The book cover features a dark, starry night sky with a faint, glowing nebula or comet streak across the center. The bottom of the cover is filled with a dense field of tall, golden-brown grass. The title 'THE DRY' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters, with 'THE' positioned above 'DRY'. Below the title is a line of text in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters: 'A DESPERATE ACT IN A SMALL TOWN WITH BIG SECRETS'. At the bottom, the author's name 'JANE HARPER' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters, with 'JANE' above 'HARPER'.

THE DRY

A DESPERATE ACT IN A SMALL TOWN WITH BIG SECRETS

JANE
HARPER



About *The Dry*

Who really killed the Hadler family?


Luke Hadler turns a gun on his wife and child, then himself. The farming community of Kiewarra is facing life and death choices daily. If one of their own broke under the strain, well . . .

When Federal Police investigator Aaron Falk returns to Kiewarra for the funerals, he is loath to confront the people who rejected him twenty years earlier. But when his investigative skills are called on, the facts of the Hadler case start to make him doubt this murder-suicide charge.

And as Falk probes deeper into the killings, old wounds are reopened. For Falk and his childhood friend Luke shared a secret . . . A secret Falk thought long-buried . . . A secret which Luke's death starts to bring to the surface . . .



DRY JANE HARDER



Contents

[Cover](#)

[About *The Dry*](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-one](#)

[Chapter Forty-two](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About Jane Harper](#)

[Copyright page](#)

To my parents, Mike and Helen, who always read to me.

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 opened 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 scrapping 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.

Chapter Two

'Aaron Falk, don't you bloody dare leave.'

Falk was standing by his car, fighting the urge to get in and drive away. Most of the mourners had already set off on the short trudge to the wake. Falk turned at the voice and despite himself, broke into a smile.

‘Gretchen,’ he said as the woman pulled him into a hug, her forehead pressed against his shoulder. He rested his chin on her blonde head and they stood there for a long minute, rocking back and forth.

‘Oh my God, I’m so glad to see you here.’ Her voice was muffled by his shirt.

‘How are you?’ he asked when she pulled away. Gretchen Schoner shrugged as she slipped off a pair of cheap sunglasses to reveal reddened eyes.

‘Not good. Bad, really. You?’

‘Same.’

‘You certainly look the same.’ She managed a shaky smile. ‘Still working the albino look, I see.’

‘You haven’t changed much either.’

She gave a small snort, but her smile firmed. ‘In twenty years? Come on.’ Falk wasn’t just being flattering. Gretchen was still entirely recognisable from the photo of the teenage foursome that had flashed up during the service.

The waist Luke had thrown his arm around was a little thicker now and the baby-blond hair might have been helped by a bottle, but the blue eyes and high cheekbones were pure Gretchen. Her formal trousers and top were

a shade tighter than traditional funeral attire and she moved a little uneasily in the outfit. Falk wondered if it was borrowed or just seldom worn.

Gretchen was looking him over with the same scrutiny and as their eyes met, she laughed. She immediately looked lighter, younger.

‘Come on.’ She reached out and squeezed his forearm. Her palm felt cool against his skin. ‘The wake’s at the community centre. We’ll get it over with together.’

As they started down the road, she called out to a small boy who was poking something with a stick. He looked up and reluctantly abandoned what he was doing. Gretchen held out a hand, but the child shook his head and trotted in front, swinging his stick like a sword.

‘My son, Lachie,’ Gretchen said, glancing sideways at Falk.

‘Right. Yes.’ It took Falk a moment to remember that the girl he knew was now a mother. ‘I heard you’d had a baby.’

‘Heard from who? Luke?’

‘Must have been,’ Falk said. ‘A while ago now though. Obviously. How old is he?’

‘Only five, but already the ringleader half the time.’

They watched as Lachie thrust his makeshift sword into invisible attackers. He had wide-set eyes and curly hair the colour of dirt, but Falk

couldn't see much of Gretchen in the boy's sharp features. He scrambled to recall if Luke had mentioned her being in a relationship, or who the boy's father was. He thought not. He liked to think he'd have remembered that. Falk glanced down at Gretchen's left hand. It was ringless, but that didn't mean much these days.

'How's family life treating you?' he said finally, fishing.

'It's OK. Lachie can be a bit of a handful,' Gretchen said in an undertone.

'And it's just him and me. But he's a good kid. And we get by. For now, anyway.'

'Your parents still have their farm?'

She shook her head. 'God, no. They retired and sold up about eight years ago now. Moved to Sydney and bought a tiny unit three streets away from my sister and her kids.' She shrugged. 'They say they like it. City life. Dad does Pilates apparently.'

Falk couldn't help smiling at the image of the plain-speaking Mr Schoner focusing on his inner core and breathing exercises.

'You weren't tempted to follow?' he said.

She gave a humourless laugh and gestured at the parched trees lining the road. 'And leave all this? No. I've been here too long, it's in the blood. You know what it's like.' She bit the sentence short and glanced sideways. 'Or

maybe you don't. Sorry.'

Falk dismissed the remark with a wave of his hand. 'What are you doing these days?'

'Farming, of course. Trying to, anyway. I bought the Kellerman place a couple of years back. Sheep.'

'Really?' He was impressed. That was a sought-after property. Or at least, it had been when he was younger.

'And you?' she said. 'I heard you went into the police?'

'Yeah. I did. Federal. Still there.' They walked on in silence for a way.

The frenetic birdsong coming from the trees sounded the same as he remembered. Up ahead, groups of mourners stood out like smudges against the dusty road.

'How are things round here?' he asked.

'Awful.' The word was a full stop. Gretchen tapped a fingertip to her lips with the nervous energy of an ex-smoker. 'God knows, it was bad enough before. Everyone's scared about money and the drought. Then this happened with Luke and his family and it's so bad, Aaron. So bad. You can feel it. We're all walking around like zombies. Not sure what to do, what to say. Watching each other. Trying to work out who'll be next to snap.'

'Jesus.'

‘Yeah. You can’t imagine.’

‘Were you and Luke still close?’ Falk asked, curious.

Gretchen hesitated. Her mouth set into an invisible line. ‘No. We hadn’t been for years. Not like it was when it was the four of us.’

Falk thought about that photo. Luke, Gretchen, himself. And Ellie Deacon, with her long black hair. They’d all been so tight. Teenage tight, where you believe your friends are soul mates and the bonds will last forever.

Luke lied. You lied.

‘You obviously stayed in touch with him?’ Gretchen said.

‘On and off.’ At least that was the truth. ‘We caught up occasionally for a beer when he was in Melbourne, that sort of thing.’ Falk paused. ‘I hadn’t seen him for a few years, though. It gets busy, you know? He had his family, I’ve been working a lot.’

‘It’s all right, you don’t have to make excuses. We all feel guilty.’

The community centre was heaving. Falk hung back on the steps and Gretchen tugged on his arm.

‘Come on, it’ll be OK. Most people probably won’t even remember you.’

‘There’ll be plenty who do. Especially after that photo at the funeral.’

Gretchen made a face. ‘Yeah, I know. I got a shock too. But look, people

have got plenty of things to worry about today other than you. Keep your head down. We'll go out the back.'

Without waiting for an answer she grasped Falk's sleeve with one hand and her son with the other and led them in, easing her way through the crowd. The air was stifling. The centre's air conditioner was trying its best, but fighting a losing battle as mourners huddled in the indoor shade. They were mingling solemnly, balancing plastic cups and plates of chocolate ripple cake.

Gretchen made her way to the French doors where collective claustrophobia had forced stragglers out into the patchy playground. They found a spot of shade by the fence line and Lachie ran off to try his luck on the scalding metal slide.

'You don't have to stand with me if it's going to sully your good name,' Falk said, tipping his hat a little further forward to shield his face.

'Oh shut up. Besides, I do a good enough job of that myself.'

Falk scanned the playground and spotted an elderly couple he thought might once have been friends of his father's. They were chatting to a young police officer who, suited and booted in full dress uniform, was sweating under the afternoon sun. His forehead glistened as he nodded politely.

'Hey,' Falk said. 'Is that Barberis's replacement?'

Gretchen followed his gaze. ‘Yeah. You heard about Barberis?’

‘Of course. Sad loss. Remember how he used to scare us all to death with horror stories about kids who mucked about with farm equipment?’

‘Yeah. He’d had that heart attack coming for twenty years.’

‘Still. It’s a real shame,’ Falk said, meaning it. ‘So who’s the new guy?’

‘Sergeant Raco, and if it looks like he’s stepped straight into the deep end, it’s because he has.’

‘No good? Seems like he’s handling the crowd OK.’

‘I don’t know really. He’d only been here about five minutes when all this happened.’

‘Hell of a situation to land in in your first five minutes.’

Gretchen’s reply was cut short by a flurry of movement by the French doors. The crowd parted respectfully as Barb and Gerry Hadler emerged, blinking in the sunlight. Holding hands tightly they made their way around the groups of mourners. A few words, a hug, a brave nod, move on.

‘How long since you last spoke to them?’ Gretchen whispered.

‘Twenty years, until last week,’ Falk said. He waited. Gerry was still on the other side of the playground when he spotted them. He pulled away from a rotund woman mid-hug, leaving her arms embracing fresh air.

Be at the funeral.

Falk was there, as instructed. Now he watched as Luke's father approached.

Gretchen got in first, intercepting Gerry with a hug. His eyes met Falk's over her shoulder, his pupils huge and shining. Falk wondered if some form of medication was helping him through the day. When Gerry was released, he held out his hand, enclosing Falk's palm in a hot, tight grip.

'You made it then,' he said neutrally as Gretchen hovered by their side.

'I did,' said Falk. 'I got your letter.'

Gerry held his gaze.

'Right. Well, I thought it was important you be here. For Luke. And I wasn't sure you were going to make it, mate.' The final sentence hung heavily in the air.

'Absolutely, Gerry.' Falk nodded. 'Important to be here.'

Gerry's doubts hadn't been unfounded. Falk had been at his desk in Melbourne a week earlier, staring blankly at a newspaper photo of Luke when the phone rang. In a halting voice Falk hadn't heard for two decades, Gerry had told him the funeral details. 'We'll see you there,' he'd said, without a question mark at the end. Falk had avoided Luke's pixelated gaze as he mumbled something about work commitments. In truth, he'd still been undecided. Two days later, the letter arrived. Gerry must have posted it

as soon as he'd hung up the phone.

You lied. Be at the funeral.

Falk hadn't slept well that night.

They both now glanced awkwardly at Gretchen. She was frowning off into the middle distance where her son was clambering shakily over the monkey bars.

'You're staying in town tonight,' Gerry said. No question mark that time either, Falk noted.

'Above the pub.'

A wail went up from the playground and Gretchen made a noise of frustration.

'Shit. I could see that coming. Excuse me.' She jogged off. Gerry grabbed Falk's elbow and angled him away from the mourners. His hand was shaking.

'We need to talk. Before she comes back.'

Falk wrenched his arm away in a tiny controlled movement, aware of the crowd behind them. Unsure who was there, who was watching.

'For God's sake, Gerry, what is it you want?' He forced himself to stand in a way he hoped appeared relaxed. 'If this is supposed to be some sort of blackmail, I can tell you right now that's a non-starter.'

‘What? Jesus, Aaron. No. Nothing like that.’ Gerry looked genuinely shocked. ‘If I wanted to stir up trouble I’d have done it years ago, wouldn’t I? I was happy to let it lie. Christ, I would love to let it lie. But I can’t now, can I? With this? Karen and Billy both dead, him not even seven years old yet.’ Gerry’s voice broke. ‘Look, I’m sorry about the letter, but I needed you to be here. I have to know.’

‘Know what?’

Gerry’s eyes looked almost black against the bright sunlight.

‘If Luke had killed before.’

Falk was silent. He didn’t ask what Gerry meant.

‘You know –’ Gerry bit back his words as an officious woman wobbled up to inform him the chaplain needed to speak to him. Right away, if possible.

‘Jesus, it’s bloody chaos,’ Gerry snapped, and the woman cleared her throat and arranged her expression into one of martyred patience. He turned back to Falk. ‘I’d better go. I’ll be in touch.’ He shook Falk’s hand, holding it a beat longer than necessary.

Falk nodded. He understood. Gerry looked hunched and small as he followed the woman away. Gretchen, having soothed her son, wandered back to Falk. They stood shoulder to shoulder as together they watched

Gerry go.

‘He seems dreadful,’ she said in an undertone. ‘I heard he was screaming at Craig Hornby in the supermarket yesterday, accusing him of making light of the situation or something. Seems a bit unlikely, Craig’s been his friend for fifty years.’

Falk couldn’t imagine anyone, least of all stoic Craig Hornby, making light of those three awful coffins.

‘Was there really no warning at all from Luke?’ He couldn’t help himself.

‘Like what?’ A fly landed on Gretchen’s lip and she brushed it away impatiently. ‘Him waving a gun around in the main street threatening to do in his family?’

‘God, Gretch, I’m only asking. I meant depression or something.’

‘Sorry. It’s this heat. It makes everything worse.’ She paused. ‘Look, there’s barely anyone in Kiewarra who’s not at the end of their tether. But honestly, Luke didn’t seem to be struggling any more than anyone else. At least not in a way anyone’s admitting seeing.’

Gretchen’s thousand-yard stare was grim.

‘It’s hard to know, though,’ she said after a pause. ‘Everyone’s so angry. But they’re not just angry at Luke exactly. The people paying him out the most don’t seem to hate him for what he’s done. It’s weird. It’s almost like

they're jealous.'

'Of what?'

'Of the fact that he did what they can't bring themselves to do, I think.

Because now he's out of it, isn't he? While the rest of us are stuck here to rot, he's got no more worrying about crops or missed payments or the next rainfall.'

'Desperate solution,' Falk said. 'To take your family with you. How's Karen's family coping?'

'She didn't really have any, from what I heard. You ever meet her?'

Falk shook his head.

'Only child,' Gretchen said. 'Parents passed away when she was a teenager. She moved here to live with an aunt who died a few years ago. I think Karen was pretty much a Hadler for all intents and purposes.'

'Were you friends with her?'

'Not really. I –'

The clink of a fork against a wineglass rang out from the French doors.

The crowd slowly fell silent and turned to where Gerry and Barb Hadler stood hand in hand. They looked very alone, surrounded by all those people.

It was only the two of them now, Falk realised. They'd also had a

daughter once, briefly. She was stillborn when Luke was three. If they'd tried for more children after that they hadn't succeeded. Instead they'd channelled all their energy into their sturdy surviving son.

Barb cleared her throat, her eyes darting back and forth over the crowd.

‘We wanted to thank you all for coming. Luke was a good man.’

The words were too fast and too loud, and she pressed her lips together as if to stop more escaping. The pause stretched out until it was awkward, then a little longer. Gerry stared mutely at a patch of ground in front of him.

Barb prised open her lips and took a gulp of air.

‘And Karen and Billy were beautiful. What’s happened has been –’ she swallowed, ‘– so terrible. But I hope eventually you can remember Luke properly. From before. He was a friend to many of you. A good neighbour, a hard worker. And he loved that family of his.’

‘Yeah, ’til he butchered them.’

The words that floated from the back of the crowd were soft, but Falk wasn't the only one to whip his head around. The glares pinpointed the speaker as a large man wearing his mid-forties badly. Fleshy biceps that were more fat than muscle strained against his t-shirt as he folded his arms. His face was ruddy, with a scruffy beard and the defiant look of a bully. He stared down each person who turned to chastise him, until one by one they

looked away. Barb and Gerry appeared not to have heard. Small mercies, Falk thought.

‘Who’s the loudmouth?’ he whispered, and Gretchen looked at him in surprise.

‘You don’t recognise him? It’s Grant Dow.’

‘You’re kidding.’ Falk felt the hairs on his neck prickle and turned his face away. He remembered a twenty-five year old with lean muscles like barbed wire. This bloke looked like he’d had a tough two decades since.

‘He looks so different.’

‘Still a prize dickhead. Don’t worry. I don’t think he’s seen you. You’d know about it if he had.’

Falk nodded, but kept his face turned. Barb started crying, which the crowd took as a sign the speech had ended, and people gravitated instinctively towards her or away, depending on their sentiment. Falk and Gretchen stayed put. Gretchen’s son ran up and buried his face in his mother’s trousers. She hoisted him with some difficulty onto her hip and he rested his head on her shoulder, yawning.

‘Time to get this one home, I think,’ she said. ‘When are you off back to Melbourne?’

Falk checked his watch. *Fifteen hours.*

‘Tomorrow,’ he said out loud.

Gretchen nodded, looking up at him. Then she leaned forward and wrapped her spare arm around his back and pulled him close. Falk could feel the heat of the sun on his back and the warmth of her body in front.

‘It’s good to see you again, Aaron.’ Her blue eyes wandered over his face as though trying to memorise it and she smiled a little sadly. ‘Maybe see you in another twenty years.’

He watched her walk away until he couldn’t see her anymore.

Chapter Three

Falk sat on the edge of the bed, listlessly watching a medium-sized huntsman perched on the wall. The early evening temperature had dropped only fractionally as the sun disappeared. He’d changed into shorts after a shower and his damp legs prickled uncomfortably against the cheap cotton bedsheet. A stern sign hanging from an egg timer next to the showerhead had ordered him to keep ablutions to three minutes. He’d started to feel guilty after two.

The dull sounds of the pub thudded up through the floor, the occasional muted voice ringing a distant bell. A small part of him was curious to see who was down there, but he felt no desire to join in. The noise was punctuated by the muffled smash of a dropped glass. There was a short

pocket of silence followed by a chorus of derisive laughter. The huntsman moved a single leg.

Falk jumped as the room phone on the bedside table rang out, its tone shrill and plastic. He was startled but not surprised. He felt like he'd been waiting for it for hours.

'Hello?'

'Aaron Falk? I've a call for you.' The barman's voice was deep with a trace of a Scottish accent. Falk pictured the imposing figure who had taken his credit card details in exchange for a room key without comment two hours earlier.

Falk had never seen him before, and he was certain he would have remembered a face like that. Late forties, with broad shoulders and a full orange beard, the barman was a backpacker who had stayed and stayed, Falk guessed. He'd shown no spark of recognition at Falk's name, just an air of disbelief that anyone would use the pub for a purpose not directly linked to alcohol.

'Who's calling?' Falk asked, although he could guess.

'You'll have to ask him yourself,' the barman said. 'You want a message service, you'll have to stay in a nicer establishment, my friend. Putting him through now.' The line went silent for a long moment, then Falk heard

breathing.

‘Aaron? You there? It’s Gerry.’ Luke’s father sounded exhausted.

‘Gerry. We need to talk.’

‘Yes. Come out to the house. Barb wants to speak to you anyway.’ Gerry gave him the address. There was a long pause, then a heavy sigh. ‘And listen, Aaron. She doesn’t know about the letter. Or any of this. Let’s keep it that way, yeah?’

Falk followed Gerry’s directions along gloomy country roads and twenty minutes later turned his car onto a short paved driveway. A porch light cast an orange glow over a neat weatherboard home. He pulled to a stop and the screen door screeched open, revealing Barb Hadler’s squat silhouette. Her husband appeared behind her a moment later, his taller frame throwing a long shadow onto the drive. As Falk climbed the porch steps, he could see they were both still wearing their funeral clothes. Wrinkled now.

‘Aaron. My God, it’s been so long. Thank you for coming. Come in,’

Barb whispered, reaching out her free hand to him. She was clutching baby Charlotte close to her chest and rocking her with a vigorous rhythm. ‘Sorry about the baby. She’s very restless. Won’t go down.’

From what Falk could see, Charlotte was fast asleep.

‘Barb.’ Falk leaned in over the child to give the woman a hug. ‘It’s so

good to see you.’ She held him for a long moment, her plump arm around his back, and he felt something in him relax a fraction. He could smell the sweet floral notes of her hairspray. It was the same brand she’d used when she was still Mrs Hadler to him. They moved apart, and he was able to look down at Charlotte properly for the first time. She looked red-faced and uncomfortable, pressed against her grandmother’s blouse. Her forehead was creased into a tiny frown that, Falk noticed with a jolt, reminded him uncannily of her father.

He stepped into the light of the hallway and Barb looked him up and down, the whites of her eyes turning pink as he watched. She reached out and touched his cheek with the warm tips of her fingers.

‘Just look at you. You’ve barely changed,’ she said. Falk felt illogically guilty. He knew she was picturing a teenage version of her son next to him. Barb sniffed and wiped her face with a tissue, shredding little flecks of white onto her top. She ignored them, and with a sad smile gestured for him to follow. She led him down a hallway lined with framed family snaps that they both studiously ignored. Gerry trailed in their wake.

‘You’ve got a nice place here, Barb,’ Falk said politely. She had always been scrupulously houseproud, but looking around now he could see the odd sign of clutter. Dirty mugs crowded a side table, the recycling bin was

overflowing, and stacks of letters stood unopened. It all told a tale of grief and distraction.

‘Thank you. We wanted something small and manageable after –’ She hesitated for a beat. Swallowed. ‘After we sold the farm to Luke.’

They emerged onto a deck overlooking a tidy patch of garden. The wooden boards creaked beneath their feet as the night soaked some of the ferocity out of the day’s heat. All around were rosebushes that were neatly pruned, but very dead.

‘I tried to keep them alive with recycled water,’ Barb said, following Falk’s gaze. ‘Heat got them in the end.’ She pointed Falk to a wicker chair.

‘We saw you on the news; did Gerry tell you? A couple of months ago. Those firms ripping off their investors. Stealing their nest eggs.’

‘The Pemberley case,’ Falk said. ‘That was a shocker.’

‘They said you did well, Aaron. On TV and in the papers. Got those people’s money back.’

‘Some of it. Some of it was long gone.’

‘Well, they said you did a good job.’ Barb patted his leg. ‘Your dad would’ve been proud.’

Falk paused. ‘Thanks.’

‘We were sorry to hear he’d passed. Cancer is a real bastard.’

‘Yes.’ Bowel, six years ago. It hadn’t been an easy death.

Gerry, leaning against the doorframe, opened his mouth for the first time since Falk arrived.

‘I tried to keep in touch after you left, you know.’ His casual tone failed to hide the note of defensiveness. ‘Wrote to your dad, tried calling a couple of times. Never heard anything back, though. Had to give up in the end.’

‘It’s OK,’ Falk said. ‘He didn’t really encourage contact from Kiewarra.’

An understatement. They all pretended not to notice.

‘Drink?’ Gerry disappeared into the house without waiting for an answer and came out a moment later with three tumblers of whiskey. Falk took his in astonishment. He had never known Gerry to drink anything much harder than a light beer. The ice was already melting by the time the glass was in his hand.

‘Cheers.’ Gerry tilted his head back and took a deep swallow. Falk waited for him to wince. He didn’t. Falk took a polite sip and set the glass down. Barb looked at hers in distaste.

‘You shouldn’t really be drinking this stuff around the baby, Gerry,’ she said.

‘Crying out loud, love, the kid doesn’t care. She’s dead to the bloody world,’ Gerry said, and there was a horrible pause. Somewhere in the inky

garden the nocturnal insects rattled like white noise. Falk cleared his throat.

‘How are you coping, Barb?’

She looked down and stroked Charlotte’s cheek. Shook her head and a tear dropped onto the little girl’s face. ‘Obviously,’ Barb began, then stopped. She blinked hard. ‘I mean, *obviously* Luke didn’t do it. He would never have done this. You know that. Not to himself. And certainly not to his beautiful family.’

Falk glanced at Gerry. He was still standing in the doorway, glaring down into his half-empty drink.

Barb went on. ‘I spoke to Luke a few days before it happened. And he was completely fine. Honestly, he was normal.’

Falk couldn’t think of anything to say so he nodded. Barb took it as a sign of encouragement.

‘See, you understand, because you really knew him. But other people round here. They’re not like that. They just accept what they’re told.’

Falk stopped himself from pointing out that he hadn’t seen Luke in five years. They both looked up at Gerry, who continued to examine his drink.

No help to be found there.

‘That’s why we were hoping –’ Barb looked back, hesitating. ‘– *I* was hoping you’d help us.’

Falk stared at her.

‘Help you how exactly, Barb?’

‘Well, find out what really happened. To clear Luke’s name. And for Karen and Billy. And Charlotte.’

At that she started rocking Charlotte in her arms, stroking her back and making soothing noises. The baby still hadn’t moved.

‘Barb.’ Falk leaned forward in his chair and placed his palm on her free hand. It felt clammy and feverish. ‘I am so sorry for what’s happened. To you all. Luke was like a brother back then, you know that. But I am not the right person for this. If you’ve got concerns you’ve got to go to the police.’

‘We’ve come to you.’ She removed her hand. ‘You’re the police.’

‘The police who are equipped to deal with this sort of thing. I don’t do that anymore. You know that. I’m with the financial side now. Accounts, money.’

‘Exactly.’ Barb nodded.

Gerry made a small noise in his throat. ‘Barb thinks money troubles may have played a part.’ He’d aimed for a neutral tone, fallen well shy.

‘Yes. Of course I do,’ she snapped. ‘Why is that so unbelievable to you, Gerry? Talk about burning a hole. If Luke had a dollar, he’d spend two to make sure it was gone.’

Was that true? Falk wondered. He'd never known Luke to be too keen to put his hand in his pocket.

Barb turned back to face him. 'Look, for ten years I thought we'd done the right thing selling the farm to Luke. But these past two weeks I've done nothing but worry we saddled him with a burden that was too much. With the drought, who knows? Everyone is so desperate. He might well have borrowed money from someone. Or had bad debts he couldn't pay. Maybe someone he owed came looking for him.'

A silence stretched out. Falk found his glass of whiskey and took a decent swallow. It was warm.

'Barb,' he said finally. 'It might not feel like it, but the officers in charge really will have considered all these possibilities.'

'Not very bloody well,' Barb snapped. 'They didn't want to know. They drove over from Clyde and took one look and said, "Yep, another farmer gone off the rails" and that was that. Open and shut. I could see what they were thinking. Nothing but sheep and fields. You'd have to be half off your nut to live here in the first place. I could see it in their faces.'

'They sent a team down from Clyde?' Falk asked, slightly surprised.

Clyde was the nearest big town with a fully stocked cop shop. 'It wasn't the local guy? What's his name?'