

ONE

She lies perfectly still, listening in case they draw closer, in case these strangers come for her. Listening for the telltale click that precedes the thunder, the whine of something hot and the pain that follows. Listening for the roar of things that would chase her at great speeds through fallen branches and dry scrub, never losing their breath, never slowing down, never stopping. But most of all, she listens for the Men to leave.

High up on this rocky ridge, sheltered in her den from the day's fierce sun, she had been sleeping when the machine arrived. These metal monsters were not new to her; she had heard them before, had run from them before, but never this close to home. Is it here for her? She does not know.

She creeps forward, silently, cautiously, and peers out into the bright midday glare. Already she is panting, both hot and nervous. The machine stops, the roar settling to a low grumble. It carries the stench of death and decay. She hears the voices of Men as they climb from its belly. Perched on this granite outcrop she sees two approach. One stinks of fear and looks hurt, and she shuffles back into the shadows, for it is never good to be seen by Men.

There is the click, and then the thunder. She ducks as it booms, shrinking back even further. The smell of hot blood wafts up,

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filling her nostrils and making her long for tonight's hunt. More sounds from below, a dull thud, and then the machine rumbles off to wherever it is such things come from.

The dingo sniffs the air once more and returns to her den. She will sleep, and later inspect the area, removing any trace of the intruders' scents with her own. This is, after all, her territory.

TWO

It's the slow burn that gets them, Gabe decided. Not like floods or fires; they all happen too fast. You don't have time to dwell, or to hope, you just deal with the shit as it pours down and worry later. But a drought? Those bastards linger.

He could see it in the station owners' eyes, earlier that day as he passed through. The season was going to break soon – it *must* break soon. Gabe had nodded in mute agreement with them, seated on the old homestead's verandah as he sipped his coffee and ate the dry fruit cake they'd laid out for him. What else could he do? Everyone knew it would rain again, it was only a matter of when. He'd heard it before, from each property owner or manager along his run, some relying on experience to form their judgement, others on the blind faith that comes from not wanting to consider the alternative. Besides, it always rains after a drought.

Not that it was a drought, not technically. Just a bloody long summer that happened to follow an extremely short winter. Dry, but not dry enough to attract any attention beyond the region. No well-meaning city folk buying a bale out here just yet.

He shifted his weight, easing the pressure on his knees. The hessian bag under them was not there for comfort, but to catch

his scent. Fresh tracks showed in the surrounding dirt. The owners had said there was at least one dog watering nearby, and Gabe suspected it might be about the only thing drinking in the area.

The sun was at its peak, beating down with relentless force and continuing to suck away whatever moisture still remained in the earth and surrounding scrub. His hands sweated under latex gloves, and tiny black flies danced at his mouth and nose, dodging the sharp puffs he blew at them from pursed lips. All around a hum echoed, a mixture of fence wires singing along the track he was on and the incessant chirp of cicadas, interrupted only by a *thunk* as his mattock bit into the ground. But it was easy digging and his efforts soon ceased. Just a small hole was needed.

Gabe wondered how these people could do it, with nothing but hope and resolve keeping them going. He knew what it was to be trapped with your thoughts, and it wasn't as though they could just stay busy to take their minds off things; the dry was everywhere you looked. Country cried out for a drink, and bare dirt greeted his eyes all through this area, the carpet of red broken by poverty bush and mulga trees doggedly hanging on. Any other palatable shrubbery had been eaten down to woody stumps by what stock was left. He'd passed a small mob of sheep shortly after leaving the homestead, all hips and ribs, their heads either down searching for the last skerrick of grass, or skywards, straining to trim back the curara trees even higher. They could have well been looking for rain. God knows everyone else was. Hindsight said the stock should have been sold off months ago, but months ago it was going to rain soon, wasn't it? Slow burn indeed.

The hole was the right size. No surprise there; he'd done this a hundred times before. Gabe laid the steel trap in its new home,

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keeping his hands clear of the rubber-coated jaws, particularly the one with deadly strychnine powder wrapped under black electrical tape. He checked the foam beneath the trigger plate one last time, sifted dirt back over the trap until it was buried, and scattered a handful of crushed twigs and leaves onto the disturbed earth, covering all but a patch directly above the plate. A single dried dog scat from the container among his other gear was placed under the bush behind the set, at arm's length past the trap, and a final drop of pungent liquid from his brewing bottle finished the lure nicely.

This was the perfect spot, funnelled in by broken branches on either side. Any passing dog deciding to investigate the foreign scents had no choice but to walk across the trap, and the only spot to lay a paw without fear of prickles was the bare ground over the trigger. *Bang. Gotcha.* Another happy station owner, another bounty claimed. One down, hundreds more to go. Gabe stood to admire the work, his knees cracking like gunshots, and he rubbed his hip, knowing that the dull throb would not go away until later when the whisky bottle came out.

He gathered his gear and carried it back to his LandCruiser, a khaki four-door model all kitted out for bush living, and stowed it in the large white upright toolbox mounted inside the tray's canvas canopy. A second, older toolbox took up the rest of the left side of the tray, this one silver, dented and adorned with all manner of warning stickers. There was a place for everything. Gabe had spent considerable time and thought getting his dog-trapping outfit precisely the way he wanted it, though it had come at a price.

He returned with a hand rake and scratched away at the dirt in front of the trap; just another old dog marking its patch. A leafy branch was swept over his tracks as he walked to the ute

for the last time, removing any trace of him ever being here – so far as the next mongrel who trotted down this fence was concerned, there would be nothing suspicious around save for signs of a strange dog invading their territory. He had considered setting two traps but decided to save the second for where he knew the quarry roamed in larger numbers, and where he would have to be much more inconspicuous in his work.

He closed and locked the silver toolbox, the one that held the business end of his trade, the one that he did not want to leave open for prying eyes and curious fingers. Removing the latex gloves, he wiped his hands on the towel hanging from the tray rail. He would wash them properly once away from the set, not wanting the scent of soap to potentially spook any wary dogs. *Leave no sign, leave no trace.* That was his rule.

Gabe kicked off his sneakers, tucked them into their designated pocket on the tray, and lowered the mesh security cage surrounding the canopy's steel frame, locking the panels and zipping up the canvas flaps. He padded around to the driver's door and, once inside the cab, slipped on his work boots. Stained with kangaroo blood, spilled diesel and all manner of giveaway scents, these never saw the ground within cooee of a trap site. Traces, and all that. Plus, he knew of a station owner whose labrador had been unwittingly poisoned after licking contaminated boots. The inept dogger who had kicked off his footwear by the kitchen door was lucky she hadn't force-fed him his own baits in return.

He started the engine and rolled a smoke while waiting for the air conditioner to begin its battle against the heat that had built up in the ute like an oven as he worked. Others left theirs running, he knew, keeping their cabin sanctuaries cool for when they returned. But others didn't catch as many dogs as he did, and sweat was a small price to pay for a bounty.

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Reaching back into the Engel, he retrieved a beer, glad to finally have his hands on something cold. The fridge took up most of the rear bench seat, with a canvas bag containing a few changes of clothes and a tub with his dry stores occupying the rest of the rear seating. He hadn't bought the Dual Cab model for passengers, he had no need for that, but the extra enclosed storage space was handy. A second, larger Engel resided on the tray, stocked with a mixture of store-bought and bush-caught meats, and, more importantly, extra beer. Save for fuel stops at lonely outback roadhouses Gabe had no real need to deal with civilisation for a while yet, and that was fine by him.

After a long draw of beer, he retrieved a GPS unit and record book from the overhead console. His fingers brushed the rifle concealed inside, the one pushed back deep, away from the same prying eyes he didn't want looking too closely at the locked box emblazoned with *Danger Poison* stickers. He figured most times anyone asking would be focused on the .223 sitting close to hand in the gun rack behind his head. That one he had papers for.

If the drought doesn't get us all, he mused while the GPS booted up, the bloody paperwork will. The book was filled with dates, notes and locations, all meticulously recording each and every trap set since he began this contract. Some had details of dogs caught, others merely stated *Nil*.

He marked the new position on the station map stapled inside, then completed the entry with the coordinates from the GPS. No doubt some boffin down in Perth would have a field day with the data once he sent it in, along with the slivers of ears taken from his previous catches, each nestled in its own little specimen tube, labelled, numbered and ready to be paired with Gabe's entries. All to create the latest DNA map showing just how far the dogs had moved since the last report was compiled.

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Gabe didn't need a map to know they were moving in; the phone calls from property owners served well enough.

Clerical duties completed, Gabe stowed the bureaucratic bullshit back in the overhead console, tossed the empty can into the bin bag hanging from the passenger door, pulled a second one from the fridge and set off down the station track. There were still a few hours before he was due to meet his friend, but Gabe was in no hurry, knowing they would wait for the goods he carried. And such things were best done under cover of darkness.