

ERN WAITS in Brenda's bedroom until he is sure that Elaine has gone to sleep, as the last thing he needs is another confrontation.

He and Johnny had sat at the kitchen table sharing a bottle of red from Fortuni's, talking about their plans, until Elaine's homecoming put an end to their conversation. He was stunned by how lovely she had looked, hair pinned up, pretty green frock. He had only ever seen her in a nurse's uniform, starched and prim, an ugly red cape that clashed with her auburn hair and dusty freckles, arranged around her shoulders.

'You look gorgeous,' he said.

'Out,' she said pointing to the door. 'I need a cuppa before bed, so I'd ask you two to get out of my way.'

'Hey, if you can't talk civil to my friend when he pays you a compliment, don't open your mouth at all,' Johnny fired back.

'Yeah,' Ern snarled. He felt his heart thump against his chest. Elaine stared at him long and hard before saying, 'I don't know what Brenda sees in you, I really don't.' She

turned on her heel to leave, but before she could reach the door, Johnny was on her like a cat on a mouse.

‘No one insults my mate and gets away with it,’ he said, edging closer and closer until she had her back against the wall.

‘Get out of my way, you greasy little wog,’ she shouted, pushing him away.

‘Yeah, and you know what us greasy little wogs are good at? Wiping the smile off the faces of sheilas like you.’

‘Get out!’ she shouted.

Johnny inched further forward, a smile curling his lips. ‘You like me, don’t you?’ She screamed and launched herself at him. Managing to shove him aside, she rushed along the hallway and up the stairs. They heard her door slam and something heavy scrape across the floor, no doubt a chest of drawers blocking the door.

Ern lit a cigarette and rested his head in his hands. Brenda had made him promise when he came to stay that he would have no visitors, would clean up any mess, and would not be there when Elaine came home. ‘Elaine’s the type of girl who needs her peace and quiet,’ Brenda had said. ‘She’s not like me, happy to have anyone drop in. Elaine’s more formal. I want you to respect that about her. She comes from a good family in the country.’

‘All right, love,’ he had said. ‘I’ll do whatever you ask, because after all, you’re the most important thing in the world to me.’

‘Cut your rubbish,’ she had said. ‘If I was so important, how come you’re planning to run away to Queensland?’

‘I’m not running away. We’ve been through that before. I want us to get on in the world, that’s all, and this is the best way for me to do it.’

‘One hint you’re causing trouble and it’ll all be over, I’m telling you. I’m not putting up with your rubbish one single time more.’



In Brenda’s bedroom he finds a writing pad in her bedside table and starts his letter.

*Dear Bren, I got the telegram late so I’ve gone to Flinders Street to wait for train, leaves reel early and I want to get a good seat. Sorry I couldn’t stay to give you the goodbye you deserve, but you can make it up to me when I get home. Don’t be angry with me for this, Bren. I’m doing the best for us both. Yours forever, love. Promise. xxxxxx*

He folds the paper and puts it in an envelope. Writing her name across the front, he adds a few more kisses before leaving it on the pillow. As an afterthought, he pulls the covers up to make it look as though he has made the bed.

The house is quiet when he closes the front door. He steps out onto the footpath and strides away from the house, not giving it a second glance. Slipping into the Carlton Gardens, he breaks into a jog, the bag containing his belongings slapping against his knees as he runs. Nicholson Street is deserted. The tram tracks where they arc into Gertrude Street glisten in the streetlights. He follows them down as far as Smith, where he turns and enters a cobble laneway that comes out almost in front of his house.

Hunching into the doorway of a valve factory, he scrutinises the row of terraces. No lights on in any of the front rooms. Funny to be leaving without saying goodbye to Sissy. He crosses Victoria Parade and is soon in the Fitzroy Gardens. Possums dart about in the pre-dawn, running across the grass and up and down tree trunks. Over Wellington Parade, then under the overpass and down a little side street to a boarding house cum sly grog and betting shop. Johnny has a room above the front door, a handy lookout for a man who likes to make a bit on the side. 'The bloody Premier of Victoria came here last night,' Johnny had boasted to him not long ago, 'but the stupid idiot didn't win nothin' so I let him go, pissed as he was and all. Woulda been a perfect headline! "Premier found with his pants down in gardens".'

'Dream on, Johnny, you wouldn't be able to get within a bull's roar of him. He'd have his bodyguards nearby, don't you worry.'

'No,' Johnny had insisted, 'no one was with him.'

He had let the conversation drop. Johnny can be like one of those terriers that will hang on to the death, if necessary.

A head peers out of a half-opened window. 'That you?'

'You comin' or what?' Ern whispers.

'Catch!' A soft leather bag flies out the window and lands with a plonk on the footpath. 'Be right down.'

Johnny appears at the front door, which he carefully closes behind him. The two scarper back down the street, under the railway bridge, and half run, half walk towards

Flinders Street Station. Dawn is lighting up the tops of buildings as the pair approach the ticket office.

‘Go and get us a paper, will you, and I’ll get the tickets,’ Ern says.

Coming back a few minutes later, Johnny offers him a piece of Spearmint gum. ‘We’ll be up north before anyone’ll miss us.’

‘No one’ll miss me anyhow,’ he says, pocketing his change. ‘C’mon, let’s get to the platform.’

‘What about the nurse? Won’t she miss you?’

‘Something makes me think she won’t miss me at all.’

‘You mean she’s got another fella?’

‘No, nuthin’ like that. Probably more likely she’ll be glad to be rid of me after what went on last night.’

‘You did something?’

‘No, you idiot. I’m talking about what happened with Elaine.’

‘Oh that, that’s nothing compared ...’

‘Compared to what?’

‘Compared to what you and me have done before.’ Johnny winks at him and starts to laugh. ‘What’re you lookin’ at, any rate?’ Johnny punches him in the arm and circles round him like a boxer in a ring, all the time jabbing and laughing.

‘Stop it,’ Ern says. ‘By the way, did you get the paper?’

‘Not that it’s much good for anything other than wrapping fish ’n’ chips,’ says Johnny, holding it high above his head.

Ern grabs the paper, flicking through the pages to see if

there is any mention of his call to the police. On page five he finds a headline 'MR X CALLS AGAIN'.

'I'm going to get a cuppa tea,' says Johnny. 'Wanna come?'

'Nah, I'll see what's in the rag. You go and get one though, plenty of time.'

Late yesterday a mystery caller who Police believe has rung before, claimed he knows the identity of the man who killed Beverly Middleton at Mt Martha on Saturday 12th September. The caller, who sounded young, did not give his name or address but was able to tell police the man they should be looking for is middle-aged, before he hung up.

Police think someone else came into the room and disturbed him, perhaps the murderer himself. Detective Richardson, who is heading up the investigation, made a plea to the caller to ring back. 'The police understand the caller may be reluctant to provide information which could lead to the arrest of someone close to him. The police are sure that the caller will see his way clear to do what is right by Beverly and right by the community,' he said. 'Having information about a murder on your conscience is not easy.' Police said the call was logged last night at 8:20 p.m.

He looks up but there is no sign of Johnny. He reads on.

The description given by the caller fits the description given by a married woman who saw Beverly get into a car in Elizabeth Street, Richmond, on the night she disappeared. The woman was walking along Punt Road

when she noticed a young girl waiting on the street. 'A car tooted and turned in front of me,' she said. 'It was a light-coloured car and the driver had a long face and was about forty.' The caller said the man the police are looking for is aged in his forties, has greying-blond hair and drives a late-model car. Before the caller could tell police anything further, the line went dead. Police are keen to hear from the mystery caller again as they believe he holds valuable information that will help them track the murderer.

Ern turns and runs along the platform and back through the gates. He dashes out to the street and finds a phone box. Fumbling for change, he finds what he is looking for and dials the number he has learned by heart.

'I know a lot more,' he blurts. 'The car was black, a black Hudson. It comes into the garage where Jack works. Jack's me brother, and I go there sometimes after school to help out. The car came back all covered in mud on the Monday and I had to clean it. I know it's him who did the murder 'cos I seen in the back of the car.' He replaces the receiver and saunters back to the platform where Johnny is pacing up and down. When he sees Ern he drops his shoulders, stops and waits for him to approach.

'Didn't know where you was,' he says. 'Thought you mighta changed your mind.'

Ern brushes a stray lock of blond hair back off his forehead. 'Nature, mate. Call of nature.'