

Prologue

Joy and George

1983

The moment he dies, the room explodes with life.

I am up, pulling open drawers and dragging out underpants, singlets and socks with ugly, trawling fingers.

I'm probably in too much of a hurry, but there you go . . . I don't care.

I wonder why I didn't do this sooner, why I waited until the end.

I can't find it.

I want to ring Mark (but of course I can't) and scream, 'He's dead. He's dead. Do you know where it is?'

He'd say, 'On the nail.'

I'd say, 'Nail? What nail?'

'In the wardrobe.'

I yank open the single door of the old wardrobe and stare at the clothes hanging there. Thirteen sets of clothes he hung with obsessive care and put on so many times they took on his shape. Thirteen images of my father.

One by one, I pull them out and toss them on the floor.

Dad the longest-standing Elder.

Dad in the vegetable garden.

Dad trying to impress the bank manager.

Dad playing bowls.

Dad fishing.

Dad fixing fences.

Dad killing Ruths. I stop. All those chooks over all those years, each one called Ruth, each one beheaded by him on the chopping block. I throw 'Dad killing Ruths' to the floor and continue.

Dad praying with Mr and Mrs Boscombe after Wendy disappeared. Poor Wendy Boscombe. Ruth was right when she said they'd never find her or her missing doll.

Dad playing in the band.

Dad at Hall Committee meetings.

Dad at Bible Study.

Dad milking cows.

Dad goal-umpiring. White trousers, white shirt, long white coat. Like a modern-day angel. (Right at the back, I notice.)

I stick my hand into the darkness, and my palm hits something sharp. I peer in. And there it is. A solitary nail hammered into wood. And hanging on the nail is a belt.

One belt. And ten thousand magenta screams.

I see my father pushing back his disguises and reaching in for that belt, oblivious to the old screams in there. Then, later, hanging it up delicately, obsessively. Oblivious to the new screams.

I unhook it and hold it in my hand. It's a simple farmer's belt. Wait – allow me to clarify. Not the belt of a simple farmer, but a simple belt that belongs to a farmer. Correction: belonged. Past tense, which tastes delicious on my tongue.

The belt is made of plain black leather, and has a silver buckle with a silver tongue.

That's how they'd describe it in, say, a criminal trial. But that's only its outward appearance. More accurate for the defence counsel to say, with much emphasising and heavy pauses and gesticulating, 'Yes, members of the jury, just an ordinary, simple farmer's belt. But allow me to tell you what you can't see when you look at this belt. This belt is thirty-five years long and two children wide, and old blood leaks out of every hole. Children's blood. Run your fingers down it, and feel not leather, but pain. Hold it up to your nose and smell not leather, but fear. Bend it, and hear not leather creaking, but children screaming.'

The people in the gallery would gasp, and the jury members would shake their heads, appalled.

If it ever got to trial.

This is the first time I've held it. Of course, I've seen it before, and heard it, hundreds of times . . . dividing the air above me. And felt it, exactly the same number of times. Now I am the one holding it and he is the one on the bed, quiet and afraid.

Surely he is afraid? Now that his time has come?

I lift it towards my face. The defence counsel was right. The smell of fear burns your nostrils.

I walk over to the bed. His face is yellow-grey.

I look at the mess on the old bedside table: empty pill bottles, the thin blue face-washer with some mucus and blood sitting on it, the infant's cup he couldn't even hold to his mouth towards the end, the almost empty bottle of Passiona I got for him because he asked for it because it reminded him of Christmas and summer, and because he hated how his tongue yucked from the roof of his mouth, dry and sticky.

I made a special trip into town and bought eight bottles of it, filthy sinner though I am.

At the end of the bed is the local paper I bought for him, too. He's been reading the same page over and over for days now, his demented mind sinking into misery each time, as he recognises the names of

people who died last week. Well, to be accurate, I've been reading them to him. 'Dad, I've just picked up the local paper. How about I read you the death notices?'

I pull back the orange blankets and look at the thin body lying there, frail and lonely, but protected, dignified by blue pyjamas. I was never so lucky.

Now is the time for revenge.

I hold the pointed tail of the belt in my right hand, and raise my arm, with the belt hanging down behind me, the buckle annoying the top of my thigh. But that won't work, so I pull the tail with my left hand until the buckle is halfway down my back. That's better. With my eyes wide open, I sweep an arc with my arm and bring the belt down – counting, just like he always did.

'*One* – believe me – *two* – this hurts – *three* – me – *four* – more than it – *five* – hurts you – *six*.' He doesn't scream 'Stop, stop, please stop' because it's forbidden to say anything.

I count to fifteen, punctuating the numbers with the words I still know off by heart.

At the end, I collapse onto the chair beside the bed. Who'd have guessed it was so exhausting?

I stare at the death notices thrashed almost into pulp. Every last name, every first name, every 'beloved husband/wife/son/ daughter/mother/father of' is now in ribbons, but his silent, immobile body is intact. I was so sure I'd be able to inflict on his dead body what he'd inflicted on our living ones, but there you go. He was right after all – I'm useless.

On the upside, there'll be plenty of death notices for me to read in the next edition. All beginning with HENDERSON, George.

I'll put my own in every newspaper in Australia, so Mark will surely see one of them, and come to the funeral. So we can be reunited.

The belt, I notice, is still dangling from my hand.

At eight on the dot, I walk out of my bedroom into the kitchen, where Ruth will be waiting for me, like she always is. When I tell her that he's dead, that will be it for her. She'll leave. I knew she was only going to hang around while he was still alive.

But she's not there.

I frown, remind myself to stay calm, and walk into the good room to make the necessary telephone calls. Over at the phone, I slide the letter-finder on the old wooden tele-index down to H. The hospital says I have to ring his doctor.

I close the tele-index and slide the letter-finder up to D. There she is: Dr Cooper, Vicki. She says she will leave straight away, so she'll be here about nine. I want to say 'No rush' but instead I say 'Thanks' through grief-stricken tears.

Down to H again for Henderson. His brother's widow sobs. I want to say, *Don't cry, Auntie Rose, this is the happiest day of my life*. She says she will come tomorrow. But I say, 'No, don't worry, I'll take care of

it all, I'll let you know when the funeral is. Yes, I found him this morning when I got up, not half an hour ago. No, I'm sure he wasn't in pain . . . he was on very good painkillers, you know. Bye, Auntie Rose, yes I will, I promise, bye.'

Up to B, for *Blackhunt Gazette*. I compose HENDERSON, George's first death notice over the phone. Derek on the other end makes a suggestion. I say, 'No, thank you.' He makes another suggestion. I am silent for a second, then I say, 'No, I know what I'm doing, okay?' He grimaces and rolls his eyes. I know he does. After he reads it back to me, he says, 'Right,' (a little too slowly for my liking, the 't' coming out like the ting of a triangle) 'that's nearly two lines, and it's two dollars twenty-one per line or part thereof, so that's four forty-two, and payment is due within twenty-eight days. You're just in time for tomorrow's edition. Thank you, Miss Henderson, and my sincere sympathy.'

Yeah, right.

When Vicki arrives, she puts on a sombre face and says she's sorry. Unlike Derek, she's at least perfected the art of sounding sincere. Steps over the shredded newspaper, raises her eyebrows slightly, and puts a finger to his cold wrist before pronouncing my father dead.

You need a degree for that?

Back in the kitchen, we sit at the old table while she asks me some questions and writes my answers in the top half of a form on a clipboard. Then she looks straight at me and says, 'Righteo,' in her merry-as-a-lemon-meringue-pie voice.

I think she's about to ask me to give her the leftover pills, so I mentally say to Ruth, 'I told you!' But instead Vicki says, 'Will Mark and Ruth be able to help you with all of this?'

Surprised by this question, I spit out, 'Well, not Ruth. She's left, hasn't she? I haven't seen her all morning.' As soon as the words come out, I know I shouldn't have said that. It's just going to complicate everything. And then I cry. I am, after all, a grieving daughter and an equally annoyed and worried sister.

'Righteo,' Vicki says again, but this time in a not-so-merry voice. I try to sneak a look at what she's written down, but can't make out a word. 'Not sure if you know the drill, but since he died . . . let's just say, unexpectedly . . . in his own home, and because your sister has left . . . unexpectedly . . . we have to notify the police. I'll call them if you like.'

I know she means 'whether you like it or not', so I gesture towards the good room where the phone is. While she makes the call, I sit in the kitchen and wonder what the hell's going on with Ruth. She didn't have to leave straight away, for God's sake.

Vicki comes out of the good room and plops down beside me. 'Local cop's on his way. Nice guy. Alex Shepherd. Been here forever apparently.'

I nod as if the name means nothing to me. But I'm thrown a little bit off-balance if I'm honest. 'I took the liberty of calling Dunnes as well,' continues Vicki. 'Definitely the best undertakers for miles. Only ones, too.' She grins at her joke, and I offer a small smile in return. She keeps talking. 'So while we're waiting for Shepherd, best you call a minister, love.'

Back at the tele-index, I slide the letter-finder to B (no luck), then to R, where I find Braithwaite Alistair (Rev). I propose Tuesday afternoon, followed by tea and scones. Maybe a lemon slice or two. He says

Tuesday is too soon, there'll be so many people, and the CWA will definitely need more time, even if it is just tea and scones. And lemon slices, I remind him.

He launches into a one-sided discussion about psalms and prayers for the service, but all I can think about is *there'll be so many people*, because we both know that about two thousand, give or take, are going to be there. Yep, that's right, hundreds of people are going to fill the church right up to its holy seams, and overflow into the hall where I used to go to Sunday School with Felicity.

Then, as if he can read my mind, Braithwaite Alistair (Rev) says that he'll install speakers and a television screen so people in the hall can watch, and that the CWA will serve the tea and scones – and lemon slice – in the same hall. And now I'm picturing how, one by one, all those people will grasp my hand and tell me they're grief-stricken and so, so sorry for my terrible, terrible loss.

But I bet not one of them will even mention Mark. Or Ruth.

Eventually we hang up and I can focus again. The police will be here soon, so I've got to stay in control. And that means I need to curb my imagination. *Curb*. What a sensational word. The instant I think of it, its image of a soft, pliable orange sphere with a section sliced off it at an angle bursts into my mind. I give in to the bliss of the moment, then refocus. My control these days, as I will remind Ruth later, is excellent. Then I remember she's gone.

While we're waiting for the police to arrive, I make a pot of tea, and keep telling myself it will all be over soon, I've just got to get through the next few days, and after that . . . peace. I'll never have to talk to Ruth or look at her in that chair again. I'll get on with my life – for real this time – and never return to this decrepit storehouse of memories.

As I pour the tea, Vicki prattles on about some patient's problems, which I assume is meant to distract me from my grief. At appropriate intervals I frown and shake my head, all the time thinking that the undertaker from Dunnes will undertake to take my father away and bury him six feet under. As I picture the hearse (although I'm not actually sure if 'hearse' is the correct word at this point in proceedings) making its sombre way up the driveway, I decide on a cremation. In preparation for my father's next and final destination.

And while Vicki prattles on, in between dunking Mrs Larsen's shortbread into the tea and taking great slurps from the cup, I think about the conversation I'm going to have with Mr Dunne in a few days.

'Mr Dunne,' I rehearse in my mind, 'I have something to go in my father's coffin.' I lift up the hessian bag and hold it over the desk between us. He stares at it.

'Please,' I say in my grieving-daughter voice. 'It meant a lot to my father.' With the back of my left hand, I wipe away a tear from my left eye and then my right eye.

'But,' he says, 'it's too late. Everything is ready. And this is most . . . unconventional.'

Huh! He thinks I'm a pushover. A compliant little girl-woman who needs to be put in her place. He probably knew my father. Hell, they probably played bowls together, or prayed together. Or both.

The old Joy would have apologised and quietly retreated with the bag concealing her father's belt. Because the old Joy always let my father and people like Mr Dunne tell her what to do and keep her

small and obedient, while the eels writhed in her stomach, getting fatter and blacker and slimier by the second.

But the old Joy, the silent listener, is gone, and the new Joy looks right back at him and says, 'All you have to do is lift up the lid and put it in. Less than thirty seconds. So it would only be too late if he was already cremated, wouldn't it?' And she smiles as she puts the bag on his desk.

He snatches it up and shakes it as if he's calculating the excess baggage fee he'll have to pay to St Peter. Or Cerberus.

'Yes. Well, of course. Whatever you want for your beloved father.' I can see drops of white sarcasm dripping from his mouth, but I don't care. 'And now,' he says as he stands up, 'if you'll excuse me, Miss Henderson, I have several things that require my attention.' He holds the bag away from his body as if it's full of hissing ferrets. 'And this is the first of them.' He turns towards the door behind him.

'Just a minute, Mr Dunne. There's one more thing.'

He turns around slowly, a smile positively chiselled into his face. 'Yes?'

'This goes in too.' I put my hand in my pocket, lean forward and place it on his leather-edged blotter.

'What is it?' he asks.

I look surprised, as if he should know.

'This . . . is the last nail in his coffin.'