

*Dead
Heat*

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ONE

Vermin.

They had to be the worst thing about her job. The feral dogs, pigs, cats, goats and horses did enough damage, but the vermin Jo really disliked – the ones responsible for the vandalised camping ground in front of her – were the two-legged, hoon variety.

Five days since the State Minister and her entourage of hangers-on and media had, at this very spot, declared the new National Park open, and already the vermin had left their mark. Not only had they hauled down the information board – the one she'd dug the post-holes for herself because they couldn't get the mechanical digger repaired in time for the Minister's media event – they'd cut the posts into pieces with a chainsaw.

The door to the loo hung crookedly on a single hinge, the watertank beside the covered cooking area was riddled with bullet holes, and, judging by the copious amounts of broken

glass around the campfire remains, they'd also smashed – or perhaps shot – a fair number of beer bottles. Presumably after drinking the contents.

They sure hadn't come out here to appreciate the natural environment.

But they weren't here now. She could see the whole camping area – no cars, no tents, no people.

She reached into the cab of the vehicle for the radio mike and rattled off her boss's call sign. 'Are you there, Mal?'

'Yeah, Jo.'

'Can you give the police a call? A mob of *Homo idiota* has been rampaging. The tank's full of bullet holes, the loo door is cactus and the info board's down – they took to it with a chainsaw.'

'Damn it. Are you all right? How many of them are there?'

'I'm fine, Mal. They're gone.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Brazen louts aren't likely to be skulking in the bush, afraid of a lone woman.' Being out in the wilderness by herself was a normal part of her job, and if she spooked easily she wouldn't have lasted a week, let alone ten years.

'Okay. Can you wait until either the cops or I get there? I might be an hour. And even if there are police available, they'll probably be at least that long.'

Jo stifled a sigh. She would just have to hang around and wait for the police to take whatever evidence they needed before she would be able to start clearing up the mess.

'No worries. I'll photograph and document the wreckage.'

Photograph and document – a standard procedure she'd completed too many times, although she'd hoped such deliberate vandalism would be less frequent out here in the north-west of New South Wales than in the parks she'd worked in further east, closer to cities and city hoons.

It would take all of thirty minutes, if that. Then maybe she could map the track to the lookout while she waited, so the morning wouldn't be a total waste. Checking and updating the maps they'd inherited from State Forests was only one task on the long list of jobs to be done now that the area had officially become a National Park.

The sun's heat already warm on her back, she retrieved her camera from her day pack in the rear of the vehicle. Taking a moment to scan the large camping area, she watched, listened, alert for anything that didn't belong. The typical morning birdlife filled the air with sound. A flock of corellas, white on the dark branches of a eucalypt near the river, squabbled among themselves. A young magpie, fatter than its parents, squawked on the grass, demanding more food, and a treecreeper hopped up the bark of an iron gum, foraging for insects. At one end of the car park some of the local mob of kangaroos sprawled lazily in the shade, their morning grazing completed.

Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing disturbing the peace. Other than the wildlife, she was alone out here. Exactly the way she liked it: peaceful, without distractions, just her and the natural beauty of the wilderness. A different beauty from the parks she'd worked in for most of her career, on the eastern fall of the Great Dividing Range, but this dry, scrubby landscape

of the western slopes and plains brought her almost full circle, back to the kind of landscape where she'd grown up.

She drew in a deep breath of warm, dust-dry air. A good decision, moving here, away from the constant reminders of loss and grief, as well as an enjoyable professional challenge, establishing the new park. Definitely plenty to keep her busy.

This vandalism added a few more tasks to her list for the day. Nate Harrison, the lone constable based in Goodabri, might come the twenty or more kilometres out if he was in the area, but the chance of any other police driving the fifty-plus kilometres from Strathnairn, let alone bringing a crime-scene officer, was close to zilch. Yet, just in case, she took care to disturb as little as possible as she photographed the destruction and recorded the details in a notebook.

On the edge of the camping ground, among the undergrowth, a family of fairy wrens flittered in the bushes. Two young males, just coming into their adult plumage, chased each other, the half-grown tufts of blue feathers on their heads punk-like.

'At least *you* don't go around wrecking camp sites, boys,' she murmured, zooming the camera on them.

From this distance her voice didn't disturb them, but as she snapped a few shots they flew off, startled. She turned the camera to the dingo emerging from the low bushes, breakfast in its mouth. She caught its face close-up in the frame, the eyes watching her warily, ears upright, jaws clenched tightly around . . .

The image in the viewfinder began to shake violently but she snapped the photo, and another. Five fingers. A tattoo winding past the knuckles, up to the stump of the wrist, blood dark against the pale skin.

The dingo turned away and she yelled at it, desperate for it to drop its find, but it disappeared back into the undergrowth.

‘Shit, shit, shit, shit.’ Indecision held her motionless while she ran through her options, her heart racing as quickly as her thoughts. Follow it and see what she could find, or radio Mal to report it? She flicked the camera back to the two images she’d taken. No, it wasn’t a joke artificial limb left over from a Halloween prank. Real flesh, mostly whole, so it had not been lying on the ground for days. Whatever had happened, it had to be recent. Not a minor injury. So where, and in what condition, was the person the hand belonged to?

She jogged back to her vehicle. With insufficient mobile phone reception for a call, she radioed her boss again. First things first: find out if there was still reason to worry. ‘Mal, have you heard anything about someone being injured out here? Calling an ambulance, yesterday or overnight?’

‘Nothing I know of, Jo. Why?’

She hesitated. No, not information she wanted to broadcast on an open radio channel, with farmers, truckies and others potentially listening in. ‘There’s some signs of a major injury,’ she explained briefly. ‘I haven’t heard anything about an ambulance call-out last night, but maybe they left here by car. If you hear anything, let me know.’

Still on edge, she surveyed the camping area and surrounds, the key questions ringing in her mind: How the hell had someone lost a hand out here? Where were they now, and in what state?

The hoons had felled the posts with a chainsaw, but it would be pretty damned hard to accidentally cut off your own hand

with one. Likewise with an axe or a hunting knife. Fingers, easily enough, or a chunk out of a leg or foot, but not your own hand.

That meant a much higher probability of foul play than of accident.

If the injured man was out here, the sooner she found him, the better. Aware of the isolation, kilometres from anywhere and anyone, while she checked her backpack for first-aid kit, satellite phone and portable radio she listened again for any indication of company.

Nothing but bird calls, insects and the breeze stirring the leaves.

Not far from where the dingo had trotted back into the scrub, she found drag marks, half a metre or so wide, and a few ants still gathered, here and there, around dark smears in the gravel. Pairs of footprints flanked the drag marks.

Boot prints, not wild pig or dog tracks.

She stared at them, the skin on her arms prickling despite the heat of the sun. No, there couldn't be any sort of innocent explanation for this.

Wary, making herself breathe slowly and evenly, she followed the drag marks and tracks over the rough, rocky ground among the trees.

Less than forty metres in, she found a pile of broken branches under a tree, glimpses of denim visible through the thin, dry foliage.

She'd done her share of search and rescue over the years, and dealt with more than her share of injury and death. And she could do it again.

She steeled herself and pulled aside one of the branches to check what lay beneath . . . and then jerked away, gagging, her mind reeling in horror. Not an accident. No way an accident. The man whose body lay semi-hidden had been coldly, brutally, tortured and murdered.



The cow stood in the middle of the narrow dirt road and stared at him. Nick stared back and inched the car forward. The cow didn't budge.

A second blast from the horn finally had it ambling to the verge, and he pressed down on the accelerator as soon as he was past.

'Turn left in one hundred metres,' the female voice of the sat nav intoned.

Down a rough track with a locked gate across it, and an 'Authorised Vehicles Only' sign?

'That'd be another "no", honey,' he muttered and turned off the useless system.

An hour since the call had come in and he still had to travel at least ten kilometres to get there. Assuming his constable's directions for the 'shortcut' route between Strathnairn and the National Park were correct. Assuming he hadn't taken the wrong road. Both the map and the sat nav had proved useless – the scale of the map not large enough to show the minor roads, the sat nav thinking every farm track and fire trail was a public road.

He mentally added *decent maps* to the list of resources he would request. Only three days into the job and his list was already long. His predecessor in the senior detective position at Strathnairn might have been content to work without adequate

resources, but Nick wasn't. Although, given the large number of open cases Nick had inherited, he wondered if the word *work* had been in the man's vocabulary. That made his own posting to the almost-outback command not just a banishment but a poisoned chalice as well. Detective Garry Coulter, killed in a car accident over a month ago, had apparently been held in high regard by the locals, so raising questions about the man's competence or integrity would not make Nick popular with his new colleagues.

He would worry about that later. Right now, he had a murder to investigate – once he reached the crime scene. At least the body that had been reported wouldn't get any deader. Just – he flicked the airconditioning up a notch – just riper, in this heat.

The road joined another at a T-junction, and a National Parks sign helpfully pointed to Ghost Gums Camping Ground. After another ten minutes of winding road through dry, rocky bush he descended to the camping ground on the river flats, the parking area already busy with three police cars, an ambulance and two National Parks utilities.

The two paramedics stood beside their ambulance, idly talking, but as Nick got out of his unmarked car, one strolled across.

'Are you the new detective?'

'Yes. Nick Matheson.' He shook hands, unblinkingly meeting the man's frankly curious and not entirely trusting gaze. So, the gossip had gone beyond his new colleagues in the Local Area Command to other emergency services. So be it. He had a job to do, and he'd do it.

'Where's the victim?'

The paramedic nodded towards the police cars at the other end of the camping ground. 'In the bush over there. He definitely doesn't need us.'

'But you're hanging around anyway?'

The guy shrugged. 'It's pretty gruesome. Someone might faint or suffer from shock.'

'Who found him?'

'Jo did.' He waved a hand towards two people in khaki shirts and trousers, leaning against the bonnet of a National Parks vehicle. 'Jo Lockwood. She's a bit shook up but she doesn't need us, either. Jo's tougher than she looks.'

Jo would be the slim one with the light brown hair held back in a ponytail. Nick couldn't see the woman's face, but from her hands-in-pockets, straight-backed stance, Jo Lockwood clearly wasn't falling apart in hysterics. That would make his job of interviewing her a hell of a lot easier.

'Thanks. I'll talk to her after I've seen what she found.'

What she'd found, he discovered when he followed the local constable through the scrub to the scene, was enough to give most people nightmares for months.

The smells of death – piss, shit and blood – turned Nick's stomach, but he quelled the response automatically. *Never show weakness*. That had been life's first lesson growing up on the docks of Newcastle, and kids who didn't learn it early suffered constant beatings and degradation.

The constable stayed to one side, staring intently at the body. 'Must be a sick bloody psycho, to have done that,' he said.

Nick crouched and, without touching a thing, surveyed the body. Facts. Evidence. That's what he needed to focus

on. A rope tied tightly as a ligature above the amputated hand; another above a mangled and bloody foot. A major wound to the other knee, covered in blood, dirt and grit. The gunshot to the head probably the final of many other cuts and injuries.

The sustained violence and torture of this death – the patterns of blood flow suggested that the injuries were ante-mortem – were among the worst of the innumerable violent crimes he'd seen.

'No,' he mused, as much to himself as to the constable. 'Not a psycho. This guy's big, and he fought. It would have taken more than one man to restrain him.'

'From the looks of the camping-ground damage there were a few crims here last night,' the constable said. 'And he's got some unusual tattoos. Haven't seen anything like them before. Must be some sort of gang thing. You'd know about that, wouldn't you, Sarge?'

Another one who'd heard the rumours. The question might have been asked out of curiosity, but the sly grin suggested insolence.

Nick kept his expression carefully neutral and muttered a noncommittal 'Hmm.' Yes, he knew about gangs. Street gangs, bikie gangs, criminal mobs. The possibility of a gang connection in this youth's death was on his rapidly growing list but, far more than most cops, he knew there was no such simplistic crime as a 'gang thing'. He knew the complexities, the constantly shifting dynamics of power and personalities, of opportunity and risk, of adrenaline and testosterone and fear.

No, tattoos on the man's arms – which weren't any gang tattoos he was familiar with – didn't amount to evidence of an

organised gang. If there were even any such thing out here in the north-west of New South Wales.

He stood and glanced at the constable's name tag. Harrison. A senior constable. Young, confident to the point of cocksure; the know-it-all type who probably didn't like taking orders. Too bad, because Nick would be giving plenty of them.

'This area needs to be taped off, Harrison. From the grassed area to past here. I called Forensic Services when you first reported in and the Crime Scene Officers are on their way from Inverell. They're contacting the forensic pathologist.'

'Don't expect one to come in person, Sarge. We're too far from Newcastle.'

Eight or more hours' drive, Nick knew. Too far from city resources . . . but not far enough from his memories. Not that Newcastle had a monopoly on bad memories. He'd collected more than enough of them from all over the map during his career. The poor dead bastard in front of him was just another drop in the ocean. Just one more crime that might, or might not, be solved.

'Have you got an ID on him? Or found his car?' he asked Harrison.

'No. None of us know him. He's not local. CSOs will search his pockets for ID.'

Nick nodded but he doubted they'd find anything useful. And judging by the burns on the remaining hand, identifiable fingerprints might be almost impossible to obtain.

He also doubted they'd find a car. If the guy had driven his own car, the assailants had probably taken it, could be a few hundred kilometres away by now.

He couldn't learn much more from the victim until after the crime-scene officers arrived, so he would have to start with the nearest thing he had to a witness.

'The National Parks officer who found him – do you know her?' he asked.

'Jo? She's a newcomer to Goodabri. Setting up things for the new park. She's the quiet type, doesn't socialise much. Seems to work hard enough though.'

Nick had taken a detour through Goodabri on his way to Strathnairn on Sunday, scoping a fraction of the large region covered by the police command. The town was thirty kilometres off the main road and consisted of fifty or so scattered houses, a police cottage, a small primary school, a row of empty shop buildings in the main street and a run-down pub. Not a thriving community, and presumably reliant on the larger Strathnairn, seventy kilometres away.

A woman who kept to herself in a small community . . . He mentally filed that piece of information. Jo Lockwood turned as he walked towards her across the grass, assessing him in the same kind of way he instinctively assessed her during those few moments.

She's the quiet type . . . Her emotions tightly leashed behind her pale face and closed expression, she shook his hand with a firm grasp when he introduced himself, and the constable's description underwent a swift revision in Nick's mind. Quiet perhaps, but from reserve, not shyness.

The calloused hand briefly in his, her lean, fit frame and her lightly tanned skin confirmed the 'seems to work hard' part of Harrison's description.

Despite her control, the haunting determination in her hazel eyes held his attention. Shock, yes – she still fought to keep it from overwhelming her. But she knew she could. He'd seen that same determination in the eyes of too many colleagues over the years – people who'd seen incomprehensible death, and survived it.

He guessed she'd be in her early thirties, but those eyes were older. No makeup, no artifice, nothing *pretty* in her face, only a stunning, stark beauty he found compelling.

Her colleague stepped forward and extended his hand. 'I'm Malcolm Stewart, senior ranger for the Strathnairn National Parks division. Do you really need to interview Jo now? She's had a tough morning.'

Before Nick could answer, Jo threw her boss a glance that mixed affection with slight exasperation. 'I don't need mollycoddling, Mal. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can all get on with our jobs. I presume you'll want this part of the park closed, at least for today, Detective?'

'Yes. Perhaps you could liaise with the uniformed police, Mr Stewart, while I ask Ms Lockwood a few questions?'

'It's Doctor Lockwood,' Stewart corrected him. 'Doctor Joanna Lockwood. She has a PhD.'

With a gentle hand on Stewart's arm, Jo said, 'It's just a piece of paper, Mal. The title is irrelevant.'

Irrelevant? Not in Nick's estimation. He added intelligence and perseverance to his impressions of capability and control.

For all the cool calmness of her manner, the late morning was already hot, and she'd been standing around waiting for a couple of hours. Nick dragged his gaze away from a trickle

of sweat running down her neck and disappearing below her open collar.

‘Can we find somewhere in the shade to talk?’ he asked her.

She nodded. ‘There’s a table down by the river. I don’t think we’d be disturbing any evidence there.’

She slung a small backpack over her shoulder and led the way, skirting around the edge of the camping ground, along a thick line of trees and rough undergrowth that obscured the river from view. He could hear it – water running over rocks – but only caught glimpses now and then. So he looked, instead, at the open area of the camping ground. He would go over it closely later, but for now he concentrated on getting the general layout, the context in which the crimes had occurred. Even from this distance, the damage was obvious.

‘They sure made a mess. I don’t suppose you collect names, addresses or car registrations from visitors?’

‘Names and postcodes sometimes – when they fill in a form. But that’s hit and miss.’ She turned on to a path through a break in the trees, into a clearing beside the water’s edge. ‘However, I can tell you that there were at least two vehicles here. And two dogs.’

Hope sparked in him. ‘You saw them?’

‘No. I was only here yesterday morning, and it was after that. The tyre tracks are there, though, and dog tracks and faeces beside where they were parked.’ She rested her backpack on the wooden picnic table and drew out a camera. ‘I have photos. I was compiling evidence for a long list of offences – criminal damage, bringing dogs and chainsaws into a National Park, lighting a campfire during a total fire ban – but I guess . . .’

She sat down abruptly on the bench seat, her bitter, somewhat shaky laugh a small crack in her control. ‘Murder pretty much trumps all of those.’

‘It would. *If* the people who did the vandalism committed the murder.’ Avoiding a lump of bird shit on the seat, he sat opposite her, taking the camera she offered and flicking through the images while keeping half his attention on her. It was incongruous, sitting in such a cool, restful spot under the trees, the river winding its way over rocks less than ten metres away, when thirty metres behind him havoc had reigned in the night.

She stared at the table, circling a knot in the timber with her fingertip. Short, unpainted fingernails, he noticed. And tanned wrists and hands that, although small, were corded with lean muscle.

After a few moments of silence, she looked up at him and said, ‘If it wasn’t them, then the timing would have had to be close.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘When I arrived this morning, the dog faeces were still moist. Only a few hours old. And the . . .’ she steadied her voice and continued, ‘the victim – there was no sign of rigor. And few insects.’

She had all his attention now. He considered her argument, and explored possible holes in it. ‘The dogs might belong to the murderer.’

‘The vehicle the dogs were tied up beside is the same one that rammed down the information board. There’s a distinctive tyre track.’

‘You’re very observant.’

‘I’m a scientist.’

She said it simply, as though it explained everything. Which, he supposed, it did. Scientists relied on logical processes and evidence – just as he did.

But he also relied on gut, on the sense of what fitted and what didn't fit, on his experience of patterns of behaviours that might not seem rational but could all too easily be the caustic results of mixing personalities, power and passions.

With the niggling certainty that the elements of this crime scene didn't fit neatly together, he flicked through the images on the camera one more time. She had taken some broader context shots as well as detailed close-ups, and despite the small screen, from her photos and the general view of the destruction he'd seen he could construct a fair picture of some of the night's events.

He handed the camera back to her. 'Can I get copies of those images, today?'

'Of course.' She opened the side of the camera, slid out the memory card and passed it to him. 'Take the card. I've got spares.'

'Thank you.' He waved a hand at the camping ground behind them. 'This kind of vandalism – does it happen often?'

'It happens sometimes. A mob of louts, full of beer and testosterone, with no respect for others' property, having what they'd call "fun". There's something about the isolation and the wilderness that can bring out the Neanderthal. But—'

She stopped and, curious about her thought processes, he prompted her, 'But?'

'It's just . . . Look, I'm no detective or psychologist, but I've been going over it these past couple of hours and it seems to me that the murder doesn't fit the same behavioural pattern. The vandalism is . . . well, if we were talking about animal behaviour,

I'd call it marking a territory. I suppose it's the hoon version of it – refuting authority and order and claiming the space.'

'But you think the murder is different.'

'Yes. Possibly. It's intense, over a period of time. Focused on a person, not property. And I know that cruelty can be about power – it usually is – and vandalism also is, but vandalism is general, and cruelty . . . well, this seems more personal, more emotional. Anger or hatred or punishment.'

He stared out over the water, flowing along the path it had carved out over millennia, and considered her thoughts. She'd put her finger on what was unsettling him: the two crimes didn't naturally evolve from one into the other. If they had been perpetrated by the same people, then something must have happened to shift the mood. Something or someone.

His instinct guessed *someone*. Someone who'd manipulated the restless mob's energy and adrenaline, turned it, focused it on a target and let it loose.

He'd seen it happen before, countless times. And he knew exactly how it was done, because he'd been that kind of ruthless, manipulative bastard himself, more than once.