

Chapter 1

The single drop of wee made a pitiful splash. Fred sighed as he stood over the cracked toilet bowl that, like him, had seen better days. The public restrooms at Wattle River Reserve weren't as dirty as he'd feared, though the walls hosted a colourful array of ageing graffiti.

Another couple of measly drips. Was there a job in the armed forces for people who could urinate in Morse code? If so, he'd be an ideal candidate, though it was unlikely they'd accept 82-year-olds.

He glanced around the cubicle for something to distract his prostate – a watched pot never boils, after all. He didn't want to 'call Caz for a good time', as some peeling purple writing on the windowsill suggested, and he was getting nowhere, so he zipped up and unlocked the stall door. The damp concrete toilet block was pretty roomy. Could he possibly sleep here tonight? Surely if he asked around, he could find somewhere a tad cosier that didn't smell like urinal cakes and lost dreams.

His knobbly fingers protested as he rinsed them under the freezing tap water. The dryer was cactus, so he made the most of his wet hands to smooth out his unruly moustache. A foggy mirror above the sink reflected blue eyes flanked by deep crow's-feet. Not a

bad price to pay for eight decades of laughter – well, seven decades at least. Fred coughed. Grief's blunt force could still wind him on bad days. He shook it off and headed back outside to the river, where he'd come to clear his mind before his bladder got other ideas. The welcome scent of eucalyptus filled his nostrils from the rows of sage-green gum trees lining the bank.

It was the sound of the river that usually brought him peace: the monotonous babble could drown out whatever was rattling around the corners of his mind. But not today. Today's mental cacophony was too loud even for the river.

'I'm sorry but I gave you notice over two weeks ago, Fred. You've got to be packed and out of here by tonight, mate.'

His landlord's words from earlier this morning echoed in his ears. They hadn't been unkind (Fred hadn't been able to scrape together rent for months) but they'd meant business, and he had nowhere to go. He'd rustled up some packing cartons, but they remained empty. How could you seal precious mementos in a box, not knowing when or if they would ever be reopened? It wasn't as though he had anywhere to store them. He was terrified that the memories would suffocate in their cardboard prison, and that he would forget her. It was all too much, and his procrastinating feet had led him here.

He kicked a fallen gumnut into the water, his eyes following its descent down the grassy bank. There, by the river's edge, sat a man about his own age slumped in a wheelchair, an open bag of sliced bread at his side, now the prize of fighting seagulls. Hair the colour of aluminium foil waved carelessly in the breeze, with a matching, neatly trimmed moustache sitting below a substantial nose. The man's narrow face tilted to the side, one large ear directed at the sky like a wrinkly satellite dish. His watery blue eyes, magnified behind

thick round glasses, were slightly open and appeared to be squinting at something. Fred stepped closer.

‘Hello? You all right there, mate?’ The lack of response alongside the stare – which was as vacant as Fred’s flat would be tonight – said that he wasn’t.

Fred always took great joy in meeting new people, but usually they were alive.

He stooped down, craned his saggy neck forward, and peered into the man’s eyes. Yep, definitely dead. His breath, or lack thereof, smelt of tuna and Vegemite. A long strand of drool from his open mouth had made a damp patch on his blue flannel shirt. Fred’s pulse quickened as he stared at the torn piece of bread that sat abandoned on the bloke’s lap. He swallowed hard. More troubling than the realisation that he was face-to-face with a dead body was the niggling feeling that he knew the man. He looked so very familiar.

A babble of voices sounded from further up the riverbank near the barbecues. Some old folks in knitted cardigans sat on parked walking frames, crocheted blankets over their knees. Two women in turquoise uniforms poured them tea from a thermos and handed out biscuits. Fred’s tummy growled. Behind them in the distance stood a minibus with *Wattle River Nursing Home* painted in big navy-blue letters along the side. The old boy must belong to them.

Taking a deep breath, Fred grasped the handles of the wheelchair and pushed the old man towards them – they would surely know what to do.

It was an unusually warm April day and beads of sweat prickled his skin. He hadn’t exerted this much force in years. Except for that time on the toilet when his back passage had been so clogged up the neighbours had called emergency services, fearing his wails were that of a woman in labour.

‘Mind this for me, would you, mate?’ he said as he removed his heavy jacket and laid it over the man’s shoulder. He pushed on. A flash of grey and white appeared as a bold seagull made off with the bread from the man’s lap. With a sudden rush of air, an entire flock descended upon them, a whip of feathers assaulting Fred’s face.

‘Go on, get, you mongrels!’ Fred blurted, trying to dodge a second group attack. He grabbed the stale Vegemite scroll he’d been saving for lunch from his pocket and threw it at the birds in an attempt to divert them. The wheelchair gave a sudden jerk and tipped sideways, flinging its occupant out like a discarded piece of wrinkly fruit. The body tumbled down the bank, landing half submerged, his yellow-trousered bottom pointing upwards towards the sky. Bugger! Bother! Blast!

Fred ambled down the bank and with a gargantuan effort tried to haul the man out, the immense physical strain causing Fred to pass wind repeatedly, bringing to mind last night’s dinner, the single remaining item in his pantry: a tin of home-brand baked beans. He apologised profusely between each emission before realising whom he was talking to.

‘Lucky for you, you can’t smell, old boy.’ Fred could always find the silver lining in things.

With one almighty tug, he fell backwards onto the grass, pain searing through his skull as the side of his head knocked against a rock. When the body slipped from his grasp and was taken by the current, it was only Fred’s eyes that screamed. His mouth, along with the rest of his body, froze as if meeting liquid nitrogen.

The blob of silver, blue and yellow became smaller and smaller as it floated down the river and out of sight. Fred flooded with a type of panic he had never experienced, except in his recurring dream

where he had to fill in for Dolly Parton at one of her concerts. A dull throb pulsed through his skull as his eyes darted from side to side, up to the nursing-home crowd and back to the water.

‘Oh my god! Bernard! Bernard’s fallen!’ The shrill nasal voice came from one of the uniformed women, whose matronly bosom would have been disproportionate if not for her mass of frizzy red hair to balance it out. ‘Bernard!’

Fear rose like heartburn in Fred’s throat, questions jackhammering his brain. Did she think he’d pushed the man? She couldn’t have known he was already dead. Would he go to jail? On the positive side, at least he’d get food and a bed in prison . . .

‘Oh dear, Bernard!’

The woman’s voice, now close, snapped him back into the present.

‘You’ve fallen out of your chair, you silly sausage! Come on, let’s get you back in.’

He blinked slowly, glancing over his shoulder to see who she was talking to. Certainly not to the body; that had disappeared altogether. There was no one else there. She was staring directly at *him*, talking to *him*.

‘It was an accident. I didn’t mean to . . .’ he trailed off.

‘Yes, yes of course. That’s okay. No broken bones, I hope? That’d be the last thing I need.’ She patted him down, looking at him as one might a small, inconvenient child. ‘Oh, and I see you’ve lost your specs, too! Never mind. We’ll get you sorted.’ She picked up the man’s glasses, which had fallen near the water.

Fred winced as she spat on them and wiped them with her blouse.

‘There we are!’ She placed them on his nose and everything became a complete blur. He felt himself being firmly assisted into

a seated position then wheeled forward, smudged flashes of colour passing in a whirl.

‘Excuse me . . .’ he tried again, but it hurt to speak.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll get you a nice cuppa and a bickie. Did you enjoy feeding the seagulls?’

He paused, his eyebrows furrowed in contemplation, not wanting to be impolite or untruthful.

‘Well . . . if I’m completely honest, no, I did not.’

Fred exhaled as they finally came to a stop, now surrounded by the hazy figures of the other old folk he’d seen before. A thick plastic mug was thrust into his hand.

‘Thank you,’ he managed. Never one to refuse a cup of tea, he drank. A lukewarm fluid tasting more like dishwashing liquid filled his mouth. As he forced a swallow, something pink and red was placed on his lap on a piece of paper towel. Assuming it to be the aforementioned bickie, he tasted it. The first bite confirmed that not only was it indeed a biscuit, but it was what he considered to be the queen of all biscuits: the Iced VoVo. When had he last splurged for a packet of these? For a moment, he forgot about his predicament and felt nothing but gratitude as the glorious bursts of raspberry and coconut waltzed on his tongue. The flavours coated a delicious memory – they had been his dear Dawn’s favourite. He closed his eyes to visit her in the only way he now could: in his mind. He saw his younger wrinkle-free hand in hers as they sat on their sun-dappled porch drinking coffee, two VoVos on a plate nestled side by side – just like the two of them.

‘You, my darling, are the froth on my cappuccino!’ he would chuckle as he spooned the chocolatey foam from his cup into his wife’s mouth. The memory wrapped itself like a warm blanket around his broken heart.

Then, like clockwork, it came. The thought, so familiar it had become part of his body, spat its poison.

I should have come home sooner.

Fifty-seven years had done little to dull its jagged edge. An ache too great to bear crescendoed in his heart. He took one more longing look at Dawn's face before forcing his eyes open to what was now his reality.

The fuzzy outline of the redheaded woman came into view as she pulled the paper towel from his hand and used it to roughly wipe his mouth, making his moustache prickle.

'Bet you feel much better now, Bernard. You've certainly got a lot more colour in you than when we got here this morning – you were as pale as a corpse.'

Fred gulped. Good grief.

'But I'm not Bernard . . . I'm Fred, you see. Frederick Fife. Wait a second, I'll show you my ID.'

But she had already moved on. He reached for his wallet in his jacket pocket, only to feel his shirt. Bugger. He'd taken his jacket off. It must have washed down the river with the dead bloke!

'Time to go,' the woman bleated as she returned and grasped the handles of the wheelchair once more.

Memories of being on one of those dreadful amusement park rides rose to the surface as he bumped along the path; still unable to see anything because of the glasses. Dizzy, queasy and scared, he searched for words of protest but found none. A mechanical noise sounded as the wheelchair lift raised him into the van. Two elderly ladies whispered loudly in front of him, the scent of potpourri thick in the air.

'Did you see the trousers Denise was wearing?' said one, her voice as raspy as that unfortunate hairless chap in *The Hobbit* who was obsessed with the ring.

‘Toilet-brush Denise?’

‘No. Denise Denise. The carer.’

‘Ahhh, redhead Denise.’

‘Yes, well, her trousers were falling down, and I could see her bottom shining like the rising sun. Almost fell off my chair, I did! Absolutely disgraceful!’

Perhaps it was a good thing he had the wretched glasses on after all. As the engine of the bus sprang to life, Fred’s hands tightened over the armrests.

He managed a meek ‘Wait!’ but it was lost in Michael Bubl ’s voice oozing through the speakers. His skin twitched. Did they honestly think *he* was that poor bloke? Were older people so invisible that they all looked the same? The body had probably floated to ruddy Sydney by now. Perhaps it was all a dream . . . but the pounding in his head and the coconut stuck in his teeth told him otherwise.

A wave of nausea interrupted his thoughts. Fred was prone to feeling carsick at the best of times, even when he wasn’t wearing someone else’s glasses and sitting at the very back of a bus. He shut his eyes and tried to keep the VoVo down.