop.

'Yes, please,' Sue called back, listless. The woman had all the features of cardboard.

Evan stood up and Mark shook his hand, then watched his drooping shape leave the room. The two girls followed: Emma defiant and without glancing back, Sarah giving a small wave.

With the teenagers gone, the kitchen expanded and became lighter.

'Here.' Jacqueline was offering him a towel and a coat. 'You're still soaking.'

'Yup. Bit wet out there.' Mark took the towel and gave his hair a rough dry, rubbing it over the back of his neck and behind his ears. He wrestled off his wet coat and mimed where to put it – back of the chair? Or the table? Jacqueline nodded towards the chair. He put it there.

The new coat, much too big, was a great relief. Its dryness seeped into his bones. Comfort. He felt like curling up right then and there on the Mattesons' kitchen floor.

'What do you think happened?' Jacqueline picked up two empty cups from the table with one hand and wheeled them to the sink.

'Difficult to tell. City detectives will be arriving soon enough, they'll be able to give us a clearer picture.'

'Surely there's no clearer picture than the back of a man's head blown off.'

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He couldn't argue with that. 'What about you? What do you think happened?'

'It sounds pretty obvious that the man has been shot. Maybe by accident, I don't know. Probably a hunter, there's deer out there.'

'We can't rule out suicide.'

'No, you can't.'

Mark caught the tone, recognised it in his own thoughts. Rural men suicided all the time, twice as often as their city counterparts. Depression, the fishbowl existence, divorce, loneliness and drought. Factors that didn't seem to fit with what he knew of Aidan Sleeth, but even so. Rural men weren't generally talkers. Counselling? Maybe in a blue moon. *Maybe*. Still, why go into the bush, far from your home, in the dead of night, in the pouring rain, and shoot yourself? Most rural men suicided on their properties, had planned for it, practised even.

There was nothing so far, in the little he'd learned about Sleeth, that suggested this scenario was likely. Sleeth's farm wasn't failing. His divorce, according to Brian, the paramedic from Booralama whom he'd met at the scene, was reputed to be amicable. This rain wouldn't dent Sleeth's bank balance – his farm could withstand the rough seasons – but still, suicide could not be ruled out. The stats were clear on that. Police in rural stations across the country told grim tales of cutting people down from ropes, unhooking gas pipes from cars, and prising the family gun from fingers grey with death.

'The kids mentioned screaming, a Barking Owl. You ever heard it round here?'

Jacqueline gave an exaggerated shudder. 'Yes. Horrible! First time I heard it, I made Rod get up with me and go out looking for some woman I was convinced was being strangled in the bush.'

'Can't have been fun.'

Jacqueline shook her head. 'Took me a while to get used to the call, but I did – sort of.'

'They rare, Barking Owls?'

'Endangered I think, but I'm no bird expert. I haven't heard it for at least a couple of years. Doesn't mean they're not out there, of course.'

'You think that's why the kids were in the bush tonight, to hear it?'

'They said that's why. With Emma, though, I'm never entirely sure. She can be a bit wild.'

Wild. What did that mean? Reckless, fast? Different connotations for males and females.

'They've had a rough night,' he said.

Jacqueline yawned, ran a hand through her hair. 'Word got out pretty quick, as you can imagine. Emma and social media . . . People are already messaging to let me know what type of casserole they'll be dropping around. I'll take a few days off, see how the girls go. It's actually Evan I'm more worried about.'

Mark thought of the boy, slouched over the table, a portrait of misery. And something else – fear?

'Better be off.' He felt in his jeans pocket for his keys. 'Thanks for the coat. And for letting me talk to the kids so late.'

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'I hope Emma wasn't rude to you. She can be a nightmare.' A dark curl bobbed at the side of her cheek.

Fetching, Mark thought. He coughed. 'Fetching': a funny word to think of right now. 'Three teenage girls, don't know how you do it.'

'Three! I've got four. Georgia's at university.'

Mark gave a low whistle. 'Hats off. That's impressive.' He walked out the swing door into the lounge, Jacqueline following. He lingered a moment in the warm room. A photo on the living room wall showed a family of six: four girls, a younger Jacqueline, and a big man in a blue polo shirt and jeans. A happy shot. Mark pointed to the man. 'That your husband?'

Jacqueline looked up at the photo, head tilted in a fond expression. 'Yep, that's Rod. He died four years ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You weren't to know.' She fiddled at her hair, pushing the errant curl back into line behind her ear. No use, it sprang out again.

Mark stood awkwardly, studying the photo. He coughed into the crook of his elbow and thanked Jacqueline as she opened the door for him and said goodbye.

He gave a quick wave and stepped onto the dimly lit porch, clicking the button on his keys. The mention of the dead husband had made things awkward, though it needn't have. He knew, after all the stilted conversations about his mother, how difficult it was for people to talk naturally about what was the most natural of progressions.

Most natural, that is, unless you were shot in the back of the head.

The police HiLux lit up like an old friend as he hurried towards it, sludging through the puddles. Headlights on, he pulled out onto the dirt driveway, now a moving thing of potholes and running streams. It was another freak storm with flash flooding, crops lost, old gums falling. Dangerous for anyone caught out in it. Why choose such a night to impress the girls? Wouldn't Evan's bird be there tomorrow?

On his way home, in the darkness along Stone Town Road, then the lonely stretch to Booralama, Mark listened to radio updates about the missing woman, last seen eight days ago. No real news as yet, neighbours were shocked, leads were thin. He switched it off.

In the quiet of early morning, Mark thought about the Matteson family photo. Rod standing proud in the centre with a small girl on his shoulders, Jacqueline beside him holding another. No wheelchair. Two older girls were laughing into the camera. Four children. Oldest away at university, the youngest two in the kitchen, the ones to find the body.

So why, Mark asked himself, was it the second-born daughter, Isabelle, who was sobbing?

In the brief seconds his headlights had lit up her face as their vehicles passed each other on the Mattesons' driveway, Mark had seen the girl's distraught face; her expression anguished and full of woe.