

THE

WHO DO YOU WANT  
ME TO KILL NEXT?



NIGHT  
WHISTLER



GREG WOODLAND

'A haunting, tense and unforgettable debut.' CHRISTIAN WHITE

# 1

The dog must have been howling for a good twenty minutes before Hal climbed up on the back fence to look for it. He'd been standing on the fence, peering into the paddocks towards the hills, for about eleven minutes and forty seconds now. He knew, because yesterday he'd timed himself with Dad's old watch and that was how long it took for his legs to start trembling. Another minute and they would start to seriously ache.

He squinted into the paddocks searching for the dog. Couldn't see it anywhere. But some huge bird—*an eagle maybe?*—swooped down across his vision, three or four crows noisily pursuing it until it shook them off, vanishing into the fierce blue sky.

Shouts came from over Mrs Next Door's fence. 'Wretched birds! Get! Go away!'

Hal wished she'd shut up. He didn't mind old Mrs Armstrong, but he was listening for the dog to start up again. From far over the paddocks the howling and yelping had become gradually weaker, until you could barely hear it. Then it stopped. Like it was worn out and miserable. Or bored out of its mind, like Hal was with this yard, their new blue house, the whole ruddy town their mother hated so much.

The screen door squeaked open as if she'd read his mind.

'Boys? Come in and get dressed. You haven't got long.'

'Soon, Mum.'

She sighed as if it was too hot to stand there arguing with them and went back in, closing the main door after the screen door. As if the heat would stay outside like an obedient pet.

Hal stood on the fence and listened again, but the dog was silent. Mrs Armstrong stopped cursing the magpies and went inside. Soon even the cicadas quit their racket and deathly quiet descended on the yard and the paddocks beyond. Next thing Evan shoved himself up on the fence beside Hal.

'C'mon Hal, you said...'

'I know. But we haven't got long.'

'Yeah we have? Heapsa time.'

Hal glanced back at the house. They had an hour, give or take. Nothing else to do. 'Come on then.'

'What, now?'

'Haven't got forever.'

True. They were to be washed, dressed, combed and ready to climb in the car at twelve. Noon. On the dot. Hell to pay

if they made Dad lose so much as a minute of his big day out with the work people and the boss he had to suck up to at the picnic. You'd think it was the Queen's coronation, not just the Prime Foods Christmas party. Any case, Hal might meet some kids from the new school. There'd be Santa, and some kind of present. Piss-weak, probably, but Hal had no intention of missing out.

'Should we tell them?' Evan squinted back at the house, its pale blueness glaring under the washed-out sky.

'You're kidding.'

They braced themselves and jumped.

After half a mile of bashing through brown paspalum and dead thistles Hal halted, red-faced and puffing, as Evan lagged behind, his cries lost in the cicadas' din. Slipping between the barbed-wire strands of another rusty fence, he found himself in open fields that rolled on towards the purple hills. They were not so purple as you got closer to them, more a hazy brownish-green and nowhere near as hilly as they looked from home. Up close they seemed like ripples on a khaki pond. Dotted around them were sparse clumps of dying ghost gums, strangled by vines. Closer, fifty yards before him, a line of scrubby willows made a breach in the landscape that divided it in two.

'Crack in the World,' he said aloud. The name sprang from nowhere onto his lips. He waved back at his yelling brother and strode onwards.

The Crack in the World turned out to be unimpressive—a muddy gash through an eroded gully in the middle of

a chunk of spindly bush—twenty or thirty acres of it, he guessed, being slowly squeezed between the crab-claws of the growing town. *Moorabool, Population 3,560*, the sign on the highway said. Though he had no idea where most of them were hiding. On a Saturday afternoon you might see ten people on Main Street. The pubs would be jam-packed, of course, but out here on the fringes right now the only movement was a tiny car beetling along a row of little houses melting in the heat haze. That and the flies.

Hal peered down the yellow-brown slope through the gaps between the willows, and saw the muddy creek at the bottom. No more than three yards across at its widest, but a decent jump would get you across in most places. ‘Crack in the World,’ he murmured, loving how it meandered between crumbling clay walls a hundred yards either direction, the ends of it crimped off like a spent tube of toothpaste.

Evan barged up, red and sweaty, puffing his head off. ‘Dad said...stay away...from the...creek!’

‘It isn’t a creek. It’s the Crack in the World.’

Not that Evan cared. ‘Said you’d...wait, Hal...you...ran away!’

‘Sorry,’ he lied, to shut him up. Because for the first time since they’d arrived, he was excited about something. Not about Moorabool, it was still just a hick town with nothing in it. But this place—this was the first part of it that was actually not boring as batshit.

He stared past the Crack in the World, on and on into the mysterious vistas beyond.

‘Whaddya waiting for, a gilt-edged invitation?’ He hopped

onto a rock in the middle of the creek, then leapt onto the gravelled bank.

‘Hang on! Dad said...Hal!’

Evan was still tiptoeing across, thongs bogged in the mud, by the time Hal had scrambled up the bank on the far side. He was standing atop a small rise staring at something when Evan staggered up beside him and gasped softly. A strange yellowish vehicle-cum-dwelling: they couldn’t take their eyes off it.

The depleted shell of a truck cabin at one end merged into a decrepit caravan at the other. It was like some bizarre caterpillar with extremities so different they might have belonged to separate species. The truck’s bonnet lay on the ground, engine parts in shades of rust flung around it like a mad mechanic’s toys. Where once were wheels, tree stumps now propped the apparition up. Skew-whiff sheds and lean-tos lay scattered around it, rotting in the grass.

The caravan was covered in peeling tan and yellow paint and above the door a faded sign declared *Highway Palace*. It was a ruined palace, though, with oval windows cracked or broken, glinting like jagged teeth, shreds of lace curtains behind them. There was nothing palatial or grand about it now, and probably never had been. But behind the curtains, mystery seemed to lurk in every dusty corner.

‘Wooow...eee,’ Evan whispered.

‘We have to go inside,’ Hal gaped, half-afraid it might vanish if he looked away for a second. Evan launched himself, galloping down the ridge towards a rusted 44-gallon drum, stood on its end in the hard clay. ‘Let’s roll it down the hill.’

He went to grab it, and let out a shriek. ‘Hal! It’s dead!’

‘What?’ Hal traipsed over.

‘It’s a—Hal, it’s a dead dog. Look at it!’

Pulling him aside, Hal peered into the drum. It was a dead dog all right. A male, from the testicles sticking out between its lean brown haunches. The hind legs were all twisted up as if some huge fist had smashed him headfirst into the drum then crammed him down like a bundle of rags. Hal leaned in, caught a whiff of something, pulled back and leaned in again, gingerly sniffing. He had smelled dead animals before but not up close. Not in heat like this.

‘Stinks,’ Evan winced.

‘No it doesn’t.’ Apart from a faint odour of urine and something rusty and sweet, blood maybe, it just smelled to him like sweaty dog. ‘Must be fresh.’

In the bottom of the drum he could see blood pooled around its head. And it suddenly dawned on him. ‘God, no.’ He shuddered.

‘What?’

‘The dog that was howling. It’s him.’

‘He musta climbed in! And he couldn’t get out and he died upside down,’ Evan nodded.

‘Nuh-uh. Someone stuck him in there, he was already dead. Jesus. Let’s get him out.’

They tipped the drum on its side, and the dog’s rear end slid out. Hal grabbed its back legs and hauled it all the way out.

‘See? No rigor mortis yet. Means he hasn’t been dead for that long. Maybe an hour.’ They eased the carcass onto the grass, where it lay, its brown coat warm. Dead as a stone.

‘Look at all that blood.’ Evan shuddered.

A dark crust of blood had formed around wounds on the dog’s skull. Hal could see it had been hit there with something hard. Then, under the matted blood on the dog’s snout, he saw the gleam of a hook coming out of its cheek. Just thinking about it made him feel sick.

‘Don’t look.’ He tried turning his brother away.

‘None your business what I look at.’ Evan shook his hand off and kept gawking.

What sort of man would do this to a poor dog—even a tough-looking German shepherd? The very thought of him—it had to be a him, he couldn’t imagine a woman doing it—made Hal shiver like a lizard had crawled over his skin. He had to do something.

‘Come and help me bury him.’

‘OK.’ No arguments from Evan, for once in his life.

They dragged the dog to the nearest willow tree and laid him under it. Hal wanted to dig a hole, but the ground was rock hard and they had no shovel. So they scraped together small branches, twigs, handfuls of leaves and arranged them over the dog like a makeshift shroud.

‘You wanta say a prayer for him?’

‘Nup. Do you?’

Evan nodded, shut his eyes and clamped his hands in prayer. Hal bowed his head too, just in case.

‘You were a good dog, whoever you were. Somebody did something rotten to you, but Jesus will be waiting for you in heaven, with angels, and all the other dogs—’

‘Godsake, dogs don’t have souls,’ Hal mumbled.



‘Course they do.’ Evan prayed on.

Hal wanted the prayer to end. Not just because he didn’t believe in God—he didn’t anymore, all his prayers unanswered, especially those about leaving Sydney—but because he had a strong feeling someone was watching them, sneering quietly at their little ceremony.

As Evan rambled on piously, Hal’s eyes darted about the willows, up and down the ridge and the gully, ears straining for footfalls. The cicadas had stopped. Something creaked. A caravan window rattled. His arms prickled with goosebumps in the heat, though he could see no one.

He pulled his watch out of his pocket. Five past eleven? No way. It had stopped again. He squinted up at the blazing sun, high overhead.

‘Eleven thirty—let’s go.’ He nudged Evan.

‘For thine is the kingdom, the power and...’

‘Dad’ll kill us!’

‘He will not. Forever and ever Amen.’

‘Daddy’s boy,’ Hal whispered, pulling his brother away from the leafy mound where the dog lay. If not buried, at least covered. Hidden from cruel eyes.

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The screen door clattered shut. Mick Goodenough rubbed his greying bristles, and grabbed three tin bowls, bracing himself for the glare and the dogs’ boisterous welcome. He squinted into the noon sun and stepped out, bowls balanced on his thick arms. His service shoes crunched dead grass and bindy-eyes down to the chicken-wire compound in the corner. Two

German shepherds clamoured at the gate for their roo meat, tails rattling the wire.

‘Katie—Willyboy—sit.’

They sat. Watching, waiting, tongues lolling, oh so polite. Not like the other one.

‘Where’s Charlie?’ The younger dog was not in the doorway of his hutch. And with food on offer...Hiding somewhere?

He whistled. ‘Charlie? Come and get it.’

Mick set the bowls down and opened the gate to receive their slobbering embrace. One missing.

‘Charl-ee! Get out.’

The woman from the pound had shown up at the cop shop with the big squirming pup in her arms the day after he’d arrived. ‘I hear ya like shepherds, Constable Good-Enough.’

‘That’s Good-no,’ he’d said, resisting the urge to pick up the gleeful pup, along with the obligation. ‘As in No-Good, backwards.’

But she was on a mission. ‘That’s Charlie. Take him or they’ll put him down today. You’ll hardly know he’s there.’

‘I’ve already got two!’

‘Same as owning two.’ She thrust the pup at him and ran.

Six months later Charlie was still twice as much trouble as the other two put together. An Alsatian cross. Crossed with what, the pound lady couldn’t say. Something that objected to taking orders and wouldn’t be taught, something that liked to roam and would come home when it suited him, not before. Damn thing wasn’t so lovable you’d shoot him.

‘Charl-ee! Out. Now!’

Damn thing was gone. Again. Mick lived on the north

edge of Moorabool a mile from the town centre and the police station. Saturday, a week and a half before Christmas. *Silly season*. Punch-ups and domestics, drunk-drivers, break and enters when it came time for present-shopping. And his shift started in ten minutes. Sarge would be delighted. One more reason to complain about him to Superintendent Dennison, who had never exactly relished his role as Mick's supervisor.

At the back of the cage he found two broken strands of wire, denoting a Charlie-sized hole in the coop. A spectacular effort, even for an escape artist like Charlie. He must've slipped into the yard that backed onto Mick's, behind the Presbyterian Fellowship Hall with its wide open gate. Dog on the run. Charlie was smart enough to avoid the semi-trailers. So far.

Mick dug the phone out from under the *Sydney Morning Herald*s on the kitchen table, dialled the station and explained to Peter Petrovic that he'd be in as soon as he rounded up the dog.

'Thank you, Constable Goodenough,' came Petrovic's droning monotone. 'I'll let Sergeant Bradley know. In due course.'

'Peter, it's not Joe Public. You don't have to use cop-speak on me, pal.'

Eighteen-year-old Petrovic had started a fortnight before Mick, fresh out of Goulburn Police Academy and, in spite of the twenty-five-year gap in age and experience, had got it into his head that Mick was the junior cop. In fact, they were both probies, Mick for the second time around—at least

until Bradley and Dennison saw fit to make him a constable.

‘Certainly Constable Goodenough, I’ll pass it on. Is there anything else I can help you with today?’

Mick hung up. He wound the broken wires together, shut Willyboy in the yard and clipped the choker lead on Katie. He walked her around to the highway, and they jogged across, no cars in sight, convection currents snaking off the asphalt. Mick found the gap in the barbed wire where Charlie would have entered. He let Katie off the lead, and she jumped through. He swung his leg over the top and strode into the fields after her.

‘Charlie!’

A hare scurried. Katie took off after it. Mick called her back, made her sit, slipped her a dog biscuit. They walked on beneath the stringybarks, sun belting down, cicadas drilling their ears.

‘Charl-eee!’

His shouts barely audible above the metallic roar, Mick peered into thickets and clumps of brambles. No glossy black and brown dog came bounding out to greet him. He checked his watch, twenty-five past. *You fucking little mongrel.*

‘CHARL-EEE!’