

**THE
ANIMALS
IN THAT
COUNTRY**
LAURA
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SCRIBE
Melbourne • London

I can see the wild in her. She looks and acts like any dog. Plays, wags, stares into my eyes with her baby browns; does chasey, catch, begs for biscuits. Then the dusk comes and she lifts her neck and howls the saddest song in all the world, and there's that wild. Dingo, owl, night thing — that sound is a warning. Loneliest you'll hear. Wraps around your face, your sleep, your dreams. She's saying:

'Hey, *hey*. There's something coming.'

The rangers here are always telling me, don't talk like that. They say how dingoes are just establishing territory, checking on their pack. Dingo admin. But stand on the hot road that runs from the gift shop to the enclosures, and listen to the dingo in her cage call out to the packs on the other side of the fence. Tell me that's not special. Tell me she doesn't know something about the world that you and me haven't ever thought of.

ONE

Everyone wants to see the wild ones. Dingoes, crocodiles, stingrays, maybe a snake. That's what they ask for when they come to the Park. We've got wallaroos with striped faces and fat bums. We've got quolls and sugar gliders crouched in dark tree hollows. We've got a bird-of-prey show we do in the morning, before the kids get screamy and the dads get yelly. We've got water birds and a lizard that'll eat out of your hand. End of the day? Tourists just want to stare into the eye of a four-metre croc, hold a blonde python, then sit on the zoo train with the breeze in their faces while I chug them on down to the back of the Park, to where we keep the dingoes.

'Afternoon, ladies and gents, I'm Jean Bennett and I'm a guide here at the Park. Look to your left there and you'll see a little house in the bush. See those twigs? Blue plastic? Bowerbird made that to attract his sweetheart. Thinking of getting him to do up my place.'

Most days you'll find me driving the zoo train — sturdy old girl that runs on electrics. A few years back they talked about replacing us guides with an automated driver. A plastic man who sits in the driver's booth, moulded in the same ice-cream colours as the seats. Did a survey and nine out of ten visitors said they liked the real guides better — one even mentioned me. Management had to stick that in their pipes and smoke it.

At the dingo enclosure, I ease the train to a stop and turn on the radio. The tourists pile out and stretch their legs like it's the end of a road trip. Newsreader's talking about those poor suckers down south, where I'm from. Barely winter and they've already got the same flu, won't respond to antibiotics or anything. I remember that. Being sick, and sick to death of the rain and the cold.

From where I sit up here in the driver's carriage with my knees in the late sun, I can see the dingoes before the tourists do. At first, it looks like there's nothing in there. Just the fenced-in enclosure of low, scraggly trees, rocks, and piles of dirt. Then, movement. The tan earth grows, takes shape. The dingoes are long and the colour of sand. Manila folders. Their length buckles out at the ribs and then rises high — almost as broad as a greyhound but prettier. Long, curved legs and a feather-duster tail. A springiness. A mustiness. Dust and hair. The tourists edge forward. I've got three paper bags jammed in the glove box next to the medical supply kit. One has my sandwiches — I've got low blood pressure now. One sloses. One has dog biscuits. The tourists practically skip over to the dingo enclosure with those biscuits.

'Dingoes!' they holler. 'Look, Jason! Dingoes!'

The dingoes bunch back by the fence, alarmed. We're not supposed to call them dogs. Not *Canis familiaris*, your normal domestic dog, but *Canis lupus dingo*: made out of wolf. All the info signs say they're more like cats. Tree-climbers. Hyper-agile fur-police. A whisper to us is normal talk to them, and they can hear a thing coming before the thing even knows it's on its way. Then, one of the tourists throws a biscuit and it's business time. Half of the chow ends up in the moat for the fish, half in the dingoes' bellies. Those tourists love feeding the dingoes, and the dingoes love getting fed. Mister, the big male, grinds his paws into the dirt and dips his head low, keeping his rear and tail high: the play position. Those tourists should be flattered. They laugh and say, 'Who's a good boy?' Kids nag Dad for a dingo pup until Dad looks like he might go drown himself in the moat. The other dingo boy, Buddy, springs up a sheer boulder and moves down the other side

like he's yellow water trickling downstream. The tourists lean in. A woman lifts her baby high to see. This is noted with alarm. Everything is. Dingoes aren't love-drugged or bored like your golden retriever. You can't pop them in a backyard and expect them to be there when you get home from work. They'll jump clean over your fence, be out ripping up chickens, finding a pack before you can blink.

The heat peaks late in the day. It won't rain for another four months and then it won't stop. They're still going on about that superflu on the radio. The sniffle and fever only lasts half a day with this one, but after that it's visions of pink elephants for they don't know how long. I turn it off. Fish flick through the lily pond, and the mozzies replace the tiny nipping midge bugs that give you great itchy welts on your arms and legs. The dingoes start parading about, prancing up the rocks like the rangers taught them and play-fighting as if it was the last battle on earth — dingo against dingo, canines to the death. Those three aren't even wild — half camp-mutt-kelpie-cross, half dingo and living the soft life. We found them cuddled like beans under a bit of tin. When the little female, Sue, opened her eyes to the world for the first time, there I was. She's a sleek and beautiful thing and hardly feral. Gets cuddles and chow every morning from the rangers, but I'm the one she looks for every day. They're one-person animals.

Even though these three are mixed, their colouring is dingo and they put on a good enough performance. Last year we brought in a male from another zoo — big, pure-bred dingo, a woolly-headed thing — hoping Sue would fall in love and we could spawn little show-star pups from them. She bit that male on the nose.

The tourists are bent over the rail like they're at the greatest event on this earth. A row of sweat-cracks. I take my moment. Pull out the

hipflask from my paper bag and have a nip, just enough to coat my tongue. Then I get on the mic.

‘That’s right, ladies and gents, you’re at the Park dingo enclosure. Dingoes only came here about 6,000 years ago. Might seem a long time ago to you and me, but people and animals have been here for a lot longer than that, haven’t they. The ...’ I check the little post-it note the logistics guy, Glen, has stuck on the dash. ‘The Kungarakan people are the traditional owners here.’

The boy dingoes are hamming it up. Skulking low between the boulders, then scaling the tallest rock with long, low hops.

‘You can see the two males there. One’s saying: “Give me that chow, you mongrel.”’ The tourists titter. The vodka swills and burns in my gut. ‘And then the other one says: “Hey, I’m no mongrel. I’m purebred.” “You might have pure bread, but I got the last dog bickie!”’

Right on cue, big boy Mister shoves forward and gets the last of the chow, then takes off up the rocks to eat it alone. You wouldn’t read about it. The tourists clap and push each other. Doesn’t matter if they’re fatsos from the other side of the world or greenies from up the city: they all like a show. I flick on the mic again.

‘But you know who really runs things around here, ladies and gents? A woman, of course! Here’s sweet Sue.’ The tourists crane their necks as I look for her. Usually spot her right away even if she’s in hiding, because we see one another, me and Sue.

‘How many dingoes can you count in there, kids?’

‘Two,’ shouts one boy with a haircut like I don’t know what his parents were thinking.

‘Count again, kids. There’s three dogs, right?’

The boy shakes his head. ‘There’s two.’

‘Three. I see three,’ says a girl. She might be my granddaughter in a couple of years. All hair and eyes and limbs. She makes me smile.

‘What’s three doing, sweetheart?’

The girl takes a breath of enormous importance. ‘He’s stuck. He’s stuck. His —’

‘His foot is stuck in the fence,’ the boy shouts.

I climb down from the zoo train and go over. The two males are still rooting for biscuits, tails high, eyes on the crowd. Sue is over by the fence. The long luxurious scruff on the back of her neck, the white blaze on the caramel chest, white socks of her feet. She eyes me and moves forward, but she’s pulled up short. I run back to the train and radio in, but the tourists are uneasy, and the sky is threatening dusk, and meanwhile Sue over there with her foot in a fence, no water or nothing.

Once upon a time I could hitch my leg over a barrier and get in to just about anywhere. Now, with all the tourists watching, I drag my old limbs over like I’m hauling two pig shanks up a hill. Slip down the sharp bank to the moat. The water comes up higher than I thought, fills my pants with lilies and gunk and soaks the paper bag in my pocket. The males start yapping and whining. An information booth above the pond says dingoes can’t bark, they only howl, which is a fat load of bull when you’re in there with them. Over by the rocks, Mister starts *woof woof*-ing and Buddy, who has never done anything without Mister doing it first, takes up yapping too. I don’t look at the boys, though. My eyes are all for beautiful Sue. She sees me coming and tries to make a break for it. The sound of the fence twanging and her foot all tangled. Behind me, the tourists gasp and wave. One kid asks if I’m going to die. Has a point. Sue can be quiet and low on the nights when I take her for a walk because she’s on my terms, out of her territory. Those evenings she dances for the lead, leans into me while we walk, like, ‘Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me out here!’ Now I’m in *her* space.

Dingoes wear their fur like feelings: all sleek and shiny when they’re relaxed, a thick bank of heckle when they get wound up. Sue is wound up. Her fur so spiked it’s like an echidna has taken up residence on her neck. She looks bigger, meaner — rough patches and teeth behind it all. Her foot is caught up in some wire that’s been used to repair the fence but the wire has snared her knobbed heel, not dug

in like I feared. Still no ranger in sight. All the tourists quiet now, watching me in the pit.

‘Hello, Sue,’ I say. ‘Sweet, sweet Sue. They made a song about you, didn’t they? I don’t know the words. Here we go, Sue.’ I toss her a few of the less soggy biscuits from my pocket. She pretends not to sniff them, keeps her eye on me, but her nose betrays her. ‘Hello, Sue.’ I keep my arms down — you have to do that. Arms up is dingo fighting language. Arms down and talking gently and scattering the kibble and saying, ‘Hello, Sue. You’re a sweet Sue’ is: you’re-safe-with-me. I edge closer. She bucks and the whole fence rattles. I’m sure she’ll break away but the wire holds fast. Back in the crowd, the girl who looks just like Kimberly is staring down with moon eyes. She lifts her hand in a tiny thumbs up.

I take a breath, walk into Sue’s space. I’m at the fence and pulling on that wire before either of us can shit ourselves. Don’t think she can believe it. When I’ve nearly got her free, I give the wire a good sharp tug, and she turns and grabs my hand with her teeth. Her oversized fangs, yellow as her pelt, slice clean into my flesh. Canines don’t need to bite hard to do damage. She’s so fast that at first I don’t feel it. Just the blow of being bitten. My little Sue: chomping on my hand. Then she’s gone. I can’t even feel the bite. Can’t see where she went either. Is she limping or bleeding? She scrambles through the scrub for a while then appears, triumphant, on a rock on the other side of the enclosure — not hurt or nothing.

The tourists roar, and I feel it in my hand. A couple of the men — all brave and buff now — jump the fence to help the old girl out of the moat. I swear they almost carry me back to the zoo train. I’m a football hero, a crowd surfer. Once I get over myself, I find a bandage in the glove box kit and play the wound down. *I’m fine, thanks, ladies and gents, it’s just a scratch, I can still drive.* The little girl is sitting up behind the driver’s carriage.

‘What did she say?’ she asks. ‘The dingo. What did she say to you?’

The whole lot of them is listening, so I get the mic out. Make my

voice high and feathery, like a wild dog tail. ‘She said, “Jeanie-girl: you’re my best friend”’

They love that.

Back at the gift shop and café, Andy cranes his neck out of the Guide Manager’s office and moves it this way and that like a snake-necked turtle. I waggle the paper bag of vodka at him. He widens his eyes: *not now*. Angela is in there with him. I change direction toward the staff toilets, just cleaned by Mona for the crowd that will stay on for the Thursday night shows. Didn’t mind the cleaning job when it was mine, but Mona’s better. Wash out the cut in the spotless sink and leave the bandage off so it can dry a bit. It’s deep but not that deep, just a warning bite — Dingo Sue’s way of saying, ‘You’re in my face, bitch’. What a thug. I grin at myself in the mirror, but I look thrown. My makeup has sweated off and my hair looks like it’s been put on sideways. What was blonde this morning is now grey. Sweat patches under my arms. When I get out, Angela is waiting for me.

‘Quick chat.’

She’s got a beautiful figure, our Ange — even in her Park khakis — and you can see where Kimberly gets her hair: thick and brown, with a life of its own. All I can ever see of my boy Lee in Kim is her dark eyes, eyelashes you’d die for, and a pointy German nose from my ex’s side of the family. God knows what attracted Ange to my son. Angela has degrees, a rich dad, ambitions. Lee was ten years too young for her and dressed like something dragged out of a hippie road show. Devilish handsome, though, like his mum. Ange was still a ranger when he came along jangling his bells. She had a sea eagle on her wrist and a gleam in her eye that turned out to be Kimberly.

Except for putting up a life-sized poster of a wedgetail eagle, Angela hasn’t changed her office from that of her predecessor — a dopey young guy with a wandering crotch. There’s two nice enough easy chairs by the window, and a little table for coffee, but Ange is

serious. I have to sit across from her at the desk. She gets her phone out.

‘What’s this?’

I peer into the thing. It’s playing a video. The two male dingoes mucking about in the enclosure just like they did today, then it pans across. One of the tourists shuffles and blocks the bit where Sue has a go at my hand.

‘That’s me!’

‘Yes, that’s you. And they tagged the Park. What the hell, Jean?’

‘Poor little Sue —’

‘There are procedures in place, Jean. Rangers work with the animals. You’re a guide. You haven’t got your certificates, and you’re not trained to handle them. What if she bit you?’

I keep my sore hand hidden. ‘Nah. I’ve got a way with the dogs.’

‘They’re not dogs, and it’s not good enough, Jean. This is actually serious. Did you see the news?’

‘That flu.’

‘I’m talking about the break-ins.’

I shrug.

‘You need to be across it,’ she says. ‘These eco-terrorists ... or maybe they’re animal liberationists, I don’t know ...’

‘Animal libs.’ I nod at her. ‘Greenies.’

‘*Someone* is breaking into zoos and releasing animals down south.’

‘Yeah? Sucks to be south.’

‘Well, it affects us. The board’ll lock us down by tomorrow if they get nervous. You in the dingo pit is the last thing we need. If it was anyone else —’

‘Sue wouldn’t let anyone else near her. It’s me she loves.’ I test my hand, flexing it under the desk. It doesn’t hurt too much. Ange should be halfway through a speech about animals being incapable of love, but she’s just staring up at her wedgetail poster. ‘You’re worried they’ll close the Park for good.’

She turns back to her computer and clicks her mouse a few times.

‘No. I don’t know. I’m in a teleconference half of tomorrow about the releases. In the meantime, I need to give you a warning, to show the staff I mean it.’

‘Alright, Ange.’ She’s so stiff and upright and official. Nails to the quick. Back when she worked with birds of prey, she had flight in her eyes. Eagle maiden with a leather glove, straight out of some medieval fantasy book. Look into those big browns now and there’s just a bunch of paper clips and a digital calendar. Sometimes she gets so wound up I think she’ll burst. I remember being thirty-five. You still think you’ve got a life ahead of you, then forty hits and your skin goes south and you’re fucked. She doesn’t know the half of it. I get up to go.

‘Sit down, I haven’t finished. I hear you’ve been doing the voices again.’

That’ll be the rangers dobbing me in. Vanessa. Or Liu. Those toff-nosed hags won’t say a peep to me, but they’ve got mouths on them.

‘The tourists love it. So do the beasties —’

‘It’s against everything we stand for at the Park. Respect, accurate information —’

‘Exploitation.’ Idiot.

‘What?’

‘Just kidding. But I’ve read the manual, Ange —’

‘Well, read it again. It’s not Disney, here. It’s not *The Lion King*. You know what it says in the manual?’ I open my mouth, shut it again. ‘It says people who anthropomorphise tend not to read cues, and people who don’t read cues are dangerous. Dangerous to themselves, dangerous to the animals, and dangerous to visitors. I don’t want danger here. I don’t want to hear that you’ve been putting everyone and everything at risk.’

She waves me out. I stop by the eagle poster. ‘You bringing Kim over tonight?’

She nods sharply, but her face softens a bit. It’s Thursday. Kimberly always stays at mine on a Thursday. Ange goes up the city for a business masterclass, then does what single ladies do these days: hangs out

with other women doing exercise, changing profile pics, and going to expensive bars. In my time you just went to a pub, got shitfaced, picked up. Never caught her with anyone, no matter how early I drop by the next day.

‘Hey, Ange? I was wondering about my application. For the ranger job. You said —’

‘Really, Jean? Really?’

I duck out. Rather get bitten by sweet Sue than face Angela, some days.

Out in the gift-shop courtyard, some of the rangers and guides are having an early dinner, alongside the tourists. The chip fryer broke down last week, but they’ve got it going again and the smell is terrific. My stomach groans. The rangers avoid my eye, but one of the tourists remembers me, calls out, ‘It’s the dingo lady! Hey, dingo lady, can we have a photo?’ Andy pokes his head out and calls me into his office before I have the chance to pose. I go to lean in his doorway.

‘Shut it. Jeez.’

I do and pull the hip flask from my pocket. We have a nip. The vodka is cheap. I prefer the sweet stuff — sherry, rum — but voddy is good for work. The Guide Manager’s office is tiny, with high open windows. It houses a massive straw-coloured python called Blondie in a too-small cage. She’s our showgirl, and when she’s not wrapped around the neck of some tourist getting her photo taken, she lives a sad, safe life by Andy’s desk. Reckon she’s the only actual animal Andy sees most days. I watch her as Andy takes another shot. Will her to lift her diamond-shaped serpent head, but she doesn’t.

Sufficiently boozed, Andy grimaces at me. ‘Exciting day?’

‘Woof. You could sell tickets.’ I show him my hand.

‘You got bit?’ His voice is apologetic, like he’s done the damage. He rummages through his drawers, but only turns out a ratty Band-Aid you wouldn’t put near anyone. ‘You got all your shots, right?’

I nod. 'She's a funny girl, that Sue. Hard to read. You don't know what she'll do.'

'You're not her keeper, Jean.'

'Thanks, I've already been read the riot. Anyway, you'd do the same.'

Andy grins. We both know he wouldn't. A group of rangers pass the office, their voices floating up through the windows.

'What's wrong with it, though? I don't see why the guides can't do animal work if they want it.' That's Casey. New girl, real sweetheart.

A laugh. Liu? Vanessa? 'They're not ... you'll learn. They're unqualified. Jean can't even get her Cert Three Captive Animals. Angela only keeps her on because she looks after Kimberly. She's a grandma, for shitsake, not a ranger.'

They pass. I've twisted the flask lid so tight I can't get it unstuck.

Andy plucks at my brown guide shirt. 'You'll get your certificate, Jean. Give it another go.'

Too busy with the flask to answer. It gives. I take a slug and pass the dregs to Andy. Outside in the petting zoo, one of the wallaroo joeys hisses at another. Andy looks at the clock, winces.

'Fucking hell, Andy, why do you work here?'

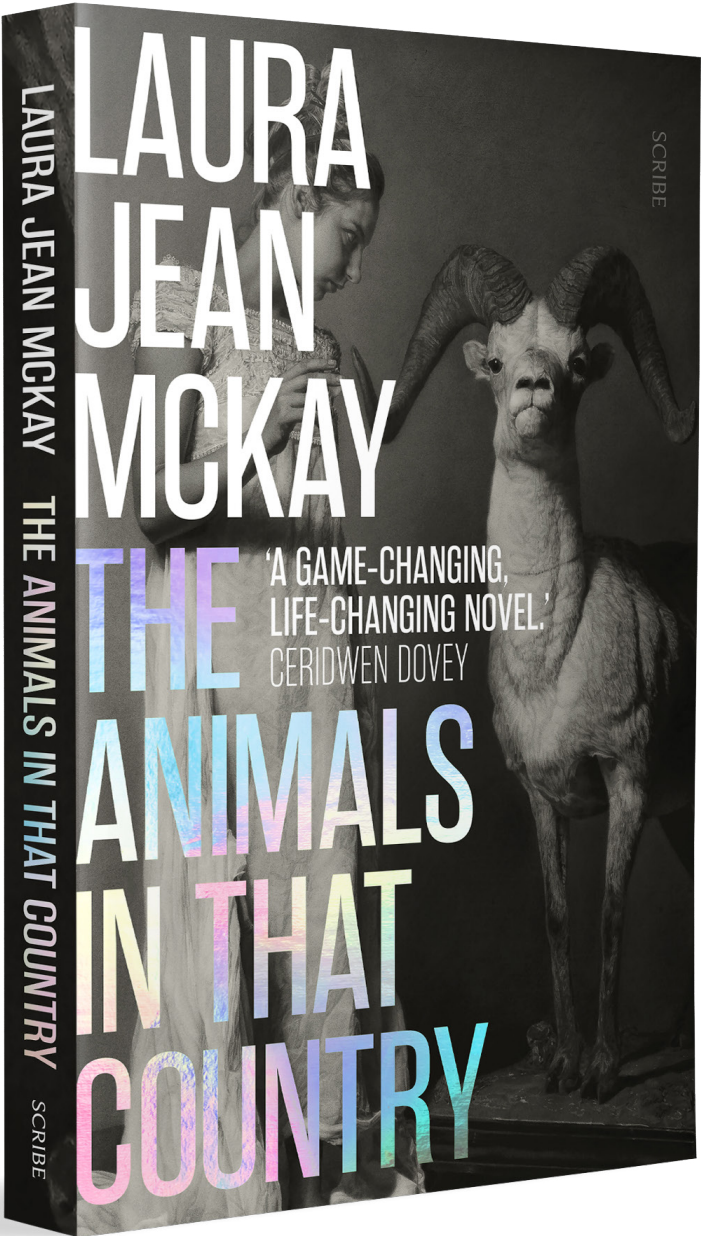
He drains the flask. 'Perks.'

'You want me to feed them?'

'They like you. They don't like me.'

'You've just got to show them who's boss, mate. Don't treat them like they'll rip off your face. Talk to them. Didn't they teach you that in Cert Three?'

I grab for the bucket of special mix for the joeys, made up fresh this morning by the volunteers in the food store. Corn, apple, sweet potato, and pellets, with some vitamins and worming fluid sprinkled through. The bucket swings, makes me stumble a little. My gaze falls on Blondie. Her serpent's eye trained on me now, her regard for me simple: if I feed her, she might not try to eat my arm. Animals are straight up like that. It's people you have to watch out for.



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