

Chapter One

Welcome to Walsh ~ Population 1381

As Fergus McWilliams drove into his new life he wondered if his arrival meant the population was now 1382. He turned to look at the cat sitting resentfully in her carry box on the passenger seat.

‘Does that include animals, do you think?’

Mrs Norris gave him a look of disdain and then turned around so he was looking at her fluffy tortoiseshell butt.

‘I guess not. The animals down here probably outnumber the people a hundred to one if the cows in the paddock we just passed are anything to go by. And what happens when someone is born or dies? How often do you think that sign gets updated?’

Judging by the faded colour and the way the paint flaked at the edges, probably not that often.

He shook his head as he realised that not only was he talking to a cat, but also asking her the kinds of questions the kids in his classes would ask. That’s what happened when you spent the majority of your time with children: you started thinking like them. Then again, that was probably a good thing—kids, he’d decided, were far better humans than their adult counterparts.

The advertisement for a Year 3 and 4 teacher at the small primary school in the dairy farming community of Walsh, three hours south of Perth, couldn't have appeared at a better time. Ferg needed a fresh start—away from the gossip and pitying glances of his colleagues, neighbours and so-called friends—almost as much as the small school needed a teacher. Their current principal, Carline Saunders, had been recently diagnosed with cancer and while she was on sick leave, their usual Year 3/4 teacher was stepping up into the role.

Fergus slowed the car as the lush winter-green paddocks that bordered the main road through town made way for houses and then a row of shops on either side. It was like he'd driven out of Perth and back in time forty years—he spied a post-office, a café called 'A Country Kitchen' (that according to its sign out the front promised you the best coffee in the south-west), a hardware store, an IGA supermarket, a pub, an agricultural supplier, a vet and a yarn store. The latter seemed surprisingly busy for a Saturday morning, with dozens of people milling about outside.

Ferg guessed there wasn't much to do in the country but knit, not that he planned on taking it up as a hobby. Glancing at the time and seeing there were still twenty minutes until he had to be at the school to meet Joanne Warburton, the acting principal, he decided he wouldn't mind stopping and testing that coffee promise. Unlikely the coffee would be up to the standards of the local café he'd left behind in Perth but he'd need somewhere to get his morning caffeine hit on the way to school. Not even the best of teachers could be expected to face a class of thirty without at least one coffee in their system, not that there'd *be* thirty kids in his new class. Small class sizes were one of the benefits of country teaching.

Late September, the temperature was mild, so Mrs Norris would be fine in the car for a few minutes with the windows ajar. She wouldn't like it any more than she'd liked being cooped in a

box on the three-hour journey, or the fact he was now her primary caregiver, but ... she'd live.

However, within minutes of trying to find a parking spot, Ferg realised it wasn't only the yarn store that was busy but the whole damn town. Vacant parking spots were non-existent. It felt like each and every one of the 1381 people were in town this morning, all of them wearing identical red and white scarves and beanies, making it like a page in a *Where's Wally* book. Wasn't this supposed to be a small, sleepy rural community?

Long ago, he, his mum and his twin sister had driven through Walsh on one of those very rare family holidays they'd taken when he was a kid, and he remembered it as a blink-and-you'd-miss-it town with next to no life. The perfect place to hibernate for a few months while he planned his next move. Today, Walsh appeared anything but quiet. In addition to all the Wallys and Wandas, every shop had red and white balloons and streamers littering its front windows and the queue to the café was out the door. There had to be some kind of game happening. He'd heard country towns went rabid for sport.

Mourning the loss of the coffee that never was, he continued down the main street and soon came upon the school. He turned into the empty car park and took in the old buildings, which looked like something out of *Seven Little Australians*. In the playground there was one of those big, modern, climbing web things, but also some monkey bars, an actual roundabout and the kind of tall steel slide with no sides that could burn a hole in your pants on a hot day. The type of equipment that had been banished years ago in the city.

Ferg put the windows down a bit for Mrs Norris and climbed out of his wagon to look around while he waited for Joanne. He'd barely made it past the front gate when a silver four-wheel drive, followed by a dirty, once-white ute, entered the car park.

‘Hello.’ A middle-aged woman with wavy shoulder-length dark hair and a ridiculously large smile leapt from the four-wheel drive. A red and white striped scarf flapped in the air as she waved her arms excitedly and hurried towards him. ‘You must be Fergus?’

‘Yes,’ he replied as a younger woman burst from the ute and jogged to keep up with the other. She too wore red, white and chirpiness.

The older woman landed beside him and thrust out her hand. ‘I’m Joanne. So lovely to meet you.’

‘You too.’ He nodded and accepted her hand.

‘And this is Beck, our school receptionist. Although she’s much more than just a receptionist. We’d all flounder without our dear Rebecca.’

‘Good to meet you both.’ He smiled as he shook her hand as well, noticing that in addition to the scarves, both women were wearing T-shirts with the words ‘Walsh Wanderers’ and a matching logo stamped on their chest pockets.

‘You must excuse us for being slightly late,’ Beck said. ‘We’ve been down at the oval helping in the canteen, getting ready for the big game.’

‘First time the Wanderers have been in the footy grand final for thirty-seven years,’ Joanne said as if he was supposed to know who these Wanderers were. ‘And their last final win was thirty-nine years ago.’

Beck nodded. ‘This is monumental. A lot’s riding on today. My hubby’s on the team and is beside himself with nerves and excitement.’

‘Do you play footy?’ Joanne gave him a once-over as if she was eyeing up his potential.

‘Nope. Fraid not.’

Joanne showed momentary disappointment, then shrugged. ‘Never mind, season’s practically over anyway. But you should

come along and watch the game. It'll give you a chance to meet the locals. We haven't had a male teacher in years. You're going to give all the mums something to talk about, that's for sure.'

'Especially the single ones.'

As Joanne and Beck exchanged an amused glance, Ferg shifted from foot to foot; were they *trying* to make him feel uncomfortable?

'Plus, there's always a good feed,' added Beck, as if this would twist his arm.

'Well ...' He cleared his throat. 'Thanks for the offer, but I think I'd rather get settled in this afternoon. I'm sure there'll be time to meet everyone when school starts.'

'Oh, you won't have to wait that long,' said Joanne. 'Now, do you want to check out your classroom or just head straight to the farm?'

'Farm?'

Beck chuckled. 'Didn't Jo tell you? Don't worry, the land is leased by the two farms on either side and the cottage is very homely.'

'It's Mrs Lord's house. She's only recently had to move into the nursing home but has lived in that place since she got married at twenty-two. Lucky for you or you might have had to sleep on my couch or take a room at the hotel.'

Beck made a face. 'They had a bedbug infestation recently—not surprising really, they haven't replaced the beds since the nineteen-fifties.'

Ferg knew the house of the principal wasn't available as she was still living there with her husband, and there wasn't any other education department accommodation available in town, but he'd assumed he'd be staying *in* town. Never mind, as long as he wasn't expected to milk any cows, he didn't care where they put him. 'Since you two are busy with the football, maybe you could just leave me the key to the cottage and give me directions?'

‘Oh no, we wouldn’t do that,’ said Jo. ‘Beck and I will show you out to your new home. We’ve got an hour or so till the game starts.’

‘Thanks.’ Ferg hoped he didn’t sound too unappreciative and tried to maintain an acceptable level of friendliness as the two women gave him the school tour, but he really just wanted to be alone again. For a place with only four classrooms, a big room that housed the library, music and art areas, and a small office/staffroom, it took longer than he’d have hoped due to the local history Joanne and Beck provided and the numerous questions they asked. If they ever lost interest in their current jobs, both of them could have promising careers in investigative journalism. It was only when he remembered Mrs Norris in the car they finally hit the road.

After about ten minutes following Joanne’s four-wheel drive down roads in dire need of some TLC, they turned on to a gravel track. Fat black and white cows in the paddocks eyed the cars suspiciously as they drove past and then the track widened and a little cottage appeared in front of them. With its tin roof, faded blue weatherboard exterior, wooden rocking chair on the verandah and established fruit trees out the front, he guessed it was built sometime in the early 1900s. Jools would have been in heaven in a place like this.

But he didn’t want to think about Jools.

He parked alongside Joanne, then went around to the passenger door to retrieve the cat box.

‘Aw, isn’t she the sweetest thing,’ Joanne cooed as she peered into the box under his arm. ‘Is she friendly?’

‘Not at all.’ The only person Mrs Norris liked was his ex. Pity said ex had decided she liked somebody else better than the both of them. Just as well misery loved company.

‘What type of cat is she?’ Beck asked.

‘A Maine Coon,’ he said as Mrs Norris’s paw swiped at him through the bars. ‘I should probably get her inside before she claws me to death.’

The women chuckled and started up the rocky garden path to the cottage. Joanne opened the door without using a key.

‘It’s not locked?’ he asked, the scuffed floorboards creaking as he followed the others inside.

‘Nobody bothers locking up out on farms, most of the crims round here are too lazy to come this far. Mrs Lord couldn’t even tell us where the keys were.’

Placing the cat box on the floor but not releasing its occupant, Ferg looked around. He imagined this was what his grandmother’s house might have looked like ... if he’d ever had a grandmother. A crochet rug hung over the back of a floral sofa that looked as if it had been bought mid last century. The walls were covered in black-and-white photos and watercolour paintings in tarnished gold frames. A glass cabinet filled with trinkets stood along one side of the living room and a bookshelf overflowed with hardbacks. And likely dust.

The décor wasn’t exactly to his taste, but his contract was only for six months.

‘This will do nicely,’ he said.

‘Feel free to move or box anything up,’ said Joanne. ‘Mrs Lord won’t be coming home sadly—she has Alzheimer’s and she doesn’t have any family. She and the late Mr Lord were never blessed with children. Make yourself at home.’

Ferg didn’t know where he was supposed to put any of the stuff if he did clear it out, but decided not to ask in case it prolonged the conversation. He was working out how to politely send the women on their merry way when Joanne glanced at her watch.

‘Look, we hate to dump you and run, but the game will be starting soon and we don’t want to miss the bounce. Sure you don’t want to come?’

‘No, I’d rather get settled in, but thanks. It was kind of you to escort me out here.’

‘No worries.’ Beck smiled. ‘It’s easy to get lost when you don’t know the roads.’

‘Well then,’ Joanne said, ‘you get settled and Trev and I will have you round to dinner in a few days. I’ll invite Beck and the rest of our staff so you can get to know everyone before school starts.’

‘Thank you.’

He waved them off and, as the four-wheel drive grew smaller, let out a long slow breath. Aside from the occasional murmur from the cows in the paddock close to the house, there was absolute silence. He’d gotten used to quiet (except when at school) over the last few weeks and told himself it was better than meaningless chatter, or worse, pretence. And the air felt so fresh! Maybe he’d like living in the country after all.

Heading back inside, he approached Mrs Norris’s box as if she were a lion.

‘Hey there, gorgeous girl.’ Although she might be pretty on the outside, there was nothing beautiful about her on the inside, but Ferg attempted sweet talk anyway.

Holding his breath, he released the latches to open the door of the cage and stepped back. Mrs Norris glared at him as she slowly reached one paw out of the box and took a tentative step towards freedom. She hissed at him and then ran straight under the coffee table.

‘Trust me,’ he told her, ‘life hasn’t exactly gone according to my plans either, but we just gotta make the best of a shitty situation.’

Then, leaving her to sulk in solitude, he went into the kitchen to make a coffee.