

Book One – the First Day

CHAPTER ONE

You never see the truck that hits ya.

Never.

Russ the cop don't care about that; especially right now, cutting his big toe nail. He's concentrating. Any case why should he? Russ's been king Wy-Wy cop going on 17 years; he

knows Wy-Wy like he knows the hand that slaps ya.

Least he's out of bed. That's all that matters now.

Down the cop station, working, matter of fact ; sock off, one fat foot on his desk, a big silver toe clipper in his paw, indulging in some male grooming. Clipping them hard to reach places.

Lucky for him, it's early morning, round 4am; utterly no one's about, it's not even light, and while of course it's stinking hot, the air con's good in here. It's empty and quiet outside and he's getting paid, and furthermore – like he's said before - he's not at home. How good is that?

I mean being home in Wy tonight, the night before and tomorrow night as well, means trying-to-sleep-not-being-able-to; staring at the ceiling, tangled in them tangled sheets, muttering and cursing, fidgeting and sweating.

Night after night it's exactly the same. Trying to sleep in Wy-Wy, what a mugs game! Russ don't even try anymore.

For a start it's stinking hot, even at night. Then there's the smoke – the day-white, night-black, 24 hour, all-mixed-up grey smoke; that's the topper right there. Sitting on Wy-Wy stinking hot and dusty, never shifting an inch, night or day.

So in the matter of not being able to sleep a wink, Russ's not on his own; not by a long shot. Where he is on his own but, and this really makes him feel good, is not having to wear it.

'Mugs!' says Russ.

Yeah, the smoke, it's stuffed alright. Like lying under a car all day. With the engine running. Just walk down the street sometime: some mum's eye-balling her kid's inhaler; the mall's jammed with families sucking on the air con; blokes dead asleep on the pavement.

Russ's seen it all.

Most days, hell, you can't even see your car in your own driveway! That's how crook it's got.

Nor your own hand neither, let alone the other bloke's.

'Stuff that' asserts Russ.

On top of which, everyone's wearing these little grey mud specks on their face, specks they can't get off. What's that about?

It's a prime old cock up.

Every night Wy-Wy studies the telly weather, talks about nothing else. It's 'smoke', 'smoke', morning noon and night; 'weather', 'weather'; 'smoke', 'smoke', 'heat and 'smoke – twenty four hours a day.

Mind you, there's that other thing; that's there as well.

And this other thing; they talk about, in between the weather and the smoke, this other thing, they go hand in hand.

But yeah yeah, we're coming to that. Don't rush us. It ain't going nowhere!

Anyhow, Russ' dark morning right here, is exactly like every other dark morning before or since. It's the start of the day, the first night, the last night and every day in between.

Not a breath of air, not a whisper; stinking hot; gums leaning limp on every street; burnt nature-strips fronting every house; maybe some cat taking its time, crossing the wide dark streets of Wy-Wy.

Not forgetting of course, in the Wy-Wy cop shop, like Mr. Single Rose in a Box, Russ the cop; performing his male grooming and loving the mighty air-con.

Anyhow, maybe an hour goes by, sweating like a pig, clip, clip, clipping.

And then the phone rings.

Which is where, this whole, what's-about-to-happen-dreaming-thing kicks off.

In the Wy-Wy land of magic OZ.

Russ almost does his back in when he hears it, fallin' out his chair and as he straightens up, mmm...there's this funny old feeling in his guts, gotta admit it. Like maybe he shouldn't, you know, be there-here, where ever he is.

Like maybe there's somewhere else he should be, and like, immediately too.

The way the phone's bouncing but, you can hear it all over Wy-Wy: round them highway motels, across them railway tracks and playing fields, cross them empty school yards, up them suburban crescents with no trees, past the art gallery, the hospital, the new town hall – all over Wy.

So after a bit Russ picks it up.

Mug!

Cursing himself, sailing nail clippings at the air con, he hops outside towards the cop car, doing his shirt up, making big strides, dropping his gun, effing this, effing that, effing bloody non-stop.

Outside the night's thick as pitch, and stinking hot.

'Mr money bags' Lonnie Pope'. No wonder Russ's crook on 'imself.

Gunning the cop Holden along the sea road, his air con kicking on ten, he wants to give the siren a burst, wake himself up; decides better not.

Shifting in his seat pulling and tugging his seatbelt.

This Lonnie Pope fellow see, he's a big talking Yank from California, with a crumbed veal tan.

Abides in Wy Lonnie does. He's a 'Foreign Investor'.

But right now but, he's also a gone, gone foreign investor. With the town's cash investor!

And this is the other big thing Wy-Wy's chewing on night and day; other than the smoke and how bloody hot it is: where Lonnie? Two words. And another two: 'what's left?' And another two: 'who's paying?'

Lonnie, see, he don't owe one or two. Oh no, no, he owes the whole bloody town Lonnie. Every blinking sod!

So, swaying by their magic swimming pools, with their mouths full of sacred Barbie smoke it's 'Lonnie this', 'Lonnie that' – yakkity-yak, non-stop. That's it! Lonnie and the smoke. Lonnie and the smoke –yeah, yeah!

Giving out a big humungous copper sigh, Russ pulls into that little picnic area along the sea road - the VC Jeff Jackson Reserve. Nothing much to see here: a lit up toilet block no one uses, a mounted map beside a gum tree, couple of wooden tables; lots of official signs, some riddled with bullet holes.

Kills his engine and sits a bit, staring where the Inland Sea's meant to be; at the high wall of smoke sitting there instead. A blob of black, moonless and silent.

Tiny waves go flop, flop on the beach below his bumper bar

Last night - bless her - Granny Grimson tossed a brick through the Workers Club window. Went wee-wee in the van on the way back as well. Big mug Russ had to hose it out.

Still he'd rather be there right now – no risk.

Reason being, that out there, in the middle of the Inland Sea, behind that wall of smoke, old Lonnie is/was building a world class mega-hotel just like a good Lonnie should.

Furthermore, this hotel is flat out, the hope, pride and joy of every man, women and child in Wy-Wy (population who knows); who see it like some folks see Jesus: close-up, personal, and friendly. Who can tell ya at the drop of a hat how it's got one-twenty rooms, four or five pools, every room like a palace, slippery water slides, ten screen multi plexus, tennis courts, gold taps, running porn, heli-pads; the flat-out latest in everything. Woosh! Meant for rich Japs, Arabs and Yanks and yeah, anyone else rich enough besides.

Lonnie's gift to Wy-Wy.

Putting Wy back on the map, that's what Wy reckons. The latest of everything, floating in the Inland Sea right straight in front of Russ. And in front of the town.

Primus Corp, that's the mob, official label anyhow; but it's Lonnie alright, Mr mover and shaker. 'Investor'.

Which is why, right this instant, Russ's staring at the Inland Sea and the eyes of Wy-Wy are wide with sleepless fear: fear going with sleeplessness, fear going with smoke; fear going with nothing.

On account of what Lonnie owes and more to the point, on account of Lonnie being 'on rest-leave', AWOL, extended honeymoon, flown the coop, fled to Thailand and so on. There's a hundred and thirty countries in the world just about, and most have got a mention.

Still there's only so many ways to say it.

For eleven long big weeks and counting.

And also on account of how, for that whole time, hotel construction's been temporarily suspended on the got-everything-modern-Jesus-floating-hotel.

What a turn-out this turn-outs turned out to be!

Every day there some new tale: emerging finance, bail-out funds, Russian investors, Arab cash, Thai jail, Swiss clinic, Israeli passport; cashed-up Russian mobsters..

The whole town's swallowed 'em whole, every stupid story. Till half of the blokes in Wy-Wy are talking slick economist smartie talk all day; bloke's who never put the second Wy on Wy-Wy ever. Dear oh dear!

Russ stumbles down to the edge of the water, washing his hands in the dark waves.

Turned up out of the blue Lonnie did, bringing Primus Corp with him.

First they got the mine, then some big out-of-town spread; then they cooked up this floating hotel idea.

Every dollar in Wy's come from him.

And there's no one in Wy either who don't know that right now, out at Lonnie's big out-of-town spread "Bright Tomorrow", it's all closed up and dusty, or that out at the mine there's only some little Asian bloke who speakee no English and waves a big shottie.

Russ straightens up not wanting to leave for some reason.

Truth is Wy's going crazy: the banker, the butcher, the hardware and the servo bloke; school teachers, shop-keepers, cross-eyed footballers; everyone's flat-out mad like a frothing dog.

Now with this phone call and this possible, maybe, phone-call body - if the body is the body - for sure things are heading South; that's a fact.

And all entirely on account of Lonnie's big no-show, big gaping absence; on account of his low visibility profile, on account of him, flat out, having in fact, totally – snap - disappeared.

Except he hasn't has he, totally – snap – disappeared? That's not the go here at all.

Little waves flip flop on the muddy beach and the big copper boots. Bearing magic algae from the inland sea.

Yeah the magic land of OZ, lots of dreaming here, oh yeah: 'Black fella' dreaming', that's the original; 'white-fella-dreaming'; 'migrants-dreaming'; 'surfer-dreaming'; 'footy-dreaming', 'home-buyer-dreaming', 'meat-pie-dreaming'. You go faster and faster as you say 'em all.... 'the-truck-that-hits-you-dreaming'; 'Big-Bloke-dreaming'. Wow! TV dreaming! Plenty ain't enough!

Naturally white fellas don't see it that way; don't see it as dreaming, know what I mean? Dreamings just a black thing. Rationality's the go here, since 1788.

'Nonsense dreaming!' that's another one.

Anyhow people walk off cliffs thinking they're wide awake so.....

Russ rubs his hand slowly down his shirt; stares blank and fat into the hanging smoke right there before him.

The smoky space of the Inland Sea.