




This time, the stakes are
higher than ever.

WILD CARD



'A gripping suspense thriller.' AUSTRALIAN on *THE LONG GAME*

SIMON ROWELL

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The kookaburras, lost in the spring fog, laughed at one another across the water, as if in some maniacal game of hide and seek. With red gums crowding against the banks, the Murray River arced around on itself at this spot just out of Echuca, nature having changed her mind. Zoe Mayer, standing on the outside of the bend, could look both upstream and downstream with a tilt of her head. Her boss, Rob Loretti, had woken her at some ungodly hour. It had taken Zoe and her partner, Charlie Shaw, the best part of three hours to make the drive north from Melbourne, speeding through towns whose streets were deserted at that early hour.

Zoe had been working with Charlie for about a year and a half. He was a tall man, with close-cropped blond hair and a piercing gaze that commanded people's attention. She knew that the confidence Charlie projected was mainly bluff, but he was Zoe's pet project, and she was

determined to raise his skills day by day.

The famous river separating Victoria and New South Wales was about sixty metres wide here and the silt made the water appear soupy. A family of ducks glided by, as a double-storeyed houseboat made its way towards her like a ghost ship, heading upstream, motoring slowly through the gloom, all its lights on. This would be Zoe's last moment of peace for a while. She lifted her arms above her head, before stretching from one side to the other, preparing for the challenge she knew was coming. The start was always the worst part. Too many questions and rarely an obvious answer.

A man was awkwardly sprawled on the ground behind her, wearing a blackened t-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots. His arms and neck were covered in a carnival of tattoos. Zoe had already noted his burnt hair, the charred ground he lay on, the two bullet wounds in his head. There was a scorched phone on the ground beside the body, glass cracked. The melted remains of a red plastic fuel container lay nearby, and the bark of the nearby gum trees was charred. A pistol lay beside the red plastic mess. A burnt-out black SUV sat beyond the body, still smoking. Police tape, guarded by a constable carrying a clipboard, framed the scene. A golden retriever lay beside him, intently staring across at Zoe. The dog wore a vest with blue and white checks that read *Victoria Police Service Dog*.

'I do not like the smell of this place one bit,' said Charlie through his mask as he walked up to her, scrunching the ground in his blue plastic booties. His brow creased as he glanced sideways towards the victim. Zoe knew her partner

hated the sight of the dead—a problem when you were a Homicide detective.

‘Breathe through your mouth,’ she said from under her mask.

A uniformed sergeant approached. ‘Peter Reynolds,’ he said, introducing himself. He was in his early fifties, fit-looking with neat grey hair. ‘I run the Echuca station.’

‘G’day, Peter. Zoe Mayer and Charlie Shaw,’ said Zoe. ‘What have we got?’

‘Call came in about five hours ago, around 3 am. Couple on a houseboat heard two shots. Rapid fire. Thought it was hunters. Then they heard a whooshing sound and saw flames shoot up over the riverbank. Called triple zero. CFA turned up and one of our patrol cars found the body in the clearing here, along with the burning vehicle. Firies put out the blaze, but the guy was well dead.’

‘Do you recognise him?’ asked Zoe.

‘Yeah, I reckon it’s Freddie Jones. Ninety-five per cent sure. The car is registered to him. I already checked.’

‘What’s the make?’ asked Charlie. ‘I don’t recognise it.’

‘Maserati Levante,’ said Peter. ‘Only a few months old. Top-of-the-line model, all the bells and whistles. I’ve seen him driving it around town.’

‘Any other info on him?’

‘Freddie’s a bikie from Moama, across the border in New South Wales.’

‘Is that far?’

‘Nah, soon as you cross the river from Echuca, you’re in Moama.’

‘You’ve had dealings with him?’

‘Sort of. He tends to stay close to home, but whenever we’ve pulled him over he’s been clean. No weapons, no drugs. Best you check with Mick Kovacks, the sergeant at Moama. He might have more for you.’

Zoe noticed Peter staring behind her. She turned to see Anna Sorgstrom approaching. With her blonde hair and blue eyes she looked as glamorous as ever, even while wearing a white Forensics jumpsuit and carrying her medical bag. After making a note of Anna’s name on the crime-scene log, the constable lifted the police tape with a flourish as the pathologist walked underneath. ‘Hi there, Harry,’ she said to the dog, who wagged his tail in response. The constable, who had been perplexed by the arrival of the golden retriever with Zoe and Charlie, shook his head.

A white major-crime-scene van pulled up beside Anna’s SUV and two Forensics officers in blue overalls got out and gathered their equipment.

‘Morning, Anna. You made good time,’ said Zoe, walking over. ‘You beat Forensics.’

‘It’s amazing what a double espresso can do,’ Anna replied with a warm smile. ‘It was a pretty clear run until I hit the fog.’ She gave Charlie a nod as she pulled the white hood over her blonde hair and tightened it. She lifted her mask up over her nose. ‘Let’s get to it.’

Anna made her way into the burnt clearing, circling the body, taking in details. One of the Forensics officers stood beside her, shooting video, while the other took photographs.

‘Two gunshot wounds to the right temple,’ Anna called out.

Charlie opened his folder and started making notes.

‘Was he moved?’ Zoe asked.

‘No drag marks that I can see. He could have been carried here and dumped, or shot on the spot. Based on his size, I’d say it’s more likely he was shot right here. Plus, the way he’s splayed out makes it appear that he collapsed in a heap.’ Anna stood up, took a few steps away from the body and knelt down. ‘Weapon about a metre from the deceased. Handgun.’

‘Damaged?’ called Zoe.

‘The fire hasn’t helped,’ said Anna, bending to squint at the gun. ‘But I can read the side. Says it’s a Glock 20, 10mm auto.’

One of the Forensics officers placed a lime-green plastic evidence marker labelled *1* next to the gun.

‘Is the serial number legible?’ asked Zoe.

Anna crouched as low as she could without touching the ground with her hands. ‘Looks to have been filed away. Sorry.’

‘Should have guessed.’ Zoe turned to Charlie. ‘Can you get Anjali to run a list of registered Glock 20s with an emphasis on anyone within a hundred clicks of here?’

Anjali Arya was a tactical intelligence officer in the Homicide offices. Although young, Anjali had proven herself, helping Zoe to solve a recent case, and had since become her go-to TIO.

‘No point,’ replied Charlie, who had once worked in

the Organised Crime Squad. ‘No one in this country can register a handgun with a calibre over 9.65mm. It’s not a legal weapon.’ He pulled out his phone. ‘But I’ll call Anjali to check if the military or any other state police force use Glock 20s.’

‘Okay, good. Once they have documented the scene, ask the Forensics people to get that phone to their telephony team asap. I want to hear if the SIM will give up some clues,’ said Zoe. She ran her eye over the melted fuel container and back to the body. ‘Anna, the victim looks like he only has superficial burns. They would be worse if the accelerant was poured directly onto the body, yes?’

Anna appraised the man again. ‘Agreed. Something was poured all around him and set alight. Based on the smell, it was petrol. The fire basically just singed him.’

Zoe wondered about this. *If they were burning away any forensic evidence, why wouldn’t they have poured fuel directly onto the victim’s body?*

Charlie walked back over. ‘Spoke to Anjali. No Glock 20s in use by any other police jurisdictions or the defence forces.’

‘Right, okay.’ Zoe pointed into the clearing. ‘I don’t reckon this was some anonymous hitman. They used petrol around his remains to set the dry grass and fallen bark and whatever on fire, but not the body itself. I think the killer had a personal connection to our victim and didn’t want to...I don’t know...desecrate the corpse after he was shot.’

Zoe called out to Peter, who stood nearby. ‘Is this a popular spot? There seem to be tyre tracks everywhere.’

‘Yeah, it’s called Bob’s Bend, due to the river turning on itself here. An itinerant guy named Robert lived out here in a makeshift hut following the war in the late forties, hence the name. Gets loads of campers and people fishing, especially in summer. All the locals know it.’

So the victim was meant to be found quickly, noted Zoe.

‘Where are the people who called it in?’

Peter pointed off towards the river. ‘Head that way. They’re on their houseboat.’

‘I’ll see you in a bit,’ she said to Charlie, walking back towards the crime-scene tape, ducking underneath it. Harry jumped up, spinning around once, before the two of them made their way to the river.

Peering down the bank through the thinning fog, she saw a couple seated on the front deck of a houseboat, drinking coffee. The boat, nose into the shore, was moored with ropes to two large river red gums. It was a large vessel, painted a matt white, with walls of tinted glass all round and an angled roof covered in solar panels that tilted up towards the front. At the back she glimpsed part of a large spa. Zoe could see that the houseboat was dedicated to comfort over speed.

The woman seemed to be in her mid-sixties and wore a baby-blue dressing gown and slippers. Her hair was held back neatly in a ponytail. The man wore jeans and a black t-shirt. His unkempt hair was greying and it was a few days since he had shaved. Zoe raised a hand in greeting as she stepped carefully down the dirt slope, Harry close behind. Seeing her, the man stood, holding a remote control. The

ramp at the front of the boat pushed out in front, before lowering down to the ground.

Zoe walked up the ramp, Harry following behind. ‘Good morning. I’m Detective Sergeant Zoe Mayer.’

‘Yeah, g’day. Brian Smith,’ said the man, ‘and this is my wife, Glenda. We’re the ones who called triple zero.’

‘Have a seat, please,’ added Glenda, smiling. ‘What’s your dog’s name?’

‘Harry,’ Zoe said as she sat on a deckchair, prompting Brian to sit as well. Harry lay down beside Zoe, looking at Glenda and then at Brian. Through the glass, Zoe could see a large open-plan room. On one side was a living and dining area, with a large TV mounted on the wall. On the other side of the room was a luxury kitchen with thick marble benchtops and glass splashbacks.

‘Would you like a coffee, love?’ asked Glenda. ‘We’ve got a machine inside.’

‘Thanks, but no. I appreciate the offer though.’

‘Victoria Police Service Dog,’ Brian said, reading Harry’s vest. He gave Zoe a curious glance. She could tell he was trying to work out why she was familiar. It happened often.

‘So, what happened?’ Zoe asked.

‘We were in bed,’ Brian said. ‘Bit of a restless night. We both got woken by a couple of rapid gunshots. Bang, bang.’ Brian pointed his finger, pretending to shoot. ‘Must have been about a quarter to three.’

‘It was really close by,’ said Glenda, ‘but then we thought it was probably a hunter.’

‘I got up and turned on a light,’ said Brian. ‘If it was a hunter they might not see us moored down here and we didn’t want a stray bullet flying through the houseboat. These walls aren’t too thick.’

‘And then there was a big whooshing sound,’ Glenda added. ‘We could see the glow from a large fire up over the bank.’

Zoe was making notes. ‘Then what?’

‘I called triple zero to get the fire brigade and your lot out,’ said Brian. ‘First we had to open the map on our phone so we could pinpoint our location. We heard sirens maybe ten minutes later. Could have been longer.’

‘Did you go up to the scene?’

Brian nodded. ‘After a bit I made my way up the bank and a young copper came over. I told him I was the one who called and he said to stay put until you arrived. I saw the guy lying there. Shocking thing to see, that.’

‘So, before that, around the time of the gunshots and the fire, did you see or hear anything else? Anyone talking, yelling?’

Brian scratched the back of his head. ‘I didn’t hear any voices at all. What about you, love?’

‘No voices,’ Glenda said, ‘but after the fire started I heard a car door slam. By then, we were standing out here, on the front of the boat, so we could hear it just fine.’

‘That’s right,’ said Brian. ‘A door slamming. Then the car drove off.’

‘Just one door slamming. Are you sure?’

‘Definitely,’ said Glenda. ‘I was frightened by the

gunshots so I was listening hard. I'm sure of that.'

'Okay, anything distinctive about the sound of the car? Was it speeding or loud?'

'It sounded normal,' Glenda said. 'It didn't tear off or anything. Just drove away.'

'Anything else?' asked Zoe.

'We did hear a boat heading upstream before all that. At about two.' Brian pointed east.

'Two? As in 2 am?'

'Yeah, it was strange,' said Glenda. 'It was a speedboat and it was going fast. It woke us up. The wash rocked the houseboat around a bit.'

'I looked out the window,' said Brian, 'and saw the shadow of it moving away in the moonlight. No lights on it or anything. This fog wasn't around then, but it was still a crazy thing to be doing in the pitch black, what with all the floating logs and stuff. He was motoring, that's for sure.'

'He? It was a man?'

'Sorry, just presuming,' said Brian. 'Seemed like the kind of risky activity only a bloke would do. I could see two people on the boat, but that's about as good a description as I can give you. They looked like shadows.'

'You're sure about the time?' Zoe asked.

'Definitely,' said Brenda. 'I checked the clock when it happened. It was bang on 2 am.'

'Okay. Anything else?'

'Hope he was a crim,' said Brian, looking up the riverbank.

'Who?'

‘The guy who got shot. Wouldn’t like to think we were that close to the murder of someone innocent.’

‘Oh, right. Bit early to say,’ said Zoe.

Zoe wrote down their details and stood. ‘Thanks for your assistance. We may need to be in touch again,’ she said. ‘Where are you headed now?’

‘Downriver,’ said Brian. ‘We only go five or ten kilometres a day, just until we find a peaceful spot.’

‘Sounds nice. Well, I wish you better luck at your next stop,’ said Zoe, placing her card on the table. ‘If you think of anything else, give me a call.’

‘We will,’ said Brian. ‘Good luck with all this.’

Zoe and Harry walked down the ramp and started up the riverbank again. She heard Glenda whispering. ‘She’s that officer from the Grand Final Day thing.’

‘Bloody hell, I knew I knew her from somewhere. We should have got a photo with her.’