

**THE
DEPTHS
WITHIN**

PART 1

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MICHAEL

*The eastern world, it is explodin',
Violence flarin', bullets loadin',
You're old enough to kill but not for votin',
You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin',
And even the Jordan River has bodies floatin',
But you tell me over and over and over again, my friend,
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.*

Barry McGuire – *Eve of Destruction* (1965)

It was another typical morning for Michael Baker; he had woken up alone and broken his fast in sweet solitude. The boy had cleaned himself, brushed his teeth with the disgusting 'Close Up' mouth wash and toothpaste in one, with red gel instead of white. He remembered the first time he had ever used it; the sight of the red liquid pouring out of his mouth and trickling down the drain had almost made him faint. He had rinsed and rinsed while he sporadically checked the inside of his mouth, the red gums, and his bright white teeth in the dusty mirror of the only bathroom for twenty minutes. Until his father beat him for using too much of the tank water.

He often thought of his father during his long, daily walk to the Chinchilla sawmill that his father managed. His head slanted forward as he watched his engineering boots trudge down the freshly graded dirt road. He watched the dust erupt in a furious flurry each

time he swung his foot a little too low and mused at how the wind slowly whisked it away to eventually dissipate and vanish, as though it had never existed. Sometimes he wished he could do the same.

Tony Baker was a large man who stood over six foot with massive, mauler hands and large, hairy arms. He wore his temper like his hair, so short that you could barely hide a blade of grass beneath its longest point. Tony had served with the Royal Australian Army in the Second World War as a sapper and saw extensive combat in the South Pacific. Along with his brothers in arms, they had traversed the Kokoda Trail and had eventually, with great loss, routed the Japanese from their holes and thrown them back, inch by inch. That is all that Tony would ever tell Michael or Jack, his older brother, his voice slurring, heavy with drink. His eyes red with intoxication, half-closed, failing to focus. Yet even the boy could see there was so much more; he could see it in his eyes. He saw it in the way he drank, the way the big man hit him for running in the house or for not completing his chores. Once the target of his rage had been laid down on the ground, they were left to wither under the look of fury and disgust as he stared down at either of his two children or, worse yet, his wife.

Michael kicked a pebble off the road and watched it vanish into the gidgee bushes that scattered the fire trail. He thought to a time when he was no older than six or seven and had rushed to his father's side, when he had pushed through the rear screen door at their residence in the north-east country of Chinchilla, Queensland. Happy to share with his father that he had been watching a documentary on the Second World War. Tony had faltered for what had only seemed like a split second as he processed the words that came from the smiling mouth of his youngest child. The big man glanced down at his darling son and dropped his jacket onto the back of one of the worn, timber dining room chairs which surrounded the Baker

family's undersized dining room table like the 'Kings Guard' of a fictional tale. He walked to the fridge door without a word, opened it and removed his first Fosters long neck. Tony tore the lid from its perch around the brown glass rim with his monstrous hand and stood while he stared down at his son, whose smile still had not faltered. As he tipped his head back and poured the brown, stinking liquid into his mouth, Michael still saw one eye staring down at him, unblinking, unwavering. It wasn't until his mother had walked into the room did Tony open his mouth.

'The boy tells me he's been watching the war.'

His mother smiled briefly at her husband and continued to simmer the mince that was browning in the old cast iron pan above the wood fire stove. 'You know he loves watching those things; he swore he saw you once to—'

For a large man, Tony Baker had always been greasy quick; this was but one of the times that Michael could remember the sheer speed of the man. He brought the back of his right hand across his wife's face in an effortless movement that sent Grace Baker sprawling to the floor, along with the mince and the pitted old iron pan. The clap that rang out as the backside of his father's hand drove into the soft cheek of his mother's face stuck with the boy for years, along with the crash that the old cast iron pan made as it slammed into the hardwood floor, hard enough to mark it. The mince for her husband's meal still sizzled while it covered the kitchen floor from the stove to the back door.

Grace raised her hand to caress her quickly reddening cheek. With a grimace, she propped herself up with her other hand. 'Tony?' She whimpered as she looked up at her husband.

Tony stood over her with a look of absolute disgust on his face; Michael remembered the feeling of relief that his father's attention wasn't on himself when his temper had exploded. He tilted his head

back for another swig of beer and continued to stare at Grace in the same manner. 'I work my fuckin' ass off day after day.' He raised one of his huge hands to point at Michael, 'and you let this fat shit sit on his, to watch what I did in my past?'

Grace whimpered again and mumbled an apology. However, she still had not broken her eye contact at this stage.

'You get him working, Grace. I'm not carrying him forever, and I'm not hearing about those days again; I thought I married a woman with sense.'

Grace broke her eye contact with her husband and turned her face to the ground. Her long dark hair tumbled around her neck and shoulders, so long it touched the floor in places. Her ears shone red with her own anger or shame; the boy never knew which. At some point, Tony had realised that his son still stood there. He stomped over to him and grabbed Michael by the scruff of the neck, lifting him from the ground to swing by his side. He felt the rough feel of his father's hand, the power in his arm and the strange sensation of weightlessness.

'Clean this shit up,' Tony barked as he stomped his way to the rear door of their dwelling, the same door he had entered some two minutes before. Michael remembered his thoughts that perhaps the night wouldn't have been so memorable if only he hadn't opened his big mouth. Tony pushed the screen door open with his son's forehead and roughly threw him onto the grass to the left of the path; Michael was at least thankful that he wasn't thrown on the concrete.

'Sit down!' his father exclaimed as his bulk disappeared into the darkness. Michael remembered sobbing at this stage; succumbing to the cool of the night air and the dampness of the lawn beneath him. He recalled the hard decision to run back inside to the safety of the house and of his mother or to stay and obey. He remembered the following thought, which still chilled him: *Is it truly safe with*

Mum? She had been reduced to a whimpering mess due to her son's happiness to see his father, for his weakness. It was at this point Tony's large, unforgettable shape had emerged from the darkness of the Bakers backyard. In one hand, he held his old axe; in the other, a large dead gum branch. The big man's heavy footfalls echoed softly as his weight drove his boots into the soft ground. The lighter point of the dead branch in his hand scratched at the ground behind him as he moved, as if trying to grasp some strong surface to save itself from the man's iron grip. Tony embedded the axe head into the soft grass and threw the dead gum branch to the ground in front of his son.

'Now, make yourself useful and cut up this branch to keep your family warm tonight.'

'D-Dad,' Michael had started, but it was a mistake. He didn't learn quickly in those days; that was the second time he had failed to keep his mouth shut. The next instant, he had found himself sprawled on the ground, clutching his face and staring at the grass. The inside of his head erupted with the ringing from his ear, and his chest heaved uncontrollably now with the sobs he could not contain.

'You fuckin' want another one?' Tony growled beneath his breath, his hand still cocked, 'Get going or sleep out here tonight; I couldn't give a shit either way.' Tony, at that point, straightened up and stretched his back; he turned without a further word and pulled the rusting screen door open and disappeared back into the kitchen. The screen door clapped a few times against its frame as it swung back on its hinges. Michael, still down in the grass, continued to sob. When he heard some more soft padding on the grass behind him. In the moonlight, he made out the colossal frame of his older brother, Jack slowly made his way along the side of the house. He stopped about five feet away from his younger brother and leaned up against the cladding with a grim look. Jack always looked grim. For a boy of early adolescence, he had a remarkably deep voice. It was easy to see

that sooner rather than later, the elder brother was going to outgrow his father and outweigh him. Still, Jack was no idiot, and he knew what side his bread was buttered on and how to keep it that way. He avoided Tony like the plague.

‘Better get to it; you’ll get it worse if he gets another beer into him and you haven’t started.’ His voice was truly deep; he had to keep his words low at this point so their boom wouldn’t attract their father.

‘Can’t you help me?’ Michael had asked, still on the ground. He continued to sob and cupped his red, stinging cheek. His eyes fixated on the axe head buried in the ground, its handle like the hull of an alien ship marooned in foreign soil.

‘You started this; you sleep in the bed you’ve made for yourself. If I help you, I’ll get it worse.’ Jack shifted his weight from the wall and slowly stood back under his own power. He crossed his arms and frowned; his jaw muscles worked. ‘You’ll get hit again. Maybe not today, but you’ll learn to handle it.’ He brought one of his own large hands up to his head and scratched at his scalp. His bicep bulged as his fingers moved to ease the itch. Jack could have broken the branch to kindling with his bare hands, but he still wasn’t going to help his brother. ‘You’re the one that got Mum hit anyway, so why would I help you?’ Jack swung his huge arm back down to his side and turned his already monstrous frame to disappear back into the darkness of the Baker’s lot.

‘Jack,’ Michael sobbed after him, but there was no answer apart from the soft padding of his large feet burying themselves into the soft grass as he trudged away and disappeared into the darkness as his father had before.

Michael clambered to his feet. His cheek still stung from the blow his father had laid down upon him. He held his hand out to grasp the axe handle; it settled upon the cold, hard dark timber that jutted out of the ground. The boy used his weight to free the steel head

from its mooring, yet either the boy was too light, or the soft ground sucked to the pitted surface of the axe. He clutched it with trembling hands while tears freely poured from his small eyes and ran down his cheeks, one pale white, the other an inflamed red. Grunting between sobs, he slowly worked the axe head loose, then struggled to drag it over to the dead gum branch that still lay in wait for him. He placed one of his hands further up the shaft, kept the other low, and heaved.

Michael felt as if he were the mythical David in an attempt to lift Goliath's sword. A boy less than ten, who had shown no signs in following his father's build, as Jack had at such a young age. Crying out as he heaved again, Michael managed to lift the axe head a foot off the ground. He held the wavering axe head above the branch, his back already afire with strain, and let it fall. There was a dull thud as the heavy, pitted steel head fell onto the branch, bounced, and then fell to the grass. The indent the dull steel made in the timber was barely visible. Michael cried out in frustration; tears still stung his eyes. However, he arched his back as he strained once more to raise the axe up again. He lifted the steel as high as he could, this time a foot and a half above the ground. He squared his feet and lunged as the blade fell through the air to hit the branch five inches to the right of the original dent. The blade glanced as it connected and left a smaller indent than the first.

Inside the Baker's kitchen, he heard the muffled conversation, very short and unaffectionate. There was dull click and static with garbled noises, then eventually, soft tones fluttered into the boy's ears from the Kelvinator radio that endured its lonely life on the window-sill of the kitchen. It was the first time that the boy had heard this song. The muffled, static plagued tunes were difficult to hear clearly, but they were clear enough to understand the song.

'Then, in 1915, my country said, son, it's time you stopped rambling; there's work to be done.' Michael heaved the heavy axe head into the

air again, his back stiff with an ache that had spread to his legs and arms; this was only the third swing. *'So, they gave me a tin hat, and they gave me a gun, and they marched me away to the war.'*

It took Michael what seemed like two hours in the cold to eventually break the dead gum branch into six pieces. Inside, he heard his mother cleaning the kitchen, the meal that he was yet to eat, more than likely trashed or consumed by his own father. He listened to the entirety of the song, and with each new verse, the words seemed to burn themselves into his brain. They called to him, nursed him, yet at the same time bludgeoned him worse than any hit from his father. As he heaved the dull steel into the air and let it take its treacherous fall, the words in his head echoed on and on.

'And the band played Waltzing Matilda as the ships pulled away from the quay.'

His hands were a bloody mess by the time he had finished. The dried timber didn't seem as cold and smooth as when he had first started, and his back screamed in agony.

'And amidst all the tears, the flag-waving and cheers.' He leaned the axe, its blood-streaked handle, up against the side of the clad house and picked up the few pieces of dead gum branch. He remembered how his hand had left a bloody print when he pulled open the rusting screen door and ambled into the house. *'We sailed off for Gallipoli'*

His father was seated in his accustomed chair at the head of the dining table, begrudgingly mauling his way through the mince that had been placed before him. His expression was that of disgust; he had a chunk of hard bread in his hands, which he used to sop up some of the juices from the oily mince. As the boy hobbled passed him, the big man lifted his gaze and saw the timber in his hands, and a furrowed expression came over his face.

'Boy,' the large man called without turning as he jammed a piece of the sopping bread into his mouth and chewed loudly. Michael, who

had noticed that his brother and mother were absent, stopped and turned to look at his father. His eyes still stung from the tears that had continuously wet his cheeks throughout the ordeal.

‘That’s a gum branch,’ the big man barked as he sopped up more juice from his plate with the remaining chunk of hard, stale bread. He jammed it into his mouth once again as the excess oil ran down his dirty cheek to his chin, where it massed at the lowest point and finally fell to make a stain on his blue, chambray work shirt, which would remain till this day.

‘I cut it for you,’ Michael’s almost inaudible voice quivered. ‘Like you said.’

Tony carried on like he hadn’t heard. ‘Gum smokes when it’s burned,’ he barked as he pushed the plate in front of him away from his setting, signalling that he was finished with the meal. He pushed back the timber chair from the table; the legs groaned under his weight and echoed a low screech as they ground against the hardwood floor. Tony raised to his full height and snatched the timber chunks from his son’s trembling, bleeding hands. They were all chipped and whittled from his untrained axe swings. The big man strode to the door that Michael had entered from, pushed it open and hurled the timber outside. ‘You’ll smoke the whole house out, you idiot. Gum branch, fair dinkum.’ He shook his head. ‘Get cleaned up and go to bed.’ With that, Tony brushed past his bleeding, dirty son. He reefed another Fosters from the fridge and passed by Michael once more before he stormed outside. The screen door slapped against its frame as it swung shut in Michael’s face. It was shortly after that, the tears started to flow once more in the boy’s frustration.

Michael was now twelve, the same age that Jack had been back then. He was still nowhere near the height and weight of his older brother. He was five feet tall and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet. Whereas Jack was now a monstrous seven feet

and weighed a freakish three hundred and sixty pounds. The boy continued his journey down the fire trail from the Baker residence to the mill while he pondered the memory. He reminisced mainly about his mother and father. Grace Baker had come to him in his bed later that evening and had begged him not to blame his father. She had said that when Tony went overseas he was a beautiful man who only cared for her; he promised her they would marry on his return. He would whisk her away to a faraway paradise that she could only dream of. However, when he returned, the happy young man wasn't really there anymore. It couldn't be said that the big man didn't have a sense of humour; unfortunately, neither could it be it said that he slept peacefully and that his return home was without incident. Soon he started drinking, and it helped at first. He slept easier, and he was more relaxed, but as time went on, he needed to drink more and more to forget. The woman had pleaded with her son that night to never mention those days to him again, as it was wrong of her to let him watch that show.

The boy didn't see how it was her fault; he recalled the black and white faces of the young men boarding the ships to head overseas to glory. They were young; they were smiling, near invincible as the sheer thrill of the adventure that stood before them was visible in their eyes. But the boy could never remember his father with the same glint in his eye, the same boyish charm. The drinking had gotten worse over the last years. More often than not, he wouldn't return home and would either fall down drunk at the Chinchilla Hotel or collapse on the Darcy's porch swing.

The Darcy family owned the property adjacent to the Baker's lot. Paul, the head of the family, worked under Tony at the sawmill. Michael had taken a liking to Paul as he often removed the old man from the house; more importantly, he referred to Michael by the name Mick.

‘Mick,’ he said to himself, smiling as he rounded the final bend of his journey. As the fire trail widened and the scrub fell further away from the edges of the track, beaten back to submission from the years of constant use. His engineers’ boots paced down the trail and continued to kick up dust on every third or fourth step. His hands jammed deep into the pockets of his jeans as he looked down at his own blue chambray shirt. ‘Mick’ was embroidered above the chest pocket on the left hand side. He preferred Mick to Michael. However, Darcy seemed to be the only one who referred to him by that name. As the mill came into view, the whistle powered by the steam of the boiler hollered its dreadful tune to the world and signalled the start of shift. The boy pulled his hands from his pocket and ran the last two hundred yards to the open gates of the Chinchilla sawmill.