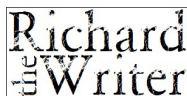


Diane and Bill

Richard Jefferis



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Chapter One

I was sitting in my car at traffic lights when she approached. She walked over to my car and tapped on my window and I wound it down.

"I'm collecting for the poor, would you like to make a contribution?" she said, thrusting a box in my face and shaking it so it rattled.

I felt a little guilty as I wasn't poor myself and the car I was driving made that abundantly clear. So I checked my pockets for some loose change but of course there wasn't any. I always dump any change I have in a bowl by my front door so I have no idea why I was looking in my pockets. Maybe I was just trying to show I was being cooperative. I pulled out my wallet but there was nothing in there smaller than a fifty and I had no intention of being that generous.

She rattled her box impatiently and the lights turned green. There was no one behind me so I stayed put.

"Do you take credit cards?" I asked.

"No" she said, "fraid not."

This seemed a little strange to me as all charities take credit cards. These days most transactions are done by credit card so to not take credit cards would be almost fatal for a charity. Come to think of it, she wasn't wearing an official badge either and the box was a plain brown cardboard box with no mention of a charity name on it.

"OK, just a sec" I said. "I'll pull over up there."

She pulled the box out of my face and I wound up the window. I pulled over just the other side of the lights and got out and locked the car. It wasn't a bad neighbourhood but it wasn't the best either. I looked for passing traffic then walked across the road. She was still waiting at the lights and was engrossed with another car.

I saw the driver of the car put some coins in the box and drive off. There wasn't much traffic so she had nothing to do for a while. I also

noticed that she was on her own. When charities collect money at traffic lights they have at least four volunteers so each of the four directions of traffic have a collector. I was suspicious.

“I was at the lights just now,” I said to her. “I pulled over up there.”

I don't know why I said that since it was unlikely she'd have forgotten in the 15 seconds that it had taken. She nodded, no doubt wondering why I'd come back.

“Which charity are you with?” I asked.

“I'm not,” she replied with a grin. “I'm just collecting for the poor.”

I hadn't expected that. I'd expected her to try to bluster and make out she was with a recognised charity.

“Which poor are you collecting for?” I asked. “Poor children? Poor minorities? The disabled?”

“Single mothers,” she said. “Me, basically.”

I was about to get angry and accuse her of doing something illegal, begging, maybe, I don't know, but I didn't. I just stood there, not quite knowing what to say. I think I was a little concerned that I was being conned in some way but equally I was concerned that I might be making a fool of myself.

Another car pulled up at the lights and she stepped forward and pushed the box into his face the way she had mine. I saw a note going into the box. She thanked him and stepped back onto the pavement.

She looked quizzically at me, as though wondering why I was still there. I was wondering the same. Why didn't I just leave it and walk away? After all, I hadn't given her any money so it's not like I was trying to get my money back after being conned.

Then I had a brilliant idea. Something to say!

“So you are, er, basically, just begging then?” I said.

“Spot on, sweetie. Just begging.”

“So you're a single mother then?”

“Yup.”

And chatty too by the sound of it.

Another car pulled up and she stepped forward again but the driver completely ignored her. She muttered something under her breath and came back to me.

“People like that irritate me,” she said. “I don't mind if they don't want to contribute anything but they don't have to be rude about it.”

She gave me a half look as if to imply I was on the edge of being rude myself. For some reason I found her innocence and grit quite endearing. If she really was a single mother she must be driven by strong needs to do this sort of thing. If she was. She may just be a con artist who'd found a nice little earner.

There was a coffee shop a couple of doors up from where we stood so I made a quick decision.

“Why don't you take a break and have a coffee with me? There's not much traffic at the moment but if you wait a while it'll pick up with the rush hour.”

“I'm not a hooker,” she replied, so quickly that I wondered if she'd been taken for one before.

“I can see that,” I said. “If you were you'd be on a better corner.”

That made her laugh. She looked around for any other traffic but it was quiet. She took a long appraising look at me and then seemed to collapse in on herself slightly, as though in defeat.

“OK,” she said. “I could use a coffee. But no funny business, all right.”

“OK,” I said, “no funny business. Which is a shame as I'm a

comedian.”

She laughed again. “Yeah I can see that. What's your name?”

“Bill,” I said, “what's yours?”

“Ohh, I know lots of Bills,” she replied. “Every one of them unpaid.”

“Ha, ha,” I replied. “So you're a comedian too.”

She smiled. “So where's the coffee? Your place?”

“Just over there.” I nodded towards the coffee shop.

She glanced towards it then started walking over. I followed a step behind.

Inside the coffee shop I asked her if she wanted anything to eat. She was looking a little peaky. She gave me another long appraising look then glanced at the menu board and opted for a ham and cheese focaccia. I ordered while she went to a table by the window. I joined her and sat opposite.

“You didn't tell me your name,” I said.

“So do you often take strangers for a coffee when you meet them on the street?”

“No,” I replied. “I've never done it before.”

“Why did you start with me then?”

I imagine she was still concerned I might be trying to pick her up or something.

“I really don't know,” I said thoughtfully. “You just seemed a little pathetic standing there trying to collect money.”

She burst out laughing and I realised that probably wasn't the best thing to have said, or perhaps it was because it seemed to have broken

the trust barrier slightly.

“My name's Diane. But you can call me Patty,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

“Why Patty?”

“Because my middle name's pathetic,” she said with another laugh.

“What's your middle name then?” I asked then realised that she hadn't meant her middle name was something pathetic, she was just playing with my words.

“OK, I get it now,” I said.

I was feeling a little pathetic myself as I consider myself to be fairly sharp but Diane clearly had the initiative in this conversation.

The coffees arrived and the girl said the focaccia would be along in a few minutes. Diane ripped the tops off three tubes of sugar and poured them in simultaneously, stirring with her other hand.

“That explains why you're so sweet,” I joked, nodding towards the empty tubes in her hand.

“Do you want me to be sweet?” she said, tensing and lifting one eyebrow fractionally.

“I didn't mean it that way,” I said hastily. “It was just a little joke seeing as how we're both comedians. I'm not trying to pick you up.”

She relaxed again.

“So why am I here?”

I decided to be honest.

“I got suspicious when you didn't accept credit cards. So I pulled over to challenge you and, I don't know, maybe even get you arrested as a beggar or a conman.”

“So why didn't you call a cop?”

“Because you were so honest when you said you were collecting for yourself. It took me by surprise.”

She looked puzzled.

“If you'd tried to bullshit I might have called a cop but you didn't. And when you were collecting from that other car it occurred to me that there no real reason why you couldn't ask for money directly when a charity can. Besides, you don't have their overheads and you don't have to abide by their rules when they're doling money out.”

The focaccia arrived just then, with a knife and fork. On the rare occasions I have a focaccia I just pick it up in my hands and eat it but Diane daintily picked up her knife and fork and cut a piece off and put it in her mouth. I could see she was desperate to wolf it but was working hard to restrain herself. The betrayal was the speed with which she swallowed each piece and put the next piece into her mouth, it was just a little too fast. I let her eat in peace.

“That was heaven,” she said, as the last piece went down the hatch.

“So you were hungry then?” I said when she squashed the last few crumbs with her finger and sucked it clean.

“A little,” she admitted.

I called the girl over and ordered another.

Diane had a strange expression on her face but she didn't stop me. She watched the girl go back to the counter then looked at me in silence and opened her mouth to speak a couple of times.

“Thank you,” she said, quite simply. She'd clearly decided nothing else was appropriate.

I wanted to ask why she was so poor that she needed to beg for money on a street corner and about her life and so on but I suddenly felt embarrassed. Her hungry eating of the focaccia had made me

realise she was a vulnerable human being and not just something to be gawped at and poked like a circus animal.

We sat in silence for a while then she asked what I did for a living.

"I have my own business," I replied. "Basically I'm a travel agent."

"Oh," she said, then after a few moments "I can't think of anything to say to that. What do people usually say when you tell them you're a travel agent?"

"They usually ask if I can get them discounts on travel."

"That explains it then. I can't afford to travel so a discount wouldn't help. It must be a fun job. Do you get to go to all sorts of exotic places?"

"I do sometimes to sort out problems or investigate new places but not often. Mostly I just organise things for other people."

"You must be very rich," she said.

"I get by," I replied, suddenly aware of the gap between the haves and the have nots.

"Can't you get a job?" I blurted out. The silence had become a little tense.

"No," she said sadly. "I was sacked from my last job when I wouldn't sleep with the manager and he won't give me a reference and I can't get benefits because he told them I quit."

"That doesn't seem right," I said. "I thought everyone who was unemployed got benefits."

"If you quit you can't claim anything for six months," she explained.

"How long ago were you sacked?"

"Two months just about."

“So what do you live on?”

She gestured with her head out the window.

“Not a lot else I can do for now. At least not legally. My savings lasted a week.”

I pondered the injustices of the welfare system while she ate the second focaccia. When she was done she got up and went to the toilet. While she was gone I slipped a couple of fifties into her cardboard box which she'd left on the table. She'd probably thought I was rich enough not to steal her meagre collections, which just goes to show how little she knew about wealthy people. I knew several who would have emptied her box and made her pay for the focaccias at the same time.

When she came back she said it was time she got back on the street corner. Traffic was beginning to build up and clearly she needed the money.

“Will you be on this corner again tomorrow?” I asked.

“No, I can't stay in one place too long. The police don't mind so long as I'm not too obvious about it and people don't like giving to the same charity every day.”

“Where will you be tomorrow then?”

She gave me another long speculating look.

“Why?”

“If it's not too far away I thought I'd buy you lunch again,” I said, “so long as you're not on a diet that is.” I was trying to make a joke of it.

She reached a decision and told me of a set of traffic lights a couple of streets away.

“But you don't have to buy me lunch,” she said.

“I want to,” I replied. “I like you and I think you've been treated badly.”

I finished the dregs of my coffee and said “come on, back to work,” and could have kicked myself as soon as I'd said it.

She didn't appear to have noticed and picked up her cardboard box and followed me to the door. I held it open and she walked through as though polite behaviour was normal. We said our farewells and she thanked me again and I walked back to my car.

As I was about to pull away I glanced in the rear view mirror and she was standing on the corner staring at two fifties in her hand. She must have looked inside her box. Then she looked at my car and made as if to run after me. I drove away quickly.

At the next set of lights an idea dropped into my head and, unusually for me, I acted on it immediately. I pulled a U turn and drove back to Diane's corner. She was still there but was ignoring the car waiting for the green light. I pulled over again, this time on the opposite side of the road from her. She saw me and ran across the road before I could get out.

“Did you put those fifties in my box?” she said challengingly, with a small quiver in her voice. “It's too much, I can't accept that from you,” and she pushed them back at me.

“Keep them,” I said. “You'll need some money for the bus fare tomorrow.”

“What bus fare?” she said.

I pulled out one of my business cards which had my company's address on it and gave it to her. She looked at it uncomprehendingly then looked at me again.

“What's this?” she said.

“Your new job,” I replied. “Come and see me sometime tomorrow and we'll sort out what hours you can work to fit in around your kids. I'm

giving you a job as a trainee travel consultant.”

She stared at me as though I was mad.

“I know nothing about travel or hotels and stuff,” she said after a long tense pause.

“That's why it's a trainee's job,” I replied. “And if you don't like it at the very least you'll get a good reference at the end. OK?”

She just stared at me then looked at the card and turned it over several times.

“But ..., but ...,” she stuttered and started to tug her ear and brush her hair back. Her eyes looked damp. “But ...”

“What should I wear?” she said finally.

“Make it something nice,” I replied. “You've got a lunch as well. See you tomorrow.”

I drove off. I saw in the rear view mirror that she lifted her hand and gave a tentative half wave then looked down at my card again.

I wondered if she'd turn up.

Chapter Two

I got to my office on Friday at my usual time of around 7.15 in the morning. I like to get in early mainly to beat the traffic but it gives me time to think about the day ahead in peace, plus it sets a good example to the staff who know I'll be there when they come in so they tend not to drift in late. It also gave me a chance to browse the Financial Review and various trade journals for travel to see what ideas were brewing in the airline, cruise, hotel and tourism industries. My wife, Lucy, phoned just after 8. It seemed that there were things we needed to talk about so we arranged to meet for lunch in a coffee shop in Bourke Street.

Sophie arrived around 8.45. She's my secretary and runs the general administration side of things. It's only a small company. After she'd done all the little things she likes to do when she gets in, like water her pot plant and check herself in the toilet in case something had gone unexpectedly wrong with her attire since she'd left home, and had made some fresh coffee she came into my office to see if there were any early jobs I wanted doing. We discussed a couple of matters which she noted in her diary then I brought up the subject of Diane.

"At some point today we may get a visit from a lady called Diane Something. I've forgotten her last name."

I didn't know Diane's last name as it hadn't occurred to me to ask for it but there was no need for Sophie to know this. I still cherished the illusion she might think I was fairly efficient. Sophie looked at me expectantly, her pencil hovering over her diary.

"She's coming to see me about a trainee consultant's job."

As the office manager, Sophie knew very well there was no vacancy for a consulting trainee as she would have handled the advertisements and collated the resumes when they arrived if there had been.

"I take it no appointment has been scheduled?" said Sophie.

"No. It's all very informal really. I'm not even certain she'll turn up and I've no idea when although it'll probably be in the morning, but I

can't say for certain." I was beginning to ramble a little.

"When and if she arrives, get her to fill in an application form then show her in."

"You have a teleconference scheduled for 11am with Maurice Harvey. If she arrives during that conference do you want to be interrupted?" Sophie hadn't needed to check her diary for this.

"That shouldn't take more than half an hour or so," I mused. "No, don't interrupt. I'm sure she'll wait."

Sophie made some sort of squiggle in her diary and returned to her own office.

I leaned back in my chair, wondering if Diane would turn up and whether or not to break the news of a new trainee to Ben, my Liaison Manager, before or after she arrived. On the one hand it might be better to do it afterwards so if she didn't turn up he needn't know anything about it. On the other hand there was a fair chance Sophie would say something to him, perhaps to remind him that all new positions should go through her, which could lead him to think that something was going on behind his back.

"Oh, to hell with it. It's my company and I can do what I want," I muttered to myself, "which includes not telling people things."

Good, that was decided.

"Morning, Bill." Ben stuck his head around the door. "How's things this morning?"

"Oh, morning Ben. Have you seen the Review yet? Oil prices have got up slightly again."

"Not had a chance yet" he said, wagging his folded up copy of the Financial Review. "What's all this about a trainee? Sophie just asked me when I would be available today to interview someone you've lined up."

That honestly hadn't occurred to me. Sophie had been very efficient and effective as always and naturally presumed Ben would be interviewing Diane as well. It's unusual for me not to be thorough and think things through.

"Grab a seat for a moment."

I gestured vaguely and Ben came in and sat down in the chair in front of my desk.

"She's a friend of the family," I lied. "She needs a job and I suggested she came in to talk to me about it. I don't know if she'll turn up but if she does I was thinking of putting her on as a trainee for a while with you and if that doesn't work out then maybe with Marnie."

"OK," said Ben, looking a little nonplussed.

When he'd joined me a few years ago I'd told him that the company operated a double standard. I did what I wanted and he did what I told him. He'd accepted that and only ever argued about sales targets. This was a little bigger than my usual whims but he's a good man is Ben.

"We don't really have a vacancy at the moment so did you have any particular plans for her?" he asked.

"I was thinking perhaps she could take on some of the paperwork and basic research for George and Stavros, which would let them spend more time liaising and give her a basic grounding." I said improvising quickly. "Then when she's got the basics of the business we can attach her to one of them and she can learn the principles from him."

"Hmm," said Ben. "That could be a bit tricky. Stavros is decidedly misogynist and George likes to work alone."

This was, unfortunately, true.

"We'll worry about that when the time comes. If she's any good it might be worth putting her on a basic travel training course online then putting her out on her own to sink or swim, with you in the

background. Let's just wait and see. She may not even turn up and I'm not going to create a job for someone who can't be bothered to turn up."

Ben laughed. "Is she a friend of Lucy's?"

OK, that stymied me. Ben and Lucy knew each other quite well so if I said 'yes', sooner or later Ben would mention her to Lucy which would make things worse. On the other hand, if I said 'no she's a friend of mine' he would just assume I was hiring a girlfriend.

"She's a friend of my brother," I said after a moment. I hoped Ben hadn't seen my hesitation.

This lead me to a new line of thought. If Diane turned up what would she tell people about how she knew me? Would she be honest and tell them that I'd met her begging on the street? I doubted it but you never know. She had seemed to be an unusually honest and forthright sort of person.

"Relatives can be a pain, can't they," said Ben. "What can you tell me about her?"

"Well, her name is Diane," I said.

Ben waited for more.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Ummm, no," I said, "not really. I only met her yesterday and that was only for a few moments."

"Well how old is she?" he asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Late twenties I think."

"Has she any background in sales or travel?"

"I don't think so."

“What's her employment background?”

I smiled and shook my head.

“Didn't your brother tell you anything about her?”

“No. It was a quick chat.”

He sighed. “Must've been very quick. So when do I get to meet her and do I get any say in whether she's taken on?”

“Well, I've kind of promised ...”

He laughed. “OK. Let me know if this Diane turns up and if she does I'll think about what to do with her over the weekend and meet her on Monday.”

“That sound like a good plan. Don't forget I'm talking with Maurice Harvey at 11 so send me through the latest figures for him would you, asap.”

Ben got up. “Sure, give me ten minutes or so.”

At the door he paused and gave me a backward glance. “Don't worry, I won't tell Lucy,” he said and disappeared.

I sighed. Clearly he'd put two and two together and come up with five or six. It wouldn't help that Diane was young and rather attractive. I was beginning to hope she wouldn't turn up now.

I was in the middle of reading my mail when a thought struck me. If Diane hadn't been young and attractive, would I have made the offer yesterday? Would I have even stopped the car? Of course I would have, I decided, I'm a decent, charitable man. I returned to my mail, leaving the question 'so why have I never done anything like this before?' in abeyance.

I was talking with Marnie about some tax projections for the next couple of years when Sophie knocked discreetly on my door.

“Miss Diane Guthrie is here, Bill. Shall I tell her to wait or come back another time?”

I couldn't recall a Diane Guthrie and I was sure I had no appointments before Maurice Harvey, then I realised that Diane Guthrie must be Diane the Collector.

“Ahh, thank you, Sophie, ask her to wait. We should be done in five minutes or so,” I glanced enquiringly at Marnie who nodded.

Seven or eight minutes later Marnie put away her spreadsheets and departed. I got up and went to Sophie's office and semi-recognised Diane.

“Ahh, Diane, glad to meet you again. Did Sophie offer you some coffee or anything?”

Of course Sophie would have.

Diane had leapt to her feet when I appeared.

“Yes,” she said, rather nervously. “I had some water, thank you.”

“Come on in then and we'll have a chat,” I said, gesturing to my office.

Sophie got up and handed me Diane's application form. I thanked her and Diane followed me into my office.

I'd only half recognised Diane as yesterday she'd been wearing tatty and rather dirty blue jeans, a battered leather jacket and heavy work boots and her hair had been loose. Today she wore an old but serviceable navy blue skirt and a jacket of a slightly different shade, which looked to be perhaps a size too large for her, and her hair was aggressively clean and pulled back neatly into a pony tail. I have to admit I was quite impressed. I'd pretty much assumed she'd turn up in what she'd been wearing the day before.

“Come in, come in, have a seat. Are you sure you wouldn't like some coffee?”

She perched nervously on the edge of the chair and smoothed her hem down.

“Umm, no, thank you.” she said, then blurted out “should I call you Bill or Mr Kettering? You told me Bill yesterday but I didn’t know you were ...”

The company is called Kettering’s Travel so I imagine she felt it would be disrespectful to call her future boss and the owner of the company by his first name.

“Oh, call me Bill,” I said. “There’s only seven of us here so we’re pretty informal.”

We sat in silence for a few moments. Neither of us quite knew what to say.

“I half expected you wouldn’t turn up,” I said.

“I nearly didn’t” said Diane. “I didn’t believe you’d be genuine. I thought maybe you were some sort of sl...” she stopped, clearly embarrassed.

I knew what she meant. “A sleaze?”

She nodded.

“What changed your mind?”

“I went home and thought about you and what you’d said. Your job offer.” She paused then rushed on.

“So I went round to my friend Cathy’s and we looked up your website on her internet and it looked like a real website. Then we went into Google StreetView and checked the address and it was a real office building. It seemed like too much trouble to go to just to con a girl.”

I laughed. I liked Diane. She was open and cautious. A good combination.

I suddenly realised why the jacket didn't quite match the skirt. She'd probably bought them at different second hand shops. I'd almost forgotten why she was here.

“OK, let's get down to business,” I said seriously.

She nodded.

“I said yesterday I'd give you a job as a trainee consultant. Have you given that any thought?”

“Yes,” she replied, equally seriously. “I've no experience of selling other than some waitressing and bar work but I'm good with people and I really want to give it a real go. I learn quickly and I'll do everything I can to justify your faith in me.”

She paused, then rushed on. “I've already made a start. I went online and found out that Australia's tourism industry generates about \$48 billion a year and we get about seven and a half million visitors.”

She gave a nervous smile and the fingers of her left hand unconsciously plucked at the bottom of her jacket.

“That's excellent,” I said. “Although it varies from year to year, obviously, depending on the exchange rates. I think those figures were for 2013 or 2014. This year's is a little lower because of Brexit which is depressing British visitors. We don't deal with the general public though.”

She looked a little puzzled.

“Who else would you deal with then?”

“We aren't a conventional travel agency. We work for people who are discerning enough to want something more ..., more exclusive shall we say, than package holidays and cut price air fares.”

“Ahh,” she said. “Wealthy people.”

This was encouraging.

“Exactly. Our staple is tailored travel and accommodation for high level business executives but we also plan and arrange travel for the extremely wealthy for whatever they want. So, for example, one client we’re working with at the moment is for Kasey Kaley to visit the El Castillo.”

“Kasey Kaley the actress?”

“Yes. She’s the highest grossing Australian actress and I believe one of the top 50 in the world. Unfortunately El Castillo is closed to visitors but one of our roles is to overcome minor problems like that.”

She nodded.

“We also have good relationships with a number of hotels worldwide, such as Claridge’s in London. Now, just to give you some idea of the clientele we work for, a typical tourist hotel would be in the region of, say, \$200 a night. Claridge’s would be in the region of \$10,000 a night.

Diane looked visibly impressed.

“I will work very hard to learn everything I can, ummm, Bill.”

She was still very tense but I was becoming quite relaxed. After all, I was on home ground here. I’d been in this game for fifteen years and had built the company up from nothing.

“Now there is something I need to make absolutely clear,” I said. “Most of our clients value their privacy so it is vital that you never discuss any of our clients with any of your friends or family. Now, Kasey Kaley is an exception because her every move is reported in the press almost hourly but most of our clients need their travel details to stay very private. For some, it’s so they can have some personal privacy whereas for others their movements can have significant impacts on, for example, the stock markets.”

“How would someone’s flight affect the stock market?” asked Diane.

“Good question. Suppose, purely hypothetically of course, that Mr X is the CEO of, say, Nike. Now, Nike’s manufacturing is mostly in

Southern Asia. Let's say Mr X flies to Belarus and word of that gets out. It is quite possible, especially if other rumours are doing the rounds, that some people might deduce from that that Mr X is in Belarus to discuss alternative manufacturing arrangements and those people may start to play the stock markets to buy stock in Eastern European companies and sell off stocks in Southern Asian companies and that could have significant consequences, not only for Nike, but also for the economies of some countries."

Diane's eyes went round as she tried to follow me in a world she barely knew existed.

"So, something I am going to need you to do if you are going to do anything more than make tea is to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I'll get Sophie to give you a copy before you leave today."

"What does that mean?"

"It means very simply don't tell anyone what you pick up in the office. If you read something in a newspaper or on TV that's fine since it's already public. But if you hear something here keep it to yourself. I know this sounds easy but it can be quite hard when you know someone famous is going to be somewhere at a certain time."

"What should I tell people?"

"Just tell them you work for an ordinary travel agent. They won't be interested unless they're planning a holiday so tell them Bali is a popular place." I laughed.

"OK," she said. "I'm good at keeping secrets."

"Good. Now, let's talk about you."

I scanned her application form and she was a 29 year old unmarried mother with one child aged 6. There was little point in discussing this as I knew the essentials from yesterday and they were largely why I'd made the offer.

"Has your son started at school yet?" I asked.

“Yes, he started at the beginning of the year.”

“So you will need to fit in with school hours?”

“I may be able to get him into after school care. It depends on how, umm how ...”

“How much I pay you?” I finished for her.

She nodded.

“OK.”

I mentally halved what I paid George and Stavros, then halved it again since they were experienced consultants, then decided that was too little so I gave her a pay rise straight away and upped it to one third and said the number out loud to Diane.

She stiffened in surprise then said quietly “I’ve never been paid that much in my life.”

“Oh,” I said, jokingly. “Well, I can always reduce it if you want.”

“Yes,” she said seriously. “That much will only scare me and I’ll won’t be able to do anything.”

We thrashed out a deal whereby she would start on the quarter pay and rise in increments if I thought she was earning them. It was an interesting sales technique she had.

“When would you like to start?” I asked. “Would Monday be OK?”

“Yes,” she said but looked a little worried.

I was about to start to reassure her that I thought she do just fine when a thought struck me.

“We pay fortnightly here and we’ve just done the payroll so that means you wouldn’t get paid for two weeks. I’m guessing you haven’t got enough money to survive for that long.”

Diane nodded.

“OK.”

I thought for a few moments. “I’m going to go out on a limb here. I’ll give you an advance of two weeks pay and when you get your first incremental rise you can pay it back.”

She looked relieved but also a little embarrassed.

“I’m sorry, but”

“It must be very difficult when you’re living from day to day.” I confess I’d never given the plight of the unemployed a thought before.

“Have you got your bank details and tax file number?”

“No,” she confessed. “I never thought to bring them.”

“That’s OK. Bring them in on Monday. I’ll get Marnie to give you cash today. Marnie’s my accountant. A word of advice, always stay on Marnie’s good side. It never pays to annoy accountants!” I laughed.

She smiled, clearly overwhelmed at what was happening.

“Umm, is there, umm, is there anything I can do ready for Monday?”

Now was as good a time as any.

“Yes” I said. “Sort out your after school care for your son and use some of the money to buy a new suit.”

She looked dismayed.

“I got this in an op shop. I was hoping you wouldn’t notice.”

“It doesn’t bother me but as a consultant person you’ll be out meeting customers occasionally. You have to make the best impression. But, and this is an important but, don’t go overboard. Get a suit that fits and that matches but don’t spend too much on it. You’ve got to get

through until the next payday so budget accordingly. Nothing too flashy. Besides, it'll make you feel more confident."

She nodded.

I looked at my watch and saw it was nearly 11.

"I have a conference in a few minutes," I said, "so we're going to have to stop here. By the way I know I said yesterday I'd buy you lunch today but I'm afraid I can't. I have to meet my wife for lunch."

Diane didn't react to this at all. She sat completely immobile on the edge of the chair.

"We're separated and going through the process of divorcing. There are things we need to discuss about that."

I don't know why I told Diane that. After all, it was none of her concern whether I was married or divorced.

"Right then. My Liaison Manager is Ben and you'll meet him on Monday and he'll sort out the details of what you'll be doing. Ummm, what else do you need to know? 9am start, we have plenty of tea, coffee and water but bring your own mug and lunch."

She nodded.

"Oh, and don't be upset if we don't have a desk for you. I'm not sure if we have a spare at the moment but if we need one we'll have it by Wednesday. Right, let's go and see Marnie and sort out your advance. Have you any questions?"

Diane stood up.

"Mr Kettering, umm Bill umm you have no idea just how important your kindness and generosity is to me." She was on the verge of tears. "I won't let you down, I swear it."

She pulled out some tissues and I got embarrassed so I dumped her on Sophie while I went to see Marnie on my own. Sophie glared at me

for making Diane cry but took her to the toilets to sort herself out. It seems Diane told Sophie something of her story because after my conference with Maurice Harvey, Sophie put her head around my door.

“You’ve done a very fine thing, William,” she said quietly and disappeared back to her office.

That thought kept me going almost to the end of my chat with my soon to be ex-wife.

Chapter Three

I was a little late arriving at work on Monday. It had been raining as it so often does in Melbourne and the damp roads had caused a minor collision which, in another hour, would be a major traffic jam. This was why I came in early. Around 7.45 I parked my car in the underground parking lot and took the lift to the fifth floor where the office was. We had a quarter floor in a seven story building with a 15 story skyscraper on one side and a 5 story former townhouse on the other side. Melbourne is a strange mixture of styles. Diane was leaning against the wall of the corridor outside our office door.

“I didn't want to be late my first day,” she said with an embarrassed smile.

“How long have you been here?” I asked as I unlocked the door and turned off the alarm.

“About 10 minutes,” she admitted.

“I'm running late today. There was an accident on the Eastern Freeway. Normally I'd have been here to let you in.”

She followed me inside.

I dumped my briefcase on my desk and took the carton of milk I always bring into the small kitchenette to put the kettle on.

“Do you want some coffee?” I called out.

“Oh please, let me make it,” said Diane, appearing in the doorway. She pulled a simple black mug out of her shoulder bag and showed it to me.

“I've brought my own mug, like you said,” she said, a little proudly

I didn't get to be the boss of a small company without learning to delegate so I showed her where the coffee jar and the teaspoons were. I figured she could use her initiative to find the fridge. When she came out of the kitchenette with the coffees she'd taken off her coat. I

could see she'd taken my advice and bought a new outfit. She had on a grey – I think they call it black and white microdot – jacket with matching pencil skirt and black ankle boots with those low, narrow heels. They might be what my wife called kitten heels but I'm no expert in women's shoes.

“Ahh, very nice outfit,” I said. “Very neat and business-like. I hope you didn't spend too much money?”

She turned faintly red. “The skirt, jacket and shoes were under \$120 at Target and my friend Susan lent me the trench coat until I can get one myself.”

I'd heard of Target. Their brochures appeared regularly in my letterbox although I can't honestly remember ever going inside one. My own suits were made for me and cost roughly fifteen times as much.

“Excellent. Let me show you around and tell you who sits where. We'll do the introductions later when people get here. The kitchen you already know. Next to that is Marnie and Des' office. Marnie does the accounts and Des is Marnie's assistant. Over there is my office and next to that is Sophie's area. Sophie is the Office Manager and she basically is my secretary as well and handles Reception on the odd occasion someone comes to visit us.”

Diane nodded. She'd already met Sophie.

“In the middle is the hub of the business. This is where Ben, George and Stavros liaise with clients and where you'll be.”

This area had three desks, each with two phones and a computer, and filing cabinets were massed against the walls. It wasn't immediately obvious where a fourth desk could be fitted.

“You know where the toilets are?”

“Yes, Sophie showed me on Friday.”

“Good. Right then, come into my office and I'll give you a brief

rundown of what we do here then I'll pass you over to Ben when he arrives.”

We went into my office and Diane waited for me to sit before sitting down herself. I quite liked that, as being a small outfit the others were pretty informal and tended to either talk to me from the door or come in and sit right down. I daresay Diane would come to do the same in time so I resolved to enjoy some respect while I could. My office had windows along one wall so I could see what was going on in the rest of the office but the piles of paperwork and brochures and other odds and ends, including someone's suitcase, largely obscured the view. Every now and then I'd resolve to find out whose suitcase it was but I invariably forgot by the time I'd reached the office door.

Diane pulled a large notebook and pen from her shoulder bag and prepared to take notes.

“Incidentally, if you need any stationary, pens, paper, post-it pads, staples or whatever, talk to Sophie. She handles all that,” I remarked.

I was quite impressed by Diane's determination to give the job her best even though it was probably unnecessary for her to write “Sophie – Stationary” on her notepad.

“What did you do with your son this morning? What's his name by the way?” I asked.

“Tom, Thomas. My friend Cathy is taking him to school today because I wanted to be early. Normally I'll take him before I get the train. I was able to get the after-school thing sorted on Friday.”

“Excellent. I'll organise a company mobile phone for you with the right apps in a week or so but for the moment, do you have your own mobile phone?”

She gave me the number and I wrote mine and Ben's on a compliments slip and passed it over.

“That's the office phone number and that's my personal number and that's Ben's. If you're running late or can't come in ring one of them

and let someone know. If you ever run into a problem with a client that you can't handle either ring me or Ben straight away. Don't ever be afraid of looking stupid, the only time Ben or I will think you are stupid is if we lose a client because you didn't tell us about a problem."

She nodded while I saved her number in my own phone and she tucked the slip away safely inside the pocket of her bag.

"When do you think I'll get to deal with clients, ummm Bill?"

"Probably today. I don't know what Ben has planned for you but we are 100% client focused so the sooner you get used to talking to multi-millionaires the better."

She looked distinctly anxious.

"Don't worry, some of them can be quite human sometimes," I said with a smile.

She stayed looking anxious and I could see she was gripping her note book very firmly.

"OK. Stavros is Greek as you've probably guessed and George is an Arab. A few years ago we started to get international clients and there can be national and religious tensions which is why I hired them. For example, a Turk won't deal with a Greek but is generally happy to deal with another Muslim. Quite a few Jews, on the other hand, won't deal with Arabs but they will deal with Stavros. It can get quite complicated sometimes. You will find that there are clients who will refuse to have anything to do with you because you are a woman."

"Does that mean I'm a liability to you?" Diane asked.

"Oh, not in the slightest," I replied. "It's just part of dealing with certain people. Those clients usually refuse to have female staff at their hotels, for example, so it's fairly routine. On the other hand, there are an increasing number of wealthy women these days so you might well be an asset if any should prefer to deal with another woman."

“What happens at the hotels then?” she asked.

“We make sure that the hotel is aware of the client's wishes and the hotel ensures that only male staff attend the client. On the other hand, some of our Middle Eastern clients travel with their wives and so we have to make sure the wives are never visible to men. The hotels have to ensure all the relevant staff are female and that windows are covered and so on.”

“It must get very complicated.”

“It can be sometimes, which is why we exist. Our job is to make sure everything runs smoothly and exactly in accordance with the client's wishes.”

I thought for a moment and smiled as I recalled one incident.

“For example, a couple of years ago a client was taking his wife on a cruise and his wife phoned me in the middle of the night to complain that the DVD player in their suite wasn't working.”

Diane looked surprised.

“How could you do anything when they were on a cruise ship?” she asked.

“I phoned the captain of the ship and told him and he had it sorted out straight away.”

Diane looked astonished.

“Money talks, Diane. When you are living at that level, money is power. That particular client could have bought the entire cruise ship out of his petty cash and sacked every member of the crew. That kind of money not only buys you service, it buys you instant service.”

Sophie arrived at that moment and said “Good morning” to us both with a smile for Diane. I got the feeling that she and Diane would get on well together.

“You will feel very confused for a while but remember that only one thing matters here and that is making the client happy. It doesn't matter what extra work you cause for us here, we'll sort it out, but if the client isn't happy about anything, no matter how trivial it seems to you, he or she will go elsewhere. Don't worry though. It will all make sense after a while.”

Diane was looking thoughtful and apprehensive at the same time. I'm sure it was a huge change from collecting donations at traffic lights.

“Now, I don't want to be negative as I'm sure you'll be very good at this line of work, but ...”

I opened my desk drawer and pulled out a manilla folder which I passed over to Diane.

“I did say when I told you to come in and see me that at the very least you'd get a good reference out of it. Well, there it is. If for any reason you don't stay here, there's your reference. All we need to do is date it.”

I'd written it on Friday afternoon, deliberately keeping it vague on how long she'd been with the business but it was on headed paper and had my signature which makes it official.

“Morning, Bill.” It was Ben.

“Ahh Ben, come on in. This is Diane. Diane, this is Ben, my Liaison Manager.”

Diane jumped to her feet and dropped the manilla folder. She ignored it and concentrated on shaking Ben's hand with a becoming smile then excused herself while she bent to pick it up. In the half second that that took I could see Ben giving her an instant appraisal and he glanced at me with a half smile and a raised eyebrow. Knowing Ben as I did it was apparent that Diane had made a reasonably good first impression. Certainly many people would have gone for the folder first or simply got flustered.

After the first thrill of altruistic virtue that I'd felt after telling Diane

to come in and see me about a job I'd had a lot of doubts and several times had regretted my impulse. I'd half hoped she wouldn't come in the next day and I'd been curiously pleased and worried when she did. I was worried because she was an unknown and could have serious consequences for my business and, frankly, being an unemployed single mother and begging for a living wasn't the best possible background but on the other hand I was pleased because I liked her and felt she deserved something good in her life. She'd relieved some of my misgivings because of her very positive and determined attitude but I'd still woken up each morning since, resolved to get rid of her quickly although as the mornings wore on I'd convinced myself to give her a decent chance.

"Stavros is on a fam today and tomorrow so Diane can use his desk for now," Ben said.

"Of course, I'd forgotten," I replied.

"A fam is a 'familiarisation trip'," I said to Diane. "We quite often go to visit hotels and other locations to talk directly to people there and to get familiar with the facilities and so on. Stavros is in Hawaii."

Ben nodded. "He's checking out a couple of deep water fishing charters but he should be back Wednesday."

"Do you have a passport?" he asked Diane.

"No, I've never been outside Australia," she replied.

Ben glanced at me, an unspoken question in his eyes. Clearly he was wondering how far I wanted Diane to become involved at this stage.

"That's not a problem," I said to both of them. "It will be quite a while before Diane will go overseas so we can worry about a passport when the time comes."

She would have to prove herself quite thoroughly before I'd let that happen and besides she'd have problems being a single mother.

"Right," said Ben, "let's go and have a chat," and he led her out to the

central office.

I went to have a chat with Sophie and noticed that Ben was introducing Diane to Des. Des was, well, strange. Her full name was Desdemona but everyone called her Des. She was 22 and drove an extremely large motorcycle even though she looked too small to even get it off its side stand and she had long dreadlocks which varied in colour from week to week and shaved her head on both sides. She rarely spoke and had a tendency to fly off the handle if she felt her political views were being questioned. Sophie had whispered to me once that she thought Des was a lesbian but there had been no overt evidence of that since even George was intimidated by her, George being a bit of a womaniser, although she'd never been seen in any item of clothing that could be described as feminine. However, Marnie thought very highly of Des and Des had mastered with great tact the very difficult skill of collecting debts from rich people who disliked paying their bills. I just made sure she never actually met any of our clients. Quite why she'd decided to study accountancy was a mystery to us all but I had never regretted offering her the job.

With a large company you have teams of HR people who develop checklists and who need to justify their roles but with a small business, hiring tends to be based on gut instinct. Des's resume had looked much like thirty others I'd seen in reply to the advertisement but she got an interview because she phoned me and asked me when her interview was. Note that she didn't ask if she was going to be interviewed, simply when. So I gave her a day and time and she was there on the dot. My heart sank when I saw her as she doesn't look your normal office type and she answered all my questions with monosyllables and avoided eye contact. It was a brief interview and more or less to get rid of her I asked her why she thought I should give her the job when there were other, better candidates, which was probably a little rude of me. She locked eyes with me at that point and said quite simply

"No there aren't."

I just stared at her while she held my gaze unblinkingly, defying me to turn her away. We remained in silent eye combat for a good minute or so then she looked away. I remember leaning back and laughing and

she smiled for the first time, and the last time now I come to think of it, and I'd said "OK, three months trial period starting next Monday at 9am."

"Deal," she'd replied and got up and walked out without even a goodbye. I'd never regretted giving her the job, although I'd regretted it hourly until she started.

When I went out to get some lunch I noticed Diane and George weren't there so I wandered over to Ben.

"How's Diane looking?" I asked.

"Oh, it's too early to tell yet but she's certainly keen," he said. "I've never seen anyone take so many notes. George has taken her to lunch."

I was a little miffed at that although it was not surprising as George tried to pick up every woman he met. Perhaps I should have taken Diane to lunch to make up for the one I'd promised but cancelled. Anyway, I was sure Diane would handle George since she probably encountered men like him all the time.

I spent much of the afternoon on the phone trying to obtain permission for the rapper Notorious Willy Shaggers to have his wedding party amid the ruins of the eight century Buddhist Borobudur Temple on Java in Indonesia. Notorious Willy was getting married to his latest conquest, the professional swimmer and four time Olympic gold medallist, Natalie Sherquin and, being a Buddhist himself, they both thought it would be 'an experience'. It didn't help that Natalie is the daughter of Christian Fundamentalist Dr Isaac Kennet as Indonesia is an Islamic country. Still, that's why my company existed - to smooth the way for people like Notorious Willy and Natalie.

I would also be up late that night as I needed to find the right person in Mexico who could make the arrangements for Kasey Kaley to visit El Castillo. El Castillo is the central pyramid in the ancient Mayan site at Chichen Itza and both it and its interior throne room have been closed to everyone except a few archaeologists since 2006. Of course,

private arrangements can always be made, it's just a question of finding the right person and using the right lever. It's usually the case that the right person is a government official as government officials are rarely paid as much as they think they should be but it can be wearisome tracking down the right person. The main problem was the time difference. 9am in Mexico is midnight in Melbourne and government officials dislike being woken early.

Diane had left for the day before I got a chance to see how she was going.

"George has already complained about her," Ben said with a grin.

"Why? What did she do?"

"Apparently she declined the opportunity to go out to a club with him tonight, which makes her mentally incapable." Ben laughed. "I said it showed she has good sense and he didn't appreciate that."

"So anything to report?"

"I got her to phone Richard Lambert to confirm his travel arrangements for his exhibition at the Pompidou Centre and she managed to get him to at least confirm he was going to go to Paris for the event and that he'd be happy with a chartered helicopter which was quite an achievement."

Richard Lambert was well known to us for his inability to commit to anything as his life was fairly chaotic due to his 'artistic temperament'.

"I also got her to phone the manager of the Belfry in New York for EXO_Pink to see how she'd handle it. She did quite well. She was clearly nervous as hell but got the details right and has got them booked in."

EXO-Pink are a Korean pop foursome who are mega-stars in Asia and are trying to break into the American music world. They always travel with an entourage of about twenty people so it can sometimes be difficult to find suitable hotels without a lot of advance notice. The Belfry is an excellent hotel but it's fairly small. Fortunately EXO_Pink

would be ending their tour in New York so Diane had been able to give the hotel nearly three months notice. It wasn't an overly difficult assignment but dealing with self-inflated American hotel managers can be tiresome.

"So what do you think of her? Do you think she'll be able to cope?"

"Well I'll leave the computers for a week or two but so far she seems to be able to deal adequately with people which is a big thing and I'm sure with practice she'll get adept at it. She got totally confused by some of the paperwork but then so does everyone. It took me several weeks to get the hang of Chinese visa applications. Too early to say for sure but she has potential. I'm a bit worried about her kiddie as he may make her unreliable. I know my kids were forever getting sick but I've got a wife."

"At the end of the day Diane's going to have to figure that issue out, whatever job she gets. But after today you're happy for her to come back tomorrow? Shall we buy her a desk?"

"She was totally overwhelmed by the end of the day but it's one hell of a learning curve here. I've a feeling she'll handle it OK after a while but even if she only ever handles the low level stuff she'll still be useful as that'll free up the three of us. I'm thinking we could put some of the older files into storage so maybe if you got some space we could shift a lot out and free up room for another desk. Diane could go through the files so it won't be too much hassle."

"OK. I'll get Sophie to organise that in the morning and get some boxes and a desk and chair and organise Clark to set up a computer for her. How did she get on with Marnie and Des?"

"Ahh, that was interesting. I've never seen Des smile before although she didn't actually say anything. Maybe George will have some competition."

Chapter Four

“Hello, what the fuck's going on here then?”

It sounded like Stavros was back. It was a little early as it was barely 8.40 and he usually got in a few minutes after 9.

“Oh, you're back Stavros.”

Marnie's voice drifted into my office.

“Where's all my files gone and who's is that desk?”

“Ben archived most of the old stuff and rearranged what's left. You'll have to talk to him about where your files are now. Did you have a good trip?”

“So Bill hired that girl off the streets then did he?”

Stavros made it sound like Diane was a street prostitute.

“No, Bill hired a woman who seems to be quite capable. Don't look at me like that. She may be a single mother but that doesn't make her 'off the streets'.” Marnie was as unflappable and reasonable as always. “Her name is Diane.”

“Morning Bill,” Ben stuck his head round my door as usual. “I want a chat with you later abo ...”

“Ben! Where are my effing files?” Stavros interrupted. “Oh morning Bill. So you hired her then?”

“Yes I did, which is why there's another desk out there and why I had some files archived to make room.” I fixed him with a blank stare. “You have a problem with that?”

Stavros just grunted and turned back to Ben. “My files?”

Ben raised his eyebrows at me and disappeared with Stavros. “Yours are these two cabinets here. I've archived everything over three years

old.”

“Good morning Bill, I’m sorry I’m late,” said Sophie, appearing in the doorway. “My husband wasn’t feeling well this morning so I missed my train making sure he was comfortable.”

“Wouldn’t you rather take the day off?” I asked. Sophie’s husband was diagnosed with lymphoma a couple of years ago and had to give up his job as an electrical engineer. He had good days and bad days. Sophie hid her worries behind a veneer of detached efficiency.

“He likes me to be out during the day so he can play his infernal jazz records.”

“You’re still a pig.” Des’s voice drifted in. I figured she was talking to Stavros.

“Be nice, Des,” from Marnie.

“Hello Bill, Sophie,” Diane waved at us through the doorway.

“Hello, you must be Stavros. I’m Diane. I’m new here.”

The whole office went silent as we all waited to see how Stavros reacted. Even Sophie leaned back and craned her head around my door.

The silence grew. By the sound of it Stavros was ignoring Diane. Unable to see anything but the tops of their heads through the windows I could feel my tension rising but it was beneath my dignity to go out and watch.

“You know where my old files are?”

“Of course. I archived them and fixed a list of what’s where to the wall.”

“Good. Then you can go and get them when I need them.”

I could visualise Diane silently counting to ten.

“Of course. I am here to help all three of you.” A pause then “so long as you make it absolutely clear which files you need otherwise I might get the wrong file by accident.”

There was a slight but noticeable emphasis on the 'by accident' suggesting that Diane was aware Stavros might send her for the wrong files deliberately.

A phone rang and the office went back to normal. Well, as normal as it ever was.

Stavros, being Stavros, kept having little digs at Diane. He'd done it to all the women for a while until he'd got used to them. He was never far enough out of line to call him out but it was a bit of a problem that I'd never found a solution to. He specialised in little remarks that, while technically correct, were made in a sneering way. He would say, for example, pointing to an error in some paperwork “You've made an error in this *again*.” Diane seemed to take it all in her stride though and usually responded with ruthless logic saying something like “I can't have done it again since I've never done this before” or occasionally “That's strange, since I've had such a good teacher.”. Stavros had never quite mastered the art of quick retaliation whereas Diane had had a thorough grounding in it from when she'd been unemployed and collecting money at traffic lights.

I was out of the office with a potential client when things came to a head but Sophie gave me the details after Stavros had handed in his notice. Diane had been with us about three months and was progressing quite well and I had given her an incremental pay rise in recognition of that.

“Diane's son had been unwell during the night and she'd not got enough sleep,” Sophie told me, “so when Stavros started making his snide remarks she started to get annoyed with him and that just encouraged him since that was what he wanted. To get under her skin. Then it changed from being about her work and got personal.”

“So that's where you met Bill, was it, on the street?” Stavros had said.

“Yes, he bumped into me when I was collecting for charity,” Diane had

replied.

“Just a bump was it?” he come back with a leer.

George was on the phone but Ben had looked over and told Stavros to can it. He hadn't.

“So how did you con him into giving you a job?”

Diane had gone white at that and had frozen.

“Stavros, stop it” Ben had said. “I won't warn you again.”

But Stavros had got a reaction at last and wasn't going to stop.

“No, I do understand how hard it must be to be unemployed with a kiddie and the things you have to do to get a *man* to support you. 'Specially as you wouldn't want another bastard.”

Diane had completely lost her temper at that and had leapt to her feet saying “how dare you say things like that, you bastard, how dare you” and she'd tried to slap him across their desks just as Des had been passing behind Stavros on her way to the kitchen. Stavros had jumped out of Diane's way and at the same moment Des had hit him over the head with her and Marnie's coffee mugs and then she'd grabbed Stavros by the neck and pushed him into a corner and talked very quietly to him for a few moments then she'd stormed back into Marnie's room, still holding the handles of the mugs.

Marnie had come rushing out and she'd hustled Diane off to the toilets while George had gaped in astonishment with his phone to his ear and Ben had been saying “I told you to shut up, you idiot” to Stavros but Stavros hadn't been listening.

We didn't know what Des had said to Stavros but he'd just grabbed his jacket and his phone and left the office shouting “fucking bitches, I've had enough of these fucking whore bitches” then he switched to Greek.

The first I knew about it was when I got a long obscene text message

from Stavros which boiled down to “I quit!”

When I asked Sophie later what she'd done during all this she just laughed.

“Oh I just sat back and watched, laughing to myself,” she said. “Stavros got everything he deserved and not a moment too soon. I just wished I'd had the courage to do it myself.”

As the boss I had to sort it all out when I got back. Ben's account was much the same as Sophie's except that he put more emphasis on his attempts to stop Stavros. Knowing Stavros, Ben and Sophie as well as I do I confess I found it all too easy to believe and I berated myself for not having anticipated something like this might happen. I knew how Stavros had behaved when Sophie and Marnie had joined but I failed to appreciate that Sophie and Marnie had quite different roles and that he would see Diane as direct competition. I accepted Stavros' resignation but I was left with two problems.

Firstly what to do about Des. A physical attack on another member of staff would be more than enough grounds for immediate dismissal but, frankly, I could understand her reaction and I didn't want to sack her. I called Marnie in for her opinion.

“You should sack her but I hope you won't.”

“Why not?”

“She's damned good at her job and I enjoy her company. Other people talk too much and I can't stand idle chatter.”

“What does Des think?”

“She thinks you're going to sack her but she'll never apologise.”

I told her to send Des in to see me. Des came in defiantly, her dreadlocks vibrant red this week.

“You realise that attacking a staff member is a sackable offence?”

“Yes.”

“What did you say to Stavros?”

“Nothing.”

“Will you apologise to Stavros?”

“No.”

“Will you apologise to me?”

“No.”

“Think very carefully before you answer this one. Will you ever do it again?”

She thought very carefully.

“No?” as though that might be the wrong answer.

“Good.”

I reached a decision.

“Will you pay for a new mug for Marnie and for cleaning the carpet?”

She thought very carefully again.

“OK.”

“Right, well as far as I am concerned we'll leave it at that although if you ever do anything like that again I will sack you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

As I said, she's a girl of few words.

As Des was leaving my office I called her back.

“You know Stavros may report you to the police?”

Des gave a half grin. “No he won't,” she said very confidently. “I know where he lives.”

I felt it best to pretend not to have heard that.

Diane came to see me after Des had gone, presumably to buy some new mugs. Her face was stricken and her eyes were still a little puffy.

“I want to apologise for my behaviour,” she said, “and I quite understand if you want me to leave.”

“To be honest Stavros had it coming,” I replied. “And to be more honest I should have stopped him long ago.”

“I should have kept my temper but when he started implying things about you I got angry and then when he called my son a bastard I just lost it.”

“I took on Stavros when there was just me and Ben,” I told her. “We were all guys and his attitude didn't seem to matter. When I took on Marnie and Sophie he was nasty for a while but he got used to them. I don't think he ever really saw Des as a woman although they used to bicker a lot about politics and women's rights.”

“Yes, she can be a little scary.”

“Well I've accepted his resignation so he won't be coming back and if I sack you that'll just give me more of a problem. How do you get on with George?”

“We get on well. He got his panties in a wad when I wouldn't go out with him but he got over it.”

“Good,” then I had a thought.

“Do you want to leave?”

“Oh god no. I know I'm not very good but I'm learning as fast as I can

and I love what I do. It's the best job I've ever had. I'm just sorry I've repaid your trust in me by making Stavros leave."

"You didn't make him leave. His own personal problems made him leave."

Des probably tipped the balance but I wasn't going to reopen that issue.

I had a chat with Ben later in the day about how to move forward with the second problem.

"It seems to me that if we advertise for a replacement for Stavros we may get someone with a travel agency background but we may not and either way they'll still need to be trained up and they won't have the contacts Stavros had."

"Spot on," said Ben. "Diane is going fine and she's partly trained already. Why not just take her on in Stavros' role and maybe think about getting an assistant to replace her? Maybe someone young and sexy to cheer us old farts up." He leered.

"Don't you start. We've had enough trouble as it is so don't go winding Des up either. She promised not to do it again but I don't think it was from the heart."

"Oh don't be too sure of that," said Ben unexpectedly. "She uses her image as protection. I think she must have had a horrible childhood. I bet you fifty that deep down inside she's even more of a softie than you are."

I laughed. "So how do we find out to settle that bet?"

"I've no idea. I guess we just wait and see. Maybe someone will break through that tough persona and one day she'll come in in a dinky little frock."

"That image is even scarier. Would we even recognise her?"

"Well, she'd have to shave off the dreads so if anyone in a frock turns

up with a completely shaved head it'll probably be her."

We were skirting the issue.

"OK, is Diane up to it?" I asked.

"I think so. If we split Stavros' clients so she gets say the Corporates and George and I take on the Personals we can probably manage. Maybe if you take over some as well. Don't forget we'll lose a few simply because they won't be dealing with George anymore."

"Yes, I was looking at his client list earlier. I think we'll probably lose between thirty five and fifty of the Personal clients although I doubt we'll lose any Corporates. Maybe a few more, although if any of the dormant clients come back they'll probably accept Stavros isn't here any more. Is Diane up to finding new clients?"

"No, definitely not. She's barely begun to network yet. It'll probably be another year or more before we can even think of that."

"I suppose it's possible someone else might bring some new clients with them but I doubt it."

I pondered for a while.

"OK, how about this. We save on the wages by not replacing Stavros or getting an assistant and we give Diane half of his clients and split the rest between you, George and me. Give Diane some of the Personals too so she gets the practice. If she just gets the Corporates she'll always be limited."

"Yeah, makes sense. I'll go through the list tonight and do a preliminary split and we can go through it tomorrow."

The Corporates, as the name suggests, were companies and they generally did straightforward travel, conferences, conventions and so on and our margins were good but not excessive. The weird and exotic stuff invariably came from the private individuals who had the freedom to indulge their personal whims without having to justify things to shareholders and were more than happy to pay for the

privilege. Most of my own clients were Personals.

A couple of days later I gave the news to Diane. As I expected she looked panic stricken at the prospect of taking full responsibility for any clients let alone half of Stavros'. I neglected to tell her that Ben and I would be keeping a close eye on things as it's good to keep employees on their toes. It's also good to give employees ownership as it makes things more personal and employees like having the confidence of their employers.

"I'm also giving you a pay rise," I said. "As you are taking on half of Stavros' workload its only fair I pay you half what Stavros got. Which means you're jumping two increments."

She stared at me for a long time and I thought she was going to cry. Instead she burst out laughing. I was quite taken aback.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked. "You think this is funny?"

"I'm laughing because it's all so unbelievable." she said. "Three months ago I was begging on the streets just to find the rent and some food for me and Tom and now look at me. I'm earning twice what I've ever earned in my life before and doing a job I love and I've got some self respect now even though I have panic attacks in the middle of the night about not being able to cope."

I didn't know she had panic attacks and I started to wonder how to help her with that but she continued.

"And because I'm feeling good Tommy is feeling good and he's starting to do well in school and I was able to get him his own Xbox and he's stopped pulling his eyebrows out and it's all down to you. You. Our own Guardian Angel. You picked me off the streets and had faith in me and you've given me everything and, and ..."

And she burst into tears then got up and came round to my side of the desk and gave me a big long hug. I hadn't had a hug from my soon to be ex wife for a long time and although I had a girlfriend it was more of a physical relationship than an emotional one. Diane's hug was pure emotion and it felt good, very good, although the

shoulder and chest of my shirt got wet but it soon dried. I put it aside when I got home and never had it washed, as a little memento. Being a Guardian Angel could become addictive. As Sophie put it when Diane left my office

“You do like making that girl cry don't you. Just always keep it for the right reasons.”

I didn't really understand what she meant.

Chapter Five

“Bill? It's Diane.”

Diane had been in every day since she'd started, ohh ten or eleven months ago. She'd never been sick so I was a little surprised to hear her on my mobile at 8am on a Monday morning.

“Hi Diane, nice to hear your cheerful voice.” Actually her three little words had already alerted me to a problem. She sounded tense and strained.

“Bill, I'm with Sophie. Something dreadful has happened. Her husband died yesterday evening.”

I thought for a moment. There was nothing immediately apparent that I could do to help.

“You are with her now?”

“Yes. She's very upset. She knew it was going to happen only she wasn't expecting it so soon. His doctor thought he'd have another year at least. He was taken into hospital on Friday evening and she phoned me on Saturday morning. I've been with her ever since.”

“Where are you now?”

“We're back at her house. We won't be coming in to work today. I can't leave her like this.”

“No, no, that's fine. We'll manage. Take as much time as you both need. Where's Tom?”

“I'll probably be able to come back in a day or two but Sophie will need some more time. Oh Tom, umm, he's with my friend Cathy.”

“Would you give Sophie my sincere condolences and tell her everyone here will be thinking of her.”

“Yes, I will.”

“And if there is anything I can do to help let me know immediately.”

“She knows that already but thank you Bill. From Sophie as well as me.”

After we'd hung up I sat back in my chair. I was only a little surprised Sophie had phoned Diane as they had become friendly and spent most of their lunch breaks together and Diane had shown herself to be a good person to have around in an emergency.

I waited until everyone had arrived in the office before I broke the news. It was easier than doing it one by one as they arrived.

“OK, everyone, I've some bad news to share with you all. As you know Sophie's husband has had lymphoma for about three years now. Last Friday he was taken in to hospital and he died yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh, poor, poor Sophie,” said Marnie. “Where is she now?”

“Is she still at the hospital?” said Ben.

“I hope it was quick,” said George. “My cousin died of lymphoma. It dragged on for years. Very nasty.”

“Sophie is back home. Diane is with her.”

“Shall I get a card for us all to sign?” said Des.

“No I'll get one,” said Marnie, quickly jumping in.

“Should we send some flowers or something?” said Ben.

“That's a good idea. I'll get Soph ..., I'll get some organised myself,” I said.

“Don't use Exclusively Floral in Regent Street,” said George. “They're in my bad books since they screwed up with the Prince of Mali. I haven't forgiven them yet.”

Ali Farka Keita had asked us to arrange a large floral arrangement to

one of his 73 wives to show his appreciation of his favourite. Unfortunately Exclusively Floral had sent the arrangement to the wrong wife and the domestic political disharmony that resulted had caused the Prince no end of problems. George was from Saudi Arabia where polygamy was also common and probably understood the consequences better than the rest of us.

“Would Sophie mind if I went to the funeral do you think?” asked Marnie. “I met Sam several times over the years. He was a nice chap despite his taste in music.”

“I'd like to go too,” said Ben.

“I never met him but I'd like to show my respects to Sophie,” said George.

“Me too,” said Des, unexpectedly.

“I don't know when the funeral is. I'll asked Diane to let me know and if Sophie doesn't mind we can all go and I'll close the office for a while.”

“That's a nice idea. Sophie will appreciate it,” said Marnie.

“What should I wear?” Des said to Marnie.

“Let's get back to our office and talk about it,” she replied.

“Did they have any children?” George asked Ben. “It's hard when a child loses a parent.”

“Not as far as I know,” Ben told him. “They might have but Sophie's never mentioned any.”

I left them to talk amongst themselves and sent Diane a text about the funeral. She rang about ten minutes later.

“Sophie's making the funeral arrangements now but I told her you wanted to close the office so you'd all come over for it and she was touched. Deeply touched.”

“Should Sophie be making the arrangements? Wouldn't it be better if you did?” I asked.

“This is Sophie, Bill. Do you honestly think I could stop her organising something?”

Fair point.

“And besides, it gives her something to do.”

There was a voice in the background.

“Sophie just told me the funeral will be at 2pm on Thursday. I'll text you the address. She's also going to organise something at Sam's favourite cafe afterwards and we're all invited to that as well.”

“Tell her everyone sends their love and support. I'd like to pay for the cafe event myself.”

“No Bill, don't do that. Don't even mention it to her as she'll be offended. It's the last thing she can do for him, you see, and she won't want you or anyone interfering.”

“Surely there is something I can do. I've known Sophie for years.”

“The best thing you can do is just be yourself and support her and let her disappear every now and then when she needs to cry when she's back at work.”

“OK, will do. And tell her to take all the time she needs before coming back to work, I'll give her compassionate leave and Marnie can handle things until then. You too.”

“I'll be back in on Wednesday. Tomorrow I'm helping her go through all Sam's things. She can't face it alone. Now, there's a few things I need to get organised for clients which can't wait 'til Wednesday so could you ask Ben or George to handle them for me?”

We talked work for a few minutes while I made some notes. A couple of them were fairly major things and it made me reflect how far Diane

had come since she'd nearly had a nervous breakdown – not literally, I'm exaggerating – in the first week after Stavros had quit. One of his clients that she'd taken over was a Bulgarian Iron and Steel consortium which had profited immensely by the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the Bulgarian economy in the late 1990s. The head of Bulgar Ore is Serge Yasinkov, who is one of the 250 richest people in the world, and Serge has refined the art of taking personal offence to record heights. The slightest thing which does not go perfectly to plan is a personal attack on his ego.

She'd taken over Stavros' almost completed arrangements for Serge and four of his senior directors to attend a Steel Consumers' Convention in the USA but unfortunately Stavros had kept many of the details in his head. Ben and I had deduced a fair amount from our knowledge of Stavros' habits and other similar events but we'd left Diane to finalise things and to be the front person. Inevitably problems arose and an irate and deeply offended Serge had phoned her several times. I could hear his furious voice on her phone from my office. We had lost Bulgar Ore as a client and Diane took it badly, blaming herself and using hindsight to second guess what she should have done. Still, it was an excellent learning experience and if we had had to lose a client Bulgar Ore was probably the one I'd have chosen.

“Good morning, Bill,” said Diane when she came back to work. “Did Ben and George manage to handle those things for me while I was away?”

“Most of them. One isn't quite finalised but George can update you on that. It's just a timing thing. How's Sophie?”

“On the surface she seems fine, almost cheerful, but inside she's very emotional. Since Sam fell ill she's built a wall that she's hiding behind. It'll take her a while to get past it. I would have stayed with her longer but she wouldn't let me.”

“Mmm, I know it's none of my business and I know the two of you are friendly but I was a little surprised she turned to you when Sam went into hospital.”

Diane looked faintly surprised by my question. I suppose it was none

of my business but when you run a company you tend to think anything you want to know about is your business, even when it isn't.

"After Sam started having health problems they gradually stopped seeing their friends and doing things so I suppose she had no one else to turn to."

She gazed reflectively at her bag sitting on her knee and slowly fingered its strap.

"And, you see, I've been through it myself."

"Ahh, I'm sorry. It's wrong of me to pry."

"Well, you might as well know. I probably should have told you long ago but, I don't know, it never seemed particularly relevant," she trailed off.

"I started living with Jack when I was 21," she continued after a few moments. "He was Tom's father. He was a builder, a plasterer. We were going to get married after Tom was born but when I went into labour I sent him a text message as he was at work and he left to come and get me to take me to the hospital." Her voice was quiet and monotone.

"He was hit by a truck at an intersection. The truck pulled out when it shouldn't have done and Jack went head first into it. He was killed outright. When he didn't turn up I had to get a taxi to the hospital and a policeman told me he was dead just after Tom was born."

She looked up and stared out of the window.

"I couldn't love Tom for weeks after that. I blamed him. If he hadn't made me go into labour Jack wouldn't have come home at that time and wouldn't have hit the truck. I was a mess frankly. I was 23 and it seemed my life was over. "

She glanced at me with a wan smile and dropped her eyes again.

"I'd quit my job to be a full time mum so I had no income and his

boss turned out to have not been paying the super contributions so it turned out there was no life insurance. My mum had married an Italian and was living in Italy so I didn't get much help there and Jack's parents blamed me, I think. Anyway they were grief ridden too and could barely speak to me. And I had to move out of our rental as it was way too expensive for me on my own. It was a bad time."

I had no idea what to say.

"Sophie was such dear to me when I started here and we've become friends and I think I've been able to help her prepare for this over the last few months," she sighed. "It's still a shock though, even if you are prepared."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea ..."

"You just figured Tom was the result of a one night stand? No, that was unkind of me I didn't mean it, I'm sorry. It's just that guys don't ever think about where children come from. They meet up with someone with a kid in tow but never think about the background or where the kid came from. It's just there."

She was right to an extent. It had never occurred to me to wonder about Tom's father or that she might have been in love with him. Tom was simply a part of Diane much like her shoulder bag. I'd never wondered where that had come from either. There was a certain irony here. Two women close to me had both lost a loved partner and only the week before I had brought a cake into the office to celebrate my decree absolute. My ex-wife wouldn't come to my funeral to grieve, she'd come to dance on my grave.

I'd arranged for a temp to come in on Thursday afternoon to answer the phones and take messages and I'd hired a black limo to take us all to Sam's funeral. There was only the five of us as Des had taken the morning off and was going to meet us there and Sophie of course had her own arrangements.

We arrived at the cemetery and made our way to the Chapel. There must have been a hundred people or more there and we weren't the last to arrive. Sophie came over and gave me a hug.

“Thank you so much for coming Bill, all of you thank you.”

She took hold of Diane's hand

“And thank you so much Diane for helping me. You've been such a support,” and to me “She's been an angel.”

There was something different about Sophie. She must be in her early forties I reflected to myself and, I realised with a start, still attractive. She still had that same air of detachment, a gentle efficiency and self-sufficiency but something wasn't quite right. She'd had her hair done but that wasn't it. Then it struck me. This lady in front of me wasn't Sophie my secretary and office manager. It was Sophie the human being, a real person. It's funny how you know someone quite well in a certain setting but when you encounter them in a different setting they are subtly different because the context is different.

Standing a few steps behind Sophie was a young woman holding hands with a young lad who I presumed was Sophie's daughter as she looked faintly familiar. I'd probably met her once some while back. I looked around to see where the others were and the young woman came over to me.

“Bill, this is my boyfriend John,” she said and John said “Hi” and stuck out his hand.

I went wide eyed in surprise. The voice was Des' but her appearance was almost normal. She was wearing, of all things, a black knee length skirt and a neat cotton jacket which covered almost all of her arm tattoos. Her dreads were almost invisible under a large scarf and her heavy boots had been replaced by some very subdued, almost flat shoes.

“Umm, delighted to meet you, John. I'm Bill.”

“Des has told me so much about you,” he said with a smile.

“Nothing good I'm sure,” I replied. It's a cliché but a useful one.

“No, no,” he said. “She won't hear a word against you.”

“Well that's nice to hear,” I replied “Although I can't imagine why anyone would want to say anything bad about me. Have you known each other long?”

“Longer than you have,” he laughed. “I was the one who made her reply to your job advert. She didn't think she'd have a chance but I figured since you worked with rock stars and the like you would be able to see past appearances. She's a wonderful girl deep down.”

“I'm surprised I've never heard anything about you. Anyway I'm glad you did since she's a brilliant debt collector. What do you do for a living?”

“I'm in banking. I'm an assistant manager and hopefully I'll be a branch manager in the next five years or so.”

I wondered how such a conventional seeming young man could have got involved with such an unconventional person as Des.

“Do you have a motorcycle as well?” I asked.

“I have five,” he replied. “I race them at the weekends. At Calder Park.”

That explained a lot. Calder Park is the home of Drag racing and I could see Des being involved with someone from that life.

“Do you race street bikes?” I asked. In my line of work I had to have a superficial knowledge of just about everything.

“I've got a couple of street bikes,” he replied, “but the most fun is my eight cylinder twin engined turbocharged fuel bike. I'm hoping to be the first Australian to break under six seconds.”

Ben wandered over and I introduced him to John. I could see he was about to say “oh, she's not a lesbian then” but he managed to stop himself in time and started chatting with John animatedly. I wandered over to Marnie and congratulated her.

“Oh, it was all Des' idea, I just helped with the details as she doesn't

know much about styles and colour coordination. She wanted to show some respect to Sophie. She couldn't face the prospect of makeup though”

By this time people had gathered inside the Chapel and many were already seated. Sophie and Diane went to the front row while hidden speakers played Cab Calloway's St James' Infirmary ~ *I went down to St. James infirmary, I saw my baby there, stretched out on a long white table, so sweet, so cold, so fair.* The rest of us stayed near the back. The minister did a creditable job and Sophie read out her eulogy with steel in her back and a quaver in her voice. Sam's coffin slowly drifted off the stage to *Ella Fitzgerald's Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall*. It was all quite moving.

I'd organised the limo to take us to the cafe after the funeral but we'd make our separate ways after that. Sophie and Diane went on ahead and we waited while George had a cigarette with Des and John and some other dedicated smokers.

“That was a beautiful ceremony,” said Marnie, “more of a celebration than a funeral. Umm, no that didn't come out right. I didn't mean we were celebrating that he's dead.”

“I know,” I reassured her. “A celebration of his life.”

“That's right. Although I never did like Ella Fitzgerald.”

The cafe had prepared a buffet of hot pizza slices and cold sausage rolls and what appeared to be egg sandwiches, although the wine was quite nice. Sophie gradually made her way around thanking people for coming and how much Sam would have appreciated it. When she reached me she looked quite exhausted.

“Oh, I shall sleep well tonight,” she said to me. “Thank you so much for coming, Sam would have really appreciated it. I'll be back in the office tomorrow.”

I noticed Des and John through the cafe window. They were having a smooch.

“We’ll be delighted to have you back. The place is falling apart without you,” I replied. “But please don’t come back until you are quite ready. Today must have been very stressful for you.”

“I need to come back,” she said seriously. “The house is so empty and I feel lost and very alone there.”

She turned away and put her hand on someone’s shoulder. “Thank you so much for coming, Sam would have really appreciated it.”

My phone rang. It was the temp I’d left at the office.

“I’m sorry to bother you but Kasey Kaley phoned. I explained you were at a funeral but she insisted I call you. She needs to speak with you urgently.”

I thanked her and said I’d call Kasey immediately. It was undoubtedly not that important but life goes on.

Chapter Six

Sophie's bereavement faded with time as these things do. After three or four months it was apparent even to me that the grief and loss she hid behind her unruffled, efficient demeanour had subsided although I think it would be a long time yet before she found herself another man.

Diane had scored a fairly major coup. One of her clients, Shonto Agonishi, who ran a very successful accounting software company in Japan, had been visiting Australia to go diving in the Great Barrier Reef off Queensland and Diane had flown up to meet him. While she was there Agonishi introduced her to Kim Pak Choi who was the head of the Yaegihaja social media site. Yaegihaja translates roughly as 'let's talk' and had taken South Korea by storm and was rapidly expanding throughout Southern Asia. In two years Yaegihaja had gone from a start-up working with three servers in a basement in Seoul to a US\$1½ billion corporation and 24 year old Kim Pak Choi was understandably giddy from all the success. To hear Diane tell it Kim Pak Choi was simply delighted to have someone of around his own age to talk to, she being a couple of weeks short of her 30th birthday, as he spent most of his time with elderly venture capitalists, who were mainly in their forties, intent on exploiting his success. Whatever the reason, it was a significant achievement because she signed Kim Pak Choi as a client and South Korea ranks lowest amongst major economies for attitudes towards women. Had he approached us directly I would never have assigned him to Diane for that reason. I ought to mention that our clients pay a respectable annual subscription whether or not they ever use our services, and for some it was simply status enough for them to be able to say they used Kettering's as it signified they were now in the big leagues.

After Diane had told me about Yaegihaja and I'd given her yet another incremental pay rise as a reward I decided it was time she started going overseas herself. A key element of our success is what we call 'familiarisation trips' or 'fams' for short. Ostensibly these are for the consultant, myself, Ben or George, to go to an area and become familiar with the hotels, travel services, nightclubs, recreation venues and so forth which made it much easier to offset the expenses against tax. In reality, although being familiar with a hotel is useful, the main

purpose of a fam is to network. A bit of the old back-scratching. If, say, Diane had a good relationship with, say, Benoit Declaren, the manager of Il Lisso di Roma, one of Rome's most exclusive hotels, he would ensure our clients got the best possible service and we would give his establishment preference over others when giving recommendations to our clients. At the top end of the market the competition is significantly fiercer than at the bottom. Special offers and cut-price deals are an anathema to the top 1% whereas word of mouth, image, rivalries and connections were all powerful, so these organisations networked with us, and our competitors, just as much as we networked with them.

“You've visited some of the top hotels in Melbourne and Sydney to get some experience but, and I mean no disrespect to our home country, Melbourne and Sydney don't really cut it on the world stage. As you know the serious stuff goes on overseas and although you can do a lot over the phone it's time you started building personal relationships in the power centres.”

She nodded.

“Yes I'm beginning to realise that myself. Knowing people face to face is much better than as a disembodied voice. Does this mean you think it's time for me to go on overseas fams?”

“Yes. Did you get your passport sorted out?”

I'd suggested she obtain a passport a couple of months before.

“It was exciting,” she said, smiling. “I've never had a passport before and I felt quite the international traveller even though I've never been further from Melbourne than Queensland. The photo wasn't very flattering though.”

“No they never are. Here, look at mine.”

I dug my passport out of my briefcase and showed her the picture. I always carried it with me as occasionally I have to drop everything and catch a flight somewhere. She grimaced at the sight of it and her eyes flickered from the photo to my face and back again several times.

"I'm surprised you've never been arrested at an airport," she commented. "You look like a born criminal here."

I put the passport away again.

"Where shall I go?" she asked.

I got up and went to the door of my office and asked George to join us.

"George, I want to send Diane on her first overseas fam but I don't want her to go alone."

George's eyes lit up at the prospect of a few nights alone with Diane in a luxury hotel.

"Where haven't you been for a while?"

"There are a lot of new places springing up in India I want to check out" he said. "Particularly in Surat which is booming from the IT industry."

"I think India would be too much for a first visit," I said. "How about in Europe?"

"London would be useful. There are no new hotels of any consequence although Lanesborough's has recently been refurbished and I've heard their Royal Suite is now £26,000 a night so we ought to check it out. There are also a couple of new managers I'd like to meet and I'm hearing about plenty of new clubs."

"OK," I said. "London it is. Nice and easy since they all speak English and there'll be no problem with visas. When?"

George and Diane both consulted their phone calendars.

"I would think a week would be long enough. Is that OK?" said George.

"If you're sure," I replied.

“That would give us time to stay at six hotels,” he mused “and we could probably schedule a dozen meetings with other hotel managers. We should also be able to squeeze in another 20 or so meetings with other people and venues. We definitely need to get Diane in to meet Sir Terence and I think Sebastian St Johns would be useful too.”

Sir Terence Ashton-Nugent-West is the Comptroller of the Lord Chamberlain's Office and he is responsible for managing Her Majesty's public and private schedule. A surprising number of our American clients wanted to meet the Queen. Sebastian St Johns was the Specialist Operations Director at British Airways and was responsible for VIPs.

“Six or seven meetings a day?” Diane said in surprise.

George raised an eyebrow. “It's not a holiday.” he said. “It's a business trip.”

We agreed a week about a month ahead.

“So what happens now?” asked Diane.

“We get in touch with all our contacts in London and start sorting out meetings. Since we're both going we'll need to coordinate since we don't need separate meetings with the same people. I'll sort out some hotels to stay at ...” said George.

“Separate rooms I hope,” interjected Diane.

George laughed. “I was thinking the Bridal Suite at each. No, we'll stay at different hotels so that we can get better coverage. I'll get you into Claridge's, the Savoy, the Hilton, the Dorchester, the Clarendon and the Goring,” and he ticked them off on his fingers, “as they are the mainstays and I already know their managers.”

He looked at me. “Shall we travel by BA or Garuda? We've been taking on quite a few new Indonesian clients and I don't think any of us have tried Garuda's service yet.”

“Yes fly Garuda. I've heard some good and some bad things so we

ought to try it. Why don't you go to Jakarta first and stay at the Hermitage and go on to London from there and come back direct with BA?"

"That's a good idea." George made a note. "OK I'll get those booked."

"Hold on," said Diane. "We're looking at something like a quarter of million dollars for this trip. Can we afford that?"

"Probably more since you'll be flying first class all the way as well and eating only at the best restaurants," I said, "but it won't cost us anywhere near that. We represent new business to these outfits so we'll almost certainly get most of it for free. OK you won't stay at the best suites in the various hotels but you'll experience the service and atmosphere and you'll be shown around the best suites and talk to the staff. I don't know about Garuda as we've never used them before ourselves but BA always gives us free flights if they're not already fully booked. Most likely it'll cost 10 or 15 thousand all up but it's well worth it. Just knowing one little detail about a particular hotel that would suit a particular client can generate more than that in income for us."

"That's right," said George. "I once told an Italian client that there was a mural by Banksy visible from some of the rooms at the Amersand in London and he stayed there for two weeks. I seem to remember we got a substantial kickback from that one."

"Who's Banksy?" Diane asked.

"No one knows," said George unhelpfully.

"Banksy is a London street artist who has become globally famous. No one knows who he or she really is or even if it's the same person each time," I said, trying to be more helpful.

"Ohhh," said Diane. "I think I see what you mean. I didn't know we got kickbacks."

I smiled. "It's one of the things you'll be sorting out in your meetings. Go to the first couple with George and pay close attention. Oh and by

the way, when you're scheduling your meetings ask them for suggestions on who else you could usefully meet. They'll line up a few people for you that you wouldn't otherwise meet but who could be of interest to our clients. Like Gonzalo," this last to George.

"Oh yes, Gonzalo the Singing Gondolier," George smiled. "He's a trained opera singer who didn't make it in the opera so he set up a gondola and charges a small fortune to ferry people around while singing extracts from their favourite operas. I had a couple of Americans go to Venice just to hear him sing. And could you ever forget Angelique?"

"Angelique's an Algerian who provides, ummm, personal services in Paris. She charges something like US\$30,000 a night and is very popular. These people never advertise, it's all through word of mouth and recommendations and knowing them personally can be very beneficial," I explained to Diane.

"Did you know Angelique?" Diane asked me.

"Not well. I only met her once. She is fantastically beautiful with coffee cream skin and the most incredible eyes. She makes Miss World look like one of the ugly sisters."

"She's retired now," said George. "I met her twice. She retired last year on her thirtieth birthday having been working since she was 14. Unbelievably gorgeous but she had a heart like a calculator. I think she's worth something around US\$400 million. She used all her earnings to buy property which she rented out. She just went from hotel room to hotel room so she never bothered to have a place to live in herself although when she retired she bought a place near Orleans and was going to grow peonies and irises because they were pretty. I don't think she ever bought anything either. The first time I met her she'd just come from Maje which is, or was then anyway, Paris' leading fashion shop where Hashimoto Bonsai had just bought her half a dozen new outfits. I heard she stayed in his suite for over a week and left the clothes behind at the end of it but I don't believe that. Most likely she sold them. I tried to sign her on as a client but she said we were a waste of money." He shrugged his shoulders.

Marnie came to see me a couple of weeks later. She wanted to tell me that Des had passed her recent exams and was now only one set of exams away from becoming a qualified accountant.

“I just wanted to warn you that she may decide to leave when she qualifies so you may want to think about improving her remuneration package if you want to keep her.”

“Do you think she'd be able to get another job easily?” I asked.

“Probably not easily but yes, she'd get another job. She's changed a lot over the last four years but you wouldn't have noticed. She's a lot more confident and tolerant of other people's opinions now. I think she'd probably change her dress style too but she's scared of how people here would react. Sam's funeral was just a beginning for her. She now owns two dresses!”

“I'm guessing you'd prefer we kept her rather than find someone else to replace her?”

“I would but she'll leave one day whatever happens. And if I'm totally honest I'm scared she'll have a serious accident with her bike. She's already come off a couple of times although without serious injury.”

“Hmmm”. It was something else I had to think about. Running your own business is never quite as easy as the books make it out to be.

“Does she want to leave do you think?”

“No, she likes it here. I think she likes that we accept her as she is and she doesn't have to fight all the time because of the way she looks. But now she's nearly finished her studies she also wants more responsibility. She's basically an over qualified clerk at the moment. I can only see three options if she stays. Firstly, everything stays as it is. Secondly I leave and she takes over in my role.”

“Do you want to leave?” The day was turning nasty on me.

“Oh lord no. I like it here too. I have no plans to leave, assuming you want me to stay that is.”

"Of course I want you to stay. Have I ever even hinted I wanted you to leave?" I was getting worried.

"No," she said calmly. "I was just covering all bases. The third option is that we merge Des and my roles into a single unit and she and I split the responsibility equally. So Des would work with me rather than for me."

"Would that work?"

"Anything will work if everyone wants it to," Marnie replied pragmatically. "I haven't discussed anything with her as that's your role, not mine."

"Would you be happy with a reduced responsibility?"

"I have no ambitions where work is concerned. I chose accounting as it seemed to give the best financial return for the least amount of effort. So long as you continued to pay me I don't mind what I do and judging by the accounts the business is unlikely to fail in the foreseeable future. Even though there is a recession coming it is unlikely to affect us significantly."

This was undeniably true. The extremely rich as a group are rarely affected by economic downturns and now we had global clients we were protected to some extent from local economic crises. Individuals, of course, come and go but the class goes on forever.

"OK," I said. "Let me think on it. I'll probably have a chat with her."

"While I'm here I also want to book ten days off in August." She gave me the precise dates.

"Are you going anywhere nice?"

"I'm going to Singapore for the World Amateur Go Championships"

I've heard of the game Go but I knew very little about it. So I asked her.

“Go is played with black and white stones on a 19x19 grid of lines. One player is black the other white. Stones are placed on the intersections of lines so there are 361 intersections. That’s 19 squared,” as if the maths made much difference, “and if one colour stone is surrounded by the other colour’s stones it is removed. The game ends when there are no intersections left and the winner is the one with the most stones.”

“Well that seems pretty simple,” I said.

Marnie laughed.

“It’s actually more complex than chess. There are two times ten to the power of 170 possible moves. That’s a 2 with 170 zeros after it. Or 200 with the word million after it 28 times.”

“That’s a lot of moves. So who do you follow for the World Championships? Do you have a favourite player?”

“Yes, me.”

I looked at her in astonishment.

“You’re competing? In the World Championships?”

“No,” she said quite calmly. “I’m competing in the World Amateur Championships. The World Championships are professional and they’re in Beijing.”

“So you just entered your name?”

“No, it’s by invitation. The top 128 amateurs are invited by the organisers.”

“So you are one of the top 128 amateurs?”

“Yes, I’m ranked 53rd.”

“In the world? 53rd in the world? Not just in Australia?”

"I'm number two in Australia. Third if you include New Zealand."

I just stared at her. How was it possible that in the eight years I'd known Marnie I'd never known she not only played this game but was a world ranked player? She started to turn red.

"Please stop staring at me, I'm getting embarrassed."

"How have you managed to become 53rd in the world and I never knew?"

"No one here plays Go so there didn't seem any point in talking about it. And besides, the tournament is only held every 3 years and the last time I was outside the top 128."

"But presumably you've had to play against other people world wide? How did you manage that when you don't take much time off?"

"No not really. Most of the best players are Asian and Australia is on the edge of Asia so it's been fairly easy to fit it in at weekends or the occasional day off. And besides, half of them come to me."

This was true. Marnie took most of her leave as one or two days around a weekend. She usually only took a block when she took a week off to go to visit her father in South Africa. Her parents were divorced and Marnie's mother lived somewhere in Melbourne.

"Will I see you on TV?"

Marnie laughed.

"No, only the World Championships are televised and only in Asia although I think you can get it on cable TV. The Amateurs aren't taken seriously enough for TV."

"Are the professionals that much better?"

"Oh yes. If I turned professional I'd be lucky to be ranked in the top thousand. I'm not clever enough to be professional."

She thought for a moment.

“No, actually I probably am. But I'd need to get a coach and work hard at it. As an amateur I just play for fun and there's no stress. I think being a professional would be very stressful. And besides,” her accountant's mind clicked in, “the winner of the World Championships only gets US\$400,000. My pay is more than enough for my needs and I don't have the costs that a professional would have. Or the stress. Although I suppose if I ever lost my job here it might be worth thinking about although I'd have consequences if I lost which wouldn't be fun.”

“But why haven't you ever told any of us?”

“Told you what?”

“Like when you reached 53rd in the world. Didn't you think we'd be interested?”

“No, it never occurred to me. And besides you'd all then have expectations and you'd want to know how I did after every game or even want to come and watch and I'd get embarrassed.”

I was dumbfounded.

“So why did you tell me just now?”

“I needed time off and you wanted to know why.”

“So if you hadn't needed time off you'd never have told me?”

“No.”

“And when you win the World Championships? Would you have told me then?”

“What for?” She seemed as dumbfounded as I was.

“Well, wouldn't you be proud of that?”

“Yes of course I would be. But I wouldn't need to boast about it.”

Not for the first time I wondered if Marnie is an alien living among us.

Chapter Seven

The next day I had a chat with Des about her future.

“Marnie tells me that you're doing well with your accounting studies and that you've passed your most recent exams.”

She nodded.

“And there's just one more set to go?”

She nodded again.

“Have you given any thought to what you are going to do when you've finished and you're a qualified accountant?”

“Not really.”

I had a little laugh at this as it was so typically Desdemona, then I got serious.

“Well, you should be very proud of yourself as you've done it entirely on your own. It's just that we didn't employ you with the intention that you'd become a qualified accountant and we have no real need for two accountants here.”

A flash of suspicion crossed her eyes.

“Do you want me to go?”

“Oh god no. You're an excellent worker.” I nearly added “so long as you don't attack people in the office” but thought better of it.

“Marnie has come up with a suggestion which I think is worth thinking about but it all depends on what you want to do with your life. You're only 24 and your life still lies ahead so I wouldn't be upset if you just saw us as a stepping stone to bigger and better things.”

She returned to her normal expressionless face although her body language suggested a little tension. Mind you, her body language

always suggested a little tension.

“OK. What did Marnie suggest?”

“She suggested that we combine both your roles into one and then split the responsibility between you both. So basically she'd take on some of your lower level work and you'd take on some of her higher level work. That way you'd at least be doing some work that fits your qualifications.”

“OK.”

“I believe your final exams are in six months?”

“Yeah.”

“So there's no rush. Have a think about where you want to go in life and how Kettering's would or would not fit in with that. Then come and have another chat.”

“OK.”

We left it at that. I did like Des and she fitted in with the team surprisingly well but she wasn't the easiest person to talk to. I wondered how John, her boy friend or partner – I didn't know if they lived together or not – had coped when they first met. Maybe it had been Des who'd chased him rather than the other way around.

Well Des will do whatever Des will do and there wasn't a lot I could do about it. Kettering's was just too small a business to need a large accounts department.

George and Diane's trip was brought forward a couple of days to fit in with flight bookings. Garuda Airlines only has four to eight first class seats available depending on the type of aircraft and getting two for free had been a bit of a challenge. We'd arranged that both Diane and George would send me a detailed email of her activities each day and that she would phone me mid evening each day to give me quick updates and outline their plans for the next day. There's a nine hour time difference so she would be ringing around 9 in the evening which

would be 6am for me which meant I'd be awake.

Their first communications were from Jakarta and Diane's email was mainly about how different Indonesia was to Australia. She'd never been outside Australia before so this was fairly inevitable. Interestingly Garuda had implemented the first class pods, or suites as they called them, that were appearing with a few other airlines. Each passenger had a fully enclosed area with a fully reclinable seat. There were two adjoining pods in the centre and a single pod on each side and Diane and George had the pair of adjoining seats which had a retractable partition so they could converse or be private. Each pod had just about every possible modern convenience which was good news as many airlines still had older facilities.

Diane was particularly impressed that first class passengers boarded the plane from the front while business and economy passengers boarded from the rear which gave the first class passengers the impression they were alone in a small but very comfortable private jet. While not an issue for most first class passengers, any of our clients who had their own private jets and, for whatever reason, had to fly commercially would appreciate not having to mix with the low life in business class.

George was favourably impressed by The Hermitage which is an old style colonial type hotel but Diane felt it was overly masculine and would be less appealing to female guests which was a useful observation.

Ben, on the other hand, was not impressed that he was left alone in the office, despite the fact that I was there too. Both Diane and George being away at the same time significantly increased our workloads. He'd been a little grumpy and short of temper recently which hadn't helped. I put this down to the imminent arrival of his 50th birthday and the growing realisation that he was getting old. He'd bought a Harley-Davidson when he turned 49 which I'm told is a certain sign of male menopause – a man trying to regain his youth through the style symbols of youth – and Des had been scathing about it when he'd proudly brought it in to the office one day.

“A bike for posers,” she'd said. “Not a real bike like mine” and pointed

to her Suzuki Hayabusa a few yards away in the car park.

She'd once told me her Hayabusa, which she called "Hey Babe" and that name was painted in a scroll-like font on the fuel tank, had a top speed of over 300 kilometres per hour and was therefore the fastest street legal bike in the world. I'd commented that that seemed perhaps a little excessive when most roads in Melbourne are limited to 50 kph and even the interstate highways max out at 110 kph and she'd laughed and said I was just jealous as her bike was not only faster than my Porsche by 5 or 6 kph but well over \$200,000 cheaper. I countered by saying that my Porsche wouldn't wreck a lady's hairstyle and she counter countered by pointing out that I didn't have enough hair to wreck with a crash helmet. I then pointed out that it would be difficult to afford to run a bike like that on unemployment benefit and she graciously conceded that Porches were excellent vehicles for people who's reactions were slowing with age.

Diane had also told me over the phone that one of the great benefits of the double pods in the Garuda flight was that the retractable divider between the two pods only went about half way down and had made it impossible for George to 'accidentally' touch her legs during the seven hour flight. George, on the other hand, had felt that the divider inhibited intimacy and any of our clients travelling with an amiable companion would not like it. Swings and roundabouts but both aspects needed to be taken into consideration for particular clients.

In her first email from London, Diane told me that she had learned a lot about George on the flight.

"Did you know George is one of 7 brothers?" she'd written. "His father has three wives and George is the youngest son of the oldest wife."

Actually I had known that.

"And that all the sons were sent overseas for their educations. Three went to America, two to Britain, one to China and he came to Australia. And that one of the sons was now an outcast from the family because he'd met and married an Israeli girl in America."

I hadn't know that. The son in China was interesting as it suggested that George's father had been particularly far sighted and it made me wonder why he'd chosen Australia for George.

"I also asked him why he chased women all the time and had never found one to settle down with and after a lot of evasion it eventually came out that he is scared stiff of women and chases them in order to overcome his fear of them. He told me that with three mothers and Allah knows how many female servants he was both coddled and harshly disciplined as a boy and was never able to settle into trusting any of the women because he thought they were deceitful. Isn't that interesting?"

I had to admit that I didn't find it particularly interesting. George is a decent chap with a strong sense of personal and family honour, even where women are concerned, and how that came about isn't my concern. But Diane is a woman and women worry themselves about that sort of thing.

"Anyway we reached a compromise. I've agreed to have dinner with him each night while we're away and he's agreed not to try to bed me. It seems that bedding me isn't that important to him but being seen dining with a woman is important for his self image. That seems strange to me as I've usually found that it's the other way round but then I'm used to Aussie men who prefer to eat with their mates and only meet up with sheilas for a shag, lol."

I was tempted to reply saying I'd like to do both with her but felt it would be inappropriate so I didn't.

"I think George was really pissed off when we got to Heathrow though. My hotel had sent a luxurious chauffeur driven limo to collect me from the airport whereas he had to get a taxi to his. You're right – this is exactly the sort of background info I really need to know. Both our hotel suites had a dedicated valet though which took some getting used to. Tom never tidies up even when I tell him to whereas James, my valet – doesn't that sound so cool! – didn't need to be told! My hotel manager is a sweetie though. Very formal and gentlemanly even though he's actually a German. Isn't that unusual – a German managing a top London hotel? Anyway, we had a good meeting –

George will send you the details – and George let me negotiate on the commission we'll get when we book a client. George was a bit of a bastard over that as he wouldn't give me any clues about what was normal so I had no idea when I was negotiating but he told me afterwards that I ended up only ½ a percent below what we'd usually get from hotels and if I'd known that I'd have held out longer.”

Actually that was very good. What George didn't tell Diane is that that particular hotel normally gave us a commission ¾ of a percent below what was usual so she'd actually managed to talk the manager up. I'm guessing George didn't want her to get too cocky from her first fam negotiation.

“Even though I'm exhausted from the jet lag, we're shifting hotels tomorrow and I've got a couple of meetings lined up in the morning with people the manager thought would be useful for me to meet. One runs a helicopter limo service and the other is a former paratrooper who's recently set up a security company specialising in female bodyguards for female clients. Apparently the women are all ex military or ex police and I can see how useful they would be for many of our clients. Mitchell Hartscombe for one! Must close now as George is taking me to a casino tonight.”

Mitchell Hartscombe is a client who married a Filipino lady who seems to be unable to keep her hands off men generally so this could prove to be a useful contact although probably not as useful as you'd expect. Many of our Muslim clients travel with their wives but also with their own trusted bodyguards.

Ben came in to see me after I'd finished reading Diane's email and I told him about the commission she'd negotiated.

“That's great,” he said unenthusiastically. “I knew you'd picked a winner with her. Listen Bill, I need to talk to you about a personal matter.”

My heart sank. Ben was my right hand man and I'm not entirely sure I could run things these days without him.

“Fire away.”

“Umm, you've met my daughter, Julie, haven't you?”

“Yes, the last time was a couple of years ago. Isn't she 18 or 19 now?”

“19. I don't know if you've noticed but recently I've not been able to concentrate as well as I used to and my work's been dropping off.”

“Actually I had noticed, Ben. You've also seemed to be stressed more than usual and maybe a little irritable.”

“Oh, you're fucking right there. My stress level is off the scale.”

“Is it because of Julie?”

“Yes. She went to Bali three months ago with her friend Chrissy. They were going to stay there for a holiday then start travelling around the rest of Indonesia then up to Malaysia and Thailand for a few months.”

“Yeah, that's quite a common thing these days for kids to do.”

“Except she never left Bali. We've been worried for a long time because we hadn't heard from her or Chrissy and we found out three days ago that she is in a hospital in Denpasar.”

“Oh god, what happened? Was it a car accident?”

“No, she's got hepatitis. They think she got it from an infected needle. It turns out she's been injecting heroin for several months. We just thought she smoked some grass now and then, like we did when we were that age.”

He seemed on the verge of tears. 'We' were him and his wife Melissa. I went round the front of my desk and put my hand on his shoulder.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“No, not really. My medical insurance has agreed to pay out her hospital bills in Bali after I threatened to take them to court but my baby's got Hepatitis B and it's gone to her liver. That means she'll almost certainly end up with liver cancer in a few years. And the

hospital said that, because it's in her liver, the hepatitis virus will never leave her body. If it could it would have before infecting the liver."

He started to cry. I fished around for the roll of paper towels I always kept on my desk as I frequently spill my coffee. I waited for him to pull himself together.

"And there's every chance Chrissy will be infected as well since she was sharing the same needles, only she has gone missing. The police think she went off with the man she and Julie were getting the stuff from and they haven't found her yet."

"How come it's taken so long to find out?"

"The hospital didn't know who she was. Someone dumped her outside the hospital stoned out of her head and with no identification a couple of weeks ago. They treated her for hepatitis and put her through a preliminary detox at the same time and she didn't start talking until a few days ago. The police contacted us and are looking for her dealer. She didn't have any heroin on her and they didn't find any drugs in the shack she'd been living in so they're not going to prosecute her for drugs and because she's sick they've decided not to prosecute her for overstaying her visa either. There's a couple of legal things I'm sorting out but she should be home next week."

"Listen Ben, thank you so much for telling me. I'll help in any way I can. I know the Australian Consul in Bali so we can organise the best medical evacuation."

"No, she should be able to handle a normal flight. Melissa is going to fly over and come back with her as she's apparently emotionally unstable and could end up anywhere if she's left on her own. I've already sorted things out with DayHab."

DayHab is a drug rehabilitation centre in Melbourne and we were not unfamiliar with the place. The rich and famous are not immune to drug addiction problems.

"OK, Ben, I'm going to ask you something and I don't want you to

think I'm being callous. Can you hold it together until next Wednesday?"

"Oh yes," he said. "I'm tough, I can handle it. It's just Melissa said you had a right to know why I wasn't up to form. Aren't George and Diane back next Wednesday?"

"That's right. So if you can just hang in there until then you can have all the time off you need."

"I won't let you down Bill. I need to work so I don't just implode like a black hole. I feel better already, just for telling you."

He was looking drawn and I wondered if perhaps he'd lost a little weight.

"How's Melissa coping?"

"She's desperate with worry. All she wants to do is get out there and make things right. She going to go out on Saturday. Listen Bill, could I come and stay with you on Saturday? Just for a few days until they get back? I can't face being in that empty house all on my own going out of my head."

"Sure, no problem."

OK that was my dirty weekend shot to pieces. Not to worry, these things aren't as important as they used to be. To be honest now I was divorced and had my freedom back I rather missed the domestic life. A quiet weekend with a distraught companion would make me feel I was married again.

We had a man-hug and I persuaded him to get some lunch. He'd admitted he'd hardly eaten for the last three days.

"Oh my word, what an eye opener that was!" said Diane in her email the next day.

"George took me to Winners in Leicester Square. I've been to Crown Casino in Melbourne so I was expecting something similar but oh my

word!"

I knew Winners and the Crown Casino so I had an idea where she was heading.

"We went in through the discreet side entrance. George told me it was for high rollers and we had a chat with the manager. He mentioned the 'amenities' but didn't go into any details then he took us on a tour. The normal punters use the main rooms which are much like at Crown but for the high rollers there are two other rooms which are very plush and discreet and everything is free. There's all this glorious food and endless drinks and even Cuban cigars if you want them. One room is for the table games like roulette and craps and the other is for the card games like poker and baccarat. Then he took us through a curtained door at one end and OH MY WORD!"

Yes Diane, I thought to myself, it's a different world. Get used to it.

"It was a BROTHEL!!! A free whorehouse. For relaxation during tense games the manager told us. There were even some guys available for either women gamblers or gay men. Apparently gamblers can come in for a few minutes or a few hours then go back out and start gambling again. And the women are very skilled at all sorts of things or so George said although he admitted he'd never used those services. Have you? I'm sure you know what goes on in these places and I wish you'd told me in advance so I'd have been better prepared. I was soooooo embarrassed especially when Yvonne asked me if I'd like some company away from 'these nasty men'!! I didn't know where to look! George told me that so much money changes hands at these casinos that the cost of all the "extras" barely dents their profits and I surely can see why someone would rather come here than stay in the general public rooms. Does Crown have back rooms like these?"

In my reply I told her that Crown does have back rooms for the high level gamblers but they don't have the extra rooms. They don't need to because they also have a hotel on top of the casino so things can be managed differently.

"After that we went to the Black Box nightclub in Kensington. There was a massive queue of people waiting to get in but George went

straight up to the doorman and told him we were there to see Cyril Westram, who's the manager, and we went straight in. It looked like pretty much every other nightclub I've been to, which admittedly isn't many although on the top floor there is a separate VIP dance floor, which has lots of dark nooks and crannies with couches and low tables with bowls on them. I didn't look too closely as most were occupied."

I wondered briefly why George was taking Diane to these places but then again, she needed to know since a lot of our clients who were new to particular cities or hadn't visited for some time wanted to know where such places were and how to get in. Generally you have to already be on a list so we had to know how to get people on those lists. And, of course, it was important for the casinos and nightclubs to have people like us to get the right people on the lists. Like I said, back-scratching.

A lot of people who don't really know think that money is power. This is only partly true. Money is self-indulgence and one form of self-indulgence is power but there are plenty of other forms. I hoped George wasn't planning to show Diane some of the less savoury places so I dropped him an email telling him to simply tell Diane of their existence but not to take her there, unless she particularly wanted to go, which I doubted judging by her reaction to the fairly commonplace.

"Tomorrow is Saturday so we're going to the races. To Ascot to check out the facilities, private boxes for entertaining, the new catering facilities and so on then we're off to see a couple of horse breeders and one of the Queen's horse trainers. Apparently she uses seven different trainers. I'm staying at Claridge's tonight and I've already had the tour. I was fascinated by the storerooms where they keep the furniture required by particular regular guests and the files of photographs showing how their suites are to be laid out. Do any of our clients get this privilege? George is at the Rosewood tonight. Did you know their Manor House Suite has its own private street entrance and lift and is the only hotel suite in the world with its own postcode? Why would anyone want a suite with its own postcode?"

I had to admit in my reply that no, none of our clients rated quite that high. Many of the top hotels have a Royal Suite but Claridge's is the

only hotel to have three of them and there are circles above the one Kettering's moves in. I also had to admit that I didn't know why anyone would want a suite with its own postcode but it's quite incredible the sorts of things people do want. Rich people need to feel special just as much as poor people.

She shot back a quick email after I'd sent my reply. It just said "What makes you feel special Bill?"

I didn't reply to that.

Chapter Eight

“You'll never guess what happened today,” said Diane in her email.

“I'd left the Savoy and was walking through Trafalgar Square to meet George and I stopped for a moment to watch a couple of street dancers doing their thing outside the National Gallery, down between the two fountains, you know, near Nelson's Column. Then the music changed to Bruno Mars singing “Marry You” and a couple of people in the crowd watching suddenly jumped in and started dancing too! Then a couple more did then some more until there were like 15 or 20 of them all dancing and I suddenly realised it was a flash mob! I've seen some on YouTube but I've never seen one for real! It was so cool and then another guy joined them and someone threw out a piece of red carpet and someone else dragged a girl from the crowd and the guy walked down the red carpet to her and pulled out a ring and proposed to her! It was sooo romantic! Anyway, I thought it could be useful if any of our clients wanted to do a flash mob proposal so I talked to one of the dancers and she pointed out Chris who organised it and did the choreography and I'm taking him to dinner tonight to find out more. What do you think?”

We'd done a flash mob proposal in LA for a client a few years ago when these things were starting to become popular but there had only been the one and flash mobs had had their day. Our clients who like to be ostentatious also liked to be at the start of trends, not the end of them. But it was good news that Diane was using her initiative and not just following George. When something new starts we need to be able to spot it and be ready when a client wants it, or be able to suggest it when the client is looking for ideas. Some clients like the routine and the familiar, others like innovation.

“I had a meeting with Dave Stephens last night and was able to sign him up as a client,” George told me in his email the next day.

“He's an up and coming snooker player and wants us to handle all his travel for the Snooker circuit which could be lucrative as he's recently got into the top 8 rankings so he's starting to become in demand for exhibitions as well as for tournaments. Diane was going to come with me but she decided to stay with Chris Smith, the flash mob chap she

found, after dinner. I told her that flash mobs were history but she pointed out that it could be useful to know someone who could choreograph for private functions so I suppose she has a point. We've already got a couple of them in the UK but it never hurts to have contacts with new people too."

We often organise things for private parties, weddings and so on but we generally use contracted planners who deal with the nitty gritty of finding performers, choreographers, caterers and so on but it's better to have contacts and never use them than to need them and not have the contacts.

Diane's email was more forthcoming.

"It was great to have a relaxing evening last night. So many meetings is exhausting! George explained to me that flash mobs weren't that hot an idea after all but we still had dinner with Chris who explained about all the planning that goes into what looks like a spontaneous thing. Apparently it can take months to organise as he needs to get permission from the local Council and find performers and have rehearsals and so on. All very interesting. Then George had to go to sign up a new client so Chris took me back to his studio apartment which sounds very flash and cool but really all he's got is a small dance floor with a bed and a camping stove in one corner! But it was great because he explained to me how he goes about choreographing from the initial idea and the music to the final sequence of dance steps. It was absolutely fascinating! And he got me to tell him a song I liked so I said "All Of Me" by Sarah Blasko which he had never heard of because she's an Aussie so we downloaded it and he choreographed it for me and taught me the steps and we made a little video lol. I'll show you when I get back. Anyway I got his contact details this morning so if we ever need a choreographer in London"

Well now, wasn't that interesting. I can read between the lines as well as anyone else and I'd very much like to see that video.

That email was the only high point of the weekend. Ben came round on Friday evening after dropping Melissa at the airport so she could fly to Bali to be with Julie. We had a few drinks and he got a little maudlin about Julie as a young girl and then moved on to other

things. He's been using the internet which is generally a bad thing to do for illnesses as all you do is make yourself even more worried.

"Either she'll have her liver removed or they'll do chemotherapy which'll probably kill her anyway."

The only way I could refute this was by going on the internet myself.

"Says here that the first option is tumour ablation which is using radio waves to kill the tumours," I told him. "Anyway, there's a damned good chance she won't get liver cancer. That other site said that hepatitis doesn't always end up causing liver cancer."

It wasn't a fun evening. Whatever the internet said, Julie wasn't in the best of health and heroin addiction doesn't ever really go away. Back before I started my business I had a friend who had got addicted to ecstasy and had managed to get through rehab and three or four years ago we ran into each other and went for a drink.

"How are you these days?" I'd asked him. "You look pretty good."

He'd been a bit of a wreck when we used to hang out.

"Oh I'm still clean, man," he'd told me.

Yes, some people do still talk like that.

"You're still off the E's?"

"Shit yeah. 16 years now and not a pill."

"That's awesome. How's it going?"

That was a bad question to ask. He'd spent the next five minutes telling me how every hour of every day was a battle against his desire for a hit and that he could never relax his self control. Even after 16 years. Heroin was a lot more addictive than ecstasy so Julie was going to be in for a hard life. I just hoped she'd never watched *Trainspotting*. She probably hadn't as it came out a couple of years before she was born but you never know. I'd never understood how anyone could get

into drugs until I saw that movie but the main character, I don't remember who it was, said something that made me understand. I've forgotten his exact words but it was along the lines of "other people only see the misery and desperation but they don't see that when you take a hit it's awesome, just fucking awesome and there's not a single fucking worry in the whole fucking world."

Anyway, this was all very depressing so from then on I kind of put a limit on the drinks and tried to keep Ben occupied instead. When Ben had told me about Julie and the stress he was under I'd toyed with the idea of asking Stavros to come back for a few days to give Ben a break. I'd decided against it as I couldn't really trust Stavros any more as he could easily do a lot of irreparable damage if he was so inclined. I now realised that keeping Ben occupied was the best thing I could do. Giving him plenty of time to think would not help in the slightest. On Saturday we watched the footy and on Sunday I took him to a barbecue which wasn't much but it gave us something else to talk about.

Things were better for Ben on Monday as he was back at work and had more to think about. They weren't for me, however, as around ten in the morning I got a panicked phone call from Diane.

"Bill! Oh thank god! Something dreadful had happened, George got into a fight and he's been hurt and the police are here and ... and there's an ambulance taking him away and ..."

"Diane stop. STOP. Now take a deep breath," pause, "now take another," pause, "and again."

I could hear her raggedly inhaling deeply.

"Now count to ten slowly."

I was fairly familiar with what to do with panic phone calls as some of our clients panic quite easily. She counted to ten, faster than I would have liked, but she got to ten which was the main thing as by nine her voice was moderately calm again.

"Now slowly tell me what has happened."

“We had been at another club in Paddington and we decided to walk back as it was a nice night with a full moon. George wanted to show me the Serpentine so we walked through Hyde Park and then were going to head off to our hotels. He's at the Hilton and I'm at the Dorchester and the path out of Hyde Park comes out between them. And these three guys were coming up another path to the same exit and they started shouting at George and swearing at him and saying things like 'go home you fucking ay-rab' and then they started calling me a slut and a whore and then George told them to shut up or he'd call the police and then they started pushing him and he pushed back and one of them punched him and he punched back and then all three of them jumped on him and I started screaming and the man who locks the gate came rushing up and yelled at me to call the police and he started pulling them off and I called the police and they ran away and George just lay there on the ground and ...”

She paused for a deep breath.

“And then the police came screeching up and I pointed down the path screaming 'they went that way and he's just lying there' so they called for an ambulance and the gate man told them what he'd seen and ...”

“OK stop there. Are you hurt?”

“I twisted my ankle trying to kick one of them but no they didn't touch me.”

That was a relief. I had visions of what three young toughs might do to Diane.

“Where are you now?”

“We're at the hospital.”

“Which hospital?”

“I don't know.”

“Is there anyone else there? Ask someone.”

I could hear background voices.

"It's University College Hospital," she said eventually. "We're in the Emergency Room."

"Has anyone seen George yet?"

"The ambulance people brought him in a few minutes ago, he's all covered in blood."

This didn't sound too good. I'd heard there'd been a lot of knife attacks in London.

"I'll call you back in a few moments, there's someone trying to talk to me."

She called back about two minutes later. She sounded much calmer although still a bit shaky.

"As far as they can tell he's fine. All the blood came from a cut on his head which is full of dirt so they think it happened when his head hit the ground. They can't find any other injuries and he's conscious although they're going to do some tests to see if there's any internal damage. They've made him have a pee and there's no blood in the pee so there's no kidney damage. The man also said that they're going to keep him in for a couple of hours but since it looks like he's fine there's no need to keep him in overnight and they need the beds."

"Oh, that's great news. Great."

"I'll stay here and wait for ... just a sec. Oh there's a policeman who wants to talk to me. I'll call you later if there's any news. OK?"

"Yes, that's fine. Call me when you can."

I went out of my office to tell the others. There's something about bad news from someone you know that makes you want to share it. I probably just needed the reassurance. They were horrified, of course, and we talked about it for quite a while. I phoned the University College Hospital while Ben recounted the time when he'd been

mugged in New York as a teenager and Des chimed in saying she knew some people who'd 'sort them out'. The Hospital took their time but confirmed in slightly more technical terms what Diane had told me.

George rang around lunchtime to say he'd been discharged and he and Diane were back at his hotel.

"She's put me to bed and got them to make me some cocoa. I hate cocoa but she insisted."

"Did she undress you herself?" I teased him, delighted that they were both fine.

"No, I had to do that," he sounded disappointed. "I'm going to have a huge black eye in the morning and my head hurts like hell but I'm fine. Just shaken up. The Hospital gave me some painkillers but they're useless."

"You should get plenty of sleep. Get Diane to cancel the rest of your meetings and stay in bed until your flight leaves."

They were due to fly out of London the following evening.

"Yes boss," he said. "I really don't feel up to them."

We chatted for a few minutes and I told him how worried everyone was in the office which cheered him up a bit, especially when I told him that Sophie had said he was a hero and he laughed about Des wanting to fly over to take revenge on his attackers. As soon as he'd hung up I rang Diane.

"Are you alright?" I asked. "How's your ankle?"

"I'm fine. I'm over the shock now and my ankle hurts but they strapped it up at the hospital. I got a bad case of the shakes earlier but that was just shock. I was so scared, it all happened so fast and being a stranger I hadn't seen the signs. We got a taxi back to the hotel. George is in bed and they've brought me another bed so I'll stay and keep an eye on him. They've been very sympathetic here and

they've alerted the hotel doctor and he's going to check George in the morning and I'm to call him immediately if there's the slightest problem."

"What do you mean 'the signs'?" I asked her.

"Oh back home in Broadie", she lived in Broadmeadows which is a northern suburb of Melbourne, "there are attacks and fights all the time but I'm on home ground and I can see things build up and get out of the way before anything nasty happens. Over here everything was so wonderful and exciting and the people so nice that it never occurred to me that anything might happen. I should have realised that they'd pick on me for being a woman with a foreign man and that George would fight back to protect me."

"Don't blame yourself," I said hurriedly.

"I don't," she replied matter of factly. "I blame them for looking for a fight. It's none of their business who I am walking with and it's not George's fault if they can't get girls themselves."

This was opening up a big kettle of fish on racial tolerance which neither of us wanted to get into just then so we chatted inconsequentially after that for a while, mostly to reassure myself that she really was OK, but I could tell she was overly tired and still a little distressed so I sent her to bed. I also reassured her that she'd absolutely done the right thing ringing me. She'd been a bit worried about that. I passed on the good news to the others in the office and everyone was very relieved.

Melissa arrived back with Julie the next day, around the time Diane and George arrived back, coincidentally. Ben met them and they took Julie straight to St Vincent's Hospital here in Melbourne. Diane and George came into the office the next morning and we all admired his extremely black eye and sympathised over the large piece of sticking plaster covering the two stitches he'd had in the gash on his head. The good news came later that day when Ben got a phone call from Melissa who'd been told by the specialist at St Vincent's that although liver cancer was a possibility, it was only a very slight possibility. The better diagnostic facilities at St Vincent's had shown that Julie would

most likely recover full health but she'd need to be on antiviral medication for a year or two. Although expensive, this was a lot better than chemotherapy or a liver transplant. I took Ben and the others out to a local wine bar to celebrate when we heard that good news.

When we got back to the office there was a large bouquet of flowers waiting at the door. There was an envelope with it addressed to Diane and so we all waited and watched to find out who it was from. There's no privacy where we work and we're all nosy sods.

"It's from Chris Smith, that choreographer in London," she announced. "Do we have any vases here?"

"Why's he sending you flowers?" asked Sophie, examining the flowers closely. "That's an expensive looking bouquet."

"There's one in the cupboard in the kitchen, I'll get it" said Marnie.

"I don't know, he doesn't say. Maybe it's to thank me for taking him to a fancy restaurant. I don't think he eats much normally."

"Seems a bit much for just dinner. Maybe he's hoping for more."

"I wouldn't think so seeing as how I'm in Australia and he's in England."

"Maybe he's going to come out to Australia to propose to you. Wouldn't that be romantic!" said Marnie, returning with a vase.

"Oh, I hope not," said Diane. "I liked him but not that much."

"No one's ever sent me flowers," chimed in Des.

"Nothing happened, Sophie," said Diane, watching her.

"That's because they're too scared of you, Des," said Marnie. "Come on, back to work."

"John isn't scared of me," said Des walking back to their office

“Hmm,” said Sophie and went back to her desk.

Ben took the vase back to the kitchen to put water in it.

“Put a couple of spoons of sugar in the water,” called George after him. “That way they’ll last longer.”

Ben helped Diane arrange the flowers in the vase.

“Melissa did a flower arranging course at TAFE a couple of years ago. I picked up a few things from her,” he said apologetically to George and myself since we were watching his every move.

“Where shall we put it?” said Diane when they were satisfied.

“How about on my desk?” called Marnie from her office.

“I think they should sit on your desk,” said Ben, “after all they’re for you.”

“No, I think he sent them to all of us,” said Diane, glancing at Sophie. “Since we’re probably his biggest potential client. He’s probably hoping to get lots of lucrative jobs out of us and wants us to be sweet on him.”

“How about on the window sill? Or on George’s desk then?” said Ben, “since that’s closest to the centre of the office and George did get attacked and no one else has sent flowers.”

I would have done but there seemed little point as he was about to fly back and it slipped my mind after that. I felt a little guilty and went over to Sophie to ask her to organise some flowers to be sent to Julie and Melissa instead. She seemed a little terse but she’d probably had her fill of flowers when Sam died.

Chapter Nine

I broke up with my girlfriend that weekend. I'd met Annette while I was going through my divorce from Lucy and I guess the physical companionship was a relief from the stresses of that breakup but when it was over we didn't have sufficient emotional connection to keep a relationship going. Things came to a head after I'd cancelled our weekend because Ben needed company and she felt that I didn't value her enough. It would be churlish of me to say that I felt she was more interested in the gifts I got her and the lifestyle but underneath, that's how I felt. I suspect she'd miss my Porsche more than she'd miss me. Anyway, that's how life goes. You win a few and lose a few.

That Tuesday George disappeared at lunchtime which was unusual. He generally brought in some food and ate it at his desk. He reappeared with a large cardboard box and, when everyone was back from their own lunchtime missions he asked me, Marnie and Des to join him in the main office as he had an announcement to make.

"I have brought in a cake for us all to share," he started. "It is a traditional Arabian cake made with honey and cinnamon and I hope you all like it. I am to be married and it is fitting that you, my friends and colleagues, share in my good fortune."

We were all absolutely stunned. George was a confirmed bachelor and inveterate womaniser and no one would have imagined he would ever settle down. Marnie was the first to recover and rushed over to hug him with Diane and Sophie not far behind and they started asking questions the way women always do. Ben, Des and I hung back until there was space then we shook his hand and wished him all our best wishes.

It seems that when George had been on a fam to California a couple of years previously he had met a Chinese American girl and they had stayed in touch via Skype since then. Six months previously he had asked her to marry him and the Australian Immigration Department had finally given their blessing the day before, allowing Su Li to come to Australia to marry him and have permanent residency once the deed was official.

“How did you meet her?” Sophie wanted to know.

“I had to get my suit cleaned and there was a dry cleaner near the hotel so I took it there. I saw this wonderful girl behind the counter and we got to talking and she went out with me that night. Her father has a chain of dry cleaners throughout Los Angeles and San Francisco. When the paperwork arrived in California this morning she called me on Skype to say she didn't want to marry me anymore because I was so ugly now.” He laughed and touched his black eye gingerly.

He showed us some pictures of her and we all said how beautiful she was.

“That was some incredible good luck,” I commented, “finding a Chinese girl in America who's a Muslim.”

“Oh no, Su Li isn't Muslim,” he said.

“I thought Muslims can only marry other Muslims.”

“Ah no, you are wrong. Muslim women can only marry Muslim men but Muslim men can marry girls who are Muslims, Christians or Jews, people of the book.”

“That seems a little unfair,” said Diane.

“It is written in the Qur'an,” he replied seriously. “Surah 5, verse 5”, and he quoted it from memory,

“And permitted to you are chaste women, be they either from among the believers or from among those who have received the Book before you, provided you become their protectors in wedlock after paying them their bridal-due, rather than go around committing fornication and taking them as secret-companions.”

“So have you committed secret fornication with her?” asked Marnie, making Des snigger.

George was shocked. “Of course not!”

“So all the women you've chased in the past you would never have married?” asked Diane, with an incredulous look on her face.

“Don't go there,” cautioned Sophie. “That's a kettle of fish you really don't want to get into,” and Diane subsided.

George concentrated on handing out slices of cake. It was quite delicious.

“So when is the wedding and will it be here in Australia or in America?” asked Sophie.

“We are having two weddings,” replied George. “We're going to have a Chinese wedding in America and a day or two later an Australian Islamic wedding. The Australian one will be the official one for Immigration as it is easier than getting all the documents to prove an American wedding. Now we have permission we can start to make the arrangements. It will probably take a few months.”

Diane came to see me later that week.

“Who would be the best outfit to freight a car from Los Angeles to Munich?”

“You mean air freight?” I asked.

“Yes. Oscar Mauritz wants to spend a month in Germany tracing his roots and wants to ship his Cadillac over rather than hire or buy something there. He's had its windscreen made to fit his eyes so he doesn't need to wear glasses when he drives and doesn't want to go back to wearing them just for a trip.”

“Right,” I sifted through my mind for a few moments.

“I'd use Grissom Freighting in LA. It'll still go through Lufthansa but Jed Grissom will send someone out to collect the car and organise its delivery to wherever Oscar is staying and handle customs as well which will be easier for you.”

“Great, thanks.”

“How long have you been here now?” I asked as she turned to leave.

“Oh, about 18 months now.”

She searched my face to see if it was a simple enquiry or a prelude to something longer. Apparently she decided the latter as she came back in and sat down.

“Time has gone quickly,” I said. “It doesn't seem anything like that long.”

“Time flies when you're having fun,” she answered with a smile.

“Are you having fun here?” I asked. “You seem to be fairly happy but I don't feel I've really got to know you. I like to know the people I work with. Like Ben for instance. We know each other very well.”

“Oh, I love it here” she said. “Anyway, you know me quite well.”

“But I'd like to know you a lot better,” I persisted. “Why don't we have dinner tonight and get to know each other better. I'm sure there's a lot more to you than just a hard working single mother.”

She hesitated, her face a picture of indecision. A smell of oranges wafted into my office. Sophie must be peeling her lunch already.

“OK,” she said. “That'll be nice. Where and when?”

I pondered. The last time I'd gone out with Diane was to a run down cafe when I first met her at the traffic lights. She's moved upmarket since then. I suggested the Katamaran in Flinder's Street. It was a five star restaurant and was comfortably homely rather than trendy.

“I'll meet you there then.” She paused as if waiting to see if there was anything else then smiled and left.

I got up to ask Sophie to make a booking but she was just disappearing out of the door into the corridor so I made the booking myself. I didn't know quite what I had in mind but I was feeling a little lonely and depressed and Diane was a nice girl. She'd never

mentioned the video she made with that choreographer so maybe she'd show it to me that night.

Fifteen minutes later, I was on the phone with a client when I noticed Marnie hovering in my doorway. I waved her in and gestured for her to sit while I wound up the call.

"What can I do for you?"

"Have you got some time for a chat with Des?" she asked.

"Certainly. Is there a problem?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. It's just that she's been thinking and she's got an idea but she's nervous of talking to you about it."

"I can't imagine Des being nervous of anything. She doesn't even let Vasily Sakarov intimidate her"

Marnie laughed. Vasily Sakarov is a client who had been a professional prize fighter in his youth and had a tendency to not mince his words in either Russian or English.

"She's not afraid of people like that. She's afraid you'll laugh at her. You don't want to know this but she's always looking for your approval. You're probably her substitute father."

Oh god, was I really old enough to be a father figure to a 24 year old? How depressing.

"So what's this idea about?"

"Don't you remember you told her to think about what she wants to do when she's qualified?"

"Ahh yes. Has she run this idea by you?"

"Yes, we've talked about it. I think it has possibilities. And risks. But it's certainly worth considering."

“OK, send her in.”

“She wants me here too. She's not very good at explaining things.”

“Go get her then. I'll get some coffee. I've a feeling I'm going to need it.”

They came in and Des sat in the chair opposite me. Marnie perched on the edge of a small filing cabinet. The smell of oranges had gone but Sophie still hadn't come back so I'd had to make my own coffee.

“Marnie tells me you have an idea about what to do when you've qualified,” I said to Des.

Des looked uncomfortable and looked at Marnie. Marnie nodded towards me and said

“Tell him what you told me. Go on.”

Des cleared her throat.

“You know we have all this money come in from subscriptions and payments,” she said hesitantly.

I nodded. It was my company after all and I did have some idea how it operated.

“And you know, like, the clients usually pay us several weeks before we pay the suppliers.”

I nodded again.

“Which means we have the clients' money for several weeks and we put it on short term deposits so it's available when we have to pay out.”

I looked at Marnie.

“Yes, that's the way we do things here.”

Des swallowed.

“Well, we've got, like, a lot of cash just sitting round getting bugger all, I mean, very little interest. Especially at the moment when interest rates are hovering around 3%. I reckon I could get us at least 15%, probably more.”

“Des wants to play the stock market,” said Marnie. “Maybe even set up a hedge fund in time.”

Des stared at the floor.

“OK,” I said slowly, thinking fast. “Two questions to start with. One, why aren't we doing this at the moment and two, why do you think you could get 15%?”

I put an emphasis on the second 'you'.

Marnie answered the first question.

“We don't do it at the moment because term deposits are safe and I'm not adventurous enough. I've wondered about it before but we make money on the deposits and you've never wanted to make more. At least you've never told me you have anyway.”

This was true. I loved the wheeling and dealing and organising and being on the edge of the top circles but I had no great desire to squeeze every possible cent out of it and become one of them. So long as it made enough for me to live comfortably I was happy.

Many years ago my father had had a friend who was a money lender in Syria. He'd died when Israel bombed Damascus in 2003 but when I was young he told me the secret of successful money lending.

“Always check the assets the borrower is offering as security for safety but never forget the biggest asset of all, himself. Look in his eyes and trust your gut because it's the person who'll work to pay you back and if you don't trust him don't lend to him whatever other assets he has and if you do trust him then lend to him even if he don't have any other assets.”

I looked at Des. Did she have the technical skill but more importantly, did I trust her enough to invest my money in risky ventures?

“Umm, you remember my partner John, who works at the bank?”

I nodded.

“Well, he's been teaching me and I started out with imaginary money in a spreadsheet and tracked what would have happened if I'd actually invested any money and after a year or so I'd made 17% on \$5 million.”

Marnie muttered “show him the printout” so she did. She explained to me the layout which showed the stocks she'd chosen, the dates bought and sold and so on and sure enough the profit at the end of the year was a little under \$850,000.

“Then we pooled our money and did it for real.”

She pulled out another spreadsheet. I was impressed that they'd managed to get \$87,000 together. John was heavily into drag racing and that's an expensive hobby. More importantly, after 18 months they'd made a little under \$24,000 which I worked out, on a calculator as numbers aren't my strongest point, at 18.4% a year.

“I could do better with a bigger capital base as I'd be able to get better prices dealing in larger volumes.”

Des could be quite communicative when she got going.

We spent much of the afternoon talking about why she'd chosen which stocks and why she'd decided to sell when she did and then we talked about risks.

“That's why I want to get into hedging,” she told me. “I buy some stock at one price and at the same time sell it in the future for a higher price. The downside is that if the stock goes up above that future price I don't make as much as I could have but the upside is that if the stock goes down I have a guaranteed sale at the agreed future price.”

“So you're gambling on someone else's gamble?”

“Yup. But that's all the stock market is anyway, and hedging reduces the risk.”

My gut told me I trusted Des. She seemed completely genuine and I'd taken a risk when I hired her and she hadn't let me down. If her spreadsheets were anything to go by she seemed to also have the talent, so we worked out a provisional agreement. When she was qualified I'd let her play the markets using our profit margin, meaning she'd have to make sure that there was always enough money to pay the wages and the suppliers and the tax and a little bit spare for emergencies. I was putting everyone's bonuses on the line as well as my own personal profits but that's the risk, isn't it. If it worked we'd all get bigger bonuses, if it didn't we'd still have our wages and our jobs. This was my own version of hedging and I'd have a couple of months to change my mind. Obviously Des would get a decent share of the profits all to herself but since it wasn't her money and she wasn't covering any losses it wasn't that big a share.

“Long term I want to build this into a full scale hedge fund of my own, with other clients, not just you.”

It was good to see her with some ambitions. But, to be safe, Marnie and I agreed a few safeguards.

I spent some time choosing a suit to wear for dinner. I guess it was rather pointless trying to dress to impress someone I'd been working with closely for 18 months but it seemed the right thing to do. I was also well aware that it's very silly to get involved with an employee but we can all be very silly when we're down and need cheering up. The world would be a very boring place if we were all ruled by logic.

It had been raining and when I arrived at the restaurant everything smelled damp and the city lights reflected in the puddles. It's when Melbourne's like this I rather wish I was a photographer or an artist.

The maitre d' showed me to my table. Diane hadn't arrived. The place hadn't changed since I was last there and was still dim but tasteful and gave a feeling of privacy. This was not a place to be seen at, it

was more a place for discretion.

I ordered a drink and settled back to wait. I still wasn't clear of my motives. Did I really want to get to know Diane better or was I hoping for more? Did I even want to get married again? Twice was enough but I did miss some aspects of married life, particularly those I hadn't got from Annette. I was musing when Diane arrived. She'd made an effort as well, or at any rate put on an outfit she'd not worn at work. I complimented her on it and she thanked me graciously.

"Is Annette joining us?" she asked. They'd met once before I seemed to remember.

"No, we've gone our separate ways."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It happens. Few people go through life without romantic scars."

She nodded and we concentrated on choosing what to eat while a waiter hovered irritatingly.

We chatted inconsequentially about the weather and the restaurant and briefly about work but veered off onto her son, Tom, and how he was doing at school and how unfortunate it was that I'd never had children. I kept bringing it back to her.

"What did you do after leaving school and before you met Tom's father?"

"I worked as a bar maid for a couple of months then got a job selling mobile phones and then moved into computer sales. Did you set up Kettering's after university or did you work somewhere else first?"

"I got a job as a travel agent. Since my degree was in Geography it seemed to be of some use there. One day I saw a documentary on television about the lifestyles of the rich and famous. They interviewed a man in New York who ran a travel agency exclusively for the uber wealthy which required a subscription as a way of proving that the client was worthy of his services and I thought 'That's a good idea. I

can do that.' Already I was tired of dealing with the general public you see. I've always preferred people with a bit of class."

"But you don't want to be one of them yourself?"

"Oh no. I prefer to retain some grip on reality. Their lives are totally unreal and I like to think I'm not that selfish. To get the kind of money our clients have requires a high level of dedication to themselves. Have you wondered what it would be like to be one of them? Perhaps get one as a husband?"

She laughed.

"I'm far too ordinary for that," she said. "And I kind of like being ordinary too. It was nice being treated as someone special on the fam but it was nice to get home again and take Tom to school or go to the supermarket without having to need a bodyguard. I'm sure you never worried about whether either of your wives married you for your money."

"Lucy might have but if she had she wouldn't have left me, or at least left me for a much richer man and my first wife married me when I was a poor travel agent with no discernible prospects."

"How about Annette?"

"Ahh Annette. I'm not so sure about her but it's probably not the best time to talk about her since we've just broken up and time has yet to bring back the fond memories."

"You have fond memories of your wives? That's nice to hear. Most men don't."

"Yes I do, actually. Particularly about Jean my first wife."

"That's so sweet. What sort of fond memories?"

I told her a few and she listened intently.

"And you never regretted having children?"

“Jean did. She wanted children but it wasn't meant to be. We considered adopting but you know how it is. Lucy didn't particularly want children and I was fully engrossed with the business by then so we never made the time for kids. Do you want any more?”

“No I don't think so,” she said slowly. “I've got Tom and I'm 30 now and my life isn't heading in that direction. Do you think you'll keep Kettering's going forever or have you thought about selling and moving on to something else or even retiring?”

“Oh god, retiring? You make me sound old. Especially as this afternoon Marnie told me Des seems me as a father figure.”

We then talked about Des and Marnie for a while. It was when we were mid way through dessert that I steered the conversation back to romance.

“So after Tom's father ..., umm, did you ever think you'd find another man? Maybe get married?”

“It was quite a while before I even started to think about that sort of thing. He left such a hole in my life.”

“And when you did start to think about it?”

“I was desperately poor by then and with a young kiddie. Not a great catch.”

“Have you even dated anyone since then?”

“Oh sure. I've dated some guys but they never went anywhere. Most of the guys around then were losers and deadbeats. Not people I'd want to be around for long. So no, I've not got into any long term relationships with a man since. You coming along made such a huge difference to my life. I still can't believe it.”

This was encouraging. I wanted to ask about that choreographer but it didn't seem appropriate.

“Do you want to?”

“Oh everyone wants to be loved and have someone to love don't they. I think it's part of being human.”

We'd finished our desserts by this time and the wine bottle was empty.

“I'm still hopeful,” I said. “I'm still looking for love.”

She put her dessert fork down and took a deep breath.

“Oh dear,” she said. “I was afraid of that.”

“What do you mean?” I was confused. This wasn't how I'd scripted the conversation.

“I mean, this wasn't a 'get to know you' employer employee thing was it. This was kind of a first date thing. Yes?”

I was a little taken aback and didn't know what to say. I fiddled with my wine glass.

“I suppose, yes, perhaps, I was maybe thinking I might have got to know you a little better than simply as an employee.”

I stared at the rim of the wine glass, a little embarrassed. Not that embarrassed as my experience of women is that they like it when men admit to positive feelings towards them so it could still work to my advantage. She reached across the table and took my hand in hers.

“Oh Bill. You are a dear sweet man and I will always love you for picking me up off the dirt and giving me a chance but, you see, I'm in a relationship.”

What?

“I thought you said you weren't in a relationship with anyone?”

“Umm, with a man I said. We were hoping you wouldn't go this far.”

“We? Who is we? Is it someone I know? Oh god, not Ben. Melissa would never get over it.”

She laughed out loud and pulled her hands back.

“No, not Ben or even George although he's tried very hard. No, with Sophie.”

I just sat there, like a lump. She waited calmly while I pulled myself together.

“Sophie? But she's, you mean, you're, Sophie!”

“We became close when Sam was ill and became very close after he died.”

“How, umm, ...”

“We had a big fight after those flowers came from Chris in London and we only realised then what we meant to each other, We've started looking for somewhere to live together, over the weekend. She hates being in that house full of memories of Sam and I have been wanting to get out of Broadie for some time.”

“So you're lesbians?” I was hurt so I was perhaps a little less diplomatic than I should have been.

“No, we're not. We're just two people filled with the pain of loss who need each other. Does it matter really if we're the same sex? Love is a feeling, a need, it has no gender, it is what it is.”

“But what about Tom? Doesn't he need a father figure?”

“He likes Sophie and she likes him. He lost his father the day he was born and he's managed without a substitute so far.”

OK, I know when I'm defeated. When you have to resort to bringing up a woman's kids to blackmail her you've already lost, no matter what the outcome is.

“This could make things a little difficult at work. Will Sophie mind you telling me?”

“It was her idea. When you asked me out we went for a walk and talked about it. She said it was best to be open and honest as you'd find out sooner or later. I agreed since I never want to lie to you, Bill.”

Chapter Ten

I had trouble sleeping that night. A toxic mixture of embarrassment over the evening generally, shock at what Diane had told me and erotic thoughts about Diane and Sophie swirled round and round in my head. I may be a caring and sensitive new age employer but I was still a guy after all. Lucy, my ex wife, wouldn't have agreed, she'd never thought that I was that caring and sensitive but what did she know? I also knew the worst was yet to come and that it had the inevitability of the Grim Reaper.

Sophie came in ten minutes earlier than usual, she must have caught the earlier train. She watered her pot plant and checked herself in the toilet mirror as usual then brought me in my morning coffee. Instead of asking about the day ahead as she normally did she sat in my visitor chair, gave me a calm, level look and said

“We need to talk.”

Yup, the dreaded moment had arrived. Why do women have this insatiable need to discuss emotions and feelings with men when we really, really don't want to? I'd much prefer to pretend the previous evening had never happened but it looked like I was going to become very embarrassed again.

“What about?”

Good one, Bill. Like pretending ignorance has worked in the past. Sophie just raised a well groomed eyebrow. I sighed and sat back.

“How do you feel?”

To tell the truth I felt cheated but I couldn't tell Sophie that so I just said “Fine”.

“I meant about Diane and me, not your bowels.”

I thought I'd try the sensitive, caring, new age man approach.

“I am delighted for you both. It was a bit of a shock I must admit as

you've both kept it very quiet but I have to say it couldn't have happened to two nicer people. I wish you every happiness."

"Don't bullshit me Bill, We've known each other a long time. I know you too well."

Bugger.

"OK, Sophie." I flopped forward and rested my elbows in my desk and fiddled with a pen. "To be honest, I don't know what to feel."

I paused to consider if there were any ways forward without revealing my masculinity had been badly bruised.

"On the one hand I think it's great that you have found someone since Sam died but on the other hand you loved Sam, how could you ..." I petered out.

"How could I fall in love with a woman when you thought I was heterosexual?" she finished for me.

"Well, yes."

"It has nothing to do with sex," she continued. "It's about finding someone who cares and supports me and who I can care about and support. We've both lost someone we loved deeply and we have come to love each other."

"Do you sleep together?" I asked, stupidly. I'm a guy, everything is to do with sex.

"You don't pry into Ben's sex life do you? Or Marnie's? It's not really your business who I sleep with or don't."

I was glad she hadn't mentioned Des there as I'd often wondered about Des' sex life. I think we all had. Even Sophie.

"No, you're right." I decided to take the initiative. "But it is my business to worry about how the office runs and to make it run smoothly."

“Was that why you tried to date Diane then? To make the office run smoothly?”

I knew it had been a bad thing to say as soon as I'd said it. Unfortunately I hadn't thought it through before I'd said it. There wasn't much point in trying to bluster my way out of it either.

“Won't it make things difficult in the office?”

“I don't see why. I'm the same person I was last week and I've my job to do. Diane is the same person she was last week and she has her job to do. Does it really matter which homes we go to at the end of the day?”

I had to admit the logic of this.

“You're the only person who knows so it's really down to you. The others will find out eventually and they'll take their lead from you. If you want to make a thing out of it then it becomes a thing and even if they never find out they'll still pick up on how you behave.”

“So basically you're saying I should carry on as if nothing has happened?”

“But what has happened Bill? You've found out a couple of your staff have got into relationships. Is that really such a big deal? Did it bother you when you found out Des had a boyfriend?”

“No but Des is ...” I struggled to find the words. “Des is, well, Des is Des but you're Sophie. You're so ... normal.”

“So is your problem that I've found someone or is it that I've found someone who's also a woman?”

Actually a large part of the problem was that Diane had found someone, it didn't really matter who it was. But I couldn't say that either.

“Oh come on Sophie. Don't try to tie me in logical circles. You're a middle aged woman who was happily married to a man and now

you're running off with another woman. Of course something has happened! We can't all pretend that Diane is really a man. Everything we thought we knew about you has suddenly changed. You've changed and I don't know how to handle that."

She dropped her righteous pose and became very solemn and shook her head slowly.

"You're right I know. I keep trying to convince myself it's just a little thing but it isn't, is it. When I work through the logic it all makes sense but ..." She paused. "I know what you mean. I would never have envisioned this, ... I don't think ... I mean ... Oh I don't know what I mean. Oh dear."

I thought she was going to cry. Or I was. I wished someone would just to break the tension.

"Bill, I need you to tell me this is OK. You're the first person we've told and I'm so scared. I've never done anything like this before. I was so in love with Sam and he's gone and he kept telling me to find someone else but I feel I'm betraying him. It's like another man would be a substitute for Sam but a woman, am I betraying him Bill, am I?"

Marnie and Ben arrived together so I got up and shut my office door and pulled my chair round the desk so I could sit next to Sophie. I put my arm around her. I was on more familiar ground here with a woman feeling betrayal.

"Sophie, listen to me. You're not betraying Sam because all Sam wanted was for you to be loved again as much as he loved you and for you to love someone again yourself. He knew he was going to die and all he wanted was for you to be happy after he'd gone. He would be so happy for you now. You've found someone to love who loves you and that's all that matters."

She started to cry.

Someone opened my door and I said "Go away" very loudly without looking to see who it was. The door closed again. I let Sophie cry for

a minute or two then gently disentangled myself and got my roll of paper towels. She shook her head and pulled some tissues out of the cuff of her sleeve.

“I want you to do me a big favour though,” I said.

She looked at me, her eyes a little red and puffy, puzzlement and a little concern on her face.

“When you get married to Diane I want to be your best man.”

For a few moments I thought I'd managed to screw everything up completely then she started to laugh.

She was right though. Sophie was still Sophie, Diane was still Diane, the rest of us were still the rest of us. Even though it felt strange to begin with, when the phones started ringing life went back to pretty much the way it had always been. I never did find out if they slept together but it seemed easiest to just assume they did and not worry about it.

Something that I did worry about was Des' proposal. Even though I'd decided to follow my gut instinct and trust her I still had a few nagging doubts. So after a couple of months when a client by the delightful name of Jethro Josserand, who had made a tidy sum dealing on the stock market, came to Sydney I asked if I could have a chat with him and get some advice. I flew up and had a long talk with him over lunch. Although he talked a lot, and much of it was over my head, it boiled down to three things:

1. Do your research but trust your gut instinct regardless.
2. The risk was minimal. Worst case scenario was if the shit hit the fan we pull the plug and lose maybe two or three months of the business's profits. So what?
3. Get Bloomberg Terminal – it may not be the best tool for analysis but it's up there and every stock market trader worthy of the name uses it and most importantly it lets you talk directly to all of them which none of the other software packages do.

Reassured I went into Marnie and Des' office when I got back. They were both sitting there watching a YouTube video of some coloured stones on a piece of wood. Not a lot was happening.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's a video of Stephen Conolly's last game," said Marnie. "He's the New Zealand amateur number one and he beat me last time we played. What can I do for you?"

"I've decided," I said.

"I'm glad the therapy is working. Dare I ask what you've decided?"

"I've decided to go ahead with Des' idea to trade on the stock markets whether or not she passes her exams. Although I do expect you to pass them anyway," I said, with a glance at Des. She looked almost excited.

"What software do you need?"

"I've been using Metastock although Bloomberg's is better. Me and John just can't afford it with our limited capital. It's expensive but the key thing is the background information. You can analyse historical data any way you want but it'll never tell you what's going to happen tomorrow. With the right background information you can make better predictions."

I told her to go ahead and organise a subscription and arrange whatever training courses she needed to learn to use it.

"When shall we go live?" I asked.

"I want to get my exams out of the way first," Des said unexpectedly. "Then I can concentrate on this."

"They're a couple of weeks after my trip," said Marnie.

"What are you going to do with your pets while you're away?" I asked out of idle curiosity. Marnie lived alone with two cats, a macaw and a

lace monitor, a scary looking lizard about a metre long, and it was a mystery that none of them ever tried to eat any of the others.

“The cats are going to a cattery, a friend's going to look after the macaw and Cagney's staying in the back yard. I wouldn't trust them on their own for a week.”

“OK, so that's what, a month away? So say another month for Des' training, so in two months then?” I said.

“Make it three months, that way we'll not be rushing things and make unnecessary mistakes,” said Marnie.

Des nodded.

“OK, let's make it in three months time. We can always delay it if we need to but it's good to have a target date to work towards.”

Partly in anticipation of the huge profits Des was going to generate but mostly because I wanted to I placed an order the next day for my new Porsche. There was a waiting list of several months but when it arrived I was going to sell my old one. The new one was a Taycan and was Porsche's entry into the electric car market. I thought it would be pretty cool to have a silent sports car. Maybe the police wouldn't notice me as much. I also arranged for a charging unit to be installed at my home. I then phoned the property agents who managed the office block we were in to get them to install a charging unit in our underground car park. I'd just hung up from the frustratingly negative call when Ben came in to see me.

“Just thought you ought to know Maurice Harvey has died,” he said.

Maurice Harvey was the CEO of Australian Grain Systems, a medium sized grain brokerage company that dealt mainly with south eastern Asia. He'd also been my first Corporate client and we'd known each other a long time.

“I just heard it on the news. He had a heart attack at home and was pronounced dead at the hospital.”

I was shocked but not really that surprised. He rarely ate his own product, preferring to live on fatty meats and large quantities of Bundaberg Rum, which is distilled from sugar. He had grown more portly over the years and had had a heart attack before.

“Oh well,” I said. “I suppose it was inevitable.”

I asked Sophie to discreetly check if the news item was true and, if it was, to organise flowers and condolences to his wife and family and find out when the funeral was to be. I felt it my duty to attend clients' funerals. Particularly as their successors were usually there and I would have the opportunity to talk to them.

“Do we have any idea who will take over as CEO?” I asked Ben.

“Malcolm Burnsted will be acting CEO until the Board appoints someone. I've no idea who'll be in the running.”

“Keep an eye on them, it would be unfortunate if we lost AGS.”

The news had made me feel a little jittery so I decided to go for a walk. When I got out of the lift on the ground floor I bumped into Diane who was just returning from a meeting with a possible new client.

“Hello, how did it go?” I asked.

“He baulked at the membership,” she replied. “A bit of a loser.”

The main reason we had the subscription was to filter the 'haves' from the 'think they haves'. If they can't or won't pay the annual membership fee they were unlikely to have sufficiently expensive tastes for our services.

I laughed. Diane still took these things personally and hadn't quite grasped the underlying importance of the membership – the “think they haves” will waste her time but generate little income.

“Know anyone who wants to buy a used Porsche?”

“Why? Are you selling yours?”

“Yes, I've just ordered a Taycan. It's the new all electric Porsche. Not quite as fast as my 911 Carrera but it accelerates a little better and it doesn't use petrol.”

“Oh, how nice. How much do you want for yours?”

“I haven't thought about it. Are you interested?”

“I bought a little second hand Mazda when I started here but I'd like something better now and clients expect it. I'd love a flash sports car.” She grinned. “But I don't know anything about them so if it's good enough for you it's good enough for me and I like the colour of yours.”

“OK, you can have it. I'll find out the market value and we'll knock a bit off since you're almost family.”

A month later Marnie went off to Singapore for her tournament. She came to see me the day before she left to remind me she would be away and let me know what important things I had to do in her absence.

“Are you feeling confident?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she said looking at me strangely. “I wouldn't be going if I wasn't confident.”

Marnie was a strange anomaly. She didn't get nervous about a major competition but she couldn't phone clients and ask them to pay their bills.

“Don't you get nervous at all?”

“Why would I be nervous? There are no consequences to be scared of. If I lose I lose, it's no big deal. And when I lose I analyse why I lost and I learn from it. Actually I learn more than I do when I win so losing is better although it's fun to win to be honest. Especially against the sexist guys who don't think women have brains.”

“Don't you even get tense?”

“I do some Tai Chi before each game. It helps me loosen up and focus. Sometimes a game can go for several hours.”

I'd told her to book her flights through us so she'd get them for free which was normal practice but she wouldn't go first class as she preferred business class which was more difficult to organise as the airlines couldn't see how they'd benefit. Business class passengers were ten a penny and they didn't need us to get them customers. Anyway, Marnie didn't win the Championship although I'd expected her to. She went out in the third round, which meant she'd got into the final 32 which pleased her. When she got back she told me that that result would almost certainly improve her world ranking from 53 to the high forties.

She'd been back a week when I arrived at work after a quiet, somewhat lonely weekend. I parked in the underground car park as usual and made my way to the lift. A fit looking middle aged man joined me in the lift. I didn't recognise him from any of the other businesses that operated out of this building but I thought nothing of it. Strangely he got out on the same floor as I did and followed me to Kettering's front door. As I unlocked the door he stopped close behind me. I glanced at him in surprise then at the three other men converging rapidly down the corridor. I went inside and he blocked the doorway.

“Mr William Kettering?” he said.

“Yes,” I replied. “Who are you?”

He stepped forward to make room for the other three to come inside and forced me to step backwards. He pulled out a slim wallet and held it up for me to look at.

“Australian Federal Police. Please do not touch anything.”

Chapter Eleven

The Australian Federal Police???

What?

He opened his briefcase and took out several sheets of paper, stapled together, and proffered them to me.

“I have a duly executed warrant authorising me, Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall, to impound any and all records found on these premises pursuant to our investigation into breaches of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, the Biosecurity Act 2015 and subordinate legislation. Failure to comply with this warrant will result in proceedings against you and or any other persons so involved.”

Well, that made everything clear.

“What are you talking about?” I said, taking the sheets and looking at them uncomprehendingly.

“Do you have a mobile phone, recording device or any other electronic devices on your person Mr, umm, Kettering?”

“Yes, I've got a phone.”

“Can I have it please?” He held out a plastic bag.

“What for?”

“Failure to comply with my lawful request will constitute a breach of the aforementioned warrant.” he said, still holding the bag.

I pulled out my phone and offered it to him and he slipped the bag over it before taking it. He then sealed the bag and noted my name on the label, together with the date and time and a number. He pulled out a clipboard and made a note.

“Thank you sir. Would you please sit over there.”

He pointed to George's chair, which was closest. I went and sat down.

Three more people had arrived to make seven of them and one of me. One of them was hunched over Sophie's desk phone which was also the switchboard for all the desk phones in the room. The others were working their way around the offices, skilfully wrapping all our filing cabinets and computers in sheets of clear plastic. Each item was given a number after it had been wrapped. Clearly they were quite practised at what they were doing.

Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall sat on Diane's chair.

"You are the owner of Kettering's?"

"Yes."

"How many people work here?"

"Six."

"Does that include yourself, sir?"

"Seven including me."

"Would you please sketch for me a layout of these offices, noting the name of each person and their usual place of work."

"You mean who sits where?"

"Exactly, sir. Here is some paper," and he handed me a blank sheet of paper.

I quickly sketched out the layout and handed it over. He looked at it then around the room to orientate himself.

"So I am sitting at the desk normally occupied by Diane Guthrie?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, sir."

After about 10 minutes the lady hunched over Sophie's phone announced it was just a phone system and contained no records.

“OK. leave it then,” said Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall.

A few minutes later a couple of the team wheeled in two hand trolleys from the corridor and started to remove all the plastic wrapped items, presumably to a waiting vehicle somewhere. Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall noted the number of each item as it went through the door and precisely where it had come from, in conjunction with my floor plan. It took about an hour to gut the place.

At one point I asked if it would be OK if I made myself some coffee and he conceded that it would not constitute an offence. I offered him and his team some but he declined. We sat in silence for the most part, with Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall periodically jumping up to note another item being removed. When all the wrapped items were gone he methodically went around the entire office, presumably to check nothing had been missed while another man stood quietly by the door. He paused next to Sophie's desk just as Sophie and Diane came in.

They both stood in the doorway and gaped.

“What on earth's going on? Where's all our stuff”

“This is Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall of the Australian Federal Police,” I said and introduced them. He consulted my floor plan.

“This is your desk?” he asked Sophie.

She nodded.

“What plant is this?” he asked, pointing to her pot plant.

“It's a Peace Lily,” she said. “What's this all about.”

He ignored her politely and turned back to me.

“When will the others arrive?” he asked.

"They should all be here in the next half hour or so," I replied. "Except Des, who is off doing her accounting exams today."

He noted that on his clipboard then suggested Sophie sat down.

"What do either of you know about orchids?" he asked.

"Bugger all," I replied.

"They're very popular flowering plants," said Sophie.

"They're pretty," said Diane.

Marnie arrived moments later with George not far behind. Both went through much the same reaction when they walked in and were asked the same question.

"Do you mean the flowers or the Indian pharmaceuticals company?" asked Marnie.

"I don't think they grow in Saudi Arabia, it's too dry," said George. "Are you going to arrest us? I am not a terrorist." He seemed a little agitated.

"Yes, we know," said Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall, glancing at a piece of paper on his clipboard. "You're getting married next week, are you not? To a Miss Su Li Chong of Los Angeles?"

"Yes," said George.

"Congratulations," said Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall. "We need some more chairs."

"I'll get a couple from my office," said Marnie and brought her and Des' chairs out. I moved out of George's so he could sit down and sat in Des' chair.

We all sat in silence, looking covertly at each other and at the two policemen. The one by the door had not spoken or even moved beyond the occasional blink.

Ben walked in quickly and froze when he saw the scene. I introduced him to Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall who asked the same question yet again. He was a man of few words.

“Oh shit,” said Ben and turned white.

Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall noted this on his clipboard.

“This is everyone?” he asked me.

“Except Des,” I answered.

“Indeed,” he replied.

He looked at each of us in turn.

“This business appears to have been involved, to an extent yet to be ascertained, in the distribution of orchids originating in Thailand to a number of countries including Australia. Under Australian Law the importation of such plants without a legitimate phytosanitary certificate and contrary to quarantine regulations for plant pathogens is prohibited.”

“Wouldn't orchids be handled by the Department of Agriculture?” I asked, “Why are the Federal Police involved?” I'd had a chance to make some sense of the warrant while I'd been sitting there.

“The Australian Federal Police have jurisdiction for potential transnational breaches or those involving government officials,” he replied.

“What is the penalty?” asked Ben.

“Potentially a fine of up to \$525,000 or 10 years imprisonment or both for the importation of prohibited plant materials,” he replied “and a fine of up to \$2.1 million or 10 years imprisonment or both for bribing or attempting to bribe a government official for each individual involved and a fine of up to \$21 million for the company if those individuals are found to be acting under the instructions of that company.”

“Oh shit,” said Ben.

“We have impounded all computers and documents found on these premises. I also need to impound any mobile phones, recording devices or other electronic devices any of you may have in your possession.”

“Does that include my computer at home?” asked Marnie.

“The warrant, of which Mr Kettering holds a copy, only refers to these premises,” he replied.

He distributed plastic bags for their phones and George's iPad and numbered them and recorded them on his clipboard.

“When do we get the stuff back?” I asked.

“If we find nothing substantiating anything of a criminal nature then I would expect within eight to ten weeks. Any device or document found to substantiate a crime will be held pending further investigation and may be held indefinitely as evidence for subsequent prosecution.”

He paused for a few moments as if waiting for more questions but we were all slowly absorbing what information we had. And, no doubt, reviewing all the things we'd done in the past. Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall signed each of the documents on his clipboard with a flourish and separated out the copies and handed me a set.

“Here is a receipt for what we have impounded and here is my card should you wish to discuss anything with me at a later date.” he said. Then he turned to Ben.

“I would like to discuss a few things in more detail with you sir, so if you will accompany me ...” and he gestured to the door. The other man came to life and Ben meekly picked up his coat and followed him.

“Goodbye,” said Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall politely and left us.

We sat in silence for several minutes then Marnie broke the silence.

“Des will be gutted to have missed this!”

The silence broken, we all started talking at once. Mostly we tried to figure out what had happened and how Ben was involved. Certainly he seemed to have a better idea of what had happened than we did. I phoned our lawyer and faxed over the warrant, the copy of the list of impounded items and Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall's business card. He said he'd try to find out more.

The sudden removal of all our records wasn't as catastrophic as it may sound. Because of the nature of the business we were almost totally dependent on our personal contacts and that information was stored in our phones as they were compact and easily carried. However, we were constantly losing, breaking or wiping our phones or simply replacing them with newer models so their loss today wasn't catastrophic, simply irritating. We also had our own little computer network which held the accounts and a vast amount of other information and that was gone too.

Nine or ten years ago we had lost a lot of our data when our server failed and we'd had to rebuild as much as we could from memory and the paper records we had. It took a long time and things got missed. We'd grown a lot since then – there was only myself, Ben, Stavros and a part-time Sophie – and the loss of all our data would be catastrophic now. So I had asked around and tracked down a young lad called Clark who was a fiercely nerdy IT geek who operated from a basement somewhere in Prahran. He disliked daylight but he had set up a more or less fully automated backup system that had, as he put it, 'no single point of failure'. He also insisted, once with tears in his eyes, that we restored everything every few months to make sure that the restore process was working as well as the backup process. This was a damned nuisance so after a couple of disrupted work days I persuaded him to do it at the weekends.

All our phones and George's iPad automatically backed up wirelessly to our server every day and our server backed up twice a day to a cloud somewhere on the internet. So, if any of us had a problem with a device or had a new one we could restore the data from our server

and if our server went down we could restore from the cloud. Just in case there was no internet access we also had a physical backup in the building. There was an Internet Service Provider who operated out of a ground floor office in our building who, for a small fee, kept a server dedicated to storing backups for a number of the other businesses in the building. We were all connected to it via a dedicated router and cabling just in case there were internet problems. And just in case something nasty had got in the data itself, such as a virus, we kept every day's backups for six months and every six months we copied the last six months worth to tapes which we kept in a safety deposit box at the bank. As Clark said, "Data storage is cheap, losing your data is expensive. Your choice batman."

He also pointed out that we didn't really need to know where the data was physically stored on the cloud.

"If there's no internet access and you can't get at the physical copies in your building or your bank then you've probably got bigger problems than worrying about your data. Like someone's taken out Melbourne."

Which was a fair point.

Now, being a security fanatic Clark had given me a plastic card with details of every possible way of contacting him in the event of IT problems and had insisted I carried it with me at all times. Being somewhat less of a security fanatic I had sellotaped it to the side of my desk along with a few other phone numbers of people who would be useful in the event of an emergency. Not having a mobile phone with my contacts in I was thankful that I'd done this and phoned Clark to explain we'd lost everything which he couldn't understand until I told him about the Feds. He seemed to have some experience of AFP methods, which I didn't enquire into, and he swung straight into action and three hours later turned up at the office with a brand new server restored with last night's backups and seven brand new desktop computers which he configured and tested so everything was working again.

I also phoned my contact at Telstra who sent round seven new mobile phones and did something on his own computer system that

transferred our numbers to the new phones. Senior Sergeant Warren Marshall had said nothing about leaving our phones live so we basically closed them down. Clark restored all our phone data to the new phones and so we were back in business by mid afternoon. While we'd been waiting we'd still been able to take calls as all our phones were configured as a matter of policy to divert to the office land line if not answered directly. The paper files weren't that important as most things these days were done electronically. Even most invoices came through via email now. I left Ben's new phone on his desk. All this wasn't particularly cheap but Clark had been saying it was time we upgraded and I'd prevaricated so this was a good opportunity.

Once she had a computer again Marnie started to go through the accounts using the only three pieces of hard information we knew; Orchids, Thailand and Ben. She came to see me towards the end of the day.

“As far as I can tell from a quick overview,” she said, “Ben has been organising the freight of orchids from Thailand to Australia and the USA roughly once a month for at least the last ten years, possibly longer but we don't have those older records. Now from what I can see there's been nothing illegal in the paperwork about the freighting so we'll have to see what the AFP turn up. Documents don't tell you everything and, of course, some or all of them may be fake. Like most businesses so long as we pay our bills and our clients pay theirs no one really bothers to enquire any further and anyone doing anything deliberately naughty doesn't call attention to themselves by doing something as stupid as not paying an invoice.”

Melissa phoned me at lunchtime as she'd just heard from Ben. She told me he'd phoned her to say he was with the AFP and that he didn't know when he'd be home but that she wasn't to worry so of course she was going out of her mind. I told her what had happened at the office and that Ben had left with the police.

“I bet it's that fucking Kevin behind all this,” she snarled, almost melting the phone.

“Who's Kevin?”

“An old friend of Ben's who lives in Thailand. I can't stand him. He's been in trouble with the police before and Ben had to bail him out once. I think he's done some time too. Shitty little ratbag.”

We left it that we would each call the other as and when we found out anything new. She phoned me mid morning the next day to tell me that Ben was home and would be coming to see me when he'd had some sleep. He'd been with the police all night.

Ben came to see me at home early that evening.

“I'm really sorry about all this, Bill,” he said. “I swear that I didn't know anything illegal was going on. My friend Kevin Nugent runs an orchid exporting business in Thailand and years ago he asked me to help him with organising the freighting of the orchids as he was having problems finding reliable shippers and he thought that Kettering's would also give him credibility with possible customers.”

We sometimes did this for the occasional client as it's all part of the business of networking although we did usually take steps to satisfy ourselves that it was completely legal. I'd cancelled the membership of Alex Novotny who'd asked us to handle some freight for him when we discovered that he was wanting to smuggle illegal arms out of Czechoslovakia under the guise of being parts for Praga cars.

“As far as I can gather from the police, Kevin was using me to organise the freight and taking advantage of discounts I was able to get him and, of course, he didn't pay us any margin either as I was doing this for a mate. But there's nothing illegal about that and the police seem reasonably happy that I wasn't doing anything wrong. The illegal part is that Kevin was shipping the orchids and bribing customs officials here in Australia and in America to turn a blind eye to the lack of certification and bypassing quarantine regulations and import duties to get his orchids to his customers. I wouldn't be surprised if he told them that he was paying the import duties so as to make a bigger profit for himself.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Fourteen years or thereabouts.”

I wondered why we'd never picked it up if we'd been invoicing a client with no mark-up on the suppliers' invoices to us. I made a mental note to talk to Marnie in the morning.

"I never really thought there would be anything illegal. After all, they're orchids for god's sake, it's not like guns or drugs."

I knew what he meant. Orchids are somehow innocuous.

"Why orchids though? Surely they aren't that profitable?" I asked.

"Actually they are. There are well over 28,000 species of orchid and over 1,000 come from Thailand alone. The rare and exotic ones are collectors' items and they pay a lot for something special, particularly if it's unique. Kevin was making unusual hybrids by taking the pollen from the male orchid and inserting it into the female orchid then germinating them in bottles and shipping out the bottles. The buyers would then transplant them into pots. Apparently he was also selling them as unique to quite a few different buyers. This is what brought him down because a Canadian orchid fancier found an American orchid fancier who had the same unique species and they went to the police who tracked back through their suppliers and found they'd originated from the same person and the American police tracked it all the way through and discovered the customs bribing and they alerted the Australian police who found much the same thing."

I pondered all this for a while then asked how he knew Kevin.

"We were friends in school. We took a gap year before university, back in '88, and spent several months bumming around Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. I came back and went to uni but Kevin loved it so much there he decided to stay. He got a permanent residency permit by joining a Bhuddist monastery but left after a couple of years and taught English for a while and set up a diving business for tourists and a few other odds and ends."

"Melissa said he'd been in prison and you'd posted bail for him."

I was trying to find out if Ben knew Kevin was a criminal which would make his judgement suspect when Kevin asked him to help with the

orchid shipments.

“Yeah, but it was only for posing as a Bhuddist priest and begging on the street after he'd left the monastery. He was only in jail for two days. I've never posted bail for him though, but I did act as guarantor when he needed equipment to start the diving business. That's probably what she meant, she's never liked him.”

“So what's the state of play at the moment?”

“As far as I could tell, the Thai police have Kevin in custody and the Americans have charged several of their customs people and the Aussies are still investigating our customs people. I swear, Bill, cross my heart, that I never even knew he was bribing anyone or faking certification. All I ever did was get him some discount rates on freight.”

“Are the police still investigating you?”

“I'm sure they are and their forensic accountants will take the computers apart but there's nothing they'll find as I didn't do anything. Kevin will go to prison I'm sure and the customs people will have a very hard time but they've let me go and they're not going to press any charges and they seem satisfied that no one else at Kettering's was involved. Everything involving us was done in my name and I've admitted to everything I did.”

I wasn't entirely sure what to do. By the sound of it Ben's only crime was to trust a friend and we're all guilty of that. I just wasn't too happy that my company was being investigated. I guess I'd have to wait and see if the police turned up anything else.

Chapter Twelve

Overnight I pretty much decided not to do anything about Ben. It looked as though he was as much a victim of Kevin's as all the other people and he hadn't done anything illegal, assuming the AFP's investigations didn't turn up anything else. All the stress this was causing him was enough. Me adding to it wouldn't be productive.

In the morning I explained to Marnie what Ben had told me.

“So why was this never picked up through the accounts?”

“Because we're not organised that way,” she replied. “We receive invoices from suppliers and the consultant adds a percentage and charges the client, usually in a single invoice which ties back to multiple supplier payments. Because of the timing difference no one other than the consultant would ever notice if the client invoice was the same as the supplier invoice or even if the client ever got invoiced at all. We don't have any system for matching expenditure on a particular thing to what we charge the client.”

“How hard would it be to implement some sort of system to do that?”

“A piece of cake. Literally no more than a couple of minutes, unless you want to back date it in which case we'd have to go back through everything which could take a few weeks. All we need to do is implement a bit of basic job cost accounting so each new client request is treated as a job or a project and given a project identifier and then everything to do with that project is charged or credited to the project number. Then periodically you can review the profit or loss on each project individually. The facility is already in the accounting software. All we have to do is decide on a system for identifying each project.”

“So presumably the easiest way would just be to number them 1, 2, 3 and so on?”

“It would be the easiest but not necessarily the most effective. A better way might be to have a client code with a number, so for example Australian Grain Systems could be coded AGS and then all their

projects number 1, 2, 3. That would mean we could look at project AGS3 on it's own or we could look at all the AGS projects as a group.”

“Which would mean ...?”

“It would mean you could assess the profitability of one AGS project against the average profitability of all AGS projects to see if it varied much. Or you could see how all the AGS projects compared with all projects to see if AGS is a good client or not or if the consultant who handles AGS is doing a good job or not.”

“I see.”

“We could also built in a code for whether the client is a Corporate or a Personal client so you could also see how AGS projects compared with all Corporate projects and ignore the Personal projects.”

“Oh?”

My eyes were beginning to glaze but Marnie seemed to think it was quite interesting.

“Or you could code by consultant so you can easily compare one against another. On the other hand you could have the code assigned by type of project so E might be an Event and T might be Travel so you can see how the different types of projects compared or you could build the project type in with the client type and the client so you could compare different Corporate clients for the same type of project or Corporate Events versus Personal Events. Or anything you want really.”

“What's the downside? Apart from information overload for me?”

“The more complex the code the more likely errors will occur and then you end up with GIGO.”

“GIGO?”

“Garbage In Garbage Out. Put in erroneous data and you can't make valid judgements from the reports. Also if you start comparing the

performances of the consultants you could create resentment and hostility. They all do a good job so if one project isn't quite as profitable as another does it really matter at the end of the day? And don't forget you'll have to use the project codes as well so if it pisses you off it will piss the others off too."

"What would you do?"

"What's your objective? Catching issues like Ben's orchids or analysing the performance of the business?"

Frankly I'm a simple person at heart and the only real performance indicator I took much notice of was the bottom line profit.

"I suppose really just highlighting situations like Ben's so we don't get the AFP surprising us again."

"Then keep it simple. I'd use a client code and a simple consecutive number. A number on its own is easy to get wrong but if the client code is there as well it makes it easier for people. Like 'why am I writing AGS5 on an invoice for Bulgar Ore?'"

"Wouldn't that be a pain for the guys? Having to identify the project every item ties in with?"

"Shouldn't be. They think in terms of projects already. All we're doing is enumerating them."

"And this will be easy to set up in the accounts?"

"Depends on whether you want to start from today's new projects or just all current projects or whether you want to go back to cover completed projects as well."

"What would be the benefit of going back in time?"

"It would identify Ben's orchid projects and might throw up a few others too."

I wished I'd never brought any of this up with Marnie.

“What would you do?”

Whenever I talked to Marnie about our accounting systems I usually ended up asking this question and then doing it.

“Personally I'd go back through everything but that's a huge piece of work and would tie up everyone, except Sophie. And frankly there doesn't seem to be much point in reviewing Stavros' old projects. Probably the most effective is to just work on the current projects. The guys have all the current ones in their heads at the moment anyway so it shouldn't be too hard to identify the paperwork for the current stuff.”

“OK let's do that then. Right, let's go out and you can explain it to everyone.”

“OK. Oh just one point. Do you want Des' trading to be part of this or completely separate?”

I had a gut feeling Marnie thought it should be included with its own special project code so I said to include it. This is the wonderful thing about Marnie. Once something is agreed she gets it done. It makes me feel a little God-like, I say “let it be” and it becomes so which is cool. At least until she brings me the next set of monthly accounts and I have to get her to explain it all to me. I've heard that in large businesses some people spend their entire working days thinking up ways to monitor the performance of other people. What dreadful lives they must lead.

A couple of weeks later I took a potential new client to dinner. Ann Li is a Melbourne entrepreneur who developed GeoGo, a multipurpose geolocation app that can be used in a wide number of ways such as web-based treasure hunts. Her app had started to become popular across Asia and she was moving into the world where people like me can start to become useful. Ann Li wasn't quite a 'have' but she was more than just a 'think they have' so it was worth cultivating her before our competitors started to get too interested. She was young and fun and I began to realise that since I'd broken up with Annette I'd got into a work rut and that it was maybe time for some female company again. Nice as she was, Ann was not the person for me.

Aside from being a little too young she had an abstract intensity that reminded me a little of Marnie. Much as I love Marnie as an employee I wouldn't want a romantic relationship with her.

While we were dining and discussing a range of things, not least of which were Kettering's services and how she could benefit from them, I couldn't help noticing a couple at a table nearby. They seemed to be deeply engrossed in an argument of some kind but for all the loudness of their body languages their voices remained very low and I couldn't make out what they were saying. It was quite an intriguing scenario and kept me from keeping my full attention on Ann.

The man had his back to me so all I could tell was that he had a nice suit and went to a decent hairdresser. She on the other hand was clearly visible much of the time and was undeniably attractive and stylishly though simply dressed. I'm going to say she was a young lady because, although she was perhaps only three or four years younger than me, if I said she was middle aged I'd have to face up to my own 'no longer a young man' status. Anyway, she was clearly involved with the man in some way as their inaudible debate was obviously between two people fairly well acquainted with each other's foibles.

Whether or not Ann picked up on my slight distraction I don't know but not long after the dessert she announced she had another engagement and departed without committing herself to any form of business agreement. I ordered a coffee liqueur and the bill and settled back to the prospect of another quiet night at home on my own. I continued watching the couple as frankly they were more interesting than any other thought I might otherwise have had. They had clearly reached the crux of their dispute when the lady calmly stood up, put on her jacket, grasped her purse in one hand and used the other to quietly and with unerring accuracy pour the contents of their water flagon gently over the head and shoulders of the man. She then neatly placed the flagon on the table and departed with a grace that is more common among the French than the Australians.

Interesting, but I have seen too many scenes like this in restaurants around the world to get overly excited by it although the man had quickly moved beyond his initial shock and had become rather loud. I drained my liqueur glass and left the restaurant. I had parked some

way up the road so I turned left as I exited the restaurant and nearly bumped into the lady who was a couple of metres away from the entrance, trying to wave down a taxi.

Buoyed by my pleasant dinner companion, even though she hadn't signed up, I was in a jovial mood.

"Excuse me," I said, "I apologise for watching you in a time of stress, but I thought you handled it with great style."

"Thank you," she said and sighed as a taxi ignored her waving.

"What's your name?"

"Elaine," She didn't bother to look at me, just waved at another taxi on the far side of the street.

"Nice to meet you Elaine, I'm Bill. Can I offer you a lift since the taxis aren't cooperating tonight? Are you going home or could I tempt you to a nightcap somewhere?"

I thought that if I invited her for a drink I'd find out what they'd been discussing, since I was mildly curious. Elaine was quite attractive too, in a business-like sort of way. She certainly wasn't a bimbo type. She looked a lot more interesting than that.

"I'm going home."

"Perhaps somewhere on the way then?" I said.

She gave me a mildly contemptuous look.

OK, so that idea died a death. Never mind, I was still in a happy mood.

"Oh well, my Porsche is just up the road, but I can see you're not in the mood."

The taxi on the other side of the street spotted her and did a sudden U turn. Fortunately there wasn't a lot of traffic. She turned to

face me with a distinctly cool expression.

“Do you normally hang around the streets waiting for women who've had a bust up and try to catch them when they're vulnerable? Does that approach usually work for you, Mr low life playboy with the fancy Porsche?”

I was too astonished to think of anything witty. Well, of anything really.

“Umm, er ...”

She got into the back seat of the taxi and left the door open for her parting comment

“Not going to answer me? Has the smooth talker lost his tongue? Surely you can do better than that?”

I felt a strong urge to be somewhere else.

“I, er, I left something ...” I mumbled and gestured towards the restaurant entrance.

The taxi driver leaned over the back of the front seat.

“You getting in, mate, or what?” he shouted, somewhat aggressively.

Thoroughly intimidated and befuddled, I reacted the way I always do to loud taxi drivers. I got in the taxi. Elaine slid across to the far side of the back seat.

“Where to luv?” asked the taxi driver.

Elaine twisted on the seat so her back pressed uncomfortably against the car door. She gave me a long, level stare and a waft of her perfume drifted across my nose.

“Are you wearing Tokyomilk Parfum?” I asked facetiously.

The diver twisted round in his seat again.

“Where to, luv?”

She gave a small sigh and told him her home address.

The next morning I took a taxi back to where I had parked my car and found I had a parking ticket for exceeding the night hours parking without a valid ticket. In the office, hunched over my first and hopefully restorative cup of coffee I was tired and beginning to ache a little. I was definitely not as young as I used to be.

“I really need to get myself a stable relationship,” I thought to myself. “I’m getting too old for one night stands. Maybe I should take the day off?”

I mentally reviewed what I had to do that day and came up blank. Blearily I checked my diarised notes and discovered that it was going to be a fairly busy day. I groaned.

Sophie arrived a little later and found me still hunched over my desk, still staring at my diary.

“Late night?” she asked depressingly cheerfully and gave me some fresh coffee. I ignored her and she departed laughing quietly to herself, no doubt to share her thoughts on my mood with Diane.

Marnie arrived and greeted me. Silently I handed her my parking ticket for her to pay. She looked through it then at me with a raised eyebrow and a half smile but had the sense to say nothing. She departed and I yawned and tried to wake up.

Ben wandered in next.

“Can I have a word before the day begins?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He sat down. That was bad news. It meant it was going to take some time and would require me to pay attention. Perhaps even think.

“I’m thinking of quitting,” he said.

That managed to do what the coffee had not.

“Surely the new project codes aren't that big a problem?”

“No they're fine. I think they're a good idea,” he said. “I'm just under a lot of stress at the moment and I'm not handling it well.”

“How is Julie?” I asked.

“She's been back for four or five months now but she's not doing well. She was detoxed in Bali but it wasn't voluntary so she fought it for a while and wouldn't cooperate with the outpatient program at DayHab and managed to get a couple of fixes off someone she knew. Melissa and I spent quite a lot of time talking with her and trying to convince her that she needed to come off and stay off but the hepatitis made her scared and anxious and that's why she went back on the stuff.”

“That's not good news.”

“No it isn't. Still, we managed to talk her into inpatient detox and she got through that and she's back in outpatient detox again and seems to be really trying.”

“That's good.” I sensed a 'but' though.

“But you've no idea what it's like living with someone who is chronically ill and coming off heroin at the same time. She swings between suicidal and just plain depressed and has bouts of severe anxiety and she has trouble sleeping or concentrating on anything for more than a minute or two.” He paused, “she attacked Melissa last week.”

What can you say?

“Melissa is bearing the brunt of it although I take over when I get home so she can get some decent sleep. We have to keep track of her all the time in case she scores another hit.”

He paused again. He was looking thinner and more drawn than usual.

“And then there's the orchid business. It won't go away. The police haven't finished their investigation and won't say for certain that I'm not going to be charged with anything and they keep coming round or phoning with more questions.”

He leaned forward and held his head in his hands.

“I'm not coping, Bill, I'm just not coping and I'm worried to death about Melissa as well.”

He visibly made an effort and pulled himself upright again.

“Melissa and I had a long talk last night. We've got a fair amount of money put aside and we can always sell the house and move somewhere smaller in a cheaper area. But to be fair to you I can't do my job properly. I'm missing things and making mistakes and ...”

“Please don't rush into anything Ben. If you leave and I replace you it may not be that easy to take you back later on. Let's try to think of another solution.”

He spread his hands hopelessly.

“How about for a start we take the Liaison Manager role off you. That way you won't have to keep an eye on Diane and George.”

He nodded.

“And maybe they could take on a few of your more difficult clients.”

“That would certainly help,” he said.

“Do you have anyone else to help? Like a private nurse or someone like that?”

“We didn't want to do that,” he said. “Julie is our baby, our responsibility, not someone else's.”

“They wouldn't be taking over your responsibility, just helping you out. Like a cleaner isn't running your house, they're just helping out.”

He nodded again.

“Yes, I think you're right. Someone to just babysit her for a few hours a day would be good.”

“Let's give it a try,” I said. “Cut down your clients, cut down your responsibility, get in some outside help and if that isn't enough maybe think about going part time for a while, maybe half days or two or three days a week.”

I was going to suggest working from home for a while but realised that would simply add to his stress, not reduce it. Going part time wouldn't be a good solution either. Our clients don't stick to neat schedules, at least not our schedules.

“I've also had another thought, Ben. We've been getting quite a few new clients lately and I've been half toying with taking on another person. After all, we did have the four of you when Diane joined until Stavros left. Maybe now is a good time to think seriously about that and take on someone who can at least take over the low level stuff.”

He was beginning to cheer up.

“These are all good ideas,” he said slowly. “It shows you what state I'm in that I could only think about quitting. Would it be OK if I go home and talk to Melissa?”

“No problem. Take the day off and give Melissa a break. I'll give that nursing agency a ring. What's their name? Ummm, NurtureCare, that's it and get them to send two or three possibles round for you to meet.”

After he'd gone I sat back. Shifting some of the clients around wasn't a drama but taking Ben's supervisory role away was. It wasn't a time consuming role but it needed delicacy as Ben was the next in line when one of the others had a problem with a client they couldn't handle. There were four available options. One was to handle it myself but I wasn't overly keen on that. There are times when a third level is needed and I was the only one who could do that. I couldn't very well pass a client up from myself to myself. George wasn't really an option and he knew it. As a Muslim he was a great asset among Muslim

clients but his religion could prove to be a difficulty with others, particularly Americans. Fortunately George's personality wasn't particularly ambitious. Well none of them were to be honest. With no real career progression options anyone with ambitions in that direction wouldn't join us in the first place. Diane was the third option and the fourth was to not cover Ben's supervisory role at all, which basically meant me again. Not really much to think about really. I called Diane into my office.

"I don't know if you've noticed any change in Ben recently?" I started.

"I've been quite worried about him to be honest," she said. "He's been looking iller and iller and he seems to be having difficulty concentrating. I've been thinking about talking to you about him. He needs a holiday."

"He tried to quit this morning." I briefly explained the pressures he was under.

"Oh, the poor man" she said looking sad and concerned. "He doesn't say much about Julie but I suspected she was a problem for him."

"Well I've persuaded him not to leave but we've agreed to shift some of his more difficult clients on to myself, George and you."

"That's a good idea. We can cope."

"And we've also agreed that he'll drop his role as Liaison Manager."

"Oh, that's sensible too. I'm sure George will do a great job at that."

"Actually I was thinking of asking you to do it. Just in the short term for now while Ben sorts himself out but possibly permanently."

"Me?" she exclaimed. "But I've only been here five minutes and George has been here for years. I don't think I could handle it anyway"

"I disagree. You have fewer difficulties than Ben or George and don't say that's because you have easier clients. You don't. You've also found

more new clients in the last six months than any of us.”

It took a little while to persuade her. Despite her successes in the almost two years she'd been with us, the insecurities from her years of being a desperately poor single parent weren't far below the surface. Fortunately she now had Sophie as her support crew.

I called in George and explained the situation to him. To his credit he was pleased for Diane and not in the least put out. As a Muslim living in Australia he was well aware of his limits. I also explained we were going to look for another consultant regardless of whether Ben stayed full time, went part time or left. We simply had enough business now to warrant a fourth. I asked them to put their minds to thinking of someone who might be suitable.

Slipping out of crisis mode I put my energy to good use while it lasted and disposed of most of my important other tasks of the day. By mid afternoon I wasn't far off the state I'd been in when I arrived at the office.

An idea passed through my mind and I acted upon it.

“Hello Elaine? It's Bill. I was wondering if the unusual and special lady would like to have dinner tonight with the quiet and sensitive new age me?”

She said “Yes.”

Chapter Thirteen

I took Elaine to an Italian restaurant I knew in St Kilda. It was a more down to earth place than where I would normally take a client but then Elaine wasn't a client, she was my date and that called for a relaxed, intimate atmosphere rather than somewhere that implied I was successful. Gli Amanti – which is Italian for 'The Lovers', a great name for a restaurant – was just such a place and I rigorously suppressed the memory of my taking Annette there for our first date after my wife had filed for divorce.

Elaine arrived only a few minutes after I did which was a good sign. Of what I'm not sure since we'd already slept together the previous night. Maybe it was a sign that she didn't think of me as simply a passing fling to satisfy whatever inner need she'd had. I suppose it's a sign of the times that going out to dinner with someone seems to have more meaning nowadays than sleeping with them. While she did whatever women do in toilets as soon as they arrive somewhere I diverted my musings into something more productive and ordered a couple of drinks.

Elaine was a lot less assertive and cynical than she had been when we met. In fact she seemed a little shy. Still, she'd kissed me on the cheek when she'd arrived which was also a good sign. Damn it, I needed to stop seeing everything as a sign! Our drinks arrived just as she returned to the table and we sat in silence wondering what on earth to say to each other.

"You're wearing the same perfume," I commented. "It is Tokyomilk, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied. "Tokyomilk Dark. It's supposed to be edgy and delightfully decadent."

"And there I was thinking it was you that was edgy and delightfully decadent when it was just the perfume," I said with a smile.

That didn't seem to lead anywhere so silence fell again.

"This is a nice restaurant," she remarked, looking around. "It's nicely

casual and relaxed and not busy like some places. Do you come here often?"

"No, I usually go to more upmarket restaurants." I could have kicked myself. Now she would think I didn't think she was worth taking to a more upmarket place.

"I said that wrongly," I added quickly. "I didn't mean to imply you weren't worth a more upmarket place." That was good, just in case she hadn't spotted it first time, I'd gone and spelled it out clearly.

"What I mean is," I tried again, "I normally go to restaurants with potential clients and I take them to places which I think will impress them."

"So basically you don't think I'd be suited to a more upmarket place and I'm not worth trying to impress anyway," she said. "I wonder how deep a hole you'd dig yourself into if I just let you carry on?"

There was a glint of humour in her eye, which was a sign of hope.

"I brought you here because I wanted to get to know you and if we'd gone to one of the places I take clients I'd probably mess things up by trying to sign you up out of habit. This way you at least know I'm making a mess of things especially for you."

That made her laugh and she asked what I did and I told her the essence. She, it turned out, was a conveyancer with her own business. A waiter appeared and we hurriedly ordered.

Once the ice was broken we were able to talk more freely. Over a pleasant meal of prawn linguine, for me, and spaghetti carbonara, Elaine, we exchanged details of our lives. She was 39 with a 23 year old son working for a mining company in Perth and a 19 year old daughter at university in Sydney.

"When I turned 21 I took a cold hard look at my life and realised that with two little kids already and a deadbeat partner my life was already going nowhere so I decided to turn things around. I looked online for training courses I could do that might get me somewhere and ended

up doing a conveyancing course. It took me three years and in the middle my partner walked out because I wasn't what he wanted, which was a bed mate, cook and cleaner. He was no great loss. I passed my exams and when my youngest started school I found a job with a local conveyancing business and learnt everything I could and six years ago I quit and set up my own conveyancing partnership. It took a while but it's doing quite well now."

There was a lot left unsaid but I could tell that she'd pulled herself out of adverse circumstances through the strength of her personality. I liked her.

Back at the office the next day I organised the transfer of a handful of Ben's clients to Diane and George and told Ben to disappear in the mid-afternoons until he felt he was ready to work full time again. I also set out some fairly vague requirements for a trainee and circulated them to employment agencies. The problem with this job is that it isn't clearly definable like that of, say, an accountant or a secretary. Obviously the right person had to have great social skills and an ability to organise but there's a lot more to it but it's mostly indefinable. Worse, the only directly relevant experience would be working for one of our competitors and I simply don't employ anyone who has ever worked for a competitor. It's far too easy for them to get inside information and then go back to where they were and use it against us. The great thing about Diane was that she had no real background but you can't really put out an ad calling for unemployed single mothers as it gives the wrong impression. Diane had been a fortunate accident.

We had a lot of response in the first week or so but looking through the resumes no one particularly stood out. Most were hopefuls attracted by the prospect of free travel but Diane and I interviewed two or three. They looked OK on paper but none of them had that unknowable and unspecifiable something that would make them stand out. I'd interviewed people in the past but Diane never had and she found it even more traumatic than being interviewed herself.

"I feel as though I'm being nasty," she told me after the first. "It's like he came to me for help and I just picked on all his faults and sent him packing rather than helping him and giving him a job. He was a nice

guy but the world is full of nice guys and I can't give them all a job. The thing is, could he do the job and do it well? No, he probably couldn't but it feels mean of me to say that."

The third one we interviewed was a girl who gave us both the impression that she was only interested in finding herself a sugar daddy. Interviewing for staff is a depressing experience. I knew from experience that finding the right person could take a considerable while. I'd been fortunate with Ben as I'd already known him and when I needed someone to help me the business hadn't taken on any particularly strong direction. Stavros, for all his personal failings, was a damned good consultant and that had been quite clear when I found him. George had been one of a job lot of about 20 resumes one agency had sent me a couple of months after I'd advertised. The pile of resumes felt like the agency was sending me the no-hopers in the hope I was getting desperate by then and would be willing to take almost anyone. But George, like Stavros, had had a certain quality about him that was apparent as soon as he walked in. I daresay the same had been true of Diane as I see people at traffic lights every day but have never thought to offer them a job. On the whole the resumes were only good for rejecting people. Like the chap who clearly thought his resume was so good that it didn't matter that it was creased and marked with specks of dirt. Or another who listed as one of his hobbies "watching porn". Now what people get up to in their private lives isn't really my concern but on the whole private lives should stay private and the fact that he felt watching porn was an impressive achievement did make me wonder.

With Ben working part time and Des out of the office more than she was in at the moment because she was doing some short courses on how to use Bloomberg Terminal our workloads were increased and when George went on a fam for a few days the place looked almost empty. Especially as we still had the desk we'd bought for Diane and Stavros' desk had become a general dumping area after he'd left.

Two or three weeks after Des got her results – she'd passed and was now a qualified accountant – Marnie stuck her head round my door.

"Des is all ready to go live. She's got the system set up and done some research and is ready to make her first purchase. Do you want to come

and give her the formal go-ahead?”

I jumped up and went over to their office. This was an exciting moment!

“So what's the first purchase, Des?” I asked.

“A company called Suz Hang Shu on the Shanghai stock exchange. I've been following up some rumours and it looks as though they are about to be taken over by Nippon Ceramics. If I'm right when Nippon Ceramics makes its bid Suz Hang Shu shares should go up by eight to ten percent within a day or two and I'm hearing that Nippon are going to put in their bid tomorrow morning. Already the price has gone up one percent.”

“OK sounds good. How many shares are you buying?”

“A quarter of a million. They're currently at 32.655 yuan, which is about US\$4.8975.”

“What will that cost us?”

“A little under A\$1.8 million or thereabouts.”

I gulped. “That's a lot of money.”

“Worst case scenario is the bid doesn't happen and they drop one maybe two percent so I sell and we lose maybe \$20,000 but if the bid goes through and I'm right about the increase we could gain around \$175,000 in 24 to 48 hours.”

They both looked at me, waiting for me to give the word to go live.

“OK,” I said. “It's now or never. Let's do it.”

Des click her mouse on something then stared at the screen.

“Ooops,” she said. “I clicked on the wrong thing.”

“Did you just bankrupt us?” I asked, hoping I was joking.

“Nah,” she said. “I just tried to sell the shares rather than buy then but the system knows we don't have them so it wouldn't let me. OK that's it. Done. We now own a quarter of a million shares in Suz Hang Shu and if I just half a sec,” she did another couple of clicks and peered intently at the screen.

“Yes, they've just gone up .075 yuan so we've already made about four grand, simply because we bought a large block of shares.”

She grinned.

“Not bad for 3 seconds work. Now we sit back and wait.”

“Does that happen every time?” I asked.

“Does what happen?”

“Does the price go up every time you buy some?”

“Noooo,” she exclaimed. “It's just that they have only five million shares issued so we bought 5% of the company and the market knows the rumours. Most companies have a hell of a lot more shares issued so as few as 250 thou wouldn't even be noticed. That's one of the reasons I chose them so I could see if I could cause a ripple in the market.”

Well it sounded impressive. I suppose I ought to have a better understanding of this game but frankly, my view is why keep a dog and bark yourself? There's an old story that Henry Ford, the founder of Ford cars, gave a lecture to a group of university students and one of them asked how he had got so rich when he didn't even have a degree. Henry Ford replied “I've got a phone, son, and when I pick up the phone I can get as many people with degrees as I want.” The key to success in life isn't what you know, it's who you know. And knowing who can make money for you is better than doing it for yourself.

My phone was ringing when I got back to my office. It was the guy from the Porsche showroom ringing to tell me my new Taycan would be arriving the following Monday and would be ready for me to collect the next day. They just had to do a post-shipping service and

get it registered. This was good news. He also gave me the registration number so I phoned my insurers and got that organised.

I went back out to see Diane.

“My new Porsche will be ready next Tuesday. Are you still interested in my old one?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “That's exciting. When will we see it?”

“I'll probably bring it back to the office. Maybe take it for a long drive in the evening. It depends how much charge it has. I may have to take it home to fully charge it first.”

“And yes I'm still interested.”

“I wouldn't buy a car off him,” said George, giving me a disdainful look. “Shifty looking character. Never trust a used car salesman.”

Diane laughed.

“How much do you want for it?”

“I've no idea. Come into my office and we'll look it up online.”

I looked up a couple of used car guides online.

“It's the rear wheel drive, manual, convertible version,” I said. “Four years old so we're looking at around \$170 to \$190,000.”

Diane just looked at me, expressionlessly. This usually meant she was thinking fast.

“I'll tell you what, let's call it a round hundred grand,” I said.

“No, I couldn't let you lose so much,” she replied.

“Think of it as a tax free bonus,” I replied. “For doing a good job.”

Which was true. She'd been the Liaison Manager for a little over a

month and was turning out to be quite good at it. If only I could find a trainee as good as she'd turned out to be.

"I can't understand Diane," I said to Elaine that evening. We were now seeing each other two or three times a week and we were having dinner at her place.

"That girl makes the business a lot of money and works her butt off finding new clients but it's always a big struggle to get her to accept a pay rise or half yearly bonus. And now she's arguing over the price of my old car. She thinks I'm asking too little for it."

"It's because she feels she doesn't deserve it," said Elaine. "I think she works hard for you, not for herself."

"Why would she do that? It doesn't make much sense to me."

"From what you've told me it makes a lot of sense. She was unemployed and used to low paying jobs and struggling to survive with a young child and you came along and changed her life. You didn't just give her a job, you gave her self-respect, excitement, status, power and yes, you even gave her love."

"What do you mean?" I said, worried Elaine had somehow found out I'd taken Diane to dinner with the intent of seducing her, not that long ago.

"You gave her Sophie. I don't mean like a slave thing, but Sophie is a part of your world and Diane would never have even met Sophie if it hadn't been for you. And even more than that, you approved of their relationship."

Well I guess that was true. I'd told Elaine about how I'd told Sophie I wanted to be her best man when she married Diane. I'd meant it as a joke but Elaine had explained to me that even as a joke it was me giving them my blessing. I'd told her that that was absurd and that it wasn't for me to give them my blessing, I was just their employer.

"OK, I concede that point, but I really do think you're wrong though. Diane deserves her success."

“Oh you silly old man,” Elaine said, giving me a kiss. “You really don't get it do you. Diane worships the ground you walk on and Sophie isn't far behind.”

I was faintly irritated she was calling me 'old'. She'll probably buy me slippers for my birthday.

“Now you really are talking nonsense.”

“Deny it all you want, but you seem to bring out the best in people.”

“How come both my wives divorced me then?”

“How would I know? I'd have to marry you to answer that question.”

* * *

Marnie dropped by my office a couple of days later to let me know that we'd received the cash for the sale of Des' shares in Suz Hang Shu and that we'd made a little under \$167,000 after fees. The bid from Nippon Ceramics had come though in the afternoon and the share price had risen almost as much as Des had predicted. I was impressed, and very relieved. Marnie wasn't.

“I expected it to happen,” she said. “I know how good Des is, you don't. I work with her every day. Sometimes you don't even see her for a week at a time let alone talk to her beyond 'Good morning'.”

“How could I bring out the best in someone when I'm not even around,” I thought to myself. “Elaine definitely got that wrong.”

Diane came with me to pick up my new car so she could drive the old one away and keep it. She nearly crashed it when she got behind the wheel outside the dealership.

“It was a little more powerful than my Mazda and I wasn't ready,” she told me.

Since the Taycan hadn't come out when I ordered it I hadn't been able to take it for a test drive, I'd just bought it in good faith knowing that

Porsche wouldn't release a bad car. I was quite ... shocked, for want of a better word. I knew that the Taycan was electric and electric cars are very quiet but it had never occurred to me that the Taycan would not sound like my 911 Carrera with its 3.4 litre 6 cylinder engine. I know that sounds stupid but it simply hadn't occurred to me.

Although the real shock of the day was when Diane told me she thought Marnie was pregnant.

Chapter Fourteen

"I was in the toilet last week and I heard someone throwing up in one of the cubicles so I asked if she needed any help and Marnie's voice answered. She said she was fine, just a little tummy upset. Probably something she'd eaten. But it happened again yesterday so either she's been eating a lot of bad food lately or she's got a serious stomach problem or she's pregnant," said Diane.

"Knowing Marnie she's probably ill and isn't telling anyone," I replied. "She doesn't have a partner and she isn't the type to sleep around."

"That's what I thought at first but I've noticed she's going to the toilet more often, since she has to walk past my desk. And she's adjusting her bra a lot too."

"Her bra? What do you mean?"

"When you're pregnant your boobs get sore."

"Oh ... but Marnie doesn't really have boobs though, does she."

"Oh you're so sexist Bill!" Diane was a little irritated with me. "Of course she has boobs. They may not be as large as the Hollywood starlets you drool over but she's still a woman and they still get sore!"

I thought it over. Marnie being pregnant might well be a source of gossip and speculation but at the end of the day women do get pregnant, even human calculators like Marnie and it's none of my business until she chooses to tell me. I'm certainly not going to ask her about it. As her employer I only need to know when it comes time for maternity leave.

"You don't think she's just a little ill then?"

"Well, she could be but she seems as healthy as ever. And Sophie thinks so too."

"I wonder who he is? Has she mentioned anyone to you?"

“No, but I'm not that close with her. Neither's Sophie.”

I laughed. “It's not that big a deal. Come on, give her some privacy. She'll tell us when we need to know, you know what Marnie's like.”

“I know but this is Marnie. Little Miss Self-Contained-I-Don't-Need-Anyone Marnie. And she's gone and got herself pregnant.”

“Well, talk to Des then if you have to, she might know something.”

“I was going to but she's been acting strange for the last week or so as well.”

“What do you mean strange?” I was a little puzzled. Des always acts strangely.

“I don't really know, just different. She seems more withdrawn than usual.”

“That would be difficult to tell, she's always withdrawn.”

“What colour are her dreads this week?”

“How would I know?”

“Exactly! She's been wearing a headscarf for over a week. Maybe she dyed her hair again and it's all gone funny.”

“It does happen. I remember Jean, my first wife, once bleached her hair blonde then went swimming at the local swimming pool and it turned a funny shade of sickly green.”

“Yes I've heard of that. It's something to do with the chlorine. Anyway, there are funny things going on in the accounts office and I'm going to find out what they are!”

A couple of days later Diane and I were discussing arrangements for her to go on a fam to India. The Indian economy was booming and there were a lot of opportunities for foreign investors so India was becoming a fairly popular destination for some of our clients. And,

perhaps more importantly, there was a rapidly expanding high income class. We had next to no clients in India so it was time we started to do some serious networking.

“Something is going to happen tomorrow and I'm just giving you a heads up so you don't freak out,” she said when we were just about done.

“I never freak out.”

“Oh really? What about that time when George dropped his paint?”

George had gone through a phase of interior decorating a few months previously and had brought a can of paint into the office to take home with him. He put it precariously on his desk and inevitably it had fallen off and landed on the corner of a metal waste paper bin and split. Two litres of virulent pinkish red paint had gone all over the carpet, his desk, his trousers, a filing cabinet and a couple of files of archived documents that were sitting on the floor. I had not been amused and we'd had a day of chaos while the carpet was replaced since there was a large patch of pinkish red and a number of footprints around it.

“I did not freak out. I was merely concerned about the workplace health and safety regulations.”

“Anyway, Des had got rid of her dreadlocks.”

I was stunned. Des' dreads were an integral part of her personality.

“What, she's shaved her head?”

“Nooooo, she's spent the last couple of weeks combing them all out. I asked her why she was wearing a headscarf all the time yesterday and she told me. She's been spending every evening soaking her head in conditioner and she and her friend have been combing her hair and separating out all the strands.”

“Wow, that must have taken forever.”

Des' dreadlocks were almost a metre long and reached all the way down her back.

"She said they've been working on it for four or five hours every night. She's at the hairdressers at the moment, getting her hair styled."

"What's she going to do about the shaved bits?"

Diane looked at me pityingly.

"She hasn't shaved the sides for ages. Hadn't you noticed?"

I didn't answer.

"I wonder what she'll look like?"

"Marnie said she's completely changing her image. She's been wanting to for a long time but has been too scared but getting qualified has been the turning point. She doesn't think it's right to be a qualified accountant and still be in leathers and dreads. She probably wants to be taken seriously now she isn't a radical tearaway any more. She's 24, nearly 25. I think she's growing up."

"What's she going to do about her tats?"

"I don't know but at least she never got any on her face which is a relief. There was just that one on the side of her head. You know that little devil with a trident? Her hair covers that now."

"I vaguely remember that tattoo. So what's going to happen tomorrow?"

"I don't know but I think she's planning on turning up in her new image and knowing Des it'll be radical. She never does anything halfheartedly. Which is why I'm warning you so you know to expect something. And whatever you do don't laugh. She'll be mortified if you do."

I promised I wouldn't.

“And I asked her about Marnie too. She said she hadn’t really noticed but since I mentioned it Marnie has been a little moody and irritable recently. Not really irritable more less calm if that makes sense.”

We left it at that. It seemed to me that having a long running stomach problem would leave me moody and irritable as well but Diane was convinced. I suppose women care more about each other's pregnancies than men do.

I spent the afternoon working on a wedding proposal. \$\$\$on Phiipa (pronounced Phission Philipa), a Korean pop singer and one of our clients, was getting married to her long time - a month being a long time in the Asian pop world - partner Jacko Dinatale and insisted with every fibre of her 5 foot 1 inch body vibrating with passionate conviction on having the ceremony and reception on a coral atoll in the Paracel Islands. In principle this was fine. Celebrity weddings happen fairly frequently and weren't much of a problem beyond having to deal with several hundred inflated egos. In this particular case, however, the Paracel Islands have no air facilities and are 200 kilometres from the nearest land, which is Vietnam, and is only 350km from the Chinese island of Haunan and about 500km from the Philippines. This in itself wouldn't be an insuperable problem as the guests could be ferried out by boats or even, conceivably, by seaplanes.

The pressing problem was that the Paracel Islands, whilst notionally under the control of China, are also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam and they lie smack in the middle of the South China Sea. China and Taiwan both claim control over all of the South China Sea and Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore claim control over parts of it and the USA claims no one has any control over it at all but if anyone did it should be the USA. It didn't help that the Chinese were reinforcing every atoll they could find and building up defensive structures on them and that the Americans were sending warships to protect their freight ships. The South China Sea was an area of particular international tension as one third of all commercial shipping passes through it. The political hurdles were immense and I was at my wits' end.

“Is it really worth it?” Elaine asked me that night.

“Probably not, but it's become a pride thing with me now,” I told her. “Kettering's has built its name on being able to get anything done and I'm damned if I'm going to let the chance of World War 3 between China and America get in the way. Fucking Φ\$\$on Φlipa is going to get married there whether she likes it or not.”

The Asian celebrity press were already hinting that all was not well in the Φ\$\$on Φlipa – Jacko Dinatale romance and that both had been seen out with other people while not together.

“You're not getting any younger. Maybe you should hand over some of the stressful ones like these to someone else. Diane maybe, or George.”

“No it's my responsibility. It's the way we run things. As the head of the company it's my responsibility to handle the most difficult projects.”

“Maybe it's time to reconsider that. After all, the basic principle of management is delegation. Most bosses set policy and leave the grunt work to the grunts.”

“I don't think Diane would like you calling her a grunt. Anyway she doesn't have the experience.”

“You're right, I used the wrong word but does she need that much experience? Isn't it mostly a matter of finding out who to talk to and then soothing their national pride? You're always telling me how good Diane is with people.”

“Can't we talk about something else? I'm sick of this damned wedding. Tell me what exciting things are happening in the world of conveyancing.”

Even Elaine was forced to admit very little exciting happens in conveyancing so we found something else to do that was fun.

The next morning I was discussing an aspect of the wedding with Ben when Des arrived. Not that I recognised her at first. Gone were the leathers and motorcycle boots, replaced by a very smart, tailored

charcoal grey business skirt and jacket with an emerald green blouse and medium high heeled shoes. Gone too were her dreadlocks. She'd had at least half the length cut off and her red-black hair was now very stylishly cut in a long smooth China Chop style which framed her face nicely. Admittedly her hand tattoos were still apparent but she'd had the good sense to choose artistic tats so they didn't detract from her overall appearance. She was as tense as an over-wound clock as she stood there in the doorway.

The entire office went silent. George's eyes lit up in appreciation and even Ben forgot his depression for a while. I won't say what my reaction was but I was glad Elaine wasn't there to make some sarcastic reference to dirty old men. Diane and Sophie were the first to react and rushed over making all sorts of comments about how beautiful she was and what a dramatic change and so on. She smiled shyly and very self consciously and Marnie came out of her office to see what had happened. It was all very dramatic and I was astounded at the sudden change. Des had literally gone from being a tough bikie chick to sophisticated young lady overnight. It was quite a profound moment. Instead of being a contradiction she now looked like the successful business woman she was fast becoming. After simply staring for probably far too long I went up to her and discovered that she smelt different too. I didn't recognise the perfume she was wearing but it was delicate and feminine and definitely a lot better than the faint smell of engine oil that used to hang around her. I told her how fabulous she looked and Des did something I would have thought was impossible. She blushed.

"She's even selling her bike," Diane told me later, after I'd taken everyone to a wine bar at lunchtime to show Des off to the world. "She told me she took the train in this morning and got freaked out by all the men staring at her. She's not used to it and she's going to get a car."

"She's going to have to get used to it and fast," I said. "She's definitely eye catching now. What does John think? She's not the person he thought she was any more."

"I'm not sure but she said he's been very supportive. I wouldn't be surprised if he's growing up too and beginning to realise that the

exciting rebel he partnered up with wouldn't go down too well at bank functions. Her old image could have held him back for promotion. Could you imagine a bank manager with a wife like Des was?"

"Yes, I'd wondered about that myself. Has she changed for him or did she want to change herself?"

"No, Marnie says it was definitely her. She knew that her image would hold her back and now she's qualified and trying to make it as a stock trader she's realised she had to change how she looked. She's been like that since she was 15. It was time for an image change since her lifestyle and ambitions have changed." Diane laughed. "She hasn't been to a hairdresser for over a decade! Did you like her hairstyle? It cost over \$500 and a lot of her hair had to be cut off because of the damage when it was being untangled."

"Well good for her. She's done a brilliant job and it was worth every cent. I wouldn't have a problem with her meeting clients now. She'll impress a lot of them."

"That's right. And she knew that too. She's been working on this since Sam's funeral. You remember you didn't recognise her in a dress?"

"Yes I do although I thought she'd have to shave her head to get rid of the dreadlocks. Is it my imagination or has she changed her hair colour?"

"No she hasn't actually. It's just that the dreads were matt and her hair is glossy now because it's straight and full of conditioner so it picks up the lighting better."

I never knew that. I always thought hair was, well, just hair.

Diane was away in India for four days. Her first email told me she'd experienced the culture shock that most people get when they visit India for the first time.

"I've been to a lot of places now, including several in Asia but India is something else. When I got off the plane I looked around the airport and thought 'yeah, it's much like anywhere else' but when I got out of

the airport holy sh*t!! Where do all these people come from? I never realised there were just so many people! I know the population of India is over a billion but for crying out loud were they all just outside the airport? No they weren't I discovered. They're everywhere. No matter where I go there are thousands of people bustling all over the place, crowding round and it freaked me out. It's pure chaos and it's not just the people either, there are cows everywhere, gaunt mangy looking things just wandering around and the noise is simply unbelievable. Even in my hotel rooms twenty or thirty floors up I could still hear the noise of everyone in the street and it goes on all night long. It's simply unbelievable. And the smell, it's indescribable."

Actually the smell is very easily described. It's a combination of rotting garbage, human waste, exotic spices and incense. Nowhere in the world smells quite like India.

"Something I have realised though is that very little changes for the rich. I kind of knew this before but I've only fully realised it now. What I mean is that the way most people live varies from country to country. If you take someone from their home in say Melbourne and dump them in India they'll know instantly that they're somewhere very different. Even if you dump them in London or New York it's different. But when you're wealthy it's all much the same. So long as the air conditioning is on I could be in a hotel in Paris or Montreal or Los Angeles or even Moscow, just with an Indian themed decoration. It's a real eye opener realising that the rich just don't ever see much of what really goes on around them. You can go from a fancy mansion in Hollywood to a fancy hotel in Mumbai and never know that anyone lives differently."

Well this was undeniably true. Some years previously I'd met a British Earl who's idea of abject poverty was not having napkins on the dinner table. He simply could not conceive that anyone might not have a dinner table or food to put on it. I was a little surprised Diane had not already realised this.

"Anyway, I've made some useful contacts already. I didn't know this but the Indian Civil Service is very influential – unlike the Aussie Civil Service which has next to no influence – and I spent a day getting to know several people, all men, in high level positions in

Tourism and Commerce. It seems that the other people to know are the taxi drivers. If there's anything you want, ask a taxi driver and he'll have a distant relative who can do, supply or organise whatever you want."

That's not actually true. I knew this from experience. Most taxi drivers in India say they know someone in the hope that you'll believe them and then they'll desperately try to find someone when you do. It's just that Indians learn from birth that they have to fight for everything so they cannot ever turn down an opportunity even when they haven't the slightest hope of ever being able to handle it. It's a 50-50 chance that the taxi driver won't even be able to get you to your destination. I expected Diane would find that out quite soon.

The last email she sent me, the day before she came back, was more interesting.

"I had a meeting today with a man - I haven't had a single meeting with any women, incidentally - who took me to his daughter's wedding. He couldn't get out of it but wanted to meet me as he thought we could be useful for his cloth manufacturing business. To be honest I don't see how but I thought what the hell. Anyway, that isn't important. What is important is that I got introduced through a complicated series of distant relations to another man who runs a company that manufactures cameras and other equipment for movie making. He introduced me to his son because he wants his son to go to a western country to learn about life in the west. Anyway, here's the thing. The son, Rajesh, has excellent English and immense charm and knows a few people in Bollywood and has some friends in the IT world. The reason I mention this is that, unless you've found someone in the last few days, I think Rajesh would make an excellent consultant for Kettering's and he has some contacts already."

I sat back and thought about this. I obviously couldn't comment on Rajesh as a person as I hadn't met him but an Indian? With contacts in Bollywood and the booming IT sector? Most of our clients were in the eastern Asia region, basically north of Australia, or in the USA and scattered around Europe. There was a huge gap between east and west for us that was taken up by India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and various other 'stans'. Now admittedly these places have fairly bad

reputations but I'd heard there was a growing wealthy class coming from American 'benevolence' in Afghanistan and former high ranking people from the old Soviet Union who had found new capitalist opportunities after the collapse of Communism. It was certainly time we tried to get a toe into Indian wealth but an Indian consultant with connections there? Potentially very useful. And if Diane thought he'd make an excellent consultant he would certainly be worth meeting even if he turned out not to be.

After a few minutes I phoned her.

"What's happened?" she said blearily when she finally answered.

"I want to talk about Rajesh," I said.

"Are you serious? It's 4.30 in the morning!"

"You've only been gone three days. You're still on Melbourne time. It's 9am here."

"No, not really. I was asleep."

"Talk to me about Rajesh."

So she did, for almost ten minutes, between yawns.

"OK," I said. "How can I meet him?"

"He's coming over to Australia for the cricket. The Indian team is touring Australia soon. How about then?"

I checked the Australian Cricket team's schedule on the internet.

"Is he coming over for the whole tour? It goes on for three months."

"I don't think so. I think he's only coming over for one of the test matches. Either in Adelaide or Perth, I got confused."

According to the schedule the Adelaide test was three weeks away and the Perth test was a week and a half after that.

“OK, tell him I'd like to meet him and find out where he will be and how to contact him when he's here.”

“Can I go back to sleep now?”

Chapter Fifteen

Diane emailed me that afternoon to say that Rajesh was going to go to both the Adelaide and Perth Test matches and that he was 'most definitely very keen to meet Mr Kettering'. On the whole I prefer Adelaide to Perth. The city centre of Adelaide is surrounded by a circular park and the suburbs were beyond the park. It gives the city a charm that most cities don't have with their sprawling suburbs. Even nicer, most of the residential suburbs of Adelaide are hidden away in the Adelaide Hills so when you look out from the city centre you can see green hills rather than endless streets of brick and concrete. I'm a city boy but it's nice to experience a sanitised countryside once in a while.

I checked my contacts and phoned William Matheson, a corporate lawyer I vaguely knew in Adelaide.

“William, hi, it's Bill, Bill Kettering.”

I could almost hear him sift through his mental filing cabinet to place who I was.

“Ahh Bill, it's been a while. How's Lucy?”

He hadn't heard about my divorce which meant he no longer kept tabs on me which meant I was no longer on his radar. Probably because I did very little business in Adelaide. I hadn't kept up to date on his information either so it seemed fair. He was only in my contacts because I never delete anyone, not even when they die. I just note that they'd died because you never know when their replacement or someone else in the family might be useful. I brought him up to date on my marital status and he may well have noted I was now with Elaine as clearly I wasn't ringing for a friendly chat. Information is an extremely valuable commodity and you never know when a seemingly trivial titbit can swing the balance. My own files hadn't been updated for William for almost five years and the last item noted that his oldest son was just starting a law degree so I took a chance.

“And has young Albert joined you at Matheson, Carlisle?”

“Indeed he has. He's a junior associate.”

Bingo! Mind you it wasn't much of a risk. When a lawyer's son takes a law degree it's pretty much a certainty that he'll be joining Daddy in the office.

We chatted about the weather in Adelaide and then, to try to show he was a busy corporate high flyer, he brought me to my reason for calling him. The truly powerful are usually willing to chat all day as getting to the point is the task of the supplicant, not the benefactor.

“I was wondering, William, if Matheson, Carlisle still had a corporate box at the Adelaide Oval?”

Corporate boxes at sports venues are a useful option for entertaining clients and Kettering's has one at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. It really wasn't worth the cost of \$150,000 a year to have a box at the Adelaide Oval as well.

“Yes we do. Did you want to borrow it?”

“I'm coming over for the Test match in three weeks and was wondering if we could meet up again.”

I crossed my fingers, hoping they wouldn't be using it and I could have the box all to myself.

“That would be delightful, Bill. We'll be entertaining some clients but there's always room for one more.”

Damn!

“Oh superb! I'm so looking forward to the match,” actually I wasn't a big fan of cricket, “although I'll only have time for one day. Work keeps me very busy.”

A little bit of one-upmanship there, implying he could take five days off without a problem.

“Would you be able to squeeze in a couple of my colleagues as well?”

He wasn't impressed with this but couldn't very well back out now as he was a moderately large fish in a very small pond whereas I was a moderately large fish in a very big sea. We exchanged a few more pleasantries and promised we'd stay in contact more frequently.

I thought of taking Ben to cheer him up a little but I doubted it would work. Although taking on a private carer to help with Julie had taken a lot of the strain off his wife, Melissa, it hadn't made a lot of difference to him and he was barely holding his own. He was disappearing mid afternoon most days now and had passed around a third of his clients over to George and Diane. Technically Ben should be the one to talk with Rajesh but I felt it was increasingly likely that Diane would become my Liaison Manager permanently which was a shame as Ben was a good friend as well but the needs of the business must come first.

I emailed Diane back and told her to pass on the details to Rajesh and that she'd be going too. Meeting in a corporate box would probably impress him and it would give me a chance to see how he interacted with the minorly powerful.

Des had been playing the stock market for about four months by this stage and had given George an idea.

"Why can't we put some of our own money into Des' portfolio and let her manage it for us?" he asked me a week or so before Diane and I went to Adelaide.

"From what I'm hearing she's getting a better return than I do myself and by combining our capital with the funds she's managing for you we can all benefit."

It seemed like a good idea so I put it to her.

"It's a very good idea." said Des. "I hadn't thought of that. Long term I want to set up my own managed fund but before I can do that I have to set up a public company and get a Financial Services licence and I'll need to find fifty shareholders in order to become a public company, even if it's unlisted. If we implement George's idea as an investment club we wouldn't be treated as a managed fund unless we

have more than twenty members. Let me look into it.”

I left her to it. I've never been able to understand the ins and outs of investing but Des seemed to be good at it and, more importantly, seemed to enjoy it.

The next day she came in to see me.

“There's a bit of a problem with setting up an investors club. Assuming everyone at Kettering's decided to join in there'd still be no way that they could match the investment being made by Kettering's itself so it would end up being a corporate fund open to employees which would make it a managed fund. The only way round it I can see is if I continue to manage Kettering's money as an employee and set up a separate investment club with me as a member as well but then the club would lose the power of the business capital so wouldn't be able to make quite as much money. The club would have to trade slightly differently as well, otherwise it could be argued that the club only exists to get around the legislation.”

Des was a very different person to the one I'd taken on a few years before. This Des was confident and articulate and very committed. Anyway, to cut a long story short, we, mainly Des, put it to the staff and everyone agreed to put some money into a club each month, except Ben who didn't want to tie up his money. However, when I told Elaine about it she wanted to join as well.

“That's awesome,” said Des when I told her. “Elaine's not an employee so there's no way the club could be considered a corporate fund, especially as not all employees will be members so that means the club can handle the business' money as well. It'll be just another member. John was wondering if he could join up too but I thought you'd restrict it to employees.”

Diane and I flew to Adelaide the night before we were due to meet Rajesh. Cricket test matches go on for five days so I'd arranged to see William Matheson on the second day, which was a Friday. We'd fly back to Melbourne that evening and still get our weekend. I love it when business matters work out like that.

"I've found out a bit more about Marnie," Diane told me on the flight over.

"So is she ill or is she pregnant?" I asked.

"She's definitely pregnant. She's starting to get a little thicker around the middle so I asked her if she was putting on weight."

Diane is a brave person. I would never dare ask a woman if she was putting on weight.

"And she admitted that she's pregnant. She said she was about four months gone so counting back it looks suspiciously like it happened around the time of the Go Championship."

"And more importantly that means she's got five months left to go," I said.

"Well yes, maybe. She could be a little earlier. But aren't you intrigued by Marnie shagging someone when she's supposed to be concentrating on the Championships?"

"Well I'm a little surprised she thought it was worth bothering with but maybe her Tai Chi wasn't relaxing enough."

"I wonder if he was one of the spectators or if she shagged one of the competitors to try to put him off his game or a referee?"

I laughed. "Now you're just being bitchy. Maybe she did it because she loved him. Maybe she's still seeing him. Maybe she's even married to him and just never told us."

"Hmm, maybe. I think the idea of Marnie shagging her way through the competitions is rather fun though. Like a secret life."

Fortunately the flight to Adelaide is only an hour long.

To put Adelaide in perspective on the world stage, the most expensive hotel rooms there are at the Adelaide Hilton and are only \$400 a night. It hardly seemed worth putting the two rooms and the flights

through the accounts but I did out of habit.

In the taxi on the way to the Adelaide Oval I told Diane to point out Rajesh when she saw him but to otherwise ignore him as I wanted to see how he handled approaching me. It was almost a shame we hadn't driven over as the Oval has an entire car park for corporate box guests whereas the MCG in Melbourne has only two cramped parking bays in an underground car park for theirs.

Rajesh was already there when Diane and I walked into Matheson, Carlisle's corporate box. Diane spotted him immediately and pointed out a slightly chubby, well dressed person of decidedly Indian extraction talking to a very large older man. Rajesh saw Diane and made his excuses and came over to greet her then turned to me with a beaming smile and held out his hand.

"You must be Mr William Kettering, sir. I am Rajesh Bhattacharyya of Mumbai in India. I am most honoured to make your acquaintance, sir. I have heard so much about you, sir. It is indeed an honour to meet you in such auspicious surroundings as these despite it being such an appallingly bad occasion for you, sir."

I shook his hand. Clearly he wasn't afraid to talk to me which was a good sign and he was as well mannered as Diane had said. And yes, he did have a certain presence.

"Why is it such a bad occasion?" I asked. "And call me Bill."

"Australia has a fine cricket team, sir. One of the very finest but I am saddened to inform you that India will win both this test match and the series. Of that there is no doubt, sir."

"Don't call me sir, call me Bill." I looked around and saw William, our host, talking to someone on the other side of the room.

"Have you been introduced to our host?" I said, pointing him out.

"Indeed I have sir, indeed I have. When I arrived I enquired of the man at the door who I should be thanking for this splendid opportunity and he most kindly introduced me to Mr William

Matheson.”

“Excellent. I need to let him know I'm here and introduce Diane. You go and find us some seats to watch the game and we'll be back in a few minutes.”

Diane and I joined Rajesh after having been introduced to several of William's more important guests. The large gentleman Rajesh had been talking to was Ken Mahler, a major South Australian grazier. Rajesh had selected the three viewing seats at the end of the row which was a good choice as we were the guests of Matheson, Carlisle and, if we pretend that Matheson, Carlisle were a client of Kettering's, it was good that he did not try to put us above any of the other guests. There's no formal protocol for this but on the whole it's good in our line to be a little self effacing.

Rajesh had remained standing beside the seats and tried to arrange things so he was at the very end but I insisted that he sit between myself and Diane as I wanted to talk to him. He then apologised to Diane for the need to keep interrupting her view every time he went to fetch anything for us.

“Can I get you some refreshment, sir?” he asked. “Some coffee perhaps or some wine. I believe I saw some wine on the table. Perhaps for the lady, sir?”

We agreed on coffees as it was a bit early in the day for alcohol and I wanted to stay clear headed. He bustled off to organise that. Diane glanced over at me.

“He seems a little nervous. I'm sure he'll calm down soon.”

“For heaven's sake tell him to stop calling me sir.”

“It's a sign of respect. I think it's the way he has been brought up but I'll tell him.”

As Rajesh was handing me my coffee there was a roar from the crowd in the stadium as the teams came out on the pitch to begin the day's play. Rajesh jumped and rattled the cup in the saucer but managed to

avoid spilling any. We settled back in our seats to watch. The box had an excellent, uninterrupted view of the ground. I've been to some arenas where the view is obscured by the general public.

"What should I call you Mr Bhattacharyya?" I stumbled slightly over his name.

"I am most honoured for you to call me Raj, sir."

That would make life easier, I thought to myself.

Diane tapped him on the knee and whispered briefly in his ear. His face betrayed a small struggle of some sort then he turned back to me.

"Yes, please to call me Raj, Mr Bill," he said with another beam.

Well at least it wasn't sir.

"Are you a cricket lover?" I asked.

Raj expounded for several minutes about his love for the game, his belief that India was the greatest cricketing nation of all time and that Australia were fine opponents and undoubtedly the greatest cricketing nation outside India.

Australia were batting first that morning, having won the toss the previous day and there was another roar from the crowd as the first ball of the day went hurtling towards the batsman who ignored it with fine contempt. There is something about the atmosphere of a five day test match that raises it above other games of cricket, such as One Day Internationals. The sheer length of the game makes it possible for a level of strategy well beyond the fast pace of shorter matches. I mentioned this to Raj.

"Oh yes indeed s..., Mr Bill. One Day cricket is not really cricket. It is for the television. Fast and full of action but the people do not like it. People who come to watch do not stay to the end. They go before the end to avoid the traffic."

That was an interesting perspective and showed that Raj was not only

a keen observer but had an understanding of the economics of sport. Sport is just another form of entertainment and television companies rely on advertising for their revenue. They need to attract audiences in order to attract advertisers and at the same time reduce their costs. It is a lot easier and cheaper to edit the highlights of a fast, action packed and short match than it is to edit the highlights of a slow, strategic and long match. For the viewers tuning in to the highlights at home One Day Internationals were fine but for the aficionados anything other than five days just wasn't cricket.

"Has Diane told you about why you are here with us today?" I asked casually.

"Oh yes indeed, Mr Bill. Your very fine associate has told me that there is a possibility of employment with your good company."

This was good news. It could have been awkward if he thought he was just here for the cricket.

"Tell me a little about yourself."

I wasn't overly interested as his background wouldn't have a great impact on whether or not I offered him a job. What I was more interested in was what he chose to tell me. Some people choose to waffle on about their hobbies or their ambitions or their first girlfriend's cat, as if they expected me to be interested. I want to know what motivates them and how they can help me with my business.

"I am 24, Mr Bill. My father owns a movie equipment company in Mumbai and supplies many of the movie makers in India, what you call 'Bollywood'. I have honours degree from Mumbai University in Business and I am working for my father selling movie equipment for two years. I know many people in the movie industry in India. Many people. Not only those who buy movie equipment. I know actors. I know producers. I know directors. Oh very fine shot, sir, very fine shot!" and he leapt to his feet applauding the Australian batsman loudly as the ball crossed the boundary. The other people in the box turned to look at him.

"Oh yes, Mr Bill," he resumed, sitting down. "I am also minoring in

Information Technology and Computer Programming. I have many friends who are now working in that field.”

We chatted for a while about the movie industry and IT and Raj dropped a number of names quite casually. I had no way of telling if he really knew these people but at least he knew their names. This isn't always the case with interviewee claims. I'd interviewed one man several years ago who claimed to know the owner of a major restaurant in Melbourne. When I said “And how is Sam Boothman doing these days? I haven't seen him for a while,” he'd told me Sam was doing just fine and sent his regards. I'd made up the name Sam Boothman.

“How much has Diane told you about Kettering's and what it does?” I asked.

“Miss Diane told me only that Kettering's is a travel agency, Mr Bill,” he told me. “But I thought it most strange that a travel agency should send someone so far at such expense for just the selling of low cost airline tickets.”

I nodded. This could be interesting.

“Therefore I make enquiries, Mr Bill. You are not well known in Mumbai but I talked to a movie maker who makes short movies in Malaysia for music singers and you are known in Malaysia, Mr Bill. Yes you are known there.”

“How do I become known in Mumbai?”

“It is the easiest thing in the world to do, Mr Bill,” He beamed at me with full wattage. “I work for you, you become known throughout all India! That is my guarantee Mr Bill!”

I couldn't help but like the guy.

“I hope I will not offend you with this next question,” I said. Raj looked serious. “What is your caste?”

“Ahh Mr Bill, we have no caste in India from 1950. We are a caste-less

society!" he replied.

"Now tell me the truth," I said.

"My family is Vaishya," he answered with a grin. "We are merchants and manufacturers."

"Only the Brahmins and Kshatryia have money in India," I said. "And they won't talk to a Vaishya like you."

"Oh Mr Bill, you are very mistaken" he replied. "What you are saying was true many years ago. But now the Indian economy is very good, very very good. What do you say when someone had made money themselves unlike someone who inherited from their father and grandfathers?"

"New money," I told him. "New money and old money."

"Ah yes. That is good, very good. Simple words that say so much. Yes, the Brahmins and Kshatryia have money but they are old money. They are not benefiting from the good economy. The new money is the Vaishya. We are the ones making the economy good and we are the ones making the big money."

The caterers had set out a buffet lunch on the tables behind the viewing area and faint odours of wet cardboard were filling the room. The match had stopped for lunch so we made our way over. Sadly the caterers at the Adelaide Oval were no better than those at the MCG. Whenever Kettering's entertained clients in our box at the MCG we brought in outside caterers. Raj chose to have some smoked turkey and salad in preference to the Tandoori Chicken. Knowing the difference between Chinese food in China and Chinese food in Australia I suspected he'd already reached the same conclusion about Indian food in Australia.

Diane had been quiet throughout most of the morning, only speaking when I asked for her input or to decline yet another coffee or sandwich the enthusiastic Raj wanted to bring her. While Raj was visiting the toilets she asked me what I thought.

“I'm impressed,” I said. “Raj is personable and keen and he has a fair grasp already of what we do and the markets we are targeting. Well spotted. Have you anything negative?”

“No,” she replied. “I think he'd be great.”

“I just wish he'd stop calling me Mr Bill.”

Chapter Sixteen

When I came into the office on Monday morning after hiring Raj over the weekend I stood there in the centre for a while just looking around. The place was decidedly drab looking. The once beige walls were marked and scuffed and looked dull and tired. The windows needed cleaning and the new carpet which had been fitted when George had his accident with the paint was beginning to fade. The old filing cabinets which had been second hand when I started the business were getting rickety and one of them needed a knock to get the second and third drawers open. The desks and chairs were shabby. Only the computers were new. Trying to look at the place through the eyes of a new employee I realised that it was dingy. Drab, dull and dingy. What did that say about us, the people who worked there?

The main business of my day would be to get Raj a work permit. Australia requires all businesses wanting to employ foreigners to explain why no Australians were suitable before granting a work permit which I didn't think would be a significant hurdle. After all, I wanted to expand the business into India and clearly I needed someone with relevant and current expertise. Nonetheless I was going to go through my contact at the Department of Immigration as personal contacts speed things up and smooth things down.

There had been a laughable situation back in 2015 when the Hollywood star Johnny Depp and his wife, Amber Heard, illegally brought their pet dogs into Australia and ended up with a much publicised row involving the then Minister for Agriculture, Barnaby Joyce, who threatened to have the dogs exterminated. Joyce in particular became a bit of a laughing stock and the label about his 'war on terriers' stuck with him for years. It didn't matter from my point of view whether the dogs were legal or not or even whether the Depps knew what they were doing or not. Clearly whoever was handling their travel had been incapable. Had Johnny Depp and Amber Heard been my clients none of this would have happened as I would have used my contacts to smooth and soothe before any awkwardness arose.

Even the ~~\$\$\$~~ on ~~Clipa~~, Jacko Dinatale wedding would have been straightened out if it had been allowed to happen. I'd managed to get

all the countries involved, or who thought they might be involved, to the point of agreement to the venue and was well on the way to getting all the guests approved when ~~\$\$\$~~ on Dipa decided that Jacko Dinatale was too much of a philanderer for her taste and ended the engagement with a fairly explicit announcement on Facebook and Twitter followed up by an emotional and, it has to be said, fairly incoherent, set of detailed accusations via YouTube. It probably didn't help her case that she spent much of the YouTube video in unnecessarily close proximity to her latest beau. Still, I wasn't her PR agent. I just sorted the travel arrangements.

"When did we last decorate the office?" I asked Sophie when she arrived.

"I honestly don't remember," she said. "I'll have to check the files."

“About nine years ago,” she reported a few minutes later, holding a manilla folder in her hand. “That would have been when I was still part time. The place is looking pretty drab now, isn’t it.”

“That's what I was thinking. Everything is drab and dull, we need to spruce the place up. Make it clean and bright and cheerful and looking like the successful business that we are. Completely redecorate and have new carpets and desks and chairs and filing cabinets. Get rid of all this old tatty stuff. New and invigorating! Motivational!” I was getting quite excited by the idea.

“Excellent. What colours were you thinking of?”

There's always a catch.

"I've no idea. Something that reeks of success and expertise."

“Gold leaf then?”

I had a look around, trying to imagine the place decked out in gold leaf with marble desks and somehow it didn't seem quite right.

“No, perhaps not gold leaf. Anything else though so long as it isn't beige or grey. Why don't you go online and research colours for

successful offices?”

Diane came back at that point from wherever she'd gone after arriving with Sophie.

“Diane! We're going to spruce the place up and redecorate and get new everything!” I told her.

“Why don't we move then?” she said.

“You don't think redecorating is worth doing?”

“I think we're short of space and we're going to need to expand very soon anyway so why redecorate this place if we're going to move out soon after anyway?”

“OK,” I said, feeling deflated. “Let's talk about it.”

We retired to my dull, dingy, cramped, confining office.

“When I joined it was cramped in here but then Stavros left which eased things. But with Raj starting it's going to be cramped all over again but this time because we're expanding into India we're going to have to replace anyone if they leave.”

“Who's thinking of leaving? What have you heard?”

“No one is thinking of leaving but we're going to need all four consultants now so if someone does leave they'll have to be replaced. And it's possible that we may need to take on a fifth consultant. We're getting more new clients than we are losing and if Raj gets a decent foothold in India it could become more than we can handle. That's how I see it anyway. Or maybe when Raj is established we could set him up in an office in Mumbai and expand that way.”

Now this was interesting. I looked at Diane thoughtfully. Was she taking a longer term view than I was or was I taking a shorter term view?

“No, I don't want to set up an office in India. It would be a pain to

oversee and isn't really necessary since we can do almost everything by phone or teleconferencing. And don't go suggesting that to Raj either or he might get ideas about setting up on his own."

Although Raj was a bright boy and had undoubtedly thought of that himself. That's the risk you run when you employ people and let them into your professional secrets.

"There'll be eight of us with Raj and we'll be cramped so why not think about moving somewhere a little bigger so we could fit in ten or maybe even a dozen? If we have more consultants doing business we'll probably need an accounts clerk to help Marnie and Des."

I thought it over. Diane certainly had a valid point and it was worth looking into. I stuck my head out the door.

"Cancel the redecorating, Sophie, and get on to some letting agencies for a bigger office instead. See what's available round here. And don't cancel the redecorating, we'll need to redecorate anyway, either the new place or this place if we stay here. And check when the lease on this place is due for renewal."

"It's in three months. We had the new contract through on Friday for the next three year renewal. I left it on your desk for you to look at."

I'd forgotten about it. I'd seen it and put it aside for study later.

"Excellent. That's the gods telling us it's time to move. Perfect timing. Good. Let's find ourselves another office."

Diane and I then had a brief discussion on whether to have individual offices for the consultants or to stay open plan. It was noisier when they were all on the phone but it made for quicker communication when someone was, say, on the phone and needed to ask one of the others a question which happens quite often. Diane thought that personal offices would get rather lonely.

"You need a holiday," said Elaine when I told her later that evening. I was now more or less living at her place and going to my own place two or three times a week mainly to recharge the Porsche. This was a

decided disadvantage of electric cars. Petrol stations are everywhere but recharging points are few and far between and if you had a home charger you had to be home to use it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean taking some time off from work,” she said sarcastically.

“I know what a holiday means, I meant why are you bringing up holidays when I'm talking about redecorating and moving offices?”

“Because that's why you think the place is drab and dingy. It hasn't bothered you for years but all of a sudden it's drab. It's the same place and hasn't changed, it's you that's changed. You've become drab and dingy in your mind because you need a break from it. It's all you ever think about.”

This was to an extent true. The ~~Φ~~\$\$on ~~Φ~~lipa, Jacko Dinatale wedding had taken up most of my waking thoughts recently and more than one dream. Maybe I did need a holiday?

“When was the last time you went away and didn't think about the business?” she asked.

“Oh god, let me think. It was certainly before I got divorced. I think it must be five or six years. And don't ask me where we went. I've had so many trips I don't remember which was business and which was a holiday.”

“Let's go somewhere then. Just the two of us and we'll forget about our businesses. It'll do you good to get away for a while.”

“Sounds good. How long for?”

“Let's make it worthwhile. A month, maybe more. What do you think?”

“A month? I'm not sure I can take a month off.” I saw the look in her eyes. “OK a month. Why not six weeks? Raj starts in three weeks and I'll need to be around for his first two or three weeks in case there's

any major problems but after that I can't think of anything that'll really need me. The guys can handle anything my clients can dream up. How about you?"

"I'll need to finish the current ongoing settlements but any new ones I can get Jan or Barbara to handle while I'm away. I'll need to check my diary but say in two months or so."

The problem with being a travel agent, even a glorified one like me, is that there's no fun in pouring over travel brochures. Not only is it all in my head already but I know what the brochures don't say.

"Where shall we go?" I asked.

"Where haven't you been?" she responded.

"Ummm, Antarctica, the Arctic and most of those little states in Africa which are full of insects and nasty diseases."

"Well, I don't fancy any of those. Shall we sit in the sun on a beach or get some culture?"

"This is Australia. We don't need to go away to sit on a beach in the sun but there's damned little culture here. How about touring Europe? Hire a car and travel round Athens and Rome and Prague and Vienna and places like that. Check out some of those ancient civilisations?"

"OK, I'm sold. Let's set some dates to work towards."

One of the many things I liked about Elaine was her decisiveness. It was invigorating.

I thought about Raj for a few days and discussed him with Diane. We agreed that he would need to get to grips with the way we did things and familiarise himself with our network of contacts and destinations but I didn't want him taking over any existing clients.

"I think it's important that he focus on getting new business for us in India, so the only clients he has are the ones he gets himself."

“That's pretty much how it's going to have to be anyway,” said Diane. “None of us speaks any Indian.”

“Most Indians speak English to some extent. It's a hangover from the British Empire,” I told her. “And he'll have to go over for some personal contact as well quite a lot to begin with, at least until our reputation starts to gain some traction.”

“That does mean that we're going to have to take on someone else. The main point of taking on Raj was for him to help with our existing clients, especially with Ben ...”

“So we need to keep looking. And we need to get a bigger office.”

I thought for a few moments.

“Once Raj is settled, Elaine and I are going to go to Europe for a holiday. I need one, I'm feeling tired.”

Diane nodded her understanding. “You haven't had one while I've been here and I bet you hadn't had one for a long time before that.”

“And since you've excelled yourself by finding Raj,” I continued, “I'm going to leave you to look for another consultant. Just don't offer the job to anyone until I've given them the final approval.”

“OK,” said Diane, “leave it to me. You go find us a new office. With a nice view.”

It's almost axiomatic in this business that something unexpected will go wrong with the best laid plans and I had a fair idea of what it was that was going to go wrong, just not when. It turned out to be two weeks after Raj started with us.

I was in my office, looking over the floor plans and proposed contracts for three alternative offices, wondering which, if any, would be suitable. I needed to let the landlord of our current offices know that I wasn't going to renew but I still had a couple of weeks left in which to do it. I'd have to make a decision soon though as we'd need to get the redecorating done before moving in and we'd have to move

in before the old lease on the current office expired.

“Can I have a word, Bill?”

“Sure Ben, come in and shut the door.” It looked like a private problem rather than a client problem.

He looked uncomfortable and clearly didn't quite know how to start.

“I'm guessing this isn't a client problem?”

“No it's me. I'm the problem.”

He took a deep breath and then blurted it out.

“I just don't care any more.”

I'd seen this coming for several weeks but we had to go through the motions.

“What don't you care about?”

“The clients. I don't care about their silly ideas and I don't care about making them happen.”

Well, it was fairly obvious what had brought this about.

“How's Julie?”

“She's a lot better now. The hepatitis is under control and the doctor says he's hopeful that Julie will get rid of it completely although it'll probably be a year or more yet.”

“And the”

“She's been clean for nearly four months now. She says she doesn't crave it anymore and she's not suicidal anymore either. She still has big mood swings but she swings between happy and depressed now, not depressed and suicidal.”

“And Melissa?”

“Melissa is coping fine now too. That nurse Tiffany was a godsend. Once Melissa had a few nights of decent sleep she was able to cope again. The strain was unbearable but it seems to be well and truly over now.”

“And you?”

“Much the same for me too. Now Julie and Melissa are doing so well I'm not going out of my mind anymore. I'm sleeping too at night now and I'm not depressed. I'm not happy either but I'm not depressed.”

“So what's the problem?”

“You'll hate me for saying this Bill but I just find it all so trivial now. So pointless. What matters to me now is my family, my wife and my baby girl. What do I care which hotel some over-indulged rich bitch stays in? All I want is to be with my family and love them while I can.”

It happens to most of us all eventually. Sooner or later something major happens which makes you question your life and your values. So far it hadn't happened to me, two divorces hadn't significantly changed my values but I daresay one day something will.

“Raj is a bloody good lad and I reckon he's going to be a first rate consultant. I've been hanging on for the last few weeks to see how he would work out but he's good and I'm delighted because I really didn't want to leave you in the lurch.”

“So you've decided then?”

“Yes, I've been talking it over with Melissa and Julie for the last few weeks and we're all agreed. We've got some money put aside and I can start to get my super in a few years and if needs be Melissa and I can get easy part time work. Maybe Julie too, soon, but the money isn't important.”

“So when are you leaving?”

“I was thinking I'd finish the week and not come back after that. If that's OK with you?”

Ordinarily when someone leaves I pay them for the period of notice but make them leave the office straight away. This is because I don't want anyone copying any of our data intending to use it after they've gone. It's a faintly absurd policy because anyone leaving with that intention is going to make damned sure they have all our data before they say anything about leaving but you have to at least be seen to be making any effort. It was doubly absurd to make Ben leave immediately. The amount of data he had in his head was phenomenal and I knew that he would never, ever use it against me.

Much as I was concerned about my friend and long term associate, at the back of my mind was a niggling little worry over what Elaine would say. I was pretty certain she wouldn't be overly delighted at having to postpone our holiday indefinitely.

I could tell there wasn't any hope of changing his mind and to be honest the way he'd been recently he was almost a liability. It was an incredible shame that his life had been turned around so much and I'd sorely miss him. That said, I liked and respected both Ben and Melissa enough to not try to change his mind. They had their lives to get on with together and with Julie and that was what was important. My business was important to me of course but I wasn't so egotistical to think it was that important to anyone else.

The thing is, the axiom is that something *unexpected* will happen. This was actually expected. My phone rang and I saw it was Diane so I excused myself to Ben and answered it.

“Umm hi Bill. I may not be in this afternoon. I've, err, been arrested.”

Oh how peachy. My old Liaison Manager is leaving and my new Liaison Manager is in prison. I should have stayed in bed this morning.

Chapter Seventeen

When they arrived in the office the next morning, Sophie was thin-lipped and brusque. Diane wasn't her usual cheery self either.

"Hello Bill," she said as she took the spare seat in my office. "I'm sorry I couldn't say more on the phone yesterday but the police officer would only let me tell you I wouldn't be in."

"What happened?" I asked.

She was embarrassed and couldn't look at me.

"I got arrested for shoplifting," she said quietly.

"So you forgot to pay, it happens all the time. Just apologise and pay for whatever it was and it'll be fine."

"Umm, I didn't quite forget," said Diane. "They've got security cameras."

"So what did you do?"

"I wanted to get something nice for Sophie," she said, almost defiantly. "We've been going through a rough patch so I wanted to give her a lovely little present. And I was passing iSaw up in Bourke Street Mall at lunchtime so I thought I'd pop in and there was this lovely little cashmere sweater that was the perfect colour to set off her eyes." She ground to a halt.

iSaw was a very trendy, very very expensive fashion boutique. I wouldn't say it was the top boutique in Australia but it was certainly in the top ten and most of the other nine were in Sydney.

"So what happened then?"

"I went to try it on as Sophie about the same size as me and then a security man stopped me and he called the police."

"So you were outside the shop?"

Security staff don't stop people inside shops. They may just be wandering round before paying. If they leave without paying though the presumption is that there was intent to avoid paying and they don't really like that.

“Umm, yes.”

“With the sweater in your hand?”

“Umm, not quite. I was still wearing it.”

“And this is all on film?”

“Yes, I, err, went into the changing room with three things and came out with two and then left the store.”

“How much was the sweater?”

“\$450 or thereabouts. There's such a big profit margin there I'm sure they could easily afford it.”

That wasn't really the point. The point was it was their sweater and they don't give these things away, and while we're at it, Diane could afford that. I know because I know how much I pay her.

“You didn't have any credit cards or money on you, did you. You'd accidentally left them behind and you were going to go back and pay them, weren't you.”

“Umm, I had nearly \$1000 in cash in my purse and my cards as well. The police itemised it all.”

“Oh well. I'm sure if you apologise and pay for the sweater you'll just get a caution. These things do happen. You had a lot on your mind. Pressure of work and all that.”

“Yeah, err, it's not quite that simple, I'm afraid.”

“No,” I thought to myself. “It never is.”

“OK, tell me.”

She seemed to shrivel a little inside her clothes and wrapped her arms around herself and stared at a fascinating old, grey filing cabinet.

“It's happened before.”

I was afraid of that.

“You've taken things before or you've been arrested before?”

“I've got, umm, three prior convictions.”

I just stared at her. Why didn't I do a police check before employing her? I knew why. It was because she had seemed honest and trustworthy.

Then she went on in a rush.

“I never had any money, you see. I had Tom to feed and we were always short and I'd sometimes take things from the supermarkets, because we needed to eat and sometimes when he needed shoes or something I'd find a busy shop and just slip them in my shoulder bag and when I lost my job and we had no money at all it as the only way we could make ends meet as any money I managed to get went on the rent and the supermarkets make so much money and ...” She petered out.

“So what happened with the convictions? Did you get fined or what?”

“The first time the Legal Aid people got the magistrate to do a diversion which meant it was more or less dismissed and the second time the magistrate let me off with a caution because he understood my circumstances. And the third time I was fined \$1500 which my lawyer said was reasonable under the circumstances.”

“You could afford a lawyer?”

She blushed and looked shamefaced. “I was working here then. I just

took a day off for court. I told you it was Tom's Sport's Day."

"So will you be going to prison?" I asked.

"No. My lawyer said last night that it's unheard of for anyone to go to prison for shoplifting these days. It'll be a Community Correction Order."

"What does that mean?"

"Basically a good behaviour bond, with a few conditions."

"What sort of conditions?"

"My lawyer said they're certain to stipulate that I can't leave Victoria without permission and that I'll probably have to have a psychiatric evaluation and undertake a course of counselling since, apparently ..., " she paused, "oh dear, apparently a fourth conviction will show I'm a compulsive shoplifter. And he thinks I may have to do some community service as well. Maybe I'll be sweeping the streets or taking food to the homeless or something."

I knew losing my temper wouldn't help the situation but I sort of did anyway.

"Oh for god's sake Diane! You can easily afford these things so why steal them and risk getting caught? Jesus! It's just so I don't know ... stupid!"

She cowered back in her chair. I don't think she'd ever seen me angry before. Well, I wasn't angry, just annoyed really. I'm not sure why. After all, any number of my wealthy clients had convictions for shoplifting.

"But I wanted to get Sophie something and it was so nice and Sophie would have ..."

"You could still have got Sophie the sweater and paid for it."

"But that's not as much fun." She stopped when she realised what she'd said.

“Go on,” I said, feeling weary all of a sudden.

She sat there in silence, tightly wrapped in a protective ball. The silence grew and I started to wonder what to do next.

“I used to take things because I had to. It was the only way we could get by, Tom and me. And when I'd get home afterwards I'd feel relieved but also pleased and proud.”

She smiled a little at the memories.

“I'd beaten the system for a few more days and I'd be so happy and then we'd get behind again and I'd take something else and be happy again. And then you gave me a job and everything was great but there were still bills to pay and it was so hard, I've never done a job like this before and it was so hard to try to remember everything and figure out what had to be done and getting it done and living up to your expectations and Stavros was on my case all the time and after a while I started taking stuff again so that I would get that feeling of beating everyone and it was so easy and I could do it and I'd be happy for a while and I'd go out and do it again whenever I got stressed and then I got caught again. And I promised the magistrate I'd never do it again and then I found Sophie and everything was so wonderful and I didn't need to take things to feel good because I felt good all the time and then you promoted me and I got stressed again and then I fell out with Sophie and I wanted to give her a present to make things better and I wanted to feel happy again so I just took the sweater and now she's so angry with me and I've ruined everything.”

We sat in silence for a while. My anger had gone as quickly as it arrived. I fully understood what she was saying. I'd seen it too many times before. I cleared my throat.

“I have worked with a lot of celebrities over the years and some of them became celebrities too quickly. Lauryn Hill for example. One day she was just another singer struggling to make it and the next day her debut album was nominated for 10 Grammys and won five of them and the instant stardom destroyed her. She became a recluse almost as quickly as she became a star and ended up in prison for tax evasion, I

think it was.”

I picked up a pen and started fiddling with it. Diane was just looking at me blankly, not having any clue where I was going with this.

“I picked you off the streets, literally. It never occurred to me that you'd have any trouble doing the job or even that it would stress you. I just figured you'd be fine because you had some money coming in. It never occurred to me that this would be so, so strange, so different. I should have realised that you would be a bit like Lauryn Hill, one day nothing the next day thrust into a fast moving world of privilege and glamour. Even though we're only on the edge of it, it must have been one hell of a shock. I've pushed you too hard. I should have realised and been more supportive.”

She unwound herself and sat up properly in her chair.

“No Bill, you've been wonderful to me and I've let you down.”

Having been divorced twice and broken up with a number of lady friends over the years I could see a distastefully emotional situation brewing so I figured I'd better head it off quickly.

“Yes you have,” I said bluntly. “But I've let you down too. So let's move on from this and think to the future. You're sure that you'll only get a Community thingy?”

“Yes. My lawyer said there are too many drug users in prison to make room for a silly little shoplifter.”

“Good. That shouldn't have too many repercussions on the business. Ben has resigned and I need a permanent Liaison Manager. So, you decide. Do I give you the job permanently or is it too much for you and I should appoint George instead? It's up to you.”

After a very long five seconds she said quietly

“I want to be your Liaison Manager.”

“Good. But there is one condition.”

She nodded.

“I want you to undertake the psychiatric evaluation and counselling before the court orders it. From what you’ve told me it’s almost certain that they’ll order it so if you preempt it I’m sure the court will accept that you know you have a problem and that you are trying to change and will be more lenient. They may even not record a conviction so long as the counsellor’s report is satisfactory and you never do it again.”

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“OK,” she said. “That sounds like a good idea. I’ll talk to my lawyer and see if I can find out which counsellors the court uses. I wouldn’t want to get one they don’t approve of.”

“Good. As of now you are my Liaison Manager instead of being the Acting Liaison Manager. This afternoon I want to get together with you and Sophie and go through these possible new offices. We need to make a decision soon. By the way, should I have a chat with Sophie about pushing you too hard?”

“Oh god no, Bill,” she was horrified. “You’ll only make things worse. Men are useless in these situations. I’ve got to sort it out myself. And find a better way to de-stress.”

I wished my divorces had been so easily resolved. Certainly Diane seemed to have been able to have a chat with Sophie as Sophie was no longer thin-lipped when we got together that afternoon. There was a trace of lipstick on her neck but I pretended not to notice.

I showed Diane and Sophie the layouts of the three offices and let them debate the various merits and demerits of each without telling them my preference. Diane chose the one I liked and Sophie felt it and another were comparable and was happy to agree. I phoned the managing agent and we went round to have a look.

It was on the twelfth floor of the building next door and was a corner office so it had windows on two sides and because it was so high up the views were pretty good. Along the shorter side were two offices and a kitchen, all with windows and the rest of the office was a large

empty area. It was slightly more than twice the size of our old office which meant there'd be lots of space and it had a suspended ceiling so there was no problem getting power to wherever we put desks. I proposed to take the office in the corner which had windows on two sides and use the other office for Marnie and Des. Sophie would have her area outside my office which pleased her no end as for the last nine years or so she hadn't been anywhere near a window. This left an open area for the consultants that was really a little too large for comfort and I proposed that we get some comfortable easy chairs and a couple of occasional tables and have an area where people could go to relax away from their desks or even, at a push, be used for meetings on the rare occasion we actually had a visitor. Diane and Sophie thought that this was an excellent idea. I then explained my ideas for decorating the place.

I say 'my ideas' although they were really Elaine's.

"Grey and beige are the standard for rented offices," I'd told her a few days previously. "But they're quite depressing after a while but I can't think of anything better."

"Almost anything would be better," she replied. "Except possibly all black. Colour has a big impact on people's emotions so what are you hoping to achieve?"

"Well, I'd like everyone to be happy and productive."

"Blue is often considered to be the most productive and it's good for promoting communication, trust and creativity as well. Only you have to be careful as if it's too dark or too intense it can do the opposite and make everyone flat and untrusting. Blue can also make people sad."

"OK. I rather like orange myself."

"Stay away from orange. It's a high energy colour and is great in very small doses but too much will exhaust everyone."

"How do you know all this?"

“I did a course in colour psychology when I was training to be a real estate agent then I chucked it up for conveyancing since real estate is too unreliable.”

“What can we use to show we are successful?”

“Purple. That's the real colour of money, psychologically. The problem is that it's usually seen as artificial or false. Green is good because it reconnects with nature, especially if you do it with plants.”

“Is it relaxing and restful?”

“Yes, why? Do you want your staff to relax rather than work?”

I explained that one of the offices I was looking at was too big and that I was thinking of having a relaxation area.

“Oh, that would be good then. Separate it off and have it greens and some earthy browns and some light blue which is also calming.”

“What about the rest of the office?”

“Yellow is good for innovation and creativity but it can also cause anger so be careful with that too. Will the office have lots of natural light or mostly artificial?”

“If we go for the big one it'll be natural light.”

“Don't use yellow then as it reflects natural light which is also yellowish and will cause eye strain.

“Oh god, well what would be good then?”

She thought for a while then said

“How about purple office chairs? That way it'll show the success but not be overwhelming. Go for a light blue ceiling with a few white or very light grey patches so it feels like its in the open air and use a pale green on the walls all round except the rest area which should be a deeper more relaxing green. Then break it all up with strong vibrant

colours like red and yellow in small amounts so things like bins, small tables or cupboards, desk lamps and staplers and hole punches. Try to get some filing cabinets that aren't grey. And have nice cheerful pictures on the walls, landscapes and happy scenes, nothing dark or depressing. And maybe red door frames."

"Sounds, mmm, radical. What colours are your offices?"

"Greys and beige. We're conveyancers. We're not radical."

It took a while but I think I managed to convince Diane and Sophie. The main disagreement was the door frames. Sophie felt strongly that a purplish colour would coordinate with the pale green walls far better than red and Diane was inclined to agree as she thought that red would be too aggressive. So we went for fuchsia instead.

I signed the lease agreement that afternoon and dumped the whole problem of moving onto Raj, under the supervision of Sophie. He could organise the decorators and removals people and get new desks and filing cabinets and so on and spend his weekend seeing everything was moved and nothing was lost. That's what office juniors are for, and it was a good opportunity to see how well he organised a project.

I was feeling very positive. New staff, new horizons, new Liaison Manager, new offices, new image. Time to talk to Marnie and get that side sorted out.

"When are you due?" I asked.

"Three months more or less," she replied.

"Excellent. What are your plans? We ought to sort out maternity leave and cover and so on. The government says you're entitled to eighteen weeks maternity leave at the minimum wage which is something like \$700 a week which I think is an insult. I'll give you eighteen weeks at full pay and thirty four at half pay."

"That's very generous of you, thank you, but I won't need a year off. I'll be climbing the walls. I was thinking I'd come back after a month

or so.”

I laughed. “I’ve never had any kids of my own but I’ve friends who have and the government didn’t set eighteen weeks to be nice. You’ll be exhausted simply from looking after the baby until you both get into a routine.”

“Yes I’ve been hearing that from others. Will you be getting Des to cover for me? She assumes she will be so if you’re not you’ll need to tell her.”

“Yes I was going to although I’ll need to get someone in to help her. I’ll get a temp rather than someone permanent.”

“OK, plan for the eighteen weeks then. They’ll do a better job if they know they’ll be working for a decent period. If you do it one week at a time they’ll not be as committed. And if I need more time off I’ll give you plenty of warning.”

I confess I was dying of curiosity so I took the bull by the horns, metaphorically speaking.

“So, I have to say, Marnie, that I, umm, you were the last person I expected to get pregnant. You are so ... independent. I didn’t know you had a partner.”

Marnie laughed.

“I don’t have a partner.”

OK, this was going to be more awkward than I’d anticipated although knowing Marnie’s reticence I didn’t know why I’d expected her to be more forthcoming.

“So who is the ... father? Will he be around to help bring up ... is it a boy or a girl?”

Marnie looked surprised at the question. It had probably never occurred to her that anyone would be curious, despite Diane’s leading questions.

“She’s a girl. The father is a man I met at the Go Championships, a professional who had come to scout the amateurs for any likely talent who might be turning pro. I don’t expect he’ll be around as I haven’t told him I’m pregnant although we’re still communicate now and then.”

“So you’re not planning to marry him then?”

“Why on earth would I want to marry him? Anyway, I think he’s married already. I seem to remember he said something about that but I not sure.”

“Your mind was elsewhere then?”

He must have been a pretty good lover since women usually pick up on that sort of thing instantly.

“I was focused on the competition. To be honest I didn’t pay a lot of attention to what he said other than when he was talking about the other competitors. He gave me some very useful tips and he helped loosen me up between matches. For some reason I was getting a little tense. I don’t know why.”

“Had you known him long?”

“I’d known of him, of course, but I had never met him until the competition.”

“So he was basically a one night stand?”

“Oh no, I met him the day before the opening and he stayed with me till the end of the competition. More of an eight night stand really.”

“So you just left him at the airport at the end?”

Marnie stared at me in puzzlement.

“Of course. He lives in Singapore and I live in Melbourne. What else would I do?”

I couldn't imagine why I'd thought she might do anything else.

Chapter Eighteen

We had a new consultant join us a couple of weeks before Marnie left to have her baby. Diane had interviewed him after seeing a long run of fairly unimpressive candidates that had left her feeling a little negative about the whole process.

"I wish we could articulate exactly what qualities we're looking for," she had said. "Most of these were nice people who could probably do a competent job but none of them had that spark, that 'oomph' that said 'I'm the one'."

"I've tried for years," I told her. "Whatever I write for the ads and agencies as requirements seems to be irrelevant. It doesn't really matter what their background is or what their qualifications are, so long as they are reasonably literate and reasonably organised. It's just that every now and then someone comes along and you get a feeling. You don't even really have to like whoever it is, you just have a feeling. Maybe they have an aura of a particular colour."

Elaine had been telling me about people's auras. It was mildly interesting but I wasn't convinced. I don't think she was either but she'd been reading a magazine article about them at the hairdresser. Anyway, whatever 'it' was, Davy had charmed Diane into getting him an interview with me.

"So tell me a little about yourself," I said after he'd sat down and we'd sorted out coffees. I don't bother myself much with resumes other than a quick glance to see if there's anything particularly exciting or worrisome about it. The job is about dealing with people so I want to know how they deal with me.

"Oh I'm a boring, tedious person," he said with a grin. "I am what you see and that's about it."

He was verging on the immense and looked like the archetypal rugby forward that he had been. I found his response irritating and told him so.

"Ahh," he said, trying to look serious and not doing a very good job of

it. "You want someone with hidden depths and mysterious personality facets. Sorry but that's not me. I'm good at getting things done and I'm good at dealing with people. If I don't know how to do something I find out how and then do it and I can talk to anyone and I know when to shut up. If that's not what you want say so and we'll call it quits with no hard feelings."

This was a positive as more than a few people who think they are good with people think that way because they talk a lot and fail to pick up when the other person wants them to be quiet. Someone who is really good with people knows when to listen and generally the type of clients we deal with prefer people who listen.

"What do you think it was that made Diane decide you were worth my time?"

"She saw immediately that I'm genuine. What else matters?"

"Tact and diplomacy," I said. "Very useful skills in this line."

"Yes so I imagine. But who said being genuine means not being tactful? When I was playing rugby if I had a player going through a bad patch I had to choose whether to bawl them out or be sympathetic and caring. Some people respond to one way, some to the other but either way I was genuine. I cared and they knew I wasn't bawling them out because I was angry or falsely sympathising to manipulate them. It's about finding out what each individual needs to give their best and not faking it."

"How do you know what someone needs?"

He became serious for the first time.

"I don't actually know. I just get a feeling when I meet someone. Maybe it's their body language. Some people need a friend, some need someone to fight with, others just want to swap some dirty jokes."

"So what do you think I need?"

“Honesty,” he replied, unexpectedly. “I don't think you want someone who's going to bullshit and tell you what they think you want to hear. Your business and reputation is on the line and I think you want to know the truth even if it isn't perfect.”

He was right there. Knowing someone's weaknesses is usually better than knowing their strengths since we can work around weaknesses but if you send someone into a situation because of their strengths you may be let down by an unexpected weakness. Diane was a classic example. Now I knew her weakness I could work around it rather than be caught unawares. Having said that, I would be surprised if she ever took anything from, say, a client. One of the key features of a shoplifter is that the victim is a faceless non-entity, not a real person and I was convinced Diane would never take anything from a real person.

I wasn't totally convinced about Davy but Diane confirmed what he'd said. She thought he was completely genuine and that that quality would appeal to most, if not all, our clients.

“After all, they are surrounded by sycophants and 'yes' men who pretend all sorts of things in order to get their money,” she said.

It wasn't that I doubted his genuineness. I just had my doubts over whether our clients would respond to that or see it as just another put on persona. Having said that, Davy's genial good humour and undoubted capacity to organise and work with people made him at least worth a try. Rugby is, after all, a sport that needs people to cooperate closely to achieve a specific goal and being a former successful team captain Davy certainly seemed to know how to gain cooperation and he was leaving professional rugby because of knee injuries, not because he was losing his skills. He didn't have “it” but on the other hand he didn't not have “it” either. I suppose he was what you might call borderline and my gut said “give him a go”. I offered him the job with a year's trial period and he was quite happy to accept that.

“All my life I've had to prove myself,” he said. “I know I'm only as good as my last game.”

This was an unfortunate metaphor as his last game had gone badly as he'd sustained the injury that finally put him out of action and led him to retire, but I knew what he meant. He also did have one very strong attraction; he could entertain those clients who liked to watch sports. That's my weakness and now I could work around it rather than simply grit my teeth and try to stay awake. On the other hand his sheer size made it a distinct possibility that he would break his chair.

Pauline, however, had "it" oozing out of every pore. She was a 24 year old English girl who'd just arrived in Australia having emigrated with her new husband. She came to us as a temp to help Des while Marnie was away. Half way through her third week she was passing Raj's desk when his phone rang and she answered it, trying to be helpful.

The caller was Chetan Akshay, who had started out doing private tuition while he was taking a degree in Maths and had been recommended to the parents of a boy who was too far away to travel. Being industrious, hard working and poor, Chetan had made some tuition videos and sent them to the boy and those videos had somehow found their way onto YouTube. From that Chetan Akshay had built a thriving business of short, easily digested and innovative maths tuition videos and was expanding into the sciences as well. Raj had been trying to contact him for a couple of weeks.

"Raj was only gone for a couple of minutes," Diane told me "and when he got back Pauline tried to pass Chetan Akshay over to him but Chetan refused to talk to Raj. He was enjoying talking to Pauline and Raj had the good sense to tell Pauline to keep talking to him and whenever he asked something Pauline either wrote it down or whispered it to Raj and Raj passed her the answers and after spending nearly an hour on the phone with her Chetan signed up as a client. It was very impressive considering she didn't have a clue what she was talking about!"

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked nervously when Diane sent her in to see me.

"Oh definitely not," I replied. "I'm impressed that you answered Raj's phone rather than let it ring and I wanted to thank you personally."

I didn't see the need to tell her the call would have gone through to Sophie after a short while as all our phones automatically redirected if they weren't answered.

She smiled very engagingly and thanked me in return and relaxed.

“How did you feel talking to Mr Akshay?”

“It was fun, I think he liked me and I don't get to talk to many people doing accounts.”

“Is that what you like to do? Talk to people?”

“Oh yes! Especially interesting people like Mr Akshay. Did you know he does maths on YouTube and he's got very rich doing it?”

“Yes, I did know. So why did you go into accounts when you like talking to people?”

“Oh it's almost impossible to get a job in England if you don't have any experience. I applied for hundreds of jobs for all sorts of things when I left school and only one ever offered me a job. Stevens Winches and Pulleys, as an accounts clerk and once I was doing that I couldn't do anything else because that's the only experience I had so I got stuck in accounts. That's what I've been doing for the last five years.”

“Don't you like accounts?”

She pulled a face. “Please don't tell Des though.”

I laughed.

“Do you know what we do here?”

“You're some sort of travel agent aren't you? Specialised custom travel as far as I've seen.”

“That's right. And Diane, George, Raj and Davy talk to our clients and work with them to find out what their travel needs are and organise

things for them. Would you rather be doing that?"

"I'd love to. It sounds like a lot more fun than accounts."

Pauline had a vitality that was hard to ignore and I couldn't see why no one else had picked up on this before. Maybe it was because she wasn't reserved the way most Brits are and so she didn't fit in. Well, their loss our gain. Pauline and her husband Ron had come to Australia for new opportunities so I gave her the opportunity and told Des to find another assistant. Fortunately accounts staff are easy to find. Des phoned an agency and Zoe turned up the next day.

It was also an opportune time as George and his wife had gone to Saudi Arabia the previous weekend because George's father had died. Diane was struggling because where we'd previously had Ben and George, she was now having to cope with everything on her own with help from Davy who was still a trainee. Raj had his own work relating to India although he did help as far as he could. Still, it was not an ideal situation and we were slowly getting more clients. The extra help Pauline could provide would be very useful and even with Raj and Davy we still wanted another consultant.

When Ben resigned I'd had to suspend my holiday plans with Elaine. She'd been philosophical about it.

"I know what it's like to run a business. Sometimes things just happen that you can't avoid and everything else has to go on hold. I'm just pleased he didn't go while we were away."

She was, however, quite pleased when I told her we'd taken on Pauline and that things were looking quite settled.

"I'll need to be around for a couple of weeks until George is back and Pauline knows enough to be useful but Raj is doing very well and Davy is coming along nicely. So I think we can start to set some dates for our trip again," I said that evening.

"Awesome. Are we still going to Europe or have you changed your mind?"

“No Europe is still good. Although I have had an idea.”

“Oh god. Am I going to like it?”

“I think so. You remember you once told me how lovely it would be to sail around the Pacific and visit all those romantic and gorgeous little tropical islands?”

“Ye-e-ss,” she replied cautiously.

“We can still go to Europe in the short term but Clive Basscombe is selling his yacht.”

Clive Basscombe is one of my American clients who inherited a bottle cap company and had laid off almost the entire workforce and installed automation which produced fifteen times as many bottle caps with less than ten percent of the labour cost and was riding high on the results.

“We know nothing of sailing. We'll drown.”

“But you like the idea in principle?” I asked.

“I like the idea of staying alive in principle.”

“Because the way I see it we have two options. We can either hire someone to skipper the boat or we can take some courses and learn to do it ourselves.”

“When will you ever find the time to learn to sail a yacht?” she asked, quite reasonably.

“Well I've been thinking, once everything is settled at work and everyone knows what they're doing of starting to step back. Maybe just managing the business instead of handling my own clients and winding down so I can retire in maybe, I don't know, five years or so. I'm 49 now and I don't want to keep on going until I'm too old to enjoy life. Maybe when I'm, say, 55 I should retire and we can just cruise the world and just enjoy life instead of worrying about work all the time.”

“It's a beautiful idea. Just the two of us anchored in some idyllic tropical cove on a sapphire blue sea. What if the weather turns nasty and there's a storm or one of us gets sick?”

“That's what we'd have a skipper for and radios and stuff.”

“Then we wouldn't be alone. There'd be someone watching us.”

“Which is why we could do some courses and learn how to sail.”

“Doesn't that take years?”

“I phoned a training outfit in Port Melbourne yesterday. To pass the skipper exams we'd need twenty five days of training, spread out over a year or so. No more than two days at a time and we can use our own boat so we'd learn the specifics for it. And if we both do the courses we'll both be skippers so if something happens to one of us the other would be able to handle it.”

“What about storms and tornadoes and stuff?”

“Clive's boat's got GPS and all the latest tech stuff so we just keep an eye on the forecasts and run for safety if anything is brewing nearby. The courses include all the gizmos.”

Elaine thought about it while she made dinner.

“How big is Clive's boat?”

“Fifty two feet. It's got three decks inside and can at a pinch sleep nine people. And it's got two sundecks. One at the front and one at the back.”

“So if we had a skipper would he or she have their own sleeping area or would they be in our bedroom?”

“The skipper could have an entire deck to himself.”

“It sounds expensive.”

“About the same as three Porsches. It's two years old. Clive bought it new.”

“We can afford that?”

“Easily.”

“OK. It'll be awesome. Let's do the courses so we don't have to have anyone else on board.”

“Clive did warn me about something though.”

“Oh really, what's that? The engines don't come with it?”

I laughed. “Some of the Pacific Islands and other places aren't as relaxed about men and women as others. He said we'd find it a lot easier if we were a married couple rather than a man and a woman living together.”

“Is that a proposal?”

“Sure sounds like it to me.”

“Is it conditional on buying the boat?”

“Only if you want it to be.”

“I suppose I could put up with being married to you if it's a nice boat. A really nice boat.”

“It is a really nice boat.”

“Then I suppose I'll have to marry you,” she said with a big grin. “Can I keep the boat if we get divorced?”

Towards the end of the week I was reading an email from George when Diane came in.

“Bad news,” I said. “George isn't coming back.”

“You're joking,” she exclaimed. “Why ever not?”

“It seems that they had a big family meeting and they all want George to take over his father's construction business.”

“Does George know anything about construction?”

“Not as far as I know but it's a big company. He won't be involved in actually building anything himself, just managing it as far as I can tell. Apparently it's worth about half a billion dollars and operates throughout the entire Arabian Peninsular and Iran.”

“Wow, good for George. Is Su Li with him or did she stay in Australia?”

“No, she went with him. Apparently she's converting to Islam and is happy to stay in Saudi Arabia although he says she has made him promise she can go back to the states every year to visit her family.”

“He's not coming back at all?”

“No, he's already taken over the business but Su Li is coming back next week to pack everything up and ship it and put their house on the market.”

“Wow. It was strange when Ben left. It's going to be really weird with George gone too.”

“I know. The last two and a half years have brought huge changes. Ben was with me for, what, thirteen years, Stavros just over ten and George for eight. Now the only consultant who's been here more than three months is you.”

“It's just as well we took on Pauline. It would be difficult if we had to start looking for another consultant again.”

“I think we ought to. Davy and Pauline are both new. We don't know for sure yet if they'll last the distance and even if they do we really ought to have another consultant anyway. With Raj focused on India we've still really only got three consultants and we're getting new

clients almost every week. And if Davy or Pauline or, god forbid, both don't work out we'll be in deep shit. How are you handling the stress?"

She knew what I meant.

"I'm coping. The counsellor has been really good. She's made me realise that shoplifting really can affect people and it's not victimless. I've been seeing her every week for the last ten weeks and we've been working on strategies for dealing with stress which don't involve breaking the law. And I'd got a date for the hearing. Stephanie's going to prepare a report for that. She's confident that if I continue the way I have that the magistrate will accept I'm working to solve the issue. I'll get her to send you a copy too because I really want you to know I'm serious about this and not just bullshitting everyone." Diane gave a little laugh. "She's got me doing half an hour's yoga every day."

"That's excellent, but I don't need to see the report. You need your privacy."

"No, I want you to have it. I can't make you read it but I need you to know that I am serious about this and I don't ever want to be so damned stupid again. It's just not worth it."

"OK. Oh you came to see me, didn't you. What was it about?"

"Yes, I was wondering if you've rented your house out yet?"

"No not yet. I've been meaning to now that Elaine and I are living together. By the way, we got engaged the night before last."

"Oh, that is so awesome," cried Diane. "Let me give you a hug. Have you set a date yet?"

"No, not yet. Maybe next year but we'll see. Anyway, why were you asking about my house?"

"I was wondering, if it's available, if I could rent it from you for a few weeks."

"Of course you can. As long as you want. But I thought you were

living with Sophie?”

She deflated in her chair.

“Tom and I were in a hotel last night. Sophie and I had a huge fight and I’ve walked out.”

Chapter Nineteen

"I warned you this might happen," said Elaine. "They're both heterosexual and living in a false homosexual relationship. It would never have worked out."

Actually Elaine had never warned me of this. Diane and Sophie were already an item when I met Elaine and their relationship was just another aspect of my working life that she got to know over time but it was never an issue we talked about. Still, women generally like to think they predicted the state of relationships and it wasn't worth arguing about.

Of far greater concern to me was the fact that Diane splitting with Sophie would very likely progress to one or other of them leaving. This is so often the case with workplace romances.

"She's just, so, so *stifling*," Diane told me on one occasion.

"That woman is far too independent, I don't think she wants to be in a relationship," Sophie told me separately.

"She never wants to make love, we cuddle and things barely two or three times a week," Diane casually announced to me over a discussion of golf courses in Kuala Lumpur.

"Ohm she's obsessed with sex," Sophie confided to me. "Twice a week at least, sometimes more! Can you imagine?"

I tried hard not to imagine. On the positive front there was no particular sign of their working relationship deteriorating so there was a chance neither would leave and I had a tenant for my house. On the other hand I had to be extra careful in the office not to take sides. As the boss, whatever I said or did would add legitimacy to one side or the other so I neither agreed nor disagreed with either, figuring they were both adults and should be able to sort themselves out one way or another. Which, of course, they did after a month or so when Sophie decided to give up the rental she and Diane had been sharing and moved into my house and back with Diane. They both had strong characters so undoubtedly this wasn't the beginning of a new,

beautiful, harmonious relationship but it made my life easier.

“She has her idiosyncrasies but underneath she’s a wonderful person,” Sophie told me when she arrived at work the morning after they reached a settlement.

“She can be a bitch but she’s a lovely person really,” Diane told me a few minutes later. “But don’t tell her I said that.”

Much more importantly, Elaine and I had reached a decision and decided to abandon going to Europe for a holiday and instead to buy a yacht. Perhaps one day we’d sail to Europe. Anyway, we’d both signed up for the various courses to learn to sail. We’d been to see Clive Basscombe’s and although it was very nice Elaine didn’t like the layout. She did like another one we had a look at because it had six suites for guests, each with its own bathroom but at \$11 million we couldn’t afford it. We’d only gone to see it to find out what the top end of the “ordinary people” yachts were like. The really fancy yachts were a little more expensive, like that of Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. His cost around \$1 billion and had two helipads built into its 530 foot length as well as 24 guest cabins, each of which would rival Claridge’s suites for luxury.

One that we both liked the look of in the photos was a 62 foot cruiser with three large cabins which was currently moored in Perth and cost only the equivalent of three and a half Porsches. It didn’t have a helipad but the cockpit looked like it was out of the space shuttle and I wondered if a year would be long enough to learn how to drive (or was it pilot, sail or fly?) the thing. Cars are easier. Much easier.

Marnie was coming to the end of her statutory maternity leave when she texted me asking when I’d be available for her to come see me. She came in and caused chaos immediately since there were now five women in the office and only three men, including me, and each of the women vied with each other to hold the baby and coo over it, while the three of us guys looked on in puzzlement. Even Des went all gooey and made strange and disconcerting clucking, googling noises. Marnie was largely ignored.

“I love the new office,” she said to me while watching the fuss

indulgently. "And the colour scheme is ... distinctive."

I smiled. "I'm still not used to it myself yet but I love the space. Come into my office. I'm not certain fuchsia door frames was the perfect choice but I love the blue ceiling. It helps me think."

Marnie abandoned her kiddie to their collective care and followed me in.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Rebecca," she replied. "A friend of mine who's a Hitchcock fan pointed out that 'Marnie' is the name of one of his famous movies and she thought my daughter should be named after another one so I said 'I'm not calling her 'Psycho' and she told me 'Rebecca' was another Hitchcock movie and since it's a nice name I went with it. I didn't see a lot of point worrying over baby names."

I wasn't feeling too well and have little interest in babies at the best of times. Rebecca's name was enough conversation on that topic for me and I was fairly certain Marnie wasn't the type to give me the graphic details of how many nappies she got through or the colour of her poo or how long she slept between meals.

"That's a great name. How's life treating you?"

"Oh everything's going fine. You've some new faces here I see."

I briefly updated her on the disappearance of Ben and George and the arrival of Davy, Pauline and Zoe. Marnie was particularly impressed that Pauline had made the change from accounts clerk to consultant.

"I wouldn't have thought that the mindsets were compatible but I guess she was in the wrong job to start with. I couldn't do it. I just don't think the right way."

"Speaking of thinking, Marnie, I'm glad you're here as I wanted to run something by you." I outlined our plans to buy a yacht and go cruising and asked her if I could buy it through the company and get tax relief.

“Forget it. You haven't a hope in hell. With the nature of the business you might be able to swing it if you bought a small plane through the business but you've offset so many travel expenses as 'research' I doubt the Tax Office would wear that but a yacht? No way. There is no circumstance the Tax Office would be convinced it's a business necessity.”

“That's a shame. I thought it was a cool idea.” I was a little short of breath but the thought of the Tax Office usually does that to me.

“Why didn't you ask Des about this? She knows as much about tax as I do.”

“I suppose but I still think of her as the junior even though she's making a small fortune on the trading and is turning out to be one smart, sophisticated lady. You're still my accountant.”

“That's what I wanted to talk to you about Bill. You see, I'm not coming back.”

I suppose that could have been foreseen but in all honesty it had never occurred to me. I was a little shocked.

“What are you going to do instead?”

I would be pretty pissed off if she'd found another job as she always said she liked the easy life and her job with us was pretty easy.

“I've decided to turn professional.”

“You mean at Go?”

“Yes.”

That was unexpected too.

“Didn't you say that it was too much like hard work and would be stressful?”

“Yes but now I've got Rebecca I don't want to go back to full time

work. I like being at home and looking after her and when she's asleep I have plenty of time to think. If I turn pro I should be able to make a living and spend a lot less time doing it than I would be working full time."

"Don't you need a coach?"

"I have a coach. Rebecca's father is a professional player and he's been coaching me for the last two or three months. He thinks I should be able to get into the top twenty or thirty if I put some effort into it and that would get me some decent prize money."

"I thought he was in Malaysia?"

"Singapore. He still is. He coaches me over Skype. It's mostly talking and studying positions and strategies. We don't need to be in the same room for that."

"Does he know about Rebecca?"

"Of course he does. Oh I see what you mean. No I haven't told him he's her father. Where's the need? It'll only distract him unnecessarily and he's married so it will probably cause him grief anyway. Incidentally, I'll pay you back the maternity leave money since I'm not coming back."

"Oh no, there's no need. Besides, it's statutory entitlement and I'd get into trouble if I took the money back. Just officially give me your resignation today and I'll give you a month's pay in lieu."

"That's very kind of you Bill, but I'm happy to give it back. It's like I got paid under false pretences."

We argued back and forth for a few moments and she agreed to keep the money in the end and I wished her every luck in her new career. I gave it an hour after she'd gone for things to settle down again before calling Des in.

"Did you know Marnie isn't coming back?" I asked.

“Yes, she told me earlier.”

“Do you want the position permanently?”

“Sorry no,” she said. “I’ve got plans and I’ve just been waiting for Marnie to come back.”

This was turning into a bad day.

“You mean your investment fund?”

The fund had been doing well. Des clearly had a talent for this.

She nodded. “Yes, John and I have been looking for potential shareholders for the last couple of months. We need to set up a public company with a minimum of fifty shareholders and we’ve got about a hundred and thirty promises so far. Even if only half of them subscribe when it comes to it we’ll still have enough.”

“Don’t you need a licence?”

“Yes but the law says we can trade once the licence application has been submitted, which kind of suggests the application won’t be turned down although we may need to tweak it.”

“So what stage are you at?”

“We’re all set to go. All the paperwork is done. All we need to do is register a company, sell the shares in it and file the application and we’re off and running. I’ve just been delaying until Marnie came back but since she isn’t coming back there’s no real point in waiting any longer.”

“So you’re leaving too?”

“Yes, but I’m happy to wait until you’ve found another accountant and maybe hand over for a week or so.”

“What about Zoe? Can she do it?”

I confess as Zoe was a temp and in the accounts office with Des I hadn't had that much to do with her.

“Oh no, she's nowhere near ready to handle the accounts. You'll need to get a qualified accountant in although Zoe is a good girl and if I were you I'd offer her the assistant role permanently.”

“Would she take it or is she planning to leave as well?”

I was a little sarcastic because two people leaving in one day was a burden, I have to admit.

“She just might as she's looking for a permanent job. Do you want me to ask her?”

“No, I'll do it. I ought to get to know her a little. I don't think we've ever spoken beyond good mornings.”

“She's got a good brain and she's organised. Why don't you think about taking her on as a trainee accountant and putting her through her exams?”

We discussed that briefly and then moved on to whether Des would continue to manage Kettering's investments and those of the staff and, of course, Elaine. It turned out to be extremely simple.

“I'll just close down the existing fund and pay everyone what they're due and if anyone wants to they can subscribe to the new fund through my company. So it's basically down to the individual. I would love it if Kettering's joined since you give me a decent capital base to work from but if you don't want to I'll understand.”

I promised that I'd make Kettering's her first subscriber and wished her every luck in her new career too.

I got Des to send Zoe to see me. She was understandably nervous but we chatted for a while and she seemed a nice enough kid. So I offered her a permanent job as a trainee accountant and she was absolutely delighted so I wished her every luck in her new career as well. This was getting to be a habit.

On the way home I was stopped by the police for not having any number plates on the car. I was certain there had been plates on the car that morning so it looked as though someone had got into the building's car park at some point in the day and taken them. The policeman checked my licence details and the car's registration and its engine and chassis numbers and decided everything was legitimate and I hadn't stolen the vehicle. Irritatingly I was going to have to get the Porsche re-registered with a new number since the old plates might be used for some crime or other. I'd also have to pay a fine for driving without registration plates. Consequently I was in a bit of a temper when I got home and Elaine, being a wonderful person who's only sarcastic when I'm in the mood for it, was attentive and listened to my woes.

Which was just as well as later in the evening I was sitting on the toilet and got a nasty pain in my chest and struggled to breathe. I was able to bang on the wall and was trying to pull up my trousers when Elaine came in and I told her how I felt and she called an ambulance. Impressively two ambulances turned up, obviously I was more important than I thought I was. As it turned out though there had been a mix up and there was a brief debate in the driveway over who had jurisdiction over my dying body while Elaine hovered anxiously and demanded someone do something. After what seemed like an hour but was probably only thirty seconds one pair of ambulance men came in and pronounced I was having a heart attack and one pushed a tablet of some kind under my tongue with his thumb which made me feel better almost immediately. I'm not sure if it was the tablet or a regression to my thumb-sucking childhood. Either way I was in Monash Hospital within thirty minutes and wired up like a Christmas tree while Elaine very kindly did all the paperwork. Two days later I was fitted, if that's the right word, with a stent.

"It was just a mild attack," said the Consultant cheerfully. "A warning if you like. Your aorta was about 60% blocked and your pulmonary artery was about 90% blocked. If it had been the other way around you'd be dead. We've put a stent into both the pulmonary artery and the aorta to clear them and we'll keep an eye on both to make sure they don't get any worse. You'll need to watch your cholesterol very carefully and you'll be on medication for the rest of your life."

Although I wasn't particularly overweight, my lifestyle of fairly rich foods had caught up with me but, as the man said, it was just a warning. Elaine told me she'd had explained the situation to a tearful Sophie, which cheered me up. Had she been pleased or laughing I would have been very upset. Both Diane and Sophie came to see me in hospital bringing a large Get Well Soon card signed by everyone in the office and Marnie together with a large bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates which Elaine wouldn't let me touch. She ate most of them and Diane and Sophie finished the rest. Diane and Sophie assured me that they'd keep everything in the office running until I came back. Ben came in to see me a couple of days later which was very nice of him and I had a telegram from George in Saudi Arabia wishing me a quick return to health. I had a few cards from clients as well, not that many but more than I expected.

I was out of the hospital a week or so later with strict instructions to rest and exercise, which seemed like a contradiction, for at least another six weeks before even thinking about going back to work. Rest wasn't a problem as even walking from one room to another was difficult for the first few days as I was very shaky on my feet and got breathless quickly. But with encouragement from Elaine we went on walks which got longer each day although what surprised me was that I found I now got quite emotional very easily.

After a month or so of being at home, Diane and Sophie came round to update me on things. Elaine had been giving them health bulletins every couple of days but I was beginning to fret a little over the state of the business. Diane had decided as it was an emergency that Raj would take on some of my clients and she, Davy and Pauline had taken over the rest. She'd also found a new consultant who had just started and was there on a temporary basis pending my final approval. He was an Egyptian immigrant called Masud and Diane had felt he would be particularly useful as he was a Muslim and would be able to work well with some of George's old clients as a result. Sophie told me that they'd found a new accountant, by the name of Michael, who was also there on a temporary basis pending my approval. Des was in the process of handing over to him and wanted to come to visit me at home to thank me for everything before she left to start her company. I told them I'd be back in a week or so and Elaine told them two weeks would be more likely.

The conversation then died for some reason and Diane and Sophie started looking at each other and making funny eye movements.

“What's up?” I said. “One of you tell me what's happening.”

Sophie decided to bite the bullet.

“Des has told us that we can either take our money out of the fund or reinvest it in her new fund.”

“Yes,” I said. “Kettering's is reinvesting and Elaine and I are both reinvesting personally too.”

“Only we were wondering,” said Diane, “since we are thinking of buying a house together, and I've got a fair amount in the fund and Sophie put the proceeds from the sale of her house in ...”

“Yes, go on”

“We were wondering,” Sophie continued for her, “if you'd be willing to sell your house to us and if you were how much for?”

Like I said I was quite emotional since the heart attack and for some reason I felt I wanted to cry. I didn't but it was a close thing.

“What do you think, Elaine?”

“I think we should give it some serious thought,” then turned to Diane and Sophie, “we haven't decided yet where to live when we get married. We may stay here but we may decide to move.”

We left it at that for the time being. After all, my intention was to go back to work as soon as I could and we wouldn't need to sell my place to buy another place.

The thing is, though, when I did go back to work it was very strange. Everyone gathered round to welcome me back, of course, but it felt wrong. There were a couple of people there I'd never seen before and most of the rest weren't that familiar. Sophie, of course, had been with me for donkey's years and Diane for almost three years but the rest?

Strangers really. And the office! Gone was the old, familiar small cramped and drab place I was so used to and which, for some reason, I'd half expected to come back to. It was now this large, well lit, brightly coloured place that was really quite unfamiliar. It was a bit like going home to a hotel room rather than to home itself. Nothing was quite right. And I didn't have any work to do. All my clients were now being handled by other people. I sat there for a while wondering what to do then had chats with Masud and Michael and confirmed them as appointees but that was it. I had nothing else to do other than signing a few bits of paper so I went home.

Over dinner that night I explained to Elaine how I'd felt.

"I think I saw this coming when you decided the old office was getting drab and confining. I think you were starting then to get sick of it all and maybe your heart was already playing up then and you just didn't realise," she said.

"So what do you think I should do?" I asked.

"You were talking about retiring in a few years. Why don't you retire now? I'm not being rude but they don't seem to need you at the office anymore. And you could always go back in an advisory role if you need to occasionally. Why not make Diane your office manager and leave her to it?"

I thought about it for a while.

"You know, a year ago if you'd said that I'd have been very upset but now, I don't know, I guess now I just don't care as much. A bit like Ben when his world turned up-side-down. My clients just aren't that important to me anymore."

Later that evening I had an idea.

"Listen Elaine, why don't we finish the sailing courses and buy a yacht and sail off somewhere exotic and get married there and just sail the seas and have some fun together?"

"What about your health? Will you be up to it?"

“You heard what the doctor said. Because of the stents I’ll actually be a lot fitter and healthier in a couple of months than I have been for the last few years.”

“What about my conveyancing business?”

“Sell it. Jan and Barbara may well buy your share or maybe someone else could buy in.”

“What about your business?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “We could still use the income from it but, I don’t know, I’d feel guilty about having all that income and getting someone else to make it for me. I built it up from nothing and that’s a strong motivator. Just being a manager isn’t the same.”

“Why don’t you sell half of it to Diane? That way she’d be part owner as well as manager and she’d be that much more motivated and involved.”

“But if I do that they won’t be able to buy the house, which they seem to really want to do.”

“Talk to her. See what she thinks. Don’t try to sort out her problems for her.”

So I did, and we worked out a fairly complicated scheme whereby each year for ten years she’d buy 5.1% of the business. That way after ten years she’d own 51% and be in control but I’d still have an income. Elaine reached an agreement with her partners, Jan and Barbara, and they found someone who wanted to buy Elaine’s third of that business. And Diane and Sophie bought my house, with the help of a small mortgage. And Elaine and I bought the yacht we liked in Perth. All very neat and tidy really and all done in just over six months.

Elaine finished her sailing courses and became a qualified skipper and I was still two courses behind as I’d failed my navigation exam twice. I never was that good with numbers but I passed it the third time. And we got married on board although we had to get a celebrant to do it as Elaine couldn’t marry herself even though she was the skipper.

A year or so after my heart attack we were moored just outside Suva Harbour in Fiji. We were having a final drink before going to bed and we were just relaxing and enjoying the tranquil tropical night.

“I was thinking this afternoon, while you were having a nap. Four years ago you met Diane on the street and now she has your car, your house, your secretary as her lover and half your business. And she's recruited pretty well everyone in the office and none of your people are left. Do you think she planned it that way?”

“Oh god no,” I exclaimed, “I suppose she may have been a factor in Stavros leaving although that was mostly Des hitting him over the head. There's no way she could have arranged for Ben or George to leave. She had no way of knowing George would take over his father's business for example, that's just the workings of chance, or maybe fate if you prefer. No, she's only done so well because she's very good at her job and was able to take opportunities when they came up.”

“It was just an idle thought,” said Elaine, “I wasn't making a thing of it. I'm certainly not suggesting she got Ben's daughter addicted to heroin or anything like that.”

She turned the page of her Lonely Planet Guide to the South Pacific.

“Ooooh look. There's the Fire Walking Festival at Mariamma Temple on Suva Point this weekend. I'd love to go to that. Would you walk over hot coals for me?”

I said I would but secretly hoped I'd never have to.

We pencilled the festival in on our delightfully un-busy schedule and discussed what other delights Suva and the rest of Fiji held then went to bed.

A month or so later Elaine and I moored our yacht at Lakes Entrance, a nice rural harbour a couple of hundred kilometres east of Melbourne. Our first shake-down trip had gone well and we wanted the yacht checked over and the engines serviced before venturing off for a longer voyage. We also wanted to register the yacht with a new name. The old one was 'Albatross 3' which we thought was a little

clichéd and Elaine had come up with 'Memories Not Dreams' which we both agreed was much more evocative. Also Diane had left a message to say there were some documents that needed my signature to finalise the arrangements to transfer her initial 5.1% of the business and setting up the annual transfers, so it was a good opportunity to get everything done.

I called Diane to say we were back and she invited us up for dinner. Elaine elected to stay in Gippsland and visit an old school friend who lived in the area so I took the train to Melbourne alone. I booked into a moderate hotel for the night and took a taxi to Diane and Sophie's. Diane and Sophie had done wonders to the place and the inside was very different to how I'd had been when I lived there. They'd completely redecorated and, of course, had their own furniture.

Sophie had just had a bath when I arrived and greeted me wrapped in a luxuriously fluffy pink bathrobe giving off delicious wafts of assorted bath oils. They both admired my tan and remarked how healthy I was looking. I asked where Tom was and Diane explained he had joined the school band and was at rehearsals. He'd be back soon which was why we were having dinner a little later than normal. We chatted for a while inconsequentially then Sophie went off to change into something more appropriate, as I was still at least notionally her boss, while Diane went to prepare dinner.

I wandered around the lounge looking at the pictures they'd put on the walls, wondering if they were Diane's choice or Sophie's or a mixture of the two of them. At one end there was a large abstract painting vaguely reminiscent of Klee which I suspected was more Diane's than Sophie's.

"That's by Kathleen Bath," called Diane from the kitchen doorway. "She's a local schoolgirl who had an exhibition at the local town hall while you were away. I was blown away by her talent. I think she's going to be major one day. I was her first sale which was cool. She was over the moon when I handed her the cash and took the picture away. She'd called it 'Nightmare of Happiness' and she signed it on the back for me. Hey, I'm an art collector now!" She laughed and went back to whatever culinary delight was bubbling away.

“Very nice,” I replied. My tastes are more conservative, as I like Constable and that vintage although some of the early Impressionists resonate with me as well. I wandered into an alcove off the lounge which I used to use as an office and it looked like Diane did as well. She had a small desk with a computer and a fax machine there. Other than a couple of framed photos of Tom and Sophie on the desk there were no pictures in the room although hanging on the wall over the desk was what appeared to be a sheet of Kettering’s headed paper. It was in a simple black wooden frame that looked like it had come from a reject shop. Curious I went over to have a closer look. Sophie joined me, carrying the wine bottle.

“Do you want a refill yet, Bill?” she said then saw me looking at the framed letter. “Ohhh, I’m sure you remember that. It’s the reference you wrote for Diane the day she started, in case things didn’t work out. You remember?”

I remembered.

“Diane reads that reference every morning before she goes to work. She told me a long time ago that the only way she’s been able to cope with the incredible changes of the last few years has been your faith in her.”

She paused and put her palm to my cheek.

“You did a wonderful, wonderful thing, Bill, and I will always love you for that. She’ll never, ever let you down.”