

Chapter 1: The Prince is Dead

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S COME DOWN TO A BATTALION of wood-turnings.

We're gathered in the Staffroom, staring at the pieces on the table, and then at each other. There are *dozens* of them, each with its own little tag around its neck. Carefully arranged, as if ready to go into battle. It made me think of those amazing Terracotta Warriors in China, discovered by accident.

It's morning teatime, but our principal, Nate Theron, is still in his office. For the past sixteen years, Nate's been a Rock of Ages for Bayside State School, an immovable force. He started with the Education Department nearly forty years ago at a one-teacher school west of Emerald and gradually worked his way up through the ranks, eventually clawing his way back to Brisbane where he was Deputy Principal at Duck Hill State School before getting the nod at Bayside. When I transferred in twelve years ago, Nate had already made his mark on the place, with a reputation for firm discipline and can-do academics. I can hardly imagine the school without him.

'Where *is* he?' grumbles Carol.

Carol Gridwell landed Grade 5 this year because she couldn't hack it in the lower school. The little kids were just too demanding, and their parents found Carol a soft target.

'At least I can *talk* to them,' she says of the older kids, 'and get some sense out of them.'

The change has been good for her: she's put on a stone this year, and her bust is starting to register on the radar

of the few males at the school. She's becoming a bit outspoken at staff meetings and let her name stand as our union rep.

I spin my chair to glance down the hallway. 'Still in his office,' I say. 'Maybe he's polishing his farewell speech.'

'Nate always had an impeccable sense of timing,' Gretchen Russell quipped. 'Or maybe he already knows what we got him for his send-off.'

Everything about Gretchen smacks of the Old School. She's three-year trained and would have been teaching Latin or Greek a few decades ago. If Nate weren't indelibly married, I reckon she'd be a perfect match for him. Starched blouses, tailored skirts. Never, under any circumstances, does she wear pants to work. Just picture it: 18 year-old sherry at sunset darkening against the beige walls. His and her bookmarks at bedtime.

'Well, it was the best I could do for \$50,' whines Mary Hamilton, staring at the neatly wrapped package with the garish bow on the table. 'Hopefully he won't find out they were on sale at Harvey Norman.'

Mary's our long-suffering administrator. Everyone knows that she runs the place, though Nate might think otherwise. Mary has a problem with eyeliner; she never *quite* gets it right. And it smears by afternoon. But then, if I had to get up at six a.m. every day to field our lame excuses for taking a sickie, and then find someone to cover for said teacher by first bell, I wouldn't care less what my eyes looked like.

'A DVD player was a great idea,' I say, delicately. 'I'm sure he'll be fine, once someone shows him how to use it!'

'Oh, no,' moans Mary. 'What if you're right? Should I just...take it back? Get him the gold watch, or something?'

'Don't be ridiculous!' says Ralph Broadwaite. 'A bit of technology won't hurt him, especially now with all that time on his hands.'

Ralph's our librarian. Or he *would* be if he could get

his nose out of his software manuals long enough to help the kids choose their weekly readers. He's got a weight problem that he blames on everything but diet and lack of exercise and a demeanour that reminds me of Eeyore. The kids call him Humpty Dumpty behind his back, and I think they'd be happy to see him slip off his. At the rate he puffs Ventolin, that won't be long – poor bastard!

Frankie Hickey picks up one of the taller vases and squints at its tag. 'Snowy Redgum,' he intones. 'And look, this one's Jarrah. Now I know what he was doing while *we* were marking report cards!'

'They're actually rather *nice!*' Gretchen muses, having a closer look at them. 'Look at the *detail*. It must take him ages to get them so...smooth.'

Frankie's the school Casanova. I suppose every school has to have one on staff to keep the female student teachers on the back foot, especially the ones who wouldn't pass their prac unless he put in the good word for them. He tries it on with me now and then, more often of late since I got married, as if that makes me more of a challenge. I may have been tempted once or twice just to see what on Earth those other women see in him – but I got over it. Frankie teaches the Grade Sevens and handles most of the after school sports. Keeping him at bay is *my* idea of sport.

Which is why I'll never tell him that Nate actually *gave* me one of his turnings a few weeks back. It wasn't even a second. I didn't have the nerve to ask why: some things are better left unsaid. Especially out in the parking lot, where anyone could see what was happening.

'The Crafty Life of Nate Theron,' whispers Kylie, conspiratorially. 'He was never one to play principal when he didn't *have* to!'

Kylie Moore and I share a classroom with the Grade 3s. She's almost as tall as I am short and was a model for *Marie Claire*, once. Meaning once, rather than once upon a time. Or, more accurately, an understudy to the real model. That was the dream that got away. Anyone be-

tween five foot two and five foot seven, she says, is ordinary. Not that she's an elitist. Kylie has this heightened sense of empathy. When anyone on staff gets sick with something that defies instant diagnosis, Kylie hops onto WebMD to shortlist and rank the possibilities, which she'll agonise with the victim over morning tea – before heading off to her GP for tests to be sure *she* hasn't contracted it. But we always have something – or someone – to talk about, don't we?

'I wonder how much he wants for this one,' says Gretchen, picking up the smallest woodturning.

'Don't you dare!' snaps Nicole Packer, who teaches Grade 1. 'If you break ranks, we'll all have to buy one!'

Frankie holds up one to the light and then rubs it against his cheek. 'You're right, Gretch – smooth as a baby's bottom. Very tactile.'

'God,' I say. 'Everything's sex with you, isn't it?'

Frankie stabs at his heart. 'That's so unfair, Cherry. I simply meant –'

Ralph clears his throat and gestures at the door. A breeze whips down the hallway: Nate is on the move.

Gretchen clutches the woodturning to her bosom. 'I'll have this one,' she says to Nate as he takes his seat at the head of the table.

Nate seems disappointed. 'Wouldn't you like something...bigger?'

Gretchen shakes her head. 'It's not the *size*, Nate. It has an Egyptian feel about it that I find...irresistible. How much?'

Carol rolls back her eyes.

Nate sighs. 'Thirty dollars. Cash.'

He's wearing his usual crisp white shirt and skinny maroon tie, hair slicked back like an Elvis impersonator. Kylie thinks that he only owns one shirt, which his wife washes and irons daily, given the fresh creases every morning, but I'm sure he has a stack of them at the ready in his wardrobe, even if they *are* all white.

Gretchen fumbles through her purse and produces

crumpled notes: a ten and twenty.

Frankie closes his eyes, and picks up the first turning his fingers contact as if he expects to get an electric shock. 'Don't take Amex?' he asks. 'I *suppose* I can do without a second sausage roll at Big Lunch!'

Before the dust settles, half the turnings have been sold. Nate pauses like an auctioneer with his gavel suspended in mid-air, just in case there are any more takers. Ralph stifles a burp, goes red in the face and finds a cobweb on the ceiling to gaze at. Carol stares straight through Nate. Slipping out a mirror, Kylie scrutinises a tiny mole on her nose, then powders it. Nicole is surreptitiously texting someone on her mobile. I simply drum my fingers on the table.

Carol elbows me in the ribs. 'He could still transfer you, Mrs Kaufman!' she whispers.

I shrug, and then hum under my breath, 'Can't get me, I'm part of the Union... Right, comrade?'

Nate unwraps his DVD player, preserving the paper and bow, and does his best to seem impressed. 'My,' he says, 'it *does* have a lot of buttons! What do you suppose—'

'Speech!' cries Gretchen, before he starts to inventory each one.

Nate pats the DVD player and tucks it back neatly into its box then clears his throat. 'As you know, I'm a man of few words and more paperwork...'

Frankie is miming Nate's words. I try not to laugh.

'Though *some* might disagree?' Nate says, looking straight at me.

'Sorry,' I say, slapping myself on the wrist. 'Bad girl!'

Nate's eyes bulge ever so slightly. 'But I *will* say,' he goes on, 'that it's the people here, the *community* that I'll miss, not The Education Department! You get tired after 43 years of all the posturing, and the politics that masquerades for pedagogy—'

'Nice alliteration!' Ralph says, admiringly.

'Please, Sir,' Frankie counters, 'what's ped-a...?'

Gretchen shoots Frankie a killer look. Not that she's all that keen on Nate. It's just that she's older than the rest of us by several years and thinks that gives her seniority. Which could be a short step to becoming a deputy principal soon – if Nate puts in a good word.

'I just hope,' Nate sighs, 'that my successor is as patient with you lot as I've been.'

Kylie jumps in. 'And what's *not* to like about us?' she smirks.

'Yeah,' says Frankie. 'I think we've been a Dream Team, compared to some of the schools in this district that shall remain nameless.'

'Oh, please,' I say. 'Not another *sport* metaphor!'

'It's boxing gloves time,' Carol injects. 'What *is* it with you two?'

'Sexual tension?' Nicole says, batting her eyelashes.

'I don't think so,' I say, brandishing my 1.27 carat diamond wedding ring.

The glint from the ring must have caught Nicole in the eye, for she just bursts into tears. 'May I please be excused?' she sobs, not waiting for Nate's.

I feel their eyes on me. 'I meant that for Frankie, not her. Nicole's not even married, for Christ's sake.'

Kylie pats me on the hand. 'I think that's the point, dearie. She's what, thirty-two next month? I'd already had a kid and been soundly divorced by then!'

'I wish you'd sell your story to *Women's Day*,' Carol smirks, 'and be done with it!'

'If it's a kid she wants...,' Frankie offers, probably only half tongue-in-cheek.

Nate puts up his hand. 'I hope we can get through this without me having to send anyone to the Quiet Room.'

The Quiet Room is a spare office across from the principal's where the unwashed are sent to reflect on their misdeeds. When the strap and the good old rap across the knuckles with a ruler were outlawed, Nate was forced to resort to psychology, and the Quiet Room was the best alternative he could come up with. Every good teacher

knows behaviour modification takes much longer than a smack and is next to useless. Which is probably one of the reasons why Nate's taking early retirement.

'I think we should let the principal have his say,' Sheriff Gretchen says.

'Thank you,' Nate says. 'Some of you may well be asking why I would want to retire at 55, at the point when men my age are poised for the final assault up the career ladder.'

'Actually,' says Ralph. 'I think we assumed you wanted to take your Super and run.'

'Thanks, Ralph,' Nate says, thin-lipped. 'You're closer to the mark than you might think. I'm a great believer in getting out while you can still hold your head up. To tell the truth, I've been having this dream—about paperwork. Someone stuffs wads of it in my mouth until I can't breathe.'

'Oh, my God,' cries Gretchen. 'That's *my* dream!'

'Did you steal it from under Nate's pillow?' Carol asks sweetly.

Frankie hisses like a cornered cat, and the rest of us, save Gretchen, of course, have a laugh. Even Nate stifles a chuckle.

'I'm sorry,' he says to Gretchen. 'But, as of tomorrow, I don't have to consider other people's feelings—or their nightmares—before my own.'

He's cut her lifeboat adrift, but she takes it on the chin. We give him a round of applause.

Nicole's come back, composed, but slightly stuffed up. 'Sorry, allergy attack. Did I miss anything?'

There's a southwesterly change coming, and the wind is swirling leaves and dust under the school. Kylie and I huddle cross-armed together on playground duty as the kids are bouncing off the walls.

'You have to hand it to him,' Kylie says. 'He was a do-nothing principal, but he let Gretchen have it between the eyes!'

'More importantly,' I say, 'at least we got *our* way with him.'

'You more often than me,' Kylie says. 'No free woodturning for *this* girl. Do you suppose it's my breath?' She puts a hand in front of her face and breathes on it.

I'm beginning to regret having told her about my freebie. But you have to have a workmate you can tell. I've never been one to rely on the proverbial hole in the ground.

'We could do far worse than Nate,' I say. 'Who knows what the next principal will be like?'

'He won't be a match for us,' she winks. 'We'll have him trained in no time!

'What if he's a *she*?'

Kylie thinks about it. 'I can't imagine that.'

'I think this calls for a meeting of the Central Committee,' I declare. 'Just in case.'

'I agree,' Kylie says. 'But what about Hazel? She's off sick, remember?'

'Hazel's never too sick to miss a debriefing,' I say, already texting her.

Anyone can have a social club, but Bayside School has its Central Committee. The less charitable might think it's just an excuse for drinks after work, but of course it's much more than that. It keeps us sane.

Sure enough, even though she hadn't texted me back, Hazel Frankston's waiting for us at the pub.

'Feeling better, darling?' Frankie says, kissing the back of her hand.

'It was all I could do to get here,' Hazel moans, like a Southern Belle. 'The fever comes and goes!'

She teaches Grade 2, so she can be forgiven for needing more sickies than the rest of us. She had a dream of setting herself up in small business, importing container loads of rubbish from China, but the years have faded her entrepreneurial spirit.

As the first round is served up, we fill her in on the goss.