

Crossing the Thin Blue Line

The Chief Commissioner decides to go undercover in his own police force to find out why crime is flourishing in his city. But patrolling the streets with his unconventional partner is nothing like he expected.

Chief Commissioner Ray Bannerman stood at the southern end of Williams Street and scanned the vibrant shopping strip. The air was thick with the sounds of hawkers and buskers and nattering shoppers, of busy corporates on mobile phones, of slow-rumbling cars and jangling trams. Bannerman loved the colour, the clamour, the efficient economy. This was Ray Bannerman's city.

But there was also a layer of muck beneath all that most did not see. The hustlers and pick-pockets. The prostitutes and seedy massage parlours. The tattooed thugs and ropey drug addicts. Crime was flourishing in his city, and only walking the streets as a regular cop would help him understand why.

With his hands on his hips and his chest puffed out, Bannerman felt resplendent in his brand new uniform. His epaulettes may have said constable, but his steely grey gaze was all experience.

“Watch yourself there, sweetheart.”

Bannerman turned stiffly to see his shift partner had emerged from the ice-creamery.

Jenny Pasquale's hair lay in a lazy tuck and she had altered her uniform so the shirt hung low over the swell of her cleavage. She was wearing almost as much make-up as the street harlots. Bannerman cringed at the code violations. He still only reluctantly accepted women's involvement in frontline policing, and here was a clear example of why.

“What did you say?” Bannerman asked gruffly.

Pasquale wagged her precarious chocolate double scoop at Bannerman. “Standing there like that, all pompous-like. Not a good idea. People will expect something from you.”

Bannerman felt a growl forming in his belly, but he kept it in check. He had to see the truth about what was happening on the street, why the efforts of his police force were barely impacting crime statistics.

“That’s not what they teach at the academy,” he said instead.

“Yeah, but what they teach you there don’t prepare you for out here, you know? Wanna lick?”

The ice-cream had a deep groove through the middle, about the width of Pasquale’s pink tongue. The sight made Bannerman’s ulcer-riddled stomach queasy.

“I do not.”

“Well I can’t finish it. Eyes bigger than my stomach. Guess it’s for the bin, then.”

Pasquale trotted over to a nearby trash can already overflowing with takeaway rubbish and cigarette butts. She dumped the ice-cream on top and failed to notice when it slid off and plopped onto the ground.

But Bannerman noticed. His jaw muscles tightened.

“You know, you’re a bit old to be a constable, aren’t you?” Pasquale was eyeballing Bannerman from underneath two false lashes so poorly applied one flapped with every blink.

“You’re never too old to serve the public, kid.”

“That’s *senior constable* kid to you mate,” said Pasquale with a cheeky grin. “Hold the phone—do I know you from somewhere?”

Bannerman froze. He had grown a beard and was wearing contact lenses so he wouldn’t be recognised, but still his heart beat faster as Pasquale scrutinised him. “I don’t think so.”

“No, I’m sure of it.” Pasquale leaned closer. She was chewing gum now and Bannerman could smell the tutti frutti.

“I’ve got it!” Pasquale clicked her French-tipped fingers. “I’ve seen you on Tinder, right? I’m more than a little partial to a silver fox. Can’t think why I would have rejected you, though...”

“I can assure you I am not on Tinder.”

“If you say so. Shall we get started?”

“Please.”

Bannerman turned and looked down Williams Street. The sun was setting and the strip was coming to life. Already he could see five infringements and three suspicious characters he should question.

“Right, first things first.” Pasquale plucked her gum from her mouth and stuck it to the side of the bin. “We’ll start with Don’s Bakery up on the corner. A few weeks back Don had some kid trouble and we helped him out. If we start there we can—”

“Community reassurance,” Bannerman interrupted, pleased with this brief glimpse of professionalism. “Perfect! Employing the broken window theory of policing. Excellent thinking.”

Pasquale had a dazed look on her face. “What are you talking about old man? I just wanted to get a Danish.”

Flabbergasted. Somehow the words Bannerman came out with were: “Didn’t you just have trouble finishing your ice-cream?”

“Different stomachs.” Pasquale patted her gently rounded belly. “Ice-cream one’s full, but there’s still room for pastry.”

Bannerman took a deep breath, spoke through gritted teeth. “What sort of trouble was the proprietor having?”

“Oh, no actual trouble! You met Hugh Stamp at the station yet? He’s a hoot. Anyway, he dressed up in baggy tracky dacks and a backward baseball cap and loitered outside the bakery looking suss. Don got real worried he was scaring off customers and called us in. Me and Craig Viggers swung by and put Stamp in the back of a paddy van, gave him a lift back to the station. Don loves us now. Free Danishes whenever we pop by.”

Bannerman could feel his fists clenching. What Pasquale had described was not just a code violation, it was borderline extortion. For a *pastry*.

“You alright, gramps? Looking a bit peaky. Not having a stroke, are you?”

Bannerman turned away from Pasquale to prevent himself from erupting. He had joined the force thirty years earlier because he had craved excitement, danger, *order*. This was Williams Street, the highest concentration of crime in the city. There had to be something worthwhile they could do.

He saw it. A man in a long coat, standing at the edge of an alleyway, pulling a zip lock bag from an inner pocket. A second man produced some money and the bag exchanged hands.

Bannerman grabbed Pasquale by the arm. “Look! What would you usually do in this situation?”

Pasquale had been flirting with a café patron old enough to be her father. She turned to Bannerman distractedly. “What’s that now?”

“A drug dealer! Go arrest him!”

Pasquale looked confused. “You know,” she said. “I bought a pair of shoes off a drug dealer the other day.”

Bannerman’s mouth fell open. “What?”

“Bought a pair of shoes. I have no idea what he laced them with, but I’ve been tripping ever since.”

Pasquale burst out laughing. The older gent at the café joined in.

Bannerman glared at the both of them. It was going to be a long night.

Three hours later the pair neared the end of the two-kilometre-long stretch that was Williams Street. The sun had long since disappeared behind the skyline, neon lights were blazing. There had been no arrests, no cautions, not even a *word* to any of the lowlifes that crowded the boulevard. At one point Bannerman had thought Pasquale was about to ask a homeless busker for his authorisation but she had simply requested ‘something by the Pussycat Dolls’. Her impromptu pole dance up against the *Dry Zone After 12am* sign had stopped traffic.

But finally things were looking up. Pasquale had just stepped sideways into an alley like she had serious business to attend to.

“Where are we going now?” Bannerman asked.

Pasquale rolled her eyes like a teenager mocking a stupid question. “We can’t spend *all* day eating ice-creams and pastries and trying on clothes at *Supré*. Gotta nick *someone* each shift.”

Finally, Bannerman thought, his arms tensing at the thought of some *action*.

Bannerman followed Pasquale to the end of the alley, then along a maze of dark walkways formed by the tall fences of the rich people's homes. There were empty beer bottles and discarded syringes everywhere.

When they came to a dead end Pasquale pulled aside a couple of loose wooden palings. Beyond was a two-storey house with boarded up windows.

"Got your gun on ya, gramps?"

The comment came from nowhere and sent Bannerman's blood racing.

"You better believe I do." Bannerman patted his holster with pride and no small tinge of excitement. He hadn't fired a weapon for years. God he loved the feeling.

"Can I borrow it for a sec?"

Bannerman paused. "Where's yours?"

"Who knows? Check this out."

Pasquale pulled out a pistol with a barrel so long it belonged in a *Dirty Harry* movie. Viggers blanched when the black hole swung his way, but his flinch was unfounded. The gun was made of grey plastic and had the words *Nintendo Zapper* © 1985 on the side.

"I lost my real gun a few weeks back. Haven't got around to reporting it. Kind of hoping it turns up at some point, you know? Pat down a perp and there it is. Can you keep an eye out for it when you're on shift? It's got *Frozen* stickers on it."

Bannerman was too stunned to speak.

"Right, so this is how it's gonna work. This squat is chock full of junkies. The winner is whoever nicks the most. But we have to give them fair warning, you know? Legally

speaking. So it's more like a race. Starter's pistol goes off, sets them all running, and we have to go in and catch them."

Bannerman was lost for words. Then he saw his service pistol in Pasquale's hand. How had she taken it from his holster?

"On your marks." Pasquale winked in the moonlight.

"Get set." She pointed the gun in the air.

"Go."

A gunshot boomed across the still night.

The next twenty minutes were a blur for Bannerman. Perhaps it was a desire to prove himself the more effective police officer in the face of his partner's absurd lack of professionalism. Or perhaps it was the primal lure of competition, some deep-seated desire to win at any cost. Maybe he just did not want to lose to a girl.

Whatever the catalyst, Bannerman scrambled through that squat, chasing shrieks and fleeing footfalls. The place was worse than a pigsty, but Bannerman didn't care. Like a predator he honed in on the squealing bodies, crash tackling men and women alike, hog tying them with his plastic pull-tie cuffs. He lost sight of Pasquale as soon as they entered, but every now and then he could hear her yee-hawing somewhere deep in the house.

Soon the squat was empty. Bannerman had five bodies tied up on the exposed floorboards. His blood was pumping, his silver coif was a mess and his brand new uniform was ripped and stained, but by *God* he felt *alive*. The boardroom meetings, the statistical reports, the politicians' whining—it was all so *irrelevant*. His face was flush and his world on fire.

Pasquale appeared in the doorway, dragging two squirming bodies behind her. She looked as exhausted and invigorated as he felt. The pair collapsed on a soiled mattress and tried to catch their breath.

Pasquale began giggling. Bannerman couldn't help but join in.

"Then this one guy went for the window," he gushed. "Like he was gonna jump *straight through the glass*. I grabbed him by the back of his pants and they ripped clean off! He went through the window buck naked! I should've called it in—*bare arse last seen running north on Barrett Grove*."

Bannerman laughed. He hadn't felt this good in *years*.

Then Bannerman felt Pasquale's lips on his own, thought *why the hell not* and went with it. Soon his equipment belt was off and Pasquale was on top of him, her breasts bouncing beneath the code violation that was her shirt.

After they had finished, Pasquale snuggled up close and said, "We certainly haven't met through Tinder before, then. I would have remembered *that*."

Bannerman smiled. He felt intoxicated. It was as though he was melting into the mattress, total bliss. And best of all, all he had to do was shave his beard and return to his office and no-one would ever know what he had just indulged in.

"Pasquale," Bannerman said. "I would have to agree. That was a delight."

Pasquale gave him a cute smile. "Wasn't it just, Chief?"