



There's only one rule  
when a killer is on the loose.

# THE LONG GAME

'This clever crime thriller kept me hooked till the end.' SARA FOSTER

SIMON ROWELL

## PROLOGUE

He sat in his car, high above the Portsea back beach, near the very tip of the Mornington Peninsula, watching the waves rolling in off Bass Strait, a single bead of sweat on his temple. His was the only car at this end of the car park. Behind him were scrubby dunes, and before him was an endless stretch of ocean. The summer sun, now high in the sky, blanched the scene like a faded polaroid. He held the large knife loosely, bouncing it gently in his right hand, happy with its weight. He turned it to and fro, glinting the sun's rays off its silver edge. Twelve inches long, the knife had a series of black dots on its handle, making it easy to grip.

When he'd been a young boy, his mother would take him to the bayside beaches a few kilometres north, across the peninsula, where the water was calm enough for him to paddle about. He could only remember his father taking him to the beach a couple of times, and it was always here, on the

wilder ocean side, amid the saltbush and wallaby grass that clung tightly to the dunes.

‘Tasmania is out there. Can you see it?’ his father had asked, pointing.

He’d squinted and lied that he could.

He shook his head at the memory. Despite himself, he looked up at the horizon and stared again.

Out beyond the break, teenagers sat on surfboards, laughing and calling to one another. He’d been parked for ten minutes, watching them ignore one perfect wave after another. He knew what they were thinking: that there were plenty of waves, and there always would be. He remembered thinking the same thing. That everything lasts forever.

As a wave broke to his left, he traced his knife through the air, following the slice of white water across the deep blue.

Through the open window, he caught the tart scent of green apple. He turned sharply, staring for a long moment, an impossible expectation filling his mind. Then the perfume was gone, leaving a memory in its place.

It was time.

He returned the knife to his backpack on the passenger seat, and stepped out of the car. He walked around it, checking that the number plates were screwed on tight. Then he took a few steps towards the sea and breathed in as he watched another wave forming. When it started to break, he exhaled until the wave petered out near the turquoise water close to shore. He did this several times. It calmed him. He was in control. He had no other choice.

Shutting his eyes, he sucked in one last deep breath. He got back behind the wheel and eased out of the car park, pulling his baseball cap down low. He kept under the speed limit, as the road curved through dunes, passing a row of drooping sheoaks and clumps of green tussock grass. After a minute, he turned left into Latham Drive. As he'd expected, the street was empty. It was too hot for gardening and everyone would have walked their dogs earlier. People would either be inside staying cool, out back by their pools, or at the beach.

He took his foot off the accelerator and let the car glide the last thirty metres into the empty driveway.

After checking the rear-view mirror, he grabbed the backpack, opened the door silently and stepped out. Using the door as cover, he slipped the knife into the back pocket of his jeans, before letting his shirt fall back over the handle.

He felt good. He could hear the orchestra's drums thumping, racing towards a crescendo. Soon, it would be over.

1.20 PM, SUNDAY 2 FEBRUARY

The familiar metallic smell enveloped Zoe as she reached the end of the hallway. Under her old dark work suit she was wearing a new white shirt, not yet washed enough to feel comfortable against her skin. Her black Doc Martens, polished soft over many years, were encased in powder blue plastic booties. She adjusted her forensic mask and from the doorway looked down at the man slumped against the far wall. Zoe thought he looked about forty, fit with sun-bleached blond hair and a deep tan. His pale blue eyes stared back at her in surprise. His mouth was open and his arms were spread out, as if he were still pleading for life.

Zoe could see the blade of a large knife, an intricate pattern of dots etched into its silver handle, disappearing into a short-sleeved shirt, once white, now stained a rich burgundy.

On the wall above the body a mirror was shattered, shards still held loosely together by its frame. She saw herself

reflected from across the room, her tanned face and dark ponytail shattered into a dozen abstract angles. *Looks about right*, she thought with a wry smile, considering the reason for the four months of enforced leave she'd just taken. At that moment, one of the pieces of glass fell, bouncing off the victim's head and landing, point first, in the thickening blood pooled around the body.

Zoe swept her eyes around the room. The furniture looked cheap and new, except the television, which was high-end and huge. Nothing seemed to match, as if it had all been bought in a hurry.

In the distance, she could hear waves crashing and children squealing. Even inside, the late-summer heat baked her throat and she wished she'd left her jacket in the car. She cursed the idea of the dark suit as the standard homicide uniform.

When her phone had rung, just before lunch, she felt a rush seeing the number on the screen. She called Charlie straight afterwards to say they had a job. He moaned when she told him it was in Portsea, an hour and a half's drive south of Melbourne, around the arc of Port Phillip Bay.

'Welcome back,' he had mumbled, before hanging up.

While being part of the weekend on-call team wasn't Charlie's idea of a good time, Zoe was ready to go, happy to be back. Now she was here, though, she needed to keep her game face on. She heard footsteps coming up the hall.

'Detective Sergeant Mayer. Good to see you.' It was Oliver Nunan, the pathologist. He wore a white jumpsuit, with a hood and mask. His powder blue plastic booties

matched hers. When Zoe was in training, Oliver had performed the first autopsy she'd witnessed. He was sympathetic when, along with most of her class, she threw up into one of the sick bags he'd handed out beforehand. She became a vegetarian that day.

Zoe had always liked Oliver. He had been kind-hearted and patient when she was learning the ropes. She pivoted to face him, smiling behind her mask. 'Hi, Oliver. Good to see you, too. How've you been?'

Oliver gave a resigned snort. 'Okay, though I'd prefer to be at home watching the cricket.' He turned to take in the scene. 'Well, that's just unpleasant,' he muttered, looking down at the body. Zoe noticed that his greying eyebrows had grown longer since she'd last seen him.

Three major-crime-scene examiners from Forensics pushed past them into the room. All were wearing jumpsuits and masks. One had a case of tools, for collecting evidence; one a video camera and the last a large Nikon. The woman holding the video camera took a slow sweep of the room before zooming in on the victim.

'Hey there, Zoe,' said the officer carrying the tools. 'When did you get back?'

'Hi, Jenny. Today. Charlie and I are on call.'

'Glad you're back on deck. Charlie putting off the inevitable?'

Zoe grinned behind her mask. 'Guess so. He's checking outside the house.'

'Being thorough,' said Jenny. Zoe could see her smile lines around her eyes.

Once the scene had been documented, Oliver approached the body. He felt for a pulse that was long gone.

Zoe remained in the doorway.

‘Looks like just the one stab wound,’ he said. ‘Knife is a decent size. Kitchen knife.’

She watched as he pulled a case from his pocket. Opening it, he picked out a thermometer and measured the temperature in the room, before taking a couple of readings from the victim. He pulled out a notepad and did some calculations.

‘When?’ asked Zoe.

‘Between ten-thirty and eleven-thirty this morning. I’ll be able to pinpoint it at the autopsy tonight.’

Zoe made a note. It was now almost one-thirty. The killer might have a three-hour head start.

Picking up one of the victim’s hands, Oliver pulled his mask aside and sniffed.

‘What?’ asked Zoe.

‘Bleach,’ answered Oliver, without looking up. He turned the hand, looking under the fingernails.

‘Fuck,’ said Zoe.

‘Exactly.’ Oliver turned towards Jenny. ‘If your team finds a nail brush anywhere, can you bag it?’

Jenny nodded. ‘Will do.’

Oliver let out a small groan as he stood up, his knees creaking. ‘Okay, I’m done. Tonight at eight work for you?’

‘It’s a date,’ said Zoe.

Oliver nodded. ‘Right, I’m off. See you then.’

Zoe walked to the corner of the room, her plastic booties scrunching on the wooden floorboards. She crouched down



and watched as the officer with the video camera walked towards the back of the house, recording. Thirty seconds later she came out. 'There are drops of blood leading into a bathroom. No nail brush that I could see. Bathroom's clean though. Heavy smell of bleach and there's a mop and bucket next to the toilet.'

'The killer knew they had time,' said Zoe. 'Flushed away evidence. Can we check for prints on the buttons on the toilet?'

'No problem.'

From above, she heard an intake of breath.



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