

Chapter 39

Crouched over his dog-eared notebook on the kitchen table, Kev wrote a Gundabarri phrase in pencil, an eraser at the ready, and pronounced it repeatedly. He peered around the place, his mind searching for the right letters and markings, Skipper at his feet.

After a deep breath, he thought, this won't be easy.

Acting above your station once daunted him but after he worked for the union he realised himself. As an Official, he talked to his fellow shearers so they understood what needed doing. Like in the army; giving instructions. Now he committed to this business because of Catherine and her Canberra mob. They had confidence in him.

Since he mailed his last tape, he realised Gundabarri had not been 'spelt out.' So, he took the job on. Once he overcame the problem of the lettering to bring words closer to the best pronunciation, he recognised that written on paper the language might be learnt at home or in school. That surprised him.

'Obvious, isn't it, Skipper?'

To the song of his scratching pencil morning passed peacefully until he heard a grumpy, grinding engine on Gumby Road. He expected it to fall away but instead, the vehicle changed down a gear, suggesting a truck turned onto his drive. When it came to rest and two doors opened and closed, the new arrivals made their way to the landing. By the time their footsteps scraped the step, he fronted the door.

'Hello,' he called, seeing two men, one of them, Danny's employer.

Something happened to him, he thought. Everything alright? He turned out his hands as if to say "What's this about?"

Paddy glanced at his companion, Con Demitriotis. 'He's fine.' Almost smiling, Bourke stretched his body like he was newly out of bed. Putting his hand to the wall, and one foot on the boards, he was coming no closer.

Fifteen years ago, this prickly man rammed Dickie's tow car off the road on the other side of the bridge and drove his rival into receivership. Poor Dickie lost everything, only saved from destitution when he won a Council job. He lived on the other side of the river ever since.

Now he stood where Badger once slept, shadowed by a green-and-white motor.

'I've come about a matter.'

'Business?'

'We've got a few things in common. Gotta stick together. We have things to protect, things to share. Cops are a problem, right?'

He let him draw a chummy picture at his leisure.

'Like Danny. He's a good boy. Works well for me. Very friendly with the boys. So helpful.'

'What's this about?'

'He says you'll lead us to the Commodore VL. Seems you're the only person who can.'

Kev sucked his top lip.

He wouldn't.

'You are the man about town, mate. A volunteer plenty; everyone likes that. And now,' he said so melodious, 'I need your assistance because ... He stopped mid-sentence. 'It's like this: I left some valuables in the boot. Sentimental value, you understand. Billy drove off with them. Careless of me, I know. He didn't know anything about them; innocent as a newborn.'

He might have admired the mechanic's patter if he hadn't used Danny's name like a casino chip. The rotten odour from the back of the Commodore couldn't be valuable to Bourkie unless ... it's a body!

Paddy's rugged face appeared menacing under the landing shade. 'You understand what I'm getting at? I'm not interested in the car. I want to recover my precious things. The car's all yours. Your son as much as said you'd take me.'

'I see. How did you come by the car? What kind of things are they?'

A rare grin. 'Sentimental valuables. I won't insult you by offering a reward, though, why not? Five hundred bucks for your help ... easy money.'

'What about Billy? Surely, he's the one to talk to.'

He smirked. 'Ah, poor fellow. He misplaced the VL that night in the park when you drove away with a beautiful

new vehicle. And why not? Late model. Air-conditioned. Powerful engine.'

Kev shuffled back, his heel striking the wall. Bourke already knew too much, or was he guessing? 'That car might be dumped in the river,' he said. 'Your goods would be ruined, top to bottom, and no use to anyone.'

'Not your style, mate. Besides, I am offering you five hundred bucks for the location, tipped in water, firebombed or hammered. Uncle Paddy will handle everything, no questions asked.'

He waited, and so did Kev, a heavy silence borne with impatience.

Finally, his visitor took out a fag and asked Con for a light. Once it was lit, he settled back. 'Con is so helpful.'

With that, the boss stepped on the landing. 'I'm grateful for him but losing patience with you.'

'I'll ask around, Mr Bourke.'

'Nar. I think you'll assist me.'

'I will.'

'Not like this, mate. Not like this.'

Kev's face told his enemy more than enough. Paddy threw his fag on the floorboards and ground it in with his cowboy boots until the remains slipped between the boards. He reached into his pocket and took out a silver lighter and a packet of Redhead matches.

Striking a match, he watched the flame settle into a steady burn on its thin slither of wood, and flung it at the cane chair.

Kev moved quickly to smother it, using the nearest rag to prevent the seat from catching fire.

Bourke lit another, this one he tossed onto a newspaper pile beside the door.

'Damn you,' said Kev, turning and he smothered that too.

And another, held in front of his face. 'I'm not normally this clumsy,' casting the flame at the window curtains, although it fell in the woodpile.

Amongst the scattered logs and kindling, he extinguished the match. 'Stop. Just ...'

Paddy grinned, the man's eyes so excited. 'So, Kev, help me out. Or see what a common lighter can do.'

'Not a chance. Get out of here. Out,' forgetting he might call on Con's thuggery.

'That's unfortunate, matey. There's trouble if you think you can run a racket yourself. Think I'll let you threaten me? Think you can turn the cops onto me; pin Badger's murder on me?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Bit late, sonny Jim. Better give up before your place goes up in flames.'

With his jaw grinding, and cheeks rippling, he examined the cottage like a hack building inspector. 'Will burn well. And I don't care who's inside.'

Kev swallowed. 'You've got this all wrong.'

'I've never been more right. You take me to the Commodore or you'll lose everything. New Year's Day. Should be fun.'

Kev remembered how much he disliked tow trucks, and he didn't like green either.

That night, Cassidy's men broke down his front door. The unlocked one. That made an impact. Charlie Ward smashed and climbed through the back window, Crowbar swept aside chairs, scattered and hammered cups, crockery and plates like he played the xylophone. Plenty of noise, action, darkening his senses.

Raids should be quick and loud according to Cassidy. Entry by smash-bash-and-crash, before the poor bastard wakes up. Grab the scumbag before he has time to think, shove him across the room, and pin him against the nearest wall. Put your hand on their throat and the bastard's eyes pop. Extract the guilt and get out of there. If she's a black sheila, dig where no one else dares. Always works.

This isolated suspect received the treatment, the same as everyone else. It produced the same reaction too: the sleepy, wide-eyed crim searched for a way out of chaos, cacophony and calamity. Cassidy laughed.

'A blackfellow in pyjamas. What next?'

Back to the wall, clutching a blanket, his eyes narrowed, but his mouth quivered.

A disfigured face pushed against his. 'Gimme the low-down, Kev. Now.'

Turning his face from his inquisitor and his black-faced cohorts, he expelled sweaty fear.

'On what you did to Bicentennial Badger.'

'I told -'

'You told Hanna-spanner a pack of lies.'

A swift slap across the face, and a kick in the groin, darkness preventing any defence. He buckled up in agony, Cassidy peeling him open again, bringing his face close, observing the pain on his face, smirking.

'I'm telling ya, we're serious. Tell us about your gun-toting army, or we'll fuck you over; Billy, Mara and the rest.'

Where are the weapons?’

He said nothing, sliding to one side, and curling up again, fearing another slap and kick. Or worse.

With his boot against Kev’s back, the cop demanded, ‘Come on, mate. Give me something. Give. If you’re so innocent, give me something.’

Kev searched past, perhaps in hope of seeing an angel, but instead, spied more cops in dark clothes, with blackened faces leering at him; with torches in hand, the house off, altogether a sideshow’s Ghost Train of Horrors.

‘Why? I—’

‘Boy, oh boy, fella. We ask the questions around here. No time for introductions. What do you reckon, boys: did Henry what-his-name say “Please” or “Thank you” before being dispatched?’

Their laughter bore down on him, only encouraging his inquisitor. ‘Bet Henry begged forgiveness for his sins, eh? On his knees praying for his hide, because he didn’t have much time left. I only wish I could have helped him.’

Cassidy’s comic routine must have relaxed him because he fell on the nearby lounge, lit a cigarette, sucked deeply, and let the smoke pour from his lungs.

With a bruised shoulder, crotch and arms, Kev checked out the damage. Coughing violently, clutching a blanket, he didn’t attempt comfort.

‘Understand, mate,’ said Cassidy in darkness. ‘We’re here for the town’s protection. Rough times. Unless you gimme-some-shelter from my boss, you’re doomed. So is your son.’ Kev stiffened. ‘Yeah, Danny. He’s been a bad boy. Chances are we’ll have him in gaol soon enough. Any time, really.’

Kev wrapped his arms around himself, though he couldn’t refrain from closing his eyes and lowering his head.

The cop leapt from the dark, holding Kev’s head by his ears, pulling forward, bringing them nose-to-nose. ‘Thinking time, mate. Don’t hold out. Think quick.’ He chuckled in short fits, before pulling back.

‘I guess we should wait a bit.’ He looked over his shoulder to the men with darting torchlights. ‘We clocking overtime yet?’

Laughter rippled around the room as Kev shuffled his legs to fight off the cold.

‘You’ll catch the flu lying on the floor, fella. Who can tell what condition you’ll be in by tomorrow? I ain’t no medico. What can I do if you fall sick or try to escape? You could be hurt; you could die. In this dark, you could have a nasty accident. I can’t be responsible. Chances are you’re on the grog. Kidneys fail. I’m no doctor.’

Cold fluid dripped down his face, whether blood, sweat or snot, didn’t matter to him. Further down, his trousers soaked up his fear, the salty urine rising. That bothered him.

Give them something, he thought. Something.

‘Come along,’ said Cassidy, grabbing his shoulder, then his throat and mouth. With both hands, he slammed him against the wall. Thud. He leaned to his face and placed his hands against his throat. The pressure intensified before his hands moved up and down, oscillating between throat and face.

After a while, he removed his hand, using a finger to draw a sharp line across his windpipe and flesh.

Oblivion.

It was enough.

‘The car.’

‘What’s he saying,’ Cassidy asked the other cops? ‘Speak clear, mate.’ His face drew closer, the tobacco breath flooding his nostrils. He examined him for every sign of fear, a true perfectionist. ‘I am listening.’

‘Mr Badger’s ...was ...a VL.’

‘Bugger you,’ answered Cassidy, and shoved him hard against the table.

‘Same as Billy’s,’ he blurted from his wretched position.

‘The VL. They’re the same.’

‘Same? They drive the same model or *is* the same car?’

‘Is, same.’ Kev tasted blood in his mouth.

‘Good boy. Good boy.’

Cassidy paced the floor to take in this new information, leaving him gasping, coughing and rubbing about his throat, his hand glided over his bruised contours. His chest and neck ached. Propping himself, a sharp pain made him fall back against the matting. In this state, he felt as wet as stepping from the shower.

His torturer reappeared. ‘So what?’ he said, standing over him. ‘The Commodore was stolen by your mate. And what? Did they fight over it? Kill him?’

‘He ... bought it.’

Cassidy grinned like a car salesman. ‘You mean, your mate, the revolutionary, says to Mr Rich Sydneysider: “Here you are, mate. Have a few hundred bucks for your Bicentennial car. I’ll take it off your hands. We’ve been buddies for days. A little fight on the street doesn’t matter.” Uncle Bicentenary says: “Thanks for the dough. Me vehicle is all

yours.”

‘Sounds sensible, doesn’t it, boys?’

He put his back to him but swung around again. ‘Fuck you.’

A boot crashed into his thigh.

‘Arrh,’ cried Kev, his eyes smarting. ‘Off Bourke. He bought it ... off Bourke.’

‘Hello. Him again. We’re playing Pass-the-Parcel, eh? Let’s see: The vehicle is sold to a garageman, and Billy the Revolutionary buys a luxury Commodore, as you do. It disappears, and no one’s seen it or the official since.’

Cassidy considered it, still grinning. ‘Kev. You wouldn’t be telling me fibs, would you? More likely you murdered him and sold it on. Where is the corpus delicti? What happened between you and him?’

‘He must’ve ... took the money and ...’

‘What a story? Mr Badger is the Happy-little-Vegemite who takes a few hundred, and says “I’ll retire on that.” He’s alive and well and living in Cuba.’

Another kick in the guts, and his eyes watered. His body begged for breath, vomit rising, leaving him sprawled on the floor, Cassidy retreating to the next room. Men talked and whispered, occasionally laughed, expletives free-flowing before his tormentor returned.

‘Don’t be sad, Kev. Maybe, we’ve been wrong about you. We’re gonna slip out now and make some enquiries. Don’t go away, mate. Don’t leave this house. Your phone calls will be recorded.’

His parting words were not enough. He picked up the soda bottle, juggled it with both hands and pretended to lose grip. Regaining it in his fist, with all his strength, hurled it across the room. Smash. His wife’s gift exploded.

‘Remember, we’ll have another little chat real soon. And ... Merry Christmas.’