

## Prologue

The beast howled in agony.

Edgar Wallace, his bald head shining in the illumination of a fluorescent light, quickly downed a slug of whisky. He moved across the floor to the whining cow and reassuringly rubbed her ears to calm her.

The animal was in labour, about to give birth to his latest attempt at genetic mutation. His previous attempts had failed miserably, but this time he was hopeful he'd got it right; more confident of success.

The labouring cow howled in pain again as it tried to give birth to a creature that was foreign to it.

Wallace was worried.

He moved away from the beast and poured himself another shot of whisky to settle the squirm in his stomach. He hoped nothing was wrong. The animal seemed to be in too much pain.

There was a splattering sound and another cry from the beast. The bald man turned and saw a bloody mass lying on the floor between the cow's hind legs.

He dropped his glass to the tiles where it shattered into a thousand fragments, and scurried over to the stricken mother. As he knelt to the floor to examine his latest work, the afterbirth came and washed over him like a wave.

"Fuck!" Wallace spat, glaring at the beast's behind with contempt as he wiped blood and membrane from his face.

The surge of fluid didn't stop there, though. Blood gushed from the cow in a torrent until the animal was too weak to stand. It crumpled to the floor with a life-ebbing sigh and lay still.

Wallace slipped his hands into the bloody mass on the ground and retrieved the product of his creation. He couldn't see it clearly as it was so covered in gore, but could see it well enough to know it wasn't moving.

Quickly he took it over to a basin and washed it clean in cold running water.

As soon as the blood was swept away he knew it was dead. The thing was totally malformed, unrecognisable. One long horn and one short horn stuck out from a round hairy mass that was supposed to be its head. The rest of the body was a twisted heap of deformed limbs with patches of smooth skin appearing amidst the fur.

Wallace gritted his teeth as rage seized him.

"Fuck it! Fuck it! Fuck it!" he fumed.

Clutching the dead creature by its demented head, he stormed over to the lifeless cow and kicked it hard in the guts. "You fucking hopeless bitch!" he screamed and headed for the door.

Outside a fire was burning on the parched earth. Wallace dumped the newborn into the flames where it hissed and spluttered and burned with the smell of roasting beef. There he stood

and silently watched it burn as he calmed down. More months of hard work come to nothing. Damn it to hell!

"I'll try again," he whispered into the night, and vowed he would continue until he succeeded.

## Chapter 1

*Twelve Months Later:*

The small fire crackled and gave off warmth to the two boys that huddled around it. They were brothers; Jason, seventeen and Scott, fifteen.

"I can't wait to get my driver's licence," said Scott, reclining back on his sleeping bag and gazing up at the stars. He couldn't believe how bright they were out here. Much clearer than back in town.

"Yeah, it's great," Jason assured him. "Gives you so much freedom, like being able to drive out here and go camping."

"I'm surprised Dad let us use the car, seen as though you've only had your licence three weeks."

His brother smiled, his face cast in shadowy hues of red and orange by the firelight. "Yeah. He's a great old man."

"He'd love to hear you call him an 'old man'," Scott chuckled. "You may be old enough to drive, but he'd still kick your arse."

"If you think he'd kick my arse over that comment, then he'd certainly kick it over this." Jason produced something wrapped in foil from the pocket of his jacket and placed it on his sleeping bag. He then removed some cigarette papers and a plastic lighter from another pocket.

His brother's eyes almost popped out as if they were spring-loaded. "Where'd you score the dope?"

The older boy grinned. "I have my contacts." He commenced rolling a joint. "You want some?"

"You kidding? Of course I do!" Jason gave him the first joint and Scott hurriedly lit it. He inhaled deeply on the pungent smoke, felt it burn a path down into his lungs and almost immediately detected a change in his sense of well-being. The stars above grew a little hazy after several more puffs on the joint. His head feeling sluggish, he looked across at his brother, who was also now lying back with a joint on his sleeping bag, staring up at the cloudless night sky.

The fire's heat seemed to grow with each inhalation of the smouldering weed. Scott was comfortably warm, felt almost cocooned as the blanket of warmth swept around him. For the moment he didn't have a care in the world.

Jason heard it first. He hadn't smoked as much of his joint as his brother and was therefore more alert. He sat up, looked at Scott.

Scott's head turned lazily towards him. "What's wrong?" he asked nonchalantly.

The older boy shrugged, then shook his head. "I'm not sure." He strained to listen. "I thought I heard something."

Scott propped himself up on an elbow, the joint dangling wetly from his mouth. "Like what?"

"Like something crashing through the bushes."

"So? Probably just a rabbit. Besides, I didn't hear anything."

"That's because you're off your face."

They both heard it this time; the crunch of snapping twigs, followed by what sounded like a snort.

Scott was alert now and moved over to his brother's side. "Doesn't sound like a rabbit," he conceded.

More twigs snapped. Another snort.

"Sounds much bigger than that," Jason whispered. The two boys scanned the foliage to the right, the direction of the sounds. Neither of them could see anything in the darkness beyond the campfire.

Scott rummaged in his backpack for a torch. He found it, switched it on to test it, saw that the light was bright, then flicked it off again.

"Should we go take a look?" he asked.

The older boy shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe?" He drew a little nervously on his joint one last time then tossed it into the fire. "Here. Give me the torch." Scott handed it to him. Jason got onto his haunches and shined the beam over the bushes.

Nothing moved.

"Maybe it's gone," the younger boy said. "Whatever it is."

They heard a sharp snap behind them. Jason swung round quickly with the light and shone it into the trees.

"What the hell is it?" he whispered.

"Sounds like somebody's stalking us."

"Somebody or something."

Heavy footsteps thudded over the ground, heading to the right. Jason followed the sound with the light, but still saw nothing. The bush land was too dense.

"Whatever it is, it sure sounds big," Scott said, a quaver in his voice.

"Probably just a wild pig," decided Jason. "There're heaps of them around here."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel any better. They're ferocious things."

"Don't be such a whimp. A pig's nothin' to be afraid of."

"All right then," Scott challenged. "If you're so brave, go out there and take a look. Find out what it is."

Jason, never one to shy away from a challenge by his younger brother, got to his feet and, torch out in front of him, cautiously walked towards the trees. Just as he reached the edge of the clearing he stopped and turned. "You comin' with me?"

"Uh, uh," Scott shook his head. "You're the gutsy one. Remember?"

"Right," he agreed, though inside he didn't feel too courageous at the moment. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the bushes.

Scott watched his brother disappear and drew the last puff from his smoke. He could see the light bobbing around through gaps in the trees, and heard Jason's footsteps receding as he ventured further away from the clearing.

He heard more footsteps, these louder but no closer than Jason's; just louder because they were much, much heavier.

The younger boy got to his feet and circumnavigated the edge of the clearing with his eyes. He could no longer see Jason's light and suddenly felt very alone. Nervously he moved closer to the fire where he squatted and warmed his hands over the dying flames.

In the distance he heard what sounded like hooves galloping towards the clearing, though it wasn't really a gallop; sounded more like somebody running.

He leaped to his feet, stared in the direction of the sound. He couldn't see his brother's light, and knew the footsteps were too heavy to be Jason's.

Shit! What the hell is that? he wondered, his heart slamming hard against his rib cage.

He didn't have to wait long to find out.

Something big came crashing through the trees into the clearing and stopped, letting out a tremendous roar. It was no pig, Scott saw. He didn't know what the hell it was, hadn't seen anything like it in his life. For a moment things seemed to move in slow motion as he stared mesmerised at the beast not twenty feet away.

It stood upright like a man, only much taller; maybe seven or eight feet. Its legs were covered in dark hair and had hooves for feet. A long tail flicked from side to side as it stood there. Its powerful upper body was that of a man's, with bulging muscular arms and chest, its shoulders broad. Scott couldn't see its head clearly though, as something limp and lifeless hung in front of its face. The limp figure was that of his brother, impaled through the mid-section on two long, curved and very sharp-looking horns.

The beast suddenly moved, flicked its head to the side and sent Jason's body flying across the clearing.

"Holy shit," Scott whispered to himself, feeling too terrified to move with the beast's eyes riveted upon him.

The thing's head looked familiar, like that of a bull, though the horns and face were much more menacing. The beast snorted and scraped a hoof along the dirt in the action of a bull about to charge.

Coming to his senses, Scott turned and ran towards the bushes. He could hear the creature coming up fast behind him and knew he couldn't outrun it. Frantically he tried to scale a tree but could find no purchase on its smooth trunk. He ran on. Branches snapped and dirt churned as the powerful animal, or whatever the hell it was, continued in pursuit. Scott chanced a look around, saw it only five metres behind him. That look proved a fatal mistake.

Not watching where he was going, he slammed hard into the trunk of a gum tree. The impact knocked the wind out of him and shook him senseless. The next thing he felt was a searing pain in his back as a horn penetrated his ribs and nailed him to the tree trunk. His mouth spewed forth blood and he mercifully passed out.

The beast heaved backwards with its powerful legs and dislodged its horn from the tree. With Scott's lifeless body still impaled on its horn, the creature made its way back to the clearing.