

My next encounter with the mist was at a crisis meeting called by Wesley Forrest and three other hobby farmers, who'd all lost their stock in recent nights. Wes had been a stalwart of the town for decades, its unofficial mayor and one of Earl and Wally's history society cronies. Most people referred to him (behind his back – Wes wasn't renowned for his sense of humour) as Alderman. Although he was now retired and had subdivided and sold off the bulk of his land, he'd held on to the best of his heritage breeding stock, and had established a lucrative arm in animal husbandry. His stud was purebred and worth a lot of money. And now it was gone.

Wes wasn't a man with a patient disposition. Arrogant at the best of times, he now offered us beers on his back porch with barely concealed fury. Gilda, his wife, had packed herself off to her sister's in Adelaide a week ago, after losing her beloved Siamese and her entire aviary. Wes meant business. A whiskey bottle stood a little to the right of his beer can. The day was only just starting to wane.

'What I want to know,' he was saying, 'is why the authorities are refusing to react. I've lost over eighty-thousand dollars' worth of almost pure bloodlines, almost irreplaceable breeding stock, which anywhere else would be considered a serious crime worthy of investigation. And all I'm getting is "no evidence" shrugs. Who gives a shit if there are no tyre tracks or footprints – it's their bloody job to investigate.'

'What's your insurance say?' croaked Fisher O'Toole through a mouthful of peanuts.

'Pending investigation. Pending the frigging police getting off their arses and doing their job. Doing something useful instead of cross-examining me and my family, speculating about my financial situation. Lazy bloody pricks.' He gulped at his beer, then reached over for the whiskey bottle.

'So what's your theory?' I asked him.

'My theory is that some shady arseholes snuck out here three nights ago with a stock truck and nicked four prime Hereford bulls and three of the best bloody breeding boars I've ever studded.'

'And you didn't hear a thing?'

He blanched, the briefest flinch. 'There was a bit of bellowing. I thought it was possums, or dogs.'

'You didn't investigate?'

'If I'd thought for a moment that some arsehole was making off with my livelihood, I would have been out of bed pretty bloody quickly, with a shotgun, I can assure you.'

'But you didn't hear a truck? Motorbikes? Dogs? Any sound of mustering?'

'Look, McIntosh, I've had enough bloody innuendo from your useless mates to last me a lifetime.'

'I'm just making a point. What would you think of a stockman whose entire herd disappeared from his pens, right under his nose, without him hearing a thing and with no signs of intrusion? You'll be lucky if your insurance coughs up a cent.'

Wes flashed and was about to tear into me, when Matt Johnson swore under his breath and pointedly cleared his throat. 'Sorry to interrupt, gents, but Wes, I think your bulls are back.'

Wes jerked around to face the fields. We followed the direction of his gaze, Matt's face strangely grey. The dusk had deepened while we'd been arguing, and in the settling dark a thick sea of fog was flowing over the fields towards us. Elongated figures seemed to cyclone around its edges, and at its dense core other forms pulsed and throbbed indistinctly. As the mist continued to deepen, the forms became more solid and recognisable. Standing out within the writhing centre were four enormous beasts, which would once have been hulking bulls, prizes of their species. Now their frames sagged, and they grunted forlornly, their huge carcasses stripped back to bones, with a few shreds of torn flesh hanging like rags. One raised his huge skull and bellowed, the ring audibly clattering in the bone shells of his nostrils.

Wes swore. The mist flowed on towards us, the skeletons of his cattle plodding in its midst.

'I'm out of here,' I said, and pushed back my chair. In unison, the others followed. To the side of the cloud, a large man in a bloodstained yellow shirt waved dislocated arms around like a grotesque, broken marionette.

'Wes,' Matt called from the doorway. 'Come on.'

'Matt's right, mate,' added Russell Simms. 'There's nothing you can do.' But Wes, a man who'd always

fought – and usually won – his battles, stalked away from us, descending the back steps to the lawn and heading resolutely towards his fields.

‘Wes!’ called Fisher. ‘For God’s sake, man – come away!’

We’d all started yelling by then, but not one of us moved to go after him. We stood, shouting and imploring, until he reached the very edge of the mist, and began to yell into it, demanding an explanation for the desecration of his cattle.

At first the mist only swirled, while the grisly remains of the bulls slowly, mournfully moved to surround him, as if asking to be taken home. They brayed solemnly at first, and then their tails began to flick. Eyeless and unseeing, they nevertheless moved to arrange themselves so that they all faced Wes, enclosing him in their centre. He was surrounded. Beside me Fisher swore and began a furiously whispered prayer. One of the bulls gave a furious bellow, and they all began to stamp and paw at the ground, raising small puffs of dust to swirl among the mist. A low chant could be heard, arising from the smoky cloud and building like an audible wall around the scene.

‘Wes!’ Larry yelled, ‘for shit’s sake, run!’, but at the same moment the largest of the bulls lowered its massive skull and charged, lifting the big man and tossing him into the centre of the cloud. The others stampeded, with sickening thuds that were soon drowned out by the shrieks of laughter coming from within the mist. Frozen on the back porch, we could just make out the writhing figure beneath the stamping hoofs, being pulverised into his own field.

As the mist eddied around the scene, three smaller loping skeletons with blunt snouts and long curved tusks broke from its borders and galloped towards the house.

There was no pride, no decorum. Paddy Lynch was sick before we’d even finished bolting the door.