



Some secrets are too dangerous to tell

THE GOOD DOG

'Unputdownable...with a plot twist you won't see coming.'

AUSTRALIAN on WILD CARD

SIMON ROWELL

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GOOD
DOG

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TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

5.50 AM THURSDAY 4 JANUARY

Flashes of blue and red strobed through the darkened canopy.

‘Looks like we’ve found the carnival,’ said Ben, leaning forward.

Zoe’s headlights raked the road. An hour after leaving Melbourne, they were almost at the top of the mountain. She gripped the wheel a little tighter and continued to scan the road ahead for wildlife.

She and Ben had only been partnered up for two weeks. Her boss, Detective Inspector Rob Loretto, head of Homicide, broke the news of Ben’s transfer from Armed Crime only half an hour before Ben walked through the door. Zoe understood why. She’d spent a month or so before that working solo, and she was starting to prefer it that way.

She guessed Ben must have been at least thirty-five, although he puffed himself up with all the bravado of a man in his early twenties. On that first day, he strutted into the

squad room in a grey tailored three-piece suit, his dark hair carefully styled. To Zoe, he looked more gangster than cop. When he spotted Harry curled beside her desk, he pointed at his suit. ‘This doesn’t go with dogs.’

Zoe had stared at him for a long moment. ‘You know that door you came through,’ she said, pointing over his shoulder. ‘It works both ways.’

There were snorts of laughter from the other detectives seated nearby.

It wasn’t a good start.

In the two weeks since, they had worked a domestic homicide—an easy win once Zoe tripped the killer up in his own lies—and formed the secondary team on the fatal stabbing of a teenager on St Kilda foreshore. Routine gathering a haul of witness statements, videos and photos. In Zoe’s mind, Ben had not yet been tested.

A minute later, they pulled in next to four other police cars at the peak of Mount Macedon. Called Geboor for millennia by the people who lived and hunted there, it was now somewhat improbably named after Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, and famous for the lavish European-themed gardens that settlers made wealthy by gold had begun to build there in the eighteen hundreds. Standing out against the paddocks and forests all around, it could get bitterly cold in the winter months.

Zoe had been in this carpark once before. A picnic with her parents when she still was a child. Her mother had bought her a hot chocolate in the cafe that stood off to her right, its windows darkened. In the pre-dawn gloom, with

emergency lights flashing, this hardly seemed like the place for a picnic. She could see the beginning of a pink hue to the east over the treetops and she was glad to have made it up there before the local kangaroos started bouncing across the roads.

As she parked, Harry sat up in the back of the Subaru, secured in his harness, his curiosity piqued by the show ahead. She stuffed two pairs of plastic booties and gloves in her pocket, then picked up her notebook and went around to the back door, reached in and unhooked the golden retriever's harness. He jumped down, sniffing the air. Dense eucalypt forest; large ferns shrouding the ground. It was far cooler up here, a welcome change from the stifling heat that had been trapped in the city over the last week. Zoe had hardly even seen a cloud since the start of November.

'Let's get on with it.' They were her first words in half an hour. With Ben two steps behind her, she walked towards the group of uniformed police who stood beside a gate draped in crime-scene tape.

They all stared at Harry. She was used to it now—the detective with the service dog was old gossip, but it didn't stop the uniforms gawking.

The sergeant who stepped forward was about fifty, brunette, with a sharp gaze that said she was all business. 'Hi. Candice Weller, from down at the Macedon station.'

'Morning. Zoe Mayer and Ben Tarro. What's the situation?'

'One victim. Male. Mid-fifties. Appears to be a single gunshot wound to the chest. He's at the base of the memorial

cross, about two hundred metres that way.' Candice pointed up the path past the police tape. 'No weapon in sight.'

'Who found him?'

Candice half-turned as an officer behind her raised his hand. 'Joe Murphy,' said Candice, waving him over.

He was tall and broad-shouldered with a strong jawline and a dazed expression.

'G'day Joe. What happened?' asked Zoe, shooting a glance at Ben. He nodded and opened his notebook.

'We started getting calls to triple zero around 1.40 am, reporting a gunshot somewhere on the mountain. At 2 am, we had more callers saying there was a second shot. I was already out on patrol so I headed straight up here, but I couldn't find anyone anywhere. After the second shot Tim Hughes and Marie Whelan,' Joe nodded at two other constables, 'they shut the station to come up and search as well, then we got some officers from Gisborne and Kyneton in too. None of us found anything. In the end, Tim suggested that we check around the memorial cross. I followed the path and found the guy. Checked for a pulse, but he was cactus. I called it in and scouted around for the shooter, but there was no one about. The ambos came up and pronounced him.'

'What time did you find the victim?'

'Around 2.40 am, give or take.'

'Okay, thanks. So, apart from you and the paramedics, has anyone else touched the body?'

'No, just one of the paramedics and me. I was conscious about that. The paramedic who checked him was gloved

up. I set up a perimeter about twenty metres back up the path. When the boss arrived,' said Joe, glancing at Candice, 'she moved the perimeter back here. No one's been down the path since.'

'Good,' said Zoe. She looked at the constable Joe had pointed out. 'Tim, what made you think of checking the cross?'

Tim shrugged. 'Dunno. Between the lot of us, we'd checked everywhere else we could think of.' He was about thirty, tall and thickset; his voice gravelly.

Joe fished out his notepad. 'I got the names of the two paramedics. Wayne Foote and Katie Johinkie. Based in Woodend.'

Ben wrote down the names.

'The other thing is that I know the dead guy,' added Joe. 'Well, I know who he is, at least.'

Zoe raised an eyebrow. 'Okay. And?'

'Name's Piers Johnson.'

'The fraud guy?' asked Ben, animated.

'Yeah. Well, he got off, but yeah, him. He got acquitted six months ago. It was huge news around here.'

'Looks like we have ourselves a motive,' said Ben. 'How much was it? Over twenty-two million dollars?'

'You sure it's him?' asked Zoe.

'Yeah. He's got a property up here on the mountain.' Joe pointed towards the northeast. 'Big old stone mansion, maybe eight kilometres down Mount Macedon Road. He called just before Christmas complaining about his neighbour and a party that was a bit too rowdy for his liking.'

Tim and I came up and I remember that he was fairly, um, direct in telling us how to do our jobs. The neighbour's place was probably around four hundred metres down the hill, and we could see half a dozen or so people sitting outside at a dinner party. It was about 9 pm and they were just chatting. We could hardly hear them from his place. Told him it wasn't a police matter. He didn't like that too much.'

'Said he'd be making an official complaint,' offered Tim from the back.

'Did he?'

'Nah,' said Tim.

'You got an address for the victim, Joe?'

'Yeah...' Joe flipped through his notebook. '1155A Mount Macedon Road.'

Ben wrote it down. 'The neighbours he called about the party. Their details?'

'No, sorry. We didn't bother them. It's the next property down the hill, though, same side of the road.'

Zoe watched as the Major Crime Scene van pulled up. An officer in his fifties got out along with a much younger woman, both in navy forensics jumpsuits. Frank Miller and Tess Halliwell. Zoe had worked with them before. They opened the van doors and started to gather their tools.

'He's had a reputation as being a bit of a prick ever since he bought the place twenty years ago,' added Joe.

'How long have you been stationed here?' asked Zoe, surprised. She would have said Joe was in his early thirties.

Joe seemed to catch the inference. 'Yeah, I grew up in

Macedon. Managed to snag a transfer back here couple of years back. I worked part-time in the supermarket as a kid and I remember he treated everyone down in Macedon like shit.'

'Right.' Zoe turned to Candice. 'Can we keep Joe for a bit? I want him to show us the crime scene.'

'Sure.'

In her peripheral vision, Zoe saw Hannah Nguyen and Angus Shaw arrive, the latter a good foot taller than his partner; both dressed in navy pants and crisp white shirts. If not for the guns at their waists, they could have been a team of evangelist door-knockers.

'Hey, you two,' said Zoe. 'You got the early call, eh?' They were the secondary team, there to assist for the first couple of days.

'Yeah, lucky us,' said Hannah. She drained the last of her take-away coffee and bent over to give Harry a gentle rub on his head. He wagged his tail furiously.

Angus smirked. 'How's your new boy doing today? Solved it yet?'

Ben did his best to disguise a scowl, and Zoe shot Angus a look: equal parts *nice one* and *ease up*. She shielded her eyes from the sun that was now burning through the trees, and brought them up to speed. 'Hannah, I'll get you and Angus to manage the canvass of the locals. Candice, can we get some of your officers to help out with that?'

'No problem.'

'Thanks. Start with the people who called it in. Then their neighbours. Apart from the usual stuff, check if anyone

has CCTV of the road. Ben and I will do the victim's home when we do the notification, and then the neighbour down the hill.'

'Got it,' said Hannah.

'Also, can you get statements from the paramedics in Woodend. Names are Wayne Foote and Katie...um.'

'Johinkie,' said Ben.

'I can leave an officer here to keep everything secure and run the crime-scene log if you like,' said Candice.

'Thanks, Candice. Okay, let's go.' Zoe fished a pair of the plastic booties out of her pocket and gave them to Joe. 'Ben, you'll need to grab another pair from the car.'

Ben snapped his folder shut. 'Right.'

The asphalt path cut through a forest of mountain ash, tree ferns and large wattles, with sculptured hedge plants and flowering camellias lining the way. The dawn air was scented with jasmine. Harry trotted along beside Zoe.

'Joe, how many people do you get up here every day?'

'Maybe a few hundred, a thousand. You could probably triple that in autumn. People come to see the leaves changing colour.'

Harry stopped here and there to sniff rocks and leaves. As they came over a small rise, they saw the top of the memorial cross bathed in early light. The colour of sandstone, it was more than twenty metres tall, sitting high up on a three-tiered plinth supported by a large round concrete base, ten metres across and cut into steps. A metal railing enclosed the base. As Zoe approached she could

see the victim slouched on the concrete, his head and right shoulder propped against the plinth, a single bloody wound in his upper torso, a thick pool of dark blood staining the concrete to his left. Past the cross, the mountain fell away and a patchwork of farmland and forest stretched to the horizon.

She stopped and looked up at the cross.

‘First World War memorial,’ said Joe. ‘The dawn service up here on Anzac Day’s massive.’ They reached the line of tape that he had strung across the path.

‘Harry, stay put,’ Zoe said, placing a flat palm out in front of the dog, and he sighed and dropped down. Zoe pulled the plastic tape apart, letting the ends fall to the ground. A small yellow-breasted robin was standing on the ground near the victim, turning its grey-blue head from side to side, chirping loudly as it examined the man. Sensing their arrival, the bird took flight.

Standing about four metres back, Zoe assessed the victim. Around fifty-five, well-groomed with dark hair that might have been dyed. His eyes, open, stared at the path. He was wearing long dark-blue satin shorts and a white T-shirt with a picture of a yacht on it. There was a bloody wound in his upper chest, around the heart region. He wore no shoes and there were cuts and grazes on the soles of his feet. His left hand lay palm-up in the darkened blood beside him, a silver wedding band just visible. A single brass-coloured bullet casing lay two metres away.

‘Two shots. Twenty minutes apart,’ said Zoe.

‘Yes,’ Joe replied, as if it were a question.

Zoe's eyes scoured the cross, looking for any sign of damage from a bullet. There was none. She glanced back. The two forensics officers, greeted by Harry, were hauling large plastic toolboxes along the path. Frank smiled at Harry; Tess's attention was squarely focused on the victim. Harry lay down again as they continued along the path.

'You think he was chased here?' asked Ben.

'The twenty-minute gap suggests maybe the first shot missed.' Zoe shook her head. 'But why would he stay on the path if he was trying to escape? Look how dense this forest is. You could run thirty seconds in any direction and just vanish.'

'He's not wearing shoes,' said Ben.

Zoe was unconvinced. 'If I'm trying to get away from someone with a gun, I'm not worrying about my feet.'

'The first shot might have been to scare him. Let him know the shooter was serious.'

'In that case, where's the other bullet casing?'

'Morning, Zoe.' Frank Miller tilted his head. 'You know Tess Halliwell?'

'Yeah. Hi, Tess.'

Tess smiled warmly at Zoe. 'This the new guy, eh?'

'My name's Ben Tarro,' he said stiffly.

'How's he going?' Frank asked, looking at Zoe. 'Up to scratch?'

Zoe, seeing Ben start to bristle again, smiled despite herself. 'Early days. I'll let you know.'

'He's got some big shoes to fill,' added Frank.

Ben crossed his arms, pursing his lips.

Zoe had known Frank for many years. With his wry sense of humour, he knew how to mentor newly minted forensics officers to become experts. High standards were one of the things he and Zoe had in common.

Frank and Tess, masked and hooded, pulled video and still cameras out of the toolbox.

‘Bullet casing,’ said Tess. She placed a numbered marker beside the brass-coloured item and photographed the casing from a number of angles.

Hearing footsteps, Zoe turned to find a woman approaching in a white jumpsuit, her blonde hair held back in a ponytail. Zoe heard Ben inhale. *Easy, young fella*, she thought.

‘Morning, Anna. Ben, this is Anna Sorgstrom, the pathologist.’

‘Hi,’ said Ben, his voice suddenly upbeat and youthful. Zoe bit her lip to stop from laughing as Anna looked Ben up and down, gave him a cursory nod and pulled her hood up over her head.