

Chapter One

One thing Jy hated more than seeing pictures of his ex-wife and her slick husband in the society columns of Melbourne newspapers was being summoned by the Education Department. He loathed bureaucracy.

But he loved shaping young minds, so he'd suck it up and front the big wigs. For the third time in two months—some kind of record for the principal of an elite private school, apparently.

'Mr Bosch will see you now, Mr Atherton.' The PA pointed to a heavy wooden door to his right. Like he needed the instruction. He'd been privy to the condescension and censure behind it already. What could they say this time? He'd already been warned and he'd chosen to flout the rules. More fool him.

Mustering a tight smile of thanks for the PA, he opened the door. To face a firing squad.

Nothing quite as dramatic, but this time, Gus Bosch, chief education officer for the state of Victoria, had a backup team: three fellow cronies in their sixties wearing matching grim expressions.

'Take a seat, Mr Atherton, and we'll get started.' Gus didn't bother introducing his mates. Jy hoped that meant he wouldn't be staying long.

Closing the door, Jy resisted the urge to slip a finger between his collar and his neck. He'd been wearing a suit and tie daily since he'd graduated uni and started teaching fourteen years ago; didn't mean he had to like it.

The four men stared at him as he crossed the room and sat opposite them—spine ramrod straight, shoulders back, hands clasped in his lap: perfect minion posture.

'Thanks for coming in today,' Gus said. Like Jy had been given a choice. 'We'll make this brief.'

Good. The briefer the better so Jy could get back to what he did best: running Korrungal Grammar, the small private school he'd worked at for the last five years and been in charge of for the last twelve months.

'Rest assured, we've heard all your concerns regarding the new curriculum and taken them into consideration. And it's because of your passion for education in this state that we're sending you to Acacia Haven.'

Gus's monotone grated on Jy's nerves as much as the CEO's out-landish proclamation. 'What do you mean you're sending me? I'm a principal. I can't be shipped off anywhere.'

A groove dented Gus's brow and his lips thinned. 'You're not being shipped. We need someone with your experience and exper-tise to ascertain whether the school is viable.'

Jy struggled to hide his growing horror. They were sending him to some godforsaken place he'd never heard of to shut down a school? This was a major slap on the wrist. An archaic punishment for having the balls to stand up to these dinosaurs with their antiquated ideas of what constituted a good education.

When he remained stubbornly silent, trying to get his rising temper under control, Gus continued. 'We've already teed up your deputy to take over your role for the month you'll be in Acacia Haven.'

Jy would deal with the traitor Olga, his vice principal, later. She could've given him a heads-up at least.

'We want you there for the first four weeks of the new term to ascertain why their VCE results are the lowest in the state and if there's any chance to rectify. If not ...' Gus shrugged, as if closing down a school meant nothing. 'We expect a full report and will take your recommendations into account.'

That'd be a first, considering they'd shot him down when he'd voiced his opinions on their proposed changes—while Science, Technology, English and Mathematics were still valued, they wanted to invest more money into humanity teachers than STEM along with sacking school counsellors—in a very public forum of senior teachers and principals from all around Victoria. He'd stuffed up. He should've kept his big mouth shut.

'Do you have any questions?'

He had a feeling they wouldn't want to answer anything he had to ask. Like 'Why are you treating me like a naughty child being sent to detention?' Or 'Why would I want to spend the last month of summer in some hick town I've never heard of?' Or 'Where the hell is Acacia Haven and is it as hokey as it sounds?'

Instead, he cleared his throat and said, 'When is the report due?' Gus raised his eyebrows, apparently surprised by his acquiescence. 'After you return ... the first week of March, is fine.'

Nothing was remotely fine about this ludicrous situation and Jy didn't appreciate being treated like a recalcitrant insubordinate. But he was coming up for long service leave in April after being in the education system for almost fifteen years and the last thing he wanted to do was give these guys an excuse to screw him over somehow.

'We'll email you the details and if you have any questions after that, feel free to contact me.' Gus stood and extended his hand. 'Good luck.'

Jy hid a grimace. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

Chapter Two

Jy saw three things as he hit the outskirts of purgatory. Two girls, barely school age, making daisy chains on the side of the road. A rogue roo up on hind legs staring balefully, like he wanted to leap out in front of the car and add to Jy's woes. And an ocean so blue his eyes hurt.

He didn't mind the sea; he remembered beachside holidays as a kid fondly. In fact, those weeks spent in Sorrento or Rosebud or Ocean Grove with his folks were the only times he saw his parents truly relax. For the rest of the year, Sylvie and Angus Atherton coexisted in polite indifference, staying married for the sake of appearances and little else. So he'd cherished those snatched weeks by the ocean when he'd sit next to his dad on a pier, rods in their hands, raspberry icy poles in the Esky. They never caught a fish, not once; it didn't matter, because he liked hanging out with his father, the sun on their backs and the breeze on their faces. Not catching anything had an added bonus of getting fish and chips for dinner and he couldn't taste salt and vinegar without remembering those days.

When his mum spied the paper packet in his hands as he trudged sand all over the floor, her eyes would light up in a way they never did at home in their small weatherboard in Chadstone. She liked a treat as much as he did and for an all-too-short hour he'd share a meal with his folks on the porch, the distant sound of the waves crashing on the back beach a pleasant distraction, and pretend like everything was okay.

But he wasn't at a seaside jaunt now. For the last four weeks of summer, he had to atone for his sins in godforsaken Acacia Haven. That's what it felt like, being sent to this tiny town three hours from Melbourne—and three hours from the best barista in bayside Brighton—like he was being punished.

Not that he'd given Gus and his brigade any indication how truly pissed off he'd been. He'd bide his time, give them their precious bloody report, and look forward to utilising his long service leave by taking the last term off. He had plans for those four months and no way in hell he'd let some bureaucrats derail him.

As he crested a small hill leading towards town, the ocean vista widened into a cerulean crescent, and for a moment he released his residual bitterness and took in the view. To his right, a sheltered bay with towering cliffs. To his left, a calm stretch of ocean with a rock poking out smack dab in the middle, like a giant nose. And in between, a main street lined with shops leading all the way to the beach at the bottom of the hill.

He slowed below the recommended speed limit and cruised up the street. Along with the requisite pub, supermarket, post office and bank that most small Victorian towns featured, this place had an abundance of eclectic shops and cafés with equally distinctive names: Vegan Vault, The Cool Candle, The Love Lotus, The Okra and The Knick Knack Shop. Rainbow-coloured banners fluttered in the brisk sea breeze, beckoning the few people strolling the street into the shops. Sandwich boards were propped along the footpath, advertising sesame cucumber salads, chilli cauliflower steaks, grilled shiitake and asparagus tacos and quinoa burgers.

Jy's stomach rumbled, reminding him he'd grabbed a muesli bar with his takeaway coffee before he hit the road, but none of what he'd just seen sounded appetising. A chicken parma at the pub was more his scene but first, he had to swing past the school.

He was not looking forward to this. Gus had reassured Jy the Education Department hadn't told the school the reason behind his arrival but it wouldn't take Einstein to figure it out, especially when he was stuck here for four weeks. They'd know he was making a note of their every move with the sole intention to close them down. There was no other option.

He'd read the reports Gus had emailed and they weren't pretty. Acacia Haven College had eighty-nine students of various ages and grades, most of whom barely passed the national standard exams set every two years. As for their VCE results, the few kids who actually sat the exams failed more often than not. In comparison, kids in nearby Inverloch outranked them by sixty percent. Not good. As Gus had said, they had the lowest results in the state and nothing Jy did could change that.

This wasn't a fact-finding mission for some bogus report Gus wanted. He'd been sent here to shut this school down. And that made him the bad guy before he even set foot in the place.

The droning voice from his satellite navigation told him to turn left at the end of Main Street, drive another kilometre, then take a slight left and his destination would be dead ahead. He followed the instructions but when he pulled up outside what looked like a massive wooden shearing shed, he glanced at the screen again. It still displayed the bullseye, indicating his destination was dead ahead.

This was a school?

Shaking his head, he parked under a towering eucalyptus and got out of the car. His back twinged from the long drive and he linked his hands, stretching overhead, before taking a step and stopping. Should he put his suit jacket on? As Gus had reminded him many times, he'd be a representative of the Education Department while in town and he had to act like it. The warning had pissed him off. What did the old guy think, that Jy would do a nudie run along the beach's foreshore?

This was the first day of a new academic year in a small country town. Strutting into a school where he wouldn't be welcome, wearing a suit and tie, probably wouldn't endear him to the teachers, so he left his jacket in the car and undid an extra button on his shirt. He'd been tempted to wear jeans as a silent finger towards Gus, but he'd settled for a suit. He had to present a professional front because the last thing he needed were the local teachers snitching on him to the board.

Opening his big mouth had landed him in this predicament in the first place. He'd seen a lot of changes in curriculum during his time as a teacher but the latest proposed updates had sent him into a tailspin. He'd always been old school in his approach to learning but open to possibilities. Yet the current recommendations, to focus on pouring money into expanding humanities and cut funding so all schools wouldn't have counsellors to deal with escalating mental health issues, ensured he couldn't keep quiet. He'd approached the department with his concerns, twice. Being a respected principal at an elite private school meant he usually had clout.

Not this time. Instead, he'd been sent to Acacia Haven to effectively close their school down and that's something he wouldn't be able to shake. His stellar reputation would be tarnished and those bozos at the department knew it. Gritting his teeth, Jy strode towards the long wooden building. On closer inspection, it was an L shape, probably delineating between primary and secondary students. He bounded up the rickety steps and pushed open one half of a double door.

To find the place empty.

He entered and the familiar smell of a classroom calmed him. Crisp paper, ink, the pungent tang of a few teens who refused deodorant and the faintest waft of old banana left over from recess. While bordering on unpleasant, the scents grounded him as he wound his way between the tables and chairs to the front of the room, where an open laptop sat on a desk in front of a massive whiteboard.

But not a teacher in sight. He was supposed to meet with Hugo and Jill St Clair. Hugo taught secondary, Jill primary, and according to the Education Department, he had to hold them both account-able, though Hugo was on the chopping block considering the shoddy VCE results.

When he reached the desk, a movement outside caught his eye and his jaw dropped as he peered out the window. A woman of about seventy, wearing a flowing black kaftan with her hair in grey dreadlocks, was juggling in front of a group of laughing and clapping students. A man around the same vintage held sway with another group trying to light fires with sticks. And a third woman, young, blonde, sat in a large circle of kids, with rows of tiny bottles lined up in front of her and a few beakers.

With a shake of his head, Jy headed outside. If this was how Hugo and Jill taught he'd have his work cut out for him. As he approached the groups he saw they were much smaller than the reported eighty-nine students who studied here. In fact, there

was about half that number and he made a mental note to look into the truancy rates. Not actually attending classes would have a massive impact on final grades in year twelve.

To the kids' credit they didn't glance his way, their attention riveted to their respective teachers. Though the young woman with the tiny bottles noticed him and stood, unfolding herself with a lithe grace that had him admiring her without realising it. She was tall, at least five ten, with blonde tousled hair half-way down her back and big blue eyes that pinned him with cool distrust.

He smiled and raised his hand in a wave. She frowned in return. Yeah, they were expecting him.

She said something to the kids, who were scribbling notes in exercise books, before approaching him with long, easy strides, her colourful skirt swishing, her simple black tank top skimming her curves. He liked how she moved, with confidence and an ease that had him wishing he felt that comfortable in his own skin.

When she reached him, her lips thinned in disapproval and she arched a brow. 'Can I help you?'

'Jy Atherton,' he said, holding out his hand.

She stared at it like he'd offered her crap on a plate.

'I'm here to—'

'We know why you're here,' she muttered, folding her arms, leaving him no option but to lower his hand. 'You want to close down the school.'

'I'm here to ascertain the viability of education in this region—' 'Can you hear yourself?' She snorted; a rude, disparaging sound. 'You sound like a pompous ass.'

Rather than being insulted, Jy felt like laughing. At six three, he usually towered over people and he liked having this woman go toe to toe with him, standing up for what she believed in. Pity it had to be a decrepit school with poor results that had to be shut down.

'I'm not your enemy. I'm here to get a feel for the place and write a report, that's it.'

'Bull.' She squared her shoulders, her glare so fierce he had to bite back another smile. 'Some slick city suit doesn't come all the way out here and hang around for a

month if it's just to "write a report". She made inverted comma signs with her fingers. 'At least have the decency to tell the truth.'

'Maybe I would if the person I was conversing with had the decency to introduce herself.'

He scored a direct hit as a flicker of remorse made the indigo flecks in her eyes glow. 'Summer O'Reilly.' She eyeballed him, defiance stiffening her shoulders. 'Giving you a heads-up. You're not going to be popular around here.'

He shrugged. 'Then lucky I'm not here to win any popularity contests.' Her eyes narrowed but not before he'd seen fury deepening the blue to midnight. 'You have no idea what you're up against here. We're a tight-knit community doing our best for our kids and the last thing we need is some clueless know-it-all bustling in and throwing his weight around.'

She almost choked on the last word and a flicker of pity made him want to reach out to her. Instead, he held up his hands in surrender. 'I'm not the bad guy you've built me up to be. And for the record, I don't want to be here any more than you want me here, but I had no choice.'

'What did you do to get exiled here?'

He couldn't have put it better himself but no way in hell he'd be giving away that much information to a woman he barely knew, a woman who was technically the enemy.

'The Education Department has set me a task. I intend on completing it to the best of my ability.' Damn it, he did sound like the pompous ass she'd accused him of being, so he tempered his response with, 'Things will go a lot smoother if you cooperate and we all get along.'

'Cooperate? With you?' She took a step back and swept him from head to foot with an imperious glance and a jab of unexpected lust shot through him. 'I'd rather eat meat.'

A burst of laughter escaped. He couldn't help it. 'Let me guess. You frequent the Vegan Vault.'

'My eating habits are none of your business,' she said, but he glimpsed a slight twitching at the corners of her mouth. 'Now, if you don't mind, why don't you come back later when the kids are at lunch and I'll introduce you to Jill and Hugo.'

He had no intention of going anywhere but the kids were starting to cast curious glances their way and he didn't want to disrupt their learning. By those reports he'd read, they needed all the help they could get.

'You weren't mentioned as a teacher in any preliminary reading I did regarding the region?'

He saw he'd inadvertently touched a sore spot as she drew herself up to her impressive height and folded her arms again. 'Come back later and we'll discuss my role, among other things.'

'Like?'

'How you better shelve any preconceived ideas you have of Acacia Haven and this school, because no-one in this town is going to let some upstart bureaucrat like you barrel in here and tear down a vital part of this community.'

With one last scathing glare, Summer turned on her heel and stomped away, her long paisley skirt swishing around her ankles. Only then did he notice the brash, mouthy teacher was barefoot. Combined with the juggling, the fire starting and the essential oil bottles, it merely reinforced what he already knew.

He didn't fit in here and the next four weeks would be hell.