

PROLOGUE

2 December 2024

Alan is deep in a dream when the alert on his phone jolts him awake. He tries hard to ignore it, clinging instead to the sweat and lanolin, watching Rhonda watch him as she leans against the press. Already, her belly is growing but no one in the shed knows except for her and him. His biceps were like shotputs back then.

The alert again, and Rhonda slips away. Shoulders aching, Alan rolls over, finds his glasses and phone, and with effort sits up. It is just after 5 am.

A malfunction: number 82, back paddock. Briefly Alan considers ignoring it, going back to sleep, trying to find his wife again. But the alert is a red one and the job is new. Reluctantly, he puts on his trousers, his shirt and his boots. This fancy new control feature on his phone is too eager. Technology, you can't trust it.

Even so, the man finds his keys and heads outside, calling for the dogs as he climbs into his ute. He bypasses the roads and instead drives through the paddocks, the sky a thin grey now, a hint of orange in it. It used to be his favourite time of day.

Over the bumpy paddock – the sheep half asleep, the dam a slick mirror, and the dogs’ ears flapping in the back – he heads past the two Blakeley gums, their shapes like old-fashioned ladies in skirts. Stars bow out; the sky is clear.

Everywhere farmers like him will have their elbows out the ute windows, feeling the breeze, rattling along, thinking of the jobs ahead. The thought gives him comfort.

At the top of the hill they call Mont Blanc, Alan kills the headlights and looks across the land. He’s lived here his whole life, but he’ll never get used to this: the sight of them. From this vantage point, the three hundred turbines look like a scene from *War of the Worlds*.

It takes Alan less than a second to locate number 82.

He turns his head away in horror, and then slowly forces himself to look again.

His hands are gripped tight to the steering wheel, and he’s finding it difficult to breathe.

Out there, from one of the blades on wind turbine 82, a body hangs.

CHAPTER 1

The sun was sitting on the paddocks and making its presence felt by the time the police arrived. In the golden haze of morning, their flashing lights were unnecessary, but the blue and red in this instance were designed more to encourage the crowd to move than to signal an emergency. Because, clearly, the person hanging up there was dead.

One of the first farmers to call it in, Alan Crowe, stood at the front of the paddock's gates, holding a hand up to signal the officers through.

The gate behind him had a sign on it: *Clean Energy Solutions Australia*.

The police phones had not stopped ringing since dawn. Every farmer in his ute or on her four-wheeler had seen the dangling shape the moment daylight appeared. It was a nightmare for the country station. Belinda Burney's mobile rang again. 'We know, we're there now,' she said, her voice rising. 'Yes! We can see it, yes, we're dealing with it now.'

Will Lovett pulled the police car in beside Alan, turned the engine off and gave the man a nod.

‘We need to get that body down now,’ Belinda growled as she ended the call.

‘How the hell do we do that?’

They stared at each other. The real question was, how the hell did it get *up* there?

‘Mr Crowe?’ Belinda snapped into action as they both stepped out of the car. She held out her hand to the farmer. ‘Senior Sergeant Burney, Belinda. Thanks for keeping everyone at bay.’

‘Whole district is here,’ Alan said, red-faced and flustered. His hair was sticking up like a rooster; he looked as if he hadn’t slept in a week. ‘Everyone gawking.’

Belinda, Alan and Will raised their chins so they too could gawk at the body directly above. The feet were pointing down, rotating slowly, drawing a circle in the air. The turbine’s gigantic blades were still.

‘Senior Sergeant Will Lovett.’ Will took his turn to shake the older man’s hand. ‘A team from Ballarat are on their way, but we’ll need to clear this crowd and check there’s no one else up there.’

‘I don’t have keys to go inside.’ Alan tipped his head towards the turbine. ‘I’m just the overseer – you’ll need the wind techie for that.’

‘Wind techie?’

‘Shane Burrows, local kid. I called him, should be here in a tick.’

‘Good work, Alan.’ Will rested his hand lightly on the farmer’s shoulder. ‘You want to sit down?’

‘Before you do’ – Belinda tilted her head up, shot her tall partner a look – ‘can you tell us how you came to know about . . . this?’ She waved a hand upward.

Alan ran his fingers through his wild rooster hair. ‘Got woken by an alert on my phone. Shane downloaded it for me. It lets me know when any of the units have been opened, or if they aren’t functioning or need maintenance. When that happens, I’m supposed to call him.’

‘So did you call him this morning?’

‘No. Often it’s the new gadget playing up. Plus, it wasn’t even light, just gone five – didn’t want to wake the kid for no reason.’

‘Who owns the turbines?’ Will asked, even though he had seen the sign on the gate.

‘Geordie Pritchard,’ Belinda cut in. ‘He owns them all.’

‘I’ve called him too, left a message,’ Alan said. ‘He should be here soon.’

‘Thank you, Alan.’ Belinda’s eyes were drawn again to those rotating feet.

‘You’re Reg’s daughter, aren’t you?’ the man said, blinking.

‘That’s right.’ She turned her gaze to him, gave a distracted smile. ‘I wondered if you’d remember me.’ Alan had the air of someone who’d been dropped onto a strange planet and had no idea where he was or what to do.

A hush fell over the chattering crowd as an ambulance snaked its way through them. *Make way*, the flashing lights said, *this isn’t over yet*.

‘Who is it up there, Alan?’ someone in the crowd yelled out.

‘I dunno,’ the man muttered, then more loudly, ‘How would I bloody know!’

‘Go sit in your ute, mate,’ Will said. ‘I’ll walk you there.’

Grateful, Alan nodded at him, and they began heading to his vehicle.

‘Bound to happen!’ another person in the back shouted, and Will strained to see who it was. He caught a glimpse of a woman

ducking behind a group of men. The crowd shifted and he lost sight of her.

‘Do you have *any* idea who it is?’ Will asked Alan, quietly.

‘No,’ the man said, and then turned his back as a fierce gust of wind suddenly blew in. The turbine blades spun faster. *All that energy*, Will thought, *the power in it*.

Another police car pulled up close by and the young senior constable, Tammy Reyner, got out, her wild curly hair blowing into her face.

‘Cordon off the area, will you, Tam?’ Will called out. ‘We need some order round here.’

‘Boss.’ Tammy was onto it, shepherding people away, telling them to leave, that there was nothing to see here.

An eager young man broke through the crowd, holding up a set of keys while making his way towards the bottom of the turbine.

‘Wind techie.’ Alan gave the approaching figure a glance. ‘Shane.’

‘Okay, good.’ Will opened the driver’s door for Alan. ‘Why don’t you go on home, mate? Looks like we’ll be able to get inside and up the turbine now.’

Alan climbed in but then just sat, staring at the steering wheel. ‘Glad Rhonda’s not here to see this,’ he said, jerking his chin upward.

‘Yeah?’ Will didn’t know any Rhonda. After ten months, he still barely knew anyone around here. ‘Why’s that?’

‘She said it from the get-go – these turbines, they’re killers.’

Tammy had encouraged the gawkers to leave with minimal success, though she did get them to part for Alan to drive off. Will walked over to the wind techie, who was talking to Belinda

at the base of the turbine. The young man was decked out in ropes, a vest with harness and a sturdy helmet.

‘You must be Shane,’ Will said. ‘Nice to meet you – and all your gear.’

‘One of us has to put this stuff on too,’ Belinda said. ‘Safety regulations.’

‘And gloves.’ Will pulled his pair out of his pocket. ‘Investigations will be all over us if we muddy the scene.’

‘Photos too,’ Belinda added. ‘I’ve taken some, but we’ll need more of the inside and the view of the body from up there.’

Shane was holding out an extra helmet and harness. ‘So, which one of you is coming up?’ He glanced at Belinda doubtfully.

‘Well, it won’t be her.’ Will nodded in his colleague’s direction and Shane, with a look of relief, passed him the gear.

Belinda tightened her lips and Will steeled himself.

‘*I am* capable of climbing up a few ladders, Will.’ The policeman’s voice was ominously low.

‘This turbine’s over a hundred metres high.’

‘So what?’

‘And you’re eight months pregnant.’

Belinda swore and turned away.

‘Look, I know you can do it, Bel.’ Will spoke more gently as Shane made an effort to tune out. ‘But what if you fell or, or—’

‘I wouldn’t fall,’ Belinda replied, stubbornly.

‘No,’ Will agreed, ‘you wouldn’t.’

Belinda pulled a face then let out a heavy sigh of resignation, ducking to avoid the pat on the shoulder he was attempting to give her.

‘Hey, Will?’ she asked her husband of seven years. ‘You still scared of heights?’

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The answer was yes. Will was still scared of heights. Heights made him dizzy, made him irrational, made him feel as if he was going to throw himself off the ledge.

Now, standing in the cramped round space at the bottom of the turbine and looking up at the ladder, Will remembered just how *much* he hated heights.

‘You right?’ Shane asked. So far, the techie had shown no anxiety about what they’d see when they got to the top. In contrast, the young man was finding it difficult to contain his excitement as he checked his equipment and peered up the vertical tunnel.

‘I’m all right. The front hatch was locked, wasn’t it?’ Will asked, more to confirm it for himself.

‘Yes.’ Shane was attaching himself via a chain to a rung on the metal ladder leading up. ‘The hatch locks automatically when it closes.’

‘Who else has the keys for the turbines?’

‘The boss, of course.’

‘Geordie Pritchard.’

‘Yeah. Alan has the keys to the perimeter fence, but not for the actual turbines. He calls me when there’s a problem.’

‘Right.’

‘I have keys too.’ Shane looked down at the bunch in his hand. ‘*Obviously.*’

The two men stared at each other. In the confined area, the moment was almost surreal. Despite the tragic situation and the rising sense of claustrophobia, Will felt a laugh bubbling up.

‘I’ll just . . .’ Shane used a different key from the same set to open a small hatch, where he studied a blinking monitor. ‘Just checking to see that the turbine is definitely turned off. Have to make sure . . . and yes, yes, it is.’ He glanced meaningfully at

Will. 'So that means whoever is up there knew how to stop the blades spinning before he started climbing.'

'Right.' Will wasn't sure what he was supposed to say to that. Was Shane expecting him to be impressed? 'That's great,' he added for good effect.

'I mean, it's not difficult.' Shane pointed to a button labelled BLADE MONITOR – ON/OFF. 'But you should probably know that.'

'Thanks.' Again, that urge to laugh.

'I deliver the training to everyone who works onsite here,' Shane said, a solemn look on his face. 'Safety is our number one priority.'

Will stared at his feet for a long moment.

'Now, up we go.' Shane grabbed hold of the ladder. 'Stay right behind me.'

Will took some quick photos before placing his phone in his pocket. *Up*. He focused on climbing, one hand up, one foot up, one hand up. It wasn't too bad, aside from the heat and the clanking metal and the lack of air. *It's like a vertical prison*, he thought, *and I'm the fresh meat*.

After a couple of minutes of slow climbing, they came to a platform. Again, the standing room was close.

'I'm usually by myself when I come up here,' Shane explained. 'Not used to it with two of us.'

'What happens now?' Will took off his glasses and wiped them with his shirt. *God, it's hot*. 'Where's the ladder gone?'

'Now for the fun part.' Shane pressed a button on a remote, and Will was astonished to see a low door opening into an elevator.

'It has a lift?' He followed Shane into it, and the two stood with their noses almost touching.

‘This one does. Not all.’

‘It’s like Charlie and the Glass Elevator,’ Will observed. ‘Or that movie with Bruce Willis.’

‘Who?’

‘Never mind.’ Will closed his eyes as the lift took them up the cylinder, fifty metres, maybe sixty. His stomach lurched; his head began to throb. Might have been a useful photo, but there wasn’t room. He was sure Bruce Willis wouldn’t be this nervous.

The lift came to a stop, and Shane slid open the steel door. ‘One more climb,’ he said.

Will it ever end?

‘We do have a climb-assist, for the ladder sections,’ Shane said, as he mounted the ladder. ‘See this cable?’ Will looked to the side of the ladder, where a steel cable ran down the entire length. ‘You can clip it to your safety vest, and it relieves most of the weight. Try it now.’

Will clipped himself to the cable and was surprised to feel himself being hoisted up the rungs. He still had to climb, but the job was made much easier.

‘I didn’t show you the assist at the start’ – the young man smiled – ‘because I figured you’d want to get the feel for the climb.’

Gee, thanks, Will thought. He was beginning to tire of the younger man’s superior tone.

They climbed. After ten metres, they reached another platform. ‘Nearly at the top,’ Shane said, matter of fact.

With each different level, Will had felt a growing anxiety, amplified by Shane’s clinical approach and the clanking of metal within the tight space. Now, he followed as the wind techie climbed a short stepladder and through a grate to a wider area.

AN ILL WIND

‘This is the cell,’ Shane said. ‘In a sec we’ll be able to see everything.’

Finally, there was room for Will to take some more photos. But the heat! How could anyone work here? Sweat poured down his back in a stinking stream. Shane was pushing more buttons, and suddenly, two hatches above them opened and wind gushed in. Will’s stomach muscles clenched. The giant blades of the wind turbine were just below them and stretching out, over forty metres long.

The body hung from the end of a rope, the head bowed as if in prayer. Light brown hair flapped, revealing a small bald spot. The shirt was tucked into jeans; a neat brown belt, blue jumper on top. The corpse swung in the wind, hands coming up then down in a pleading gesture. The one side of the face he could see was a bloated grey.

Bile rose up in Will’s throat. He punched some numbers into his phone, then forced himself to look at the figure, to see if there was anything identifiable about it.

‘We’re at the top – no one else is here, it’s safe,’ Will said when Belinda answered.

‘Okay. Investigations will be on site any moment. You can come down now.’

But Will was looking at Shane. The techie’s face had gone a queasy shade of yellow.

‘Do you recognise the person?’ Belinda asked down the line.

‘No.’ Will shook his head. ‘I’ve never seen him before. Shane, do you know who it is?’

The younger man stood stock still. It took a moment for Will to realise that Shane had tears in his eyes and was finding it difficult to speak. The techie looked up at Will with a grimace. He opened his mouth, then closed it. ‘It’s my boss,’ he said.

‘What, your boss of the technicians? Of the wind farm?’

The young man’s arms flapped, gesturing across the land and around it. ‘The boss of it all. Of *everything!*’

Will closed his eyes. Now he felt the vertigo, the moving sensation, the dizziness. *Get me down*, he thought. *Get me down.*

‘The boss of *everyone!*’ Shane’s voice had risen. ‘Like, everybody!’