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DERVLA McTIERNAN



# 1

THIS CLOSE TO Christmas, the mid-north sun had some heft to it, house bricks, roofing iron, asphalt and the red-dirt plains giving back all the heat of all the days. And this Thursday morning a grass fire to top it off.

Hirsch toed a thick worm of softened tar at the edge of the Barrier Highway, watching the mop-up. Country Fire Service trucks from Tiverton, Redruth and Mount Bryan in attendance. One of them at the seat of the fire behind an old farmhouse set back from the road, the second chasing spot fires, and the Tiverton unit patrolling the fence line.

Not a blazing fire—a slow creep through sparse wheat stubble. And not a big one—only a corner of the farmhouse hedge and the road paddock. No wind today. Cloudless, as still as a painting.

A suspicious fire, though.

‘Suspicious in what way?’ Hirsch asked.

He’d parked his South Australia Police 4WD nose-up to the tailgate of Bob Muir’s ute, nudging the words *Tiverton Electrics*. If Hirsch had a friend, a male friend, in the district, it was Muir. A mild man, unhurried, but capable of a hard, exacting competency whenever he used his hands or his brain. He was what passed for the local fire chief.

‘Not a firebug, if that’s what you’re thinking,’ Muir said. ‘I’ll show you once they’ve given the okay.’

All Hirsch could see right now was a corrugated-iron roof with flakes of farmhouse-red paint still clinging, and a towering palm tree.

The Tiverton unit drew near, Kev Henry the publican at the wheel. Two men on the back, hosing fence posts: Wayne Flann and some guy Hirsch didn’t recognise. A shearer? Windfarm worker? Didn’t matter. Flann mattered, at least to some extent. He was mid-twenties, with sleepy eyes, loose limbs, almost good-looking. Always privately amused, as if he knew something the rest of the world didn’t. Getting a kick out of this fire. Flicked his wrist when he spotted Hirsch, landing a loop of water on his uniform shoes.

‘Knock it off, Wayne,’ Muir said.

The truck trundled on and then a radio crackled. Bob Muir listened, said, ‘Good oh,’ and jerked his head. ‘This way, Constable Hirschhausen.’

A long, rutted driveway took them down to a gap in the hedge and the house and sheds on the other side. The house had been unoccupied for years, the stone walls ceding to the dirt, the rocks and the dying grass. Ants teemed where once had been lawns and flowerbeds. A wheelless pram beside a crooked garden tap; a ladder busted down to three or four rungs leaning against the tank stand. Nothing seemed whole. Cracked windowpanes, grass in the rusted and drooping gutters. Only the palm tree showed any splendour, and its base was littered with dead fronds.

Hirsch parked behind Muir in the side yard and got out. Here the smoke was more acrid—burnt vegetation with an overlay of scorched rubber? The sunlight was queer, too, winking hazily where it came through the ragged fringe of palm fronds, casting blurred shadows on the dirt.

Looking up, Hirsch said, ‘These old country places with their palm trees.’

Muir grunted. ‘Over this way.’

He took Hirsch along the flank of the house and around the tank stand to the backyard. The cypress hedge sheltered the house and garden on three sides, Hirsch realised. To his eye, the fire had started in one corner, charring the patchy grass before scorching its way through the hedge, leaving a spidery tangle of blackened, leafless twigs in its hunt for

better fuel on the other side—the wheat stubble.

‘What do you make of that?’ Muir said, pointing at the blackened dirt.

Hirsch looked down. Ash on his toecaps now, not only dust. He felt sweaty, greasy, a sensation of grit in his teeth. And still early in the day. ‘Kids playing with matches?’

Muir might have been disappointed in him. ‘Mate, the wire.’

Coiled in the ash at the base of the hedge was a length of insulated cable. Now Hirsch understood the taste of the smoke: molten plastic. But mostly his gaze was caught by a stripe of copper glowing bright.

‘Ah.’

‘Exactly,’ Muir said, spreading his arms. ‘I mean, why go to the bother of slicing off insulation with a knife when you can burn it off? Lovely hot summer’s day, dead grass all around...’

Hirsch grinned. ‘Maybe they felt better-hidden in here.’

Muir pointed to the dead ground between the house and the sheds. ‘They would’ve been just as invisible from the road over there in the dirt.’

‘Who called it in?’

‘Your girlfriend, in fact.’

Hirsch visualised it. Wendy Street heading down to Redruth at seven-thirty to arrive at the high school by eight, same as usual. Saw the fire, called Bob, knew Bob would call him.

‘Early start for your average copper thief,’ Hirsch said.

‘Maybe it’s the country air.’ Back in his CIB days in the city he could rely on the bad guys sleeping till noon. He glanced dubiously at the old house. ‘They didn’t strip it out of there, surely?’

‘Nope. Not worth their while. What this is, is their base. Big metal skip full of copper in the barn.’

Hirsch gazed across a stretch of dead soil broken only by abandoned harrows, a rusty fuel drum and a silvery gum tree. A barn, an open shed collapsed at one end like a mouth in rictus. ‘So they’ve been at it for a while.’

‘Be my guess,’ Muir said.

Hirsch recalled a department memo: two thousand reported thefts of semi-precious metal in South Australia this year, estimated value \$2.5 million. Mostly copper, mostly from building sites; also powerlines, rail networks and storage depots. Electrical wiring, antenna cables, transformers, hot-water pipes. Police members advised to keep an eye open for unusual activity or reports that might indicate blah, blah, blah...

He ran a mental gaze over the district, the thousands of square kilometres he patrolled. A couple of new houses going up in Redruth, but that was his sergeant’s headache, not Hirsch’s. Some kitchen remodelling here and there. The long-abandoned railway service. Not much in that. Maybe the stuff was brought here from far and wide to be stripped, stored, shipped elsewhere. He didn’t know where to start with it. Sometimes, it seemed to Hirsch—newcomer to the bush—that his job was as much probing the landscape as

probing the circumstances of the crimes committed in it.

‘Prints,’ he muttered, thinking of the paperwork ahead, wondering about the likelihood of getting a forensic team here so close to Christmas.

Hirsch photographed the wire coil in the ashes, the charred grass around it and the skip piled with stolen copper, much of it dulled by oxygenation. Then he looped crime-scene tape across the entrance to the barn and called his sergeant, who was underwhelmed but promised to notify CIB in Port Pirie.

Finally, Hirsch reassessed the day ahead. On Thursdays he took a swing through the back country south and west of Tiverton, on Mondays he patrolled north and east. Hundreds of kilometres a week, checking in. An elderly grazier here, a widow with a schizophrenic son there. A police presence—meaning a cup of tea, a chat, a follow-up. I’m afraid your car was found down in Salisbury, burnt out. Your neighbour claims your dogs have been troubling his sheep. I’m required to ensure that your rifle and shotgun are properly secured. Any further sightings of that mysterious truck you saw last week?

Some of the people he called on were lonely, others vulnerable. Some got into trouble through a lack of foresight; a handful were actively dodgy. It was the variety, the different people and experiences, that Hirsch enjoyed about his Thursday and Monday patrols. He liked to start early, about 7 a.m., but today it was almost nine and he was

still only a few kilometres south of Tiverton. He'd have to take a few shortcuts to make up the lost time. Phone some of the people on his rounds rather than dropping in.

'You off?' Muir said.

'Yep.'

His face a picture of innocence—so that Hirsch was instantly on guard—Muir said, 'All set for tomorrow night?'

In a moment of weakness that he'd been trying to spin as building good community relations, Hirsh had agreed to be Tiverton's Santa this year. He'd be distributing presents to the town and farm kids on the side street near Ed Tennant's shop, then announcing the winner of the town's best Christmas lights, while looking ridiculous in a smelly red suit.

'Fuck off, Bob.'

'That's the spirit,' Muir said, clapping him on the back.

Hirsch set out south along the Barrier Highway. Window down, Emmylou Harris in the CD slot, a hard country lament that suited his mood—the isolation, the bush-whackery he sometimes encountered. Down the shallow valley, low dry hills on either side, greyish brown with the darker speckles of shadows or trees clinging to the stony soil. Stone ruins close to the road, distant farmhouse rooftops, a line of windfarm turbines along a nearby ridge—the settler years, the struggling present and the future, all in one. Halfway up a sloping hillside a motionless dust

cloud. A vehicle on a dirt road? A wind eddy? It all seemed unknowable, a world poised for action, but unable to proceed. Hirsch had been the Tiverton cop for one year now and was waiting for a mutual embrace, but the place kept him at arm's length. If life was the search for a true home—a welcoming place, a constant lover or a mind at peace—then he was still looking.

Kind of. There was Wendy in his life. In the eyes of the district they were 'going out', and that was just fine with Hirsch. And he was close to her clever, amusing daughter Katie, who'd saved his life last year. He had plenty to be thankful for.

Hirsch turned west onto Menin Road, the boundary between the Tiverton and Redruth police patrol areas. Place names mattered up here, where they didn't in the city, it seemed to him. Menin Road, Lone Pine Hill, Mischance Creek, Tar Barrel Corner, Mundjapi—all putting down layers of meaning and significance. Menin took him up into better wheat country. Better rainfall west of the Barrier Highway than east of it. 'Barrier': another signifier. Better crops and fencing, better roads, shorter distances between farms. But, all the same, Hirsch drove for a further twenty minutes and saw not a soul.

And then he saw Kip.

He was past the dog before he realised it and braked hard, sending road grit and choking dust over the poor mutt. He got out, crouched, offered his upturned palm. The kelpie halted, skin and bone, ribs and prick. Panting, deeply

fatigued. A low growl in his throat—it seemed to break free before he bit it back as if ashamed.

‘Kip,’ Hirsch said. ‘Kippy. Here, boy.’

The world stopped. Not a breath of wind and the day soundless but for galahs screeching in the gums beside a cracked-mud dam and the tick of the cooling motor. Kip gave a slow tail-wag.

‘You’re thirsty, right?’ said Hirsch.

He always carried plenty of water. In the rear compartment of the Toyota, where he sometimes had to transport prisoners, was a locked metal compartment for spare handcuffs, flares, ropes, a torch, evidence-collecting bags and a couple of Tupperware containers. Hirsch tipped a shallow layer of water into one of those and set it down on the crown of the road, halfway between the driver’s door and the dog.

Kip dropped to his belly, stretched and twitched his nose. Got to his feet, limped forward, dropped again. Then, by degrees, he was at the water, testing it. Started lapping all at once, drops flying about, before looking to Hirsch for more.

‘Not yet, bud. Too much too soon, bad for you.’

Hirsch drew near, reached a hand to the bony skull, stroked the dog between the eyes. Kip turned, licked his hand, and let himself be coaxed by the collar into the passenger seat, where he circled twice before curling head to tail as if he’d come home to his favourite blanket. Snout on paws, alert to Hirsch’s every movement—but trustingly

alert. Trusting Hirsch to know the way home.

‘Poor old boy,’ Hirsch said, giving the dog a last pat before turning the key. ‘You’ve been in the wars, haven’t you?’

Cuts, blood flecks, a torn ear, the sheen gone from his tawny pelt.

Hirsch glanced at his watch, did the maths again. He’d lose even more time returning Kip to his owners. He checked for mobile reception—zilch.

Half a kilometre along, steering with his right hand, one eye on the road, the other on his phone signal, he suddenly had two bars. Stopped, got out, consulted his notebook and made four calls to his non-urgent clients. Wouldn’t matter if he didn’t pay these people a visit this week.

First, Rex and Eleanor Dunner. She picked up. Sorry, but he had no leads on the graffiti artist who’d tagged their heritage-listed woolshed.

‘That’s very disappointing, Paul.’

Hirsch took that philosophically. He was always disappointing someone.

Next he told Drew Maguire it wasn’t a police matter if the neighbour’s sheep strayed onto the Maguire property through a hole in the fence.

‘What if I flatten the bastard?’

‘Then it becomes a police matter.’

Next, a call to the owner of a wallet that had been handed in. No cash or cards in it, but he’d drop it off

next Thursday. Finally he checked on Jill Kramer, a single mother who'd been robbed and hospitalised by her ice-addict daughter.

‘She’s in rehab.’

‘Doing okay?’

‘Well as can be expected.’

That was a kind of mantra in the bush. Hirsch heard it once or twice a week. Acceptance. Not daring to hope for better times. ‘Will she come home to you when she gets out?’

‘She’s got nowhere else to go.’

‘Let me know when,’ Hirsch said...And I’ll check in more often than once a week.

He drove on, past a homestead with a windsock on a landing strip, down and around and in and out of old, eroded cuttings in the folds of the earth. Along a sunken road between quartz-reef hillslopes, and across the Booborowie valley, a patchwork of wheat stubble, crops awaiting the harvester and green-black lucerne, darker where massive, computer-controlled sprinklers crept over the ground.

Then up. Over Munduney Hill and onto a side road—and now Kip knew his home was drawing near. Climbed to his feet, stuck his snout into the airflow and barked.

‘You bet,’ Hirsch said.

He slowed for the cattle grid at the front gate—not that the Fullers ran stock anymore. Then onto a track that wound past star thistles and Salvation Jane to a

transportable house on stumps. No weeds here. It was as if a switch had been flicked: vigorous couch-grass lawns, rosebushes and native shrubs. No sign of Graham Fuller's old Land Rover in the carport, but—perfect timing—Monica was there, unloading groceries from the open hatch of her Corolla. She turned with an expectant smile, a lonely country woman who didn't get many visitors, the smile growing curious when she saw she had the police on her doorstep.

Then she spotted Hirsch's passenger and simple joy lit her face. She let the shopping bags go, wiped her palms on her thighs and came at a little run to yank open the passenger door. 'You found him!'

Kip whimpered and slobbered, his tail whipping the seat.

'Where have you been, you monster? You poor thing, you're filthy.'

A glance at Hirsch as if uncertain of the proprieties. 'May I?'

Hirsch grinned. 'He's not under arrest, if that's what you mean.'

Monica Fuller laughed, helped the kelpie to the ground. 'Thank you so much. Where on earth did you find him?'

Hirsch explained, Monica cocking her head as if mentally tracing a route on a map. 'So he was more or less on his way home,' she said. 'God knows where he's been. Come and have a cup of tea. I'll text Graham, he'll be that thrilled.'

She chattered on, a simple release of tension. Within

minutes she'd settled Kip on the veranda with a bone to chew, stowed tins and packets into pantry and refrigerator, and placed a mug of tea and a slice of Christmas cake at Hirsch's elbow. A tired kitchen, a hint of 1970s orange here and there, Formica and laminated chipboard. A house where there was a kitchen reno on the to-do list, but money was tight. Some meagre light came through a window above the sink, more from a screen door to the veranda. Hirsch could see staked tomato plants in the backyard, an old stone dunny and an implement shed. No implements these days, only rusty ploughshares and rotting hay and empty grain sacks.

Monica's phone pinged. She was round-faced, comfortable in herself, her wiry black hair laced with silvery filaments. About forty, a face in the crowd if you saw her on the street, but Hirsch sensed her shrewdness, her quality of watching and waiting. She read the message on her phone and grinned happily at him.

'Graham says he owes you a beer.' She frowned. 'Is that allowed?'

'I've been known to go off-duty.'

She grinned again. 'So I've heard. Mrs Street, Wendy, teaches my youngest.'

I'm the talk of the high school? wondered Hirsch. 'I'll take down the wanted posters when I get back to town.'

She laughed. 'Wanted posters.'

Graham Fuller had come into the police station on his way to work Monday morning with a dozen A4 printouts

in his hand: a photo of Kip on his haunches, sizing up the photographer. *Have You Seen Kip? Reward Offered* in big black letters. Hirsch had pinned one to the wall next to the wire rack of police, district council and public health notices, and all week he'd seen Kip's face elsewhere in town: on power poles, fence posts, the shop window. Privately, he'd thought it was a lost cause. Kip had been bitten by a snake or shot by a neighbour or stolen. Or, worst case, he'd run away because he'd been beaten once too often.

Now Hirsch was wondering if perhaps the Fullers' dog had been stolen. He sipped his tea. 'I understand Kip has won some ribbons in his time.'

Monica shrugged, modest. 'Best sheepdog at the Redruth Show, four years running—back when we had sheep.'

It was a common story. The family farm no longer sustained a family. It was either sell out to a richer neighbour or a Chinese-owned agri-company, or shift career gears and stay in the district. Graham Fuller now serviced windfarm turbines; Monica worked two days a week at the Clare hospital. A lot of driving involved.

Hirsch said, 'All those prizes...How did the other dog owners take it? Anyone get their nose out of joint?'

Monica moistened her fingertip, dabbed at the crumbs on her plate, looked at him wryly. 'It was ages ago. And I mean...the Redruth Show? It's small-time.'

'People store grievances.'

Monica shook her head. 'Actually I'm wondering if it's

related to the time our phone line was cut—though I don't see how.'

An evening last January. Monica and Graham had just gone to bed when they heard noises in the yard and a knock on the door. Kip barked and strained at his chain until it broke—Graham was just in time to see him charge into the darkness—as Monica tried to call the police and realised the phone was dead. Kip returned eventually. Meanwhile Graham found the phone line severed, a neat, clean snip through insulation and wiring, and some garden tools missing.

Copper, again. Not much copper, though, and it had simply been cut, not stolen. 'A long shot,' Hirsch said.

Monica waved a hand as if to deny the direction her mind had taken her. 'I know, I know; hard to imagine they saw the kennel and thought, ah, a dog, we'll come back and steal him at the end of the year.'

'Anyway, he's back, that's the main thing.'

Still, two incidents involving police within twelve months. That was well over par for this area. Hirsch stood, stretched his back, said he'd better be going. He could see, through the little archway that dated the house, a sitting room with a small, overdecorated pine Christmas tree, cards on a string looped beneath the mantel above a fake log gas fire, loops of red, green and silver tinsel. 'Season's greetings,' he said. 'Thanks for the cake.'

'You too. And thanks heaps for bringing Kip home,' Monica said.

She took him out onto the veranda, watched him bend to knuckle the kelpie's head. 'Those cuts—someone's taken a stick to him.'

Hirsch allowed that that was one possibility. 'Or he got into it with another dog.'

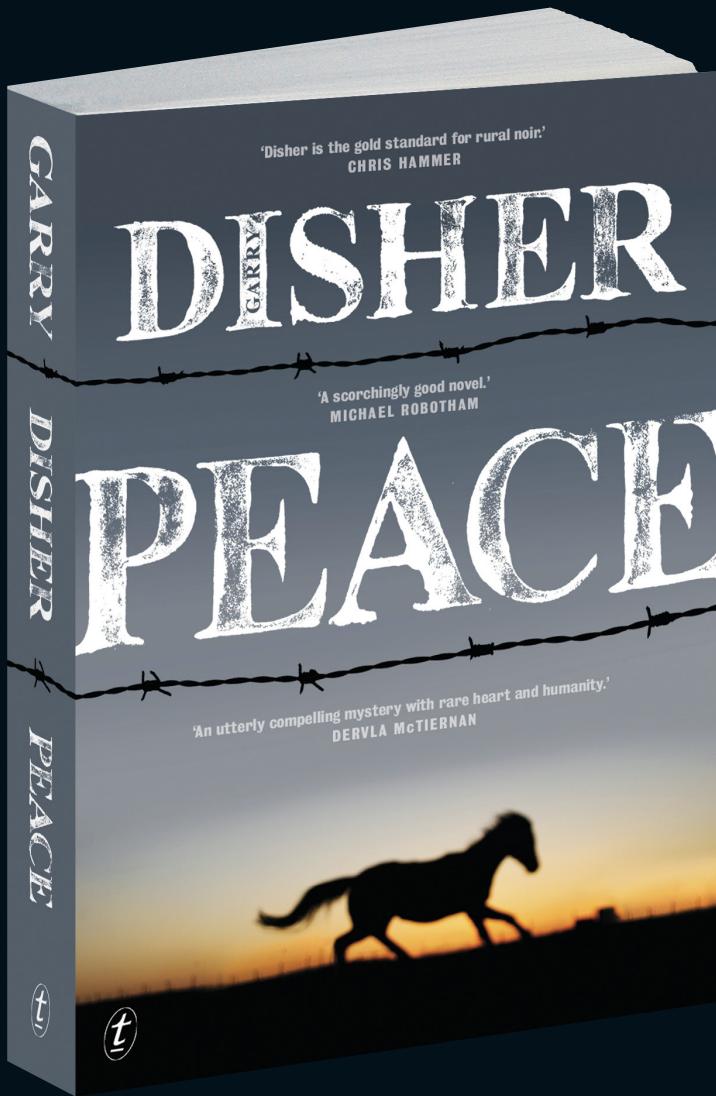
'No, that was a stick,' Monica Fuller said flatly.

She walked with Hirsch to his 4WD. 'I hate to add to your workload, Paul, but there was a bit of excitement in town just now, while I was doing the shopping.'

No one had notified Hirsch. Maybe he'd been out of range. 'Do I want to know?'

'Brenda Flann.'

'Yeah. I didn't want to know,' Hirsch said.



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