

# I

It was all her fault. He looked away from the computer screen and stared out of the window at the small patch of parched earth across the deserted street. A lone galah, its pink and grey feathers accentuated in the bright sunlight, foraged among the dry grass and spindly weeds. Antonia O'Reilly. How long ago was it since he'd seen her? Calculating from the last year of his schooldays he worked it out at thirty years. Thirty years of misery – or was it pleasure? He wasn't quite sure which. He looked back at the computer screen and reread the email that had stood out like a beacon among the multitude of spam:

*From: Antonia O'Reilly*

*To: Wallace Watkins*

*Subject: Friends Reunited*

*Hi Wally,*

*I got your email address from the 'Friends Reunited' web page. What on earth are you doing in Australia? Are you still the old Wally I remember? Do reply and satisfy my curiosity!*

*Regards,*

*Antonia.*

What a surprise! He had stumbled on the Friends Reunited web page some months' ago while surfing the *Net* and left his email address and a short message. Not finding the names of anyone he knew from his school days he'd given up the idea as a waste of time and hadn't bothered to visit the web page again.

Well, he'd reply all right! He sensed a hint of the old scorn and derision in her email and his pulse went racing into overdrive setting his fingers quiver and stirring to life an intimate part of his anatomy as his 'Antonia fantasy' sprang immediately to mind. With trembling fingers he reached for his cigarettes and lighter, fumbled a cigarette into his mouth, and went and stood at the window. Lighting the dreaded weed he inhaled deeply and exhaled a plume of noxious gasses out of the corner of his mouth. Antonia – his boyhood love! He could hardly believe it. For thirty years she'd been part of him. Been there like some nocturnal shade: there but not there. A dominating phantom, a dominatrix, lurking in the mind and levering her way into the flotsam and jetsam of his waking hours and his restless dreams, to use him and abuse him as she had done all those years ago. He loved it. It was what turned him on, made him tingle, and sent the blood coursing through his veins. Even in the early days of his marriage when his wife, Rosemary, had lain back gritting her teeth and *thinking of England* he had been visualizing Antonia O'Reilly. Antonia O'Reilly for *him* equalled *sex*. Rosemary hated sex and had dispensed with the unwholesome

practice altogether. If it wasn't for Antonia he'd probably be forced into celibacy ...

“Wallace!”

*The cry of the banshee!* His wife, Rosemary! *She who must be obeyed* was calling. It looked like his reply to Antonia was going to have to wait. Bozo, Wallace's bull-terrier, who had been sleeping peacefully next to the computer console, scrambled to his feet and made a beeline for the escape route – out the back door, up the sideway and out to the footpath. Wallace grabbed his cigarettes and lighter and raced after the dog. They both knew that that trenchant voice spelled trouble! Unfortunately Rosemary was quicker. As dog and man sprinted up the sideway she stood with her arms folded across her ample bosom, grim-faced and waiting.

“Where do you think you're off to,” said Rosemary.

“I was just going to take Bozo for a walk,” he said turning, only to see his cowardly cur sneaking back down the sideway with his tail between his legs.

“Don't lie to me, Wallace! I haven't been married to you for twenty years without knowing *exactly* what you get up to when my back's turned. You heard me calling and you thought you'd just tick off without the decency to come and see what I wanted you for.”

Protest was futile. Rosemary knew what he was up to and she was always one step ahead of him. The well-worn escape route was becoming increasingly more dangerous.

“I suppose,” she said, looking down at him with contempt, “you’ve been looking at those pornographic pictures on your computer again. Why you can’t just switch it off when you’re not using it I don’t know. Waste of electricity, that’s what it is, and I’m the idiot who has to pay the bills. Why you don’t go and get yourself a job instead of sitting day after day at that computer looking at dirty pictures, I don’t know. I’ll put a hammer through it one of these days, just see if I don’t!”

“Shush, Rosemary,” he said, seeing the nosy old bat next-door watching them with interest as she watered the plants in her garden. “The whole street can hear you.”

“I don’t care,” said Rosemary. “Let them hear. I’m sure they all know what you’re like by now.”

“Anyway,” he said. “You know I’ve been looking for work but who’s going to employ me at my age? And for your information those dirty pictures you and your mother keep on about are *art* – nothing at all to do with pornography.” He had used this hackneyed excuse in his defence so many times that even *he* was beginning to believe it.

“Ha, ha,” said Rosemary sarcastically. “To *normal* people they’re *dirty* pictures, Wallace - but you never have been normal, have you?”

Well, he supposed, he couldn’t argue with her on that score. Blame Antonia!

“And another thing,” Rosemary went on. “Do try and be nice to my mother. She’s been very good to us. While I’m working my fingers to the bone at the

office in order to pay the bills it's my mother who comes round in the evening to cook dinner for us."

To paraphrase an observation made by that tragic English princess: *there were three of them in this marriage*. Not to mention Rosemary's brother, Dennis, who while not always present, was nevertheless a frequent visitor and source of irritation.

"Anyway," went on Rosemary. "That's why I was calling you: you've got to go and pick mother up."

"Can't she come on the bus like she usually does?" he protested.

"No, Mother can't!" said Rosemary forcefully. "You can't expect her to wait for the bus in this heat! Go and get the car and hurry up about it!"

Grumbling to himself Wallace walked across the yard to the garage. It was hot and he needed a drink. He'd pop into the pub for a schooner on his way round to pick up the old battleaxe. One of the door-hinges had rusted away and the garage-door scraped gratingly on the concrete driveway as it swung outward. He got in the car and backed it out of the garage. Rosemary stood at the front gate watching him distrustfully.

"Don't you dare go to the pub!" she called, as he turned and cautiously edged the car forward onto the roadway. "Go straight there and come straight back!"

He pressed his foot on the accelerator and the car picked up speed. "Bloody cow!" mumbled Wallace between his teeth. "How does she do it, reading my mind like that?"

