

# Prologue

If anyone had ever called him by his first name, there probably weren't many who remembered it. No one who knew him these days would be able to tell you what it was, that's for sure. He remembered it, of course, though when he had to write it on a form or something, it usually took him a second. Then it was an *oh yeah, that's right* kind of moment. Truth be told, if someone had claimed his parents hadn't been arsed to give him a first name, he'd most likely have believed them—knowing his parents. Anyhow, in here he went by the name he'd used as a kid—maybe a bit cute for a thirty-seven-year-old man. *Cookie*. Over the years, it had acquired a slightly rougher, hard-baked edge. 'One Tough Cookie' they called him inside, the persona he'd acquired. Though this reputation hadn't been achieved through fighting or anything like that. In fact, it was absolute crap. He wasn't tough at all. He was every bit as scared and vulnerable and weak as the next guy. Like those orphaned baby monkeys in that psychology experiment he'd read about in the

prison library. The reputation didn't fit him any better than the baggy prison greens they handed out. He hadn't earned the stupid nickname with his attitude; it was mainly thanks to his scar. It ran from the outer edge of his right eye to the point where his earlobe met his jaw. It was neat, a clean cut, not jagged. Like he'd been slashed with a switchblade. The type of scar that commanded respect. And that was the story he'd invented. A knife fight. He kept it vague, kept it simple. And it worked. The other prisoners kept their distance.

There was another reason behind his nickname. Behind the 'tough' part of it anyway. It was bestowed upon him by virtue of his crime—murder—and the resulting time: twenty-five on the top, twenty on the bottom.

Now, Cookie's two decades were almost done. He was on the home stretch. Just four more months in Middleborough and he'd be up for parole. Four months of keeping his head down, his nose clean, doing his own time.

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‘Sit!’ said the woman, so forcefully that Cookie almost dropped his own arse to the ground. Nigel, on the other hand, was totally unmoved. He went right on gnawing the fur from where his tail met his bum. It was obvious the dog trainer lady was losing faith in him and even more so in Cookie’s ability to get things back on track. And to be honest, Cookie shared her assessment of the situation. If he could make it to the end of the session, he’d put Nigel in his crate and scrounge a beef bone from the kitchen. It was the only thing that might prevent the crazy mutt from attempting to devour his own body. He just needed to get through the next hour and a half.

‘You must stop him doing that,’ said the woman. Her voice was stern, but her face was calm.

Cookie looked down. ‘Stop chewing, Nigel,’ he said.

The dog ignored him.

Cookie tried again. ‘Come on, Nige, be a good boy and stop—’

‘Do not use the words “good boy” when he is self-mutilating,’ the instructor interrupted. ‘They are a reward. You must not praise him for his bad behaviour.’

Cookie had noticed that this woman always used complete words. Never ‘don’t.’ Always ‘do not.’ Like she was reading a list of rules and regulations. ‘Sorry,’ said Cookie. ‘I was just trying to explain—’

‘You do not explain to dogs. Dogs do not understand sentences. A swift tug on his leash sends a clear message.’ She demonstrated with the invisible lead attached to her invisible dog. ‘Use his name to get his attention. Only when he obeys your command should you use the reward words.’

It was true that Nigel wasn’t keeping up, but Cookie thought it was a bit harsh not to encourage him for trying. After all, it was only the first day of hands-on lessons. Not surprising the new commands and expectations would throw him a bit. He was never going to get the whole thing right off the bat. Why couldn’t he cut the dog a bit of slack rather than constantly reminding him what a loser he was? Chuck him a ‘good boy’ from time to time and maybe he’d start believing it. *A self-fulfilling prophecy.* Cookie had heard people use that expression about him back in the day, though not in a positive way.

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When they’d announced the dog program two months earlier, a screw the prisoners called Old Joe (though to his face he was Mr Coard or ‘boss’) was dead keen for Cookie to apply. He’d

been around for decades, but wasn't like the other old-school screws. While most of them talked *at* you, Old Joe was one of the rare officers who talked *to* you. He was a big believer in the power of education, always trying to get the men into new programs.

Cookie wasn't all that interested to begin with. Not because he didn't like dogs. He did. He just wasn't overly keen on group programs—literacy, art, theatre, that type of thing. Too much talking involved. Too much 'interacting' like they said nowadays. At the time he had only six months left before he was up for parole. If all went well, he'd be out in November. Old Joe said he should try to make the most of his remaining time. And this program was one of the best they'd ever had in Middleborough. It was the first time they'd run it, so it was a big deal. The authorities were talking it up. The minister had done a press release on the pilot of the 1997 'Pawsitive Outcomes' dog rehabilitation program. They'd got some coverage in the local newspaper and a two-minute segment at the end of the ABC News. According to the Department of Corrections, the program would benefit the inmates as much as the dogs. They liked the symbolism of it, no doubt. It was the last chance for dogs who didn't meet society's expectations, with their behavioural issues, violent tendencies and all that. One last chance to reform—just like the prisoners—or be put down. Only they'd stopped doing that to humans a while ago.

'So are you going to apply?' Old Joe had asked Cookie the day before applications closed.

Cookie was sitting at his usual table in the garden working on a necklace. His apple seed jewellery had proved an okay money earner and he was currently pretty cashed up. Other inmates bought it to give as presents to their wives and girlfriends. Cookie made key rings too, which some of the blokes bought for themselves. They thought it was hilarious. Obviously not much use for them in there.

‘I dunno, boss,’ said Cookie. ‘I don’t think I’d be much good at all that discipline stuff.’

Old Joe picked up one of the necklaces and rubbed the seeds between his fingers like they were rosary beads.

‘Have you given much thought to what you’ll do when you get out?’

‘Yeah, a bit,’ said Cookie, keeping it vague.

‘Got any support? Family? Friends?’

‘Um, some,’ said Cookie. Old Joe probably knew that was bullshit.

‘Got a place to stay? Will you head back home?’

Cookie shrugged. ‘Have to see.’

Old Joe nodded slowly. ‘Well, I really think this could be a good opportunity for you. The shelter’s going to offer part-time jobs to the participants after their release.’

‘Oh yeah?’ replied Cookie. ‘That’s pretty cool.’

He knew Old Joe was right. He had to start making an effort, getting some experience. And working at the animal shelter would be great compared to the other types of jobs he might get. Packing shit on an assembly line. Cleaning public

toilets. If he got a job at all. And working with dogs would be a hell of a lot better than working with people.

The prison had a work release scheme and had organised several outside placements with the local Baradong Shire, including grounds maintenance at the municipal library and a couple of local parks. Cookie had done a short stint on a beautification project around the council offices. Mainly mowing, planting, a bit of pruning and mulching. Not too hard, fresh air and a different view each day. But he knew he needed to get some qualifications if he really wanted to set himself up. So after the gardening gig ended, he'd done three short courses in Kitchen Operations, Workplace Hygiene and Food Safety. Solid skills to have, according to his guidance officer. That had led to his most recent job, three days a week packing frozen lunches and dinners for the council's Meals on Wheels program.

The food prep facility was behind the senior citizens' centre. They ran activities for over sixty-fives there, though strictly no contact was allowed between the oldies and the prisoners who worked in the kitchen. That was fine with Cookie. It avoided the inevitable looks of suspicion that accompanied the prison greens he and the other men wore under their plastic aprons. And it spared him the extra scrutiny he got thanks to the scar on his face. He knew that dealing with the public would be an issue once he got out. He'd need to prepare himself mentally for all the new people he'd encounter, and all the strangers who'd encounter him. He was no good at talking in general,

but especially not to people he didn't know. He hadn't had enough practice. That was one good thing about being in Middleborough. There were no strangers. You got to know everyone pretty quick. And then it was the same people, same faces, same stories over and over again.

Outside would be a whole new ball game. Not only because he didn't have many skills and didn't know what to do with his life and had no one waiting for him, but because of how he'd be judged. Not by a court this time, but by society. At least working with animals he wouldn't have to worry about that. Dogs he could handle. Sit, stay, fetch. And even if he didn't get a job out of it, the program might still be interesting—maybe even rewarding. Like being a teacher. Seeing someone succeed and knowing it was thanks to you.

'So what do you say, Cooke?' asked Mr Coard. 'Will you apply?'

Cookie shrugged. 'Yeah, okay, boss. I'll give it a go.'

Cookie was one of eleven prisoners who'd applied for the program. Eleven out of ninety-eight. There were quite a few who'd had negative encounters with dogs over their years inside—sniffer dogs and the Prison K9s—aggressive as hell—and so didn't want a bar of 'man's best friend'. The animal shelter had asked the prison administration to select applicants who showed the most potential for reform. To be fair all eleven ticked that box more or less. That was the best thing about being in a minimum-security place. Most of the blokes behaved themselves. They were getting too near the end of their stint

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to stuff it up. And they had too many privileges to lose. Good food for one. Not like some of the crap they served back in Hopetoun. *Chew and spew*, they'd called it. Middleborough was a working farm, not much like a prison at all. They had fences, but they were only about three-foot high and were mainly to keep the sheep from wandering off. They had cows for fresh milk, vegetable gardens and an orchard with apples, pears, peaches, apricots and plums. A strawberry patch too. They ate them fresh and some guys made jam and fruit tarts that they traded. All that sweetness made it feel close to normal, like the outside was wafting in.

Then there were the living arrangements, almost like the real world, with bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms. And family visits too, though Cookie didn't get those. He wasn't the only one. Most men stopped getting visitors after about five years. Wives and girlfriends often hung around less than that. Those who were in for a brick or two were mainly flying solo. The last ones to give up were the mothers. A surprising number of men openly said they loved their mums. That wasn't something you generally did in there. Talk about love. Some were ashamed of having let their mother down, and yet, the mothers rarely wrote them off. They stuck staunch.

So even for the guys who'd done a ton of time, places like this were as close to normal as you could get. The last stop before freedom. Too close to blow it. But too far from anything to be a danger. Middleborough. Middle of Fucking Nowhere.

In the end, Cookie and four other men were selected for the program. Over six weeks, they'd have two ninety-minute sessions with the instructor each Monday. The rest of the time, they were on their own: working with the dogs, getting them ready for their future lives as family pets. It was pretty clear, though, that the ones they'd sent out were the dregs of the shelter. These weren't the cute and fluffy dogs who wagged their tails and pushed their noses into your palms and quickly found a home. These were the wary ones, the ones who skulked at the back of their cage or barked or growled. Or the traumatised ones, snappy, snarly, unpredictable. These were the ones you could tell wouldn't be getting out of there any time soon—or, realistically, not getting out of there alive.

Cookie was also beginning to think he might not make it out of the program alive. Only the first session and he was already struggling. It hadn't started well. When he was introduced to the instructor she kept her gaze fixed firmly on his left eye. A discreet manoeuvre to avoid looking at his scar. Cookie knew it well. Most outsiders did it. He dipped his head and a lock of dirty-blond fringe fell over the scar. That was his own discreet manoeuvre and the reason he kept his hair not quite shoulder length.

After the introductions, the woman fetched Cookie's dog from her van. It was the last one. Like the kid picked last for sport. Cookie knew more or less what he'd be getting. Before the program began, the participants had each been shown a photo of the dog they'd been assigned and were told they could choose

a name. The instructor explained that if the dogs passed their behavioural assessments at the end of the six weeks they had a chance of being adopted from the shelter and would probably be given new names, so it didn't really matter what they were called for the moment. It was the tone of voice they'd respond to rather than any specific combination of consonants and vowels. The men didn't care. They took the job of choosing names dead seriously. Stretch called his Rottweiler 'Vader'. Eggy's dark brown Kelpie was 'Meatball'. Vinnie's jumpy German Shepherd was christened 'Pogo' and Trev's white-and-tan Jack Russell was 'Zeus'. Cookie opted not to give his dog a new name. He agreed with the instructor on this one. No point when they were just going to belong to someone else. Better not to get attached. His weird-looking big male dog had been named Nigel by one of the shelter staff. It wasn't great, but it'd do.

They told him Nigel hadn't been in the shelter long, and was 'prone to issues'. He'd been found dumped on the side of the road: no microchip, no tag, nothing, so they didn't know his background or even his breed. Only that he was approximately four years old. The hard-boiled volunteer who'd been looking after him didn't like his chances of being adopted. 'No Way Nige' she'd called him as a joke. He was black with a bit of rusty brown above the eyes. The people from the shelter said he was a Lab but with a bit of Staffy in him. Maybe other stuff too. They weren't sure. A bitzer, they said. Bitzer this and bitzer that. The dog was big, Cookie realised when the woman had handed him the leash. Not tall—its head only

came to his knees—but bulky, solid, with short stubby legs. His head was big too, and his mouth looked too wide for his face. He wasn't happy about being on the leash. He twisted around, his coarse fur rubbing against Cookie's leg.

'G'day, Nigel,' said Cookie to the top of the mutt's big-arse head. He felt a bit stupid saying the name. The dog didn't seem to think much of it either. He glanced at Cookie from the corner of his eye as if to say, 'You've got to be kidding.' All in all, it was not a promising start.



As expected the first morning of the program was complete chaos. Dogs pulling on their leads, jumping all over the place, bawling like banshees. Trev's nasty, snarly little Jack Russell, Zeus, yapped nonstop, its sticking-up ears making it look like it was in a constant state of shock. Eggy was getting the run-around from his bony Kelpie, Meatball, who darted around nipping at his runners and pulling the laces undone. Vinnie's German Shepherd, Pogo, was living up to her name, flinging her hairy heft up against his barrel chest. When Stretch tried to walk his huge black Rottweiler, Vader, the dog yanked the leash so hard that Stretch was pulled off his feet and stumbled after him, his skinny torso and ridiculously long legs flailing around like an ironing board falling down a flight of stairs.

By the afternoon, though, they were mainly doing okay. Pogo was too buggered to bounce and Zeus had finally stopped

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yapping. Trev had his nose inches from the snout of the runty mutt, kneeling on the grass, his hairy bum crack blowing in the breeze. Eggy was throwing a plastic bone for Meatball, who obsessively retrieved it, spinning around in a whirl of fur. Stretch was bent into a right angle above his Rotty, a liver treat pinched delicately between his thumb and forefinger, urging Vader to, ‘Stay . . . Stay,’ with the desperation of a jilted lover. The only one having problems was Cookie. It was pretty obvious he’d copped the worst of the group.

The afternoon started off completely shit for Nigel and went downhill from there. When the dog wasn’t trying to rip his own tail off, he was chewing chunks from the pine sleepers that edged the garden beds or attempting to tunnel down through the already ratty lawn of the yard to escape the company of the other dogs and humans.

The session finally ended at three thirty. Cookie took Nigel straight back to the unit and put him in his crate in the common area. Every time Cookie approached, Nigel lost his shit—trying to chew his way through the base, chomping on his tail or yelping like he was about to have his throat slit. And it wasn’t like Cookie was a threatening guy; not compared to some of the other rough buggers around the joint.

Like most prisoners, over the years Cookie had become a good observer of behaviour. You had to be when you lived with hundreds of other crims. On top of this, he’d borrowed several of the books on canine behaviour that the prison library had

ordered in preparation for the program. Hopefully it'd help him work out what was going on inside the dog's skull.

He sat silently on the floor about a metre from the crate and observed Nigel, making a mental note of every tiny movement— yawning, licking, the position of his head, his ears, what his tail was doing. Little by little the dog calmed down. He turned his body in a series of slow motion pirouettes and eventually sat on his haunches facing Cookie. Cookie leaned forward and looked into Nigel's eyes. It was an unsettling experience, like looking at a human. The deep brown irises held the same pitiful expression. The dog only returned his gaze for a second, though, before looking away.

That wasn't an unusual experience for Cookie. It was something you learned instinctively in prison—to avoid looking others in the eye. There was plenty of looking, of course, plenty of vigilance. But the looks were always fleeting. In here people went to great lengths to hide what they were thinking, to avoid wearing their feelings on their face. One guy, Binh, had even ripped his eyebrows off with duct tape because he thought it made him more inscrutable.

Judging by what he'd glimpsed in Nigel's expression, Cookie wondered if the dog was simply unhappy with the restrictions of the crate. Feeling too confined. Cookie could understand that. He'd been the same way in the first shitty little cell in Hopetoun.

He went to the kitchen area where someone had left a foam tray of frozen mince on the draining board to thaw. He hacked

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off a chunk and slipped it into the crate. Good Boy gulped it down, then gazed imploringly at Cookie. He was tempted to let him out to explore, but the trainer had stressed the need to set clear boundaries and adhere to them. Cookie decided to stick to the trainer's approach. Nigel didn't seem exactly happy to be confined, but at least he wasn't trying to demolish either the crate or his tail.

At four o'clock, though, the other blokes came back to the unit. The sudden increase in activity and noise set the dog off again. Before long he started trying to claw his way through the wire base. As Cookie approached he stopped and backed up against the far side of the crate, twisting his big clumsy body into a knot and gnawing on his tail till it bled all over the bedding.

Cookie was not happy. It had been going alright till the other blokes' arrival stuffed things up. They weren't the calmest of housemates for the poor mutt. Keeno had turned on the telly and was watching *The Bold and the Beautiful*. He had the volume up high but was also yelling at Harvey to shut up. Harvey was chopping onions for the spag bol he was cooking and doing his Dean Martin impression, belting out 'That's Amore'. That'd drive anyone nuts. And dogs were heaps more sensitive to their surroundings than humans. The introductory video they'd been shown in preparation for the program had explained that. It said anxiety was a result of a dog's inability to predict its environment. And this sorry pooch had been bombarded with changes. Nothing was predictable. He'd gone

from being dumped to being in a shelter and then dragged out here to a prison. So many different sights, sounds, voices, smells. Nigel was probably interpreting all the chaos in the unit as a sign of danger. Probably sensing Cookie's frustration too. Dogs were good at that, tuning in to humans, picking up on moods, emotions. They were constantly looking for signs of how their owners were feeling and how they were going to act towards them. He'd read that in the behaviour books.

That was another thing these dogs had in common with the prisoners. They were totally reliant on others—the screws in the case of prisoners or the handlers in the case of dogs—for food, water, shelter; for their means of survival. So if that environment or that relationship seemed unstable to Nigel, it made perfect sense that he'd be twitchy, anxious. Cookie could hardly blame him. He'd feel exactly the same.