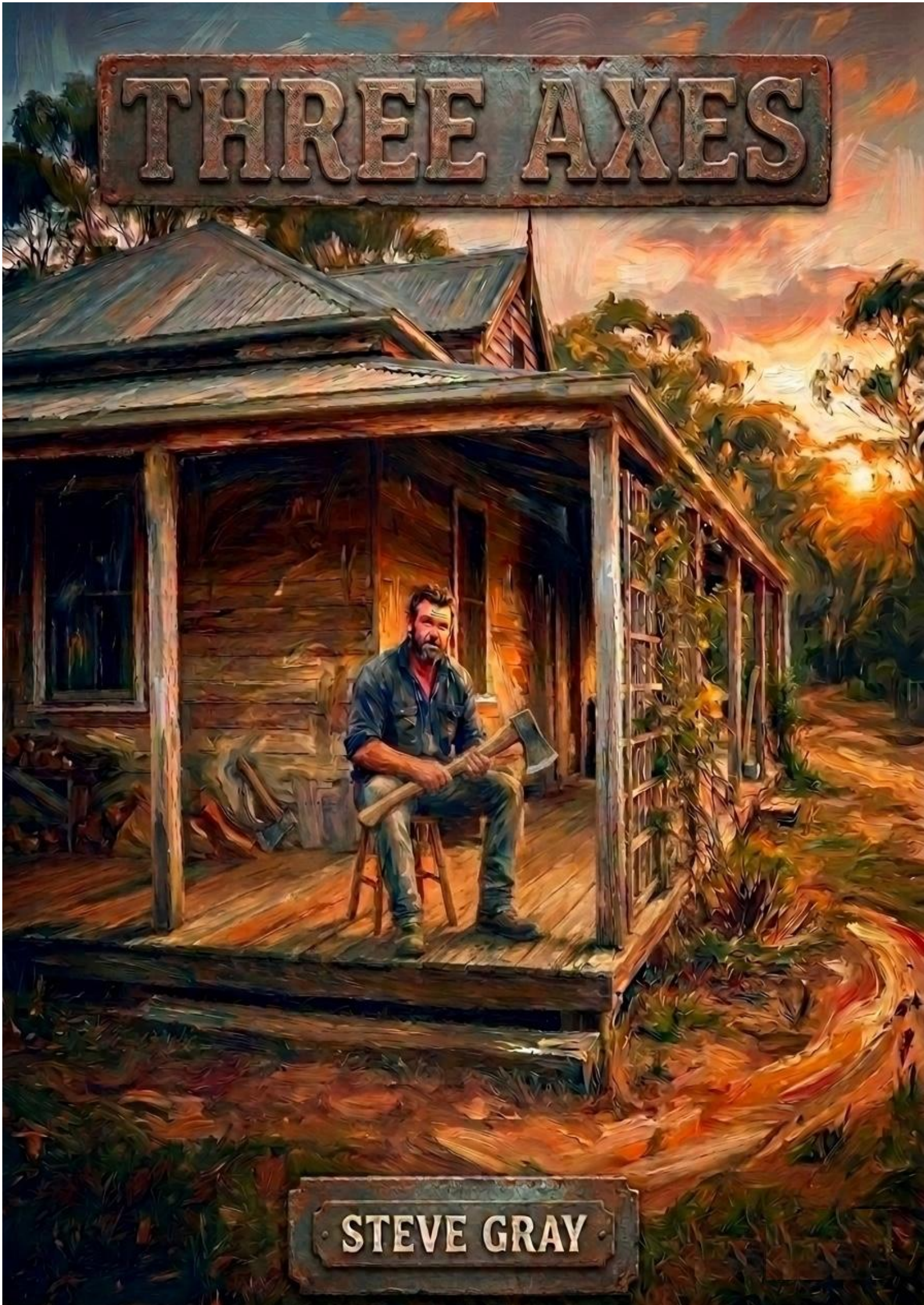


THREE AXES



STEVE GRAY

- *Three Axes* -

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Chapter One

Why he kept those three axes mounted on the hallway wall still occupies the darker corners of my mind. They hung in a meticulous, descending row against the tongue-and-groove timber lining boards, their polished steel heads catching the thin light that filtered through the front veranda. When they were all there, resting on their heavy wooden pegs, you could almost pretend they were just the tools of a meticulous handyman. But if you walked into that house and found a gap in the sequence, well that was another thing.

If one of those heavy wood-splitting heads was missing, the air in the hallway instantly turned ice-cold. If he had taken it down to run a whetstone along the bevel, that was one thing. But if he had pulled it down to hold it by his side, balancing the weight of the hickory handle in a white-knuckled grip while his mind unravelled, that was a terror altogether different. Ray was a law unto himself on those dark days. When the black dog took him, there was no reasoning with him, no erecting a barrier between his fury and whoever happened to be standing in the room. Mind you there was pure basic logic to him having them there, but more on that later.

Every single visit to that weathered old house demanded a calculated pause at the threshold. I learned to read the rhythm of his moods through the rusted mesh of the fly wire screen door before I even set foot on the bare hardwood floorboards. You could look deep into his eyes, pinpricks of cold grey, or wide, unblinking pools, and know instantly what kind of man you were dealing with. One day he would be vile, radiating a suffocating, violent malice that made you want to back down the veranda steps without making a sound; the next, he could be as passive, gentle, and utterly delightful as an old friend.

Ray was volatile like that. The local old-timers used to whisper and suggest that his mind was governed by the phases of the moon. *If the moon is full, keep your distance from the Greaves place*, they'd say. I tried charting it a few times, matching the calendar grid to the outbursts, but the math never quite settled. Usually, the realisation only hit me in the quiet, trembling aftermath of a confrontation, and by then, the energy required to look back and trace the lunar cycle felt completely pointless, buried under the sheer exhaustion of survival.

Ray is a deeply broken man, hollowed out by a childhood punctuated by a triad of traumas that completely dictates how he moves through the world. Whenever you try to gently nudge him toward the root of it, his jaw locks, his eyes glaze over, and he shuts down with a bitter whisper: 'You wouldn't understand.' He doesn't have the words, or perhaps the courage, to articulate the mechanics of what had broken him. Instead, he just lives with the shrapnel, admitting only that vivid, jagged memories violently pop into his mind at the slightest sudden noise or raised voice.

His sister, Christina, poured out the truth to me once on a quiet night, mapping out the architecture of their childhood house of horrors. Any single one of those events was enough to deform a child's psychology forever, but there was one particular afternoon that stood out,

scorched into the family history like a branding iron, and for Ray that's probably his major turning point.

Their father, Martin, had returned from his conscripted active duty in the humid jungles of Vietnam, a completely hollowed-out shell of a man. The military had drafted a normal young bloke and sent back a monster whose waking hours were governed by hyper-vigilance and an explosive, unvarnished PTSD. In his warped mind, the world was a meat grinder, and he believed his children needed to be broken and rebuilt harder if they were to stand a chance against it. 'People out there don't get it,' he'd roar, his voice rattling the cheap glass panels of the kitchen cabinet. 'They don't understand that some lives are utterly worthless. Out there, they get exterminated without a second thought. One stray bullet, one misstep on a booby trap, and *BANG*, flesh and bone are just gone. My kids aren't going to be soft. They aren't going to be targets. They will survive, even if I have to beat it into them.'

Their mother, Helena, spent years playing the role of a human shield, doing everything in her fragile power to steer the kids away from his line of fire. But her frantic interventions only fed his insatiable appetite for dominance. Martin would corner her in the narrow kitchen, shove her hard against the laminex benchtops, and bellow, 'Now look what you made me do!' The phrase was an absolute death knell, a reliable prelude to an escalation of verbal venom and physical strikes that sent the children scattering like mice into the shadows of the room.

One sweltering afternoon, the familiar script played out with lethal precision. In a vile, liquor-fueled rage, Martin began barking at Helena while she stood over the stove attempting to prepare dinner. Without warning, he swung his heavy work boot into the back of her knee. Her joint buckled with a sickening pop, and she crumbled onto the hard timber floorboards. Before she could even scramble backward, Martin unbuckled his broad, stiff leather belt, wrapped it twice around his knuckles, and lashed her and legs back five times. The heavy leather made a dull, wet thud against her cotton dress. She shrieked, pressing her face into the floorboards, begging him to stop.

Unappeased, Martin turned his bloodshot gaze toward the hallway where the three children had fled, barricading themselves inside the back bedroom by wedging a heavy chest of drawers against the frame. Martin didn't even pause. He raised his boot and violently kicked a wooden panel clean out of the old cedar door, splintering the frame into kindling. Then, using his entire body as a battering ram, he threw his shoulder against the structure

again and again until the lock tore free from the timber frame. Terrified, the kids scrambled for the open sash window, dropping out into the yard below.

Ray was the smallest, his movements clumsy with fear; he was the last to reach the sill. Before his feet could clear the ledge, Martin's broad, calloused hands clamped onto his collar, dragging him backward. The man unleashed a frenzied beating, slamming the heavy belt across Ray's backside over and over again. Then, grasping a handful of the boy's hair, he dragged him screaming across the floorboards. In the kitchen, Helena was still weeping on the floor, her voice cracked and breathless: 'Don't hurt him! Please, Martin, don't hurt little Ray!'

The other siblings tore across the road to the only sanctuary they knew: the home of Mrs Donaldson. She was an iron-willed widow and the only neighbor in the entire street with the spine to stand toe-to-toe with Martin. When he would storm over to her fence line, screaming obscenities and spitting threats, she wouldn't flinch an inch. She would fix her eyes entirely on his gaze and say, 'Martin Greaves, you are a deeply cruel man. Go back inside your house, settle your wretched demons, you miserable old bastard.'

During one past encounter, Martin had taken a wild, looping swipe at her face. Mrs D hadn't even blinked; she simply pulled out a long, thin wooden dowel she was carrying, the heavy stick she used for agitation in her washing copper. She nimbly dodged his fist, stepped into his guard, and delivered three or four savage, cracking blows with the dowel. The wood caught him square across the thigh, then cracked hard against his forearm as he raised his hands to protect his face.

She had held her ground, staring a hole through him, and barked, 'There is no universe where you lay a hand on me, Martin Greaves. Now bugger off!'

On this particular day, she was ready for him again. Ever vigilant, she had been watching the street from her front lounge window and immediately ushered the fleeing kids inside, the moment she heard their squeals of terror from across the road. Ray suddenly burst out of their back door, running blindly up the driveway. Martin was hot on his heels, charging out the front entrance, but the moment he saw the boy cross the bitumen and enter Mrs D's property, he pulled up short and retreated back into the cavernous gloom of his own home.

Inside the neighbor's house, Christina and Barry were hysterical, grabbing Mrs D's arm and screaming, 'He's going to kill Mum! He's going to kill her!' Right on cue, an almighty,

curdling shriek echoed from across the road as Martin went back to work on Helena. Mrs D didn't hesitate. She rushed straight to her laundry, wrapped her fingers around the trusty dowel, and headed out the door. 'Call the police,' she ordered the children over her shoulder. Pointing to the phone in the hallway, 'Do it now!'

She headed purposefully across the bitumen and straight into the Greaves house, where the front door hung half-open on a broken latch. Inside, Helena was weeping, her badly bruised leg entirely useless as she tried to limp away from her husband. Mrs D stepped between them and started laying into Martin with the stick, but the whole dynamic had shifted completely. This wasn't the neutral ground of the front yard; she had crossed his threshold, entering his space, and she was instantly at a fatal disadvantage.

Fueled by a sudden spike of adrenaline, Martin leapt forward and struck Mrs D across the jaw with a massive, heavy-handed blow. The old woman spun awkwardly, her feet slipping on the polished hardwood, and her head cracked violently against the edge of a heavy dining chair. She dropped like a stone and went completely still. Within seconds, a pool of blood began to seep from her scalp, spreading out gently across the old timber floor, filling the narrow grooves between the boards.

Martin stood over her, his chest heaving, his teeth clenched so hard they groaned. He turned his eyes back to his weeping wife. 'See what you made me do, you feeble bitch,' he hissed, his voice dropping to a terrifying whisper. 'There's going to be real trouble now.' Helena, choking back sobs, dragged her useless leg across the floorboards until she reached Mrs D, pressing her fingers to the older woman's neck. There was no pulse. The chest was perfectly still.

'Now look what you've done,' Helena whispered, her voice shaking violently as she stared at the body. 'I hope you're happy with yourself, Martin. You finally took things too fucking far.'

Martin didn't answer. The red mist evaporated instantly, replaced by a cold, panicked reality. He reached onto the kitchen counter, hastily scooped up his car keys, and charged out the front door. He slammed the front door shut; the force sent the outer fly wire screen door swinging violently backward, crashing hard against the exterior weatherboards with a deafening clang. He was completely unraveled, his hands trembling so badly that he spent an agonising moment frantically scraping the car key against the lock of his car, unable to find the slot.

He finally got inside and started the engine, but the roar of the motor only made the reality kick in harder. Instead of shifting into gear, he slumped forward over the steering wheel, his forehead resting against his arms, suddenly crushed by an immense, suffocating weight of shame. The demons he had carried home from the war had finally cornered him.

Across the street, Christina ran out from Mrs D's house, shouting back to her brothers to stay on the line with the police operator. She walked carefully across the road, approaching the idling car. Through the half-rolled-down driver's window, she could see her father sobbing uncontrollably, his shoulders hitching. Slipping her arm through the gap, she quietly turned the ignition off and slid the keys out of the barrel.

The next-door neighbor, an elderly but sprightly retired railway worker named Frank Finley, came stepping carefully across his lawn. 'Everything alright, love?' he asked softly, looking at the girl. Christina turned to him with a face so pale it looked translucent, her eyes wide with a sheer, unadulterated terror that defied any verbal response. She didn't say a word; she just turned and walked slowly back up her veranda steps into the quiet house. Frank walked over to the driver's side where Martin was still weeping. The broken man looked up through the glass, his face smeared with tears and snot, and blubbered, 'I did a bad thing, Frank. A bad, bad thing.'

When the police arrived with their sirens wailing through the quiet suburb, they took Martin into custody without a fight and stretched police tape across the veranda, transforming the family home into a cold, clinical crime scene.

Even now, all these decades later, whenever I recall the details of the story Christina shared with me, a profound, internal sickness takes hold of my chest. It leaves me suspended between a total disbelief at human cruelty and a tragic understanding of how easily a man can be hollowed out by violence until there is nothing left but rage. Those are the true, lasting spoils of war.

Ray used to bring it up out of nowhere, his voice completely flat as he stared off into space: 'Mrs D never deserved to die. That was a bloody sad day.' He'd say it at the strangest moments, over a pub lunch or while listening to the rain hit the roof. And Christina would always look down, adding her own quiet piece to the memory: 'We just stood there in the driveway, watching them cart Dad away in the back of a cop car. And then we watched them bring Mrs D out in a heavy black body bag. Everything was just terrifying. Mum walked with a limp for the rest of her days, and she'd start crying if a door slammed too hard or any other

sudden loud noise or raised voices. Poor Ray was also never the same after that. To be honest, none of us were.'

Chapter Two

The dirt track leading to Ray's property was short and required little maintenance. The earth was packed tight enough that ruts rarely formed, and the natural slope allowed rainwater to shed cleanly into the scrub. Once a year, Alan French, the farmer from next door, would drive his tractor over and drop the grading blade to smooth out any rough patches. Alan and Ray maintained a quiet, functional neighbourliness. Alan was a shrewd man who understood the value of keeping things amicable. However, he privately admitted that he never permitted his wife, Jean, or their children to step foot on Ray's property unless he was right there with them.

According to Alan, Ray only ever reached out by phone; he never dropped by unannounced. Their interactions were limited to brief, polite chats if they crossed paths at the petrol station, shops in town, or a casual wave through their windscreens when passing each other on the local roads.

Jean occasionally bumped into Ray at the supermarket. Their conversations never ventured past the ordinary, brief exchanges about the weather or how the kids were faring at school. He was perfectly polite, yet beneath the small talk lay an unspoken consensus among the locals. Everyone had their own theories about Ray's past and the true nature of his solitary life.

Ray's property was in parts, a dense, overgrown bush block. He maintained just enough of a clearing around the house to serve as a firebreak, though the district had escaped any major bushfires so far. Decades earlier, the land featured a cultivated produce paddock, large enough to sustain a family for most of the year. The owner before Ray, however, had chosen to plant native trees and let the bush reclaim the soil. Ray preferred it that way; it meant there was nothing left to mow, till, or tend to.

Change arrived when a family moved in directly across the main road, right opposite the entrance to Ray's track into his property. Their newly built house was modest but conspicuous, standing stark against a backdrop of empty, unlandscaped paddocks.

One afternoon, as Ray was pulling out onto the main road, he noticed the new neighbour turning into the opposite driveway. The man offered a friendly wave. Ray pulled his ute over to the shoulder, cut the engine, and walked across the bitumen to introduce himself. Mike Raison. He was a few years younger than Ray, a family man with a wife named Marlene and three young children. They stood by the roadside for five minutes, trading thoughts on the district. Mike shared his plans to run about fifteen head of beef cattle on his eighteen-acre block. Ray walked away feeling that Mike seemed decent enough. The influx of a new family was good for the area; the struggling local school desperately needed the enrolment numbers.

Shortly after, Jean made her own trip across the road to welcome the newcomers, striking up a conversation with Mike and his wife. The Raisons explained they hadn't moved far, just a few towns over, but wanted a larger block where their children could grow up in the open air, surrounded by chickens and a few sheep to keep the grass down.

During the visit, Jean gently brought up Ray. She warned Marlene that anyone with any sense kept their distance from his track. Only a select few ever went in, she noted, and only out of absolute necessity. Jean clarified that she wasn't calling him a bad man, he had no criminal record to speak of, but he carried severe PTSD from a traumatic childhood and was prone to sudden, volatile outbursts.

Marlene took the warning seriously. She admitted that her own children had already been instructed never to wander near Ray's boundary line without parental supervision. It gave the young couple something heavy to ponder as they figured out how to explain the boundary to their children.

For a long while, life fell into a predictable, rural rhythm. The cattle grazed quietly in the paddocks, the children played in the dirt, and the parents spent their weekends in mud-coated gumboots, working hard to establish their new gardens. A ride-on mower eventually joined the family's routine, taking over the manicured sections of the yard where the sheep couldn't be trusted to not eat the ornamental shrubs.

Ray kept busy working as a delivery driver a few days a week. His shifts picked up significantly in the winter months when the demand for LP gas bottles peaked. On his morning exit heading to work, he frequently passed the Raison children waiting at the edge of the road for the school bus. The kids would wave enthusiastically, and Ray would always

wave back from the cabin of his ute. He was, after all, just the neighbour from across the road.

Before long, however, Ray began noticing subtle, familiar patterns in the way Mike conducted himself. It started with small things, the sharp, controlling tone Mike used with Marlene in the yard, the sudden shifts in body language, and the early, unmistakable markers of the same volatile, abusive behaviour that a man named Martin had once inflicted.

Ray would be out on his ride on mower, clearing the verge out the front of his place, then other times out the front cutting back overgrown shrubs and assorted plants around the mail box and entrance to his place.

Recognising the cycle instantly, Ray felt a cold weight settle in his chest. A profound moral crisis took hold of him. If he stepped in to protect the family, his own reputation as the town's volatile, unstable outcast would ensure he was viewed as the monster invading their lives. But if he chose to remain passive, he would be forced to sit by and watch the terrible machinery of trauma repeat itself, knowing exactly what kind of tragedy lay at the end of the road.

A day later, Ray was on the phone to Christina, pleasantries ensued, idle chit chat about the everyday things that filled their lives. Ray cleared his throat. His recent memory of noticing Mike's voice and actions in the yard prompted him to ask Christina what he should do? There was a long moment of silence, she asked him to repeat what he had said. More silence. She said 'Now Ray, first of all don't do anything stupid, you hear me, there's been enough trouble over the years and now is not the time to stir things up. Chat to Alan and Jean, let them know first off. See what they say. Remember there have been times when you don't know your own strength and the psychologist has advised you on how to deal with that okay. Keep things nice...'

Barry rang Ray not long after, he chatted for a bit and said that Christina had called him about Ray's new neighbour. Barry was subtle and reiterated what Christina said. Chat to your neighbour, get them on board, don't do anything stupid. Ray knew they were right. The last time he got into a rage over something the victim suffered a broken jaw and a few cracked ribs. The Magistrate let him off on a good behaviour bond recognising that Ray had acted to protect someone from an attack. It didn't stop people in the community having concerns about Ray. Words were spoken behind closed doors and rumours ran rife.

Ray's boss, Simon was wary, and was nearly ready to sack him, not sure if he should be out and about with people changing gas bottles and so on. His wife Tina suggested that he rarely came into contact with people on outlying properties and he did have a good track record up to this point, at least locally. Simon saw sense in all that and besides who would he get to take over, Ray was such a good worker in many ways, knew his way around the area and all that.

Ray did have a temper if pushed, his Psychologist gave him a range of techniques to use if things started to get out of hand, in this case he rang to get support from Christina, she always seemed to have a level head, her advice was useful.

Alan was quick to answer his phone, he seemed a bit surprised and the weather had been mild and it was generally a long way off before Ray's driveway needed grading. Ray mentioned what he saw and heard and wanted to raise awareness, not sure what to do, but noting that type of activity could trigger his PTSD. Alan stayed calm and said he would discuss it with Jean and see what they thought.

Alan knew it would be a tricky area to negotiate, most people he knew would turn a blind eye and if anything was said it could make things worse. Little was known at this stage about Domestic Abuse, with most suggesting that to be attacked in some way meant the victim probably did something wrong, therefore the attack was to some degree reasonable.

Jean suggested that they were probably under stress having moved into the house and wanted to get things sorted, 'you know, people tend to have 'short fuses' under pressure.' Alan took that into account and went silent carefully exploring what it might all mean and what they might need to do. He didn't want to find out afterwards that something bad happened.

Jean had a friend who worked at the local school, and asked in a general kind of way how the school or teachers would respond if they noticed the kids had any issues, bruised arms etc? The friend said they would acknowledge it, but could do little to make any suggestions, intervene etc. There had been talk about teachers and school staff having to do mandatory reporting of any issues to do with abuse, but it was still just an idea at this stage.

Jean suggested to Alan to tell all that to Ray to at least let him know they had talked about it. Two days later Alan saw Ray's ute was at his work and the delivery truck was in the yard, he dropped in and told him what Jean had said. Ray thanked him, they casually nodded

at each other, then Alan headed off, not really sure that chat solved or added anything to the mix of things.

Alan and Jean's two boys Rod and Joey were older than the new kids across the road, the Raison's boys were in awe of Rod and Joey were out on quad bikes and a rugged old dirt bike, chasing cows and riding up and down their long front verge, a well worn track had been formed over many years. Rod was close to finishing his secondary schooling, and Joey was a year behind. Both were studious learners and would appreciate the oncoming era of computers in the classroom as well as the internet, but at this stage all that was just talk.

Occasionally the two sets of kids would catch up and have a chat, the two Raison kids Alex and Boyd, would ask if they could ride the motorbike or the quad bike, Mike was usually nearby and told the Rod and Joey that his kids were far too small yet to ride, so be aware not to make too big a thing about having bikes and so on. They got the point. After that it was usually a wave from across the road, at this stage Joey and Rod hadn't been in the house across the road, they hadn't been invited and other than that there was no need. The younger kids kept to themselves pretty much.

One afternoon Rod was out on the motorbike well down the other end of their property when his bike spluttered to a stop. Ray happened to be coming down the road and spotted the kid looking at the stopped bike scratching his head. Ray pulled up and wandered over, Rod was a bit shocked at seeing Ray show up, but kept his cool, he was a long way from the house and would Dad or mum realise that his bike had stopped and now adding to that ray from next door had turned up, Rod had been told 'some things' about Ray but was now perplexed as to what to think.

'Yo Rod, it looks like your bikes stopped, yeah?' Rod said yep and explained that it just spluttered to a stop. Ray wandered closer and asked a few questions about if it had done this before and so on, Rod said, 'No it usually just runs okay and Dad checks it every now and generally it goes fine?' Ray took a look, checked the main spark plug lead and looked in the petrol tank, it all seemed okay. Perhaps the spark plug lead was a little loose but not too bad, after a few tries and some fiddling about Ray managed to get the bike to go.

The whole time Rod had one eye on Ray and was ever alert for anything he might say or do. Nothing happened. He thanked Ray and as he headed off he thought it seemed strange, this guy was innocent enough but he had been told to watch out for him, 'He could have a temper.' Today was not one of those days thought Rod.

Little did anyone know but Ray had his eye on the new neighbours, his first observation of them in action had caused him some stress. After helping Rod out with his bike he headed off and turned onto his track, Mike was in his front yard and waved. Ray waved back, stopped his ute in the driveway then headed across the road to say hi to Mike. Ray commented on how the landscaping and so forth had gone and how well they had seemed to settle in okay. Alex came out from the house curious to see who dad was talking to. Mike didn't realise until Alex was right by his side, Mike was a little startled, Ray smiled and said Hi, then introduced himself, Alex said hi back, Mike introduced him, 'OH... this my eldest Alex, who should be inside right now...' Alex shrugged his shoulders, gave a brief wave and turned to walk away.

Mike then said, 'Kids, these days they just don't seem to follow instructions, My dad would have gone right off if I did that!' Ray nodded, Yep, my dad would have done the same, followed up with some harsh unwarranted action. Mind you these days you can't do any of that, things have sure changed.' 'Mike looked at him with one eye closed and then said, 'Well in some houses that may be the case but not here, those kids know their boundaries and if a consequence is required, it's given.'

Ray swallowed hard, then carefully and slowly said 'Yeah well, I grew up in a hard house, Dad would go off, and we all suffered, they say the Vietnam war made him that little bit too crazy and so we all copped it. He did time for his actions, it all got a bit messy. Anyway people watch for that stuff these days, it all helps if people do their bit to keep things nice.'

The subject changed, Ray then saw Marlene's silhouette against one of the windows, she was wondering who Mike was talking to, she moved away, her interest didn't seem to last long, it was just the guy from across the road she was warned about. Ray headed off not long after, having subtly mentioned to Mike that abuse was being watched as a general thing in the community these days. Mike later said to Marlene that he thought Ray was being a bit of a busybody, and enquired if she had said anything to do with any of the locals? 'No,' came her low terse reply.

Ray's next catch up with his psyche was just a week away, he noted in his journal that he wanted to mention the catch up with Mike. It didn't rattle him so much as raised his awareness a bit more about what might be happening.

Chapter Three

Ray took down one of his axes off the wall in his living room, then headed out the back to split some hardwood stumps, the firewood pile was needed a top up, the axe was of course sharp, Rays efforts in wood chopping competitions around the state and country festivals and such, meant that he knew a lot about sharpening and looking after an axe, or in his case three axes, one in particular was his competition axe, with one spare, in case the handle cracked on his main axe, and a 'round the house' axe. A few stumps were duly split and the pieces put on the wood pile.

Ray didn't realise what people thought, like me for instance, it became a malevolent symbolic device, if one was missing, which one? And what did it mean? Well I found out once, that the house axe could be left outside, by the wood pile. But there were times when it was in his ute and I wasn't sure what that might mean. Later on I found out Ray would take it to work to clear branches and shrubs in the way of him making a gas bottle delivery.

Mind you it was a challenge for him to explain having an axe in his ute when the police pulled him over, and 'had a chat', someone had gone nuts at a property earlier in the day and left a couple of nice big axe marks in a timber door of an old cottage. Ray had an axe, and was somehow known for going 'nut's' although no one really knows when or how he went 'nut's' they just heard rumours and stories went out of proportion.

The local copper had a thought, an axe mark in a door, 'Better catch up with Ray, and have a chat.' So he did, they soon realised that Ray was well over on the other side of the district doing a delivery when the 'alleged' incident happened, a clear alibi was had with Mrs Jenkins on Cloverdale farm. She and Ray had a quick chat when he arrived this morning.

Ray then guessed that locals would take a while to get the story straight so he needed to be careful about where he was and who saw him. Some people just didn't seem to take facts into account, but rather, they wanted to jump to conclusions. 'Old Ray must have gone nut's... again!' The cop knew that too, and had to tell his wife twice, 'That it couldn't be Ray, this time.'

The next day the perpetrator of that 'door chopping' handed himself in two towns over. He wasn't happy about his ex doing things a certain way, so he wanted to leave a message. It

turned out he got the wrong house, he thought he knew where she had moved to, nope, wrong house. Blinded by aggression some might suggest.

Ray realised a long while back that people could jump to conclusions, his past or his alleged past seemed to catch up with him from time to time. Mind you he liked the fact that people mainly left him alone, an introvert in the main, no kids wandering in, no un-announced visitors, he had things his way.

Loosely I kept a check on Ray, I would call and ask if it was okay to drop in for a cuppa. We were mates from years ago, he would and I would have a laugh mostly about old times, school, teachers, other kids. I found that being a few months older than Ray I was seen as a protector of sorts, Ray had a way about him that made him seem a bit feeble at times and then bang he could get rough and tough if pushed. On more than one occasion I managed to chat to him, that the kids were trying to wind him up. Times like that he would take himself into a quiet area the school set aside for 'vulnerable kids.'

Ray could generally do quite okay at school, he could kick a football decently and get amongst the pushing and shoving of 'kick to kick,' then in the classroom he was able to grasp concepts a bit better than some, meaning he didn't look stupid. Anyway some kids saw through all that and would find his achilles heel, if things got too noisy all of a sudden or too rough and tumble he would simply shut down.

I knew all that and watched out for him. I'm not sure why I did that, but it happened.

Today I was on my way to catch up, I had called and it was all good. The drive takes about fifteen minutes from my place. Cheryl suggests I take something so I don't go empty handed, I always end up saying, 'Gees Cheryl, he's a simple bloke, not one to chow down on snacks.' She would open the pantry, grab a packet of Tim Tam biscuits and literally throw them to me. I then remember it's one of the things he likes about me coming over, I bring Tim Tams!

On the way over I'm pondering what I've been up to, get my stories straight and get ready to connect, then if he asks I can recall everything that's been happening, oh and I have to remember to add in what Cheryl's been up to with work and all that., then when I get back she quizzes me on what Ray's been up to, aiming to make sure that the conversation is not all one sided.

It's been a sunny day, the temperature is still a little low, it's that time of the year. I stop to top up my fuel and then head over along the main drag then up Derringers Road to Rays place. The dappled light through the trees is always fascinating, I'm thinking about what Ray's probably been up to, he was in a chopping competition recently so that'll be interesting to hear about, then there's work and the usual customer interactions, or not. He likes the simple jobs, rock up, take out the old gas tank then fit a new one. Test for leaks, leave a note, load up the empty tank and move on to the next job.

I'm trundling along, all good, then off in the distance I can see some movement on the road. It could be a Kangaroo, or a sheep? No, it's more upright whatever it is? I slow down to take it all in, it's two kids and an adult. They are now on Ray's side of the road, right out the front of his place. I'm not sure why but they seem agitated, bothered by something. I then see Ray right behind them, looking back. He's come from the Raison's place, it was Marlene and her boys in front of him. My mind thinks the worst, what has he done now! Oh boy has he got himself into trouble?

I am now going really slow, indicating to pull into Ray's driveway. Ray is now part way up his driveway, I stop at the entrance to Ray's place and see Alan from next door heading hurriedly out of his house. Looking across to the Raison's place, there's no one about, it's just the standard serene country set up, farmhouse, grass, garden, cattle in the background etc. My window is now down as Alan approaches, his quick walk turned into a jog fairly quickly. He calls out, 'Hi Sam...' I ask what's happening? 'There was a gunshot, Ray was out the front of his place, and on hearing the shot I looked out the window and he was across the road in a flash, then just before you arrived, Marlene and the boys came out the back door, they didn't look happy at all. Then you arrived so, I'm not sure of what's what, are you here to visit?' 'Yep, Tim Tams at the ready. I better go and find out what's happening.'

Up at the house the kids are heading in his door looking back to see what they can see. I park and get out, the Tim Tams can wait. I'm soon at the door, Ray introduces me to Marlene who is looking rather anxious. 'This is Sam, a friend of mine. Marlene, Sam, and the boys, Rod and Joey.' I thought the introductions were rather quick, something's not right, there's a full on tension in the air. The boys are now sitting close to each other on the couch, wide eyed, it was probably their first, and possibly their only time being inside Ray's place.

Ray's on his phone, a call to emergency services as it turns out. Mike had got into a rage and in the ruckus that followed got out his 22 rifle and ended up shooting himself in the

foot. He had about five bullets in the magazine, but no one was waiting to count how many were really there. Marlene had said something to upset Mike, he got the gun out and started to rant and rave, then bang it went off as Marlene shouted to the kids to get out the door and run, then realised that Mike had shot himself, he was now dancing about in the kitchen last she saw, he was calling her everything under the sun as they say. Yelling, 'Now look what you've made me do.' Ray was in his front yard at the time and heard that chilling call out in the distance having heard the gunshot.

He told me later that he was really hesitant to cross the road in a hurry, the common call out of rage, stopped him in his tracks, then Marlene came out with the kids, she quickly told him that Mike was in a range and had the gun. He hurried them across to his place and she provided more detail as they headed up to his place.

It turned out that Mike had already rung for the ambulance, his injury was more of a flesh wound than anything. Ray's call then got redirected to the Police who weren't far away, they got the details and were there as quick as they could. They advised us to stay away from the scene and they would check out the scene when they got there. 'Just watch to see if he comes out of the house and tries to drive off or anything. If he does, watch to see if he has the gun with him.

It was about five minutes later that the police arrived and two officers headed into the house, calling out to Mike as they went. He was flat on the floor, gun beside him. They moved that away and then 'had a chat,' doing their best to figure out what had happened. It turned out he was having an 'off week,' and after some silly argument about nothing, he 'saw red,' and then pushed Marlene, her temper escalated and it went back and forth. He then grabbed the gun.

Marlene pointed out that he didn't use it much, it was more for foxes and so on, but he hadn't really seen any so he wasn't used to using it, and then 'bang' the darn thing went off.

The police asked him, what was he aiming to do with the gun? 'I dunno, scare the wife, she should be more compliant and not wind me up.' They discussed that, and suggested that he lock the gun up so it's not easy to get to, for him or the kids. Locking guns away was not yet a thing that people had to consider, it was being discussed as a thing to set in place in law, but not yet.

Well his actions certainly scared a bunch of people, while they waited for the ambulance to arrive, which wasn't far away, I said I would go next door to Alan's place and fill him in. Ray said 'Yeah that's good, a good idea, yeah Sam, do that.' Halfway down the driveway, I crossed paths with one of the responding officers. He looked at me and gave a brief, reassuring nod. 'Ambulance is just around the corner. The husband doesn't have the weapon, it's secure, and he's being held accountable for the danger he's caused.'

I breathed a sigh of relief and walked over to the neighboring property, calling out to Alan as I approached the porch. Both he and his wife, Jean, came to the door, their faces painted with immense relief as I explained that the danger had passed.

'When I saw Ray charge across that road,' Alan admitted, shaking his head as his hands gripped the porch railing, 'I thought, *Oh shite, this is it.*'

Thankfully, the day had ended with a flesh wound instead of a funeral. I didn't know Alan and Jean particularly well, just enough to exchange a casual 'g'day' in passing. But they knew I visited Ray. As it turned out, Ray had long ago given them my phone number. You know, just in case.

The Ambulance guys wanted to just put a bandage on the wound, the police advised that they take him to the hospital, and give his wife a breather. They complied. The police then suggested to Marlene that she give him time to 'chill out' and reflect on what he had done. Any further issues, please call. Marlene thanked them and Ray for being there for her and the kids. Marlene had a 'bit of a mess to clean up.' She admitted that she was a bit shaken up by it all. Ray said he felt for her and said a bunch of other memories came back for him in a somewhat similar situation, many years ago.

I got out the Tim Tams and gave the boys one each, then had we had the catch up with me, after Marlene and the boys returned home. Their conversation was now laced with all manner of things to chat about. Ray jotted down a few quick things in his journal as the two of us sat and had a cuppa.

I carefully asked what the journal was about. Ray mentioned that it had been a thing the psychologist recommended and he took it with him for their 'catch ups'. Well this was the first time he ever really said he was doing catch ups with a psych. I sort of knew, but then again, if no one really tells you you don't really know, you just guess and the last thing with Ray is saying or doing anything that might 'set him off.'

We plodded on with the conversation. I really wanted to know more about the psychologist but wasn't sure if that might cause an issue and push the wrong buttons. I simply waited, we swapped the usual stories about work, family issues, things I had been up to. Ray mentioned the woodchopping competition he did quite well at recently, he said, 'The old axe got a fair workout that weekend.' I could see he was happy and recalling the competition put him in a good mood.

'One interesting thing Sam, my chopping has improved, the psych I go to see is a sort of performance coach I guess you would say, with some sports people, athletes etc. Anyway he's given me a few tips on small things that can give me a mental boost. Along with some mindfulness exercises that helped me clear out some of my rage situations. It's been rather helpful. One thing he said was, and get this, our flashbacks that taunt us, are memories, they are not the actual event. That's a bit obvious. But by realising we can't change what happened, but we can alter how we 're live' those memories and therefore the situations themselves.

There's this simple thing which Greg the psyche mentioned, visualising, and how we can change what we visualise and how we respond to what we visualise. Changing the recall we have of a trauma, in my initial case, then when it comes to the future, how we visualise a possible outcome, like in woodchopping.

I used to look at a chunk of hardwood and see it as a thing to conquer, Greg said, what would happen if I saw it as a different thing, already chopped in half, with every stroke of the axe landing in an ideal position on the log. It's all in how we see things, well in my case that's most of it, then there's the sounds, loud noises used to send me off, but now not so much and with the chopping I now hear the crack of the last few blows with the axe, it changes a lot of things.'

I looked at Ray. He had a sly smile, he was in a good place. And I could see he was full of delight for some reason. As if he had just reflected on something good. I enquired. 'So What are you thinking now?'

'Oh, yeah, Sam I just realised that I jumped into a situation this afternoon hearing the gunshot and loud voices and didn't 'explode' myself, I just took things more calmly and collected. Amazing... I was across the road before I could really think about bad consequences, and helped out, amazing, no rage, no violent intervention, no yelling etc on my behalf, amazing.'

I then realised I was dealing with a vastly different person. A person who was a lot calmer and at ease with himself.

‘You know the funny thing is Sam, I now never forget to put the axe back on the rack on the wall, some days it would remain on the woodheap, not anymore.’

I suggested, ‘Well it sounds like you have broken some sort of cycle and now you can choose to act differently.’ Ray nodded in agreement.

As I left that afternoon things were different, the image I saw as I headed out the door was one of a light filled front verandah, the late afternoon sun through the trees provided a warm dappled light effect. There was a calm about the place, about Ray. He even pointed out a few things about the house that he wanted to fix up. For far too long the old place had felt the effects of bad weather, some rot here and there. I was on my way soon after our verandah chat and thought how good it was to not have to walk on eggshells at Ray’s place, darn nice.

At my next catch up he pointed out that he had become quite friendly with the neighbours now, not feeling the need to hide away, he was less reclusive. He had even had a few good chats with Martin across the road and discussed traumas and rage. Things had certainly changed all round and that was a good thing, a very good thing