BEHIND THE HORROR
TRUE STORIES THAT INSPIRED HORROR MOVIES

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Written by
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Wolf Creek captures every backpacker’s worst nightmare—being stranded in a remote location with a psychopath. Director Greg McLean based his screenplay on two of Australia’s most notorious and disturbing homicide cases: the “backpacker murders,” perpetrated by Ivan Milat, and the murder of Peter Falconio and attempted abduction of Joanne Lees by Bradley Murdoch.

On its release, Wolf Creek was lauded for its poignantly realistic depictions of brutal violence and ability to elicit genuine empathy with the protagonists’ desperate situation.

In the movie, three young backpackers—a man and two women—who are stranded in the Australian Outback accept the help of Mick Taylor, a seemingly good-natured local. Taylor subsequently drugs them unconscious before raping and torturing one of the female members of the group. When the two women escape, Mick hunts them down, murdering them and anyone who attempts to help them. Kept elsewhere and likely overlooked, the third abductee manages to free himself, collapses of dehydration in the bush, and is rescued by a passing Swedish couple. No trace of the murder victims’ bodies or Mick Taylor are ever discovered.

Director Greg McLean revised his original screenplay for Wolf Creek in 1997, after learning of the crimes of Australian “Backpacker Murderer” Ivan Milat, and another case that bore some resemblance: the murder of Peter Falconio by Bradley John Murdoch. Combining
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Milat and Murdoch’s dark characteristics and backgrounds—Milat was a rugged outdoorsman with a small arsenal of firearms and fondness for off-road vehicles, while Murdoch was employed as a mechanic and truck driver—McLean crafted a terrifying fictional Frankenstein in Mick Taylor. Completed before Murdoch’s trial, *Wolf Creek* was released in theaters all over Australia on November 3, 2005, except for cinemas in Northern Territory, where an injunction was placed on the film to prevent it from influencing Murdoch’s ongoing trial. Forty days later, on December 13, 2005, Murdoch was convicted of the murder of Peter Falconio and the assault and attempted kidnapping of Joanne Lees.

On January 25, 1990, Englishman Paul Onions took the train from Sydney, Australia to the nearby suburb of Liverpool, planning to hitchhike to Melbourne down the Hume Highway. After reaching the suburb of Casula, he stopped to purchase a drink at a shop, where he was approached by a black-haired man in his early 40s with a handlebar mustache. Likely noticing Onions’ cumbersome backpack, he asked the traveler if he needed a ride. The man stood nearly six-feet-tall with a muscular build—in some ways he reminded Onions of the Australian cricketer Merv Hughes—but seemed friendly enough. Onions affirmed that he was trying to get to Melbourne, and the man offered to take him as far as Canberra: nearly a third of the journey. Onions enthusiastically agreed and together they headed to a white Toyota Land Cruiser 4WD in the parking lot. The mustachioed man introduced himself as “Bill.” Onions hoisted his backpack into the rear of the vehicle, then hopped into the passenger seat, and together they sped off south. At first, Bill was genial, asking Paul about his travels and what he did for a living. Over the course of their conversation, Bill claimed he worked for the Roads and Traffic Authority in Liverpool, and regularly traveled around southeastern Australia.
About 45 minutes into their journey, the atmosphere in the Land Cruiser started to change. When Onions innocently expressed his surprise at Sydney’s large Japanese population, Bill’s demeanor darkened.

“We shouldn’t have all them in the country,” he scowled. “It’s the same with you Brits, you shouldn’t be in Northern Ireland either.”

Taken aback, Onions attempted to steer the discussion away from immigration, but Bill only grew angrier. For 15 minutes there was a tense silence in the Land Cruiser. Having become increasingly wary, Onions noticed the driver’s eyes repeatedly flitting to the rear-view mirror. The vehicle started to slow. Bill pulled over to the side of the road, muttering something about wanting to grab some cassettes from under the front seat. Noting that there were already tapes within reach, Onions became increasingly nervous. Bill climbed out of the vehicle, and began rooting around under the driver’s seat. Suddenly, he was holding a length of rope and pointing a black revolver in Onions’ face.

“This is a robbery,” he barked.

The passenger started frantically unfastening his seatbelt. Onions had previously served in the Royal Navy, and his military training now proved crucial. Bolting out of the car, he ran in a zig zag pattern into the oncoming traffic.

“Stop or I’ll shoot, stop or I’ll shoot!” he heard Bill screaming.

Then the crack of a gunshot. Multiple cars swerved to avoid him, but not one of them stopped to help. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Bill chasing him.

“Get back in the car, get back in the car!”

As they reached the grassy stretch of land splitting the highway, Bill seized him by the right sleeve, ripping his shirt. Realizing the danger he was in, Onions darted onto the eastern side of the highway, vowing to stop the next passing vehicle—whatever it took. When a van appeared, he stood directly in front of it, forcing the driver to slam on the brakes. Dashing to the passenger side
sliding door, Onions wrenched it open, climbed inside, and hastily locked it. When he looked up, a puzzled female face was staring at him from the driver’s seat.

“He’s got a gun, he’s got a gun!” Onions pointed to the man on the grass.

The driver immediately made a U-turn and started heading in the opposite direction. Onions watched through the window as Bill hurried back to the Land Cruiser and continued toward Canberra.

Reflecting on his close call years later, Paul Onions would comment, “As soon as I seen [sic] the rope, I thought that’s going to take a bit of time and he’s going to do whatever he wants . . . I just thought, ‘This is it, run or die,’ so I undid my seatbelt and jumped straight out of the vehicle and ran.”

The woman drove him to Bowral Police Station where he filed an incident report and caught the next train back to Sydney. Paul Onions had lost his passport and backpack, but held on to his life. It wasn’t until three years later, while watching the news back in the United Kingdom, that he realized how much worse things could have been.

In 1993, Soul Asylum—a band from Minneapolis—released a smash hit called “Runaway Train.” The music video for the song sought to address the plight of missing children. Beginning with the title “There are over one million youths lost on the streets of America,” the footage featured the names, photographs, and disappearance dates of 36 missing American children and teens. Alternate versions were made for the United Kingdom and Australia, displaying pictures and information related to missing youths in those countries. Among those featured on the Australian video were 19-year-olds Deborah Everist and James Gibson, who had vanished on December 30, 1989 while hitchhiking south from Sydney to a music festival in Albury. Within months of the video’s release, the pair would resurface under some of the most gut-wrenching circumstances imaginable.
Roughly a year earlier, on September 19, 1992, two men were orienteering near the Longacre Fire Trail in Belanglo State Forest when they were struck by a foul stench emanating from beneath a rocky ledge. Peering under the rocks they spotted a bone and some clothes shoddily buried beneath sticks and leaves. The men immediately contacted the Bowral Police. Arriving on the scene, investigators uncovered the decomposing remains of an adult female—the garrotte beside her body left little doubt she had been the victim of foul play. A closer inspection revealed she had been stabbed a minimum of 14 times in the neck and torso.\(^7\)

The following morning, a police search team discovered the body of a second woman just 30 yards from the first victim, similarly concealed by deadfall. Red cloth had been wrapped twice around her head obscuring her face. An examination of her corpse revealed she had been shot 10 times in the head with a .22 caliber rifle—a finding supported by a cluster of spent Winchester cartridge casings found approximately four yards away. Strangely, the bullets had entered the victim’s head from many different angles, almost as if the killer had been using the corpse for target practice.\(^8\) As in the case of the first victim, the police also observed multiple stabbing and slashing wounds to the upper body. Aside from their clothing and jewelry, whatever traveling equipment or additional personal effects the victims may have been carrying were conspicuously absent. However, the discovery of six cigarette butts near the second victim—five of the Longbeach brand—proved particularly valuable.

A forensic pathologist officially identified the first victim as 22-year-old Joanne Walters of Maesteg, Wales, and the woman wrapped in red cloth as her 21-year-old English traveling companion, Caroline Clarke. The young backpackers had last been seen leaving a hostel in Kings Cross, Sydney on April 18, 1992, bound for Adelaide. Clarke was known to have smoked Longbeach cigarettes. There was evidence that both women had been sexually assaulted.\(^9\)
Well aware of the seven backpackers who had vanished in New South Wales in the past three years, the authorities assigned 40 police officers to scour the area. When no further evidence or human remains surfaced after seven days, the search was called off. Instead of providing additional manpower, New South Wales offered a $100,000 reward for information resulting in the arrest and conviction of the person(s) responsible for the slayings.

Over a year passed, and the police were still no closer to catching the murderer of Caroline Clarke and Joanne Walters. Troubled by the notion that more missing backpackers could be moldering somewhere in the Belanglo Forest, local outdoorsman Bruce Pryor set out along the Morice Fire Trail to see what he could find. Eventually, he branched out onto the Clearly’s Exit Fire Trail, following it until he reached an opening in the trees. There he spotted a bone large enough to belong to a human being. His speculation came to an abrupt end moments later when he happened upon a human skull with its lower jaw missing. Bundling it up in cloth, he raced off to the local orienteering club to telephone the police. They arrived half an hour later. Pryor passed the skull into their possession and showed them to the clearing.

Detective Steven Murphy’s eyes scanned the area and rested upon a pair of sandshoes protruding from the brush. Beneath a gum tree was a set of skeletal remains clad in female clothing. The garments had been slashed, repeatedly and ferociously, leaving them in tatters, while scavenging animals had left the clearing strewn with disarticulated bone. The investigators found a small crucifix and bracelets entangled in the remains. At the base of another tree, a mere 20 yards from the latest discovery, a canopy of foliage concealed yet another skeleton—only this one was male. Like the woman, he had been fully clothed when subjected to a frenzy of stabbing and slashing. Investigators came across a bullet-riddled tree trunk 440 yards from the man’s remains, from which they retrieved nine slugs. All but one, a .22 caliber, were unsuitable for forensic analysis.¹⁰
When news of the gruesome discovery surfaced, the media immediately began debating the identities of the remains. Had the fates of James Gibson and Deborah Everist—the missing teens who had featured in the music video for “Runaway Train”—finally been discovered? What about Gabor Neugebauer and Anja Habschied: a young German couple last seen hauling their back-packs from a Kings Cross hostel on December 26, 1991? Could the remains belong to somebody else altogether? This tactless media speculation came to an end days later when forensic pathology and odontology confirmed the victims were in fact Gibson and Everist.

With four victims recovered from the Belanglo Forest in 13 months, and potentially countless others concealed in the more than 9,000 acres of pine, Detective Clive Small created “Task Force Air”—comprising 33 detectives, 11 intelligence analysts, and a myriad of forensic specialists—to apprehend the predator and restore order to the community. The initial failure to find the remains of Gibson and Everist, who had met their demise more than two years before Clarke and Walters, was not only embarrassing, but had also set the investigation back significantly. Thus, Task Force Air’s first order of business would be to conduct a thorough search of Belanglo.

Before doing so, they compared satellite images of the area from the late 1980s to the present, noting the changing patterns of vegetation. They formulated a strategy to search nearly 50 miles of paths and fire trails, also covering an area 160 yards to the left and right of each track for an additional 15 square miles. The 300-member search team was subdivided into groups of 40 people walking line abreast.

Their efforts bore fruit on November 1, 1993 when the skull and upper torso of a fifth victim were found protruding from a heap of deadfall 40 yards off the Miner’s Despair Fire Trail. Once again, the victim was fully-clothed and had suffered multiple stab wounds to her chest and back. Her spinal cord had been severed, perhaps intentionally to paralyze her. Harkening back to the discovery of Joanne Walters, a wire noose lay close to the body, though it seemed to have been used as a restraint rather than
an instrument of murder. Searchers located the victim’s jewelry, clothes, and backpack-contents nearby, along with a red T-shirt which had been sliced open from the front. As with the British and Australian couples, the backpack itself was nowhere to be found.

The victim was Simone Schmidl—another missing German backpacker—first identified informally by the distinctive headband round her forehead, then officially through forensic pathology and odontology. Simi, as she was known to her friends, had parted ways with her traveling companion Jeanette Mueller in Sydney on the morning of January 20, 1991. Despite Jeanette’s warnings, Simi had assured her “all Australians were warm and friendly”¹² and that she always carried a knife for self-defense. The tall girl with the dreadlocks and headband was last seen by motorists standing on the side of the highway at Casula.

On November 3, a stray leather sandal in the Belanglo led the search team to two additional human skeletons concealed in a now all-too-familiar fashion. Twenty-one-year-old Gabor Neugebauer and his girlfriend Anja Habschied, 20, had finally been located—though Anja’s head remained missing. Like Joanne Walters and Simone Schmidl, she had been stabbed and slashed to death through her pink top. A 5-yard blue and yellow rope looped at either end, presumably to restrain the victim, was discarded in the immediate vicinity along with Anja’s wrist watch and ankle bands. Gabor Neugebauer, on the other hand, had been used as target practice: a cloth gag was still clenched between the teeth of his bullet-riddled skull.¹³ A thorough search of the area uncovered a sealed plastic bag with plane tickets bearing his name, and a money belt with the couple’s International Student Cards, traveler’s checks, and cash. Twenty yards from the money belt lay another makeshift loop-restraint consisting of a black plastic zip tie, black insulation tape, cord, and a leash. A cartridge holder built for 50 rounds was located approximately 200 yards from Gabor’s corpse, along with Anja’s pink jeans, and two empty cardboard packs of .22 caliber ammunition. The first was for Winchester Brand, and the second
for Eley Subsonic hollow-points. The medical examiner removed four .22 caliber bullets from Gabor’s skull (though there were six points of entry in total) and a fifth from his upper chest. Furthermore, investigators had extracted six bullet fragments from tree trunks in proximity to his body.

The search continued for 12 more days before Detective Small was satisfied the Belanglo Forest had given up all of its secrets. But how long would it be before the killer returned to replenish its stock of horrors? From now on, the investigation would have to be proactive: the reward for information was increased to $500,000. Within 24 hours the taskforce had received over 5,000 calls.14

Three phone calls would prove instrumental in bringing the Belanglo Forest Killer to justice. The first came on November 9 from a Ms. Joanne Berry of Canberra, who had been driving on the Hume Highway near Berrima in January 1990, when a young man forced his way into her van shouting, “Help me, he’s got a gun.”15 Spotting an older man in pursuit, she had sped off. Along the way to Bowral Police Station, the escapee had told her his name was Paul Onions, and that he’d accepted a ride while hitchhiking, only to have the driver pull a gun on him.

Paul Onions called the taskforce from England just two days later. Reports of the horrific revelations from the Belanglo Forest had reached the UK, and were being widely reported in the media. Recalling his near-brush with death in New South Wales, Onions thought it crucial to relay his experience. He described his attacker as a male “in his early 40s . . . fit looking, about 5’10” tall [with] a Merv Hughes mustache . . . [and] black hair,” driving a “white Toyota Land Cruiser 4WD with woolly seat covers.”16

A third call implicated a local man named Ivan Milat, who owned a four-wheel drive vehicle and had a small arsenal of firearms which he was always using for target practice. Milat had already appeared on the investigators’ radar, owing to his well-founded reputation for criminality, gun fetishism, and eccentricity.17 The phone call helped to focus the taskforce’s attention specifically
on Ivan. When Detective Clive Small ordered an in-depth search into the 48-year-old’s criminal record, he uncovered a history of theft and incarceration dating back to his teenage years. His crimes had worsened as he grew older, graduating to charges for armed robbery and rape. A 1991 photo of Ivan confirmed he had owned a silver-white Nissan 4WD until September 1992, and had changed vehicles around the same time as the discovery of the bodies of Caroline Clarke and Joanne Walters. The Nissan bore a striking resemblance to a Toyota Land Cruiser. Ivan was also known to use the alias “Bill” and worked for the Roads and Traffic Authority—both details consistent with Onions’ story. He had been charged with picking up and raping two female hitchhikers at knifepoint in April 1971. The modus operandi and victimology foreshadowed those of the Belanglo Forest Killer. Moreover, he had not been at work during any of the dates of the murders.

On February 26, 1994, Ivan Milat was placed on round-the-clock surveillance to ensure he did not commit any further crimes or destroy evidence. In keeping with the hypothesis that the Belanglo Forest Killer took mementos from his victims to relive the slayings, Task Force Air was convinced that his home in Eagle Vale was a trove of “souvenirs” taken from the Belanglo Forest victims. The noose tightened even further when Paul Onions arrived in Sydney on May 2. After being shown photographs of 13 different men, one of whom was Ivan Milat, Onions easily identified him as “Bill,” his attempted abductor.

A decision was quickly made to arrest Ivan Milat for his 1990 attack on Paul Onions. This would allow the investigators to search his residence in Eagle Vale while detaining him in custody without bail. They strongly suspected that Ivan’s house held the key to unlocking the murderer’s identity—once he had been placed under arrest, they would initiate a series of surprise raids on a number of properties belonging to his family, while subjecting other Milats to questioning. Well aware that Ivan was armed and dangerous, the taskforce carefully assembled a team of four negotiators, 21
investigators, and 26 members of the SPG’s Tactical Operations Unit to ensure his arrest went smoothly. Shortly after dawn on May 22, 1994, Ivan Milat was arrested at his residence. Among the many items recovered from the Eagle Vale house were: .22 caliber cartridges of the Winchester Winner and Eley brands; currency brought back from Indonesia by Gabor Neugebauer and Anja Habschied; rolls of black electrical tape and zip ties consistent with those recovered from the Neugebauer/Habschied crime scene; Deborah Everist and Simone Schmidl’s sleeping bags; over a dozen pieces of camping equipment linked to Simone Schmidl; a photo of Ivan’s girlfriend wearing articles of clothing that had belonged to Caroline Clarke; a map of the Belanglo State Forest; a .32 Browning pistol; remnants of a Ruger 10/22 rifle (one of the firearms that ballistics experts had determined was used on Clarke and Neugebauer); and a silencer built to fit a .22 caliber rifle.¹⁹

Ivan Robert Marko Milat was convicted of the murders of James Gibson, Deborah Everist, Simone Schmidl, Gabor Neugebauer, Anja Habschied, Caroline Clarke, and Joanne Walters on July 27, 1996. He spent the rest of his life in prison. On October 27, 2019, after a short battle with oesophageal cancer, he died on the Hospital Wing of Long Bay Correctional Centre, having never admitted to the Belanglo Forest murders or any of the dozen others of which he was suspected.

Unfortunately, a few years later it would become apparent that Milat was not the only killer who took advantage of the sparsely populated Australian Outback to abduct unsuspecting travelers. Just over seven years after Milat’s arrest, another brutal crime would shake Australia.

In 1996, Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees met at Visage nightclub in Huddersfield, UK, and fell in love. Both had been raised in West Yorkshire and were in their early twenties. At the time, Joanne worked for a local branch of the Thomas Cook travel agency, while
Peter was earning his BSc in building and construction management at Brighton University. Hoping to move down south with her new boyfriend, Joanne was delighted when Thomas Cook agreed to transfer her to Hove. The two moved into a one-bedroom flat near the beach together and enjoyed a seemingly idyllic life, holidaying in Greece, Italy, and Jamaica, while Peter slowly chipped away at his degree. Though he planned to provide a life for them as a construction site manager, neither Peter nor Joanne were ready to settle down until they had seen more of the world. In 1998, they began plotting a year-long journey overseas to commence when Peter finished his studies. They spent many nights poring over Joanne’s travel brochures.

Peter graduated in 2000, and by mid-November, the couple had landed in Kathmandu. They spent the next two months on an adventure through the snow-capped Himalayas, eventually flying to Singapore. From there, they traveled by bus through Malaysia into southern Thailand. The couple had been so enamored with Nepal’s monasteries and the resplendent temples of Thailand, that they longed to see the Buddhist remnants of the Khmer Empire in Cambodia. Young and fearless, they caught a flight to Phnom Penh: the Cambodian capital. It took less than two days for a pickpocket to relieve them of their cash, plane tickets, and traveler’s checks. Luckily, they managed to borrow enough money from a fellow tourist to return to Bangkok. Their time in southeast Asia had been transformative, but the couple realized they’d pushed their luck too far. It was time to head to Australia. As Peter told Joanne, “We might as well continue. We’re over the worst that can happen.” After securing a working visa, on the morning of January 16, 2001, Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees boarded a plane. When they alighted, they were in beautiful cosmopolitan Sydney in the middle of the Australian summer.

They found a flat in North Bondi Beach, and both promptly found work. Joanne was smitten with the city and wanted to stay as long as possible. Peter thought the real allure of Australia lay within
its vast and surreal tracts of wilderness. While Joanne explored, Peter set about looking for a vehicle for the next leg of their journey. He found it at Kings Cross Car Market—an orange Volkswagen Kombi pop-top van with a built-in fridge, gas cooker, CD player, and sink—and after managing to talk its former owners, two fellow British tourists, down from $3,000 to $1,200, he bought it on May 24. Peter spent the next month tinkering with it, knowing Joanne was reluctant to leave the Harbour City. But, eventually, it was time to see the rest of the country.

On the morning of June 25, 2001, they waved goodbye to their Sydney friends, and set off south through the Blue Mountains in the puttering orange wreck. Over the next two weeks, they passed through Canberra and into Melbourne, before veering west toward South Australia and the state capital of Adelaide. Next, they headed north along the Stuart Highway (aka the Track)—right along the center line that splits Australia into east and west—and entered the Northern Territory. With a population of approximately 200,000 Territorians scattered across 520,000 square miles, it was essentially a sparsely inhabited wilderness of rock and scrub, fractured by the occasional canyon. Dangerous, perhaps, in its emptiness.

By Wednesday, July 11, Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees had reached Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, home to the sacred monolith of Uluru. Like the thousands who had come before them, it left them awestruck, possessing a kind of spiritual resonance they had not felt since Thailand. They befriended a group of Canadian backpackers, and offered them a lift north in the Kombi. The group continued along the Track, stopping at King’s Canyon, before heading to Alice Springs where they parted ways. Peter and Joanne spent the night sleeping in the Kombi on the edge of the town. They remained in Alice Springs through Thursday and into Friday, visiting the hiking trails and gorges, purchasing plane tickets, and catching up on their emails at the local library. This little town of 20,000 residents would be the closest thing to civilization until they reached Darwin, 800 miles to the north. On the afternoon of July 14,
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they attended the annual Camel Cup in Blatherskite Park, where they watched the hump-backed creatures gallop clumsily around the dusty race track. They left Alice Springs in the Kombi soon after, continuing their odyssey along the Track. Around 6:20 p.m., Joanne pulled in to Ti Tree Roadhouse to refill the gas tank. They lit a joint, passing it back and forth as they watched the sun set slowly on the dry scrubland. Sydney was exciting, but the last few days had been nothing short of magical.

Within half an hour they were back on the road. Night had fallen, and the petty thievery they had encountered back in Cambodia was about to be overshadowed by something far worse.

At 7:30 p.m., Peter was driving along an isolated section of the Track, when headlights appeared in the rear-view mirror. To their surprise, a white pick-up truck drew up beside them, almost running parallel. The interior light was on, and the driver—a man with a black baseball cap and mustache—was signaling for them to pull over. While Joanne was nervous about stopping in the Outback at night, Peter concluded it was obviously important. The vehicles parked on the side of the highway. Peter exited and approached the pick-up truck—a Toyota. Watching through the window of the Kombi, Joanne could make out a dog in the passenger seat. Peter and the motorist were discussing sparks shooting out of their tail pipe.

Peter returned to the van and explained to Joanne that they were going to check the exhaust, and needed her to rev the engine. Joanne nodded and slid into the driver’s seat. Grabbing his pack of cigarettes, Peter circled around to the back of the Kombi with the other motorist. As she pressed her foot on and off the accelerator, she heard a loud bang, and wondered if the van had backfired. Suddenly, the man in the black baseball cap was standing outside the driver’s side window, brandishing a silver revolver. He ordered her to turn off the engine. When her trembling hands struggled to complete this simple task, he climbed into the van beside her and did it himself. Pressing the muzzle to her temple, he instructed her to place her hands behind her back and keep her head down. The
man secured her wrists together with cable ties, then forced her out of the passenger side door onto the ground. Straddling her, he attempted to bind her ankles with rope, but she flailed her legs, kicking out wildly at him. Angered, he punched her in the head, leaving her stunned. He picked her up by the scruff of her neck, and she cried out to Peter, but to no avail.

Dragging her over to his white Toyota, the man tried to tape her mouth shut. Somehow, she managed to resist his efforts, while continuing to scream for help. Her attacker instead pulled a sack over her head and pushed her into the passenger seat of the vehicle. Once she was inside, he removed the sack. Joanne’s eyes settled on the black and white dog sitting on the driver’s seat. She turned to her abductor, and got a good look at his face. Judging by his lined brow, graying mustache, and collar-length hair, he looked to be in his mid-40s, with droopy, deep-set eyes and sunken cheeks. An ill-fitting checkered shirt, dark tee, and thick pants hung from his tall frame. Next, he grabbed her and shoved her under the canopy in the back of his truck. Joanne tried to speak with him, but he threatened to shoot her if she didn’t shut up. She heard him move away from the vehicle toward the Kombi, followed by the sound of something heavy being dragged across the ground. Seeing her chance, Joanne wriggled her way onto the truck’s tray, placed her legs over the side, and slipped onto the road. As soon as she felt her feet touch down, she sprinted toward the bush. The dry branches tore at her as she crashed blindly through the scrub. Once she was far enough away from the road, she crouched behind some tall bushes and went still. Out on the road she could hear her assailant’s movements. A flashlight scanned the tangled scrubland looking for her, then eventually went out. After a few minutes, she heard a vehicle door open and slam shut, followed by an engine’s roar. Headlights illuminated the highway momentarily, then shot off down the road.

Wisely, Joanne remained in hiding. Sometime later, she heard the man return to the crime scene to remove the second vehicle. When he had disappeared once more into the night, she tried
unsuccessfully to free her hands from the zip ties. Exhausted, she staggered up to the roadside and collapsed. Uncertain as to whether the man in the baseball cap would revisit the area yet again, she chose to remain lying in the grass, waiting for the first road train. Cars were too risky—she had no idea what vehicle her attacker might be driving. With the appearance of a road train, she stumbled out into the road and flagged it down. While the two men who occupied the vehicle, Vince Millar and Rodney Adams, used a tool to remove the zip ties, she recounted her experience to them and stressed the need to find her missing boyfriend. Millar and Adams did their best to search the area, but Peter Falconio had seemingly vanished. They decided to take her to the nearby town of Barrow Creek. Joanne Lees arrived at approximately 2 a.m.

At 4:20 a.m., policemen from Alice Springs arrived to gather forensic evidence from Joanne Lees’ person and record statements. They waited until 7 a.m. to erect roadblocks and search the stretch of road where the attack had occurred, finding only a pool of Peter’s blood, Joanne’s footprints, and the Kombi concealed in the bush 90 yards from the initial crime scene. After that, they more or less gave up on the crime for a few weeks, due to insufficient corroborating evidence. Yet Peter Falconio remained missing.

Though Joanne Lees garnered great sympathy for her terrifying ordeal, it wasn’t long before a cottage industry of books and newspaper articles sprang up falsely accusing her of committing, or being complicit in, Peter Falconio’s murder. The baseless accusations derived chiefly from discrepancies in Lees’ recollections of the crime, her perceived inappropriate appearance and attire during television interviews, and the overblown revelation that she had cheated on Peter while the couple were staying in Sydney.25

Eventually, when the poverty of the Northern Territory police’s investigation came under scrutiny, they were jolted into action and managed to retrieve an unknown male DNA sample from Joanne’s t-shirt, the zip tie handcuffs, and the Kombi’s gearshift. They publicly released CCTV footage from a Shell truck stop in Alice Springs
revealing the face of a man who had paid at the register at 12:38 a.m. on July 15. They urged the man in the CCTV footage to come forward so he could be eliminated as a suspect, to no avail. A $250,000 reward was issued for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the attacker. Cross-referencing the names of 36 men who tipsters had identified as the man on the CCTV with registered owners of 1991–99 Toyota Land Cruiser 4WDs, the police identified one Bradley John Murdoch, 43.

Born in Western Australia on February 19, 1958, Murdoch had moved to the state capital of Perth with his family at the age of 13. A known thug and bully, he had dropped out of high school at 15, started a trucking company, and joined an outlaw motorcycle gang, the Coffin Cheaters. In 1980, the 21-year-old Murdoch struck and killed a cyclist while driving, was convicted of causing death by dangerous driving, and given a suspended sentence. Murdoch had married that same year, though his trucking business went bankrupt in 1983. His physical abuse of his wife, Diane, led to the couple’s separation in 1986. By this time, he was working as a truck driver and transporting drugs. During the 1990s, Murdoch had developed a White Supremacist viewpoint, even joining a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. His left arm bore a tattoo of a lynched Aboriginal man with his legs on fire, while a tattoo on his right arm depicted a Klansman pointing at another indigenous Australian. On August 20, 1995, a drunk Murdoch had opened fire with a bolt action rifle on a crowd of Aboriginal Australians in Kimberley, and was subsequently incarcerated for 15 months. Released from prison, he had eventually settled in Broome, Western Australia.

On November 1, police in Broome brought Murdoch in for questioning, but in a baffling display of investigative incompetence, failed to ask him to provide a DNA sample. Fortunately, on May 17, 2002, the Falconio task force apprehended a drug-runner working with Murdoch who divulged details of the attack that had not been released to the public. DNA obtained from Murdoch’s brother was found to be closely related to the samples taken from
the T-shirt and Kombi, and a warrant was issued for Bradley Murdoch’s arrest. But by that time, he had vanished.

After his police interview, Murdoch absconded to a farmhouse in South Australia owned by a former brothel keeper, which was also home to the owner’s 33-year-old girlfriend, and her 12-year-old daughter. Hiding out there, Murdoch repeatedly claimed the police were trying to frame him for the murder of Peter Falconio. His constant use of amphetamines only fueled his paranoid fire. Allegedly, on August 21, 2002, Murdoch kidnapped the woman and her daughter at gun-point, chaining them up with manacles affixed to the rear of his Landcruiser. It was later claimed he raped the 12-year-old girl.\(^{27}\) While driving across the state, he supposedly rambled non-stop about the Falconio case and how he was being set up—all while wearing a T-shirt which he admitted belonged to the missing Englishman. After keeping the mother and daughter for a period of 25 hours, he let them go. Not long after, Bradley John Murdoch was arrested outside a supermarket in Port Augusta. When police searched his vehicle they found a knife, .308 rifle with telescopic sight, loaded .22 Beretta semi-automatic pistol, electric cattle prod, crossbow with 13 bolts, chains, shackles, 800 rounds of ammunition, and night vision goggles. He was charged with two counts of rape, false imprisonment, and one count of assault.\(^{28}\)

Throughout the course of his South Australian trial, police learned that Murdoch had returned to drug-running, transporting massive amounts of cannabis from Sedan, South Australia, up the Track to Alice Springs, and then back to Broome. This criminal enterprise netted him hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. Though Murdoch was ultimately found not guilty of the rape, imprisonment, and assault charges by a majority verdict, his DNA had been obtained during the process and matched to the samples in the Falconio case. Moreover, in November 2002, Joanne Lees was approached by members of the Northern Territory police and shown a series of photographs. She identified Bradley John
Murdoch as the man who had attacked her on the Track almost two years earlier.  

In April 2005, Murdoch was extradited to Northern Territory and charged with both the murder of Peter Falconio and the assault and attempted abduction of Joanne Lees. His trial commenced in Darwin on October 17, 2005. Murdoch pleaded not guilty to each of the charges. On December 13, he was convicted on all charges by unanimous verdict and sentenced to life imprisonment, with no possibility of parole for at least 28 years. In the years since, he has occupied cells at Darwin’s maximum security Berrimah prison and the Darwin Correctional Centre, continuing to maintain his innocence, and assailing the criminal justice system with repeated appeals and requests for special treatment.

In 2007, Joanne Lees’ book *Joanne Lees: Murder in the Outback* was published, providing the general public with her firsthand account of what had transpired. Sadly, as of the time of this writing, Peter Falconio’s body has never been recovered.
Endnotes

The Mothman Prophecies 2002

1 *The Mothman Prophecies* by John Keel.
2–27 Ibid

Wolf Creek 2005

1 *Milat: Inside Australia's Biggest Manhunt, a Detective's Story* by Clive Small.
2–5 Ibid
6 *News Australia*, 2 November 2019—“Death of Simi: The terrifying story of Simone Loretta Schmidl’s murder”
7 *Milat: Inside Australia's Biggest Manhunt, a Detective's Story* by Clive Small.
8–11 Ibid
12 *News Australia*, 2 Nov 2019—“Death of Simi: The terrifying story of Simone Loretta Schmidl’s murder”
13 *Milat: Inside Australia's Biggest Manhunt, a Detective's Story* by Clive Small.
14–19 Ibid
20 *And Then the Darkness: The Disappearance of Peter Falconio and the Trials of Joanne Lees* by Sue Williams.
21 Ibid
22 *The Telegraph*, 19 October 2005—“Backpacker tells of Outback attack and points out her boyfriend’s alleged killer in court”
23 *Murdoch v The Queen*
24 Ibid
25 *And Then the Darkness: The Disappearance of Peter Falconio and the Trials of Joanne Lees* by Sue Williams.
26 *The Age*, 15 December 2005—“Massive search for Falconio remains”