

Chapter One

Crap decisions mostly result in crap consequences. I should know.

My sister *never* goes along with my ideas. Even if she were about to plummet off the edge of the Niagara Falls in a canoe and I happened to be flying past in a rescue helicopter, yelling at her through a megaphone to grab onto the life-line dangling underneath it, she more than likely would come up with a reason not to.

Which is why it was a miracle she said yes about the car.

This was shaping up to be the best summer holiday. Mum, Molly and I had just arrived at Gran's – up near the Murray, my favourite place in the world. I was set for five fantastic weeks of fishing every day and generally hanging out with my dog, Lucky, by the river. Molly might join me for a swim in the afternoons, but for the rest of the time she wouldn't be a bother as she'd hired a shipping container to transport the books she intended to read up here. Okay, that was a slight exaggeration.

Molly and I were also going to visit Dad in Sydney. This, however, involved squishing into his miniscule one-bedroom apartment. But Dad had booked the Harbour Bridge climb! I have to say this benefit significantly outweighed the substantial pain of co-existing in such close proximity to my sister for a whole week.

The car opportunity was perfect timing. Mum had taken Gran to the Selview shops to stock the pantry. Gran and Mum were both the types to bail up a stranger and tell them their life history.

'Come on, Mol. It's more than two years before I can go for my Ls. You've had three driving lessons already.'

'So?'

'Mum and Gran won't be back for hours. Show me how to work the gears, that's all.'

'They're different on Gran's old bomb.' Molly went back to reading. She was into her second book already.

'If you show me, I'll do your share of the dishes for the whole time we're on holidays at Gran's.'

'Okay, then.'

Too easy.

Way too easy. I'd just agreed to do double dishes for five weeks. How does my sister do that?

Gran's car was parked in the carport. After about five gear crunches I managed to find reverse and ease my foot onto the accelerator. The car lurched backwards. Then again, as I was getting the hang of the clutch.

'Okay, Ish, put your foot on the brake now.'

'A bit further, Mol – I've only gone back a couple of metres.'

'No, that's enough. You'll be out on the street.'

'Come on, Molly. I'm making some room. I want to change up to second on the way back to the carport.'

'No way, Ish. You can't get up to second gear in a driveway. It's not the road. Hit the brakes. Now!'

'I *am* braking. Nothing's happening.'

'Well, hit them harder, you idiot.'

Why did my sister have to say that? She was always calling me an idiot. I lifted my foot off the stupid brake and slammed it back on – to the accelerator pedal.

'Ish! Stop! We're going to hit the pole!'

Gran's car zoomed out of the driveway and across the road. By a miracle, no cars were coming and no-one was walking along the footpath. By another miracle I managed to slam on the brakes just in time. We stopped centimetres from the pole.

'Quick, moron, drive back up into the carport before someone sees us.' Molly was yelling at the top of her voice, looking up and down the street as if she was watching a tennis match. 'Mum and Gran could be back from the shops any minute. And if the police hear about this my Learner's Permit will be history.'

I put my foot on the clutch and tried to change gears. The car made a terrible grating sound.

'Come on, hurry up.' Molly was bouncing up and down on her seat.

I pushed the clutch in again and jiggled the gear stick. Finally it shifted into position. I put my foot on the accelerator pedal and drove forward. Then I must have turned the wheel. We missed the driveway and bumped up over the curb and onto the nature strip. I took my foot off the accelerator and for a second my mind went blank. I didn't know what to do. When I tried to hit the brakes, it was too late. There was an awful clank under the car. Then a gushing sound – as if we were sitting on top of a fountain.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Water started spurting out around our feet. It shot up through little holes in the bottom of Gran's car, in places where the carpet had worn thin and you could see through to the rusted metal.

'You've run into the fire hydrant! I can't believe it. The fire hydrant! Get out of the car!'

I didn't argue. Molly slid across to the driver's side and after a few gear crunches, backed off the nature strip and onto the street. As the car moved off the hydrant, water shot up into the air like a geyser. It reached above the power lines and sprayed out to the other side of the road into Gran's and all the neighbouring gardens.

It was spectacular.

And I was shitting myself.

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‘You let a thirteen-year-old boy drive the car? What were you thinking, Molly?’ Mum’s hands were balled into fists by her side.

‘I’m nearly fourteen,’ I objected, but Mum ignored me, brushed me behind her and took a step towards Molly.

‘I was only showing him how to change the gears, that’s all.’

‘Well, how did my car end up on top of a fire hydrant, for pity’s sake?’ Gran’s substantial tummy wiggled up and down as she danced from one foot to the other. Her face was bright pink.

‘It was an accident, Gran. Anyone could figure that out.’ Molly folded her arms in front of her and rolled her eyes up to the sky.

‘Don’t you speak to your grandmother like that, Molly,’ said Mum.

‘Like what? I was only pointing out the obvious. And Gran’s car is a bomb. She needs to get a new one, anyway. We did her a favour.’

‘Molly!’ Mum looked ready to throttle her.

‘Gran’s car is more of a national treasure, than a bomb,’ I piped in. ‘A 1963 Hillman Imp in original condition. She could get a fortune for it on eBay.’

‘As if.’ Molly did another eye-roll. ‘Well, she wouldn’t now, would she?’

‘I can’t believe you could be so irresponsible, Molly,’ said Mum. ‘You could have got *Ish* killed. What if a car had been coming when he backed across the road?’

‘That’s right. Get *Ish* killed. What about me? Why don’t you think about me for once?’

Molly and Mum. Always the same angry arguments. Molly wanting Mum's attention. Mum too distracted to notice. Her new job as a court reporter was stressing her out. I wish she still worked part-time at the local nursing home. But it wasn't enough money with Dad gone.

Mum was just about to let fly at Molly again when Mr Ironclad, Gran's next-door neighbour, drove up the street and pulled into his drive. Lucky went berserk inside the house. You could see Gran's net curtains jiggling up and down as he clawed at the windows, first in the sitting room and then in Gran's bedroom. He was barking his head off. Lucky's a Kelpie cross and to say he gets fixated on things is an understatement. Mr Ironclad is one of them. It could have something to do with the fact that his pocket is always full of dog treats.

'Ish, go and let Lucky out, for goodness sake,' said Gran, 'before he shreds my curtains.'

By now the whole street had turned out to see the commotion. The geyser was still spurting up to the sky and there was a river flowing down the street. I felt bad about wasting so much water.

I dashed into the house to let Lucky out, grabbing Mum's camera on the way back. My friends Josh and Andy, back home in Melbourne, would never believe I'd crashed Gran's car into a fire hydrant. These pics would make me a legend.

Lucky practically bowled Mr Ironclad over as he waddled across Gran's front lawn. He'd always reminded me of the Fat Controller in *Thomas the Tank Engine*. He'd been Gran's next-door neighbour for ever. They hadn't always seen eye-to-eye, mainly on account of Lucky and a certain incident with chooks, but with Grandpa dying last year and the terrible time when Lucky went missing not long afterwards, Mr Ironclad had taken a shine to both Gran and my dog.

'Hello there, Lucky, me boy. Steady on, fella!'

'Lucky! Down! Mr Ironclad's got his good clothes on. Down boy. Sorry, Mr Ironclad.'

In the Dark excerpt Carole Poustie

‘Hello, Ish. What do we have here, then?’

‘Don’t ask. It’s a long story.’

‘Whoohoo, Maggie! Been doin’ some creative drivin’, have you? That’s quite a water spout.’ Lucky had his nose in Mr Ironclad’s pocket. ‘No treats in these pants, ’fraid old boy. I’ll get you some in a minute.’

I aimed the camera up at the power lines, where fingers of water were leaping and jumping like those air-filled dummies used for advertising. I’d snapped two shots when Molly grabbed the camera out of my hands.

‘How could you? You’re such an embarrassment. Isn’t it bad enough what you’ve done? We’re trying to keep this low-key and you’re taking *photos!*’

I tried to stop the laugh from erupting, but it was too hard. *Low key!*

‘Stop laughing or I’ll ... I’ll ...’

‘Everyone in Mt Selview will know about this by tomorrow, Mol. We’ll be famous.’

‘Well,’ said Mum, ‘what a pity you won’t be able to bask in your fame because you’re both grounded.’

They took a couple of seconds to sink in, but when they did, Mum’s words hit me like Molly’s entire book collection dropped on my head.

Molly was right. I was an idiot.

I’d just wrecked all my holiday plans in one stupid move.