

THE HUNTED

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PROLOGUE

The sun beat down on the highway as the lone car drove.

Behind the wheel, the girl kept her eyes forwards. The clear blue sky, the burning glare, the distant horizon. She didn't look over her shoulder, or in the rear-view mirror.

She drove fast, coming right up to the edge of the limit. The landscape, dry, arid and expansive, raced past on either side. She saw it out of the corner of her eye, but she ignored it, just as she did the pain in her leg and the pounding of her heart. She drove as the sun set and sank, until the pale blue of the sky became splashed with blood again and the land around her appeared like it was on fire.

It was only then that she looked in the rear-view mirror.

CHAPTER ONE

Now

Frank was woken by gunshots and was halfway to the door before he realised it had been a dream. He closed his eyes, swallowed, and in the darkness moved back to his bed. He sat down and kept his breathing steady until the shaking stopped.

The same dream. The one that was so vivid and real because it wasn't a dream, not really. A memory of trees and dead eyes in the dark, laughter and gunshots ringing in his ears, the taste of copper blood.

He ran a hand through his thinning hair, stood and walked out into the hall. He put his ear to Allie's door for a moment, but there was no sound. He hadn't yelled out, then. Feeling slightly better, he stepped into the bathroom and switched on the light.

He wasn't sure whether it was comforting that he looked nothing like the man who had lived that dream. Standing in front of the cracked mirror in his boxer shorts, he didn't cut much of an impressive figure anymore. The gentle swell of

his post-fifty gut was threatening to stop being gentle pretty soon and his haggard face, sunken eyes and grey hair made him look a full ten years older than he was.

He brushed his teeth quickly, then returned to his room and dressed in the dark. He didn't need electricity to find things that were always in the same place. He tucked a flannelette shirt into his jeans and did up his boots. Wishing the flashes of that dream weren't still circling in his head, he walked back down the hall.

In the kitchen he opened the cupboard and took out the cereal he'd brought over from the roadhouse for Allie. He placed it on the bench, then retrieved a bowl and a spoon. He arranged them in front of the seat he thought she used, then, suspecting it looked too regimented, shifted them slightly. He glanced at the fridge. He was never sure whether he should put milk out or not. He didn't know how late Allie slept in and the days were hot at this time of year. It would be different had he felt he could just ask her, but the way Allie kept to herself suggested she wouldn't appreciate the intrusion. Just as, he thought with a wry smile, he knew he wouldn't have. No wonder Nick was having trouble with her; his son had always disliked the things that weren't said.

The call had come just over a week ago. Frank was sitting in front of the TV, debating whether he should get up and fix the bent antenna to try to steady the image, when the phone rang. It took him a second to be sure of what he was hearing. Even telemarketers didn't know how to reach him.

He'd answered with a twinge of long-forgotten fear. That hadn't changed when he'd heard the voice on the other end:

serious and mature. It sounded like somebody official. It was only when the voice faltered saying Frank's name that realisation hit.

'Nick,' Frank said.

His son cleared his throat. 'Yeah. How, um, how have you been?'

Frank glanced around the kitchen. His son couldn't see it, but that didn't stop him wondering why he hadn't tidied the place, or at least hung a picture. 'Fine.'

Silence.

'You?'

'Busy, with end-of-year reports and everything. Emily's the same, but she's doing well.'

Frank hadn't asked after his daughter-in-law, but to be fair it wasn't as though she'd be asking after him.

The silence returned. It struck Frank how much he yearned to know what to say. A side effect of lengthy solitude was a tendency to forget how small talk worked.

'Listen.' Nick's voice dropped a little lower, the way it always did when he wanted to sound confident. 'I actually called to ask you a favour. Things are a little flat out at the moment, and Allie – well, I mean, she's fourteen, you know? The terrible teens or whatever you call them.'

Frank didn't know what you called them.

'I think she ... well, I mean it's probably just growing pains or whatever, but she's been acting up at school. She got into a fight and ... and it's just that there's only so much Emily and I can do with things being the way they are. Even if we had all the time in the world, I kind of feel like it wouldn't help. You

know what it's like when you're that age – your parents are public enemy number one.' Nick's voice was getting higher, faster. Whatever he wanted to ask, he was scared to do it. 'So look, we've been spitballing ideas and we wondered if, well, if the best thing for it wouldn't be a change of scenery. For Allie to ... to get away from everything and, you know, maybe get some perspective.'

Frank's grip tightened around the phone. A new, crawling fear was moving through his gut, something he was altogether unequipped to deal with.

'And I mean, Emily's parents live overseas and ... and you're out there by yourself, so, like, well, maybe it'll be good for you?'

'What will be?'

'If you ... if she came and stayed with you for a while.'

Frank leaned against the bench. His mind moved fast into overdrive, racing through excuses. What the fuck was he supposed to do with a surly teen skulking around the place? He could barely look after himself; he wouldn't have the first clue of how to talk to her and the house ... The kitchen suddenly looked a lot worse than basic. The mould creeping behind the sink, the cobwebs in the corner, the way the fridge sat at a slightly uneven angle; it all seemed obvious and insurmountable, a handful of the million wrong things in his life that he really did not want reported back to his son.

'Nick, look—'

'You'd be doing us a favour, Dad. A really big one.'

He could hear it in Nick's voice: the plea he was trying so hard to bury beneath nonchalance. The last time his son had

spoken to him that way, they'd still lived in the same house and Frank had been too drunk to do anything more than crawl into bed and pretend it wasn't happening.

'Alright,' he said. 'Alright, when were you thinking?'

After that, it had all happened fast, faster than Frank was used to or ready for. And now, here they were.

He stopped briefly on the porch, as he did every morning. His weatherboard house was small and on the wrong side of modest. But he wasn't trying to impress anyone. Stretching out in front of him, past the outline of a curving dirt driveway that the gloom hid too well, all he could see was the gently swaying long brown grass, spanning the distance between where he stood and the dark, barely visible shape of the rear of the roadhouse, the invisible highway just past it, and the vast sky beyond, alive with the first glow of dawn. He took a deep breath. The air was already hot. All he could smell was earth. Sometimes, after rain or if there had been a bushfire nearby, it was different. Sometimes the air smelt alive and fresh or full of warning. Most of the time, it was just earth. On the horizon the fingers of creeping red sunrise were starting to grow. He didn't bother to jump on the quad bike or get in the car. He liked his morning walk and besides, the day would be considered busy if anyone stopped in before noon.

It was just under a kilometre from his home to the roadhouse, a kilometre of dry grass and hard dirt rising and falling in erratic hills and surprise ditches. Frank knew it well enough by now; the sea of grass might hide the contours of the land, but years of the same daily walk eradicated the

unpredictable. When he'd bought the place almost a decade ago, the previous owner had told him that the house was intended to be the start of a farm, before the land had proved too rough and stubborn to tame. That anecdote didn't seem a great selling point, but Frank quite liked it. The grass grew fast and the ground beneath it resisted being smoothed or shaped into anything other than what it was. Good luck planting anything that didn't already grow of its own accord. The roadhouse and the house blended into the surrounds, the lay of the land camouflaging them to the unfamiliar eye. Especially at this time of morning, stepping out the front you might as well have been looking at a never-ending expanse of grass in every direction, one that welcomed snakes and just about nothing else. One of Allie's few questions to him had been whether he had ever been bitten, but Frank had long since learned how to watch out for them.

Allie sat on her narrow bed, against the wall. She'd heard Frank's heavy footsteps moving around the house. Here and there he'd paused, but she'd stayed put. It wasn't until she heard the front door close that she moved off the bed, and even then, she waited for a few more moments before she walked out into the hall.

She didn't like her room. As much as Frank had tried to clean it up, to make it look presentable with wilting flowers jammed into a vase and a pile of dog-eared old books on the bedside table, nothing could override the dusty smell of disuse that filled the whole house. The place was a middle-of-nowhere dump and the fact that her parents thought it

would be good for her just showed how little they understood anything.

She didn't like thinking stuff like that. She had honestly planned to be nice to Frank, to try to get on with him – even if just to piss her mum off more than anything else. But, damn, he made it hard, rarely saying more than two words at a time, spending all day over at the roadhouse, slumping in front of the TV at the end of it to watch some staticky old show that she was pretty sure even he didn't like.

'Listen, if it's really bad, you can call us,' her mother had said, with the same fake happy tone she used every time she insisted things between her and Dad were fine. 'But I expect you to be a grown-up about this, okay? It's a great lesson – sometimes we need to get out of our comfort zones.'

Funnily enough, Allie knew she hadn't thought it was a great lesson a few days earlier when she'd overheard her parents loudly arguing about the very idea of her coming here. But that was her mother. Everything could be reshaped into a bullshit learning experience.

Allie went to the small kitchen – it wasn't much more than a bench and sink, with an old oven, a groaning fridge that was slightly too big for the space, and a table with two chairs. Frank only seemed to own a handful of plates and cups, and a few bits of unmatching cutlery. She looked at the cereal and the bowl, perfectly arranged, like every morning. Usually she just put them away. She didn't like cereal, but she felt ungrateful telling Frank that. She pulled the chair out and sat. That horrible, pit-like feeling in her stomach was back. It was hard to avoid it when you were stuck out here alone

for hours, surrounded by flimsy walls that might as well have been as thick and tall as a prison's. It was the creeping feeling that it didn't matter what she did, somebody else would always control the outcome. She tried to stand up to Hannah Bond, she was suspended. She tried to keep her head down, she was sent here to Frank's silences and cereal.

As much as it had scared her at first, Allie didn't even mind the fact that most days she was woken early by a yell coming from his room. It made her feel like he might actually be alive.

Owning a roadhouse hadn't been high on the list of life goals when Frank was a kid. But then there wasn't much high on that list, and as years passed and options dwindled, he'd found himself entertaining a half-baked fantasy of solitude and routine. He'd bought the roadhouse for a pittance, along with the house, the whole catastrophe spanning no more than a couple of acres. He'd let himself settle into the quiet and hoped that, in time, it would rub off on him.

The roadhouse sat on a stretch of highway, the petrol pumps set back a good hundred metres from the bitumen. The nearest towns were hours away in either direction; Frank's livelihood relied on the roadhouse being the only place you could stop for food or fuel in one of the more desolate parts of what counted as civilised Australia. Too grassy to be a desert, too ugly to mean anything to a tourist, too dry to be farming lands. For kilometres in any direction, the most exciting things you could expect to see were a handful of run-down old barns, the odd creaking rusted windmill and

maybe a few remnants of farming equipment dumped with the understanding that no-one was likely to notice or kick up much of a fuss. Nobody came out this way unless they had a bloody good reason. Most were just passing through, and would forget about this patch of earth and the gruff man who served them by the time they pulled back onto the highway, heading somewhere worth going.

The sun was up a little higher by the time Frank crossed the concrete stretch behind the roadhouse. He unlocked the back entry door, letting himself into the drab but neat storeroom. He didn't bother to turn on the lights as he walked through the narrow adjoining hall to the kitchen. He switched on the overhead light and brought the deep-fryer to life. The kitchen had a slightly unpleasant greasy smell to it, which Frank guessed wasn't ideal but punters desperate enough to eat here didn't seem to mind. He kept the place clean enough to pass muster, but otherwise didn't do a lot more than deep-fry frozen food. It was a hard thing to mess up.

Extending from the kitchen, a cramped dining area, tiled and occupied by three tables, made up the room, which looked out large glass front windows to the unprepossessing vista of his two pumps, the highway and the grass beyond. To the right of the dining room was a plasterboard wall punctuated by a large glass sliding door that opened onto the main shop, a door Frank habitually left open. The shop was no more than a large room, really, home to three shelves holding snacks, car supplies and a few out-of-date magazines and with a rickety screen door facing the pumps. There was a counter and cash register at the room's rear – sitting there, Frank could keep an

eye on the pumps through the glass front, and slip through the internal door behind him to get to the storeroom, or round to the kitchen via the hall. Frank did his best to keep the place in half-decent nick, but he was under no illusions: nobody expected a middle-of-nowhere roadhouse like this to be especially inspiring. A service station only had to provide service, so that was what he did.

It was the thought that had sprung, almost defensively, when Allie had first arrived, pulling up in Nick's four-wheel-drive out the front. Frank had been doing a half-arsed stocktake of the shelves when he saw them. He didn't recognise the vehicle, but his stomach dropped all the same.

He put down his notebook and tried to look pleased as they walked in together, Nick with an expression that he was pretty sure reflected his own, Allie trailing behind him, a skinny thing in an oversized hoodie and tight-stretched jeans even though it was already over thirty degrees. She didn't spare a glance for Frank, her eyes instead moving around the roadhouse, taking everything in with a look of increasing despair. It was enough to make Frank want to mumble an excuse and hurry out to the storeroom, locking himself in there until Nick decided that maybe the best option was to take his daughter home and write this off as a stupid mistake.

Instead Frank shook Allie's hand while she didn't make eye contact and mumbled something he was sure Nick had told her to say. Then she took out her phone and found a seat in the dining area, from which she didn't move until Nick was gone and Frank offered to show her the house. The look

on her face as she walked through the front screen door was almost enough for Frank to call Nick back then and there. But he hadn't. He had put on a brave face and so begun the largely silent stalemate they were living through now. Nick had said two weeks, which didn't feel much different to a decade from where Frank was standing.

By the time the sun was up, the roadhouse was fully operational. He restocked the shelves, checked the pumps and finally settled behind the counter to read his book. Occasionally he'd look up if he caught a glimpse of movement in the periphery, but the few vehicles that passed didn't stop. They must have filled up back at Coogan. He went back to his book.

He was almost surprised when, in the late afternoon, he heard the van pull up. After a few seconds a young couple came through the front door. The guy was tall and thin – a bit gangly, with a tangle of blond hair and wide, nervous eyes. He wore a black T-shirt and faded jeans. The girl – short, slim and attractive, with brown hair and a relaxed stance – wore a baggy hemp shirt, Thai fisherman pants and sandals. The van wasn't painted with rainbow swirls, but he figured they'd fix that oversight at the next town.

'Doesn't work,' the girl said. Her accent was English.

Frank lowered the book. He didn't reply.

'The pump,' the girl said. 'Can you take a look?'

The guy was perusing the shelves. The girl was waiting, hands on hips and an expectant, impatient look on her face.

Frank stood. Hands in his pockets, he walked past them, taking his time. The guy didn't look at him once. The girl

watched Frank move for the front entrance. He opened the screen door and stepped out into the heat. The sun was high and the sky was the kind of bright blue that would be pretty if the heat didn't make you feel like you were in a sauna that couldn't be escaped.

As he'd expected, the handle of the pump's nozzle was a little stiff. Frank gave it a good squeeze. Petrol spurted. He looked back through the front windows of the roadhouse. The hippies were a little closer to the counter now. Frank replaced the nozzle and cast an eye over their car. There was a half-empty bottle of wine on the passenger seat. He ignored the twinge in his chest as he headed back inside.

'It's fine,' he said, walking through.

The guy jumped. He was a metre or so from the counter now.

'You sure?' the girl said. It was hard to tell if she was putting on the confusion or not.

'A bit stiff is all,' Frank said, passing the shelves and returning to his spot behind the counter. 'Anything else I can help you with?' He resisted the urge to look pointedly at the cash register. No need to invite or imply trouble if it wasn't going to happen.

The girl gave her partner a withering look. 'Go work those muscles, babe.'

The guy shook his head and loped back outside. Frank kept his attention on the girl.

'Anything else I can help with?' he repeated.

The girl bit her lip. Her voice lowered slightly. 'Can I get a pack of smokes, please? Menthols, cheapest brand.'

Frank turned and slid open the cabinet behind him. He ran his hand over the plain packets, checking the handwritten prices as he did.

‘Sorry.’ The girl’s voice had taken on a note of urgency. ‘Do you mind hurrying?’

Frank didn’t speed up. He found what looked to be the cheapest brand, took it from the cabinet and dropped it on the counter just as the boyfriend re-entered.

‘As requested,’ Frank said.

‘I thought you quit.’ There was a note of accusation to the guy’s voice.

‘Yeah, um, I lied.’ the girl mumbled as she handed over some cash. ‘Sorry, Charlie. I’m a terrible person and all that.’

Charlie didn’t laugh. ‘They’re bad for you.’

‘I know, but I am cutting down, babe. This’ll be my last pack, I promise.’ She nodded to Frank. ‘You smoke, right? You get it?’

‘Nope,’ Frank said. ‘It’s bad for you. Anything else?’

‘Food would be good, actually,’ Charlie said. ‘Del?’

Together they moved over into the dining area. Frank hoped they weren’t bloody fussy – nothing sourced from a freezer would fit that bill – but he went through the internal door behind the counter and crossed the hall into the kitchen.

‘Is any of it vegetarian?’ the girl – Del? – called over to him.

‘You could try the veggie pie, but I can’t guarantee it.’

Her mouth twitched in what, left alone, could have turned into a laugh. ‘I’ll risk it.’

As instructed, Frank zapped one vegetarian and one beef pie. ‘Been in Australia long?’ he asked, as he delivered the plates to their table.

‘Six months,’ Charlie said.

‘Two years,’ Delilah added. ‘Practically a local.’ Charlie rolled his eyes. ‘I’m Delilah, by the way, and this is Charlie. And you ... ?’

‘Frank,’ he said as he settled into a nearby table. ‘Dunno what brings you out this way. It’s not like there’s much to see.’

‘I wish I could say we had some deep and meaningful reason,’ Delilah said. ‘But I think Charlie took a wrong turn. Still, it’s cool to explore a bit. See the kinds of places people miss.’

‘Take it from a bloke living in the kind of place people miss,’ Frank said, ‘there’s better stuff to see.’

‘We’ve seen it,’ Charlie said. ‘The Harbour Bridge, the Opera House, Flinders Street Station, the Great Barrier Reef—’

‘Daintree, Nullarbor, Uluru,’ Delilah said. ‘We’ve ticked all the tourist boxes.’

‘Well, you’ve seen more of the good stuff than me,’ Frank said. ‘Dunno why you’re sticking around.’

A creak from behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see Allie standing in the doorway behind the counter. Her black hair hung down over her delicate, dark-skinned face. Her brown eyes narrowed as she looked back and forth between him and the couple.

Absurdly, a sudden rush of self-conscious panic hit Frank. The last thing he wanted was strangers’ eyes on him as he

tried to be grandfather to somebody who had no interest in him. It wasn't that he gave a shit what Charlie and Delilah thought; more that he would be happier with them not witnessing the inevitable awkwardness. 'My granddaughter,' he said, hoping he sounded appropriately warm. 'Allie. You here for something to eat, love?'

Allie said nothing. It could be hard to tell whether her silences meant yes or no, but given she had come over from the house, he was inclined to assume this one was a yes. He quickly excused himself and headed into the kitchen. Allie joined him, looking with obvious distaste at what was on offer.

'I can make you something?' Frank suggested.

'What are you reading?'

Frank was confused.

'The book,' she said. 'On the counter.'

'Oh,' Frank said. '*Jaws*. Not as good as the movie, but without a DVD player ...' He'd meant to make a joke out of that, but wasn't sure where to take it.

Allie tugged at her sleeve. 'I didn't know you liked to read. I was going to get you a book but Mum ... Anyway, that's why I got the binoculars.'

Frank blinked, surprised. Not by Allie's mother's advice – he could just imagine her smug chuckle at the suggestion of a book – but that Allie had thought to buy him a gift. He'd figured the binoculars were something Nick had made her bring.

'Well, for next time,' Frank said. 'Not that you have to get me anything.' He almost said something about her visiting being enough, but caught himself, not wanting to sound clunky or forced.

‘I’ll take a burger,’ Allie said. ‘No pickles.’

It didn’t take Frank long to fry up a frozen meat pattie and toast a bun. He added some limp lettuce and watery tomato, and squeezed on a blob of BBQ sauce. He dished the lot up, and Allie carried the plate to the dining area, taking a seat as far away from Charlie and Delilah as possible. She kept her eyes down as she ate. Frank didn’t check to see if the English backpackers had been watching them. He didn’t want to know.

He had just turned his attention back to the kitchen, figuring he might as well have something himself, when he heard it. A shriek of tyres out the front. He looked up as an old station wagon came to a halt near the pumps. It had stopped at an odd angle. The bonnet had just missed the bowser and was now facing the roadhouse.

Frank waited for the car to correct itself. It didn’t.

He walked through the dining area, past the staring Delilah and Charlie. He opened the front screen door, stepped out and put his hands on his hips, waiting.

Seeing the car clearly now, he felt a prickle of unease. It wasn’t just old; it was battered. And ...

The driver’s door opened. Somebody stumbled out.

She might have been young, not much older than Allie. But it was hard to tell. Stark against the afternoon sky, she didn’t look human. She was coated all over in what he recognised as dried mud and blood. She staggered away from the car. Veered towards him. Her dark eyes, striking in the filth that covered her face and matted her hair, were locked on his.

She opened her mouth as if to speak. She swayed on the spot. And then she fell hard onto the concrete.