

Exclusive prequel
to *THE HUNTED*

BAD PLACES GABRIEL BERGMOSER

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A short prelude to

THE HUNTED

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Constable Jim Chalmers pulled into the empty pub car park and killed the engine. He sat back in his seat, looking at the sky through the windscreen, clouds drifting across the pale blue of almost evening. Over the still streets and low buildings of his town, the scene looked almost like an oil painting come to life. He took a distinct sense of pride in that.

He glanced at his watch. Quarter to five. Technically his shift hadn't ended yet, but unless some dastardly robbery or murder occurred in the next few minutes he doubted it would matter. Twenty-six years on the job and the most exciting thing that had happened in the last twenty of those years had been the local butcher faking his own death because his wife had found out about his affair. Chuckling at the memory, Chalmers opened the door and heaved himself out into the warm air. His knees creaked and he gave himself a moment to rest against the car as he kept watching the sky. Just enjoying the view. Nothing to do with the embarrassing effort getting up was starting to require. This town had been too good to him for too long.

He glanced at the windows of the pub. It didn't look like anyone was inside. Nobody ever was at this time, which was why he always tried to get there before the town knocked off for the day. A quiet drink to end a quiet shift, then out before anybody saw the local brass sinking schooners. And if they did, well, it wasn't the end of the world. Chalmers believed in the police keeping good relationships with the people they protected, and part of that was the occasional reminder that cops were only human.

Hitching up his pants, he crossed the car park to the front door of the pub. He was still wearing his service weapon, which was never a good idea while drinking but safer than leaving it in the car for some hoon to try to steal. Besides, Paul wasn't going to blink at the sight of it. He pushed through the door, ready for the usual back and forth about how he should be on the job and was setting a bad example for aspiring future policemen but stopped short when he realised the pub was not, as usual, empty. A woman sat at the bar, deep in conversation with Paul. She turned on her stool as Chalmers walked in.

She was young, maybe twenty-five at most. Dark hair hung to her shoulders. Her face had a pinched, slightly underfed quality that made her eyes look just a little too big. She was wearing a black jacket and faded, ripped jeans. The strap of a worn backpack was hooked over her booted ankle.

It took Chalmers a moment to register that she wasn't a local. He knew just about everyone around town, and this girl was not one of them. And yet, as her expression shifted fast into an easy smile and she turned back to Paul, he was

struck by the distinct sense that he had seen her somewhere before.

Paul had barely acknowledged him. Whatever he had been talking about with the girl was evidently more important. Chalmers almost laughed. Paul was only a few years younger than Chalmers himself and not much better looking. Chalmers, at least, still had most of his hair. He approached the bar and leaned against it.

‘I mean, it was years ago,’ Paul was saying to the girl. ‘But I think I remember it pretty well.’

‘What was years ago?’ Chalmers asked. ‘The first time you started reading *Toupees Weekly*?’ It was a bad joke and he knew it, but Paul’s preoccupation with the girl had given Chalmers’ mood a sour edge. He wasn’t one to insist on respecting the police, but a quick g’day never killed anyone.

Paul glanced sideways at Chalmers. ‘Would you like a drink, Jim?’

The girl didn’t acknowledge Chalmers. ‘And you’re sure it was the same guy?’ she asked.

‘Positive,’ Paul said, picking up a glass and pouring. ‘How many Germans do you think we get through here? He told me he was heading west, insulted our beer, then a couple of weeks later his disappearance was all over the news. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer bloke.’ He slid Chalmers the beer without looking at him. ‘Ten bucks.’

‘West.’ The girl lifted the glass in front of her but didn’t drink. ‘You said he wasn’t the only one?’

‘He was the only one I met,’ Paul said. ‘Not the only one who went missing.’

‘Are you trying to scare off tourists again?’ Chalmers said, seeing a chance to redeem himself as he slid the note to Paul. ‘Come on, mate, you’ve gotta sell newcomers on the many charms of our town.’

‘Here isn’t the trouble,’ Paul said. ‘It’s out past Marriyong where the weird shit happens.’

Marriyong was only a few kilometres down the road. To a stranger, the towns might as well be one and the same. Chalmers sipped his beer.

‘Okay, so a backpacker went missing,’ the girl said. ‘What else?’

‘Well, he wasn’t the only one,’ Paul said. ‘On a long enough timeline, plenty of people vanish in these parts.’

‘That’s not true,’ Chalmers said. ‘Backpackers come and go. Just because nobody sees them again doesn’t mean they’re dead.’

The girl looked at him. There was something about those eyes, something sharp and searching that Chalmers didn’t like at all. Close up, the jab of uncomfortable recognition was stronger. He had definitely seen her somewhere before.

‘But there have been other missing persons cases,’ the girl said.

‘Sure, if you wanna be dramatic about it,’ Chalmers said. ‘Every few years some scared mum calls up looking for her wayward kid. Half the time we never even saw them.’

‘What about the other half?’

Chalmers cleared his throat. ‘The point is, that German bloke was the only time we ever heard more about it. It’s a big country and if you want to get away from someone you don’t

much like, it's easier than you'd think. It doesn't make this a bad area.' Even as he said it he heard the defensive edge creep into his voice, an edge that had something to do with the way the girl's eyes moved across him, as if weighing him up and not being especially impressed by what she saw.

She looked back at Paul. 'Is the "weird shit" just disappearances?'

'Mostly,' Paul said. 'But there are rumours too.'

'Bartenders,' Chalmers said to the girl, 'are shocking gossips.'

'What kind of rumours?'

Paul poured some more gin from the bottle into the girl's glass. Chalmers noticed with a spike of irritation that he didn't ask her to pay. 'There's the usual stuff about Ivan Milat types creeping around the bush. Then there's every small Australian town's favourite story about the panther that's escaped from a zoo. My personal favourite is that there's this place, not too far from here, but off the beaten track enough that nobody quite knows where it is.'

Chalmers noticed that Paul's voice had slowed slightly, pausing for effect at dramatically pertinent moments. Paul did local theatre sometimes.

'Anyway, the story goes that it's a town backpackers stumble on occasionally. Seems nice enough. There's a bloke who runs the joint, always really friendly to newcomers. Gives them a job, gives them a house. Makes them feel welcome. But when it's time to leave ...' He shrugged. 'That's when things get complicated.'

'Complicated how?' The girl had not touched her topped-up drink. Her eyes were locked on Paul.

‘Complicated like leaving isn’t an option,’ Paul said. ‘Complicated like as much as you might want to go, you just can’t.’

‘How do the rumours spread if no-one ever leaves?’ Chalmers asked.

The girl ignored him. ‘Any idea where this place is?’

Enough was enough. Chalmers put his glass down hard. Both Paul and the girl looked at him.

‘It doesn’t exist,’ Chalmers said. ‘It’s a stupid story designed to scare stupid backpackers, who spread it around and make everyone think we’re a bunch of hicks.’

The girl considered Chalmers for a moment. ‘So you’ve gone looking?’

‘Of course I haven’t.’

‘Then how can you know it doesn’t exist?’

Paul grinned.

‘I know because ... because it’s my business to know.’ Chalmers could feel his cheeks reddening. ‘Because if there *was* something dodgy going on around here, you can bet we’d be on top of it.’

He definitely wasn’t mistaken. That time the girl looked directly at his gut. She returned her attention to Paul.

‘Where are you from, anyway?’ Chalmers asked, before the idiotic line of conversation could continue.

‘Not here,’ the girl said.

‘Obviously,’ Chalmers said. ‘But where?’

She looked at him again. There was no tightening of her jaw, no hint of danger or anger in her expression, and yet her steady gaze made Chalmers want to move away. Somewhere

in the back of his mind a warning bell was sounding, in the same blocked-off corner as the knowledge of where he had seen her before.

‘Jesus, Jim,’ Paul said. ‘And you talk about *me* scaring off tourists.’

The girl drank. Chalmers looked away, the burning in his cheeks worse now. He lifted his beer.

‘Anyway,’ Paul said. ‘It’s just rumours, is all. Nothing ever happens on this stretch of road.’

Chalmers got to his feet and headed for the bathroom. He could feel the girl’s eyes on him. He resisted putting his hand in his pocket until he was through the door. The moment he was, he took out his phone.

He opened up his work emails and started scrolling back. Bulletins, alerts, about thirty reminders from Meryl about the upcoming Christmas party. He kept going until he saw the name that had caught his eye a couple of weeks back. With a trembling hand he opened the email.

The photo filled the screen. He leaned against the wall. He looked at it for several more seconds before lowering the phone. His heart was a heavy thump inside his chest. He felt short of breath, unsteady. He placed his hand on the butt of his gun.

When was the last time he had drawn it? A burglary in his second year on the force, once to put the fear of god into some snot-nosed kid who liked graffiti and broken windows a little too much. He had never fired it outside the range.

He turned and faced the bathroom door. He took a deep breath. His hand around the weapon tightened. He pushed back through the door.

Paul stood alone behind the bar, polishing a glass. The girl was gone.

‘What the ...?’ Chalmers gaped at Paul.

The publican’s eyes went to Chalmers’ hand, still on his weapon.

Chalmers didn’t wait for the questions. He ran to the front door, his knees protesting with every step. He burst out into the cooling air. He looked from side to side, but there was no sign of the girl. He moved towards his car.

He noticed almost immediately that something was wrong. It was sitting at an uneven angle. He slowed. He looked at the tyres. At the long, ragged gashes in the rubber.

He swore, loudly, then turned, scanning the area for any hint of movement. Nothing. The town remained still, for however many minutes were left until everyone made their daily beeline for beer.

He could run, but he didn’t know which way she had gone and, besides, there was only so much distance he would be able to manage on foot. He could radio for backup, but that would mean explaining what he had been doing when he saw the girl, and how long it had taken for him to put two and two together.

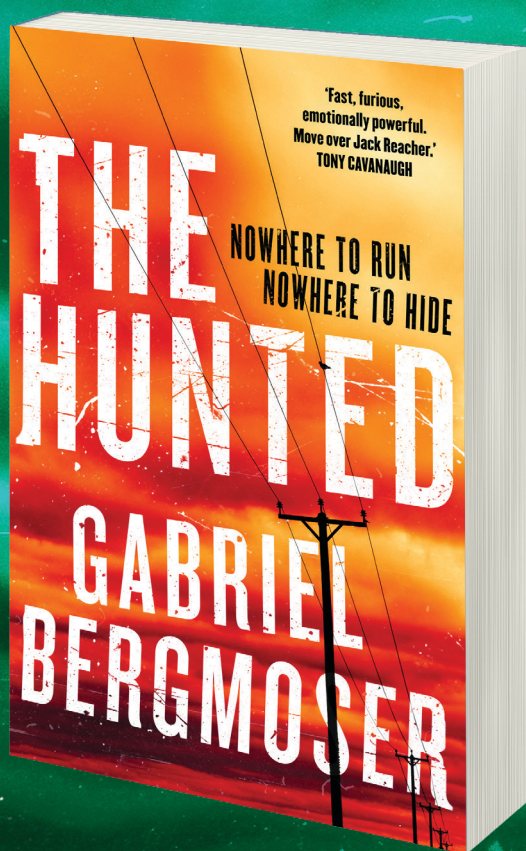
He leaned against his car and tried to think. His heart was slowing.

It wouldn’t be the first time vandals had acted silly buggers with a cop car. It would mean a stern article in the local paper and a reprimand from the sergeant. Forgotten in a week. His hand moved away from the gun. He was still trembling, but there was a bloom of warm relief in his chest.

The girl would keep moving. The next town's problem, and the one after that. She had already run from him, which meant she wasn't about to try anything stupid anywhere nearby. After all, nothing ever happened on this stretch of road.

He turned and headed back into the pub.

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