

# Chapter One

A stranger rode into town only it wasn't a stranger, it was Kerry, come to say goodbye to Pop before he fell off that perch he'd been clinging to real stubborn way for so long. Cancer, Ken reckoned, never mind cancer, ya couldn't kill the old bastard with an axe. But ah, no good. The call come last night. Get yerself home, chop chop.

Kerry dropped into second as she cruised past the corner store, clocking the *whitenormalsavages*, a dozen blue eyeballs popping fair outta their moogle heads at the sight of her. Skinniest dark girl on a shiny new Softail, heart attack city, truesgod. So yeah, let's go for it, eh, you mob. Let's all have a real good dorrie at the blackfella du jour. Kerry resisted the urge to elevate both middle fingers as she rode past the astounded locals, past the produce store. Past Frankie's Mechanical. Past the vacant lot with its waist-high weeds hiding a generation's worth of fag ends, torn condom wrappers and empty bottles. Past the landmark pub which hadn't changed in a century and wasn't about to start now, thanks very much all the same. And when Kerry had made it to the other end of Main Street, that was about it for Durrongo ('Place of Centrelink fraud,' according to Ken), population 320. Now, as ever, if you wanted anything more complicated than a beer, a bale of hay, or a loaf of last week's bread from Kath at the general inconvenience store, you had to make tracks for Patto, half an hour up the highway.

As Durrongo petered out Kerry throttled back. She stopped at the T-junction of Main and Mount Monk Road and straightened

first one stiff leg, then the other, letting her toes point skyward in heavy black leather boots. Twenty thousand bucks of American heritage engineering shifted in her hands as she did. Right boot out: a small tilt to the left. Left boot out: a small tilt to the right. Then, in a futile gesture towards flying under the gossip radar for at least the afternoon, Kerry turned the bike off. Silence expanded around her. She flipped her visor up and flinched, late December bouncing straight up at her off the tar. Eleven in the morning and already the road soft beneath her boot heels. Sweat broke out on her forehead as she gazed around the empty intersection and the paddocks beyond it.

‘Been a fair while,’ Kerry murmured to nobody and to everybody. ‘Been a fair old while.’ She let out a sharp bark of laughter. There was no telling what today might bring, or who might be alive at the end of it. Same as any other fucking day in Durrongo, in other words, only more so.

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Three waark flapped down onto the road beside her, drawn to the flattened remains of a king brown which looked to have lost a fight with Scruffy McCarthy’s cattle truck.

The birds stared at Kerry, cawing obnoxiously before they turned to their snake, and promptly ripped it in half. The biggest crow seized the open-jawed front end of the carcass, and hopped with glee to the grassy verge. Hungry, it plunged hard into the rotting head, seeking out the reptile’s soft brain, and then looked up, totally baffled. The fanged snake skull had gotten wedged hard onto the bird’s beak. The crow shook its head, first in surprise and then in anger, but to no avail. Kerry watched, fascinated and appalled. Would the crow manage to free itself? Or would the mundoolun have the last grim laugh, its hard, tiny skull locking the crow’s beak shut until the bird starved to death? The eaters and the eaten of Durrongo, having it out at the crossroads. You don’t see old mate

Freddy McCubbin painting that, do ya? Talk about down on his fucking luck.

The other crows noticed their companion's plight.

'Hahaha, looks like a mutant, half a bird and half a snake,' mocked the one on the left.

'Are you ssssssssstuck?' asked the other, falling about with delight at its own wit.

I'm not the only one in Durrongo plagued by arseholes then, Kerry noted.

'Yugam baugal jang! Wahlu wiya galli!' the luckless crow complained. *My beak's no good. You could help a bird.*

Kerry looked around the deserted road.

'Yugam baugal jang! Buiyala galli! Yugam yan moogle Goorie Brisbane?' *You could help, instead of sitting up there like a mug lair from the city.*

Kerry looked around again. The waark hopped up and down in rage.

Then the second crow chimed in, dripping scorn.

'It's no good to ya, fang-face. Can't talk lingo! Can't even find its way home! Turned right at the Cal River when it shoulda kept going straight. It's as moogle as you look.'

'How the hell do you lot know where I've been?' Kerry retorted. Back in town five minutes and the bloody wildlife keeping tabs on her already. The second crow preened as it gave her a self-important sideways glance.

'Us waark see all that happens. We see the platypus in his burrow at midnight. We see the dingo bitch in her lair under the new moon; we see—'

The third crow butted in, impatient.

'Oh shuttup ya bloody blowhard. Make me sick, truesgod! Old Grandfather Pelican went and told our aunty second cousin he seen ya get lost at the bridge. Goodest blackfella!' The third crow sharpened its beak on the bitumen in contempt. Kerry turned to

the trapped bird, pulling her hair up into a tight ponytail to get it off her neck. Because Jesus Christ Almighty, the heat.

‘I’ll help if you fly up here,’ she offered, tapping her handlebar. The other crows instantly began to shriek in alarm.

The snake-crow tilted its mutant head at her.

‘Gulganelehla Bundjalung.’ *Speak Bundjalung*. A test of good character.

‘Bundjalung ngaoi yugam baugal,’ she said. *My Bundjalung is crap*. The bird hesitated.

‘It’s a trap, a trap, a trap!’ the other crows screeched.

The sun beat down on four black heads as one minute passed, and then another. Kerry shrugged and kicked the Harley to life again, the enormous vee-engine booming like a bitch over the thistle-studded paddocks.

‘Well, suit yerself bunji. I’m not sitting here getting cooked to death.’

With a last suspicious glance at her the crow took two fast hops and then was airborne. Its so-called friends took off as well, bullying each other all the way across the paddock to the dead gum standing by the creek.

Kerry sat for another troubled moment, feeling certain the crow was going to spend several hideous days before starvation claimed it. But she hadn’t ridden three hours to worry about a doomed waark. She was here to deliver her final goodbye to Pop, and then fuck off quick bloody smart back over the border to Queensland, well away from anything resembling Durrongo.

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Reving the throttle, she looked straight in front of her, down a long gravel driveway to the house that jack shit built. It huddled beneath the spreading arms of a large leopard tree. Same old fibro walls. Same old iron roof with rust creeping into a few more panels each wet season. The lawn bore a lopsided Mohawk from where