

## Chapter 1

### *Saturday*

Tina, the receptionist, smiles as the automatic glass doors close behind me. 'Good afternoon, Mrs Sullivan. Lovely weather we're having.'

I make my way across the carpeted foyer to the imposing marble-topped reception desk and sign the visitors' book. 'It is a beautiful day. Looks like summer is getting ready to make an appearance.'

She nods enthusiastically and prattles on about her plans for the weekend while I cluck and nod, feigning interest in her social life like a benevolent grandmother. She talks about camping or hiking; I'm not sure which, because after a minute or two I tune out and start thinking about my own weekend. I create a mental checklist of all the tasks I have ahead of me to make sure tomorrow will go off without a hitch. I feel a bit like a secret agent.

When Tina runs out of steam about her weekend plans I force myself to engage by asking her how things are going with the new boyfriend. She blushes before launching into a fresh round of chatter. Obviously I make all the right noises, because when she pauses she's looking at me with affection. 'Where's your daughter today, Mrs Sullivan?'

'Oh, one of the grandchildren had something on so I caught the bus. Didn't want to let Frank down. He'll be expecting me.'

She pats my hand. 'You two are so sweet. You give me hope, you know? My mum and dad got divorced when I was eight years old, but when I see you and Mr Sullivan, well, it reminds me that true love really does exist. He'll be pleased to see you.'

Maybe he will. It depends what kind of day he's having. On a good day Frank's eyes light up the second he sees me. 'There's my girl, my bride,' he says proudly. He sweeps me into his arms and twirls me around. For a moment the years melt away and we're two young lovers dancing at the Palais Royal. But on a bad day he calls to the nurse to complain about the silly old woman who's wandered into his room.

Lately there have been more bad days than good.

Of course I don't say this to Tina. Instead I say, 'Thank you, sweetheart.'

'You'll find him in the courtyard, getting some sun,' she says, and I smile in thanks as I head off to another set of glass doors.

I make my way along the wide central corridor, passing a number of bedrooms with engraved numbers on their doors. The carpet in here is utilitarian – flat in pile and beige in colour – but the walls are painted in a soft blue hue and there's a mural, a tableau of clouds and trees and flowers and birds, on the wall outside the main lounge area. Once I pass the dining room I turn right and make my way down a narrow corridor, stopping at the entrance to the dementia ward to punch in the code that allows me access.

My gut clenches every time I walk through these doors. Here all pretence that Sunset Lodge is some type of holiday resort for 'seniors' is gone. There's no carpet – the floors are covered in mottled grey linoleum – and even the heavy scent of disinfectant doesn't mask the ever-present odour of urine. No one's bothered to paint a mural in here. It's so depressing I don't know how Frank stands it.

I make a quick detour to Frank's room on my way outside. One of the carers, Glenda, sees me and sticks her head in the door. 'He's in the courtyard, Mrs Sullivan.'

'Thanks, Glenda. Just thought I'd do a wardrobe check while he's not here. Fiona's taking me shopping next week so I'll get Frank a few bits and pieces for summer. I might get rid of some of these old things and pack them up now. You know how sensitive he can be about people touching his things. No sense in upsetting him unnecessarily.'

Glenda smiles and nods. 'Good thinking. Let me know if you need a hand taking anything to the car, won't you?'

I nod, not bothering to repeat the story about the bus. I pull a folded-up shopping bag out of my handbag. 'I'll just pop a few things in here. I'm sure Frank will never notice.'

She leaves me to it and I quickly scan the contents of Frank's wardrobe, deciding what can stay and what needs to go. I grab a few sets of underwear and socks, a pair of trousers, some T-shirts and the green woollen jumper I knitted for his eightieth birthday.

I leave the overstuffed shopping bag by the bedroom door and pause to use the mirror in Frank's ensuite to check my appearance. My hair is still looking good after yesterday's weekly trip to the salon, and the pink tones in my favourite silk scarf give my complexion a pleasing colour. Satisfied with what I see, I touch up my lipstick and make my way to the courtyard.

Frank is sitting in a wicker chair under the shade of the jacaranda tree. His legs are stretched out in front of him and his trouser legs are rolled up so his skin catches the dappled sunlight. He's always been a sunworshipper.

My pink-coated lips form a wide smile as I wave to him, but he continues to stare into the middle distance. There's not a flicker of recognition on his face.

Today is not a good day.

One of the male carers – a new one whose name I can't recall – places a garden chair next to Frank and beckons for me to sit. I thank him, and he nods and moves away to give us a modicum of privacy. Not that there's really any such thing in this place.

I sit and turn my head to Frank, resisting the urge to touch him. 'It's lovely out here today.'

He looks at me and I see the confusion in his eyes. I think it's my voice that does it. The sound is familiar but he can't quite place me. 'It is indeed.'

I try not to let my disappointment show on my face. I'm grateful for the days that he still recognises me, although they're happening less and less. It's been months since he recognised Fiona. I think that's the reason she keeps finding excuses not to visit. The pain of seeing her beloved daddy like this is more than she can bear. Most of the time I have little patience for her discomfort. 'Do you think I like seeing him the way he is?' I've said on more than one occasion. 'This isn't about us, it's about your father.' But on days like today, when Frank's eyes glaze over and he treats me like a friendly stranger, I resolve to be more sympathetic towards my daughter.

I point to the exposed skin of his legs. 'I hope you have sunscreen on. Easy to get burned in beautiful weather like this.'

He screws up his nose. 'Pfft. Sunscreen. Can't stand the stuff. Makes the sand stick to your skin.' He smiles indulgently. 'You sound like my wife. She's always trying to get me to put on suncream when

I'm on patrol. She's fair-skinned, you see. Only has to look at the sun and she gets burned. But not me. My skin's tough as old boots. Even if I go a bit pink at first, I end up tanned. My Shirley can't seem to understand that.'

I bite my tongue and refrain from talking about skin cancer. He's had half-a-dozen basal cell carcinomas cut out over the past decade, but of course the Frank sitting next to me doesn't know that. He's back in his youth.

Instead I say, 'So you like the beach, then?'

He nods. 'It's my second home. I'm a lifesaver, you know, at Bancoora. Lovely little beach. Best spot in the world, if you ask me.'

He closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again they're brighter, as though he's just had a wonderful idea. 'Look, you couldn't do me a favour, could you? You couldn't give a bloke a lift? I need to get back home to Shirl. She's probably worried sick by now. I got lost somehow and ended up in this place. I keep telling them that I need to get home, but no one's listening.'

'I'm listening.'

He breaks into a heartwarming smile. 'So you'll take me home?'

I want to take him in my arms and promise him everything will be all right, but today I'm a stranger to him and I don't want to cause him further distress by crossing any boundaries. The staff tell me when he's like this it's best to play along as much as possible. 'I can't today,' I say carefully. 'I don't have my car.'

His face falls momentarily before he regains his composure. 'Tomorrow, then?' It pains me to hear the desperation in his voice.

'Yes, love,' I say, and it's a blessed relief that this time I don't have to lie. 'Tomorrow.'