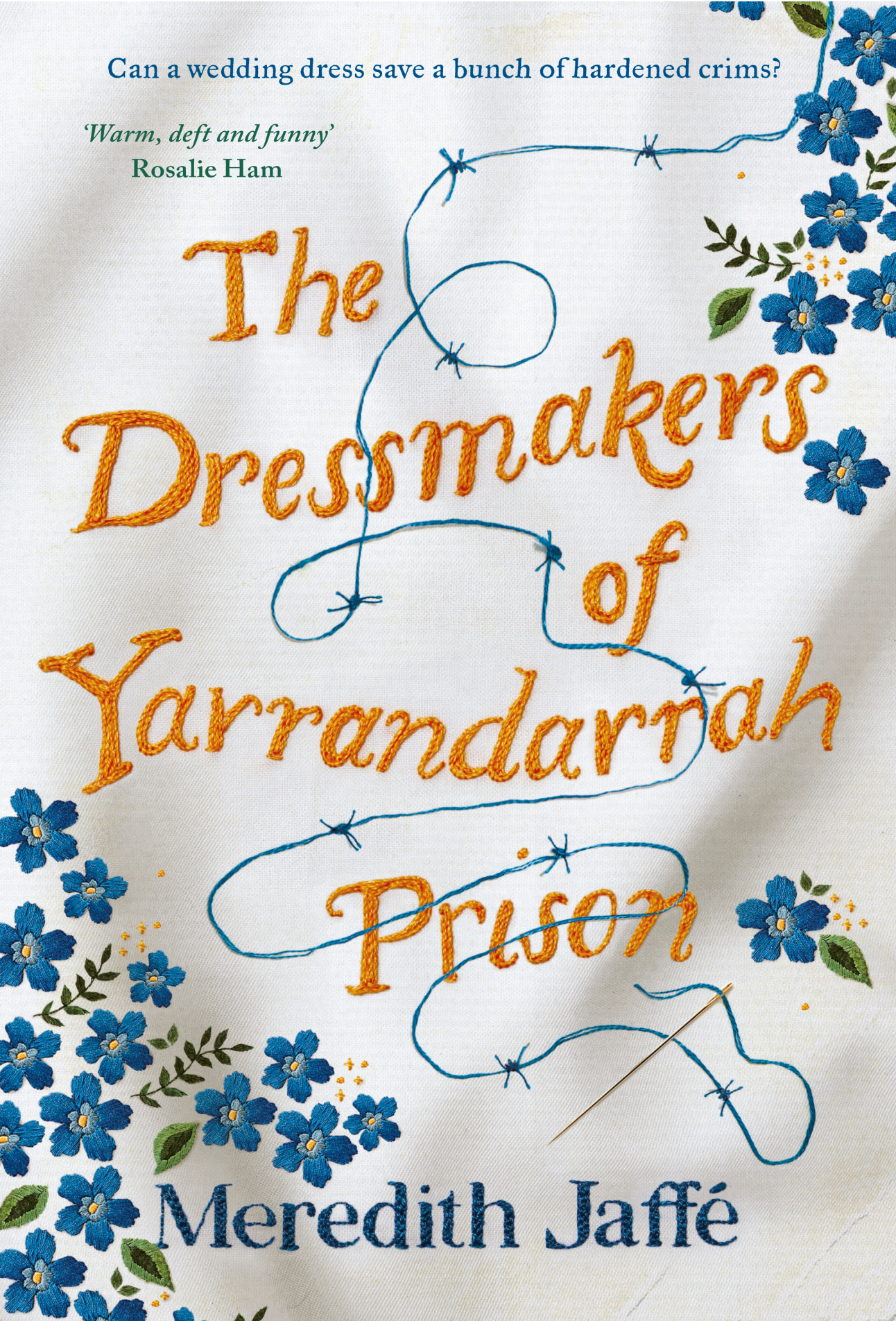
Can a wedding dress save a bunch of hardened crims?

'Warm, deft and funny'
Rosalie Ham



Meredith Jaffé

The Dressmakers of Yarrandarrah Prison

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Chapter 1

When Sharon enters the room, Derek doesn't know where to look. It's been five years since his sentencing hearing, him standing in the dock, hands clasped to prevent the trembling. He expects she's changed since then – haven't they all – though, looking at her now, it's still easy to see that Sharon is his ex-wife's sister. They don't look the same exactly, but there's something about the general heft of her that declares a shared gene pool.

The clusters of chairs and tables populating the visitors' room slow Sharon's progress. She gives the families, sweethearts and men in prison green a wide berth, as if being poor or a criminal is contagious. Even so, Derek admires her bravery, for that's what the force of her walk says: 'I am here.'

Here is where Sharon has never been, until now. Five years he's served. Five years with only the rare visit from his lawyer. Last time was to advise Derek his final appeal had failed and he'll serve every day of his seven-year sentence. 'You'd get less for murder,' some bright spark had joked at the fancy do they'd splashed out on at the golf club for Lorraine and Derek's fifteenth wedding anniversary. How right they were. Plenty of men in here are serving less time for crimes more serious than his. Murder might be diabolical, rape a terrible violence, whereas stealing, or, in Derek's case,

embezzlement, is a crime against another person's property. And people value their property highly. Still, he's more than halfway through now. Every day he wakes up with less time ahead than the day before. It's what gets him out of bed in the mornings.

'Derek,' Sharon says by way of greeting, plonking herself down on the plastic chair screwed to the floor.

No peck on the cheek then.

Still, he can't help but smile, he's so damned pleased to see a familiar face. 'You're looking well,' he says, kindness forcing the lie through his teeth. She wears an optimistic shade of foundation that has settled into the lines that map her face. Lipstick has bled through, feathering the gentle curve of her lips. Beneath her strong perfume, Derek detects the stale odour of cigarettes. She's still smoking then. He can't blame her. He would too if he could, but Corrective Services has banned smoking, killing off a popular pastime and creating a black market in one fell swoop.

'Can't say the same about you,' she says, reaching for her handbag, forgetting it is currently stuffed inside one of the lockers that line the corridor outside the visitors' room. At a loss what to do with her fluttering hands, she clamps them together on the laminate tabletop.

Derek lets that one go through to the keeper. He'd have thought it was fairly obvious that prison disagreed with most people. The food's no worse than the meals Dad dished up after Mum had gone, but the daily grind wears a man down. The constant surveillance. The constant vigilance. He can barely remember the last time he had a decent night's sleep.

Sharon fishes around inside the pockets of her coat. Finds a balled tissue, which she dabs at her face, then tucks into her sleeve. It pokes out, smeared with lipstick and foundation. 'I

guess you're wondering why I'm here,' she says, her jowls settling in the folds of her neck.

'Too right,' he says. Ever since last Wednesday when Young Carl told him she was visiting, the question's been on Derek's mind. What possible reason could his ex-sister-in-law have to set foot inside a prison? He hopes it's good news, but he doesn't like his chances.

'I'm not here for me,' she rushes out, as if Derek has openly questioned her presence.

'To what do I owe the pleasure then?'

She leans forward, as if sharing a confidence. 'If Lorraine knew I was here, she'd kill me. Lolly's more than happy to let you stew in your own juices, but …'

But Sharon's not like that. Physical similarities aside, Sharon couldn't be any more different from her sister. A bit like him and his brother, Steve.

Sharon shakes her head, gives him a sorrowful look. 'God knows you've made a complete fool of yourself, I can't pretend I think otherwise. I've been over and over it a thousand times and I really can't fathom how you could throw everything away like you did.' A ripple of discontent sends a shudder through her shoulders. 'I promised myself I wouldn't go down that path. Lorraine can say what she likes but as far as I'm concerned, it's punishment enough you're in here.'

It wasn't punishment enough for Lorraine, though. She filed for divorce right after the sentencing hearing, and, with that, their twenty-two-year marriage was over. Derek's wedding ring remains zipped inside his wallet, which is secured inside a bag with his clothes and keys for a house he no longer owns, waiting for his release.

Derek keeps his trap shut. He has no desire to rehash the ins and outs of how he became a resident of Yarrandarrah. And

he's willing to bet Sharon isn't making the seven-hour round trip to examine his conscience.

'But that's not good enough for Lolly, is it?' Sharon goes on, oblivious to Derek's internal machinations. 'No, she has to rub your nose in it and turn Debbie against you too.' Physically, his daughter, Debbie, is cut from the same cloth as Sharon and Lorraine, but personality-wise, she's always reminded Derek of his long-lost mother. Not that it makes a squirt of difference. Lorraine succeeded a long time ago in making him feel that his input, from the sperm to the parenting, was incidental.

Sharon leans closer, her generous bosom pillowed by the tabletop. 'You know that's why she refused to register for the phone service. Didn't want Debbie talking to you. Said it was for her own good, that she needed to move on.' Sharon sits back with a huff. 'It makes me spitting mad, but you know as well as I do that Lorraine's always had a mean streak.'

Derek takes a deep breath, the hurt a clenched fist in his chest. 'That's why I write to her.'

Sharon looks surprised. 'What, letters?'

'I write to Debbie every week. And Dad.'

Sharon's surprise turns into indignation. She's a woman used to having her finger on the pulse and is none too happy to discover she's not as reliably informed as she thinks. 'Lorraine's never mentioned any letters.'

'I never miss a week,' Derek replies, pride seeping into his tone. He does the arithmetic in his head. 'That's two hundred and sixty letters rounded down to the nearest year. Plus a card each birthday.' Although Christ knows it's a miserable selection at the buy-up. He pins Sharon with a stern look reminiscent of his teaching days back at Turnley Vale High. 'You're not the only one who knows what Lorraine's like. Debbie's smart

enough to keep her mother in the dark.' At least, he hopes that's the reason.

Sharon braces her forearms on the table. 'That's why I'm here.'

'Sorry, Shaz, but my interest in talking about Lorraine is zero. Can we change the subject?'

Sharon shakes her head furiously. 'Not Lorraine, you idiot. Deborah.'

This startles him, especially because Sharon used her full name instead of Debbie or Debs. Weighing out all three syllables can't be good news. He shifts in his chair, casting a sideways glance at Young Carl hovering in the corner. The officer always tries to look like he's not eavesdropping on the conversations playing out around him, but Derek's not fooled. Carl is a stickybeak of the first order. He can't help himself. Derek pitches his voice low. 'Is everything all right?'

Sharon retrieves the tissue from her sleeve and dabs at her nose again. 'Oh, she's more than all right, Derek. She's getting married.'

Well, the saying goes 'you could have knocked me over with a feather', and that's exactly how Derek feels. 'She's too young!' he splutters.

'Tell me about it.'

Derek leans closer then immediately pulls away, assaulted by the sharpness of Sharon's perfume. 'Well, did you tell her that? Did you tell her she's too young to be …' He's about to say 'wasting her life on some fella', but catches himself in time. After all, he's in no position to be casting aspersions on other people's marriages.

'Of course I did. Or more to the point, that Ian's too old for her.' Sharon glances around the visitors' room, as if the wives and girlfriends, mothers and sisters, have ears for anyone

else's troubles but their own. 'He's thirty-bloody-two! What business does he have dating a 21-year-old? *And* he still lives at home with his mother.' She offers this last fact with a note of triumph, then adds, 'I mean, he's got a university degree and a good enough job, so why does he still need to live at home?'

It's clear she's not looking for a response, which is lucky, because Derek is too shocked by Sharon's revelations to give her one. His first reaction is that Debbie should be dating boys her own age, but then she never really did. In high school, she was the girl whose boyfriend had his own car while her friends made do with the pineapple-faced youths from the selective school up the road. Debbie preferred boys with real jobs who took her to the Ming Dynasty for dinner, not Macca's.

Derek had protested about this. That be they eighteen, nineteen or twenty, these young men were not taking Debbie to flash restaurants because they fancied a few dim sims and the lemon chicken. Why tolerate a giggling teenager for any other reason than the promise of something better for dessert than the fried ice cream? But Lorraine didn't share his concerns.

Derek shakes off the plague of memories. 'Are you sure she's serious?' he asks, hoping Debbie might be merely overtaken by the idea of getting married, as if this Ian was Ken to her Barbie, rather than actually planning to go ahead with it.

Sharon throws herself back in her chair, which squeaks in protest. 'You've got to be joking? You should see the size of the ring.'

Is it real? The words almost tumble out, but he stops himself. Five years in Yarrandarrah have made him cynical. He opts for a more diplomatic question. 'What else do you know about him?'

Sharon rolls her eyes again. Derek finds this gesture strangely comforting. She's been an eye-roller since way back when they

met in the staffroom at Turnley Vale High. It's her favourite gesture of disgust. 'Mr Fancy Pants is a mortgage broker. He helps people get home loans.'

'Not himself then, if he still lives with Mum.'

Young Carl snorts back a laugh and Derek shifts in his chair. They've been getting too loud. Derek shoots him a look and Young Carl mouths an apology.

'Oh, don't you worry, Derek. He owns a portfolio of "investment properties".' She hooks her fingers around the words. 'That's how he can afford them.'

'And that's where they're planning to live, is it? In one of these investment properties?' he murmurs, because there's more harm than good if the other crims think Derek's hit pay dirt.

Sharon wrinkles her nose. 'You'd think so, wouldn't you? But Ian's decided they need a new place, a house in a nice neighbourhood with decent schools.'

Derek digests this nugget of information, wondering whether Debbie cares either way. Still, it's a small consolation to think that this Ian might be financially dependable.

'So when's the wedding?' he asks, hoping they're planning a long engagement so Debs has a bit of time to grow up and there's a chance he might be out in time.

'October. Debbie's keen on a spring wedding.'

Derek starts. 'That's only seven months away. Don't tell me, Shaz.'

Sharon flutters her hand, forgetting the clutched ball of tissue, which rolls across the floor and wedges against the table leg. 'Nothing like that, thank God. Though I have to admit, I had the same reaction. Fortunately, we've been spared the indignity of a shotgun wedding.'

That's a relief. At fifty-one, he's too young to be a grandfather. 'What's the rush then?'

Sharon nudges the ball of tissue with her foot, scoops it up, and returns it to the cavity of her sleeve. 'Apparently love cannot wait,' she says with a smile.

'But surely Lorraine's tried to talk her out of it?'

Sharon's smile vanishes. 'Truth be told, Lorraine can't wait to be an empty nester. Now she's got Garry, I mean,' she says, referring to Lorraine's replacement husband. She sighs, her shoulders sagging. 'Don't ever tell her I said this, but a part of me gets why you did what you did. Lorraine's always been a grasper. It's hard to feel sorry for a man like Garry Johns, but I don't think the poor bloke knows what's hit him.'

'Don't waste time feeling sorry for that prick.'

'Yes, well, you would say that, wouldn't you?' Sharon waggles her head. 'Be that as it may, I have no idea why Lorraine is the way she is. She always rode roughshod over you. *And* she's done her damnedest to mould Debbie into the same shape.' She shoots him a look of apology – whether for her words or her gene pool, Derek can't be sure.

'So what do you want me to do about it? I can have a chat with Debs and see if I can talk some sense into her, if you like?'

Sharon throws back her head and laughs, her fillings glinting under the fluorescent lights. 'Oh, Derek. Missing the point as usual.'

He stretches his palms flat on the table, feels the tension strain through his fingers and up through his wrists. What more is there to say? One of the most important milestones in his daughter's life and he won't be there to walk her down the aisle.

'Weddings are expensive,' Sharon throws at him.

Derek sniffs, resisting the urge to remind her that his and Lorraine's wasn't. A plain old registry affair, immediate family only, followed by the roast special at the pub. Lorraine's parents barely had two coins to rub together, and being fresh out of

teacher's college himself, his salary didn't amount to much. They'd all agreed it was better to use their money to buy a home rather than splash out on a fancy party.

'As you can imagine, Lorraine doesn't want Debs to miss out,' Sharon continues. A serious furrow cleaves her brow, reminding Derek of the school secretary she once was. 'To quote my sister, she "deserves the full catastrophe".'

Derek winces. He can hear Lorraine saying those exact words.

'Of course, that's the problem, isn't it?' Sharon catches Derek's eye. 'Because you don't have a cent to your name.' 'Anymore' hangs between them, unspoken.

Derek tries his hardest to hold her gaze, but his eyes fall to the gouged laminate tabletop.

'And since Lorraine's got the pip you can't pay for the wedding, she's decided you don't deserve to know about it either. It's petty beyond all belief, but, then again, we are talking about Lorraine.' Sharon sits up straight and tall. 'Which is why I'm here. Whatever else you may be guilty of, no one could ever doubt your love for Debbie.'

Her kind words warm Derek's soul. He clears his throat. 'Who's paying for this shindig then?'

'Not Garry, if that's what you're worried about,' she rushes to add. 'Ian's footing the bill. He's booked the reception centre down by the river. Chosen the seven-course degustation menu. And Champagne. Not sparkling wine, proper Champagne from France.'

The maths teacher in him does a quick calculation, reels at the numbers. Depending on how many guests they invite, the cost could run into the thousands, the tens of thousands. His chest constricts, as if someone is wrapping a belt around it and is tightening it, notch by notch. He remembers this feeling, what

it made him do. It's winching him in so tight, for a moment he worries he might be having a heart attack.

'There's no nice way to say this, Derek, but if you think you're going to stroll out of here after seven years and get a warm welcome from Debbie, you're a bigger fool than you look. A girl never forgets her wedding day. And she'll never forget that her dad wasn't there to give her away.'

'What do you expect me to do, stage an escape?'

By the look on Sharon's face, she almost says yes. Then she softens. 'No, of course not. But mark my words, once Debbie's married, she won't be your little girl anymore. The cord will be cut.'

Sharon pauses, distracted by a small boy who is picking at the edges of a large scab on his knee and eating the scrapings. A trickle of blood oozes into his greying sock. Disgusted, she turns back to Derek and eyes her sorry excuse for an ex-brother-in-law. Not for the first time, she remembers Derek as he was when Debs was a toddler. How happy he and Lorraine had seemed. But something went wrong between the pair of them. Derek grew quieter and shrunk in on himself. Lorraine grew brittle. Sitting there, she can see the man's misery radiating off him. Sharon sighs.

'Forget all this nonsense with Lorraine. She's got you set, but Debbie's different. You two used to be close, she has good memories to fall back on. You've got to make a big gesture, something to surprise her.'

'Time,' calls Young Carl, his rubber soles squeaking on the linoleum.

Feeling the moment slipping away, Derek grabs Sharon's hand and gives it a squeeze, surprised by its soft warmth. 'Don't you worry, Shaz, I'll think of something. That's an iron-clad promise.'

In her eyes he sees sadness, or maybe pity, he can't be sure. 'I truly hope so,' she says, patting his hand then gently shaking him off.

Sharon stands awkwardly, stiff from spending her allotted time in a cold plastic chair. She pats her hair into place, then sighs. 'You always used to tell Debbie that you loved her to the power of infinity. Remember that? "Finny", she used to say. Then the new neighbours moved in with that scruffy terrier. His name was Fynn, remember? She thought you loved her to next door and back.' Sharon chuckles at the memory. 'Funny how these things just pop into your head.' The smile disappears and Sharon catches Derek's eye. 'I think now's the time to prove it, don't you?'

With that she marches to the door, hips rolling with every stride. Derek doesn't shift from his spot until the flap of her coat disappears around the final corner.

'Shuffle on, Dezza,' says Young Carl.

And Derek does as he is told. Because even though Young Carl is as nice as officers come, there are still rules. He has to be searched, signed out, searched and signed back in again on the wing. Just enough time to be back for lunch, then off to the prison hospital for his afternoon shift cleaning the wards. Plenty of time to think of a way, any way, he might prove his love to Debbie before the opportunity is lost forever.

Chapter 2

Derek wakes the next morning with Sharon's visit still fresh in his mind. He lies there, listening to the sounds that mark the start of day. The jet of piss hitting the back of a stainless-steel bowl. A fart, rude and loud. The rhythmic swish of a toothbrush.

Yawning, he stretches his arms above his head and hits the wall. He's yet to find the edges of his space in here. A month ago, he went from sharing a two-out in the old block, to a one-out of his own in the new C Wing. No more rusty metal-framed bunk beds. Instead he has a sleek modern job secured to the wall on the long side. It reminds him of summer holidays, when his dad, Clive, would take him and his brother, Steve, on the sleeper up to Brissie to see their nan. The carriages had the same narrow bunks, with thin mattresses and pancake pillows. They'd eat dinner in a special dining car, where people served him food that was heaps better than what Dad dished up at home. And Derek didn't have to do the washing-up afterwards.

But the best bit about the trip was watching the world rush by his window. He'd sit there until stars blanketed the sky. Then he'd wake at dawn to see the sun rise over the lush cane fields racing past. It felt like they had landed in a tropical paradise. Even after all these years, the memory remains fresh.

At four by two metres, his cell is a lot bigger than those sleepers. With the bunk jammed in the corner and the tiny desk and chair bolted next to it, there's no room to swing a cat, but he doesn't care. He knows he's lucky; in some prisons the men sleep three to a cell. A cell of his own is a privilege beyond compare. He gets a bit of peace, a bit of solitude, a bit of privacy, and it makes it a lot easier to stay out of harm's way.

Derek shifts his feet to the floor and looks out the window while he waits for the blood to flow back into his legs. This view hardly changes from one day to the next. There's not much to see except a corner of the exercise yard and a patch of sky, but it faces east and Derek counts this as a blessing. The morning light, however feeble, is his to enjoy.

He hears the crunch of the lock, first one bolt then another being pulled back, and Young Carl's face swings into view. 'Morning, Dezza,' he says, his smile as broad as his hips.

It's not the young bloke's fault, but he's way too nice for this job. Always cheerful and upbeat. Derek wishes he could like him for that, but the truth is it grates on his nerves. He'd never say so out loud, though; he's not that mean.

Derek stands and tests his weight on each foot. 'Morning, boss.'

Young Carl sticks his thumbs through the belt loops of his trousers. 'Ready for breakfast?'

Derek once made the mistake of telling Young Carl that breakfast was his favourite meal of the day. Ever since he shared this intelligence, and every time Young Carl scored the early shift, he has made this running joke about what's on the menu.

But because Young Carl is a nice bloke, Derek plays the game. 'I'm bloody starving, mate. It'd better be good,' he says, his stomach releasing a timely rumble.

Young Carl's generous cheeks turn pink. 'Well, you're in for a real treat this morning. We've got bacon, poached eggs, baked beans and toast. I might even be able to swing you a bit of grilled tomato if you like,' he adds with a wink.

'Sounds terrific,' Derek says, rewarding the officer with a quick smile.

Satisfied, Young Carl tips two fingers to his temple in a small salute and moves off.

Derek sighs and fills the basin so he can have a quick top-and-tail before brekkie. He'd give his eye teeth for a decent fry-up. Even just a bit of bacon would do. But there are only two menus in this joint, summer and winter, and breakfast is the same whatever the season: doughy white bread, a carton of milk, a tiny packet of cereal like the ones his nan used to give them from the variety packs, minus the variety. There are sachets of instant coffee and artificial sweetener, single serves of jam and margarine. The only choice Derek needs to make each day is whether to eat the bread as it is with a bit of butter, or fight for access to the toaster.

He's towelling off when a man with a flat head pokes his nose through the doorway. 'You and Carl got a thing going on, have you?' he snarls, making a lewd gesture with his forefinger and thumb.

Bloody Ando. A nasty piece of work if ever there was one.

Derek sucks in air, pumping himself up to a bigger size. 'Rack off. I don't know what his problem is,' he says, ignoring his heart thumping around his chest like a trapped blowfly.

Ando crosses his skinny biceps, which are swirled with tattooed sleeves. 'Yeah, well, if you know what's good for you, you'll make sure I'm the first to know, won't you, Dezza?'

Derek picks up his t-shirt, but he's too frightened to slip it over his head. That's all it takes in here. A sliver of

inattention, and a fist to the solar plexus will drop him like a sack of potatoes. Mustering his bravado, he says, 'Mate, be sure of it.'

Ando lingers a moment longer. Derek's terrified the vicious little squirt is weighing up whether to belt him anyway. But with a grunt and a final warning stare, Ando swaggers off down the corridor, no doubt looking out for his boss man, the even nastier Jacko.

Once he's disappeared, Derek deflates and slips on his t-shirt. He joins the line of prisoners making their way down to the rec room for breakfast. He spots Parker three in front and hurries to fall in step.

'Morning,' he says with genuine cheer. Parker's friendship is one of the few things Derek can bank on in here. He's always up for a half-decent chat or ready with some useful advice on surviving the stay.

'Morning, Dezza,' he rasps, phlegm gurgling in his throat.

It's slow going. Parker's nudging eighty. His knees aren't what they used to be and most days he's got a shocking case of the tremors. A strip of duct tape holds the bridge of his glasses together and there is a diagonal scratch across one of the lenses after an encounter with a crim who demanded Parker hand over the newspaper he was reading.

The old man pauses and punches his chest, releasing a hacking cough. When he's recovered his breath, he says, 'I read in the paper that this is the hottest March since 1939.'

'Is that so?' Derek replies, hiding a smile. Parker is a one-man Bureau of Meteorology, able to recall the exact date of the hottest day on record or the highest rainfall, a habit lingering from more innocent times growing up on a farm.

'But they're wrong, you know,' Parker continues, indicating he's ready to walk on. 'The temperature gauge hit forty back

in '56.' He pauses. 'Mind you, we measured in Fahrenheit back then, so the gauge would've read 104.'

Derek's about to comment on Parker's powers of recall when a young crim barges past and snarls 'Paedo' at Parker, before shoving the old man into Derek. He catches Parker and steadies him, glaring at the perpetrator, who turns, sneers and mouths the word again.

Derek is fuming. Parker's no more a sex offender than he is, but these young hooligans assume anyone over seventy who's locked up has to be. Something about past crimes catching up with them. Parker's in for a heist that went wrong and saw him accidentally put a hole in a man's chest where his heart used to be. Any fool can see he's not a paedo.

The encounter is a stark reminder that while C Wing might be an upgrade, the reality of their situation hasn't changed much. As they walk along the corridor, Derek reads the cards next to the cell doors. The names and years tell a sorry tale. He knows his own card all too well. Brown 7. Parker is serving seventeen. Overnight they bussed in a newbie. Maloney 8. That's all Derek knows about him: a surname and the length of his sentence.

Derek's troubled by this; not by the number and certainly not the fella's surname. It's just that yesterday the card read 'Evans 18'. Where have they taken Evans? And why? Evans has disappeared into the dark of night. Ghosted.

Downstairs in the rec room, Derek sees Parker settled before fetching his own breakfast tray and finding a spot at the long table. He sinks a little when he notices the Doc sitting three down on the opposite side, unmistakeable with his slicked-back hair, the defiant set of his jaw, and an enviable level of confidence. Derek thinks back to the Doc's card: Lyall Life.

The Doc acknowledges him with a nod. Derek nods back.

'Heard you had a visitor,' the Doc says, stirring sweetener into his coffee. 'Turn up for the books, isn't it?'

Somehow, the Doc scored the prize gig of prisoner librarian. Not only does it mean he has a one-out, but it also gives him access to anyone who's doing education or wants to read, use the computers, or research their appeal. By default, he knows everybody's business and he files it all away in that enormous brain of his like one of his library cards, saving it up for when he might need it most. It says 'Life' on the Doc's door, but that card isn't big enough to write the full truth. Multiple life sentences for murdering little old ladies in their beds. Defenceless seniors who met their end at the hands of the very doctor who had taken the Hippocratic oath to do them no harm. In another time and place, Derek would cross the road rather than talk to the Doc, but in here he doesn't have that luxury.

Derek stabs at the margarine and smears it over his bread. 'My sister-in-law came to visit.'

'That a first?'

Derek nods and reaches for a packet of jam. An inmate comes over and deposits a plate of toast in front of the Doc. Derek savours the aroma, wishing he'd braved the queue for the toaster. The crim digs into his pockets and scatters handfuls of margarine and Vegemite on the table. Where the hell did he get Vegemite? Derek doesn't want to know.

'What did she want?' the Doc asks, slathering his toast with the contraband breakfast spread.

The men within listening range fall silent, hoping for a nugget of tradeable information.

'My daughter's getting married.' Saying the words out loud makes it seem so much more real. An image of Debbie flashes through Derek's mind: caramel curls, golden tan, a little dimple in her cheek to match her smile. Not old enough to commit for life.

'Pregnant, is she?'

Derek's head shoots up. It's not like he didn't ask the same question, but the Doc's got no right to judge.

A smirk dances across the smug crim's lips as he waits for Derek to take the bait, but Derek's not falling for that old trick. He chews and swallows. 'Apparently not.'

'When's she tying the knot then?' comes from two seats up.

Derek daren't look at the speaker. It's an unfortunate turn of phrase from a man who strangled his wife with her own pantyhose. 'October.'

'Long before you're out then,' quips another, and the men snigger.

The Doc shoots the joker a filthy look and the smile falters. To Derek, he says, 'So not pregnant but getting married in seven months. He must be quite a catch.'

How's Derek supposed to know? Sharon's description of Ian – which now he thinks about it, did she even tell him the man's surname? – was sketchy enough. Thirty-two, living at home with his mother. A mortgage broker, owner of an unstated number of investment properties and in love with Debbie. Hopefully. None of which he intends on sharing with this lot.

Derek sips his coffee. 'A spring wedding at a function centre is the sum total of my knowledge.'

The Doc sucks Vegemite off his thumb and indicates for the bloke next to him to swap seats so he can sit closer to Derek. He taps the table in the space between them, a frown troubling his brow. 'Tradition dictates that the father of the bride pays for the wedding.' He pauses for effect, glances around. 'Have you been squirrelling something away for a rainy day, Dezza?'

Derek refuses to answer; that'd be like flicking a lit match into a petrol tank.

'Saving up for just such an occasion?' prods the Doc.

Or poking an angry crocodile with a sharp stick.

The Doc stretches his arms and cradles the back of his head. All smiles. 'Oh no, *that's* right. You're skint.'

The men burst out laughing. Derek flinches and buries his gaze in the depths of his coffee. What he'd give to wipe the smile off the Doc's face. Thinks he's the smartest man in Yarrandarrah because he's a doctor and the prisoner librarian. Whereas everyone knows why Derek's a guest of the Australian taxpayer.

There's a hierarchy among the long-term residents in this joint, determined by a blend of time and crime. Men like Jacko and the Doc are kingpins. Even Parker earns more respect because he put a hole in another man's chest. If the new kids knew that, they wouldn't be so quick to call him names. But Derek? Stealing money to chuck it down a poker machine's gullet isn't a crime, it's pathetic.

Derek's silence prompts the Doc to have another dig. 'Poor girl. Not only is her father financially constrained, he won't even be there to give her away. She must be so proud.'

Derek jerks to his feet. Two of their breakfast companions also jump up, looking to the Doc for their cue. Derek ignores them and glares straight at the arrogant man.

The Doc breaks eye contact. 'Oh, let him go,' he says, waving the others down. 'It's time for muster anyway.' He looks at Derek, feigning concern. 'Sorry, Dezza, I didn't realise I'd hit a nerve.'

Though his temper boils, Derek puts a lid on it. He picks up his tray and chucks the rubbish in the bin. Refusing to look back, he heads straight for the stairs, desperate for the sanctuary of his cell, hating himself for being such a gutless wonder.

But the Doc can't leave well enough alone. 'I'll pop my thinking cap on and see if I can come up with a brilliant idea to help you out,' the Doc calls after him, earning a roar of laughter that rolls over Derek in a breaking wave.