

SCOTT ZARCINAS

THE
FALLING

Some things are not meant to be forgotten...



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SCOTT ZARCINAS

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For Peter and Helen

*“Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds
and other minds and other dreams. They are
journeys you can make to the far side of the
universe and still be back in time for dinner.”*

— Neil Gaiman

THE ROO

The roo hopped out of the rocky creek and into the cross-hairs of the gun sight. Behind the fallen eucalypt, the barrel resting deathly still in a wooded notch, Max Grieff exhaled silently and readied his finger on the trigger (*The warm hand, always the warm hand*). The grey and her two younger companions stopped, looked around, twitched their ears, then, satisfied they were in no immediate danger, bent down to nibble on the grass. He was down-breeze and on high ground. Unless they zigzagged up the bank between the red gums and granite outcrops and hopped right on top of his camos, there was no way they were going to detect him. He drew a deep breath, nice and slow. He'd been waiting long enough. She was his. Now all that was stopping him was the sign. And that couldn't be too long now, surely not.

The three roos kept nibbling the grass on the side of the bank as they had. He kept the Remington trained on the biggest grey as she rested her front paws on the ground, tugged at some grass roots with her mouth, then made a half-hop forward, using her tail to balance for that precarious split-second when both her rear legs were off the ground. Pointing directly at her skull, and extending as comfortably as a bionic third arm from the nook of his shoulder, all twenty-two inches of crafted cylindrical metal followed her forward, never for a second leaving its target. In fact, right at this moment, the world around him seen entirely through the lenses of the gun sight, he kind of felt like the Six-Million-Dollar man (*"We have the technology. We can rebuild him."*): physically superior, telescopic

vision, mentally focussed, all he needed was a mission to save the world from the scum of the earth. But he already had one, didn't he? Could've squeezed the trigger and ended her stupid, pathetic days right then and there. Would've been easy-peasy, like shooting ducks on the old billabong, but he didn't. The sign still hadn't appeared.

The sign. Always the sign.

There was sudden itch in the middle of his back but Max ignored it and kept his finger on the trigger, light but firm, the slightest extra pressure more than enough to send the .22-cal hurtling across the hundred or so metres to the roo and smashing into her puny brains. Like an omen, the sun chose this moment to reappear from where it had slipped behind one of the few white-bellied clouds still hanging around after this morning's downpour, bathing the valley in a sudden shower of evening gold that twinkled off the spiny fronds of the blackboys. He was more than aware of the illegality of what he was doing. His roo license was as clear as the daylight on that point, strictly night time shooting only. But what the hell, who was going to catch him out here? Nobody between him and the outskirts of Serena, just a hundred square kilometres of dirt track and bush. Bloody locals weren't much interested in venturing past their verandas in any case. Anyway, the sun was almost down. Just another few minutes before it dropped behind the hill, and less than an hour before it disappeared over the horizon altogether, so he was kind of technically into the early hours of the night, wasn't he?

But getting his wrist slapped by some dickhead ranger on a power trip wasn't what was bothering him the most. He just bloody well hoped the sun didn't reflect off his telescopic sight and startle the bitch and her mates back onto the creek bed. Worse, the winter sun had somehow brought the breeze

with it too, which had now picked up and was floating down the valley like some ghostly crow impatient for the kill. It ruffled his combat jacket and wormed its way under his camos to his naked skin, raising goosepimples around his nipples. He could also feel it tickling his ears and ruffling his scruffy locks (the way Sarah used to, when the days were good, before the troubles began), almost as if it were whispering to him, *Go on, do it. What are you waiting for? Squeeze the trigger. Nice and slow.*

Good God, it almost sounded like the good-for-noth'n bitch. That same noth'ns-ever-good-enough, whiney, moaning, impetuous whinge that always got in under his radar and made him want to slam the back of his hand across her chirpy fucking mouth.

Forcing himself to retreat from the unwanted memories, Max calmed his thoughts before he fully jumped on board the ol' rage train and hurtled back to another time and place he thought he'd left well behind. Didn't take much though, did it? The past was always closer than you thought, like a shadowy passenger. It never really left you, wherever you went, even in the dark of night, always there, watching, silent, even if you couldn't always see it. Didn't take much at all to bring it out of hiding. Just a little flame, a little torchlight, shone in the wrong dark corner of the mind and BINGO! two fat ladies, legs eleven, and you're the winner of every fucking memory you never wanted.

He suppressed the smirk that was trying to break across his face. Instead, he flared his nostrils, testing for the scent of the roos. Along with the lingering dampness of the soil and scrub, it was still there. Could also sniff a trace of the sea, even this far from the coast. No matter. The important point was that he was still downwind, but for how much longer? The breeze was like any capricious bitch. More to the point again,

like Sarah. Could turn on him any moment, then his day was as good as done. One whiff of human sweat, or the grease in his gun barrel, and the roos would spring away quicker than click of his firing pin.

What are you waiting for? the breeze whispered in his left ear. For the moment it still had a patient tone, but if it were anything like his fuck'n ex it wouldn't be long before it became downright nasty.

At the end of the barrel, the female grey was still trained in his sights, still nibbling on the grass and half-hopping forward every so often, searching for juicier roots. Slowly but surely, she and the two other roos were edging up the valley toward the sun, but he wasn't too worried. Not yet.

Squeeze the trigger, the breeze whispered.

I can't, Max spoke back in thought.

The breeze was like a pesky fly he couldn't swat away, one that was buzzing around his head and landing every so often on his face, crawling up his nostril, into his mouth, in and out of his ear. Nothing he could do to stop it. Any sudden movement to shoo it away and he could say goodbye to the day's work.

Why not? it asked, this time in his right ear.

You know bloody well why not, Max shot back, the blood rushing to his face.

He could feel his whole head glow like a billy can warming up on the humpy's campfire. Could also feel his heart suddenly kick into higher gear, ramming back and forth into his ribcage. The muscles in shoulders tensed and he dug the heels of his spit-and-polished into the dirt behind him, a reflexive jerk that he hoped the roos wouldn't notice or think too much of. For the first time since he had trained the barrel on his quarry, he sensed the first inkling of doubt. Was the sign going to happen

today? Was the entire bloody universe conspiring against him once again? The thought of returning to the humpy empty-handed made his jaw clench until it hurt, just like he'd taken a punch from out of the blue from Jonesy.

Go on. Hurry up! Before she gets away. Easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy.

His right leg twitched again. Both temples throbbed. Even his eyes felt like they were about to pop out their sockets. Man, this bitch just didn't give up, did she?

You can't do it, can you?

Now it had turned to scorn. Just like Sarah. Just like every bitch he'd ever met.

You never could follow through with anything. Just like you could never...

That was just about fuck'n enough. The breezy bitch had gone too far, and he was about to tell the voice in his head to piss off when, just as suddenly as the sun had peaked from behind the cloud, it happened. The time had arrived, and just like he could feel a sneeze coming on, it began building up, more and more with each passing second. As quick as that, the moment was erupting. There was no pulling out now. No point in trying to stop what was going to happen, just like you couldn't stop a sneeze from ejaculating out of your skull—he had seen the sign.

For a split second, that eternal moment between life and death, the crosshairs were trained right between the eyes of the roo, precisely at the junction where the bones of her snout fused with the dome of her skull, her weakest point. She had straightened, sat on her haunches, turned her head, and looked straight into the gun sight *asking* to be killed. And that was all the invitation he needed.

He knew now that only he had the power to decide the bitch's fate, not God, not anybody, not even the fuck'n

memory of his ex. Only he alone and the thought of so much power tingled delightfully in the upper reaches of his pants. Like it always did.

Then the silence in the valley was ripped apart with the cracking of gunfire.

THE ROCK

The tingling in his crotch aroused a memory of his latter primary school days, the first time he ever felt that mysterious movement down under. Back then in the seventies, most ten and eleven year-old boys were getting rocks in their pants over the sight of Olivia Newton John's gyrating skin-tight leathers at the end of *Grease*, or listening to Deborah Harry's sexy crooning of *In the flesh*. Not him. The first time his rock raised its head and threatened to peak between his zipper had nothing to do with leather clad Australian pussy or scratchy vinyl records—it was the presence of death.

He remembered as a kid wanting nothing more than to be a grown-up. He hated being small and weak, and he especially despised being told what to do. It was the year of '78, when music lines were drawn deepest and longest in the schoolyard. Could've called them trenches, in fact, dividing the world into Swedish and Scottish halves: those who worshipped ABBA on one side, and those who'd kill anybody who hadn't sworn their allegiance to The Bay City Rollers on the other. Problem was (if it were a problem at all), he couldn't stand either; couldn't stand the sight or smell of meatballs *or* haggis. Hell, he didn't even like Elvis, and was even kind of glad when the fat bastard had finally bitten the bullet the year before, too. But that probably had more to do with his old man than the burger king himself. In fact, he knew it did.

The day that sprung to Max's mind was blistering hot. Wearing only a pair of khaki shorts and a tired yellow T-shirt, the boy he once was and had tried so hard to forget (*Ah the memories, there they were again, shadowing him from the past, watching, silent*) had begun the long, slow cycle on his second-hand drag-

ster up the gravel road from Serena to the hidden clearing behind the Johnson's farmhouse.

My God, the older Max thought. *That was over thirty years ago. Three fucking decades. What the fuck have I done with my life?*

For the next eight kilometres, the road moved like a stuttering conveyer belt beneath the dragster's wheels. To make matters worse, the A131, as it was known back then, hadn't been graded for well over a year and the bike jarred so badly on the ruts and potholes his innards felt as if they were about to drop onto the road through his arse.

If dad heard me use that word, the boy had thought at that moment, cycling around another large pothole, *he'd clip me around the ears and make me wash my mouth out with soap.*

He didn't care, didn't give a blue razoo. The stinking German bastard wasn't around. Most probably propping up one end of the bar at The Griffin's Head with the other stalwart of Serena's watering hole, Rhys Fynn, and so he could say *Arse!* as loud and as many times as he wanted. He shouted it this time, "ARSE!" There, what could the useless bastard do about it? *Noth'n. Absolutely noth'n.* It felt good, like a pig wallowing in his own shit. And that was another word he liked but daren't say in front of him: *Shit!* It was great to get out of the house and do and say whatever the hell he wanted.

"Shit! Arse! Shit! Fuck!"

But, as good as he felt, he had a problem. One hell'uva problem. When the old man's newest bitch had insisted he wear a hat (*It's scorching outside*, lipstick lips had shrieked, *you'll burn to a crisp!*), he had disdainfully shrugged her off and ran out of the house, slamming the door in her god-ugly face. What the hell did she know? She wouldn't be around long enough to see his sunburn anyway. None of them ever were.

Now, riding uphill along a dirt road shimmering with heat

heat haze, he wished he'd taken her up on her offer. It was as if he were viewing the surrounding scenery over the top of a sizzling barbeque plate and he now knew what it was like to be one of those ants he'd fried to death with a magnifying glass on the driveway. Rivulets of sweat trickled off his face in gluey streams, evaporating in the oppressive heat and leaving sticky trails of salt crystals on his skin. Worse, his skull felt like it was about to explode any second, as if the useless old bastard in the sky was teaching him a lesson, focusing the sun's rays on top of his head until it burst into flames.

What'd you expect, he said to himself, *trekking out so bloody far from town on a day that pushed forty?*

He put his foot down to catch his breath. His legs had long ago started to tire and go to jelly. The hard work was almost done, though. Not much further until he'd reached the top of the hill, then the road would plateau a little before it dropped, then rise, then drop again before it hit the main road to Adelaide, skirting the edge of the old billabong. Not that he had any intention of going for a swim, despite the heat. He had other things on his mind. Plus, though he had the shit bad luck to be a fool's son, he weren't no fool himself. The old billabong was well off limits, even to him, who liked to think he was more daring than most kids in his class, even the older kids at high school, but even that place was beyond his dare. Why the local yokels called the Myponga Lake the old billabong he didn't have the foggiest, but, if he could guess from the drunken filth that spewed from his father's mouth, it was most probably a way of rat-bagging the Aboriginal myths about the place and pretending the Bunyip's curse didn't really put the shits right up them and make them tell their kids never to go anywhere near that place without an adult, *Never!* Not that he ever did, 'coz he believed the curse, like all the kids in

town, and that was good enough reason to stay the hell away. 'Till he was older, of course. Then he could do and say what he liked, anytime, anywhere.

“Shit! Arse! Shit! Fuck!”

He cast his vision beyond the old billabong to maybe fifteen or twenty kilometres away, to where the hills rose in undulating curves. The grass slopes were browned from another summer of relentless sun and through the heat-shimmers they were like waves rising and falling on the swell of a muddy sea; and for a brief, giddy moment he actually felt the ground lifting him up, like a fishing buoy. Behind him, Serena and the beach at the bottom of the hill were well out of sight. Even the now vacant edifice of Prince Albert's School for boys looming over the town from Victor's Ridge was hard to make out from this distance (“Prince Albert's School for rich bitch poofs,” his old man would always sprout, even in front of Rhys Fynn, its caretaker). Closer, to either side of him, now that the last of the houses on the outskirts of town had fallen away, all that was left was grazing farmland dotted with scrubby bushland.

“C'mon,” he said to himself, closing his mind to the heat-shimmers dancing over the road ahead. “The worst is over.”

He was surprised at how sticky his voice sounded. Every word clung to his throat like salt crystals on his skin. God, he was thirsty. And hot. Way hot. Shit, he should've put on that hat! Nothing was going to make him stop, however. He was on a mission. Not even if the farmhouse waiting for him up ahead was as spooky as the old billabong, not even if the going was incredibly slow and was murder on his elbows and knees, not even if his guts fell out between his arse, nothing was going to prevent him finishing his plans.

He drew a deep, hot breath and began cycling again.

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