

Prologue

Dan wiped the sweat from his brow, the sting of salt biting at his eyes. The Australian sun bore down mercilessly, turning the vast wheat fields into a shimmering furnace. The scent of dust and grain filled the air as he worked alongside David, sewing the wheat bags shut and stacking them in neat, heavy rows. Each bag was more than grain—it carried the weight of their labour, endurance, and legacy.

This was the life they had built. Day by day, under the same unrelenting sun. Then came the sound that shattered everything.

"Dan!" The cry was raw, torn from David's chest like something primal. A sound of pain, of finality.

Dan's fingers stilled mid-stitch. His head snapped up. David collapsed onto the dirt. For a moment, time fractured.

Dan was at his side in an instant, kneeling in the dust, his hands gripping the shoulders of the man who had been his closest friend, his brother in everything but blood.

David's face was twisted in agony, his breath laboured. "Heart... attack," he rasped, clutching his chest.

Dan held onto him as though sheer force of will could stop what was coming.

David's eyes found his, panic flickering beneath the fading light in them. But then—a slight, familiar grin. Lopsided, knowing.

"One hell of a ride," he whispered, the edges of his voice worn but steady.

Dan's throat tightened. He squeezed David's hand. "The best. Wouldn't have missed it for quids."

"Look after them.." David murmured, his voice fading.

"I will," Dan promised, looking to ensure his mate.

But the light in David's eyes dimmed, and just like that, he was gone.

Dan sat back on his heels, staring at the body of the man who had shaped his entire life. Tears burned his eyes, but he let them fall freely, mixing with the dust beneath them. They had met at college, two city boys out of place among the farmers' sons. From the moment they shook hands, they had been inseparable. Side by side, they built an empire—not his, but David Crowley's.

As Dan knelt beside David, flashes of their early days flooded his mind. He remembered their awkward yet eager first meeting at college, where they had bonded over a shared dream: turning barren land into a flourishing empire. They had laughed at their

inexperience, yet brimming with hope, they promised to chase that dream together.

He recalled the day they faced a massive storm that threatened to ruin their crops. The two of them had stayed up all night, working side by side, sharing nervous jokes amidst the chaos. That laughter and bond felt infinite then, albeit a naive belief. And the taste of that first fruitful harvest, their laughter mingling with the golden grains swaying in the breeze, felt like a distant echo of the past, now overshadowed by the weight of present sorrow.

David was the dreamer, the relentless spirit who dared to chase the impossible. To Dan, he was like a guiding star in the dark expanse of night, illuminating a path filled with hope and ambition. Always by his side. Together, they forged an empire, sprawling over twenty thousand acres, transforming barren land into a thriving enterprise that blossomed from the dust. This journey was not just about land and wealth; it was about the bond forged in their shared dreams and struggles, giving their triumph a heart that resonated with the pulse of determination.

Now, that star had fallen, leaving only darkness in its wake.

The thought gripped him—how could it end like this? So sudden, so unfinished. They had years ahead, plans still waiting, dreams yet to unfold. But fate had stolen it all.

A puff of dust signalled the arrival of Jack, his loyal border collie. Jack bounded up and then hesitated, sensing the weight of the moment. Jack crept closer, lowering himself beside David's still form, his head resting on his paws.

Dan exhaled, the air thick in his lungs. He reached out, rubbing the dog's head with a heavy hand. "One more job to do, mate."

Slowly, he rose, his knees groaning from years of toil. He stared down at David, the man who had been larger than life, now so terribly still.

Clearing the ute's tray, he laid down bags to soften the bed. He didn't know how he would lift him, but he would.

He lifted David for the last time with steady hands, placing him gently onto the makeshift bed.

He took a step back, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Sorry, mate. It's not quite your style. But you won't mind, will you?" He adjusted David slightly, trying to offer a semblance of comfort. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm going to miss you."

He shut the tray, rubbing a weary hand over his face before turning to Jack.

"Passenger seat's yours now unless you'd rather ride in the back."

Jack hesitated, then jumped into the front.

Dan climbed into the driver's seat, staring at the road ahead. With a deep breath, he started the engine, the ute rumbling to life as dust billowed behind them, carrying memories into the fading horizon.

He had to tell Mary.

The thought loomed over him like a storm cloud, heavy and inescapable.

Mary. The woman who had stood beside David through everything. The woman Dan had loved in silence for just as long.

The road stretched before him. The hardest part was yet to come.