

LOST, COLD, DESPERATE . . . DANGER RUNS DEEP

OUT  
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# FORCE OF NATURE

Author of *THE DRY* 'a breathless page-turner' *NEW YORK TIMES*

# JANE HARPER

CHAPTER SAMPLER

## Praise for THE DRY:

'A breathless page turner...A secret on every page'

THE NEW YORK TIMES

'Every now and then an Australian crime novel comes along  
to stop your breath and haunt your dreams'

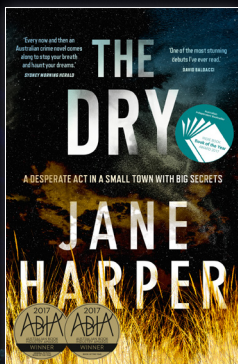
SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

'One of the most stunning debuts I've ever read...  
Every word is near perfect'

DAVID BALDACCI

'This is a story about heroism, the sins of the past, and  
the struggle to atone...a quintessential Australian story  
beautifully told'

THE AGE



## Prologue

Later, the four remaining women could fully agree on only two things. One: No-one saw the bushland swallow up Alice Russell. And two: Alice had a mean streak so sharp it could cut you.

The women were late to the rendezvous point.

The men's group – clocking in at the beacon a respectable thirty-five minutes ahead of the midday target – slapped each other on the shoulders as they emerged from the tree line. A job well done. The retreat leader was waiting for the five of them, looking warm and welcoming in his official red fleece. The men threw their high-tech sleeping bags into the back of the minivan, breathing with relief as they climbed in. The van was stocked with trail mix and thermos coffee. The men leaned past the food, reaching instead for the bag containing their surrendered mobile phones. Reunited.

It was cold outside. No change there. The pale winter sun had fully emerged only once in the past four days. At least the van was dry. The men sat back. One of them cracked a joke about women's map-reading skills and all of them laughed. They drank coffee and waited for their colleagues to appear. It had been three days since they'd seen them; they could wait a few more minutes.

It was an hour before smugness gave way to irritation. One by one the five men prised themselves from the soft seats and trudged up and down the dirt road. They thrust their phones towards the sky as though the extra arm's length would capture the elusive signal. They tapped out impatient text messages that wouldn't send to their better halves in the city. *Running late. We've been held up.* It had been a long few days and hot showers and cold beers were waiting. And work, tomorrow.

The retreat leader stared at the trees. Finally, he unclipped his radio.

A handful of reinforcements arrived. The park rangers' voices light as they pulled on high-vis vests. *We'll pluck 'em out of there in no time.* They knew where people went wrong and there were hours of daylight left. A few, anyway. Enough. It wouldn't take long. They plunged into the bush at a professional pace. The men's group bundled themselves back into the van.

The trail mix was gone and the coffee dregs were cold and bitter by the time the searchers re-emerged. The shapes of the gum trees were silhouetted against the darkening sky. Faces were set. The banter had disappeared with the light.

Inside the van, the men sat silent. If this were a boardroom crisis, they'd know what to do. A drop in the dollar, an unwanted clause in a contract, no worries at all. Out here, the bushland seemed to blur the answers. They cradled their lifeless phones like broken toys in their laps.

More words were muttered into radios. Vehicle headlights bored into the dense wall of trees and breath formed clouds in the frigid night air. The searchers were called back

in for a briefing. The men in the van couldn't hear the details of the discussion, but they didn't need to. The tone said it all. There were limits to what could be done after dark.

At last, the search group broke apart. A high-vis vest clambered into the front of the minivan. He'd drive the men to the park lodge. They'd have to stay the night, no-one could be spared to make the three-hour trip back to Melbourne now. The men were still letting the words sink in when they heard the first cry.

High-pitched and birdlike, it was an unusual sound in the night and every head turned as four figures crested the hill. Two seemed to be supporting a third, while a fourth tripped along unsteadily beside them. The blood on her forehead looked black from a distance.

*Help us! One of them was screaming. More than one. We're here. We need help, she needs a doctor. Please help. Thank God, thank God we found you.*

The searchers were running; the men, phones abandoned on the minibus seats, panting several paces behind them.

*We were lost, someone was saying. Someone else: We lost her.*

It was hard to make the distinction. The women were calling, crying, their voices tumbling over one another.

*Is Alice here? Did she make it? Is she safe?*

In the chaos, in the night, it was impossible to say which of the four had asked after Alice's welfare.

Later, when everything got worse, each would insist it had been them.

## Chapter 1

‘Don’t panic.’

Federal Agent Aaron Falk, who until that moment had had no plans to do so, closed the book he’d been reading. He swapped his mobile phone to his good hand and sat up straighter in bed.

‘Okay.’

‘Alice Russell is missing.’ The woman on the other end said the name quietly. ‘Apparently.’

‘Missing how?’ Falk put his book aside.

‘Legitimately. Not just ignoring our calls this time.’

Falk heard his partner sigh down the line. Carmen Cooper sounded more stressed than he’d heard her in the three months they’d been working together, and that was saying a lot.

‘She’s lost in the Giralang Ranges somewhere,’ Carmen went on.

‘Giralang?’

‘Yeah, out in the east?’

‘No, I know where it is,’ he said. ‘I was thinking more of the reputation.’

‘The Martin Kovac stuff? It doesn’t sound anything like that, thank God.’

‘You’d hope not. That’d have to be twenty years ago now anyway, wouldn’t it?’

‘Going on for twenty-five, I think.’

Some things would always linger, though. Falk had been barely a teenager when the Giralang Ranges had dominated the evening news for the first time. Then three more times over the next two years. Each time, images of search teams tramping through overgrown bushland with sniffer dogs straining at their leads had been projected into living rooms around the state. They’d found most of the bodies, eventually.

‘What was she doing all the way out there?’ he said.

‘Corporate retreat.’

‘Are you joking?’

‘Unfortunately not,’ Carmen said. ‘Turn on the TV, it’s on the news. They’ve called out a search crew.’

‘Hang on.’ Falk climbed out of bed and pulled on a t-shirt above his boxers. The night air was chilly. He padded through to his living room and turned to a twenty-four-hour news channel. The anchor was talking about the day in parliament.

‘It’s nothing. Just work. Go back to sleep,’ Falk heard Carmen murmur in his ear, and realised she was talking to someone at the other end. He’d automatically pictured her in their shared office, squeezed behind the desk that had been shoehorned in next to his twelve weeks earlier. They’d been working closely since, quite literally. When Carmen stretched, her feet knocked his chair legs. Falk checked the clock. It was after 10 pm on a Sunday night; of course she would be at home.

‘See it yet?’ Carmen said to him, whispering now for the benefit of whoever she was with. Her fiancé, Falk assumed.

‘Not yet.’ Falk didn’t need to lower his own voice. ‘Wait –’ The ticker tape scrolled across the screen. ‘Here it is.’

SEARCH TO RESUME AT DAWN IN GIRALANG RANGES FOR LOST MELBOURNE HIKER ALICE RUSSELL, 45.

‘Melbourne *hiker*?’ Falk said.

‘I know.’

‘Since when has Alice –’ He stopped. He was picturing Alice’s shoes. High. Pointy.

‘I know. The bulletin said it was some sort of team-building exercise. She was part of a group sent out for a few days and –’

‘A few days? How long has she actually been missing?’

‘I’m not sure. I think since last night.’

‘She called me,’ Falk said.

There was a silence at the other end of the line. Then, ‘Who did? Alice?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘Last night.’ Falk pulled his mobile away and scrolled through his missed calls. He put it back to his ear. ‘You still there? Early this morning, actually, around four-thirty. I didn’t hear it. Only saw the voicemail when I woke up.’

Another silence. ‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing.’

‘At all?’

‘There was no-one there. I thought it was a pocket dial.’

The TV bulletin put up a recent picture of Alice Russell. It looked like it had been taken at a party. Her blonde hair



had been pinned in a complicated style and she was wearing a silvery dress that showed off the hours she spent in the gym. She looked a good five years younger than her true age, maybe more. And she was smiling at the camera in a way she never had for Falk and Carmen.

‘I tried to call her back when I woke up; probably around six-thirty,’ Falk said, still watching the screen. ‘It rang out.’

The TV cut to an aerial shot of the Giralang Ranges. Hills and valleys rolled out to the horizon, a rippling green ocean under the weak winter light.

SEARCH TO RESUME AT DAWN . . .

Carmen was quiet. Falk could hear her breathing. On screen, the ranges looked big. Enormous, in fact. The thick carpet of treetops appeared completely impenetrable from the camera’s vantage point.

‘Let me listen to the message again,’ he said. ‘I’ll call you back.’

‘Okay.’ The line went dead.

Falk sat on his couch in the semi-dark, the blue light of the TV screen flickering. He hadn’t drawn his curtains, and beyond the small balcony he could see the glow of the Melbourne skyline. The warning light on top of the Eureka Tower flashed, regular and red.

SEARCH TO RESUME AT DAWN IN GIRALANG . . .

He turned down the TV and dialled his voicemail. Call received at 4.26 am from Alice Russell’s mobile.

At first Falk could hear nothing and he pressed his phone harder against his ear. Muffled static for five seconds. Ten. He kept listening, right to the end this time. The white

noise lurched in waves, it sounded like being underwater. There was a muted hum that might have been someone talking. Then, out of nowhere, a voice broke through. Falk jerked the phone away from his ear and stared at it. The voice had been so faint he wondered if he'd imagined it.

Slowly, he tapped the screen. He closed his eyes in his quiet flat and played the message one more time. Nothing, nothing, and then, in the darkness, a faraway voice spoke two words in his ear.

‘ . . . *hurt her* . . . ’



Jane Harper is the author of *The Dry*, winner of various awards including the 2015 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript, the 2017 Indie Award Book of the Year and the 2017 Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year. Rights have been sold in 27 territories worldwide, and film rights optioned to Reese Witherspoon and Bruna Papandrea. Jane worked as a print journalist for thirteen years both in Australia and the UK and lives in Melbourne with her husband and daughter.

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# WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO ALICE RUSSELL?

Five women reluctantly pick up their backpacks and start walking along the muddy track. Only four come out the other side.

Federal Police Agent Aaron Falk has a keen interest in the whereabouts of the missing bushwalker – Alice Russell is the whistleblower in his latest case.



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