

**THE
LAST
VIRUS**

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CHAPTER ONE

There was no warning when the generator cut out. One minute the single light was burning, then it faded out like it was on a dimmer. I had candles and matches in the drawer, but it turned out to be the wrong time to lose power, on account of the dogs.

I'd heard them for a week or so in the hills. Maybe they'd been drawn by some surviving sheep, or driven away from another area. I used to think only wolves howled like that. The first time I heard them, I nearly crapped myself.

The chickens were shut up securely enough, but the farm was old, and I had to use the outside toilet – an old thunder box. The flush one inside didn't work. Something had gone wrong with the pipes under the floor. And I couldn't exactly call a plumber. I didn't fancy going out at night in the dark, and I disliked being intimidated by a couple of dogs.

I was to discover they weren't exactly what you'd call dogs anymore. That there were more than a dozen of them, and with the exception of one or two with collars, they'd all been born and raised in the bush and might as well have been wolves. Apparently, all dogs have the wolf as a common ancestor – I believe it now. Some of the feral pigs in the hills behind here were as big as ponies, with tusks that would put any self-respecting boar to shame.

The first night I didn't sleep too well, with no power and the dogs so close to the farm. Though I felt reasonably safe with my stepfather's old revolver under my pillow. I don't know if the authorities had any

inkling of what was happening, back before the last virus reared its ugly head. But my stepfather started taking me to the police range on weekends and showing me how to load, shoot, and clean his Webley & Scott .38. It was his father's old service pistol. He was always making me promise that if the worst came to the worst, I'd only use it in an emergency, and let off blanks before using the real thing. I ended up with four blanks.

The first time I fired a live round, the kick threw both of my hands up above my head and I nearly dropped it. I didn't even hit the target. My stepfather was persistent, however, even though I tried to talk my way out of it, telling him I had assignments to do. I hated those targets shaped like people. He kept at me, until eventually I was hitting the outside of the target, then finally getting them in the black. His determination saved my life, I know that now. I swore to myself that I'd never use it to kill anything, just fire warning shots. Till that week, when the generator died, I'd stuck rigidly to my promise.

Nothing happened during the first night. Morgan didn't hear a thing, snoring soundly under the bed. The chooks made a racket, and weren't too keen on leaving the safety of their run the next morning. I couldn't say I blamed them. The howling must've registered with some primeval instinct of theirs, and had them huddling close together on their perches. They didn't lay eggs for a couple of days afterwards.

I thought the dogs must've passed through. The area around the farm was basically deserted – nobody had lived on the surrounding properties for ages. Not since the virus. Luckily, I had the revolver in my back pocket, more out of habit than necessity. I hadn't fired it for months.

My mother's place was about a hundred and sixty acres. It was left to her by her father, who'd run dairy herds for years. I suppose I should call it my place, really, but old habits die hard, and there was so much of my mother around it. At the front, there was a

vegetable garden, which I'd finally managed to bring under control – something I looked upon as a victory.

Behind the house were the machinery and milking sheds, a barn, and to one side, the chook shed with its enclosed run. Mostly, I let them out during the day. They never wandered far, and since they'd stopped using chemical sprays on the crops and fruit trees, there was more than enough for them to scratch up in the grass and dirt. I only fed them in winter. If I could keep the mice out of the grain silo, the wheat should last for years. Sometimes, I felt like I was turning into a bit of a Robinson Crusoe, having to reinvent things all the time. The difference was that when he finally got off his island, he found everything in the outside world almost as he'd left it. Now the whole world was an island, and there was nowhere to escape to.

I'd just finished turning some ground over to plant beans when a commotion started up around the back. Every now and then, a fox showed up on the property, and I'd lost a few chooks. They're cunning sods, and I have to admit, I actually admire them. Morgan's barking used to be enough to send them on their way, but he'd become as deaf as a post, and was lying in the shade half-asleep.

I took the hoe with me. Sensing that something was amiss, Morgan trailed along beside me. He was a kelpie cross, around fourteen years old. He'd belonged to my grandfather, then my mother had inherited him along with the farm.

When I opened the gate and walked past the barn, I saw the dogs. They hadn't made a sound. Working as a team, they circled the chooks, forcing them to huddle up together. Then a dog rushed in and seized one by the throat, shaking it with a quick flick of its head. Feathers littered the yard, and the dirt was stained dark with blood.

At first, I was so stunned by what I saw, I was unable to react. Morgan must've been just as surprised, because it was some moments before I heard his low growl. Then he was on his belly, hair standing on end all the way down his back. Our approach wasn't noticed at first – we'd been out of sight and downwind. I'm sure they knew

I was on the farm somewhere, because a Great Dane cross stood nearby and appeared to be acting as a lookout. I'm sure, too, they understood well enough that they could attack farms like mine with impunity. They feared nothing, with virtually no one left to drive them off.

I called Morgan to stay. He ignored me, or more likely didn't hear me, creeping forward with his gaze locked on the big Dane. In his time, he'd seldom met his match in fights with other farm dogs, but slowed and weakened by age, and up against an animal more than twice his size, it was terribly one-sided. I called again, frantically, but I was powerless to stop him. At least it was quick, and I doubt Morgan felt very much – poor bugger. It would've broken my mother's heart if she'd been alive.

The big Dane, lean and in his prime, moved impossibly fast. He fell upon Morgan and shook him as easily as the others had disposed of the chooks. Morgan didn't so much as whimper. There was just the sound of bones cracking like dry wood. He slumped, and the Dane dropped him and turned towards me. My father's .38 was already in my hand, though I had no recollection of taking it out of my pocket.

Without thinking, I moved through the routine my father had drummed into me – pistol firm in my right hand, left hand cradling both to steady the aim, legs slightly apart for balance, safety catch off. The dog was still standing side-on to me, and I knew I only had a second or two to get a round off while he was so vulnerable. I was never a brilliant shot, but sometimes you get lucky. Besides, he was only about ten metres away. I eased the hammer back with my left thumb, aligned the sights, breathed in slowly, paused and squeezed gently.

The first shot took the Dane high up on the back leg. He spun around snapping, as if to take hold of an invisible attacker, maddened by what he couldn't see. His hind legs seemed to lose their strength and he sunk to the ground for a moment, but then he was up again,

bounding towards me. The second shot caught him in the face. He was dead before he hit the ground, sliding to within two or three metres of where I stood.

It was a few seconds before I could move again. My ears were still ringing from the noise of the shots, and I hadn't even seen the other dogs flee. I was in a daze. The chooks were nowhere to be seen, and Morgan lay where the Dane had dropped him.

Most people don't appreciate how much damage a large projectile does when it strikes flesh and bone. It doesn't just go in and out, leaving a neat little hole. One side of the Dane's head had been carried away by the impact, and when I turned away I was violently ill. The sour smell of gunpowder hung in the air, making my nausea worse, and I ended up on the ground clutching my stomach, almost wishing I'd shared the fate of the two dogs. I can't remember ever having been so sick. When I'd recovered, there was no trace of the pack of dogs, nor did I hear them again after that day.

I wasn't proud of what I'd done. As far as I was concerned, there'd been more than enough death. But if I hadn't fired, or missed, the dog would've torn me to pieces. In retrospect, I should've been more cautious and left Morgan around the front tied up, as much as he hated it. But you can't always predict outcomes, and predictions of any kind seem more difficult these days. Besides, you get tired of forever being on the defensive. Every now and then, you have to drop your guard, or you'd become a nervous wreck. Mostly, you get away with it, and I've been luckier than many others.

I didn't think it was possible to grieve for any living thing again. After a while, you can't, or that's what I'd come to think. There's only so much sadness you can respond to, as if it'd been dealt out genetically – and when yours gets used up, you become harder, accepting the inevitability of death, especially your own. Maybe it's a self-preservation mechanism designed to keep us sane.

I had no idea how attached I'd become to Morgan. He didn't talk or criticise anything I did wrong – and that happened often enough.

His companionship was simple and honest and made few demands. We shared so much without having to reflect upon it, or rationalise about stupid things that couldn't be changed.

To be in the same room was enough – even in the same building. Every day I spent indoors, sitting somewhere in the house reading, or trying to piece my life together, Morgan would put his head through the door and look at me. Just with his eyes, he communicated more than some so-called deep and meaningful conversations I remember having with friends in my first year at uni. It was only later that it dawned on me how much I'd longed for the company of another human being, exiled in my narrow little world, head in the sand. I'd just never admitted it to myself.

I buried him at the front of the house, under the roses my mother loved so much. I couldn't go near the Dane for hours. I decided not to bury it near the house, but to drag it up to the quarry and leave it among the other wild things. I got a rope around it and tied it to the tow bar on the old Land Cruiser.

Following the track up alongside the fence, I thought I saw something in the rear-view mirror a couple of times, tagging along some distance back in the dust. I parked next to the old tin shed, away from the quarry face. Instead of taking the rope off, I untied it and threw it over the dog. I'd have burned it rather than take it back to the farm.

I used to come up into the hills a lot as a kid, mainly with Bradley Pearson and his sister, playing around the sandstone and exploring the caves. But it'd been ages since I was last there. It seemed greener, more alive, than I remembered it. The smell of eucalyptus was strong, and hundreds of insects hovered about the flowering plants. Somewhere in the canopy, a flock of black cockatoos was making a real fuss. They only came down when the weather got bad in the high country.

For me, those birds were like a weather report, the first in a long time, and I began to think about what needed doing if there

happened to be a few days of rain – a chance to relax. Most of the tanks were full or nearly full, but it'd be nice not having to water the vegetables for a few days. And I've always liked the smell of wet dust that accompanies the rain, the heavy drumming on the roof, and how the frogs in the dams go nuts all night afterwards, with their little musical numbers. I decided to walk up and find a good view of the farm.

High above the quarry, I could see across the foothills around the Dandenongs, towards Melbourne, which was hidden by a smoky brown haze. It was pretty thick above Mount Waverly, or maybe it was Box Hill. I still don't know the city or many of the suburbs that well. We'd come down to Melbourne from Toowoomba, the year I started high school. I guessed there must've still been fires smouldering around the city. Maybe even a few people down there. There must've been other survivors.

I glanced back towards the quarry. Sitting next to the Dane was another dog. Smaller, but bigger than Morgan. It sat motionless, staring out across the trees and fields below. So, something *had* followed me. It turned out to be a female. Most likely the Dane's mate, faithful to the end – made me feel pretty wretched.

When I came back, she wouldn't let me near the Land Cruiser. In all likelihood, she'd seen me fire the two shots and must've associated me with the death of her mate. She began to edge towards me, growling in a way that indicated she'd always been in control of her own fate, born among the trees and cliffs of the high country. Thankfully, on that occasion, I had a choice. I fired a warning shot into the air, and she didn't wait for a second one. She ran off far enough for me to get safely into the Land Cruiser. I sat for a time, my mind buzzing. What might've happened if I'd been unarmed, I hated to think. You can only sit in a tree for so long.

CHAPTER TWO

One afternoon, while I was wrestling with the waist-high thistles that'd spread across the orchard last summer, Blades turned up out of the blue. It was about a week after I'd buried Morgan. I'd often sat on summer evenings and watched the thistle seeds drift in the wind, settling like the miniature paratroopers of an invading army.

I could only see one person in the vehicle, an American Ford pickup, but the unexpectedness of its appearance threw me completely. When a voice called my name, I thought I must've been hearing things. And when I recognised Blades as he walked towards me, I suspected for an awful moment that I was losing my mind.

'Robbie? Robbie Beaumont?' he called out.

'Yeah, it's me,' I managed. I hadn't spoken to anyone for months.

Though he wasn't much taller than I remembered from school, Blades had filled out. He was solid as a rugby fullback, with a close-cropped beard and shoulder-length hair. He'd told me once that the red hair was from his Viking blood. His brother had once sent away a DNA sample. It was a shock to see him on the farm, like two different worlds were being drawn together. I hadn't thought much about him after he'd left school. I remember in grade eight, my second year in a big high school, living in mortal fear of school without Blades. Imagining all too vividly how that maniac Colin Stewart would make up for my year of immunity, while Blades had stood up for me. Fortunately for me, and a lot of others, Stewart had already been in year eleven. He was gone at the end of year twelve,

joining the army after winning some special military scholarship.

There was never any doubt about how clever Stewart actually was. He was always getting awards and routinely scored the highest marks in the state. He even wrote articles that were published in newspapers. For me, at least, that made his behaviour more difficult to understand. I'd always imagined the bright students to be peaceable. But he had a mean streak that must've gone right down to the bone, and then some.

My last years of high school weren't as bad as they might've been. Boring, mostly, but safe enough. Stewart didn't leave any replacement thugs lurking in the lunatic fringe. The thing that did remain to haunt us was one wild rumour, about a kid from another school who'd been locked in a machinery shed and knocked around pretty badly by Stewart and his followers. Or so the story went. In the end, we all decided someone had made it up. It was too bizarre to be real.

Half a dozen times, I'd bumped into Blades after he'd left, but our lives had moved in different directions. He'd scored an apprenticeship with a big car dealer somewhere near Moorabbin. He was pretty heavily into cars, racing them too, and he'd moved away to be closer to work. When he'd finished his trade, he started out on his own, restoring old Holdens and reselling them. Did all right too, he told me. That was how he could afford his thirsty utes. Until the virus took his customers. Took a lot of other things, too, but Blades didn't let it get to him. It didn't wear him down like it did with me, and I never once heard him complain.

'My oldest brother was the only one who survived, at first,' he said, as I was taking him on a tour of the farm. I didn't talk much. I was more than happy just to listen. He praised everything I showed him with disarming frankness. In that same open way, he told me what'd happened to some of his family.

'He was working on a fishing boat out of the Peninsula when I saw him last. The boat disappeared, then one night, my old man

didn't come home. Never did find out what happened to them. A bit like those soldiers who were listed as missing in action, and they never found the bodies. Our street ended up like a ghost town – the whole bloody suburb did.'

He shook his head and stared off into the distance, like he was trying to remember something.

'All my flatmates cleared out, after things got really bad. Do you remember that stupid money they started printing by the roll, like toilet paper?'

'If you didn't spend it straight away,' I said, 'its value was halved by the next day.'

Blades said nothing of his mother, or his two other brothers.

He seemed genuinely impressed by the farm, though I had to admit most of it was my mother's work, built on what my grandparents had done. I just followed their lead. This little confession didn't dampen his praise of my efforts in the slightest, and I was beginning to feel good about how I'd managed on my own. I didn't tell him that he'd turned up when I was almost ready to give up and do something stupid.

After we'd looked at the tomatoes and weeds in the greenhouses, we walked down to the machinery sheds. Blades's eyes lit up.

'This place is amazing, Robbie. I've seen a few farms, but none of them have got half this equipment.'

He was particularly interested in my grandfather's old horse gear. I shrugged when he asked me if the tractor and the station wagon still worked. I tried not to look at Nathan Davies' Volvo, with the memories it brought back, standing there under a layer of dust and bird shit.

Blades pointed at my mother's new generator.

'Unreal. And it's brand new.' He shook his head. 'It's still sealed in the original packing.'

I'd never given it a second thought. Like the milking machines, I'd always supposed it was something of no use to me. I couldn't

begin to understand his sudden interest.

‘It’s gotta be better than the one you’re using.’

I’d explained how my generator would always cut out. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t working the day he arrived.

‘Is anything wrong with it, Robbie?’ he asked, rubbing the dust off the invoice stapled to the wood.

I told him I’d never given it much thought, that I didn’t know a lot about that sort of thing. What a joke – I didn’t have a clue.

He gave me a puzzled look.

‘But it could give you reliable power... lights, refrigeration, heating, twenty-four-seven.’

I just shrugged. It wasn’t a big deal, or so I thought. There was the gas stove, I told him, and a row of full cylinders in the milking shed I hadn’t even touched.

‘We’ll fix this in no time,’ he said. Working with a claw hammer, he broke the packing case away, removed the nails, and stacked the wood in a neat pile. He couldn’t take his eyes off the generator, as he cut away its heavy plastic wrapping.

‘This one’s a diesel, mate. The other one’s petrol.’ Then he went on to describe how the engine worked, and why it didn’t need spark plugs – all of which meant almost nothing to me.

Later that day, the new generator was connected. I followed Blades through the house, switching lights on and off and turning on appliances that’d lain idle for the best part of a year. When he put on one of my mother’s old CDs, and music filled the room that’d been silent for so long, I wept. Not from sadness, but from the beauty of something I was hearing properly for the first time. That afternoon, music reached out and touched my soul, as no other sound had done before, or has done since.

‘Don’t get too used to it,’ he said, when it was all up and running. ‘When the diesel runs out, that’s the end. It doesn’t keep forever. And there’s nobody working at the refineries or pumping it out. They’re not making it anymore, and that’s gotta be good for planet Earth.’

He turned off the light as we walked out onto the veranda. 'What's left of the oil's staying in the ground. The few of us who've made it this far won't be leaving much of a carbon footprint.'

'You remember that day at school with Stewart?' I said, as we sat outside, looking across the hills and down to Pearson's farm. I'd waited all afternoon to ask him.

He looked at me while taking an appreciative sip of my mother's plum wine.

'Sure I do,' he answered. 'Seems like a lifetime ago, now. I remember seeing a circle of kids with Stewart in the middle. He might've been a whiz-kid, but he was a pushy prick, and I had a small issue with him at the time.'

Blades didn't elaborate.

'You didn't know it was me who was the centre of attention?' I said.

'Couldn't see much, really. I grabbed Greenway by the collar and pulled him out of the way to get at Stewart. Remember Greenway?'

'One of Stewart's wannabes. We used to call him Shadow. Wherever Stewart went, he followed two steps behind. Regular little brownnose. You know what scared me most about Stewart back then?'

Blades leaned back in the canvas deckchair. 'Tell me.'

'One summer, my stepfather took me to a beach near Barwon Heads. They'd caught a big shark – a grey nurse. I'll never forget its eyes. They looked right through me, even though it was dead. Stewart's eyes were like that.'

'He was a cold bastard, that's for sure.'

'He was almost a head higher than you, but when you scuffed him by the neck... I don't know what you said to him, but he looked petrified. Then he had one hand on his face, white as a ghost, and blood was streaming out through his fingers. None of us saw the knife, you know.' And that was how the nickname had started.

Blades reached into one of his pockets and took something out. He sat it on the arm of my deckchair.

‘It’ll still shave the hair on your arm,’ he said.

I pressed the small button on the hilt, and the blade sprang out.

‘Go on. Try it.’

I ran the knife down my arm. Sure enough, it took the hair off like a razor.

‘Like this,’ he said, watching me struggle to push the blade back in. He closed it smoothly, then slipped it back into his pocket.

‘Someone told me that your old man was a commando,’ I said. ‘That he got court-martialled for working over a couple of MPs in Townsville. And that you learned stuff from him.’

Blades didn’t respond straight away.

‘Just goes to show, mate,’ he said, clasping his hands behind his head.

‘Goes to show what?’

‘That you shouldn’t believe everything you hear.’

‘So it wasn’t true?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Well, it made life easier for me,’ I said. ‘At least Stewart left me alone. Then you left in year eleven, and I was shit scared it’d all start over. But after Stewart joined the army, it was pretty quiet. As quiet as our school could be, anyway.’ I laughed. ‘You remember old Mr Inglis’s lawnmower?’

Blades nodded.

‘He had it in the tech block to repair after school. You went in at lunchtime, and had it running like a dream before the start of class.’

‘I just liked repairing things. Anyway, it was only a blocked fuel-line,’ Blades said. ‘You know Inglis helped me get my apprenticeship?’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Everyone thought he was a bastard because he was so strict. But he put in a good word for me. Made all the difference.’

The conversation turned to the virus.

Blades sat up, leaning his elbows on the armrests. ‘About a year after I’d finished my apprenticeship, I knew something was wrong. Really wrong. Up until then, it was the same old bullshit stories.

Some infection or other, a bad flu year, golden staph outbreaks in hospital. A mutant strain of Covid. Not enough social distancing. They didn't have a clue.' He crossed his arms and shook his head. 'In the end, they stopped collecting our garbage. It piled up on the nature strips until nobody bothered taking it back in, or out anymore.'

Blades smiled.

'What?'

'Nothing really. I was just thinking about Taylor, our old landlord. He was tight as a fish's arse. Wouldn't spend a cent on repairs if he could avoid it, and that was most of the time. He stopped coming around for the rent. Every second house in the street was empty. There was no water unless you had a tank. No power. In the end, I was the only one in the street.'

He put down his glass, and I gave him a refill.

'Then they started torching houses – forty or fifty of them, in uniform. They'd turn up in big four-wheel drives and turf petrol bombs through the windows.'

'You're kidding?'

Blades shook his head.

'You ever see those speeches Stewart used to make on TV?' I asked. 'He used to go on and on about a new Australia rising from the ashes. First time I saw him with that black mask on, I nearly fell out of my chair. Why'd *he* have to survive, of all people?'

'Can't answer that one,' Blades said.

'Last time I saw him on TV, he said his people had blown up Parliament House. What'd he call it?'

'Liberation Day,' Blades said.

'Yeah, that was it. What a wanker.'

'God knows what he'd liberated us *from*. Half of the politicians were either in an ICU, or already buried. There was nothing left to govern, anyway. Food, that's what we all needed. Food meant survival.'

'You know,' I said, 'there's one thing I still can't work out.'

'Go on,' he said. 'I'm listening.'

'You're going to think it's stupid.'

'Try me.'

'Why are we still alive? What did we do to deserve it? I don't exactly meet Darwin's survival-of-the-fittest mould, do I?'

'Dunno. Probably none of us do,' he said. 'But the way I see it, it's up to us to make a difference. And this is where the future lies, out here on the farms.'

I emptied the bottle into our glasses and thought about that, as we watched the sun dip behind the hills and turn the sky a soft pink. Then, just as we were calling it a night, I remembered his proposal.

'Going to the city... it'll only be for the day, right?'

'Two, tops,' he said.

I picked up the empty glasses, and he grabbed the bottle.

'Let me sleep on it,' I said, as I walked inside, a bit unsteadily. 'Ask me in the morning.'

He patted me on the shoulder.

'Whatever you reckon, mate.'