

Chapter One

Penny

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away

Blessed be the name of the Lord

I wipe fresh tears from my face with an overly wet hanky and stare dead ahead.

Life so sucks sometimes. No – not sometimes – all the time. Right this minute I just can't see the point in livin'. June was like a real ma to me and now she's gone. What am I goin' to do without her? How am I goin' to cope?

Though I know that's not true 'cause I've got me kids. But these last three an' a bit years have bin tough, real tough. And only bearable because of June, gettin' me through all the rough times. God knows there's bin plenty of them! And now I'm on me Pat Malone again 'cause Dud don't count for nothin'.

What's the minister blatherin' on about? Somethin' about a rock?

Jesus is the rock.

Well, bugger me, I dunno about that but June was my rock. The only friggin' stable part of my whole damn rocky life! God, I'm goin' to miss her.

The old guy with the back-to-front collar drones on and I find I'm losin' track again. I glance at his face, set in a look of false sympathy. I close my eyes an' shake my head. What a fake! Crappin' on with all that guff as if he was 'er best friend! But he never even knowed her at all! June never went to church or nothin' so how could he? God, what a phony!

And while I'm on the subject of fakes an' phonies, just take a butcher's at her family, all sittin' 'ere in the funeral parlour. Dead-set, the only one cryin' is Bruce. And maybe Rosie, but I can't see her as she's sittin' on the other side of Les.

I dunno why Les chose to sit in the third row but Rosie and I sat down on each side of him to give him support. Poor Les! I know he's hurtin' inside. He was married to June for near on forty years. But he won't cry. I can just hear him now: *'It's not manly to cry!'* Just like his sons sittin' over there in the front row on the other side. Look at 'em – Dick, Bill an' Dud with Rob behind! Not a tear between 'em! They're sittin' there stony-faced and squirmin' in their hired suits – two of 'em, anyway. I doubt if Dick or Rob has ever worn a bag of fruit before in their entire lives! Their ties are all tied wrong and who else would wear friggin' joggers to a funeral?

I check out these fakes some more, these men in the family I'm part of at the moment. I dunno for sure if they even loved their ma.

Take Dick for one. He's sittin' there lookin' bored outa his brain. Now he's fiddlin' with his nails. I reckon his name is just about right for him. Dick – Dipstick - Dickhead. What a waste of space 'e is! In the few years I've knowed him, he's never done nothin' much and I reckon he's a real pillock. He thinks he knows everythin' and never takes no advice about nothin' from nobody, goin' from one disaster to the next. All he cares about is his precious car and his motor racin'. No wonder he can't keep a girlfriend. Who would put up with all that shit?

I continue starin' at him critical-like. Then I remember something else. To be fair, I have to admit he does hold down a good job and he sticks to it. He's had it for years, workin' at a garage in Warilla as a grease monkey. June's told me lots of times that he's well-respected there. Blimey! He must work harder at work than he does when he comes round home, that's all I can say. He don't lift a finger then. He lives close by us, in the Lake Windemere Caravan Park. It's only a kilometre or two away. I have never seed his place but I can just imagine it, untidy an' mucky. It'd be a real shit hole...

My eyes move on to Dud – Dudley - sittin' there in his Hawks suit. My precious - *not* - partner and the father of my two younger children, Angel an' Eagle. I don't think there's much of a future there for us. We should never have got together in the first place. Shit! I'm such a prat when it comes to pickin' men! First a two-timer, next a bloke handy with his fists and now a dud. Ha! How funny's that! Dud by name and dud by nature. He don't give a rat's arse for me or his kids. All he cares about is his precious basketball.

But, I have to admit, he is pretty good at that. He's bin with the Hawks for forever, comin' up through the juniors and now he's playin' in their top grade and has bin for the last year. It's his only job and he works real hard at it, what with all his trainin' an' that. He takes care of himself too. No smokes, he don't drink much and he watches what he eats. I glance at him again... He does look good, especially in a suit. And he's great in bed, a real good pheasant plucker. Damn fine actually. But he's hardly ever home so it's not much different now for me than bein' a single mum. And I've bin there before...

I shift my gaze from Dud to Rob in the second row.

Two plain-clothes cops are crowdin' him in on both sides. I can just make out a glint of steel where Rob's right wrist is hooked up to one of the copper's left wrist. Rob had to ask for special permission to come today – to attend his mother's funeral. He's presently a guest of the government at Silverwater for his part in a ram raid. It was only a minor part, as far as I know – he drove the get-away car or somethin' like that. Maybe he was the cockatoo, I can't erzactly remember. I don't think he's a bad bloke really. June reckoned he just never picked the right sort of friends. Anyway he's done over two years now and is due to be released next year. That new scar on his cheek looks nasty. I remember Dud tellin' me a guy knifed

him when Rob resisted his amorous overtures. Yuk! I certainly don't want to go there. Can't stand poofers. And how did the other bloke happen to have a knife in prison anyhow?... I can't see Rob's girlfriend nowhere so I don't think she's come today. Jacinta Fox, her name is and the goss is that she's a real goer. Everyone calls her Foxy. I wonder if she'll stick with him when he gets out...

My eyes wander back to the front row. Next to Dud is Bill with his wife Cassie.

Now there's a bloke who's different. He's the only one in the family with some class. And a real education. I reckon he totally broke the Hapless mould when he took himself off to the university. But he don't never come round home no more so I don't really know him. But what I know I don't like much 'cause he's a real stuck-up sod. Look at him sittin' there all prim an' proper with his wife, lookin' real fancy in his designer clobber! Oh, God! And they really know how to spend money makin' themselves beautiful! Cassie's hair is lighter than I remember from the last time too – it must o' come outa a bottle – and it's fashionably straight as uncooked spaghetti.

Bill's big with some high-flyin' company in Sydney, workin' as an architect. Last year, Cassie sweet-talked him into buyin' this mansion in Mangerton and takin' out a humungous mortgage. I bet she always gets what she wants with him... But if Bill ever loses his job, I reckon they could fall into some really deep shit. She don't work, 'cept for sellin' Tupperware. Reckons she don't have no time to do more. I could tell her a thing or two about bein' busy. She's a real poser she is!

Bruce is sittin' on the other side of Cassie. Now he's my favourite person in the family. Tears are streamin' down his face. Poor Bruce. I know he really loved his ma. Bein' the youngest son and the only one still at home – and bein' his father's most *unfavourite* - he was real close to June. I really like Bruce. He's so gentle an' carin'. Even though he's a song-n-dancy man, he's not like those faggots in Rob's gaol. Bruce is always real lovely to me an' the kids and they all love their Uncle Bruce. But I dunno how he'll go now, livin' there alone with Les. His dad and him just don't get on, no way.

I lean forward and steal a glance at Rosie. She's tryin' to sing but her face is all screwed up with cryin'. She's holdin' Les' hand in hers and tryin' to hold the words to the prayer in her other hand and wipe her face all at the same time. Poor Rose. She's only nineteen and the baby of the family, still an innocent little ivory pearl. She told me a few weeks back that her latest thing is zen philosophy, whatever that is. Probably some screwball religion she's started up with her boyfriend, Nathan. But Rosie's all right. I like her. She's livin' in Albion Park with Nathan now but she was always comin' over to see her mum and I know she's goin' to miss her just as much as me.

Les' hand grips mine more tightly and it brings me back to what's goin' on. Everyone is standin' up for another hymn. *Amazin' Grace*. I study the words on the service sheet.

I was blind but now I can see.

That sure don't happen. But the tune is nice.