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INTERVIEW WITH RUTH WYKES

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RUTH WYKES WAS THE 2016 WINNER OF THE ANNUAL SISTERS IN CRIME'S 23RD SCARLET STILETTO SHORT STORY AWARD FOR HER SHORT STORY *STONE COLD*. EARLIER THIS YEAR, VWL SPOKE TO RUTH ABOUT WINNING THE AWARD AND HER PASSION FOR CRIME WRITING.

A prolific true crime writer, Ruth had a slow introduction to this vocation. She grew up on a farm in rural New South Wales and spent the first portion of her life as a self-proclaimed 'drifter', dropping out of school at 14, traveling around the country and finding herself in a variety of transient jobs. At 28, she moved to Perth and commenced volunteer work at the AIDS Council. 'Working in something like that, you do tend to burn out,' she says. She was then looking for her next move.

Ruth always loved writing: she started *Women Out West*, a lesbian magazine that she coordinated for the next ten years whilst she completed her education. At the end of that decade, Ruth could see the writing on the wall – small print media was dying. But her writing career was only beginning. She went on to co-author two true crime novels, one with Lindy Cameron called *Women Who Kill* and a second with Kylie Fox called *Invisible Women*.

Women Who Kill recounts murders committed by women, while *Invisible Women* tells the stories of murdered sex workers in Australia and comments on why the murder of these women hardly forms a blip on our media landscape.



In her novels, Ruth and her co-authors analyse and challenge the stereotypical attitudes towards women.

So how does Ruth choose a crime topic? 'It has to hit me in the gut,' she says. Funnily enough, the inspiration for *Stone Cold* came from an unwitting young teenage girl Ruth served at Bunnings, where Ruth works on the Mornington Peninsula. The look this girl gave Ruth at the checkout affected her so much, that she wrote down four lines on scrap of paper, which would months later become the inspiration for her winning short story. 'That poor child', said Ruth, 'no one knew that a few months later I would turn her into a murderer. There's something really wrong with us writers!'

Image (above): Ruth Wykes

Image (left): Ruth Wykes and Nicole da Silva

Photography by Deb Bodinnar

Ruth has no plans on removing those scarlet stilettos any time soon. Her third book, and second with co-author Kylie Fox, is in the works, which addresses the psychological impacts caused to police, lawyers, paramedics, coroners and the like, confronted with the aftermath of violent crimes on a daily basis.

An excerpt of the award winning short story *Stone Cold* is extracted on the following page. ■

EXCERPT: *STONE COLD*

RUTH WYKES

THE DOORS TO ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY SLID OPEN AND I WALKED INTO THE CHAOS OF A TYPICAL WINTER'S DAY. EAST JINDABYNE WAS BASE CAMP FOR SKIERS AND THEIR CRONIES WHOSE DREAMS OF CONQUERING THREDBO OFTEN ENDED UP IN SPLINTS AND CRUTCHES. I DODGED A GURNEY WHERE A TEENAGER SUCKED ON A GREEN WHISTLE. THE GLISTENING BONE THAT JUTTED FROM HIS ANKLE ALMOST MADE ME FEEL SICKER THAN HE WAS.

The doors to Accident and Emergency slid open and I walked into the chaos of a typical winter's day. East Jindabyne was Base Camp for skiers and their cronies whose dreams of conquering Thredbo often ended up in splints and crutches. I dodged a gurney where a teenager sucked on a green whistle. The glistening bone that jutted from his ankle almost made me feel sicker than he was.

Mitchell Rayne's room was stark relief. I don't know what it is about hospital beds but they always make people look smaller, more vulnerable than they probably are.

'Can't you people leave me alone?' He tossed aside the newspaper he was reading.

'I brought you a coffee, a decent one.' I scraped a chair towards his bed.

'I got nothing, detective. Nothing to tell you.'

'I'm not here to ask you anything. I'm here to give you an update.'

He smirked at me.

'We searched your house yesterday, and your ute. Divers are going into the lake today. Are we going to find Max?'

He shrugged, struggled to make eye contact with me, and failed.

'Mate, help me understand. Why did you have those photos on your computer?'

'They weren't mine. My brother put them there.'

'Mitchell, look at me. I'm not judging you. I just want to understand.'

'Really? More like you've come here to play good cop and get me to confess to something I didn't do.'

'Didn't you? Then help me. Did you see Max at school the other day?'

He flared. 'You bastards couldn't find a beer in brewery. Didn't you even look at the photos on my computer? It's girls I love, not boys. You fucking blame me for everything that farts in this town just because you're too small minded to understand that what I feel for these girls is love. And I would never hurt them.'

'Girls like Nikita Jones?'

'She's too old.'

'She's 13.'

'Like I said, she's too old.'

He was rigid with anger.

'Alright, mate. Calm down. Have you ever acted on this love?'

'No, but there's a couple of girls here in town. And I know by the way they look at me they want it as bad as I do.'

Fire ants crawled under my skin and it was a massive effort to appear neutral.

'Is that why you were at the primary school?'

'I told you I wasn't there.'

'Yeah you were, mate. Mitchell, how old are you?'

'I'll be 23 next week.'

'Have you ever acted on your fantasies?'

'None of your business.'

The sexual exploitation of children most certainly was my business, but I let it go.

'It's not a crime to think, or even to fantasise. But there's a line, and you can never ever cross it. I think you saw Max from a distance, and you thought he was a girl. And I think that by the time you realised you'd made a mistake it was too late. Where is he, mate?'

I saw in his eyes that he wanted to hit me. I was still grappling with my next question when my phone rang. It was the duty sergeant.

'Kate, they've found him.'

I held my breath, not yet wanting the answer to the only question in my head. As the sarge filled me in I started to run.

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I don't care how tough you are, or how thick a skin you wear there are moments in this job that rip your heart out of your chest. The lifeless body of Max Newstead protruded from an abandoned dog kennel at the back of a garden shed. Bloodied, matted hair was all we could see and we needed to leave it that way until crime scene got here from Cooma.

It was a big yard, at least half an acre, that backed onto the primary school's sports oval. I sidestepped a puddle of vomit as I walked back to the verandah. On the way I called the station and barked to the sarge that he needed to send someone over to the Newsteads. Now.

Ross Howard reminded me of every Mullumbimby dropout I have ever met. A 50-something hippie, he looked spaced-out.

'I thought I smelt something yesterday afternoon when I was working in the shed, but I put it down to a dead animal.'

'Were you home on Tuesday?'

'What? Ah, no. I was at work. I think.' Shock seemed to have stolen his faculties, and I understood that. But my own coping skills were threatening to fray. I had to focus.

'You think? Where do you work?'

'Got a ski hire business on the main street.'

'Did you see or hear anything unusual when you got home?' I peppered him with questions as the hive of the crime scene began to get busy.

A while later the coroner called me and Bull back to the shed. 'I've had them take the roof off the dog kennel. Do you want to see him while he's in situ?'

I did. And I didn't. ■