

CHAPTER 1

Dawn was Kevin's favourite time of the day, second only to knock-off time. It was cool and quiet, and things hadn't had the chance to go wrong yet.

From the far end of the house, where the bedrooms overlooked the servo and the main road, came the radio news theme. The strident jingle shattered the stillness like a chainsaw on full throttle. Six o'clock. Shit. The oldies were awake, and Kevin was running late. He scooped tea leaves into the pot and plonked two mugs beside it, then pressed the switch to re-boil the kettle.

Voices, the flush of the toilet, then his father appeared at the end of the hall. The fluoro flickered before flooding the kitchen in harsh light.

'Standing in the dark, son?'

'Mornin',' Kevin said, then slurped his coffee.

His father, dressed for work in shirt and overalls, walked over to the bench. 'Forecast says rain.' He peered out at the breaking day, as though expecting it to pour at any moment, but the only clouds were a pink-tinged band to the west.

'And we might win the Ashes, too.'

'Miracles do happen, eh.' His father lifted the kettle to gauge its weight of water, then hit the switch, making it burble.

'It just boiled,' Kevin said with a grin and a shake of his head. Every morning, the same ritual.

His father glanced at the calendar hanging from a nail by the fridge. January, it said, underneath the blonde girl in perfectly ironed denim and fresh-from-the-box Akubra, the horse at her side looking slightly bemused. Thursday, with a red K penned in one corner of today's square.

'Your turn to open, isn't it?'

'Just heading down now.' Kevin waved his half-drunk coffee in defence.

His mother came in, her blouse and jeans a worn, imperfect version of the rodeo queen's spotless country style. 'You had brekkie, son?'

'I'll wait for smoko.' He wasn't hungry, just nervous now they were both here.

'Late night, eh?' his father said.

'Thomas . . .' his mother said. She reached for the breakfast plates, her fingers long and calloused and tanned against the china. Kevin's parents had the same eyes: crow's feet in the corners, a permanent squint forged by years of living in sunshine, blinking against the memory of flies, alight with the humour that helped them persevere.

His father replied with a cheeky grin. 'Just an observation.'

'I was at Meg's,' Kevin said. 'Watching some movie. Went longer than I expected.' He blushed. They had had the TV on – the TV in her room. Some old werewolf flick, lots of howling, a couple having sex by a campfire. Their

attention had been on other things. 'I've actually been thinking, you know, maybe next time we go to Charleville, I'd . . . well, go check out the jeweller's.'

They looked at him, expressions hovering somewhere between a resigned knowing and concern. It reminded him of when he'd bought the Commodore and his father had been all, 'Yeah, it's a great car but what about the mileage', and his mother had said she liked the colour – white – and then got all worried because it had had only the one airbag.

'What do you, um, think about that?' he asked as the silence stretched out.

'Meg's a good girl.' His father reinforced the statement with a squeeze on Kevin's shoulder.

'She is; we both like her a lot,' his mother said. 'And you can bring her around here to *watch television* any time you like.'

Damn, his face was as hot as a barbecue plate.

'But you're only young, Kevin,' she continued. 'You've got time. You should enjoy being young. You don't want to do something rash. Just look at your father and me!'

'Make your own bloody tea, woman,' his father joked, even as he poured the two cups.

'It's just that her folks are talking about selling up and moving to Brissie,' Kevin said in a rush. God, his voice had a whine like a Land Rover's diff picking up speed. Made him sound like a kid. But he and Meg had been an item since . . . since they'd *been* kids.

'Brisbane, eh,' his father said. 'Quite a drive.'

'Yeah, fuckin' Brisbane.'

'Kevin,' his mother scolded. She didn't tolerate swearing, not in the house. What happened in the garage, well, that was the place for it. Skinned knuckles, shit in the eye, machinery rusted tight and unmoving, parts they waited weeks for only to find out the morons in the city had sent the wrong ones . . .

'What's so great about Brissie, anyway?' he said. He'd been there, once, two years ago when the cricket team made the regional finals. That was back when they had enough bodies to make an A-grade team, before the Thompson boys both went off to ag college and their best fast bowler planted his ute in an irrigation ditch on the way home from the pub. All those towers, crowding out the sky, looking as if they were about to fall and crush everyone in the bitumen canyons below. Everything so grey and cold; the air so thick with noise and exhaust that he could barely breathe. Meg would hate it there.

'I don't know if getting engaged is the answer to that particular problem, but you two are old enough to make your own decisions,' his father said.

'And we'll be here for you. Always,' his mother said.

'Always,' his father agreed. 'But right now, let's get to work. You open up and I'll be down once I've had a bite to eat. We'll have a proper chat about it later.'

His mother's encouraging smile followed him onto the landing. It could've

been worse. They could've given an outright no. Still, he thought they might've been a bit more excited. A bit more supportive. A kookaburra cackled, mocking, and Kevin glared in its general direction as the stairs juddered under his steel caps. He loved Meg and she loved him; nothing was going to change that. The blue heelers, Bill and Ben, scuttled out from under the stairs and snuffled around his heels. The wire gate rattled closed behind him as he strode out onto Barlow's Siding Road and headed for the service station. The building squatted in one corner of the T-junction facing the scrub-lined B-road, a route favoured by semis and buses looking to make up time, and grey nomads looking to take it slow. The sun, red and swollen, was still low, lone trees throwing long shadows across the barren flats. The heat was starting to settle, like a big open griller, reducing the horizon to a shimmering, silvered mirage. Underneath his overalls, the first beads of sweat stuck his Metallica T-shirt, black faded to grey, to his spine.

The yard at the back of the servo was a tussocked graveyard of rusting car bodies and pieces of farm machinery butting up against the paling fence. The dogs nosed through the patch of native garden, bordered by whitewashed rocks his mother had planted to welcome the occasional tourists, and explored a roofed timber picnic table and a fake well his father had never quite finished. One of the locals had painted a crescent-shaped yellowbelly on the side of the service station, its scales flaking and crusted with dust. It leaped through the station's name, King River Road House; though roadhouse was a bit of a grand title for the old timber servo and the tin-walled garage tacked to its side.

He couldn't blame Meg's folks for wanting to go to the big smoke. Half the shops in Barlow's Siding were closed, half the farms sold off and sitting fallow and unstocked, half of everyone gone down to Charleville or east to Brissie or the coast. The town would end up like that old Ford truck out back: abandoned, slowly falling apart under the sun, while the world drove past without a second glance. It was just that he – everyone – had always assumed that he and Meg would be together. This was their future, out here. Someone had to keep the place alive. The Siding was his home; damned if he'd let it die without a fight.

He unlocked the servo door and flung it open so hard it banged against the wall. Bill yelped, then looked at him accusingly, head cocked. Kevin grabbed a chocolate bar from the fridge as he went through the routine of opening up – cash register, pumps, his nemesis the coffee machine – then headed through the side door to the garage where a four-wheel-drive waited. The voice on the radio droned on about the chance of rain tomorrow and Kevin snorted; the clouds came and the clouds went, but it'd been a long time since they'd dropped anything heavier than a galah's piss on Barlow's Siding. Should've put a CD on, made the most of it before his father arrived and tuned into ABC Country for the rest of the day.

Kevin scrambled into the pit, the Land Cruiser making a metal ceiling over his head. If he got cracking, maybe he'd be able to shoot through early and catch up with Meg. She'd seemed nervous last night, unsure; they had a lot to talk about.

The screech of braking tyres in the driveway announced a vehicle pulling up in an awful hurry. The bell dinged and the dogs rose from the shade by the garage door and yapped. Kevin looked out through the gap between the floor and the four-wheel-drive in time to see someone enter. Trousers and a pair of polished black shoes, dulled with red dust. City slicker.

A man's urgent voice: 'Anyone here? Hey, you under the truck – I need your help.'

Kevin climbed out slow and made a show of wiping his hands on his overalls.

The man stood at the door, a dark shape against the daylight. The dogs whined. 'C'mon, kid, I don't have all day!'

If it hadn't been for the anxiety in the bloke's voice, Kevin would've told him to bugger off. He was no kid. Hands in his overalls pockets, he strolled over to see what the problem was, ready to point out the pumps were self-service. The sight of the stranger pulled him up. Thirtyish, solid, short back and sides framing a slab of face. Fresh scars on his cheek and forehead; hands stained with scarlet; trench coat hanging open, tie dangling loose against a blood-spattered white collar. And was that a bulletproof vest? A pistol nestled under his left armpit? A city copper? Out here?

'C'mon, kid – move!' The man's eyes flashed red, like in a bad snapshot.

Kevin blinked, stunned by the apparition. Then he was staring at space as the cop ran outside. Kevin followed, pulled in the man's wake.

Bill and Ben stood with legs wide apart, giving occasional barks as though sniping from out of kicking distance. A heavily tinted four-wheel-drive sat in the drive, steam hissing from under the bonnet. Rough silver haloes patterned the black bonnet like stars; a constellation stretched down the side of the vehicle. The side windows looked as if bricks had been thrown through them. BMW. Custom job, riding heavy on the shocks. Someone had messed it up good. *Jesus*.

The cop reefed the passenger door open and beckoned Kevin over. 'Give me a hand here!'

Kevin moved in a daze. Blood all over the seat and the dash, big smears of it like a kid had gone nuts with paint. Slumped in the middle of it, a man, hair plastered to his face in blood so thick it might have been sump oil.

'Let's get him inside.' The cop heaved on the wounded man. Another cop, Kevin guessed: same haircut, same vest. Kevin moved in to take an arm, feeling moist stickiness against his face as the dead weight bore down on him.

'You got a couch or something?' the cop asked.

'Up at the house.'

'On the floor, then. C'mon, we're running out of time.'

They manoeuvred the injured man through the internal door into the servo and eased him down on the lino between the racks of fan belts and fuel additives. The man made the quietest of groans.

His mate leant over him, shouting into his face. 'Dave? Can you hear me? Dave, you still with me, mate?' He swore when he got no response from the lolling face, Dave's mouth open and slack, his eyes showing white through the

slit lids.

'What happened?' Kevin asked.

'Is there a hospital? Shit, there isn't, is there.'

'Charleville's the nearest.'

The cop shook his head. 'C'mon, then.'

Kevin followed him to the rear of the four-wheel-drive.

The cop paused to take a long, hard look at the road, the paddocks, then fumbled with a padlock as big as his hand before working a steel bar to open the door. A body lay there, dark in the gloom.

The dogs went mental; the cop shouted at Kevin to shut them up and Kevin shouted at them to shut up and eventually they retreated, growling their concern.

The guy in the back was dark-skinned, dressed in jeans and T-shirt and leather jacket. Matted hair curled about his shoulders.

'He ain't gonna cart himself in,' the cop said, and grabbed the body under the armpits, leaving Kevin with the feet. Biker boots, cracked and dusty. He took the man by the knees, as though he was driving a wheelbarrow. The biker's jacket fell open, hanging down from his shoulders like limp wings. Something glinted on his chest, but Kevin couldn't get a good look as they jostled him inside and plonked him down beside the wounded copper.

The cop felt his mate's neck. 'Hang in there, Dave.' He looked up at Kevin, his sweaty brow tinted pink with blood and dirt. 'You got something we can tie this bastard down with?'

'We got some chain,' Kevin said. 'Some fencing wire.'

'Bring it here, quick.'

Kevin went into the garage, aware of the curious scrutiny of Bill and Ben, wishing they could do more than just stare and whine. Like go fetch his dad; that'd be bloody handy right about now. He grabbed a length of chain, a coil of wire and a pair of pliers. The cop considered the chain, then said, 'Cut me some of that wire. A good couple of feet's worth. Then cut the same for yourself and wrap it tight around his ankles. Real tight. I don't want the bastard to be able to so much as scratch, you got it?'

'You wanna tell me what's going on?'

'Just get a move on.'

Kevin did what he was told, making sure the biker wouldn't be able to move. Not that that seemed like a problem – the guy hadn't so much as twitched since they'd dragged him in. Kevin wasn't sure he was even alive.

When he was finished, he handed the pliers and a length of wire to the cop, who used the pliers to pull the wires around the biker's wrists as tight as he could. Kevin's respect for the cop went up a notch – he wouldn't have expected many city slickers to know a Cobb & Co. twitch. The cop added a pair of handcuffs that looked solid enough to bind a gorilla.

'Jesus,' Kevin muttered.

'Yeah, he's a bad one, this one. All right, stand back.'

Kevin watched as the cop checked the wire around the biker's ankles and gave a satisfied nod, then hefted the pliers. They were a big pair with a bull nose. He stood over the biker's chest and Kevin could see clearly what had

caused the glint – the man had a piece of half-inch steel protruding from his chest.

‘Jesus,’ he said. ‘Why did we bother tying him up? He’s gotta be dead.’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you?’ There was no humour in the cop’s voice as he grabbed the end of the steel and pulled. For a moment, nothing happened, then the metal gave, slowly inching out of the biker’s chest with a low, wet sucking sound.

The biker coughed, groaned.

The cop pulled a big-arse knife, a Bowie or something like that, from under his jacket as he told Kevin, ‘Get me a bucket or a glass, anything that’s clean. Hurry!’

Kevin brought the first thing he could find – an oversized souvenir mug from a stand near the front door. It bore a picture of a fish and rod with a logo reading, ‘Welcome to Barlow’s Siding, yellowbelly country’. He wiped a swatch of dust off on his sleeve and handed the mug to the cop; he paid it the barest of glances – ‘Hold it for a minute’ – before crouching over the biker.

‘You know what I want, Taipan. Give it up.’

‘Go fuck yourself.’

The cop seized the man’s jaw. ‘I can take your head right here. Your only hope is to stay useful to me.’

‘Until we get to Brissie and I lose it anyway. No time like the present, eh?’

Dave’s breath rattled wetly.

‘I don’t have time for your games, Taipan.’ The cop plunged his knife into the biker’s shoulder.

Taipan barely reacted. ‘It don’t hurt, y’know.’

‘If Dave dies, you’re next, and I swear to God, it *will* hurt.’

‘Swear to whoever you like. I ain’t doin’ nothin’ for you, Hunter.’

‘Push his sleeve up,’ Hunter told Kevin. ‘Don’t worry, he can’t hurt you. Just don’t look in his eyes. You never know what mojo they’re packin’.’

‘You wanna tell me what the fuck’s going on? My dad’s gonna be here any minute.’

Hunter’s eyes were two massive pupils of glowing red ringed with bands of gunmetal grey – an animal in the headlights. ‘Just hold this bastard’s sleeve up for me. Do it, or my partner’s gonna die here on your floor, and you can tell your old man you let it happen.’

Kevin did as he was told. The biker’s skin felt cool and smooth, tight with corded muscle.

‘What’s your name, fella?’ he asked Kevin. The guy acted so relaxed, sprawled there as though on a sun lounge waiting for his cocktail to be served, but there was a hint of cold in his dark brown eyes. A touch of snake, watchful and deadly. ‘Handy under the bonnet, are ya?’

‘Don’t look at him,’ Hunter snapped, and Kevin jerked his eyes from the biker’s and watched, fascinated and confused, as the cop ran his knife down Taipan’s forearm. The skin parted, showing as red as a steak done rare. Blood trickled from the cut. Hunter punched the wound. ‘Let it down, you bastard!’

The biker stared hate at him.

Kevin backed away. 'Jesus Christ, what kind of cop *are* you?'

'He ain't no cop,' Taipan said, his voice filled with disgust.

'Hold him steady, damn you!' Hunter turned back to the biker. 'Sun's up, creep. You choose.'

Taipan smiled, teeth very white. Blood ran in a thick burgundy stream from the wound in his arm.

Hunter manoeuvred the mug to catch the pitter-patter.

Kevin backed into a shelf, rattling containers of oil and coolant. 'What the hell are you doing?'

Hunter didn't answer. When the mug was brimming, he crawled to his partner and raised the man's head onto his knees. 'Here, Dave, this'll put you right.'

The dogs yapped and the door buzzer sounded and, for one frozen moment, no-one moved at all.

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