



Nicole

How late is too late?

TROPE

Three Hours Late

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For Mom, Dad, Lyn and Elwin—my personal
cheerleading squad

In dreams there are flashes of his face.
Kaleidoscope light touches his hair.
His arms reach out.
In dreams his hand touches mine.
We twirl and dance touched by light and shade, spinning
until we cannot be seen.

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‘Aiden, we’ve been around this block twice already. Don’t you think that if the guy was here we would’ve found him?’ asked Julie.

‘I know, I know,’ said Aiden. ‘But it just feels . . . I can’t explain it, Jules. Maybe it’s a little of that police instinct we’re all supposed to have. Besides, the last call he made came from this tower.’

‘Yeah, but that was an hour ago. The choppers have been over this park at least twice. They would’ve seen the car if he was here. Let’s go check out some of the shopping centres. He told his wife he’d taken the kid to an arcade earlier today. Maybe he went back there. Shopping centres are a great place to hide. Let’s start at the first one we come to and go from there. We’re wasting time here.’

‘I don’t know, Jules. I think this guy will be closer to home.’

Julie pushed some blonde curls back behind her ear. ‘I think he’s hidden away in the dark somewhere far from prying eyes, just like the rat he is.’

‘Don’t make me pull rank, Jules,’ said Aiden.

Julie and Aiden hadn’t been partners long but they had clicked from the beginning. Julie never needed to be told who was in charge.

Now she looked at Aiden, hurt by the rebuke, but relaxed when she saw he was smiling.

‘Fine, but this is the last time, okay? Go around once more and then we’ll start on the shopping centres.’

The police cruiser crawled past the park again.

‘I know it looks deserted but I just want to check out the bush at the back,’ said Aiden. He pulled off the road into the dust and stone area that served as a car park and the two police officers climbed out of the car. In the dying light of the afternoon the empty swing moved back and forth as if waiting for a small body and pumping legs. The slight creak of the metal chains sent a shiver down Julie’s spine. Even as a kid she’d never been a fan of the park. There were too many big kids, too many unknowns.

‘There’s nothing here,’ said Julie, wrapping her arms around herself.

‘Looks that way,’ said Aiden. The bushland surrounding the park looked undisturbed.

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White lines chased each other around the freshly marked oval. There were three schools close by that were probably getting ready for their sports carnivals. Aiden glanced across the empty stone steps that served as stands for watching parents. He didn't understand his certainty that the guy was here. It would be a stupid place to hide. It was too close to the house where the kid lived. The guy was probably hiding out in a giant car park where he would be almost impossible to find. Or maybe just maybe he was long gone by now. He could be on the highway heading out of Sydney on the way to Queensland. Or he could be hiding out in some small country town already. He could be anywhere.

'So why do I think he's here?' muttered Aiden.

He closed his eyes and tried to work out what was bothering him. He felt like there was something he was missing. But whatever it was it remained out of reach. He opened his eyes with a sigh.

The park had a small play area off to the side but was dominated by the oval in the middle. All around houses stood on sentry duty in the quiet Saturday afternoon. It was a little cold now for kids to be out but even so the park was eerily empty.

He turned to walk back to the car as the sun dipped a little lower on the horizon and then he caught something in his peripheral vision. He turned around and waited for it again.

And there it was: a flash as the last rays of the sun hit something metal. There *was* something in the bush.

Aiden started walking towards the place where he'd seen the flash. Crossing the oval, he noticed tyre tracks. He broke into a run.

He knew what he would find when he got to the cluster of gum trees, banksias and tangled undergrowth. He knew they would be there.

As he drew closer he saw the outline of the car, a blue Toyota sedan. He knew that when he checked the licence plate it would be WVX 217.

His heart was pumping now and despite the cold he was beginning to sweat. He slowed down and made himself a cat. If they were still in the car he didn't want to startle the man into doing anything stupid, and if they were outside the car he didn't want to alert the guy to his presence.

He crept forward, trying to avoid hidden twigs; cursing the gold-red fall of leaves that carpeted the ground.

The car's engine was running, just purring gently. Aiden wondered how long it had been running for. How long could a tank of petrol last if the car was parked?

He grabbed his taser from its holder. A gun would freak the kid out but he wouldn't know what a taser was.

He stepped forward and peered through the rear window.

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When he couldn't see anything he moved around to one of the back passenger windows.

If the kid was in the back seat Aiden would have to signal to him to keep quiet. He already had his finger against his lips. Hopefully the kid would be more curious than terrified by the sight of a police officer looking through his window.

The man would probably be in the front seat and wouldn't see him. Unless of course they were both in the front seat and neither was in a position to see him. Unless neither of them was in a position to see anything.

Aiden looked back at the oval and saw Julie jogging across to meet him. He put his hand up, indicating that she should stop; the last thing he needed was more noise. Julie obliged and became a statue. She wouldn't move again until he told her to.

He refocused on the window. He saw a booster seat covered in pictures of Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends. Eeyore stared out the window at Aiden, his tail drooping and face resigned. There was no sign of the boy.

The park and the car sat together in the silence of the day. Aiden stepped forward again, straining his muscles to keep his body light on the ground. Holding his breath, he looked into the front seat.

He put his taser back into its holder.

He stood up straight and waved at Julie.

She resumed her run across the oval.