

Chapter 1

Sydney CBD **A few years from now**

He kicked the leather chair away and instantly the rope snapped tight. He hadn't thought of the pain to come, when he'd threaded the rope through the light fitting and tested it could bear his 110 kilos. His throat crushed, he couldn't call out even if he'd wanted to. His lungs burned and the veins in his face felt close to bursting. His brown eyes bulged as if in surprise. But he knew he had to die. It was his only option.

In the last throes of death, as his heart beat so loudly it was all he could hear, his legs thrashed madly and his body, naturally, tried to save itself. But the chair, where he had sat and made all those terrible decisions, was too far away. He registered a warm wetness in his pants and a moment's shame swept over him. He couldn't even die with dignity.

In that second, he saw his personal assistant finding him the following morning, the pungent smell of stale urine and God knows what else forcing her to turn away repulsed. He saw Jane and Thomas in his mind's eye, and silently told them he loved them.

Mouth agape, eyes bloodshot, the last image he saw was the night sky, clear and filled with stars, through his office window. His foot gave one final twitch and then went limp.

The office was silent except for the almost inaudible hum of the air conditioning and the creak of the rope straining as his body swung. The thick glass windows kept out any city noise. The moonlight shone on his bald head, highlighting the dark regrowth that he shaved so carefully

every morning – even that morning. His wife, Jane, and three-month-old son, Thomas, watched him, smiling, from the digital photo frame. Seconds ticked by and the digital image changed to one of Tony and Jane on their wedding day two years ago, taken outside the sandstone church. He'd been slimmer then and looked very handsome in his dark suit. In the photograph, he was looking at his wife adoringly.

Next to the silver photo frame lay a white envelope, addressed in blue ink, 'To my beautiful wife and son'. Its whiteness contrasted with the golden honey colour of the Huon Pine desk. Tony stared vacantly, no longer able to hear the whooshing sound of the door opening. A man's large-boned hand hovered over the sealed envelope, and in the moonlight his shadow made him appear twice as big as he was. He picked up the envelope and, without opening it, placed it in his jacket pocket.

The body had stopped swinging, and the intruder stepped towards it. He stood for a long moment in front of the dead man. One corner of his mouth turned up: a hint of a smile. He raised his second finger to his temple and saluted the man he'd been sent to kill. Then, turning, he quickly walked towards the glass door. It slid open and he stepped through it, careful to avoid the security spy-eye camera in the executive suite of offices. As the door closed, the words 'Tony Mancini, CEO and Senior Vice President' glinted, etched in the frosted glass.

Tony had made his last executive decision.

Chapter 2

**Orange, New South Wales
Two weeks earlier**

Turning off the ignition, she knew she was too late. In the dwindling light, the whitewashed weatherboard farmhouse resembled a sepia photograph. Through a haze of dust, she watched as her brother, Keith, pushed himself up from the soft cushions of the three-seat swing chair. For a fit farmer in his thirties, his movements were unsteady and deliberate, like an old man's. He left the long evening shadows of the verandah and stood on the top step, one hand clinging to the railing. He didn't wave.

With the air conditioning off, the heat of the summer's day rose from the scorched earth, permeating the car's interior. Serena kept both hands on the sticky steering wheel. If only she'd left Sydney earlier. If only she'd said no to the interview. Her bloodshot eyes squinted as the last of the sun's tendrils released their grip on Swift Farm, her family home. The people on the verandah disappeared into darkness. The century-old pear trees, heavy with ripening fruit, resembled blackened, gnarled fingers scratching at the corrugated-iron roof. For as long as she could remember, colourful parrots had heralded the end of each day with their raucous squawking. But even their cries were muted. Her brother waited patiently.

Serena opened the car door and stepped out. The shallow trench-lines of the driveway—formed by generations of car tyres—felt familiar. Her long hair, normally clipped up, fell loosely around her face. In another place, on another occasion, her figure would