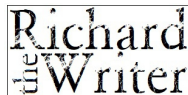


Penny

Richard Jefferis



Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
aka Richard The Writer.

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Typeset, printed and bound by Richard Jefferis

www.richardthewriter.download

Chapter One

*To: penny@dle.com.au
From: richj1602@gmail.com
Re: Employment*

Dear Ms Dorchester

I am 60, pedantic, irritable, fundamentally idle and contemptuous of authority. To add to my many shortcomings my list of qualifications is obscenely long and intimidating. I'm also told that I have a number of irritating personal habits. My sole redeeming feature, such as it is, is that I am argumentative.

A common failing among most, if not all, business owners is that they employ people who tend to agree with them for a variety of reasons and consequently do not make the best possible decisions. I am sure you share that failing.

If you would like to remedy this I am offering my services, on a purely casual basis, as I temporarily find myself short of funds.

*Regards
Richard Judicael*

* * *

“What is this garbage?” I muttered as I read it through with astonishment.

Periodically I get emails and letters from people wanting jobs or to sell me some service but this was absurd. I deleted it without another thought.

“Kasey,” I called through my open door.

“Yes?” she said, jumping up from her desk and coming to the doorway with her notebook.

“Could you set up a meeting with McNaughton's for early next week?”

I've decided I'm willing to talk about their proposal.”

“Will do,” she said. “Umm, just you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Keep it quiet, would you?”

“OK,” she said and disappeared.

I leaned back in my chair and gazed out of the window at the small, unprepossessing car park immediately outside and the industrial units beyond it. It wasn't inspiring so I swivelled round to look through the glass wall into the shop floor. Greg, one of the foremen, was talking to Josh, one of the fabricators, about something but everyone else seemed to be busy.

“Is she in?” I heard Brian say.

“Yes,” said Kasey. “Go on in.”

“Come on in, Brian,” I called.

He wandered in through the door in that laconic way he has and sat down.

“I've got the sales forecast for the next twelve months,” he said, pushing a printout at me.

“Thanks,” I said, taking it.

I ran my eye over it. It didn't make for exciting reading.

“Why's there a drop in June?” I asked. “What, 20% or thereabouts.”

“19%,” he said. “That's when the contract with Murphy's finishes. We don't have any other significant clients lined up to replace them yet. We're working on it but I've taken a conservative view.”

“We're operating at about 75% capacity at the moment,” I said thoughtfully. “That'll drop us down to around 65%. What are you planning to do?”

"I've already got the team ringing round past and present customers and I want to run a state wide advertising campaign," he said.

"Another one?" I said. "Could be expensive and the last one wasn't particularly effective."

"It's never a good idea to scrimp on marketing," he said, "but if that's what you want to do we can cut back. Perhaps redesign the promotional pack to have fewer inclusions."

I eyed him thoughtfully. He knew as well as I did that when sales orders slowed you needed to step up marketing, not scrimp. If our promotional material looked cheap possible new customers would get the impression we were second rate.

"If that's what you want to do," echoed in my mind.

"Go back and do some brainstorming," I said. "Come up with a few ideas and toss them around for a bit. You said that new girl, Ashley, has got some initiative. Give her some encouragement and see if she has any originality as well."

"Will do," he said, standing up. "Give me a week or so."

"Get back to me the day after tomorrow," I said.

He gave a half smile of acknowledgement and walked out.

I watched him go. Why had he said "if that's what you want to do"? Did he usually say things like that? I was trying to remember when the phone rang.

"Yeah?" I said, picking it up.

"Clarke's Engineering Solutions," said Kasey.

"OK, put them through." I said and waited for the click.

"Penny Dorchester," I said.

“Hello, Penny,” said a man's voice. “Darren Boscombe of Clarke's Engineering Solutions, how are you?”

“I'm good thanks,” I said. “How are you?”

“I'm very well,” he said. “I've got a remarkable new product that I thought might suit your needs perfectly. When can I show it to you?”

“What sort of product?” I said, cautiously. All sorts of new products came on the market and most faded away pretty quickly because they weren't as good as the salespeople claimed them to be.

“The Rigsby Automated Sheet Metal Folder,” he said giving just the right amount of awe to his voice, neither over-excited nor underwhelmed but just right so that it sounded perfect already. “Its computer interface is exceptionally easy to use and its precision folding mechanism should cut the time for your folding stages by anywhere up to 80%.”

“I've got very experienced metal workers for that,” I said. “How much is it?”

“There are a number of options,” he said, “which we can talk about later. First though, I hoped we could get together and discuss your processes in more detail. Perhaps over dinner?”

“Dinner?” I said, a little taken aback. “Why over dinner?”

“Oh, so you don't remember me, then?” he said, sounding disappointed.

“I'm sorry,” I said, trying to remember if I'd met Darren Boscombe before. “I didn't quite catch your name.”

“Darren Boscombe,” he said, enunciating very clearly. “We met at the Metal Fabrication and Plastic Extrusion Show in Sydney last month.”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “You did a presentation on Aluminium Jointing, didn't you.”

I'd met a lot of people at the show and to be honest Darren Boscombe didn't come to mind.

"Umm, no," he said. "I was on the Clarke's stand. We had a long chat about automation in sheet metal fabrication processes. I felt we had developed quite a rapport."

That threw me a bit. I had had a rapport with an IT salesman? Unlikely and even unlikelier that I'd have forgotten about it. Still, the immediate problem was how to respond. If I said we hadn't then it could make negotiations more difficult if I should get interested in his gadget and if I agreed we had then god only knows what expectations he might develop. Since he'd already suggested dinner it sounded like he had one or two expectations already.

"I like to think I have a good rapport with everyone," I said.

"I'm sure you do," he said smoothly. "How about Friday evening?"

"How about you send me some information first?" I said. "If I can see any potential in this folder then we can discuss it further in my office."

"Oh," he said, "Well, if you insist. Who's your Chief Engineer?"

"Yu Yang," I said, "but you can send the information to me."

"Are you sure?" he said. "It's quite technical."

That was the clincher. If we had had a long discussion and built a rapport he'd know that I knew my stuff. After all, my grandfather had set up the company and my dad had taken it over so I'd grown up with metal fabrication which is why I'd done a degree in engineering and manufacturing at RMIT. Sexism was still alive and well in Australia and, despite my being the CEO of a family metal fabrication company, I got my fair share of it.

"I'll do my best to understand it," I said sarcastically. I didn't bother to mention that Yu Yang was also female.

"I'm sure you will," he said, with an element of doubt in his voice. For

a salesman he wasn't particularly convincing. "Now, about dinner?"

"Perhaps after I've seen the information," I said, as the inherent sexism can be exploited. Having dinner with this guy could get the company a discount if I decided to invest in the machine.

"Excellent," he said. "I have your email address. I'll send it in a few minutes."

"I'll look forward to it," I said. "Goodbye."

I hung up before he had a chance to work on my 'female sensibilities'. I've a lot of experience with salesmen. I've found over the years that they fall into three main categories, those who felt they could charm me into buying whatever it was, those who didn't bother to make any real effort simply because I was a woman and those who focused on the product. Fortunately most fell into that last category. Saleswomen, on the other hand, fell into just the first and last categories since they always made an effort.

For some reason Greg was still talking to Josh and they were both frowning and prodding a bent square of what looked like 14 gauge copper sheet. I wondered if I should go and find out what the problem was. I decided against it as I'd promoted Greg to foreman only a couple of months earlier and he'd probably take my interfering as a sign of a lack of confidence in him. If it was a serious issue he'd hopefully talk to Barry or Aman, the other foremen, and then bring it to me or one of the design engineers. I made a mental note to quietly find out anyway, just in case he felt escalating a problem didn't make him look good.

I saw Greg and Josh nod at each other as if they'd reached some sort of agreement then Greg picked up the copper sheet and headed off in the direction of Yu's office. It looked like he was escalating the problem. I breathed a sigh of relief as people who can't or won't ask for assistance when they run into a problem are a liability.

My computer pinged to let me know I had an email so I turned my back on the shop floor and focused on Darren Boscombe's offering.

Why had Brian said “if that's what you want to do”?

That absurd email had got me wondering. Do the senior staff agree with me because they feel they ought to or because they think I'm right?

“Oh you're just being silly,” I said to myself. “They argue with me all the time.”

The Rigsby Multibend actually looked fairly impressive although it could only handle sheets up to 2mm thick and we sometimes had to handle metals up to 4.7mm. I spent an hour or so reading through all the documentation and thinking, then picked up the phone.

“Can you spare me a few minutes, Martha?” I asked when she answered.

“Give me five minutes,” she said. “I'm in the middle of something tricky at the moment.”

“OK,” I said and hung up.

That damned email was preying on my mind. When my father had died five years ago I'd taken over the company since Kevin, my brother, was hopeless. His kind of engineering was very different since he was the Assistant to the Principle Choreographer of the Victorian Conservatoire Of Ballet. He had a very detailed understanding of bio-mechanics but used a completely different terminology and thought in terms of grants rather than earnings. Anyway, the idea of a woman taking over an engineering company caused one or two issues of perceived competency and I'd had to take a very firm line to establish my authority. That was five years ago but could traces of that still be around? Did people agree with me because I was right or because they were a little afraid?

“You wanted to see me?” asked Martha, appearing in my doorway.

“Yes,” I said, “have a seat.”

She sat and smoothed her skirt then adjusted her glasses.

"I've got the specs of a sheet bender here," I said, passing over the printouts I'd made. "Could you do a cost analysis on it for me?"

"Certainly," she said, leafing through the pages. "I don't see any costs?"

"I don't know the cost," I said. "At the moment I just want to know the level of cost savings it would generate. It's limited to boxes with up to 2mm thicknesses so you'll need to look through past jobs to see where it could have been used and gauge the savings on those jobs if we'd had it."

"OK," she said. "But if you're thinking of getting one we'll need to factor in retrenchment costs."

"Or increase our production capacity," I said. "Don't assume we'll be laying off staff."

"Do we need the additional capacity?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said. "Brian's working on a promotional campaign."

"Then I ought to consider the space requirements," she said thoughtfully. "We may have to lease extra floorspace."

"Do that as a separate exercise," I said.

"As you wish," said Martha. "Is this all the information you have?"

"At the moment," I said. "Depending on your figures we may or may not take it further."

"Give me a few days," she said. "It'll take a while to look up all the job records. Can I use Tina?"

"Best not," I said after thinking about it. Tina was her accounts clerk. "Tina may talk and make people nervous."

"OK," said Martha expressionlessly.

She tapped the papers into a neat pile and went off to the cubby hole that was her office.

"I have no idea what she's thinking," I thought to myself.

I turned to gaze back out over the shop floor again. It was mid afternoon and some of the guys were cleaning the machines and getting ready to go home. Giovanni at the far end was using the fork lift to bring in a delivery of metal.

"If I do get one of the benders," I thought, "who the hell do I lay off? They're a good team and is it really worth it? We might save a few thousand a year but will it reduce productivity because people are suddenly worried about their jobs? But then, orders are dropping off and I might have to lay off someone anyway. What if we reduced our flexibility and focused on 2mm boxes? Is there enough of a market to do that?"

Part of the problem was that there was no one I could really talk to about this. If I talked seriously about it with any of the senior staff there was a distinct possibility word would get around and cause problems. On the other hand, Robbie, my grandfather and owner of 28% of the shares, was 81 and still thought in terms of doing everything by hand. He hadn't liked it when my father had started bringing in machines and hated that I continued. My mother, who owned 21% and Kevin, 15%, knew little of the business and cared less, so long as the profits kept rolling in. The percentages, incidentally, had been carefully balanced so that the three of them had to unite to override me, as I owned 36%, whereas I only had to have one ally to get a majority. It made for interesting family dynamics.

I opened up the Trash folder in my email and retrieved that stupid email I'd had earlier and reread it. The fool had made no attempt to sell his skills which, by the look of it were extensive. He'd attached a four page document listing all his qualifications. For a start, he had three degrees, in politics, physics and history. There were also diplomas, professional qualifications and god knows what else. By the look of it, every time he read a book he took an exam on it.

I deleted the email again. How could he possibly be of any use if he

couldn't even begin to sell himself to me?

There was a knock on my door and I looked up to see Tina.

"The day's cash flow report," she said, nervously. She was always nervous. She'd been nervous when we'd interviewed her and apparently never got over it, despite having been here for almost a year.

"Thanks," I said, taking the printout. "Jesus, is that all?"

We'd paid out \$17,000 more than we'd taken in and the balance in the bank was looking decidedly depressing.

"Martha said to say we're due about \$98,000 tomorrow or the next day," said Tina.

"OK," I said. "Thanks."

If we got nothing else in we'd have enough cash for maybe a week's worth of bills. Fortunately we were owed a decent amount. Still, I wondered if it was getting time to arrange another overdraft.

"Martha will agree with whatever I decide," I thought after Tina had gone. "Get an overdraft, not get an overdraft, get a loan, she'll just carry on regardless. She never expresses an opinion, let alone argues."

I looked out over the car park again, drumming my fingers on my desk. It would actually be nice to talk to someone who didn't have a vested interest and who I could be sure wasn't scared of me or intimidated.

"I'm off now," said Kasey, poking her head round the door. "Unless you need anything?"

"No, you go, Kasey," I said. "Have a good evening, see you tomorrow."

She smiled and gave a quick wave. I watched her walk across the car park to her little Toyota then I undeleted that dreadful email again and reread it.

“60, pedantic, irritable, idle and contemptuous,” I said. “Jesus, just what I need.”

I went to delete the email and instead picked up the phone.

After a lot of rings a gruff voice simply said “what?”

“Richard Judykale?” I asked, stumbling over the surname.

“It's pronounced Jekyll,” said the voice. “As in Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde. Who are you and what do you want?”

“I'm Penny Dorchester,” I said. “I got your email.”

Chapter Two

“There’s, umm, someone to see you,” said Kasey over the phone. “Umm, yeah.”

I was over in the Design Office talking to Yu Yang about cost saving on a project from a local heating contractor.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Richard Jekyll,” she said. “He says he has an appointment.”

“He does, kind of,” I said. “Get him some coffee or something, I’ll be over in a couple of minutes.”

When I’d spoken to him on the phone he’d simply said he’d ‘drop by sometime in the next couple of days’, which I’d found a trifle irritating. I don’t know if I like precision because I’m an engineer or if I’m an engineer because I like precision, but either way I like things to be clearly defined and adhered to. An appointment with an accuracy of plus or minus twenty four hours wasn’t my idea of ‘an appointment’ and I found it irritating. As a result I probably dragged out the discussion with Yu Yang longer than I needed to.

The mood of the shop floor seemed normal when I walked across to the admin side of the building. There was the usual noise of sheets of metal being moved around, cut, bent and welded; bangs and screeches were normal, as was the smell and the occasional showers of sparks.

“Everything OK, Angus?” I asked as I went by.

Angus was standing in front of the large First Aid box bolted to the wall beside the two fire extinguishers. Angus had been taken on as an apprentice in my grandfather’s day and would be retiring in a little over a year. He was no longer fit enough for the heavier jobs but I’d kept him on for lighter tasks and as a sort of mentor to the younger ones. Partly for his self-esteem and partly in recognition of his experience and expertise I’d also made him the Workplace Health and Safety Officer and he took the role very seriously.

“Just doing 'effing inventory,” he said. “Got some outta date stuff 'ere, needs replacing, an' one o' them extinguishers needs 'effing regassing, pressure's bit low, like.”

“'Effing awesome, mate” I said, since the guys seemed to prefer me to be one of the guys, “get an order in to the buyers. Can't have H&S bugged. Hey, listen ...” and I leaned conspiratorially towards him and lowered my voice, “... let's have an unscheduled Fire Drill in the next day or two, OK?”

His craggy old face lit up and he winked at me happily. He loved setting off the fire alarms.

“Sweet,” he said without moving his lips. “Leave it wi' me, lass.”

I nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. He did a very important job and did it well as we had a first aid incident virtually every day although we'd yet to have a significant fire. In part due to Angus' vigilance the incidents were almost always minor although one apprentice had managed to sever the tendon of a finger the previous year and had been off for ten weeks. It had been six months before he regained full movement of that finger again. While he was in hospital having the tendon sewn back together his mother had come to see me to explain about the pressure the boy, he was 16 at the time, was under as she and his father were in the process of divorcing. I'd sympathised and not terminated his apprenticeship which, technically, I should have done since he'd been negligent and had already had two warnings from Angus.

Crossing over to the Admin area I went into the little Reception Office that was Kasey's domain. She saw me come in and made a strange gesture at my office with her head and raised her eyebrows. I pointed my thumb at my office and she nodded and put her hand over her mouth to hide a laugh.

“Oh god,” I thought and steeled myself before going in then backed out again quickly.

“That's him?” I whispered to Kasey.

“Uh huh,” she said, “just your type,” and sniggered.

I didn't have a ready reply so I went back into my office. There was a large gentleman with a shaved head standing next to my bookcase studying one of my books. He was wearing a pink shirt with blue flamingoes on it, gold and red board shorts and a pair of heavy duty work boots. He looked ... well, incongruous would be one, charitable, word for it. The shirt and shorts clashed horribly. They hadn't even been ironed.

“Mr Jekyll?” I said, “Penny Dorchester,” and held out my hand.

“Hello,” he said without looking up. He turned a page and carried on reading.

I stood there for a few moments wondering what to do as I wasn't used to being ignored. Visitors to my office were normally deferential if they were trying to sell me something, respectful if they worked for me or intent if they wanted us to do some work for them. I cleared my throat but that didn't provoke any reaction so I went and sat at my desk.

“So, you want a job, then?” I asked. I expected him to say 'yes' but he didn't.

“Not particularly,” he said, looking up. “Interesting book this.”

“Which one is it?” I asked. I'd meant to say something like 'this interview is at an end' but I was caught off guard.

“Umm, Principles Of Sheet Metal Fabrication For Final Year Apprentices,” he said, looking at the cover. “By someone called Ray Dorchester.”

“My father,” I said.

“Really?” he said and shut the book with a loud bang before putting it back on the bookcase. “Seems to know his stuff.”

“He did,” I said, coolly. “So why are you here, then?”
“You asked me to come in,” he said. “Relation of yours too?”

He held up a copy of Ionic Polymer Metal Composites by Mohsen Shahinpoor.

“Hardly,” I said. “I think he’s Iranian.”

“There’s no Arabic in your ancestry?” he asked. “There looks to be a hint around your eyes and your dark colouring.”

“None,” I said. “I thought you said in your email that you were looking for a job?”

“I might have done,” he said. “I don’t remember.”

He flicked through a few pages of the book then put it back and wandered over to my desk.

“Sit down,” I said firmly and he sat down, to my relief.

“You sent me your email yesterday,” I said, leaning forward in what I hoped was a power pose. “How can you have forgotten already?”

“Ohh, I wrote it a few years ago,” he said. “Haven’t read it since then other than to change my age.”

He picked up a blueprint that was folded on my desk and looked at it.

“So you’ve sent it to a lot of people then?” I asked, taking the blueprint away from him and putting it back on my desk.

“One or two,” he said. “This is your office?”

“Yes,” I said. “So have you had much success with your email?”

“Nope,” he said. “You’re the first. You’re the head of this, umm, enterprise?”

“Yes,” I said. “So why do you think no one’s responded before?”

“No one likes a smart arse,” he said with a grin. “Well, I’d best be off.”

He stood up and glanced out of the window.

“Depressing view,” he said. “Nice meeting you.”

I watched him head towards the door, thoroughly confused.

“What?” I said. “Oy, hold on. Come back.”

He let go of the door handle and came back.

“Sit down,” I said. “Is this your coffee?”

“The young girl outside brought it in,” he said, “but she didn’t say anything so I thought it might be yours.”

“Sit down,” I said. “You’re annoying me standing there like that.”

“OK,” he said and sat down. Actually, he lounged. One arm over the back of the chair and his right leg crossed over his other knee. He ran a hand over his shaved head then smoothed his goatee.

We sat and watched each other for a while. He won.

“So why did you send me that email?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“It was the wife’s idea,” he said with a smile. “Every now and then she gets it into her head that I should get a job so I send out another batch of emails. After a couple of weeks I give her a list of who I’ve approached and that seems to satisfy her. Until the next time, of course.”

He picked up my stapler and tested it and a squashed staple fell in his lap.

“What do you do for money, then?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, “or anything, it depends how you look at it. If you want to give me some money I’ll probably do what you want me to.

"Till I get bored, anyway."

He put the stapler down and flicked the staple onto the floor then picked up my mobile phone. He put it down as soon as he saw my face.

"Why should I give you any money?" I asked.

"Bugged if I know," he said. "Seems a waste to me."

"We're going round in circles here," I said.

"Hmm, I don't think that's entirely right," he said. "We may not be going anywhere but we haven't gone back to an earlier point which, I think, would be a prerequisite of going round in a circle, or at least a regular shape if not a circle. I don't think we've even gone off on a tangent as there was no discernable direction to the conversation to begin with."

"I'm trying to find out what the point of this meeting is," I said.

"Without any success, I imagine," he said. "Thanks for the coffee." He took a sip and nodded. "Not bad."

I leaned back in my chair as my power pose didn't seem to be working.

"Do you always dress like that?" I asked.

"God no," he said. "It's 38 degrees outside although it's a lot cooler in here. In winter I wear a dressing gown most of the time. Keeps me warm."

"I'm glad it's summer, then," I said drily. "Don't you think it's a good idea to dress a little more formally for business meetings?"

"What on earth for?" he asked, looking surprised. "Ohhh, are you one of those people that think clothing choices affect the validity of ideas?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "But they help to get those ideas taken more

seriously.”

“Maybe that’s where I’ve been going wrong,” he said. “Or maybe I’ve been getting it right, after all.”

I had to laugh.

“So you dress like that to avoid getting a job?” I asked.

“Oh no,” he said. “I dress like this because of the weather since I don’t like the heat. I’m from a colder country originally.”

“Judicael,” I said, looking at the printed email on my desk. “Is that Scottish?”

“I’m impressed,” he said, looking over his coffee mug at me. “No, actually it’s a Breton name.”

“Isn’t Scotland in Britain?” I asked, confused.

“Breton,” he said, “not Britain. A Breton is someone from Brittany which is in the West of France. There are close ties between the Bretons and the Gaelics.”

“So you’re French?” I asked.

“No, I’m Australian,” he said. “What are you?”

“I’m Australian, too,” I said. “Why did you say in your email that you have a number of irritating personal habits?”

“Because I do,” he said. “Or did you want me to lie to you? I can if you want, makes no difference to me.”

“Actually,” I said, “I think it would make a difference to you. If you lied you just might actually get a job.”

He burst out laughing.

“Well, well, well,” he said and picked up my stapler again. “Early days, but I think I might like you.”

He squashed another staple and this one fell inside his boot.

“Oops,” he said and put the stapler back on my desk.

“You say you're easily irritated,” I said. “Why would you like me?”

He pulled off his boot and started rummaging around inside it, looking for the staple. At least, I hoped he was looking for the staple. For some reason I was pleased to see he was wearing socks.

“Good question,” he said. “There are very few people I like. Aha!”

He pulled out the staple triumphantly and put it on my desk. I used a pen to manoeuvre it into the waste bin while he put his boot back on.

“You know,” I said, “I think this is all an act. I think your wife's putting you under pressure to get a job and this is your way of making absolutely certain you don't get one.”

“It could be an act,” he said, “although it isn't and even if it was, it isn't working.”

“What do you mean?” I asked then turned to look out of the window. He had wiggled his little finger in his ear and was now inspecting the end of it. The finger, not the ear.

“Because you're going to give me a job,” he said.

“You are joking,” I said.

“I don't have a sense of humour,” he said. “I've never understood jokes. I got a book of them from the library many years ago. Made no sense to me at all. Here's one I remember. How many Americans does it take to change a light bulb?”

“I don't know,” I said, since that's what you say to that sort of joke.

“Well, I'd say one,” he said, “since light bulbs have been designed to be changed by one person, regardless of the nationality or ethnic

heritage of the person changing it so I don't understand why the correct answer is two."

"Why is it two?" I asked, stupidly allowing myself to get drawn in.

"Apparently they need one to change the lightbulb, and one to sue the lightbulb manufacturer for the pain and suffering incurred while changing the lightbulb," he said. "Regardless of any perceived need for legalities, why can't the same person do both?"

"I don't think it's a literal question," I said. "I think it's more of an indirect comment on how often Americans sue other people."

"Oh," he said, thinking about that. "So why not simply give some comparative statistics on litigation rates by country? Wouldn't that be more apposite?"

"Because it's a joke," I said. "Jokes are supposed to be pithy and humorous rather than being technically correct."

"So you are saying that being wrong is funny?" He frowned and gently tugged his beard.

"It can be," I said. "It depends on the circumstances."

"Hmm," he said. "I'm not so sure I'm going to like working with you after all."

"Ah yes," I said. "You think I'm going to offer you a job. I'm sorry, I thought you were joking."

"You're not?" he asked, looking sublimely indifferent.

"Do you know anything about sheet metal fabrication?" I asked.

"Only what I read in that book," he said pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. "Although it doesn't seem that difficult to pick up. Basically it's just cutting and bending thin sheets of metal, isn't it? A bit like dressmaking."

“Have you ever made a dress?” I asked.

He put his hands behind his head and gazed at the ceiling.

“No,” he said after a while, “although I did once knit a scarf and that seems more complex.”

“My father’s book runs to over 500 pages,” I said. “Doesn’t that say anything to you?”

“He has trouble expressing himself concisely?” said Richard. “Or perhaps he was paid by the word?”

“No,” I said, although he was actually right. Dad had loved the sound of his own voice, especially when lecturing apprentices. “It means that there’s a lot more to sheet metal fabrication than the two pages you read.”

“Fair point,” he said. “Perhaps I could borrow the book for a day or two?”

I laughed. “You are not going to learn sheet metal fabrication in two days,” I said. “It normally takes years.”

“Perhaps that’s more a comment on your selection procedures,” he said. “Could it be you employ the wrong calibre of people? Actually, now that we’re on the subject, it does seem a field ripe for automation.”

“Are you skilled in robotics or computer programming?” I asked.

“I was a programmer for a while,” he said, “and I read a fascinating book on robots and automata a while ago. I think I’d enjoy doing that for a few days although it would probably get tedious once the principles are established.”

“Oh we wouldn’t want you doing anything tedious,” I said. “So design is out as that can be quite repetitive. How about sales?”

“I’m crap at selling,” he said. “I tried selling outdoor furniture once. Only lasted two days.”

“Why didn't that work?” I asked.

“I could never see the point in sitting outdoors,” he said. “It's either too hot or too cold and there are lots of flies and insects. Rains too sometimes. Much nicer indoors. My supervisor didn't like me telling customers that.”

He took a packet of tobacco out of the pocket of his shorts and started rolling a cigarette. I watched until he'd finished and put it in his mouth.

“No smoking in here,” I said.

“Can't you open the window?” he asked.

“This is a smoke free environment,” I said.

“They're smoking,” he said nodding towards the window overlooking the shop floor.

“They're welding,” I said. “That's not the same as smoking a cigarette. It's a health issue.”

“Aren't the gases given off during welding more of a health hazard?” he asked. “I seem to remember reading that chromium vapour is given off when welding stainless steel as well as carbon dioxide and monoxide, argon and so on from the welding process itself.”

“You still can't smoke in here,” I said.

“Let's go outside, then,” he said. “It's a nice day, or are you ashamed to be seen with me?”

“Why would I be ashamed to be seen with someone dressed like that?” I asked sarcastically.

“I can't imagine,” he said. “But some people seem to be.”

“What does your wife think about the way you dress?” I asked,

curiosity finally getting to me.

"She says it makes me easy to find in the supermarket," he said.

"Well, there is that," I said. "I have to be honest here. I really don't see that you have any skills that would be of use to the company."

"I agree," he said, looking at his cigarette. "But that's not why you asked me to come here."

"So why did I ask you?"

"I really ought to read that email again," he said. "I thought it was quite clear."

"You think I make bad decisions?" I asked.

"Ahh, so you did get the point," he said. "Good. You had me worried there for a moment, although I'm pretty sure I didn't say you make bad decisions, just not necessarily the best ones. After all, if you made bad decisions you would probably have gone out of business years ago or gone to prison or something."

"I don't think I make poor decisions," I said.

"OK," he said standing up. "Have a nice day."

"Sit down, for god's sake," I said. "Do you always walk away when someone disagrees with you?"

"Usually," he said, sitting down. "I can't be bothered with fools."

"OK," I said. "First you say I make poor decisions and now you say I'm a fool. You still think I'm going to give you a job?"

"It depends," he said. "Maybe you are a fool and maybe you aren't. I thought you weren't but I'm often wrong so there you go."

"Why do you think I'm a fool?" I said, beginning to feel irritated. Richard wasn't amusing me anymore.

"Because you know what the problem is but you won't admit it to

yourself," he said, lighting his cigarette.

"Put that out," I said. "No smoking in here."

"Tell me to leave then," he said, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the window.

I stared at him angrily, my eyes narrow and my jaw locked.

"Ohhh, I'm scared," he said and got up and opened the window. He flicked some ash out then turned back to face me while leaning on the window sill.

"You're worried that you intimidate your staff into agreeing with you," he said. "That's why you phoned me. You don't want a salesman or another fabricator. You want someone who'll tell you the truth and not be intimidated by you."

"And you'll do that?" I asked frostily, trying not to cough from the rough tobacco smoke.

"Of course," he said. "I couldn't care less about you or your company."

"The perfect employee," I said sarcastically.

"That's right," he said. "What I do is give you honest argument so you see every aspect of the problem, including those aspects you are afraid to even think about. That way when you make a decision you've taken as much as possible into account."

"You think there are things I'm afraid to think about?" I said. "Really, Mr Jekyll, I think it is time we brought this farce to an end."

"Absolutely," he said, tossing his cigarette out of the window. "So when are you going to stop doing what you think your father would approve of and start doing what you think is the right thing?"

Chapter Three

I got rid of Richard quickly as I'd been angry at his ... impertinence, I suppose, although impertinence is a bit of an old fashioned word these days. It's a word used by a grandparent about a young child. Disrespect might be a better word but throughout our entire meeting he hadn't shown any respect anyway. He drove away in a battered VW van trailing thin clouds of diesel exhaust and I stood at my window making sure he left.

Why would he think I was still seeking my father's approval? Did he think I was still 15 and full of teenage insecurities?

I fumed for a while and had to do a few minutes of Kirtan Chanting quietly to myself to recentre and calm down. Kasey left a few minutes later, switching the phone line through to my phone in case any calls came in although they rarely did. The shop floor was usually empty by 4ish and the office staff finished at five and it was rare for anyone other than me to stay past that. Martha sometimes did stay late if there were problems with the payroll or the auditors were in but that was more or less it.

Not that the place was silent and empty though. There was always a fair amount of traffic on the road outside and the cleaners came in at 5:30 with their vacuum cleaners and disinfectant wipes and scurried around diligently. We never spoke since none of the three Vietnamese looking girls spoke English and their supervisor, Mr Do Van Tien, prowled constantly looking for any sign of slackness. I'd often wondered if the girls were his daughters but I'd just got a blank look when I'd asked.

One of the girls, dressed in a shabby pair of blue overalls with her long black hair in a loose ponytail, delicately and apologetically lifted each item on my desk and polished underneath it before replacing it in the exact same position while I sat pretending to read through a sales contract. When she'd done the desk she glanced quickly at me which was my cue to get up so she could sanitise the arms of my chair and vacuum off any dust or hairs from the upholstery. When she'd done I sat back down again and she left to go and do much the same in the Accounts Office next door. A few moments later Mr Do Van

Tien came in. He glowered around while studiously trying not to disturb me then went off to inspect somewhere else. There's nothing quite so distracting as someone trying not to disturb you so I carried on pretending not to be disturbed while pretending to read the contract. I even pretended to make a note in the margin.

When he'd silently departed I made myself some coffee and focused on the contract. It was a pretty ordinary contract with no surprises so I approved it and double checked the list of materials required. The order had been fully costed beforehand but mistakes do happen from time to time. There didn't seem to be any errors so I signed the stores requisition and gave the job the next job number and went out onto the Shop Floor to enter it into the production schedule. That sounds fancy but it was basically two large white boards screwed to the wall with columns for the next two weeks and rows for each of the ongoing orders, each subdivided into the various processes. Scheduling was simply a matter of finding gaps for each process within the order and making sure that they were in the right sequence although I leave that to the foremen to organise. That done I left the job specifications and stores requisition in Aman's pigeon hole. Aman was one of the three foremen but his special responsibility was jobs that needed a powder coating so this job was his responsibility.

A staccato burst of harsh Vietnamese came from the lunchroom but whether Mr Do Van Tien had discovered the place had been left in a mess or that one of the girls was slacking I don't know. The factory gets cleaned and we pay their bill every two weeks and I don't interfere.

There's something about an empty factory. During the day the place is busy and the various machines hum and clank and the furnace fizzles and people bustle around but then they've all gone and the machines are shut down there's an air of desolation. Interestingly, when I come in early in a morning to the exact same scene it has an air of anticipation, a readiness to get started so I guess it's more psychological than anything. I tidied up a couple of tools that had been left lying around and decided to call it quits for the day. Mr Do Van Tien would turn off the lights and lock up.

I went out into the car park and saw that Giovanni's Ducati was still

parked in the corner so I went back inside. I found him in the Stores, which wasn't surprising since he was the Storeman. He was sitting at his desk, counting rivets.

"Why are you still here?" I asked.

"We have too many rivets," he said looking very serious. "I've counted the 3.2mm rivets twice and we've 147 more than we should have."

"How many do we have in stock?" I asked. We get through typically 3000 a day so 147 isn't really that big an issue either way.

"36,728," he said. "There should be 36,581."

When I say he was counting rivets I don't mean he was counting each one individually. They came in bags of 500 so there were 81 loose ones rather than 228.

"Have you checked your arithmetic on the stock sheet?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I don't understand how there is a discrepancy."

"How much do they cost?" I asked.

"About \$18 a bag," he said.

"Great," I told him. "You've saved us five bucks. Go home and put through an adjustment in the morning and don't worry about it."

"I do worry about it," he said. "How can I make an error like this?"

"There was probably an error on a stores req," I said. "A job got finished using fewer rivets than was needed and someone put them back without telling you. Go home."

"But what if the job went out incomplete?" he said. "Not properly riveted?"

"Then we'll blame whoever worked on it when we get complaints," I said. "We won't blame the storeman. Go home."

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Yes. Your wife will be ringing soon to find out where you are,” I said. “She’ll probably think you left here and crashed your bike on the way home. She’s done that before, remember?”

He looked mortified that I remembered that stain on his character from over three years before and apologised profusely yet again. Personally I found it rather sweet but no way could I tell an Italian man that as it would destroy his macho self-image. It was bad enough that his wife had phoned work looking for him and the guys had teased him mercilessly for weeks about it which is why he’d traded in his scooter and bought the Ducati to prove his manhood. Having met Giovanni’s wife, a typically highly strung and vocal Italian lady, I was surprised she’d let him. Anyway, he grabbed his crash helmet and designer red leather jacket and I walked him to the car park.

I got into my SUV and checked my mobile for messages. There weren’t any so I turned on the CD player and slowly pulled out of the car park, the air conditioning struggling to cool down the interior. It had been the first hot day of the summer and there was no shade in the car park.

“How was your day?” asked Darrell disinterestedly when I got home.

“Oh fine,” I said, just as disinterestedly, dumping my bag in the living room. “Yours?”

“Quiet,” he said, carrying on watching the news on TV.

“Anything interesting in the news?” I asked, sitting on the couch and looking at the TV.

“Couple of teenage boys have been arrested for a string of robberies,” he said.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Locally?”

“Nah, Preston,” he said. “I’ll do dinner in a bit, OK?”

“OK,” I said, “I’m going to have a shower.”

Darrell was a wedding photographer and virtually all his work took place on Saturdays with a fair amount on Fridays and Sundays. It had seemed a very glamorous and romantic occupation when we’d met but since I worked weekdays and he worked weekends the romance had soon palled. Even if he didn’t have a wedding to cover on a Sunday he usually spent the day working on the Saturday’s photographs. I, on the other hand, ran Dorchester’s and rarely got home before eight in the evenings so we didn’t see a lot of each other, although he did do most of the cooking which was nice. Maybe if we’d had children it would have been different but we’d both been too work focused in the early days. I’d been building my own career as an engineer, never thinking that Dad would die as young as 56, and Darrell was finding his feet and trying to make a reputation as a photographer. When Dad died I’d more or less taken over as CEO by default since no one else would or could and since he’d split his 51% of the shares in his Will between me and Kevin it made sense. I was a trained engineer with a developing business sense and 36% of the shares in an engineering company. Why hire an outside manager?

We’d pooled our resources to buy this house, still vaguely thinking we might have children one day and had surprisingly quickly turned two of the four bedrooms into a computer-based photo lab for Darrell and an office for me. One was our bedroom and the other was a guest room and we took turns in using it when we had a row. In fact, I was thinking of turning the guest room into my own bedroom as most of my clothes were in there and we didn’t do anything more than sleep in the other room anyway. We’d probably have got a divorce if we’d been married but we weren’t and, in all honesty, we were both too comfortable to do anything about it. We had plenty of space, a nice swimming pool, comfortable familiar surroundings and our careers. Love had been and gone and that was that. We didn’t even row much any more.

“Are you working Friday evening?” I asked over dinner.

“Fraid so,” he said. “I’ve got a wedding at a vineyard down at Moorooduc which’ll probably go on until late. They want some moonlit shots among the vines.”

"Nice," I said, not specifying whether it was the idea of the moonlit shots or the chicken salad I was eating. "Where's Moorooduc?"

"Down the Mornington Peninsular," he said. "Maybe 20km past Frankston."

"OK," I said. "So you're unlikely to be able to get to Jenny's then."

"Is that this week?" he said, frowning. "I thought it was next week."

Jenny was a friend of mine and she was throwing a Bad Luck pre-Christmas dinner party, bad luck because it was on Friday the 13th and pre-Christmas because it was the 13th of December.

"Oh right," he said checking his phone calendar. "I wondered what that meant. Oh well, do you mind going on your own?"

"Not a problem," I said. "I warned her you mightn't be able to make it."

"Cool," he said. "Jenny won't mind, I'm not one of her favourites anyway."

Back when Darrell was trying to get started he did a few TFP photoshoots with aspiring models. TFP apparently is a common technique used by newcomers to get started on the cheap. It stands for Time For Prints although the photos are rarely printed these days. Basically the photographer and model give each other their time and they both share the photos for their portfolios with no money changing hands. Jenny had fancied herself as a model and I'd got Darrell to do a lingerie orientated TFP shoot with her as that was an area she thought she could get into. I'd been at work that day so I don't know what happened but they hadn't been overly friendly afterwards and, intriguingly, neither would talk about it. Inevitably I'd speculated that one of them had tried to seduce the other but each of them had assured me that 'it was nothing like that' and I gave up worrying about it after a while. It would have been a lot more worrying if they'd become very friendly. Over the years I'd slowly stopped worrying about all the bridesmaids as well.

I loaded the dishwasher after dinner, that being my contribution to the meals system, and poured another glass of wine. Darrell had gone back into the lounge and was lying on the couch reading the latest copy of Professional Photographer so I took my wine out to the verandah which opened out onto the pool and the back lawn.

It was a warm night and the stars were clear so I left the lights off and dragged a recliner out onto the grass. The reticulation had done its job and the grass felt damp under my bare feet. I could smell the fresh cut grass from the neighbour's garden. Sometimes there were chemical smells from the farm the other side but, thinking about it, this was the wrong time of year.

"What a beautiful evening," I thought to myself. "That looks like Orion up there. Woah, was that a bat or a bird?"

Something had whooshed out across the lawn and disappeared. Whatever it was it had wings.

"I'm a bloody trained engineer," I said suddenly. "I collect data and make rational decisions based on that data. How dare that sod say I'm emotional and I'm looking for Dad's approval? If anything I'm just following his example and there's nothing wrong with that. After all, Gramps started the business and Dad expanded it. They're both good examples to follow."

"I'm off to bed," said Darrell from the lounge. "Night."

"Night," I said back but didn't move. There had been a time when I'd have rapidly followed but that was then and this is now.

"I suppose what he meant was that if I follow someone else's example then I'm implicitly seeking their approval," I muttered.

"What was that?" called Darrell. "Were you talking to me?"

"No, just thinking out loud," I called back. The light from the bedroom was spilling on to the lawn in a neat trapezoidal shape.

"I suppose if anything I'm working for the approval of the family," I

thought, as the light went out. "There's a lot of pressure trying to generate their income as well as providing for all the staff. I'd probably do things differently if I didn't have that responsibility."

I finished the wine and went back inside to get some more.

"Taking my responsibilities seriously isn't the same as seeking my father's approval though," I thought. "Being responsible is virtuous."

I went back inside and got my phone and connected to the mail server at work to read that stupid email again.

"Stupid old fool," I said. "Of course I make the best possible decisions that I can. Does he seriously think I distort the data just so I decide to do something my Dad would approve of?"

I started to get irritated again.

"Just who do you think you are, Mr Smart Arse?"

There was a faint burst of music as a car went by on the main road a little way distant. A boom boom boom then it faded.

"But what if the right thing to do isn't what Dad would approve of?" popped into my head. "Like this McNaughton's deal? Dad would definitely approve of that although I'm not so sure it's a good idea. Doesn't that show I'm not after his approval?"

The wine glass was empty again so I topped it up from the bottle I'd brought out with me.

"Hmm, if I don't think it's a good idea why am I meeting with McNaughton's next week?" I asked the wine glass.

"Because you're still collecting data before making a decision," I told myself.

"Am I?" I speculated. "Am I really? Or am I expecting Dad to give me a pat on the back? Or am I maybe trying to avoid a fight with the family? What if all three of them gang up and force it through? Am I

really making the best decision if I don't at least consider these things? Maybe I'm just scared of conflict?"

"You're an evil old man," I said to the phone. "You just love stirring up trouble, don't you."

I scanned the email again to get his phone number then disconnected. I toyed with ringing but it was getting late and I didn't want to disturb his wife if they'd gone to bed so I opened up a new text message instead.

"Why did you think I am looking for my father's approval?" I typed in and angrily pressed send.

"There, justify that, old man," I said and put the phone on the grass.

I leaned my head back against the recliner and watched the moon for a while as it hung over the treeline at the bottom of the garden. The evening was very peaceful but I felt tense, almost as though I had an exam in the morning, despite the wine, or perhaps because of it. The phone dah-dee-dah-ed unexpectedly, making me jump.

"I didn't," said the message. "It was random stab in the dark. Interesting reaction though. Sleep well."

Chapter Four

I had a strange dream that night.

Someone, I have no idea who, was lying on the floor in a kitchen but whoever it was was young. Not a child, perhaps a late teenager or early twenties and I sensed she was female although the face itself was androgynous. I didn't recognise the kitchen either so it wasn't mine. There was an old-fashioned stool in the kitchen with a little rack of fold-out steps so it could be used to reach the higher cupboards and the stool's frame was made from thin metal tubes. The stool was positioned over the head of the person lying on the floor and liquid was dripping slowly from the hinges of the fold-out steps into the person's face. In that strange way dreams have I knew without having to be told that the liquid was a poison but I felt no horror or panic or even a need to move the stool or the person. I was simply a passive observer of the scene as the girl slowly died from poisoning. She never moved either. She just lay there quietly, eyes closed, absorbing the poison that dripped onto her face. I'm not even sure if she was alive to begin with or died before the end of the dream. In fact, if it wasn't for the slow dripping of the poison the dream could have been a photograph as nothing else moved.

I woke up at some point, perhaps at the end of the dream or mid-way through. There was no real way of telling and I wasn't in a sweat or anxious. I just woke up with a slightly dry, slightly sour mouth and a mild need to use the bathroom. Darrell was sound asleep in his usual position, on his side with one arm and one leg hanging off the edge of the bed as though he was trying to escape. In the early days I'd wake in the night to find the one arm and one leg draped over me but, in time and after a brief flirtation with lying on his back, he'd completed the one eighty flip and excised me from his dream time.

I guess what was strangest about the dream was that when I got back from the bathroom I still remembered it. Most dreams are forgotten as soon as you open your eyes but this one lingered. Perhaps it had some meaning.

I lay there for a while, listening to the faint whistling from the far side of the bed – because we had a king sized bed there was space for a

single mattress between us – as Darrell breathed, mixed with a low hum from either the fridge or the freezer in the kitchen. After a couple of minutes the hum suddenly stopped with a da-boom-like jiggling sound so it must have been the fridge. It had always done that for some reason. I'd often wondered, from an engineering point of view, why it did that but I'd always been too lazy to actually investigate. After all, the damned thing worked so why worry about it? I must have drifted back to sleep since the alarm went off and when I opened my eyes the room was lit by the early morning sun.

Darrell was already up and had made some coffee so I joined him out on the verandah. It was cool and there wasn't a cloud to be seen. It was a beautiful day and I sipped my coffee and watched some galahs strutting around the lawn, slowly waking up.

"You were laughing a lot last night," commented Darrell. "What was so funny?"

"Hmm?" I asked, my mind still on my dream. "When?"

"Dunno," he said, looking up from his phone. "I woke up at one point and you were still out here."

"Ohh, someone sent me a text," I said. "I just found it incredibly funny."

"Cool, can I see?" he asked. "Was it one of those anti-Trump things?"

"It wasn't actually funny," I said. "I'd just had a few glasses of wine, that's all. It was work related."

"Ohhh," he said, losing interest. "Hey, what do you think of that?"

He passed his phone over to show me a photograph.

"Wow," I said, looking at the picture. "That's pretty spectacular. What is it?"

"It's a pelican," he said. "Taken by Laetitia Guichard, who's a French photographer. It won second place in the World Bird Photo Contest."

"Is it on a mirror or something?" I asked.

"No, a lake," he said.

"So why's the lake and the background black?" I asked. "Did she manipulate it in Photoshop?"

"I don't think so," he said. "It would be almost impossible to do it that well in Photoshop. I'm pretty sure she managed to get the lighting and exposure just about perfect which is why she got a prize for it."

"Could you do a shot like that?" I asked, handing back the phone.

"Yes and no," he said. "Technically probably yes but I wouldn't have the patience to wait for the perfect moment. A scene like that with the right lighting could take days or weeks of waiting. With nature photography there's a strong element of luck and then you have to have the skill to grab the shot before it's gone. She's a brilliant photographer. Weddings are a lot easier since you can tell people what to do and where to go and if it doesn't work you can tell them to do it again. Photo journalism's like that too. You have to grab the moment as it's happening and get it perfect first time and there's no guarantee you'll get paid for it even if it is a brilliant shot."

"I'm going to get some toast," I said, the coffee kicking in. "Want some?"

"Yeah, thanks," he said, going back to his phone.

I went into the kitchen and put four slices of bread into the toaster then got out the margarine and Vegemite.

"More coffee?" I called.

"Not for me," he called back.

I put the kettle on and gazed out of the window rather blankly. The toast popped up and the kettle clicked off at the same time so I made myself some more coffee to allow the toast to cool a bit.

“Why did you end up doing weddings?” I asked, going back out onto the verandah with my toast and coffee. “When we met you were mad keen on all types of photography. I don’t remember you ever deciding to do weddings but I haven’t seen you take any other shots for years.”

“Course you do,” he said, putting the phone down. “It was your cousin.”

“Oh god, yeah,” I said, sitting down. “Now I remember!”

Darrell had been almost at the end of his degree in Photography at RMIT when my cousin David had phoned to say the photographer for his wedding that weekend had broken his hand and asked if could Darrell help out.

“Yeah, I’d forgotten about that,” I said. “And Davey paid you, didn’t he.”

“Yeah,” said Darrell. “That was my first professional shoot. It seemed like easy money so I put some of the shots together for a leaflet and took out an ad in a wedding magazine and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

“Do you still enjoy it?” I asked through a mouthful of toast.

“Money’s good,” he said, picking up the phone and going back to the nature photos he’d been looking at.

“Yeah,” I thought. “The money’s good but it’s not what you wanted to do, is it?” but I didn’t say anything. It was a bit like making mailboxes from sheet metal. The money was good.

I finished my toast and coffee in silence, not really thinking of anything in particular.

“Well, I’m going to get ready for work,” I said. “Doing anything exciting today?”

“Nah,” he said, looking up and squinting as the rising sun peeped around the corner of the house. “Just some post-production on the

video for the Davidsons. I promised it and the album last Monday so I really ought to get on with it.”

I smiled. After all these years, Darrell still hadn't learnt to add flexibility into his delivery dates but I wasn't going point it out. He saw my suggestions these days as criticisms.

* * *

“I've just spoken with Alan McNaughton's assistant,” said Kasey coming in to my office.

“Oh yes?” I said, looking up from a pile of resumes. I'd put out an ad for a new apprentice – we took on one every couple of years – and so far had received about forty applications. As a group they weren't inspiring although there were a couple of possibles so far. “That's taken a while, hasn't it?”

“He's been out of the office,” said Kasey, “and Babs, his assistant, didn't want to make a commitment until she'd spoken with him. She said he's free next Monday at 11 if that's convenient.”

I checked my schedule and, as Kasey no doubt already knew, I was free then.

“Did you agree to it?” I asked.

“Of course not,” said Kasey. “I told her I'd get back to her.”

“Suggest Tuesday at 10:30 then,” I said. “And don't call back until this afternoon.”

As power plays go it wasn't up to much but it's never a good idea to agree to the other party's scheduling suggestion immediately. As a general rule, the stronger party sets the schedule and the weaker party does what they're told and I was determined not to be perceived as the weaker party, even though I was. Kasey smiled and nodded but she was used to my ways.

“There were three more applications in this morning's post,” she said,

putting them on my desk with the rest of my post. "Also a few cheques which I'll give to Martha."

There was something in her tone of voice that made me look up from adding the three new applications to the bottom of the pile.

"What?" I asked.

"The cheque from Rooney's has arrived," she said.

"About bloody time," I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

They owed us \$98,000 and were ten or eleven days overdue and we needed that money for the next week's payroll. As cheques usually take three days to clear I had been a little worried. If the payment hadn't arrived by Friday morning I was going to have to get on to the bank and extend the overdraft by another \$30 to \$50,000, depending on what other payments arrived and what payments we could delay making ourselves, and I hate doing that. I always got the feeling that Brad Hennessey, the Business Accounts Manager, thought women shouldn't be involved in business. He was due to retire in a few months which meant that he'd grown up as a child in a world where Australian banks wouldn't even let women open bank accounts let alone borrow money. Incredibly, as recently as 1966, Australian women had to leave their jobs when they got married. A lot had changed for women since then but there was something about him that made me feel he only gave that lip service. On the other hand, he had never married so maybe he was secretly gay rather than a crusty old misogynist. Ironically, gay men never had a problem opening bank accounts even though being gay was illegal until 1994 whereas it's never been illegal to be a woman. It's a strange world.

Half an hour later I was frowning at one of the applications. It was one of the three that had arrived that morning and was from a Miss Gail Guichard. Her name had caught my eye since it was the same surname as the woman who'd taken that photo of the pelican that Darrell had shown me but this wasn't the only thing that intrigued me.

Generally we took on apprentices aged between 15 and 17 since people who go into metal fabrication tend not to be academics who stay on at

school. Miss Gail Guichard was 22 and had only just finished her degree and was still waiting for the results. Generally we took on apprentices who had shown some sort of aptitude for trade skills through vocational courses at school, typically engineering or automotive but not necessarily since 14 year olds usually have no idea what jobs they're going to end up in until they actually manage to get a job so they don't always make the best course choices. Miss Gail Guichard had a degree in Fine Art. I'd also read in *Manufacturers Monthly*, one of the trade journals I subscribed to, that only 1% of Australian sheet metal workers were female and Dorchester Light Engineering Ltd had never had a female sheet metal worker. In fact I was the first female to work there, other than the occasional accounts clerk or receptionist, since Gramps had started the business back in 1967. Miss Gail Guichard was, in case the Miss hadn't given it away, female.

Why would a 22 year old female Art student want to be a sheet metal apprentice? It was almost worth interviewing her just to ask that question. I was also mildly curious to know if she was in any way related to Laetitia Guichard the photographer. If nothing else, Darrell would be impressed if she was.

I ummed and erred indecisively about putting Miss Gail Guichard's application on the Interview pile or the Reject pile and finally decided to start a new pile for Think About It Later. Even if she did turn out to have some discernable aptitude for the job her presence would introduce a completely new dynamic on the shop floor. At least I'd been the Boss's daughter and came in at the top. Would her presence at the very bottom lead to harassment, bullying or open sexism? Maybe even a law suite? On the other hand, her application had managed to achieve the sole function of an application, which is to get that person noticed and separated out from the rejections.

"Send out standard rejections to this lot, would you?" I asked Kasey, dumping the pile of rejected applications on her desk. "I'm going over to see Martha."

I was half way through the door when the phone rang so I paused in case it was for me.

“Dorchester Light Engineering, how may I help you?” said Kasey to the phone in that sing song voice that professional telephone answerers have.

She glanced over at me and held up a finger.

“May I asked who's calling?” she said. “One moment, please.”

“It's Cheryl from Dandenong Real Estate for you,” she said to me, putting the phone on hold.

“Shit,” I said. “I suppose I'd better take it.”

Kasey watched me go back into my office then I heard her say “putting you through,” and my phone started ringing.

“Hello, Cheryl,” I said picking it up. “I hope this isn't what I think it is.”

“Fraid so,” said Cheryl. “She's still in arrears.”

“You've sent the final warning?” I asked.

“She's had two warning letters,” said Cheryl, “and she's not been answering my calls or replying to my texts. I drove past on my way in this morning and the garbage bins had been put out so it looks like she's still there and not done a runner but it's a difficult situation with the kiddie. Do you want me to send her a Breach Notice and start the eviction process with VCAT?”

“How much does she owe now?” I asked

“\$1040,” said Cheryl. “Four weeks rent which is the amount of the bond.”

“OK,” I said. “And the Breach Notice gives her two weeks, doesn't it.”

“That's right,” said Cheryl, “so you'll lose two weeks rent assuming VCAT awards you the bond and there's no guarantee of that.”

“Bugger,” I said. “You’re sure she’s still there?”

“Someone is,” said Cheryl, “so let’s hope it’s Sarah and not squatters.”

“Ugh,” I said. “You are in a happy mood, aren’t you. OK, draw up the Breach Notice but I’ll take it round myself and have a chat with Sarah, see if I can find out why she isn’t paying the rent and maybe find some sort of solution. How old is her child? I don’t remember her having one when she moved in.”

“Four months, I think,” said Cheryl. “Let me check, ..., yes just over four months. She got into arrears for a week when she had the baby which was eighteen weeks ago.”

“She sorted that out, though, didn’t she?” I asked.

“Yes, she paid eighty five extra for the next three weeks,” said Cheryl. “That’s why I don’t understand what’s happening this time. Last time she was very up front and helpful.”

“OK,” I said. “There’s undoubtedly some deeper issue here this time. When can I go round?”

“Ordinarily we need to give at least 24 hours notice,” said Cheryl, “but that isn’t required when the tenant is in breach of the rental agreement and since we’re serving a Breach Notice there’s no problem proving that so any time you want.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll either drop in this afternoon or send someone round to get the Breach Notice from you and I’ll take it round to the flat tonight. Hopefully someone will be there and I can find out what’s going on.”

“I’ll draw up the Notice now,” said Cheryl, “but do be very careful. I don’t think Sarah will turn nasty but there may be someone else there. I have had a complaint from a neighbour about a man shouting and swearing.”

“Oh frigging wonderful,” I said. “Well, first sign of trouble and I’m calling the police. I might take a couple of lads from the factory with

me.”

“Promise me you won't do that,” said Cheryl urgently. “If there is any trouble it'll look like you tried a forcible eviction and that's illegal. A relative is one thing but a gang is another.”

“Oh faf,” I said. “OK, I'll go on my own. Darrell's no use in this sort of situation.”

“OK,” said Cheryl, “but do be careful. Sarah doesn't have a car so if there's one on the drive or right outside leave immediately and we'll get the police to serve the Breach Notice in the morning.”

“I'll let you know what happens in the morning,” I said. “How's the rental market at the moment?”

“We'll get you another tenant fairly quickly,” said Cheryl. “It's a bit of a rough area but there's always demand for low priced accommodation.”

“OK,” I said. “How are things with the others?”

“They're both fine,” she said. “No problems with either tenant and it looks like we may have a suitable applicant for Pickett Street when that's vacated at the end of next week. I've got another reference to check then I'll be talking to you about it.”

“Great,” I said. “Right, talk to you tomorrow. Bye.”

I hung up and leaned back in my chair, staring out the window, thinking about the situation. I owned three rental properties in Dandenong, one cheap and rough, one medium and OK and one expensive and nice, just to give a mix. Surprisingly the expensive, nice one had been the only one with problems before as I'd had two girls rent the place using fake references and employment details and they'd used it as a brothel which was why I'd switched agents to Cheryl. I suspected, but couldn't prove, that the previous agent had been bribed by the girls. He may even have been getting kickbacks or services and the first I knew of what had been going on was when the police arrived on my doorstep, which hadn't been entertaining

although it gave my lawyer a lot of titillating entertainment.

“Kasey,” I said, pushing the problem of Sarah into a compartment in my mind for my subconscious to work on. “When you come back from lunch could you pop in to Dandenong Real Estate and pick up some documents for me?”

“No problem,” she said. “They're in Langhorne Street, aren't they? Who should I ask for?”

Chapter Five

There's a saying in Melbourne. "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute."

The day had started beautifully with clear skies and a gorgeous warm, but not too hot, sun and a light breeze coming in from the South. By lunchtime it was very cloudy and shortly after Kasey got back from lunch the heavens opened.

"Would you look at that!" I exclaimed, watching out of the window as Kasey came into my office. The rain was bouncing off the ground and hammering on the cars. Within seconds the potholes were puddles and small streams started to form as water sluiced off the main road and through the gaps in the chain link fence.

"Here's that thing from the agent," said Kasey. "Do you think we're going to get a flood?"

"Could do," I said, taking the envelope and tossing it on my desk. "Depends how long it lasts."

A car pulled over on the main road, blocking the entrance to the car park. A man jumped out and hastily pulled at a plastic bag that had got itself entangled in his windscreen wipers. He jumped back in the car and sat there wiping his head with what looked like a handkerchief while peering up at the sky through the windscreen. All the traffic now had their headlights on as it had got very dark and a passing truck sent a wave of water over the stopped car. The man inside ducked reflexively although he almost certainly didn't have his side window open. A brilliant flash of lightening froze the scene like a photograph.

"One, two, three, fo ..." I muttered then a crash of thunder hit and the building shook. The light in my office went out momentarily then flashed back on.

"Only a kilometre away," I said, turning to look back through the glass wall into the factory. There were scenes of commotion as machines had shut off and restarted.

I looked back outside and the rain showed no sign of stopping so I jumped up and grabbed the air horn I kept on the bookcase for situations just like this. Going out onto the shop floor I gave a blast.

“Shut down!” I shouted. “Shut everything down!”

Most of the machines were electrically powered and those that weren't, like the powder coat furnace, were electrically controlled. The last thing I wanted was an injury because a machine stopped mid-process then restarted unexpectedly.

Barry and Greg immediately moved over to their guys who were wearing ear defenders and who may not have heard my air horn and Aman went off to check the furnace. It only ran at up to 200 degrees, just like a big kitchen oven, but sudden surges in electricity could, at least potentially, cause unexpected sparks and you never want sparks around gas. Mick appeared out of his welding booth with his faceplate over his head and looked around in confusion then disappeared again, hopefully to shut his equipment down. Within a couple of minutes the whole place was quiet save the thrumming of heavy rain on the roof. There was another peal of thunder and the factory building shook again. I went over to the Schedule Board and Aman and Barry joined me. Greg appeared a few moments later.

“Take a break until the storm's passed,” I said, studying the board.

I picked up the purple board marker and put a big asterisk against the Cosimmon job and the Maxell job.

“These two have to be completed today,” I said “or we run into penalties, and the Zebek job will mess things up later in the week so we need to get that finished today as well. Put those guys on overtime if you need to.”

“Akim can't today,” said Greg. “He's got to leave at 3 for his Citizenship ceremony but I can finish that one myself.”

“Great,” I said. “Everything else looks OK unless the storm goes on for hours. Any damage?”

“A bar got bent in the torsion jig,” said Barry. “It can be straightened but it’ll take a day.”

“Are there spares in stores?” I asked.

“Should be,” said Barry. “I’ll check with Giovanni.”

“He’s coming over,” said Aman, looking over my shoulder. “Doesn’t look too happy.”

“Fottuta pioggia!” he shouted, waving as he jogged towards us. “We gotta problem, come!”

He turned and jogged back to the stores, me and the three foremen following.

“Jesus, the floor’s wet,” said Barry.

“We’ve lost a roof panel,” said Giovanni. “Look.”

In the corner at the back of the stores one of the corrugated roof panels had split and a section had completely disappeared. The rain was pouring in and the concrete floor was already a couple of millimetres under water. Fortunately the stores were sectioned off with security panels so the only exits for the water was out through the delivery entrance to the road or the door into the shop floor.

“I can fix that,” said Aman. “Can I have a couple of lads and a sheet of the 20 gauge copper?”

“Take what you need,” I said. “We’ve got to keep the water out of the electrics.”

He ran off to organise some of the men.

“Have we got any sand bags?” I asked.

Giovanni shook his head.

“How about polythene?” I asked.

“Yes, we’ve got about twenty rolls,” he said.

“Right,” I said. “Put a couple in the doorway to stop the water getting through. Use some of the packing cardboard as well if you need to and weight it all down with some metal.”

“Give us a hand, Greg,” said Giovanni and the two of them ran off to start constructing a temporary flood barrier.

“Thank god it’s only rain water,” I said to Barry, looking round at the water all over the floor, “and not sewage.”

He laughed. “Guess we’ll have to sweep out the water when the rain stops,” he said.

There was some metallic clangs and a sheet of copper appeared over the hole in the roof. A minute later loud hammering started as Aman and his crew started to hammer the soft copper to mould it around the corrugation in the roof. Slowly the water running off the roof subsided to thin trickles.

Angus appeared in the doorway, hanging back so as not to get in the way of Giovanni and Greg.

“The rain’s easing,” he said. “Reckon the storm’s passed.”

“Could you check around the rest of the factory, Angus?” I asked. “See if there’s any other damage.”

“Doing it now, lass,” he said. “One of the windows in the lunchroom is cracked. What’s happened here?”

“Roof panel came off,” I said. “There’s some flooding in the stores but that seems to be it.”

“Over the East side?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, after a moment’s hesitation to orientate myself.

“Must have been a strong gust from the East,” he said. “West side

should be fine. I'll check now."

"Thanks," I said.

Aman and his two helpers appeared in the delivery bay, carrying a ladder. All three were soaked to the skin.

"You lads go to the showers and get dry," I said. "Get some clean overalls and take the rest of the day off. You'll be paid for the afternoon. Aman, any idea where the roof panel went?"

"You're not going to like it," he said.

I groaned. "Not Mercer Freight?"

"Fraid so," he said.

Mercer Freight had the unit next to us and I'd had a run in with Tim Mercer a few months previously when they'd moved in. Their trucks would park outside waiting to get in the yard and had been blocking our delivery entrance. I'd had to threaten legal action to get Tim Mercer to reorganise his drivers and he hadn't been too impressed.

"Much damage?" I asked.

"Depends what you mean by 'much'," he said, grinning. "Never liked BMWs meself."

"You're joking," I said, staring at him. "It didn't, did it?"

"Yep," he said. "It's in the back seat."

"Oh hell," I said. "Bloody wonderful."

I looked around while I gathered my inner fortitude.

"I suppose I'd better go round then," I said.

Aman didn't volunteer to go in my place so I sent him off to the showers as well and gazed out through the delivery bay. It looked like

the rain had stopped. Giovanni had organised a couple of helpers to sweep the water out of the stores.

“OK, Barry,” I said. “Give it another five minutes then get the men back to work. I’m giving Aman the rest of the afternoon off so you and Greg supervise his jobs, OK.”

He nodded and went off to update Greg so I went over to Giovanni.

“As soon as you can, mate, check for any damaged stock and get orders in for any replacements. Give me copies of the orders for the insurance as well.”

I looked back out through the delivery entrance then decided to go and see Chris in Purchasing first.

“You’ve heard what happened?” I said.

“Already onto it,” he said. “AAA Roofing will be round tomorrow sometime. They can’t be sure when since it seems we’re not the only ones. Roof damage all over Dandenong apparently.”

“We’ve a broken window in the lunchroom, as well,” I said. “And Angus is checking the rest of the building.”

“No problem,” said Chris. “I’ll check with him later, if he doesn’t come see me first.”

I was a bit frazzled when I got back from seeing Jim Mercer. He hadn’t been too pleased to find his BWM’s rear and side windows smashed, one of the rear roof struts destroyed and the upholstery of the rear seat and front passenger seat shredded but he calmed down after a while. I had been cheered a little on my way back when one of his drivers told me, beaming all over his face, ‘the effing sod had it coming’.

“Make me a coffee, Kasey, love,” I said when I got back, “and get me the insurance file.”

I slumped into my chair, feeling drained.

“There you go,” she said a few moments later, bringing in my coffee. “I brought in the emergency Tim Tams as well.”

I laughed and thanked her. We didn't keep a stock of Tim Tams for emergencies, it was just that Kasey had put her packet of Tim Tams away in a filing cabinet when she'd started one of her diets and whenever she filched one or two she'd say “but it's an emergency” and look innocent. Knowing her love of Tim Tams I appreciated her sacrifice and limited myself to two.

I was on the phone to the insurance company for about half an hour. Three minutes of that was me explaining what had happened and warning them of our impending claim and two minutes was the person at the other end typing the details into her computer and giving me a claim reference number and the rest of the time was me on hold waiting to talk to someone. The girl confirmed what Chris had said about the widespread damage but expanded it to include everywhere from Gippsland to Geelong.

It was gone five by the time everyone had reported back to me that everything was now fully back under control and given me details of damage. Apart from the roof and the broken window, and the BMW, we'd also lost about a quarter of a pallet of corrugated cardboard and a 20kg bag of red powder for coating. Fortunately most of our stock was metal in one form or another so, as long as it was able to dry and not get corroded, it wasn't affected. The copper sheet we'd put on the roof could be flattened again and used.

I waited until Mr Do Van Tien and his girls arrived to do the cleaning so I could explain what had happened and ask him to leave a note of any other damage they came across. I'm not sure how much of that he understood but that's the way it goes.

As is so often the way in Australia the roads were almost dry when I left. The land is so parched that rain is soaked up surprisingly quickly and when the sun comes out what water still remains on the roads disappears in a fine mist. Even the car park pot holes were almost empty and tomorrow would be miniature dust bowls again. I drove out of the car park with the Breech Notice in my bag on the passenger seat, my mind on my meeting with my tenant. I confess I spared not

one thought for how Jim Mercer would get home since his BMW wasn't drivable.

The factory is in Dandenong South, near the Dandenong Bypass and I live in Berwick which means my daily commute avoids Dandenong itself. I rarely go into Dandenong because it isn't one of the nicest places in Australia. In fact, it is one of the seven suburbs identified in the Melbourne 2030 Strategic Planning Policy Framework for extensive urban renewal and it has improved a lot in the last ten years although it has yet to attract many of the more, shall we say, affluent types. Unemployment in Dandenong is around double the Victorian average and, according to the most recent census, English is only spoken in about a quarter of households. As I drove it preyed on my mind that Sarah, the tenant, was likely to speak Hazaraghi or Dari rather than English.

I tried to tell myself that this was stupid since Cheryl would have warned me if it were the case but not all irrational fears can be erased that easily. After all, she may have assumed I knew as I'd had approved Sarah's application. On the other hand, being a rental agent, she dealt with the general public of Dandenong all the time and probably didn't think it worth mentioning. It occurred to me that Sarah is also a popular Islamic name.

"Maybe I shouldn't be doing this?" I thought to myself, heading into town. "What if I get involved in some ethnic religious issue and balls things up? What if a fatwa is put on me?"

The golden M of a McDonald's caught my eye and I headed for it as a place of refuge. Even though I don't normally go near fast food joints it had a comforting familiarity and gave me an excuse to postpone the confrontation, for inevitably it was going to be a confrontation. Pulling into the car park I was pleased to note that it was quite full. With a bit of luck there'd be long queues and I'd be forced to wait forever and it would end up being too late to go to see Sarah. And, having some dinner first was a good excuse. After all, it was around dinner time and I was hungry. Who could blame me for that?

I parked my SUV and walked into McDonald's and looked around. It was busy with people sitting at tables, chomping burgers and talking

loudly but there was hardly anyone at the counter. I threaded my way through and waited while a couple of teenagers ordered while giggling at each other then suddenly it was my turn so I ordered a coffee and a cheeseburger.

“You want fries with that?” asked the Indian girl in a polyester uniform rather than a sari.

“No thanks,” I said and she briefly looked up from her register to see if I was joking.

I paid and she gave me a sliver of paper with 229 on it so I stepped out of the way of the person behind who was eagerly pushing forward, way too far inside my comfort zone. The large display over the end of the counter read 217 so I wandered over to the cutlery dispenser to get a paper napkin and wait. Looking round it seemed that the majority of the people having their food were couples with pre-teen children which made me wonder if this was their main meal of the day or if it was just a pre-dinner snack. It was a while before I noticed that most of the people were white.

It didn't take long for 229 to appear so I collected my coffee and burger, wrapped inside a sheet of paper inside a paper bag and made my way back to the car. I found the sound of all the people talking and eating was adding to my tension. I much prefer the sound of machinery. It's more soothing somehow.

“Should I say 'Hello, I'm Penny Dorchester'?” I wondered, sipping the coffee, “or would 'I'm your landlady' be better?”

I figured it was probably better to get across the fact that I was the landlady quickly thereby establishing my credentials and try to avoid giving my name just in case there was any form of retribution.

“Jesus,” I said to myself when I realised what I'd just thought. “Why am I thinking about retribution? What's she going to do, find out where I live and throw a brick through the window? Maybe I should say I'm from the agency and I'm there about the rent arrears?”

I opened the paper bag and pulled out the cheeseburger and opened

it then closed it and put it back in the bag. My stomach, full of butterflies, had recoiled at the smell of the burger. I dumped it on the passenger seat and swallowed some more coffee then put the cardboard cup in the dashboard cup holder so it wouldn't fall over.

“OK, girl,” I said to myself. “Let's get this over with.”

A few minutes later I pulled into Quidditch Street, which had that name long before Harry Potter got written, and found a parking spot not far from the block of units. I hadn't been here for three or four years and the block looked more run down than I remembered. I made a mental note to mention it to the Strata Manager but then wondered if it was worth it. After all the block of units was in much the same condition as the rest of the street. There was a group of adolescents, maybe ten or eleven years old, a little further down the road. They were smoking and trying out dance moves on the pavement to a throbbing boom box. I got out of the car and locked it, wondering if the tension was in the air or in me.

The three apartments were above a small car park designed for three cars and nine garbage bins although there seemed to be more than nine bins worth of garbage there. Walking up the short driveway, I sensed I was being watched. A quick scan of the street showed only the kids and they didn't seem to have noticed me. It wasn't until I was half way up the stairs to the second floor that it struck me that all three parking bays had cars in them.

“Hello, I'm the landlord,” I decided to say. “I'm here about the rent arrears.”

I'd had the front door repainted a cheerful pale green when I'd bought the place five years before and, for some reason, hadn't got around to having it repainted. There were quite a few scrapes through which the earlier brown could be seen and the green areas were decidedly grimy. The area around the lock and handle was almost black. The doorbell was hanging off and only had one wire so I took a deep breath and knocked.

“Jesus,” I said when the door opened. “What happened to you?”

Chapter Six

The girl who'd opened the door was young, maybe 19 or 20, blonde and probably pretty although it was difficult to be sure since the left side of her face was a mass of fading greenish yellow bruises.

"I fell down the stairs," she said quietly. "Who're you?"

"I'm Penny Dorchester," I said. "Are you Sarah, umm ..."

I fumbled for the Breech Notice as I had stupidly not thought to get the girl's surname. To me she was 'Sarah, Tenant' but that almost certainly wasn't her name. I felt like an idiot as I fumbled with my bag and stopped because she said 'yes'.

"Umm," I said again, feeling self conscious and not fully in control of the situation. "Umm, I'm here to talk about the rent."

"Ohh," she said and seemed to wilt. She paused then slowly pushed the door open. "S'pose you'd better come in then."

"Thank you," I said.

She backed up a few steps and I went inside. The last time I'd seen the place it had been completely empty so it didn't look at all familiar with someone's furniture in it. It was a small apartment, basically just a lounge with a small kitchen at the back and two bedrooms off to one side. There was a bathroom somewhere but I couldn't remember where. The front door opened into the lounge, which was empty apart from a TV, a two seater couch, a bedraggled armchair and one of those tables you can fold up to take camping. It wasn't overly clean either and there were a couple of discarded pizza boxes and some empty beer cans on the floor and a stroller beside the door. The place smelt of unwashed clothes and cigarette smoke with a hint of something else in the background, a bit like burnt plastic.

"Do you want to sit down?" she said, a little anxiously.

"Thanks," I said and decided on the couch.

Sarah hovered a little then perched on the edge of the armchair.

“So you're from the agents?” she asked after we'd looked at each other for a while. “I'm gonna pay just as soon as I get some money.”

“Actually, no,” I said. “I'm the landlord, I own this place.”

“Ohh,” she said. She sat further back in the chair and lifted her legs so she could wrap her arms around them and try to hide.

“Umm, you're four weeks in arrears,” I said. I remembered the Breach Notice and opened my bag to get it. “This is a Breach Notice which basically says that as you are in breach of the rental agreement you've got two weeks to either get the rent up to date or vacate the unit.”

I held it out to her but she stayed huddled in the chair. I waggled it a bit but she didn't move to take it so in the end I put it on the arm of her chair.

“Umm, I don't want to kick you out,” I said as the silence started to stretch. “You've got a baby, haven't you?”

“Kaylee,” she said, “she's four months.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

“She's having a sleep,” said Sarah, looking over her shoulder at what the agent called Bed 2.

“Right,” I said, lowering my voice. “So that's why we're talking quietly.”

“Kind of,” she said. “Listen, we'll get you your rent just as soon as, well, umm ...”

“What do you do for money?” I asked. “Have you got a job?”

“I'm on Centrelink,” she said.

“Doesn't Centrelink give rent assistance?” I asked. I'd had other

tenants in the past who'd lost their jobs so I knew of the principle, if not the details.

"Yeah, but ..." and she stopped again.

"We?" I asked, the 'we'll get you your rent' filtering through. "Who's 'we'? Is there someone else living here?"

"Shane," she said. "Kaylee's dad."

"He's not on the rental agreement," I said. "You're supposed to do that so we can vet everyone."

"Yeah, well, like, he's only staying here temporary, like," said Sarah, "just 'till he gets a place of his own."

"But isn't he Kaylee's father?" I said. "Surely the two of you are living together, I mean, the three of you."

"Shut that frigging noise up," came loudly from Bed 1.

Sarah looked anxiously over her other shoulder then looked at me.

"Shane?" I asked and she nodded.

"Who the fuck are you?" said a belligerent voice.

I looked over at Bed 1 and there was a skinny, unshaven man in nothing but a dirty pair of boxer shorts and a baseball cap, scratching his armpit and staring blearily at me. Sarah leapt out of her chair then stood there helplessly.

"She's the landlord," she said.

"Penny Dorchester," I said, standing up. "Umm, pleased to meet you."

"Shit," he said then belched. "Gimme a beer, hon."

Sarah scuttled off to the kitchen and Shane sauntered over and sat in the armchair, legs spread wide.

“Landlord, huh,” he said, his eyes unfocused.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m here about the ...”

Sarah came back with a beer stubby and Shane grabbed it and took a long swallow then belched again.

“Where’s me smokes?” he demanded.

Sarah bent over and moved a couple of the empty cans beside the couch then picked up a packet of cigarettes and put them on the arm of the chair. Shane put the stubby between his legs and struggled to open the packet but managed to get one out while Sarah found a lighter.

“So’s why you here, then?” he demanded. “Ain’t you s’posed to give notice or sommat?”

“I’m serving a Breech Notice on you,” I said. “The rent hasn’t been paid for four weeks.”

“Right,” he said, taking another swig from the bottle. “Ain’t nothing to do with me, like. ‘Er place, see.”

“Are you living here?” I asked frostily.

“Course I bleeding am,” he said then seemed to remember something and looked at Sarah. “Ere, didn’t I give you the fucking rent money?”

“You took it back,” she said, quietly.

Shane lurched out of the chair aggressively and Sarah backed behind the couch but he struggled to keep his balance then fell back in the chair, splashing some beer down the front of his boxers.

“Oh god,” I thought, suddenly realising. “She didn’t fall down the stairs.”

He seemed to doze off then jerked awake and looked belligerently at

me.

"I can't be doing with this effing shit," he muttered and scratched his crotch. "I'm effing going back to bed."

He levered himself out of the chair, knocking the Breech Notice on the floor and dropped his cigarette inside the stubby and staggered off to Bed 1, the stubby sloshing a few drops with every second step. I watched him go, feeling quite disgusted then bent to pick up the Breech Notice and put it back on the arm of the chair. He slammed the door behind him and woke Kaylee up. She gave a few experimental cries then a full on wail.

"Oh, Kaylee's woken up," said Sarah anxiously and half ran to the room.

She reappeared a few moments later with Kaylee in her arms, rocking her and soothing her quietly but Kaylee wasn't having any of it.

"She wants feeding," said Sarah sitting down in the armchair, "umm ..."

It took me a second or two to realise why she hadn't gone to the kitchen.

"Oh, right, I'd better go," I said, getting up. "Although there's still the ..." and I nodded at the Notice.

"You don't have to go," said Sarah, "so long as you don't mind."

I sat down on the couch, angled so that I faced the TV. I tried to tell myself it was to give Sarah some privacy while she fed Kaylee but really it was because I felt a bit embarrassed. Absurd I know since breastfeeding is totally natural. Maybe it's because I've not had any children myself. It was even more absurd since, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Sarah wasn't in the least bit concerned. She seemed calm and relaxed and her eyes were full of love as she watched her baby.

"He didn't used to be like this," she said softly, glancing over at me then back at Kaylee.

“Shane?” I asked. “Why's he changed?”

“He lost his job not long after Kaylee was born,” she said. “A month or so, something like that. He's got another now but it's nights and he's got mixed up with the wrong people.”

“What sort of wrong people?” I asked.

“I don't know,” she said, “I've never met them but he was a nice guy until then. Now he's hyper and aggressive all the time. He used to dress nice too, now he just lives in his boxers.”

“Did he hit you?” I asked, unexpectedly.

She started then touched the side of her face.

“Nah,” she said, somewhat unconvincingly, “I fell down the stairs.”

“The stairs here?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I was taking Kaylee to the shops and tripped.”

“It was lucky you didn't drop Kaylee, then,” I said.

“She was in her stroller,” said Sarah.

I have to admit that I found the scenario a little unconvincing but I suppose it could have been true and even if it wasn't Sarah could well be at the point where she was beginning to believe it herself. Anyway, just because I didn't like the guy it didn't mean he was abusive towards her and there was no real evidence.

“Oh well,” I said. “Now, about the rent.”

Kaylee gave a loud burp and started to giggle happily so Sarah pulled her tee shirt down again and sat there cradling the baby.

“Can you give us some time?” she asked. “I'll pay it as soon as I can.”

“What happens to your benefit money?” I asked
“It just disappears, like,” she said, starting to look anxious again.

“Does Shane take it?” I asked but she didn't answer.

“What happens to his wages?” I asked. “Doesn't he help out at all?”

I'd already figured out that he wasn't officially living there so Sarah could get benefits as a single mother, which was between her and Centrelink.

“Sometimes,” she said, after a while.

“So how are you going to get the rent paid?” I asked.

“I'll find a way,” she said, “all I need is time.”

“You've had four weeks already,” I said gently. “And the Notice gives you another two weeks.”

“How about I give you an extra \$10 a week 'till it's paid off?” she asked.

“It's over a thousand dollars,” I said. “It'll take two years to pay off at \$10 a week, and that's assuming you don't get into any arrears again.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Isn't there anyone who can help you?” I asked. “Your parents perhaps?”

“Me mum's in Queensland,” she said. “I think she is anyway. Haven't seen her for years.”

“Your dad?” I asked,

“Never seen him,” she said, shrugging. “Could be dead for all I know.”

“Well,” I said, feeling rotten inside. “You've got two weeks to think of something but after that I'm afraid you'll have to find somewhere

else.”

She sat there unmoving, cradling Kaylee in her arms and then she started to cry which upset Kaylee who started to cry too. I felt like crying myself. I felt guilty, as though it was me who had brought her to this situation.

“I’m not a god-damned charity,” I told myself. “I’ve got a mortgage to pay on this place.”

“I’d better be going,” I said, standing up.

Sarah just sat there, the tears streaming down her face, trying to calm Kaylee.

“Umm, I’ll show myself out,” I said. “Umm, goodbye.”

I walked over to the door and opened it then closed it and walked back again. Sarah looked up at me numbly.

“You don’t have to stay with him, you know,” I said. “You could probably manage on your own if he didn’t take your benefits.”

“But how would I get him out?” she said. “He’s not going to just walk out calmly. What if he hurts Kaylee?”

“You could go somewhere else,” I said.

“Where the hell can I go?” she said. “I ain’t got no bond and you won’t give me a reference. I’m frigging stuck here ‘till you kick us out then we’ll be on the streets. Besides, he’ll still be here and he won’t be paying you no rent neither.”

“Oh that’s not a problem,” I said, an idea forming in my mind. “You’re the sole tenant so if you’re not here he’ll be squatting so I’ll just get the police in.”

“But where would I go?” she said.

“I’ve got another place,” I said slowly, not sure I was doing the right thing. “The current tenant is moving out in a few days and I don’t

have anyone else yet. You could go there for a while. It's a lot nicer than this place. It's a three bedroom house although it's a hundred a week more than this."

"I could never pay a hundred more," she said. "Not on benefits."

"No, I suppose not," I said. "But you could afford the rent here on your own?"

"I guess," she said. "But you said I can't stay here."

"How about I let you have the other place for the rent you're paying here?" I said. "I don't know, maybe for six months or so, until you can get yourself sorted. I could even let you sublet if you found someone you could share with. Maybe another girl with a young baby, not someone like, well, not Shane anyway. He did hit you, didn't he."

"No!" she said defensively. "I really did fall down the stairs."

"Did you really?" I asked. "How did you fall down the stairs without hurting Kaylee?"

"Shane was carrying her," she said.

"OK," I said. "Well, think about it. I do have a possible tenant and I can't put them off forever. Here's my phone number. Have a think and if you want it call me before Monday. It's up to you."

I rummaged in my bag and found a pen and wrote my number on the back of the envelope that had had the Notice in it. Sarah sat there, stroking Kaylee's head, just watching me.

"If I do," she said when I'd finished writing, "how do I move without Shane finding out?"

"He works nights?" I asked.

"Yeah, most nights," she said.

"I can send a couple of my guys round with the truck," I said. "They

could empty this place in a couple of hours and when he got back you'd be long gone. The house is on the other side of Dandenong so if you don't tell him where you're going he probably won't be able to find you and if he does just call the police."

She picked up the envelope and stared at my phone number.

"It'll be vacant on Monday," I said. "That's only five days away."

She didn't say anything, just stared at the envelope and cuddled Kaylee.

"Well, I'll be off," I said. "Let me know if you want it."

I started moving towards the door and Sarah realised I was leaving and got up.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll call you."

"Did you fall?" I asked casually. "Or were you pushed?"

Sarah didn't answer but the look on her face spoke volumes so I pulled the door shut behind me and made my way down the stairs.

"Oi," I exclaimed, "stop that!"

The little brat who'd been kicking his ball against the side of my SUV stuck his tongue out at me then grabbed his ball and ran off into one of the neighbouring units. I bent to inspect the side door but it seemed to be OK. The car was less than a year old and I really didn't want any damage as it was leased and leased cars need to be returned in good condition when their three years are up or you have to pay a penalty.

I got in the car and had some of the cold coffee to moisten my mouth then started it and moved off.

"Am I being stupid?" I asked myself. "Surely the sensible thing would be just to evict her and get new tenants for both places not saddle myself with someone who's probably going to cause endless trouble."

I brooded over it all the way home and found I was half hoping she wouldn't call.

"You're back late," said Darrell.

He was watching a movie on Netflix and caught me by surprise since I didn't think he'd notice when I got back.

"I've had a hell of a day," I said. "There was a flood in the factory when part of the roof blew off in that storm then I had to go and see one of my tenants who's got herself in arrears."

"Sounds brutal," he said. "You sit and relax and I'll go and reheat your dinner. I did a roast chicken."

"Nice," I said. "Thanks. I got a Maccas but my stomach couldn't face it. Chuck this in the bin for me, would you?"

I tossed him the cold cheeseburger, dumped my bag on the floor and collapsed in my chair.

"Only be a few minutes," he said, coming back into the lounge with a steaming mug of coffee. "Was there a lot of damage?"

"Not, not much," I said, kicking off my shoes. "Ohh, thanks, you're a darling. No, mostly it was the BMW belonging to the man who has the unit next door. The roof panel wrecked it."

"Hope he's insured then," said Darrell.

"It's my insurance that'll pay," I said. "The panel was mine. It'll put next year's premium up. Do you know if there are any drugs that smell like burnt plastic?"

"You mean, like, medication?" he asked, frowning.

"No, illegal ones," I said.

"Wouldn't have a clue," he said. "I smoked some grass in uni but that

smells of burning rope. I'll google it.”
He picked up his iPad and started fiddling with it.

“What's the movie?” I asked.

“One Hour Photo,” he said without looking up. “Robin Williams is a guy who runs a photo processing shop and uses it to stalk women.”

“Sounds riveting,” I said although it didn't particularly appeal to me.

“Whoa,” he said. “You catch someone at work smoking this?”

“What is it?” I asked. “No, it wasn't at work.”

“Crack cocaine,” he said, “or maybe meth. You don't want to go messing with that stuff. Where did you smell it? Just a sec.”

He dumped his iPad on the couch and disappeared into the kitchen. He came back with a tray of roast chicken, roast potatoes, peas, roast carrots and bread sauce.

“Looks good enough to eat,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Enjoy,” he said, sitting back down. “I felt in the mood for a roast but it's a shame you weren't back in time to have it fresh.”

“It delicious nuked as well,” I said tucking in. “The tenant in Quidditch is in arrears so I went round to find out what the problem was.”

“Right,” he said. “That's the rough area, isn't it. So your tenant's a druggie?”

“I'm pretty sure she isn't,” I said around a mouthful of chicken. “She seemed OK but the man she's living with was a nasty piece of work. She said he's changed a lot recently and there was this faint smell of burnt plastic in the place. Maybe they had burnt some plastic but maybe he's recently started smoking crack or something.”

“Best evict them,” said Darrell. “Druggies are a damned nuisance.

They'll wreck the place.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I suppose I ought to, only ...”

“You're too soft hearted,” said Darrell. “What're you going to do? Let them live there rent free?”

“No,” I said. “Umm, I'm pretty sure that man was violent. Sarah, my tenant, had a lot of bruises on her face.”

“Says here that addicts can't stay still for long and get very aggressive,” he said, looking at something on his iPad.

“Yeah, that fits,” I said. “Although Sarah seemed perfectly normal so I don't think she's taking it. She's got a young baby too.”

“Hmm, nasty situation,” said Darrell. “And if you call in the social services you'll probably never get any rent out of them. They'll become protected or something. So what's happening?”

“I don't know yet,” I said. “Although I may have done something very stupid.”

“Oh god, what have you done?” he said, looking alarmed.

“I told her that if she leaves him she can move into Pickett Street for the same rent she's paying at Quiddich,” I said.

“Hmm,” he said. “A noble gesture but she'll probably turn Pickett Street into an opium den as well. Let's hope she won't leave him.”

“No,” I said. “I'm pretty sure she wouldn't do that. She loves her baby too much. Hey, I think you'd like her. She's quite pretty and when she was breast feeding Kaylee I thought it would make an awesome photograph. Maybe you could get her some modelling jobs.”

Chapter Seven

“Hey Pen,” said Aiden, beaming as he opened the door. “Come on in, how's things?”

“Wonderful,” I said, going inside. “How's the world of international finance?”

“Totally awesome,” he said. “The market's been going wild.”

We pretended to kiss each other's cheeks and I backed off quickly before he had a chance to grope my backside. I couldn't stand him but I was civil because he was Jenny's 'partner'. They were married but for some strange reason known only to themselves they referred to each other as their 'partner'. I wasn't sure what Aiden did but he liked to make out he was a big wheel in the money markets although I was pretty sure he was a very small and insignificant little cog. Still, when your friends get into stable relationships with someone you don't like, you either lose a friend or gain an irritation and I didn't have that many friends.

“No Darrell tonight?” he asked.

“He's got a wedding,” I said. “Moonlit vineyard. Should make for some wonderful images. I brought some wine, what shall I do with it?”

“Ohhh,” he said taking the bottle, “a 2010 Penfolds Bin 389 Cabernet Shiraz, how delightful. Not as good as the '96 which had an incredible black fruit on the nose but the mid-palate chocolately oak should be apparent in the unusually long finish.”

“Yeah, I thought you'd like it,” I said, leaving off the 'you pretentious twat'.

“I'll just put it in the fridge to chill,” he said rising to the opportunity to show off. “A wine like this is best served at 20.5 degrees precisely.”

“Really?” I said. “I thought 19.95 degrees was more commonly preferred.”

To be honest I didn't have a clue and cared even less. I'll drink the stuff at whatever temperature it comes at as all wines taste much the same to me. I can barely tell the difference between red and white without looking at it.

"There is a school of thought on that," he said uncertainly then rallied. "Perhaps we can compromise and split the difference. Call it 20.25, hey?"

"You're the expert," I said. "Where's Jenny?"

"She's out on the patio," he said happy to have been called an expert, "with the others. Go on through."

I went through the hallway and out of the back door onto the patio. It reeked of citronella from the artfully placed anti-insect burners.

"Penny!" called Jenny, spotting me and coming over. "You made it, how wonderful! You know Portia and Dennis, don't you."

"Nice to meet you again," I said, smiling at two complete strangers. "It's been a while, hasn't it."

"Yes, delightful," said Portia. "Wasn't it at the Wycombs, last Easter?" Dennis just smiled blankly.

"Yes, I think so," I said, wondering who the Wycombs were. "How are they?"

"They're getting divorced," she said. "And if you ask me it's not a moment too soon."

"Ah, right," I said. "Absolutely."

"Hello Pen," said George, coming over with a couple of glasses of wine. He gave me a peck on the cheek and one of the glasses. "No Darrell?"

"He's working," I said. "Beth not here?"

“She's in the toilet,” he said.

“I was hoping Darrell wouldn't come,” said Jenny. “If he had it would have made fourteen of us which would have ruined everything.”

“Thirteen?” I said, wondering if I'd only been invited to make an odd number. “Who else is coming?”

“Allissa and Jeremy,” she said. “And my mum and dad. They're bringing some friends of theirs.”

“Oh great,” I said. “I haven't seen your parents for a while.”

“Yo, losers!” shouted Jeremy from the patio door. “We're here now, let's get this party started!”

He shimmied across the patio with a bottle of wine in each hand and Allissa hiding behind him with a large plate of iced cup cakes. Whatever the occasion, Allissa could be relied on to produce iced cup cakes.

“Hi,” she said shyly to everyone and half ran to the table. She was as shy as Jeremy was extrovert, even with me and Jenny. The three of us had been at uni together.

“We can't start until everyone's here,” said Jenny giving Jeremy a hug.

“Row-ow-ough,” he growled, grabbing Jenny's bottom with both his hands and trying to bite her throat. Jenny giggled and Allissa smiled indulgently. Aiden gave him a sour look then smiled happily when he saw I was watching him.

“Never changes, does he,” he said.

“So you got any beers,” said Jeremy finally releasing Jenny, “or is this another of your wine fanciers freak fests?”

“In the esky,” said Aiden. “Aus is doing well against New Zealand, aren't they.”

They went over to join George and Dennis at the barbecue to discuss the latest developments in the test cricket.

“That’s a lovely dress, Allissa,” said Jenny. “Where did you get it?”

“Umm,” said Allissa.

“She made it herself,” said Beth coming back from the toilet. “Didn’t you, hon.”

“Umm,” said Allissa, looking round to see where Jeremy was.

“You are so clever,” said Portia, coming over. “I can barely sew on a button, let alone make a dress.”

“Did you get a baby sitter tonight, Portia?” asked Jenny.

“No, they’re with my mother,” she said.

“Oh sitters are so expensive, aren’t they,” said Beth.

“Your parents are here,” called over Aiden. “I just saw their car pull up.”

“I’ll go and let them in,” said Jenny.

“You’ve changed your hairstyle, haven’t you?” asked Portia. “Didn’t you used to have it in a hime?”

“No, I’ve always had it in a lob,” I said, “it’s easiest. It’s usually in a ponytail anyway because of the machinery.”

“Machinery?” she asked, looking puzzled. “I thought you were a journalist.”

“No, I’m in metal fabrication,” I said. “I’m an engineer. What do you do?”

“I’m a mortuary beautician,” she said.

“Ohh,” I said, wondering what to say next as it rather killed the conversation.

“Penny runs her own company,” said Beth.

“It's not really my company,” I said. “It's the family company.”

“But engineering?” said Portia. “Isn't that a rather dirty occupation?”

“Hence my hairstyle,” I said. “Simple, efficient and cost effective. What more could I ask?”

Portia was clearly baffled by my answer.

“The drinks are over there,” said Jenny coming out onto the patio with her parents. “Come over here and I'll introduce you.”

“Girls,” she said, interrupting our going nowhere conversation, “I'd like you to meet a couple of friends of my parents, Beth, Allissa, Penny, Portia, this is Judy and Richard.”

“Hey, lovely to meet you,” said Beth, holding out her hand.

“We meet again,” said a familiar voice from the shadow of the doorway. “Hello Penny.”

“What are you doing here?” I said when he appeared in the flickering of the citronella torches.

“Buggered if I know,” he said. “I just go where the wife tells me. I've learnt not to ask why.”

“You two know each other?” said Judy.

“This is the woman I told you about,” said Richard. “We've been having an affair for years.”

“You what?” I said, taken aback.

“Take no notice of him,” said Judy. “If any woman ever looked at him

twice he'd run away."

"I never run," said Richard. "It's too undignified."

"Too fat, more like," said Judy. "He tries to pretend he's clever but really he's just insecure."

"Is that why he dresses like that?" I asked then nearly bit my tongue off. Judy was wearing a strange outfit that looked like a hippie cast off from some seventies alternative Op Shop. Richard, on the other hand, was almost respectable in a vivid green Harley Davidson sweat shirt and red corduroy trousers with frayed hems. To complete his ensemble he was wearing a white and blue bandanna and thongs.

"I gave up on his clothes sense thirty years ago," she said. "I'm just happy these days if he isn't naked."

"You used to like me naked," said Richard, sucking in his stomach and pushing out his beard.

"Not at dinner parties, dear," she said. "It's called being appropriate."

"I am always appropriate," he said. "You have a distorted sense of context."

Judy raised an eyebrow and didn't bother to answer.

"Hello hello," said Jeremy coming over. "No one told me this was fancy dress."

"You see?" said Richard. "He understands."

"The only thing I understand is that there's a gorgeous woman here that I haven't been introduced to," said Jeremy, leering at Judy. "Where've you been all my life?"

"She's been defining the context," said Richard. "Why don't you get her a drink?"

"What do you mean?" asked Jeremy.

"If you want to get to know a woman you need to buy her a drink," said Richard. "Even I know that. I'll have a lemonade, thanks."

"You're confusing the poor boy," said Judy and Jeremy winced. "Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

"Oh, erm, yes, right, this way," he said. "You've met my wife, Allissa, haven't you?"

They moved off, leaving me alone with Richard.

"Why did you say we were having an affair?" I asked.

"Because she worries if I tell the truth," he said. "It's out of character."

"Oh," I said. "But didn't you say in your email that you always tell the truth?"

"Oh god, I hope not," he said. "Do you think that boy is going to bring me a lemonade?"

"I doubt it," I said. "I think you scared him."

"Oh well," said Richard. "Let's go in search of some exciting beverage to imbibe. No, I think what I said is that I always argue. In any event I usually make things up to illustrate my point. If I have a point, that is. I often don't."

"Ohh, like when you said I was looking for my father's approval?" I said, walking with him to the drinks table.

"Isn't everyone looking for their father's approval?" he asked. "I know I used to.

"Used to? Don't you any more?" I asked.

"He died a disappointed man," said Richard. "I never did manage to match his expectations, aha!"

He spotted a bottle of Schweppes lemonade and grabbed it.

“Are you driving?” I asked, “or don't you drink?”

“I drink copious amounts of coffee,” he said, “but no alcohol.”

“So you stay clear headed so you can argue?” I asked.

“No, not particularly. It's actually easier to argue when drunk since you don't need to worry about any form of logic or even continuity. I just don't like the taste, that's all.”

“So you argue with everything?” I asked, pouring myself some more wine since Richard obviously wasn't going to do it.

“Ohh, that was sneaky,” he said. “Well done,” and took a long swallow of lemonade before topping up his glass again.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“If I say yes then I'm agreeing with you,” he said, “which means I'm not arguing with something which makes me self contradictory. But if I say no that would make me a liar. I think I'll just say wu instead.”

“Wu?”

“It's a Chinese word,” he said, eyeing the plates of food on the other table. “It more or less means that yes or no aren't appropriate answers. Umm, it's more like saying that the question is in the wrong context, that the questioner wants a yes/no answer when neither yes nor no has any meaning.”

“Is that true or are you making it up?” I asked.

“I read it in a book somewhere,” he said. “Doesn't mean it's true though.”

“Hah,” I said. “I expected you to ask me what truth is.”

“Really?” he said, looking at me with raised eyebrows. “You're, what, 35? and you don't know what truth is? What is the world coming to?”

“36,” I said, “and I’m really not going to get into some existential debate on the nature of truth.”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” he said, “not me. I was told this was going to be a dinner party. Do you suppose I was lied to?”

“If you want something to eat, help yourself,” I said. “There’s plenty of food over there.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t do that,” he said. “The boss would tell me off.”

“The boss?” I said, a little confused. “Who’s your boss? I thought you were unemployed?”

“Judy,” he said. “My better half, well, better three quarters more like.”

“You really do talk nonsense sometimes,” I said, laughing.

“Oh dear,” he said. “Just because something makes no sense to you, it doesn’t mean it’s nonsense. It just means you’re not understanding.”

“He does talk nonsense,” said Judy coming up behind me. “It’s more like two thirds than three quarters.”

“That’s her way of saying I’m nothing,” said Richard. “Enjoying the party, dear?”

“Excuse me?” I said. “How do you make out from that that you’re nothing?”

“No wonder your business is struggling,” he said. “An engineer who thinks a half can be three quarters or two thirds? That’s only possible if the something is nothing.”

“I thought it was a metaphor,” I said.

“Ahh, you could be right there,” he said. “Perhaps your business isn’t failing, after all.”

“Is that where you two know each other from?” asked Judy.

“He sent me a job application,” I said.

“Oh, that was you?” she asked. “That engineering business? I should have guessed. There aren't that many people he likes.”

“He likes me?” I asked, surprised. “You could have fooled me.”

She laughed. “He's talking to you,” she said. “He only talks to people he likes. If he didn't like you you simply wouldn't exist for him. Richard, show her your mobile phone.”

“Why?” he asked. “I'm sure she's seen mobile phones before.”

“Go on,” said Judy. “Show her your contacts list.”

“Oh, if I must,” he said. He got out one of those old fashioned pre-smart folding mobile phones and handed it to her.

“You see?” said Judy, thumbing through the contacts. “There's only four contacts, this phone's number, since he always forgets it, mine, Optus Recharge and DLE, which is your phone number.”

“Umm, I don't know how to take that,” I said. “Is it a compliment?”

“Always take things as a compliment,” said Richard, “unless you're looking for a fight.”

“Actually that's a good philosophy,” I said. “Why did you put me in contacts as DLE and not my name?”

“I couldn't remember your name,” he admitted, “but I remembered the company was DLE so I put you in as DLE, Distinctive Lady of Elegance.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, taken aback yet again.

“It also stand for Divorce Level Event,” said Judy drily, “so don't change it, there's a dear.”

“Quite,” he said, smiling happily. “Do you suppose we'll be eating

soon?”

“Actually Jenny likes to make people work for their food,” I said.

“It's strange how you can go off people quite suddenly, isn't it,” said Richard. “Shall we go now or do you want to stay for a bit longer?”

“What do we have to do?” asked Judy.

“I'm not sure,” I said, “but it's usually quite fun. Ohh, perfect timing. I think she's going to make an announcement.”

Jenny had gone to stand on the patio and Aiden went to stand beside her with a half empty wine bottle and a knife. He tapped the bottle with the knife a few times and it made a half hearted clanking sound. None of the others took any notice so he called for quiet instead.

“Thank you all for coming,” said Jenny when everyone had shut up. “You may have noticed that this is Friday the thirteenth and there are thirteen of us here.”

“Actually you told us there were thirteen,” said George. “That's why you invited Penny to get the number right.”

“Yeah, thanks for pointing out to everyone that I'm just here to make up the numbers,” I said. “Call yourself a friend.”

“Actually I never did call myself your friend,” he retorted. “More of a failed lover.”

“A dismal failure,” I said.

“He was your lover?” piped up Beth, glaring at George.

“Only in his dreams,” I said.

“I've never dreamt of Penny,” said George quickly. “Only of you, my beloved.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “I'm watching you, OK, and don't you forget it.”

"It's funny how the word dreams has a dual meaning," said Richard. "In the sense of being an ultimate desire as well as a construct of the unconscious mind which can be highly undesirable."

"Not now," hissed Judy.

"As I was saying," said Jenny. "There are thirteen of us and it's Friday the thirteenth so we are having a Bad Luck party and I thought ... "

"Did you know there's a word for that?" asked Richard.

"A word for what?" asked Jenny.

"Paraskevidekatriaphobia." said Richard. "It's a fear of Friday the thirteenth."

"I think I suffer from that myself," said Aiden. "How do you say it again?"

"Para-skev-id-i-cat-tria-phobia," said Richard obligingly.

"Right," said Aiden. "How do you spell it?"

"P-a-r-a- ..." began Richard but Judy whacked him in the stomach with her elbow so he stopped.

"Sorry," she said, smiling sweetly. "You were saying, Jenny?"

Jenny smiled, perhaps a little bleakly as her little performance was dying a rapid death.

"Yes," she said. "A Bad Luck party so while we have dinner, I want you all to think of an example of some bad luck you've had and then we'll share the stories afterwards and there's a prize for the best, or should I say the worst bad luck story."

"What's the prize?" asked Jeremy. "A quick cuddle in a corner with you?"

"Noooo," said Jenny as Aiden gave him a dirty look. "It's this bottle of

wine. A 2010 Penfolds Bin 389 Cabernet Shiraz. It's worth about \$120."

"\$99.95 actually," I said acidly. "That's the one I brought."

Chapter Eight

“So who wants to start?” said Jenny brightly when we'd all acquired plates of slightly dubious looking barbecued sausages, chicken wings and salads and topped up our glasses of whatever we were drinking. The immediate effect of her question was to make the black and pink sausages more attractive and most of us munched enthusiastically on the grounds that it's bad manners to talk with your mouth full.

“How about you, Jeremy?” she said after looking around at each of us in turn.

“Can't help you, sweetie,” he said cheerfully, waving half a sausage. “I have nothing but good luck all the time. Question of attitude, you see. Think positively, I always say.”

Jenny curled her lip at him.

“Why don't you start us off?” I suggested before popping a cherry tomato in my mouth.

“OK,” she said, “although I've no idea where to begin, I've been having bad luck all my life. How about ..., ohh, I know, yes, remember the spa, Aiden?”

“That one in Boronia?” he said. “I'll never forget the damned thing.”

“I don't remember you having a spa,” said Deb. “In fact I don't even remember you living in Boronia.”

“Oh, it was years ago, mum,” said Jenny. “I think you two were on that extended trip to Europe. Anyway, Aiden and I had decided to move in together and we'd found this place in Boronia to rent. It was a nice place, only two bedrooms and a bit run down which is why it was reasonably cheap.”

“I was only a couple of years out of university,” interjected Aiden. “I hadn't been working long so I hadn't started making real money by then.”

“Yes, well, the thing is this house had a spa. It was outside on the verandah,” said Jenny putting her plate down so she could wave her hands about to illustrate. “Actually, it took up most of the verandah, didn’t it, Aide.”

“That’s right,” he said. “But the property backed on to the National Park so there was a nice view from the spa.”

“It was lovely,” said Jenny. “In the early mornings you could look out over the trees and watch the sun come up and the birds and everything. It always made me feel very close to nature. Anyway, that day I thought it would be lovely and romantic to have a candlelit dinner on the verandah when Aide got home.”

“In the spa,” said Aiden, winking.

“Ohhh, all in the nuddy then,” said Jeremy, leering. “Did you take any photos?”

“It wasn’t like that,” said Jenny, going slightly pink. “Anyway, I checked there was plenty of water in the spa and lit some of those little candles, you know, the ones you put in those little lanterns, I’ve forgotten what they’re called ...”

“Tea candles?” asked Beth.

“Yes, them, anyway I put half a dozen of them in the spa so they were floating on top then I decided to have some incense going so I went back inside to get some. I think they were sandalwood or maybe jasmine, no, I’m pretty sure they were sandalwood ...”

“Rose would have been more romantic,” said Beth, “or maybe patchouli.”

“Ohh no,” said Judy. “patchouli is more for money and prosperity. Vanilla is the best for pure lust or perhaps musk.”

“Is it really?” said Richard. “Why’d we use sage then and not either of those?”

“Sage is good for domestic harmony, dear,” she said, patting his hand.

“Doesn't seem to work very well,” he said, leaning sideways so he could look at her properly.

“Actually it works surprisingly well,” she said. “Let Jenny finish her story.”

I found that quite funny and laughed although no one else seemed to get it.

“Oh, yes,” said Jenny, “as I was saying, I had these lit candles floating in the spa and I went inside to get some incense and then I got sidetracked by dinner and when Aiden got home he went out to get in the spa and it was on fire!”

“I wondered what the smell was when I got home,” said Aiden, “but Jenny said it was the incense. The wind had blown all the candles into a corner and the wooden overhang had caught light.”

“Oh my god,” said Portia while the rest of us were laughing. “What did you do?”

“Oh I just splashed water from the spa on it,” said Aiden. “That put it out pretty quickly.”

“That sounds like some real bad luck,” said Frank.

“That wasn't the worst of it,” said Jenny.

“No,” said Aiden, sourly. “It cost almost four thousand to repair. We said it was wear and tear but the landlord didn't agree and took us to VCAT.”

“Well, I can beat that,” said Dennis, “if only on the money side. In my last job a group of us had a syndicate for TattsLotto. There were fifteen or sixteen of us, I seem to remember, and we paid in a few dollars each week and we'd split any winnings. We never won much, just a little every now and then to keep it interesting. Still, this one week I was off sick for a couple of days and didn't put in my sub that

week and, pure bad bloody luck, the syndicate won \$85,000. Just my bloody bad luck or I would have pocketed \$5300. I was bloody gutted.”

“Shouldn't everyone in the syndicate have shared it?” asked Deb.

“I suppose,” said Dennis, “but the agreement was that only people who'd paid into the winning week got a share. Otherwise some would have never paid in but claimed a share regardless.”

“Allissa knew a chap like that, didn't you, Lis,” said Jeremy. “Go on, tell them about Doug.”

“Umm,” said Allissa, fumbling with her plate.

“There was this chap called Doug who worked in her office,” said Jeremy. “Never won a thing in his life. Always said he'd been cursed by a witch doctor or something. Anyway, the company social club had a raffle to raise money for something or other, I don't remember what. What was it Lis?”

“Umm,” said Allissa, “umm.”

“No, I can't remember either,” said Jeremy. “Still, first prize was a \$200 platter of meat and there were three or four prizes of \$10 each. Anyway, Doug won one of the \$10 prizes in the draw.”

“Doesn't sound like bad luck to me,” I said.

“Yeah, but the thing is,” said Jeremy. “Doug's ticket was only one away from the meat tray ticket. If he'd had the next ticket he'd have won that instead.”

“I suppose that does qualify as bad luck,” said Jenny, “but it didn't happen to either of you personally so it doesn't count.”

“Damn, that's my bad luck then,” said Jeremy grinning. “Does that count?”

“Yes but it's pathetic,” said Aiden. “Won't win the wine bottle. You

want to hear mine?”

“Go on then,” said Jeremy, “although I bet it’ll be just as pathetic.”

“Pah,” said Aiden. “First job I had after uni this girl started not long after I did. Gorgeous little thing she was, and I started chatting her up and asked her out, you know, as you do. This was before I met you, hon,” when he noticed Jenny’s look. “Anyway, she said no and the next day I got the sack. Turned out she was the boss’s daughter and was there on work experience. She was only fifteen. How’s that for bad luck, eh?”

The rest of us fell silent and Jenny glowered at him while he looked around happily, convinced he’d won the Bad Luck competition.

“Sound’s more like Jenny’s bad luck for marrying you,” I wanted to say but managed to restrain myself since, by the look on Jenny’s face she was coming to that conclusion herself.

Frank, Jenny’s father, cleared his throat, looking a little embarrassed while Deb busied herself with putting some more salad on her plate.

“Umm, yes,” he said. “Umm, here’s my little contribution. Three or four years ago I finally got around to concreting the driveway. Debs had been on at me for years so I made the effort, you see. I spent a couple of days doing all the preparations then laid the concrete and spent hours getting it all nicely smooth with a bit of a camber so the rain ran off and everything then I put some tapes up to warn people not to walk on it until it had dried.”

“I imagine someone walked across it?” asked Richard.

“More or less,” said Frank. “Next door’s dog. Chased a cat or something under the tape and all the way up the drive. Still got the little bugger’s footprints all over the drive since it had set before I noticed.”

“Why didn’t you tell them about the time we were following that farmer?” asked Deb.

"I thought I'd leave that to you as it's a much better story," said Frank. "Pass me some more chicken, would you?"

"There're plenty more sausages," said Aiden who'd done the barbecuing.

"Actually, I'm more in the mood for chicken," said Frank as Deb put a couple of wings on his plate.

Richard got up and helped himself to some of the salad and a couple of bread rolls and started making them into salad sandwiches.

"This was, ohh, forty years ago," said Deb. "Jenny hadn't been born then but Frank had a motorbike and sidecar and it being a nice spring Sunday we decided to go over to Mount Baw Baw for a picnic."

"I bolted the sidecar on for the day," said Frank, "Debs never did like riding pillion so she had all the food and drink in it with her."

"That's right, and we were going up the road to Mount Baw Baw which is quite steep and windy," said Deb. "We got stuck behind a tractor pulling a trailer. There was this one very steep bit on a sharp bend and the tractor slowed right down so Frank was up close behind it and the damned trailer came off."

There were some theatrical gasps of horror since we already knew they survived the incident just fine.

"So did the trailer crash into you?" asked Richard, sitting heavily on his stool and dropping one of his salad rolls on the ground. He picked it up and inspected it for dirt then bit into it.

"Oh no," said Deb. "It was on a chain and the tractor was going slowly anyway. No, the trailer just upended and dumped its load all over us."

"I'm betting it wasn't hay," said Dennis.

"No," said Frank, "go on, love, tell 'em."

“Manure,” she said distastefully. “About a ton of semi-liquid manure. Took me weeks to get rid of the smell from my clothes.”

“Couldn't eat the food neither,” said Frank. “Talk about bad luck.”

“God, that must have stunk,” I said.

“I think that's probably the winner,” said Jeremy. “It stinks even more than yours, Aide!”

“Mine was pure bad luck,” said Aiden glowering at Jeremy. “Sounds to me like Frank was driving too close anyway. More like good luck than bad since he could have had a nasty accident.”

“Don't get your panties in a wad, mate,” said Jeremy, holding up his hands placatingly. “Just saying.”

“Umm, I've got a nice romantic one,” said George, the peace lover. “At least it would have been if my luck had been better.”

“Come on, tell us then,” said Portia, looking as though she'd rather see Aiden and Jeremy come to blows. It wouldn't have though as Jeremy was a master at getting under Aiden's skin and knew exactly when to back off.

“Umm, I'd been dating Beth for a couple of years when I decided she was the one and that I wanted to marry her,” he said.

Beth started to giggle and Jenny, Judy, Allissa and I inched forward since we all like a bit of romance. Deb seemed to be lost in her memories of being swamped by manure. Richard, on the other hand, picked up a serviette and started to mop up the salad cream that had dripped onto his sweat shirt and Dennis started offering wine top-ups.

“Beth was working at Parliament House at the time,” said George. “She was working as an evening secretary for the Cabinet. Minutes of meetings and so on had to be typed up ready for the next day, you see and I thought it would be romantic if I got a friend of mine to play the violin while I waited at the top of the escalators at Parliament Station with some flowers so she could see me as she was coming up.”

“Did you know Parliament has the longest escalators in the Southern hemisphere?” asked Richard, looking up from the stain on his sweat shirt. “Takes one minute twenty five seconds to get from top to bottom.”

“And from bottom to top,” said George. “Which is why I thought the building tension of wondering why I was there with flowers and a violinist would make it very romantic. The idea was that she would be able to see me kneeling at the top waiting for her.”

“I bet there were people in front of her on the escalator,” said Dennis, “so she didn't see you.”

“Ahh, no, I thought of that,” said George. “She started work at 6 in the evening so everyone was going the other way, you see.”

“So why was it bad luck?” asked Jenny. “She obviously said yes.”

“Let me finish the story,” said George. “My violinist friend and I were there at the top of the escalator when I saw Beth get on it at the bottom so he started to play and I knelt down with the ring in one hand and the flowers in the other hand so she could see, only I knelt too close to the top of the escalator and my trouser leg got caught between the top of the escalator and the moving stair bit.”

“Oh Jesus,” said Dennis.

“I didn't know what to do,” said George, “so I stayed kneeling as she came up and a minute and a half is a long time when something is eating your trousers and, well, to cut a long story short, most of my trouser leg got ripped off and disappeared inside and did something to the mechanism and the whole thing ground to a halt so she had to walk up the last thirty steps or so to meet a guy who was standing there half naked. I'd stood up, you see, when the thing died, more or less in just my underpants.”

Richard and Frank started to laugh.

“So I'm standing there, trying to hide my bits with the flowers and Beth had to climb up the steps and admit to the world she knew me

and my bloody mate was still playing the violin so everyone was looking.”

“Oh god, Beth, what did you do?” asked Jenny, looking horrified and fascinated at the same time.

“I ignored him,” said Beth. “Especially when I got to the top and he held out the flowers so everyone could see his Collingwood underpants. I pretended not to know him and ran out of the station as quickly as I could and hid at work so he couldn't find me because he didn't have a security pass. I was mortified and swore I'd never see him again.”

“Obviously you did though,” said Deb.

“Yeah,” said Beth. “He went and bought some more trousers then sat on the steps outside Parliament House until I came out after work and proposed to me there. It turned out to be very romantic after all.”

“Tell them about your car,” said George.

“That wasn't bad luck,” said Beth. “That was just my own stupidity.”

“So was George's,” said Aiden. “Only a fool would kneel on the top of an escalator.”

“Oh, so you've done that too?” asked Jeremy.

“Of course I bloody haven't,” said Aiden angrily.

“Sorry, my bad,” said Jeremy. “I thought you were talking from experience.”

“George got me a new car a couple of years ago,” said Beth hastily. “It's got one of those TV cameras at the back so you can see where you are reversing.”

“Oh, those ones with the screen in the dashboard?” asked Frank.

“Yes,” said Beth. “George dropped me off to collect it then he drove

home and I drove mine back but I stopped off at the supermarket for a few things on the way and decided I'd try reversing into the parking bay. You know those places where people leave their trolleys when they've unloaded them? With the rail around to protect the trolleys? Anyway I was so busy concentrating on the screen so I didn't reverse into the car in the bay behind that I didn't notice the rail and I scraped the side of my brand new car and ripped the wing panel off."

"Oh no," I said, probably more horrified at her driving skills than the damage since cars are designed to crumple easily to absorb the energy of an impact. Very often the shock wave of a collision can cause more damage than the impact itself, at least at higher speeds than parking in a car park. "What did you do?"

"I burst into tears," she said. "George had to come and get me."

"What happened to the car?" asked Judy, looking mildly curious.

"The insurance repaired it," said George, "then we sold it and bought another one."

"I refused to drive it," said Beth. "I didn't even want to get in it after that."

"I know what you mean," said Portia. "A few months ago I was shopping in Prahran and I parked my car nice and neatly in a slot. When I got back I found the car behind had hit it when they went and had crumpled the bumper and side panel but that wasn't the worst of it. When they hit my car it got shunted forward a bit and pushed the front wheel a couple of centimetres onto the pavement and I got a huge fine for that."

"Yeah that sounds pretty unlucky," said Jenny. "Still, we've got three more to go. How about you Pen?"

"Me?" I said. "Yeah, right. Remember that storm last Wednesday? It blew a panel off the factory roof which landed on the BMW of the man who's got the next door unit."

"Was it badly damaged?" asked Jeremy.

"It was a write-off," I said. "Then on top of that I had to go round afterwards and see a tenant of mine who's in arrears because her partner has recently taken up crack."

"Crack? You mean he's cracked the wall or something?" asked Deb.

"No, he's a druggie," I said. "Crack cocaine."

Dennis whistled. "Shit, that is bad luck," he said. "What are you doing about it?"

"I served a Breach Order on her," I said and noticed out of the corner of my eye that Richard had jerked his head around to look at me but I ignored him. "She'll be out in a few days."

"Sensible," said Aiden. "The last thing you want is a drug addict as a tenant. They don't like paying the rent."

"How about you, Judy?" asked Richard. "You don't look the sort to have much bad luck."

"Mmm, I do from time to time," she said. "In fact this evening is a good example."

"This evening? You mean here?" asked Jenny.

"Yes," said Judy. "Your dinner party actually," and she smiled sweetly.

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Jenny looking puzzled and insulted at the same time.

"There was cucumber in the salad," said Judy. "Delicious though it was, cucumber gives Richard flatulence. It's just my bad luck to have to live with that for the rest of the night."

"Ahh, the gift that goes on giving," said Richard and roared with laughter. Jeremy joined in and the rest of us half-heartedly tittered, not quite knowing if she was joking or not. Fortunately Richard didn't try to prove the point.

After he'd wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes with the salad cream stained serviette he looked around.

"Ah, my turn is it?" he asked. "Last but not least, hey?"

He turned to look at Judy who, incidentally, hadn't even smiled at her bad luck story which sort of suggested she hadn't been joking.

"Shall I tell them about Pine Gap?" he asked.

"Tell them whatever you want," she said.

"OK," he said, then took a drink of lemonade. "In the mid nineties I was working at the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap out near Alice Springs. I was involved in developing a secure hardware based communications system for the joint CIA and ASIO involvement in Project Echelon."

"You worked for Australian Intelligence?" asked Dennis, visibly impressed.

"I'm not allowed to talk about it," said Richard solemnly.

"So why are you talking about it?" I asked.

"The bit I'm talking about isn't highly classified," he said turning to face me so the wink wasn't visible to anyone else.

"OK," I said. "That's fine. So long as you aren't giving away any secrets."

"Quite," he said. "What I can tell you is that I was part of a team that developed a variant that wasn't secure enough for Project Echelon ..."

"What's Project Echelon?" asked Frank, leaning forward. "If I'm allowed to ask, that is."

"It's a global system for the mass surveillance of digital communications," said Richard. "Run jointly by America, Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. Obviously I can't give you any

more details but the device my team developed, although not secure enough for Echelon, was good enough for the International Space Station which, as you may know, was launched in 1998. Unfortunately we didn't finish development until 1999 so we had to install it on the ISS while it was in orbit. I was chosen to do that installation so in late 1999 I went to Houston to take a shuttle to the ISS. Unfortunately, and this was just my bad luck, I came down with a mild case of flu and my stand-in had to go to the ISS and install the device instead. So, you see, even though it's a low orbit, if it hadn't been for that bit of bad luck with the flu, I would be an astronaut now and not just a retired old has-been."

He said all that with such convincing gravity that I almost believed it myself.

"Good god," said George. "You're an astronaut?"

The others were watching him open mouthed with astonishment, except Judy, who now had a half smile.

"No," said Richard, putting his plate on the table and dabbing his mouth with the dirty serviette. "An unlucky failed astronaut. So, I think mine was the last story. How does this work? Does Jenny make the decision or do we vote or what?"

Chapter Nine

"I'm giving it to George," said Jenny decisively. "Even though it wasn't really bad luck he deserves it for persisting and not giving up despite Beth pretending not to know him."

There were a few groans of disappointment and a couple of catcalls and Jenny ceremoniously presented him with the bottle of wine. I got myself a coke since I had to drive home and one glass of wine was more than enough.

"You did make that story up, didn't you,?" I said to Richard when I sat back down.

"Loosely based on Big Bang Theory," he said, "although in the show Howard the engineer built a space toilet and actually did go to the space station. No one would have believed that so I tweaked it a bit."

"Do you think anyone believed your story?" I asked.

"Probably not but who wants the truth at a party like this?" he said. "They wanted a good story and maybe I gave them one, whether they believed it or not. Certainly mine was different, unlike that lady's, over there. I've heard variations of the tractor load of manure story plenty of times. I think I even read it in Reader's Digest once, one of those humorous anecdotes you get between the articles."

"Mine was true," I said.

"I dare say but storm damage is so commonplace, isn't it. Everyone has stories about storm damage," he said, scratching his beard. "Tell me more about this tenant of yours. That sounds a lot more interesting."

"Not much to tell," I said. "She's in arrears, she's not responded to warnings so I've served the Breech Notice and she has to pay up or go."

"And you're sure she's an addict?" he asked.

“She could be,” I said, “but I doubt it. No, it’s her partner. She said he’s changed a lot recently and there was a smell of burnt plastic in the place which I looked up on Google. That’s the smell of crack and his personality change seems to confirm it.”

“And you condemn her on the basis of that flimsy evidence?” he asked.

“I’m pretty sure he’s been abusive as well,” I said.

“More idle speculation or do you have any evidence?” asked Richard.

I gave him a look while I wondered how much to tell him then decided to tell him everything about my visit. After all, he claimed to be good at arguing and maybe he’d be able to help me clarify my thoughts.

“Aha!” he exclaimed when I was done. “I thought so.”

“What do you mean, you thought so?” I said. “You think I was stupid for offering her the other house?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said, “but I was surprised when you told the others you were evicting her. You hadn’t struck me as the ruthless type. No, giving her a chance is far more in keeping with your character, at least on my limited understanding of you.”

“Hmm, maybe,” I said. “I’ve got investment properties to make money though. I didn’t get them to be a charity.”

“Is that you speaking or your father?” he asked.

I narrowed my eyes and stared at him.

“What’s my father got to do with this?” I asked.

“How would I know?” he said. “I have no idea what your father was like or what kind of upbringing you had. It just seems to me that you aren’t the profit focused business executive you pretend to be.”

“What do you mean, ‘I pretend to be’?” I asked. “I run a business and

I have a number of investment properties and they all exist to make a profit.”

He smiled and drank some more of his lemonade.

“Oh, I do think our hostess has some more food for us,” he said, looking over at the patio door. “I wonder what that is?”

“Time for some desserts,” called Jenny, emerging with a platter with a large white oblong on it. “Aiden, would you get the cheese and crackers?”

“Sure thing, Jen,” he said jumping up. “Jenny does wonderful desserts, this is why we’re both getting so fat!”

“You’re not getting fat,” I said as Aiden disappeared into the kitchen. I could see Jenny was a bit hurt by his comment. “You’re still as slim as you were at uni.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile and put her dessert on the table.

“It looks delicious,” said Judy. “What is it?”

“It’s my own version of tiramisu,” said Jenny as Aiden came back out with a selection of crackers and cheeses. “It’s basically sponge soaked in butterscotch schnapps and frozen inside an egg and cream mix with grated chocolate on top. It’s awfully sweet though so there’s cheese instead if you’d rather.”

“Sounds delicious but awfully fattening,” said Judy. “I think I’ll just have a cracker or two.”

“Excellent,” said Richard going over to the table. “All the more for me then.”

“Help yourself,” said Jenny. “Anyone for coffee?”

“Please,” said Frank. “I’m driving.”

I got myself a sliver of Jenny’s tiramisu and held up my hand for

coffee as well. Richard cut off a thick wedge of the tiramisu and forked some into his mouth.

“Oh my word,” he said. “Oh my word.”

He cut off another piece and added it to his plate then came and sat beside me again. Judy was talking to Deb. Frank, like a dutiful husband, was pretending to pay attention to their conversation and slowly eating his way through a pile of crackers.

“This is wonderful,” said Richard.

He shovelled another forkful into his mouth and closed his eyes in ecstasy. I noticed the bottom of his moustache was coated with the tiramisu and there was a gobbet sticking to the hairs next to the corner of his mouth.

“So why do you think I'm pretending to be a business woman?”

“Oh you're not,” he said, the gobbet wobbling precariously. “You are a woman and you are in business therefore you're a business woman.”

“Didn't you say a few minutes ago that I was just pretending?” I said, “or are you changing your tune already?”

“No, I said you were pretending to be profit focused,” he said and the tip of his pink tongue flicked out and caught the gobbet to my relief. Now it was gone I could concentrate on my own tiramisu without any distractions.

“Well, what else would I be focused on?” I asked.

“Oh that I couldn't say,” he said. “I don't know you well enough. Tell me something though, do you ever find yourself in a situation where you ask yourself what your father would have done and then done it?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, putting my empty plate on the ground. “It was his business and his father's before him. They had a lot of experience. Why wouldn't I make use of that experience?”

"A fine question," he said and gobbled up the last mouthful. "Ahh, Jenny, that was quite delightful," he called as she passed around with cups of coffee.

"I'm glad you like it," she said, coming over. "Hardly anyone else has had any though."

"It's probably because they think it's fattening because of the cream," I said, "although what they think goes into cheese I can't imagine."

"Would it be rude of me to have some more?" asked Richard.

"Of course not," she said smiling indulgently. "That's the best compliment you can give me."

"Then I shall compliment you until my heart gives out," said Richard and got up to help himself to another huge portion.

"Oh dear," said Jenny quietly to me, "you don't think he's got a heart condition, do you? He does look a bit, umm."

"Overweight?" I said. "I think he knows that. He was probably trying to make a joke. Most of his jokes fall flat. Don't worry about it. He's old enough to look after himself. Where do you know him from?"

"I don't," she said, sitting in Richard's chair with the coffee tray on her lap. "Judy recently joined the company mum works for and they've got quite friendly so when I invited them she asked if she could bring Judy and her husband as well. I've never met either of them before. You know him, though, don't you?"

"A little," I said. "He asked for a job at the factory so I interviewed him, that's all."

"Ohh, so he really is an engineer, then?" she asked. "I wasn't sure if that story about the space station was true."

"I'm pretty sure he isn't an engineer," I said. "I don't know what he is really."

“Well, here's your coffee,” she said, passing it over then getting up. “Ah, I've put yours on the ground,” she added as Richard came back.

“Thank you,” he said and sat down. His moustache was looking a little bedraggled and sticky.

“Remarkably fine cook that girl,” he said. “What were we talking about?”

“My father,” I said drily.

“Oh,” he said and ate some more of the dessert. “Oh yes, that's right. All I was suggesting is that sometimes you do what you think your father would have done rather than what you think ought to be done.”

“Is that wrong?” I asked, leaning back in the chair and looking at the others holding normal conversations.

“Absolutely,” he said. “If you are not true to yourself then you are living a lie.”

“I'm sure you're right,” I said, beginning to feel a little bored with the conversation. “What lie am I living?”

“Profit,” he said, finishing the last of the tiramisu. “You think you are motivated by profit but I strongly suspect you aren't.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee.

“If you were you wouldn't think twice about kicking that girl out and getting another tenant,” he said, looking wistfully at the remains of the dessert on the table. “She wouldn't trouble your conscience one iota but instead you offer her better accommodation at a risk to yourself and for a lower rental.”

I overheard a snatch of conversation from the other side of the table about cricket and decided to stay in the conversation I was in. The only thing less interesting than cricket is football.

“What risk to myself?” I asked.

“The girl may be an addict herself,” he said, using his finger to wipe any last remaining traces of tiramisu off his plate. “You may find she turns the better property into a den of iniquity. She may cause extensive damage.”

He licked his fingers and looked wistfully at the table again then sighed.

“I daresay,” I said. “Although I’ve got landlord’s insurance in case she does. Anyway, it’s more than likely that she won’t leave her partner.”

“Did you factor that into your offer?” he asked.

He put the plate down reluctantly and picked up his grubby serviette and started to clean his moustache.

“No,” I had to admit. “It was a spontaneous offer. I felt sorry for her.”

“Quite,” he said, spitting onto the serviette. “Very commendable, I’m sure.”

I stared as he wiped his spit coated serviette over his moustache. It held some sort of morbid fascination despite being somewhat unattractive and probably unhygienic. At least it was his own serviette and not someone else’s.

“Do you know anything about dreams?” I suddenly asked.

The way he was dabbing his face had brought back the memory of the dream I’d had two or three nights earlier.

“Why?” he asked crumpling the serviette and carefully placing it on his plate on the ground.

“You said something earlier about dreams as ambitions and as constructs of the unconscious mind,” I said.

“I might well have done,” he said, sitting back. “I talk a lot of nonsense and rarely bother to listen myself.”

“So you think dreams are a lot of nonsense?” I asked.

“Hmmm, an interesting question,” he said. “Freud would have liked you, I’m sure. Can dreams predict the future? Probably not although I don’t see any reason why an image in your head while you sleep can’t generate a desire that you seek to attain after waking so in that sense they do. Rather like a fortune teller saying you’ll meet a tall, dark handsome stranger so you go out of your way to take notice of tall, dark handsome strangers in the expectation of meeting one.”

“So it become self-fulfilling?” I asked. “I hadn’t thought of it that way but it does make sense, kind of. No, I meant whether the dream has any meaning of itself, rather than telling the future.”

“Oh, I think it would have to,” he said. “The dream is created by the mind within the mind and, one would think, would have to be derived from experiences that that mind has encountered. After all, it was Immanuel Kant who said, in the opening sentence to his Critique of Pure Reason, 'That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt' although I have to say I’m not entirely convinced by his thesis. I daresay at the end of the day it depends on how you define knowledge. Kant, it would seem, is defining knowledge as something derived from experience.”

“What about something theoretical you read in a book?” I asked.

“Kant didn’t say it has to be your own experience,” he said, folding his hands over his stomach. “A book of theory is simply a summary of other people’s experiences.”

“Right,” I said. “Yes, I understand that. So why do you disagree with him? What would be knowledge that didn’t come from someone’s experience?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But let me turn it around. What about experiences that are denied as knowledge?”

“How can you possibly have experiences that aren’t knowledge?” I said. “That’s absurd.”

“Is it?” he asked. “What about aliens encounters? Conventional wisdom says that they’re not possible as aliens do not exist but people have had experience of aliens through encounters. How is that different to you reading a report that, say, a new metal has been created in a laboratory?”

“Oh that’s easy,” I said. “The new metal isn’t accepted as knowledge until it’s been reproduced in many laboratories.”

“Ahh, of course,” he said. “So if you read a hundred reports from a hundred laboratories each saying they have encountered this new metal you’d accept it as fact?”

“Yes,” I said. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Indeed,” he said. “So what if you read a hundred reports by a hundred completely unconnected people about alien encounters they have had?”

“But aliens don’t exist,” I said.

“Neither does that new metal,” he said, “at least as far as your personal experience goes. So why are you being selective in which reports you accept and which you don’t?”

I frowned at him.

“Ahh,” I said suddenly. “That’s because other metals exist so the new one would be a reasonable extrapolation from the existing ones.”

“You can say that because you have personal experience of metals in your work in metal fabrication,” said Richard. “What if you had never personally encountered a metal before? Would you refuse to accept all the reports of various different metals because of that?”

“Well, no, of course not,” I said.

“But you are refusing to accept the possibility of aliens on the basis of your lack of personal experience with them despite vast numbers of reports of a variety of aliens encountered by others,” he said. “And I’m

not even going to mention gods.”

“What have gods got to do with aliens?” I asked.

“Are you a Christian?” he asked.

“No, I’m an atheist,” I said.

“Well at least you’re consistent in that,” he said. “But there are many millions of people who are convinced that there is a being that they call God who exists in some other world that they call Heaven. This sounds rather like an alien to me but these people, despite their beliefs, maintain that aliens don’t exist. I find it all very perplexing.”

“I’m really not going to get into religion,” I said. “But what’s this all got to do with Kant?”

“Oh how tedious of you,” he said. “I suppose you avoid politics as well.”

“As much as possible,” I said.

“Hmmm,” he said. “Oh well. Kant said all knowledge begins with experience but aliens are an example of experiences that don’t result in knowledge so I speculate that the reverse may well be true. There may be knowledge that does not derive from experience.”

“You mean like religion?” I said. “There’s a whole body of knowledge about God and Christ that has no basis of experience?”

“Exactly,” he said, smiling happily. “So tell me about your dream.”

“What dream?” I asked.

“The dream you had that prompted this conversation,” he said. “The one you think has a meaning.”

“Well,” I said. “Umm, it was last Tuesday ...”

“Last Tuesday in your dream,” he asked, “or actually last Tuesday?”

“Actually last Tuesday,” I said. “There was no sense of time in the dream. I’ve no idea when it was set.”

“OK,” he said. “Would you mind holding on for a few moments? I need to visit the men’s room.”

“Oh,” I said, startled. “It’s through the kitchen, down the corridor on the left and the door on the right at the end.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Won’t be a moment.”

I sat there for a minute or two trying to remember the details of the dream and push Kant, aliens and God out of my mind.

“I hope he’s not bothering you too much,” said Judy coming over. “He can be insensitive and overpowering sometimes.”

“Yes, I can imagine,” I said. “He seems obsessed with the idea that I’m trying to get my dead father’s approval.”

“Yes, he rather likes that theme although I can’t think why. He and his father fought tooth and nail over everything.”

“Does he, umm, I’m not sure how to put this ...” I began.

“Does he actually know what he’s talking about?” she asked. “Yes and no. A lot of what he says is true, a lot is clever speculation and a lot is pure garbage. The problem is deciding which is which. Never take his advice on anything without thinking it through and checking as much as possible.”

“How do you check clever speculation?” I asked. “Especially if it’s unconventional and original?”

“Which is why he has trouble holding a job,” she said. “He has ideas that he thinks are quite brilliant but his boss thinks are absurd so he walks out. Every now and then the ideas actually turn out to be good but by then it’s too late. The trouble is he knows a lot but not quite enough so he’ll bring together ideas from different areas but doesn’t know how to actually bolt them together.”

"I don't quite follow," I said.

"Ohh, let me think," she said furrowing her brow. "Oh yes, a long time ago he had the idea of combining a phone, an answering machine and a fax in the same piece of equipment. The owner of the company he was working for pooh poohed it but now you can buy these things in any office equipment shop. We could have made a fortune from the patents but he didn't have the technical skills to actually make a prototype. His field is ideas not actualisation."

"That must be very frustrating," I said.

"Yes and no," she said. "It is for him when yet another idea gets rejected but neither of us have ever wanted to be rich. My salary is quite enough for our needs but it would be nice if someone somewhere accepted him for what he is."

"And what is he, exactly?" I asked.

"Who knows?" she said. "I certainly don't."

"You don't what?" asked Richard coming back.

"I don't know what you are," she said, looking at him and smiling.

"I'm a figment of your imagination," he said. "You're just a lonely old spinster who invented me for company. I'm your imaginary friend."

"You see?" said Judy to me. "He's a lost cause."

I had to laugh.

"Are you ready to go now?" she asked Richard. "Oh, what have you done to your shirt?"

"I had an accident with the salad cream," he said. "I'm sure it'll wash out. Can we go in a bit? Penny was just about to tell me her dreams."

"I can't make you miss that," she said. "I'll go and talk to Deb. Come and get me when Penny is sick and tired of you."

“Oh we can't stay here that long,” he said. “Besides you have to go to work on Monday.”

“Very funny,” she said patting the top of his bald head. “Penny, don't be afraid to tell him to shut up when you've had enough.”

Richard watched her walk away, much the way he'd been looking at the tiramisu earlier.

“Now,” he said, turning back to me. “Your dream?”

Chapter Ten

“Oh, I don't think the poison is the significant thing,” said Richard. “Obviously that's just your brain's way of saying there's something unpleasant or dangerous and probably slow acting. It's an association of ideas not a literal thing. No, what's far more interesting is the person in the dream and where it was taking place.”

“But I don't know who it was,” I said. “I'm not even sure the person was a woman.”

“Was this before or after you saw your tenant?” he asked.

“Oh god, I don't know,” I said. “Umm, I'm pretty sure it was the night before.”

“OK,” he said. “So it's unlikely the person being poisoned was the tenant since you had no idea what her situation was. I suppose it could be that you were being poisoned and your tenant is represented by the kitchen, or your property at any rate. Have you have problem tenants before?”

“Two or three times,” I said.

“But you haven't had this dream before so it probably isn't that then. It seems a little too obvious anyway, the brain is usually more subtle than that. You know, I find it intriguing that the dream happened in a kitchen. Kitchens are usually the symbol of domesticity, of home and security so to be poisoned in your place of security is very significant, I think. You say it wasn't your kitchen? Or any kitchens you've had in the past, such as when you were a child?”

“No, I'd never seen the kitchen before,” I said.

“In that case the kitchen probably represents some other aspect of your security,” he said thoughtfully.

“Does it have to be me, though?” I asked. “You seem to be making that assumption.”

“Yes, I do, don't I,” he said. “But who else would you be worried about?”

“I'm not overly worried about anyone else,” I said. “Not enough to dream about them, anyway.”

“How about your husband?” he asked.

“I'm not married,” I said. “I have a long term partner but ...”

He glanced at my hand as if to confirm this then looked over at Judy who was chatting animatedly with Jenny and Deb but kept glancing over at us.

“I wonder,” he said to himself softly then switched his gaze back to me.

“Any plans to get married?” he asked.

“We did talk about it in the early days,” I said. “But no, not any more.”

“Interesting,” he said. “Look, I think Judy and Deb want to go but I have one more idea, although I don't think you'll like it much.”

“I didn't much like the dream,” I said, “so I don't see why I should like the interpretation any better. Who's to say yours is the right interpretation anyway? Maybe the dream didn't mean anything at all.”

“Quite,” he said. “But it was important enough for you to remember it and talk to me about it so it must have some resonance, which is what you'd expect if your subconscious is trying to tell you something.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe it was just the wine.”

He laughed.

“Indeed, it's probably just the wine. Well, it's been quite delightful meeting you again,” he said standing up and holding out his hand. “Perhaps we'll meet again one day.”

“Oh,” I said surprised and standing up myself. “Aren't you going to tell me your other idea?”

I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Judy had picked up her bag and was looking over expectantly.

“I will if you want,” he said, “I just got the impression you'd lost interest.”

“Tell me,” I said. “I am curious to know.”

“Well, if you insist,” he said. “Umm, since the figure in the dream was androgynous, I wonder if it was more of a composite, a face made from several faces, such as your own and your partner's. And perhaps the kitchen represented your lives or lifestyles rather than an actual kitchen or even domesticity. I wonder if your subconscious is telling you, through a dream, that your lifestyles are in some way poisoning you both and your relationship. Anyway, I have to go. Au revoir.”

He held out his hand and I shook it automatically. He gave a nod and moved away to join Judy and they started to make their farewells to Jenny.

I stood there, frozen to the spot, my hand still outstretched.

“Don't think about it,” I said to myself. “Don't think about it. Just get to the car. Don't think about it.”

I pulled myself together and grabbed my own bag.

“I'll be off too,” I said to Jenny. “It's been a wonderful evening.”

I gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek then waved at Aiden and George who were drinking from stubbies out on the grass then quickly exchanged pleasantries with Beth, Allissa and Portia then walked quickly through the house and out the front door to my car.

“Lovely meeting you,” called Judy as she climbed into the back seat of Frank's car. Deb came over to give me a quick hug and Frank and Richard waved.

I got in my car and waited for them to leave. I could feel the beginnings of tears in my eyes.

“No,” I said to myself. “Not yet.”

I forced a smile and a wave as Frank tooted and pulled away then put my key in the ignition.

“How did Richard know my relationship is on the rocks?” I asked, staring out of the windscreen at Frank's tail lights disappearing down the road.

My tears welled up and I started to cry.

* * *

“What the hell?” I muttered sleepily.

I rolled over and my phone was glowing brightly.

“What?” I muttered. “Frigging hell, what time is it?”

04:17 my phone told me. It was still dark outside and Darrell was hanging off the edge of the bed, as usual.

“Oh go to hell,” I muttered and rolled back over again.

A car drove past, loud heavy metal music blasting through the night. The window rattled gently in its frame in syncopated sympathy.

“Jesus,” I muttered and rolled back and picked up the phone. It took several swipes before the phone decided to wake up as well and its screen lit up the little nest I'd made in the bedclothes like a searchlight inside a cave. I had to put my hand over it to protect my eyes.

“Who's bloody texting me at this time of the night?” I grumbled.

With one eye shut I navigated through to the message then stared at it.

“Did u mean wat u said>” it read.

“What?” I said. “Who the frig is this?”

I shut my eyes again and snuggled deeper inside the doona.

“Oh yeah,” I thought a few moments later. “A text.”

I looked at the message but it was just from a number so it wasn't anyone in my contacts.

“Probably a wrong number,” I figured and put the phone back on the bedside table.

“Oh sod it,” I muttered a few seconds later and sat up.

“Who is this?” I keyed in then hit Send.

“Well, come on,” I muttered, staring at the phone. “Who are you?”

Amazingly my phone seemed to have developed psychic properties since it told me almost immediately.

“Sarah ur tent.”

“My tent?” I thought. “Oh, she means tenant.”

I yawned then nearly bit my tongue.

Sarah?

“Oh shit,” I said, staring at the phone.

“Wha?” muttered Darrell, rolling over.

“Go back to sleep,” I said.

“K,” he said and rolled back again.

“Now what do I do?” I thought.

“Can you talk?” I texted back.

Four seconds later the phone rang.

"Just a sec," I said quietly when I answered. "I'm going to another room."

I slid out of bed and pulled on my dressing gown and padded into the lounge, pulling the bedroom door shut behind me.

"Hello," I said. "Sarah?"

"Umm, hi," came a faint voice. "Did you mean what you said?"

"About moving out or moving to the other house?" I asked, now wide awake.

"The other house," she said. "I can't take no more of this."

"Has he hit you again?" I asked, wondering if it would be better to get the police involved.

"Not really," she said, whatever the hell that meant. "But I got some money together for you and the bastard only bloody stole it off of me and when I tried to stop him he, like, totally lost it and chucked the friggin TV out the window."

"You should call the police," I said. "That could have hurt someone."

"Nah, don't want no cops involved," she said. "So can me and Kaylee move to your other house?"

"Not this weekend," I said. "The existing tenants are moving out but it'll be free on Monday. Can you hang on until then?"

"Shit," she said. "I guess."

"Look," I said. "If he starts being abusive or violent, call the police. Is he there now?"

"No," she said. "He went out about eleven. I think he went to work."

“So she's been sitting there stewing for five hours,” I thought. “I wonder how much courage it took to contact me?”

“Is he working Sunday night?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “But he will be Monday night.”

“OK,” I said. “Can you manage there until Monday night or is there somewhere else you can go?”

“Are you saying I can have that place?” she asked. I could hear the tension in her voice.

“Yes,” I said. “But can you hang in there until Monday?”

I heard her start to cry then the phone went dead.

“Oh god,” I thought, my heart sinking. “That bastard's come back and caught her. What to do, what to do?”

I was about to phone the police when my phone rang again.

“Sarah, are you all right?” I asked urgently.

“Sorry,” she said, sniffing. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

“Has he come back?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I just dropped the phone.”

I hoped she wasn't lying to me and decided if the phone hung up again soon I would call the police.

“So can you hang on there until Monday?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “We'll manage.”

I could only imagine what had been happening to have made her decide to walk out on him and what it must be costing her to have to stay for three more days but hopefully the idea of moving somewhere

else would give her the strength to do it.

“OK,” I said. “Whose furniture do you have?”

“Furniture?” she said. “Umm, it's mostly all mine but he'll wreck it if I'm not here.”

“Well, if he wrecks it he wrecks it,” I said. “It's only furniture. OK, I'll get a van round to you on Monday evening and we'll collect your furniture and take it to the other house but don't pack anything yet. We can do all that when he's at work. If you start packing before that he'll get suspicious. You have to keep everything exactly as normal.”

“Right,” she said. “Yeah, make everything look normal, I get you.”

“When does he go to work on Monday?” I asked. For the life of me I couldn't remember his name.

“It varies,” she said. “Could be anytime after tenish.”

“OK,” I said. “You hang in there until Monday then call me or text me when he goes off to work then we'll come round and get all your things and take you to the other house. OK?”

“Yeah, call you,” she said. “God, you've no idea ..., thank you so much, I mean it, like, ...”

“Yeah,” I said, “you just stay safe until Monday evening, OK. And let me know if anything changes but only if you can do it safely, don't take any risks. We don't want you or Kaylee getting hurt.”

“Yeah, no,” she said. “I'll never let him hurt Kaylee.”

“OK,” I said. “You go now and start thinking about your new place but don't forget, keep everything as normal.”

“I will, Mrs Dorchester,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

“Penny,” I said. “Call me Penny. Umm, OK, I'll see you on Monday.”

We hung up and I sat there for a long time. OK, Darrell and I might not be having the best of relationships but, Jesus, what must it be like living in fear of the person you're living with? The father of your child? To feel a gut-wrenching fear when you hear him come in the door, or to have to worry about every word in case it provoked a violent reaction? To be constantly worrying in case Kaylee cried or did something that set him off and maybe lash out at her? I couldn't really imagine the stress she was under.

Eventually I came out of my reverie and got a glass of water. The sky outside was beginning to lighten and the birds were waking up, no doubt full of their own worries and unconcerned with the tribulations of human life around them.

"Maybe I should make more of an effort," I thought. "Maybe that's what that dream was about. Maybe my brain's trying to tell me that it's me that's poisoning this relationship."

I tipped the rest of the water into the sink and left the glass on the drainer. Back in the bedroom I climbed into bed, my side cold again after being so long out. Darrell's form was just beginning to turn from an inky black silhouette and colour was returning to his dark blonde hair. I lay there for a few minutes, propped on my elbow, just watching him, listening to his slow, slightly whistley breathing.

"I do still love you," I whispered. "But I don't suppose you know that, do you. Do you still love me?"

He didn't reply, of course, as he was sound asleep.

"What are you dreaming about?" I wondered. "We used to talk about our dreams. We used to share things. When did that stop?"

I slid down into the bed and pulled the doona over my shoulder and reached out to stroke his back.

"Whafawump," he muttered and scratched his ear.

"Sleep well, hon," I whispered and drifted off to sleep.

Of course he was gone when I woke up again. A lot of couples like the photographer to arrive early and take shots of the bride getting ready, the father of the bride gloomily contemplating the cost of it all, videos of the bridesmaids getting flustered and irritable and the mother of the bride bursting into tears at every available opportunity. Sometimes they even want shots of the groom getting ready but that's rare. Weddings are about the bride not the groom. No one gives a toss about him, so long as he turns up reasonably sober and says the right words.

"If Darrell and I ever did get married," I wondered to myself over some toast and coffee, "who'll do the photography?"

Actually if we should happen to get married Darrell would do them himself. Not only would he not trust anyone else but he'd complain bitterly about the composition or lighting of every single shot or scene. Ah well.

At bang on nine I rang Dandenong Real Estate.

"Hello Cheryl," I said when I was put through to her. "Penny Dorchester."

"Ahh, Penny," she said. "I was going to ring you later, when I get back from my morning viewings. I've had the last reference back for that couple. Everything looks just fine and they want to move in next weekend so they can be there for Christmas. Would that be OK with you?"

"Ahh, I'm afraid not," I said. "Complete change of plan."

"OK," she said slowly, no doubt wondering what she'd promised them and how she was going to get out of it. "What's the new plan?"

"I'm letting it to someone else," I said. "It's a bit of an emergency."

"Right," she said. "So this is a private let or do you want me to vet them?"

“Actually you've already vetted her,” I said. “And I want you to keep managing the property. It's Sarah Stevens.”

“Sarah Stevens?” she said, disbelief apparent in her voice. I could almost hear her shout 'are you frigging kidding me?' “The girl from Quidditch Street?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I'm reducing the rent as well.”

There was a long pause.

“OK,” she said, even more slowly. “Is there anything I need to know about the situation?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I need you to keep a close eye on the place, maybe even monthly inspections.”

“I can only do that if she agrees,” said Cheryl. “Umm, I'm guessing there's a reason for you doing this?”

“Yes,” I said and gave her a potted version of the circumstances.

“Oh Jesus,” she said when I'd finished. “I hate it when this sort of thing happens. Do you want this to be casual or do you want a formal contract?”

“What do you suggest?” I asked.

“A formal contract,” she said. “That way you have the protection of the law if it all goes to pot and your landlord insurance probably won't cover you if there's no tenancy agreement. What about a bond?”

“Can we transfer the bond from Quidditch to Pickett?” I asked.

“Yes, so long as there's no damage at Quiddich to take out of the bond,” she said.

“It looked OK when I was round there,” I said, “although her ex might do some damage when he finds out.”

"She'll have formally left when he finds out?" asked Cheryl.

"Yes," I said.

"In that case it's straightforward criminal damage since he's not on the agreement," she said. "Your normal buildings insurance should cover that. Do you want me to find another tenant for Quidditch?"

"Yes," I said. "Presumably if that man doesn't move out we can get the police round?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll do a vacation inspection and if I find anyone there I'll get the police to remove them as squatters. They'll be round straight away if it seems to be drug related."

"That's a bit nasty for you," I said. "Isn't there any other way?"

"It's not a problem," she said. "It's happened before. At least this time I'm forewarned so I'll be careful."

"Oh god," I said. "What happened last time?"

"The tenant moved out and I went round to do the inspection a couple of days later and found two men shooting up in one of the back rooms," she said. "We, umm, had words but I was able to get out of the door in time. This time I'll have the police on the phone beforehand, all ready for me to hit Call and I'll make sure not to shut the door behind me when I go in. You learn quickly in this job."

"Take someone with you," I said. "Just to be safe."

"Yeah, I might," she said, "although the guys here are wimps. They'll be more of a liability than anything. I'll wear trainers too, not heels."

"Great," I said. "Just make sure you don't get hurt. The property isn't worth it. So can I leave the formalities to you?"

"Sure," she said, "no problem. Oh, just one more thing. Write a letter to your solicitor explaining the situation and in particular explaining why you are charging a reduced rent. Make sure it's dated on or

before the day Sarah moves in.”

“Why?” I asked.

“So you can prove to the tax man that this isn't a rent scam to reduce your tax liability,” she said. “And if there are any police or legal interventions later get your solicitor a copy as well to support your position. If I have to get the police out to evict this man I'll get them to send you a copy of their report.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

Chapter Eleven

“Do you think we're going anywhere?” I asked the next day.

Darrell had been working most of Saturday and had come home tired and more than a little irritable. There'd been an annoying child at the wedding who had followed him round all the time playing with his equipment and getting in the way of the shots. He'd had a word with the child's parents who took the view that the boy's curiosity had to be encouraged and that he be allowed to fully develop with guidance rather than discipline so Darrell had had a word with the bride's mother. She'd said the child was well known as a bloody nuisance and she wished she could get him alone for ten minutes and 'put him straight' which hadn't been particularly helpful. In the end he'd locked most of his equipment in his car then surreptitiously fed the boy cake and ice cream until he was sick and had to go and lie down. Still, he'd had a good night's sleep and hadn't yet looked at the previous day's shots.

“You mean for Christmas?” he asked, looking up from his Tom Clancy novel. “I didn't think you wanted to go away.”

“No,” I said. “I meant with us, with our lives.”

“Oh,” he said, looking back down at his book.

I waited for a few minutes in case he was thinking of a reply but none was forthcoming.

“So you don't ever think about the future?” I asked.

“Sure I do,” he said, looking up again. “We're both working and we've got investments and super funds. We seem pretty secure at the moment although photography's slowly dying. Everyone with a mobile phone's a photographer now.”

“So it's just about money, is it?” I asked.

“I suppose so,” he said. “Isn't that the way of the world these days?”

"I was asking more about us as people," I said, "as a couple."

"Ohh," he said, dismissively. "One of those conversations."

"What do you mean 'one of those conversations'?" I asked.

"You know, a deep and meaningful about relationships," he said, going back to his book.

Even though he was holding his book I sensed the finger quotes around the word 'relationships' which irritated me a little. We were in a relationship so why couldn't he talk about it? I brooded for a while.

"Are you happy?" I asked.

"Not with yesterday's bloody pictures," he said. "I'm scared to look at them. They're going to be dismal."

"I meant with your life," I said. I wanted to say 'with our lives' but thought he would probably try to avoid answering.

"I suppose," he said, ostentatiously turning a page.

"Don't you know if you're happy or not?" I asked.

"I'm not unhappy," he said. "Things are going well for both of us."

"So you're content to let things keep on going the way they are?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "Why not?"

"Don't you want more?" I asked, "or are you happy with everything the way it is?"

"Well," he said finally putting down his book. "I don't know that we can do much more. I certainly can't conjure up more weddings to photograph and you don't seem to be able to generate much more business than you are now. I suppose you could move to a bigger factory and I could take on another photographer but I do wonder if,

at the end of the day, it's more hassle than it's worth."

"You're right there," I said. "I'm not sure the factory could generate more business even if we had more capacity although I'm going to see someone about a possible long term deal on Tuesday."

"Well there you go then," he said, picking up the book again. "Obviously you're happy enough with your life."

"I'm happy enough with the way the business is going," I said. "But I'm not overly happy generally."

He sighed and folded over the corner of the page to mark his place.

"What aren't you happy with?" he said.

"You!" I wanted to shout but couldn't. My lover, my friend, my confidant had slowly turned, over the years, into a semi-automaton and I was probably as much to blame as he was. Hell, I was probably a semi-automaton myself.

I didn't say anything for a while, just stared into my coffee mug. He watched me for a while then bent to pick up his book again.

"Have you ever heard of the Bailong Elevator?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "I'm guessing it's an elevator as long as a bay."

"Bailong," I said. "It's a place in China."

"OK," he said. "So they've got an elevator. Good for them."

"It's not just an elevator," I said. "It's three double decked glass elevators that go 326 metres up the side of a mountain. They say the views are spectacular."

"So you want to go see the view in Bailong?" he asked. "We can probably get visas although taking time off could be awkward."

"I'd love to," I said, "although that's not why I brought it up."

“OK,” he said.

“When I was training to be an engineer,” I said, putting my mug on the occasional table, “I had dreams. I was going to do some incredible engineering, something that would make people sit up and stare.”

“You want to build another elevator in China?” asked Darrell.

“Oh god no,” I said. “But something like that. Something awesome, maybe like the Water Discus Hotel. You’ve heard of that?”

“Nope,” he said.

“It’s an underwater hotel in the Maldives,” I said. “The engineering on that would be impressive, but I don’t just mean massive projects. Small stuff too, umm, like, for example, *dérailleur* gears on a push bike. Have you ever looked at them close up?”

“I had them on that bike I had at uni,” he said, “but no, I don’t think I ever got up close and personal.”

“They’re incredible,” I said. “So simple and yet so effective. A set of cogs and a simple lever to swap between them. Simple, effective, elegant. Hell, a nicely tooled set of *dérailleur* gears are just plain beautiful. I dreamed of doing something like that, doing some beautiful engineering. Something that would really mean something. So what did I end up doing?”

“You run an engineering company,” he said. “That’s pretty impressive, isn’t it?”

“I don’t run an engineering company,” I said. “I run a sheet metal folding company. What’s impressive about making mailboxes or generator housings? You shove a sheet of metal inside a machine, bend it a few times and pop in a few rivets. Hell, the folding machine itself is more impressive engineering than what I do.”

“Makes money though,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said sadly. “It makes money but it’s not what I wanted to

do.”

“We can't always have what we want, Pen,” he said.

He fiddled with his book as though he wanted to get back to reading it. In fact he even opened it to the right page, but then he closed it again.

“Actually, I know what you mean,” he said. “At uni we used to make fun of wedding photographers. OK it's pretty difficult technically since everyone wears either black or white which really buggers up the contrast but once you get that sorted it's pretty routine. After a while they kind of merge into each other. There are only so many ways you can photograph a bride and make them look good and after a while you stop thinking about it and just stick to a routine. After all, most of them only get married once or twice. It's special for them but very ordinary for me.”

“So what sort of photography did you think you'd be doing?” I asked.

“Oh I don't know,” he said. “I never fancied photojournalism, that's a mug's game, but I would have liked wildlife photography I think. I always fancied the idea of going on safari somewhere, bit like David Attenborough. Or maybe pure creativity, you know, art photography. Like Uta Barth, maybe.”

“Who's Uta Barth?” I asked.

“She's a German photographer,” he said. “She takes a lot of shots of ordinary things but in a strange way. Like there's one I remember, it's just the hem of a lace curtain but it's almost spiritual the way it's come out. She does a lot that's out of focus as well. I've always loved that.”

“So why don't you do art photography?” I asked.

“Probably much the same reason you don't build fancy elevators,” he said. “We both went where the money is. I got paid to do a wedding and found it was easy money. You were given an engineering company when your dad died.”

"Yeah," I said. "But it was a pretty heavy responsibility at first, though."

"So were weddings," he said. "I was scared to death about ruining the memories of their special day but you get used to it, don't you."

"I guess," I said. "Although I always hate it when I have to sack someone. I always worry about how their family will cope if the guy can't get another job."

"Well, yes," he said. "It's easier for me in that respect."

"But are you bored with only photographing weddings?" I asked.

"All jobs are boring once you're used to them," he said. "That's the way life goes."

"I suppose that's why we've both become boring people," I said, without thinking then realised what I'd said. I looked over to see how he reacted. Strangely he wasn't upset.

"Yeah," he said evenly. "We bore each other these days, don't we."

We sat there in silence, neither of us wanting to take it any further.

"What can we do about it?" I asked after a while.

"I don't know that there's much we can do," he said. "Split up, I suppose."

I stared at him, my heart suddenly thumping. Split up?

"Is that what you want to do?" I asked, in a small voice.

"No," he said. "But I don't see how we can stop being boring without making significant changes in our lives and neither of us can give up our work. We need the money."

"But we could try to do more together when we're not working," I said, relieved. "Try to share more of each other, maybe take more of

an interest in what each of us is doing.”

“It’s a nice idea,” he said, “but seriously, folding metal bores even you. Just how much interest do you think I can raise in that?”

I gave a long sigh then laughed. “Yeah, I understand. I feel the same way about your photos. One wedding looks much like any other. Just like mailboxes.”

“So you see,” he said, spreading his hands, “we’re pretty much bugged before we begin.”

“We can still talk,” I said. “We used to talk all the time.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “But we used to talk about the future and now there’s no future to talk about.”

“What do you mean?” I said, suddenly alarmed. No future?

“We know the future,” he said. “Folded metal mailboxes and ugly brides and grooms at weddings until we die. What’s left to talk about, other than what to have for dinner?”

“Maybe we should make a list of topics to talk about,” I said. “Other things will probably crop up if we do that.”

“Google ‘what to talk about with your partner?’,” he asked. “God, do you realise how desperately sad that sounds?”

“Yeah, it does, doesn’t it,” I said, frowning. “Hey, why don’t we go away somewhere over Christmas? We’re at your parents Christmas Day but the factory will be shut down for the week and you’ve got no weddings then, have you?”

“No, no one gets married Christmas and New Year,” he said. “But where could we go? Flights and hotels will be booked solid by now. It’s only a week or so away.”

“Yeah, it does come up rather suddenly, doesn’t it,” I said. “I set the days for the shutdown a couple of months ago and haven’t thought

about it since. I haven't even done any Christmas shopping yet. Jesus, I'd better find some time in the week. What do you think your mother would like?"

"Get her some of that smelly soap," he said. "She loves things like that."

"Or one of those gift baskets from The Body Shop," I said, "or is that too obviously last minute?"

"Hey, look at us," he said grinning. "We've found something to talk about!"

"And no bloody help you are, either," I said. "Anyway, shall we go away somewhere, just the two of us or not?"

"I'm open to ideas," he said.

"It would be nice if you could do some different photographs," I said. "How about we get in the car and just drive? See where the open road takes us?"

He sat up on the couch and crossed his legs underneath himself.

"You know," he said. "I had an idea for a book a few months ago."

"So now you want to be a writer?" I asked. "Sounds cool, I could read each chapter as you write it and we could talk about that."

"Nooo," he said, shaking his head. "I couldn't be a writer. I don't think that way, I think visually, not with words."

"You could paint a word picture," I said.

"So not my scene," said Darrell. "No, this was a book of photographs. I thought it would be fun to get a boat and travel the length of the Yarra River, taking lots of photographs along the way. You know, dawns and sunsets and storms and stuff. I even got as far as looking the river up on the net. It starts in the Yarra Ranges and travels about 250 kilometres all the way down to Port Philip in Melbourne. It would

be a journey of contrasts. You know, the wilds of the Yarra Ranges to the inner city of Melbourne and all the trees and plants and wildlife and the changes as it slowly turns into a sprawling metropolis. Even waterfalls and rapids at one end and container ships and the sea at the other end.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s an awesome idea. So let’s do that then. Spend the week travelling down the Yarra. Where can we hire a boat?”

“Hold your horses,” he laughed, uncoiling himself and holding up his hands. “It needs a lot of planning and this probably isn’t the best time of year anyway. It’s too hot and dry. It would be better in the Spring or Autumn when the wild flowers are out and there’s enough water in the river to have a decent flow and there’s the nasty problem of recharging all the equipment. Besides, I don’t know anything about boats and neither do you and you hate camping.”

“Couldn’t we stay at motels on the way?” I asked.

“That would destroy the point,” he said. “It would be a photographic journey about nature, through nature. Staying at motels would mean going outside nature and staying up late and watching TV. I can’t photograph the moods and faces of the Yarra from inside a motel room, I’d have to live it and experience it to be able to photograph it properly. I don’t want to end up with a book of pictures of town centres, you know, like those travel shows with celebrities where most of the time you’re looking at the celebrity in the bathroom and not the places they’re visiting.”

“I wouldn’t mind camping,” I said, never having been camping. “I’m sure it would be fun.”

“I thought of sleeping inside the boat or maybe on the banks,” he said. “There wouldn’t be any toilets or anywhere to wash properly and there might be snakes and insects and things.”

“Well, we can cross that bridge when we get to it,” I said. “I think it’s a great idea. It’s something we can do together, especially all the planning and it’ll give you something new to photograph. Hey maybe your book will get published and you’ll become a famous nature

photographer!”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s a nice idea but I don’t know that I see it happening. We’d have to get lessons in how to manage a boat. We don’t want to get caught by rapids or something because we don’t know how to get the boat past them. We could even drown.”

“Maybe we could hike along the bank instead,” I said.

“I was thinking of something more relaxing,” he said. “Like lying back in a boat floating gently down the river. I don’t really fancy getting exhausted and sweaty carrying all that food and equipment for hundreds of kilometres. It’ll affect the karma.”

“Still, it’s a nice idea,” I said. “We both need something different, something worth while. Something we can both share that’ll stop us drifting apart. So where shall we go after Christmas?”

“Well, we could do some camping,” he said thoughtfully. “See how it goes. Or maybe just do day trips? Explore Melbourne and the countryside. Who knows, that might even inspire you to dream up some new kind of tractor or something.”

“Yeah right,” I said. “Like the world needs more tractors. But a boat, maybe we could make a boat in the factory rather than hire one? That would be cool.”

Chapter Twelve

There had been an accident on the road on my way to work Monday morning. We were backed up for more than a kilometre and not moving for what seemed like ages and I was between turnoffs so I couldn't try to find an alternative route. Every now and then we inched forward another car's length so I spent my time thinking about Christmas presents.

In due course a couple of ambulances wailed their way past going in the opposite direction and a couple of over-anxious drivers started their engines again in the expectation that we'd be moving almost immediately but life isn't like that. Once the injured are removed it takes the police a while to make enough of the road passable so it was at least fifteen minutes before we went anywhere.

By the look of it, a container truck had had to brake suddenly and had jack-knifed and then toppled over; the back end of the container landing on the front of a small car. Several other cars had braked and the truck and container had made its way across all five lanes and several other cars and a van had caused a minor pile-up. By the time I got there the police had cleared two lanes and were working to clear a third. I am by no means indifferent to the plights of others but there is something about a traffic accident that makes you want to stop and watch what's happening. It has a morbid, macabre fascination especially when it's enhanced, as it was here, by several people sitting beside the road with their heads in their hands and a mini-traffic jam of police cars and ambulances. No doubt the recovery trucks were stuck in the traffic some way behind.

"Got stuck in traffic," I said to Kasey when I eventually got to work.

"Were you in that mess on Pound Road?" she asked. "I heard about it on the radio."

"Yeah," I said. "Looked nasty."

"The radio said only one person was seriously hurt and four were taken to hospital with minor injuries," she said.

“Is that all?” I said, dumping my bag inside my office door. “Looked a lot worse than that. Still, anything exciting happening here?”

“Not yet,” she said.

“OK,” I said, heading for the door to the factory floor. “I’ll be on the floor if anyone needs me.”

“OK,” she said.

“Oh, by the way,” I said pausing when I remembered. “There’s some resumes on my desk. Could you organise interviews for them?”

“Sure,” said Kasey. “This week?”

“Make it early next week if you can,” I said. “This week could turn out to be busy.”

I had the meeting with James McNaughton on Tuesday morning and, depending on how that went, I might well end up having to have meetings with the other shareholders, which was always fun since relatives never hesitate to bring in sordid details of your past when it suits their purpose. Such as how often your nappies had to be changed, that time you fell off your bike and grazed a knee or that possible boyfriend you brought home once. God alone knows what relevance that sort of thing had.

“Consider it done,” said Kasey, reaching out for the phone as it rang.

I’d been mulling over in my head, in between Christmas presents, who to ask to help me get Sarah shifted but I paused for a few moments to look around. Yeah, they were both at work today.

I tapped on Barry’s shoulder and he looked up then removed his ear defenders.

“I need to talk to Fisnik and Lachlan for a few minutes,” I told him. “Can I take them now or are they on urgent jobs?”

“Are they in trouble?” he asked, his face creasing with worry in case

I'd found out about something he didn't know about. Or, it occurred to me later, that I'd found out about something he did know about and hadn't reported.

"No, no," I said, "I just need them for a special job, that's all."

"Is it on the board?" he asked. "I didn't notice any specials this morning."

"It's not work related," I said, wishing I had the ability to invent a plausible excuse on the spur of the moment and regretting I hadn't already thought one up. Knowing how most of the lads' minds worked, word would probably spread like wildfire that the boss wanted a threesome or something absurd like that.

"OK," said Barry, his brow staying creased although the worried look had gone. He glanced round to find Fisnik and Lachlan and remind himself what they were working on. "No, you can have them now, if you like. Want me to send them to your office?"

"No, I'll get them," I said and he nodded.

Lachlan was grinding some reinforcing ribs and sending up showers of sparks so I waited until he'd finished the one he was working on then tapped him on the shoulder. I couldn't see his eyes behind the darkened safety goggles but I motioned with my hands for him to remove his ear defenders.

"My office," I said and walked over to Fisnik who was feeding a sheet of 14 gauge aluminium into a bender.

He saw me coming and grinned happily. He was always happy since even Dandenong was a major improvement on his native Algeria.

"When you've finished that sheet come to my office," I said and his face clouded over as I turned and walked away.

I was on friendly terms with all the staff but it doesn't hurt to let them know who's the boss every now and then.

Lachlan was already in Kasey's room when I got back.

"Bring a chair in with you," I said and went into my office.

Lachlan followed me, carrying the spare chair from Kasey's room.

"Sit down," I said, sitting behind my desk. "Fisnik will be here in a minute."

He sat down a little nervously. I got up again and retrieved my bag from beside the door and dumped it behind my desk and sat down again. Fisnik appeared and came sideways through the doorway. He had to because he was wider than standard doorways.

"Sit down," I said and he did, his face unable to decide whether to smile happily or try to look stern.

I had to laugh.

"Don't worry guys, you're not in trouble," I said. "I've got a nasty little situation and I need some help."

They both relaxed, Fisnik a little after Lachlan since he still had to translate everything in his head which made conversations with him a little slow.

"A friend of mine is being abused by her partner," I said, "and I need some help moving her to another house."

"So you need some muscle?" asked Lachlan.

"Scuse," said Fisnik, looking puzzled. "What mean 'abused'?"

"Er man's beating the crap out of her," said Lachlan helpfully.

"Kess ommac!" hissed Fisnik and looked at me for confirmation.

I nodded.

"This not so good," he said, shaking his head.

"The thing is," I said. "We need to move her furniture tonight when the man is at work. I'm not sure when but probably around ten or maybe later. Will you two help me?"

"You expecting trouble, like?" said Lachlan.

"It's possible," I said. "I hope not but he may turn up unexpectedly and if he does he may be, umm, unpredictable."

Lachlan nodded then made an injecting motion on his forearm and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I think so," I said.

"OK," he said. "I'm in. What transport have we got?"

"We'll take the company truck," I said. "I'll be in my car and I'll take Sarah and her baby with me."

"No sweat," he said. "You in, Nik?"

"Girl has little baby?" asked Fisnik, "tifi?"

"Four months old," I said. "The baby's name is Kaylee."

"Ahhh," he said. "We save, yes?"

"Yes," I said. "Umm, I'll pay you, of course."

"How much?" asked Lachlan.

"No pay, no pay," interjected Fisnik. "Save girl, save tifi, no pay, OK."

"Gotta keep the missus happy," said Lachlan. "She'll think I'm cheating on her if I don't got a payslip to prove it."

"We can't have that," I said. "How about if I phone her and explain?"

"God no," he said. "That'd just make it worse. She's got a jealous mind."

"And probably with reason," I thought, word of his exploits having got back to me.

"OK," I said. "How much?"

"Time and a half's normal overtime," he said.

"Agreed," I said. "And you'll get that too, Fisnik, whether you want it or not."

"You boss," he said and smiled happily again.

"So how's this going to work?" asked Lachlan.

"Sarah's going to ring me when he leaves for work," I said. "Probably around ten but it could be later. We'll meet here at, say, nine thirty and take the truck over and park in a side street until I get the call. When he's gone we swoop in, load everything into the truck and take it round to the new house. It'll probably take no more than two hours."

"Both places in Dandy?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "so there won't be much driving."

"And what do we do if he comes back?" he asked.

"No fighting," I said hurriedly. "I don't want either of you hurt or arrested. I'll bet he won't start anything anyway, not with Nik there. He might shout a bit but whatever you do, don't hit him."

Lachlan looked a little disappointed although Fisnik looked a little apprehensive. Despite being as gentle as three ply toilet paper, Fisnik came across as very intimidating. He was about 5 foot 6 tall and much the same wide and weighed something like 130 kilograms. He looked like a cross between an Algerian wrestler and a freedom fighter and had a face only a mother could love. Fortunately his wife was a mother. In an actual fight he would be next to useless since he'd be scared to death of actually hurting someone but he would very likely be the reason a fight wouldn't start in the first place.

“So no weapons either,” I added.

He curled his lip at that then brightened up.

“What if he brings some mates?” he said hopefully.

“Then we take Sarah and Kaylee and leave the furniture,” I said. “No fighting, OK?”

“What if he follows us?” asked Lachlan.

“Interesting,” I thought. “He’s a bit of a planner. I wonder if he’d make a good foreman?”

“Good point,” I said. “Whatever happens we mustn’t let him know where Sarah’s gone to. Umm, if I keep my car round the corner he probably won’t notice it so he’ll follow the truck. Take it to the police station and tell them what’s happening. I’ll take Sarah to the house and join you there. It’s in Langhorne Street.”

“Yeah, I know where the police station is,” he said. “What if he follows you rather than the truck?”

“I’ll go straight to the police,” I said. “Umm, did you understand all of that, Nik?”

“Don’t worry,” said Lachlan. “I’ll take him through it all again before tonight so he understands.”

“Great, thanks,” I said. “And drive carefully, we don’t want any accidents. Anything else we need to think about?”

“What if he don’t go out tonight?” said Lachlan.

“I suppose we’ll have to try again another night,” I said, “although if he doesn’t go out I don’t know if Sarah will be able to contact me. We’ll just have to play that one by ear.”

“OK,” said Lachlan. “Have you got any rope?”

"You are not going to tie him up," I said forcefully.

He laughed. "Nah, I meant for the furniture. It's easier to carry with a bit of rope."

"Ahh, right," I said. "Good thinking. I'll see if Giovanni has any in the stores."

"I'll bring some," he said. "Just to be sure. You Ok, Nik, mate?"

"Is good," said Fisnik, slapping his chest. "We save moma and little tifi!"

"Absolutely," I said. "Right, we'll meet here at nine thirty tonight, OK?"

"OK," they both said, Fisnik slightly behind Lachlan.

"Oh guys," I said, as they were leaving my office. "I really appreciate this. Thank you."

"What's going on?" asked Kasey, coming into my office.

"Oh nothing," I said.

"Yeah right," she said. "You should hear what they're saying in the lunchroom. Here's this morning's post."

* * *

The car park was deserted when I pulled in that night which was understandable since it was barely nine o'clock. I was nervous and apprehensive since Darrell had given me a strong lecture on being foolish and looking for trouble which hadn't helped. He'd also insisted on coming too and it had taken quite an effort to persuade him otherwise. Fisnik was extraordinarily intimidating, Lachlan was very streetwise and Darrell was neither and I really didn't want him getting hurt. On the plus side though it was obvious that he was worried about me getting hurt as well.

I'd had the foresight to take the keys to the truck before I'd left so I

didn't need to go inside or turn off the alarms. The truck was parked beside the Deliveries entrance so I parked next to it and waited for the others. I jiggled my phone anxiously and kept checking it in case there'd been any messages. I was glad I hadn't joined the Australian Defence Force as I don't think I could have handled the stress of waiting to go into action. The only reason I'd even considered it was that they paid their engineers to go through university. Fortunately so did my father.

"Come on, come on," I muttered, watching the car park entrance and the traffic whizzing past.

About quarter past nine I couldn't take it any more and walked round to the main entrance and let myself in, remembering to turn off the alarms. Mr Do Van Tien and his crew had been and gone and the place was deserted and dark. I fumbled my way round to the toilets and relieved one of my anxieties. There was a battered old Toyota Corolla parked beside my SUV when I came back out.

"Thank god," I muttered.

"Evening Mrs P," said Lachlan, leaning against the truck.

Fisnik loomed out of the darkness looking even more like a freedom fighter with rope coiled across his chest like a bandolier.

"Hey guys," I said, "have you eaten?"

I have no idea why I asked that but they both nodded seriously as though it was a key question.

"Heard anything yet?" asked Lachlan.

I checked my phone again then shook my head. "No," I said. "We're just going to have to wait."

Lachlan pulled out his tobacco pouch and started to roll a cigarette.

"Who's driving?" I asked.

"Me," he said. "Nik can't drive."

“Oh really?” I said. “I didn't know that. Here are the keys.”

He took them. “I'll just check it's got plenty of fuel,” he said then lit his cigarette before unlocking it and getting in the cab. Fisnik went round the other side and got in the passenger seat. For want of anything better to do I got into my car.

And we sat there. Lachlan had rolled down his window and I rolled down my passenger window but no one said anything.

At ten to ten my nerve gave out.

“Lachlan,” I whispered, as though I was already at Sarah's place and Shane was inside. He didn't hear me, of course.

I cleared my throat and called again, properly.

“Yeah?” he called back.

“Let's go,” I said.

“Sweet,” he said and started the engine. If this were a book or a movie the sound of the diesel engine would have shattered the silent night but this was Dandenong. It was never silent. Bigger noisier diesels roared past all the time.

I started my car and moved off slowly, Lachlan following in the truck. I led the way to Quidditch Street and continued, going round the corner into Park Avenue and found enough space for the truck and my car to park. Lachlan pulled in behind me and killed the engine. I got out and went over.

“We'll just wait here for Sarah to call,” I said. “The flat is just around the corner, back there.”

A few minutes went by.

I heard a nearby door open and the faint patter of footsteps. “You can't park here,” said a querulous voice behind me.

"I'm sorry?" I said, turning round.

"You can't park here," said the little white haired old lady, leaning on a walking stick. "My grandson parks here and he'll be home in a few minutes. You can't park here."

Fisnik and Lachlan got out of the truck and joined us. The old lady backed away a couple of steps and waved her walking stick at Fisnik.

"You can't park here," she said. "I'll call the police, so I will."

"OK," I said. "We'll find somewhere else. Umm, Lachlan, we'll try the next street, OK."

"No sweat," he said and he and Fisnik got back in the truck.

"I'm sorry," I said to the old lady. "I didn't know about your grandson. We'll move."

She didn't answer, just stared at me as though willing me to defy a defenceless old lady. I gave her my best smile and got in my car just as my phone rang.

"Sarah?" I said. "Has he gone?"

"I can't do it," she said, tearily. "He needs me, I can't leave him, I can't take Kaylee away from him."

"Oh shit," I said.

Chapter Thirteen

The front door was open when I got there. Sarah was curled up on the couch, cuddling Kaylee and staring blankly at the wall. The boys were downstairs with the van, waiting for instructions.

“Umm, Sarah,” I said quietly, going in. “The door was open, so ...”

She muttered something unintelligible then bent to kiss the top of Kaylee's head.

“Umm, can I come in?” I asked, going further into the room.

She looked quickly at me then over at the corner of the room. Her eyes were bloodshot and teary.

My adrenaline was up and running, ready for a fast action rescue mission but it didn't look like that was going to happen now. I had to force myself to slow right down and try to be calm and supportive rather than bark orders and get things organised.

“What happened to your hand?” I asked.

“I burnt it on the stove,” she said, looking reflexively at the crepe bandage wrapped around it. “Couple of days ago.”

“Did the hospital bandage it?” I asked, sitting at the far end of the couch.

“Nah, wasn't that bad,” she said and tucked it down between her thigh and the side of the couch so I couldn't see it.

“Just as well it wasn't Kaylee,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said and went silent.

“Interesting,” I thought to myself then wondered what the hell to do next. I was about to launch into criticisms of Shane when it occurred to me that that might make Sarah leap to his defence.

“So how did you feel when you burnt your hand?” I asked.

She gave me a quick look but didn't answer.

“Did you feel loved and protected?” I asked after a while.

I let her sit for a few moments then went “Mmm?”

“No,” she said very quietly.

“And Kaylee?” I asked gently. “Is she loved and protected?”

Sarah hugged Kaylee tighter and kissed her head again. Slowly Sarah shook her head.

I reached over and gently stroked her arm. She transferred Kaylee to her other arm and took my hand.

“Come on,” I said softly. “Let's go.”

She looked at me.

“But ...” she said.

“Somewhere safe,” I said, “where you can look after Kaylee properly. Come on.”

I stood up and gently tugged her hand and to my surprise she put down her legs and stood up.

“Have you got a carry cot for Kaylee?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “It's in her room.”

“Why don't you go and get it?” I said, “that way she can have a sleep.”

Sarah disappeared into the bedroom and I offered up a prayer to whatever gods there were that Kaylee would continue to be quiet for a while longer.

“Umm, what here belongs to you?” I asked when she came out.

“Umm, everything except the XBox and the toolbox,” she said.

“OK,” I said, “come on, let's go downstairs to my car.”

She stood there for quite a long time, the carry cot in one hand just looking at me. I tried to generate a feel of positivity and kindness and I guess it must have worked.

“OK,” she said and headed for the door. I followed her downstairs. Lachlan and Fisnik straightened up as we appeared.

“My car's just over there,” I said giving Sarah a gentle push in the right direction. She moved off, lost in a world of her own.

“Everything except the XBox and the tool box,” I hissed to Lachlan then went after her.

He gave me a thumbs up and Fisnik uncoiled the rope and they disappeared up the steps.

“There's no child seat,” said Sarah when I unlocked the doors.

“Ahh,” I said. “I didn't think of that. Can't we put the carry cot on the back seat?”

“S'pose,” she said. “Don't let the cops catch us though.”

She put the cot on the back seat and got in next to it. I got in the back seat as well, the other side.

“Am I doing the right thing?” she asked, after a while.

“Yes,” I said. “Absolutely. Kaylee's safety is the most important thing and you have to be safe to look after her. You're being very wise and brave doing this.”

“Am I?” she asked. “Am I really?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “I really needed that.”

The lads emptied the flat surprisingly quickly but then, Sarah didn't have much in the way of possessions. It seemed like only a couple of minutes before Lachlan tapped on the car window. I got out to talk to him.

“Just about done,” he said. “Nik's bringing down the last load. Do we leave the lights out and lock the door or what?”

“Turn out the lights and lock the door,” I said. “Don't want his frigging XBox stolen, do we.”

“We put the kiddie's stuff at the back of the truck so it's easy to get at,” said Lachlan. “Hello, who's this?”

A Ford ute had pulled up in the little car park beside the garbage bins.

“Oh just what we need,” I groaned.

“That's 'im?” asked Lachlan.

“Yup,” I said.

“Leave 'im to us,” said Lachlan. “You stay here with the girl and don't let her get involved, OK?”

“OK,” I said, “but no fighting.”

He just grinned and walked casually over to the truck. Shane gave the truck a good looking at as he headed for the stairs, and nearly collided with Fisnik coming down with an armful of Sarah's clothes.

He looked up and saw the door to the flat open and all the lights on.

“Oy, what the fuck's going on?” he demanded. “Who's stuff's that?”

“Hello,” said Fisnik, grinning happily. “Scusi.”

He walked over to the truck and tossed the clothes in. Shane followed him and peered inside.

“Ere, that's all my fucking stuff,” he said, reaching in to try to pull out the scruffy armchair. “You fucking thieves or what?”

“Don't do that, mate,” said Lachlan softly coming over to stand very close to Shane. “Me mate wouldn't like it, see. Not after all the effort of putting the stuff in 'ere like.”

Shane tried to back away but Fisnik was right behind him.

“I'm calling the effing cops,” he said.

“Yeah, you do that,” said Lachlan, “an' I'll show 'em your little stash. Not much but prob'ly enough to get you five years.”

“You put all my stuff back,” blustered Shane.

“Ain't your stuff,” said Lachlan. “We left your stuff up there. This is Sarah's.”

“Where's Sarah?” said Shane, finally remembering her existence. “You'd better not of effing hurt her.” He looked round wildly.

“Oh yeah, like you care,” said Lachlan, stepping inside Shane's comfort zone again. “We seen the bruises on her face. Now you be a good boy and go on up them stairs and go home, like, else you might end up with a face like hers, or worse. Me mate 'ere's got a weakness for the sheilas and don't like no one what roughs 'em up. Do ya, mate?”

“Nice lady,” said Fisnik, obligingly stepping forward and cracking the knuckles of one hand. “Nice tiff.”

“You what?” said Shane rapidly backing away.

“That means baby,” said Lachlan. “The sheila and the baby's gone, mate, OK. Don't you never try to see 'em or give 'em any hassles or me and me mate'll come pay youse a visit, like, and we won't be so

friendly.”

“I’m fucking gonna get you for this,” said Shane, from the safety of half a flight of steps. “You ain’t fucking seen the end of this.”

“Anytime, any place,” said Lachlan with a broad grin. “Bring it on, mate, just bring it on.”

He walked forward a couple of steps and Shane disappeared up the rest of the stairs and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Fucking wuss,” said Lachlan and spat on the ground. “Nik, mate, shut up the truck. I gotta talk to the boss.”

“Good job,” I said when he came over. “Well done.”

“Piece of cake,” he said. “No bloody fun though. Where to now?”

“Did you get everything?” I asked.

“Think so,” he said. “We can always come back later if we didn’t.”

“Probably not a good idea,” I said then we both looked up as a window shattered and something hit the ground. Fisnik went to pick it up and brought it over.

“An XBox,” said Lachlan laughing. “Don’t look like it works no more. Chuck it, Nik, and get in the truck. After you Mrs P.”

“Well, that wasn’t too bad,” I said, getting in the car.

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” asked Sarah. “I mean, he might be upset and do something stupid.”

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “His pride’s a little hurt, that’s all. He’ll get over it pretty quickly.”

“Especially if he uses his stash,” I thought but didn’t say as I didn’t know to what extent Sarah knew about what had led to Shane’s attitude change. For all I knew she was clueless.

I pulled up outside the house in Pickett Street fifteen minutes later, having stressed myself out every time we'd seen a police car but fortunately none had paid any attention to us. Lachlan reversed the truck onto the drive.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"This is it?" asked Sarah. "Wow."

"It's nothing special," I said. "Just an ordinary three bedroom house, only in a nicer suburb."

"It's awesome," she said. "I love it already. Look, baby, look at our new home."

"Oh," I said. "Before I forget. I need the keys to Quidditch Street to give to the agent. Did Shane have a set?"

"Nah," she said as Lachlan and Fisnik opened the back doors of the truck.

She fished inside her bag and brought out a simple keyring with two keys on it, one for the front door and one for the back.

"There you go," she said.

"Thanks," I said, dropping them in my bag. "Let's go inside and you can decide where you want your furniture. The power should still be on."

She followed me nervously up the drive, carrying the carry cot.

"Quiet here, isn't it," she said.

"Yes," I said, fishing inside my bag for the keys to the house. "Oh bugger."

"We'll have this lot in pretty quick," said Lachlan, coming up behind

us with his arms full.

"There's a bit of a problem," I said. "I forgot to get the keys from the agent."

"You mean we can't get in?" asked Sarah. She sounded disappointed which was a good thing.

"Bugger," said Lachlan. "ere Nik, lay off unloading, bit of a problem, like. You want me to check round the back, Mrs P?"

"Would you?" I asked. "The previous tenants may have left the back door unlocked or a window open."

The side gate to the back yard was only latched and Lachlan disappeared.

"I'm not going to have to go back, am I?" asked Sarah worriedly.

"No way, sweetie," I said. "You're out of there and you're never going back. Hopefully the back door's open."

Lachlan came back a couple of minutes later.

"Tight as a rat's arse," he said. "You want me to force a window?"

"No," I said. "No point in damaging the place just for one night. I'll get the keys in the morning. Umm, look, you lads take the truck back to the factory and go on home. Sarah and the baby can stay at my place for the night and we'll finish the move tomorrow. Is that OK?"

"What sort of time?" asked Lachlan. "Only me and him got to go to work, see."

"I'll get the keys first thing," I said. "You two take the morning off and bring the truck back here around ten, OK? I'll square it with Barry."

"Fine by me," he said. "I'll just explain to Nik. Hey, if it's all right with you I'll take the truck home. Save going back to the factory. Me car'll be all right there for the night."

"Makes sense," I said then gave a little laugh. "Maybe your wife'll believe you when you turn up with a removal van."

"S'right," he said. "'Specially one full of baby clothes. 'Ere Nik, change of plan."

"I'm sorry," I said. "It was really stupid of me to forget to pick up the keys."

"Umm, I can go somewhere else," she said.

"Don't be silly," I said. "There's plenty of room at my place. There's only me and my partner Darrell there and we'd love to have you. Come on. It's getting late and Kaylee and you need some sleep. It's been a stressful evening."

Nik must have been happy with the new arrangement as he and Lachlan got into the van. I noticed one of the neighbour's curtains twitch when he started the engine so it was probably just as well we hadn't tried to break in. I had a vague feeling there was a neighbourhood watch scheme running in this street, which made it different to Quiddich Street. There, the neighbours made a point of not seeing anything.

"It's a lovely house," said Sarah as I pulled away, "and you're giving it to us cheap. Do those guys work for you?"

"Yes," I said. "They're nice guys, plenty of them are."

"So you're paying them for this as well?" she asked.

"It seems only fair," I said. "Especially as they're going to miss a morning's work as well."

"So, umm, why are you doing all this for us?" asked Sarah. "This must be costing you quite a lot."

"Because I felt ..., oops, wrong turn."

I was about to say 'because I felt sorry for you', but realised just in

time that that could make her feel degraded and a little pathetic. No one wants pity, least of all when they're in a pitiful situation. I covered my hesitation by turning an unnecessary corner then had to find my way back to the main road.

"Because sometimes strength and determination aren't enough," I said. "I'm a woman running a business in a man's world and I know how hard it can be. Sometimes you simply need a little help from someone else. A few dollars in the right place at the right time can make a huge difference. You've got the strength and the determination and you've a great future ahead of you if only someone would give you that little bit of help. Well, I've got a couple of dollars to spare and I'm more than happy to help. None of this is your fault and you deserve some respect and happiness."

"But it is all my fault," she said then twisted in her seat to attend to Kaylee in the back who was starting to get fretful.

"No it isn't," I said, keeping a close eye on a police car a few hundred metres behind. I kept to the speed limit and the police didn't seem to be getting any closer. "You were in a relationship and your partner chose not to respect you in that relationship. How can that be your fault?"

"I could have tried harder to be what he wanted," she said. Kaylee seemed comforted by Sarah's voice and the touch of her hand.

"You could never be what he wanted," I said. "He was a frigging druggie, a crackhead."

"You stupid idiot," I shouted in my head as soon as I heard what I'd said. I'd have kicked myself only I was driving and there was a police car not too far behind.

Sarah jerked around and stared at me. I could feel her eyes boring into me even as I watched the police.

"How did you know?" she asked after a few seconds.

"I smelt it," I said. "In the flat, and Lachlan found his stash."

“Lachlan's one of the men who ...” asked Sarah.

“The smaller one,” I said. “The big guy's Fisnik.”

“Fisnik,” she said and laughed. “That's a funny name.”

“He's Algerian,” I said. “He's had a pretty rough life too but hopefully he's going to settle now he's in Australia.”

“What happened to him?” asked Sarah.

“Ohh, I don't know if I should tell you,” I said. “Hell, I suppose it's all right. When he was 19 he got married, back in Algeria, then had to flee the country because of the civil war. This was in 2002 and he and his wife walked to Niger and settled there. He managed to get a job of sorts but it was difficult for a Christian in a mainly Muslim country. Anyway, to cut a long story short, Boko Haram rebelled against the Government of Niger ...”

“I've heard of them,” said Sarah frowning. “They were on the news on TV.”

“Yes,” I said. “Not very nice people. Anyway, I forget when the rebellion started but in 2017 Fisnik and his wife, who was pregnant, had to escape Niger and tried to go back to Algeria along with thousands of other refugees. I don't know why but Algeria abandoned the refugees in the Sahara Desert with no food, water or transport.”

“Oh god,” said Sarah. “How awful. What happened to them? How did they end up here?”

“I don't know the full story and I probably never will,” I said. “But Fisnik and his wife separated from most of the others who headed back to Niger. He and his wife were found by a United Nations rescue squad somewhere along the border with Mali and he ended up here in Australia as a refugee. Before I agreed to give him a job I was told, unofficially, by someone connected with the United Nations that somewhere along the line Fisnik's wife had been attacked by four or five men and that Fisnik had killed all of them with his bare hands to protect her. They thought I should know, you see, before I gave him a

job.”

“And you still gave him a job?” asked Sarah. “Isn't he dangerous?”

“Are you serious?” I asked. “You think someone who killed five men to protect a woman is going to hurt me? He's one of the good guys, Sarah. They're not all bad. Anyway it wasn't ever proved and no one's bringing charges anyway. Oh shit!”

The police car had suddenly sped up and its sirens were blazing away so I pulled over, hoping they wouldn't notice a baby on the back seat in a carry cot. They didn't. They totally ignored me and disappeared up the road which was a relief.

“He was protecting his wife and baby?” she said, thoughtfully.

“Yup,” I said. “Well, this is where I live. Come in and meet my other half.”

I briefly introduced them, as Darrell had stayed up to wait for me to come back, then sent Sarah and Kaylee off to the spare bedroom. She looked exhausted so hopefully she'd get some sleep although Kaylee seemed to be waking up.

“Poor kid,” said Darrell as we went to bed ourselves. “She doesn't look old enough to have a baby of her own. How long's she staying?”

“Probably just tonight,” I said. “I forgot to get the keys so I'll get them in the morning and take her round.”

“OK,” he said. “Is she the one you thought might make a good model?”

“Yes,” I said, “once the bruises have gone. What do you think?”

“Difficult to say,” he said. “Some people photograph well and others don't but you can't tell until you get a photograph. She does have a waif-like quality though, like Kate Moss in the nineties. Might be fun to do a shoot and see how she turns out.”

“Well, I’ll give her a few days and let the bruising go before I mention it. Could be good for her self esteem even if nothing else comes of it. I don’t think she’s had much luck in her life so far.”

“Could be good, could be bad,” he said. “You’ve got to be ultra tough to be a model. It’s a bitch of a job.”

“She’s had a bitch of a time so far,” I said. “She may look like a waif but I think underneath she’s pretty tough.”

“That’s if she doesn’t go back to him,” said Darrell. “I’ve read a lot of women do, for some reason.”

Chapter Fourteen

“How did you get such a nice house?” asked Sarah the next day.

I'd picked up the keys and Lachlan and Fisnik had turned up promptly and were moving all Sarah's belongings in. She'd unpacked the kettle and found some mugs and made coffee for the four of us. It was the local supermarket's own decaffeinated brand and was indescribably awful. I'd surreptitiously put my full coffee mug on the floor and was pretending to have forgotten about it.

“This place?” I said. “It's pretty ordinary but I'm glad you like it.”

“No, the place you live in,” she said. “I've never been in such a nice house.”

I laughed. “A lot of people will tell you that if you work hard you'll be successful,” I said. “It's mostly bullshit. It's more down to luck, I think, than anything else.”

“But you run your own company,” she said, “and you own several houses. You must have worked hard.”

“Yes, I did work hard,” I said. “But that's not the reason why. I worked hard to get my degree in engineering and worked hard at my jobs but I didn't set up the company. I inherited it which made it a lot easier. My granddad's the one who set it up and I'm sure he worked bloody hard but he was lucky enough to get a contract to make some sort of casing for personnel carriers in the Vietnam War which got him established. Plenty of people work their guts out but don't get anywhere. There's a guy I used to know years ago who plays the sax with a band. Now, they're a great band and they're just as good as any of the bands that hit the big time but even though they sent off demos to every record label around they never had the luck to get picked up.”

“I've never been lucky,” she said sadly.

“You're young,” I said. “Plenty of time for you to get a break. You think you'll be alright here?”

"I'm going to find someone to share with," she said. "They'll be a bit of company and bring in some money until I can find a job."

"That's a good idea," I said. "Listen, it would be a good idea if whoever you choose we put on the lease as well. That way you'll be protected legally, especially if they skip out without paying rent or something. Have you anyone in mind?"

"I thought I'd put an ad in the Advertiser," she said. "Maybe find another single mum who needs a place. That's why I'm keeping two of the bedrooms empty."

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

"Gonna have to get some new furniture, too," she said, looking at the furniture that had already been brought in. "This lot is scruffy as hell. I'm embarrassed to have it here to be honest. I'll see if I can find some better stuff in some op shops and toss this lot."

"Awesome," I said. "Anyway, I'm going to have to go. I've got a meeting that I have to go to and it's already been postponed twice."

I'd remembered the meeting with Alan McNaughton at 10am when I'd woken up and had had to get Kasey to postpone it to the afternoon. It was a nuisance and I didn't really want to go to it but since I'd stupidly agreed to meet him I couldn't really get out of it now. Still, my plan, such as it was, was to listen to his proposal then quietly back away since it was unlikely his proposal would be that beneficial.

"Oh, OK," she said. "Well, umm, thank you for everything. I really do appreciate it."

"No problem," I said, getting up.

To be honest I was reluctant to go. Sarah and Kaylee's few scruffy possessions made them look lost and lonely in the house and I was worried that she might spend too much time thinking about Shane.

"Well, you can't make her stay here," I told myself. "She's got to take some responsibility and if she decides to go back to him then I can't

make her stay away.”

* * *

“So how did McNaughton's take it?” I asked when I got in to the office.

“Babs didn't seem to care,” said Kasey. “She just put me on hold then came back with one o'clock which I thought would suit you so I agreed. Was that OK?”

“Yes, no problem,” I said. “I'll grab a sandwich on the way. Should be back by three at the outside. Anything interesting happened this morning?”

“No, not yet,” she said, “although Martha wants to talk to you about some figures for a new machine and I've put the list of interviewees on your desk. Umm, and there's some interesting rumours floating round about you, seeing as how Lachlan's car was in the car park all night and he and Fisnik aren't in today.”

“Jesus, they've got dirty minds,” I said. “Do you think I need to do anything about it?”

“Oh god no,” she said. “The general consensus is that if you want to play around that's your right and I reckon most of them hope it'll be them next time so they'll try to keep on your good side. I'd let it lie, if I were you.”

“I hope you're right,” I said. “Still, worst case, I sack everyone and hire new people. Unemployment's pretty high in Dandenong. When are the interviews?”

“They're all next Monday,” she said. “Two in the morning and two in the afternoon.”

“Four?” I said. “I thought there were only three.”

“There were four on your desk,” said Casey. “If you want me to cancel someone, let me know.”

“No, don't worry about it,” I said. “No harm interviewing someone unsuitable. It just might help with their Centrelink claim anyway.”

There was a stack of mail on my desk and a neatly printed list of interviewees, with applications attached, which I picked up and scanned.

“Oh right,” I said, realising. “Oh well, this could be interesting.”

Gail Guichard, the university girl artist who wanted to be an apprentice, was the last, at three thirty. I'd put her application aside to think about and forgotten about it and Kasey must have picked it up thinking she was one of the ones I was interested in.

I read through her application then sat for a while gazing out of the window. My gut feeling was that Gail Guichard was probably rather butch and not a particularly good artist. It would be interesting to look at some of her work although she hadn't sent any photos or mentioned a website. Still, if she showed any promise it might be an idea to take her on in the Design team doing technical drawings. Benjy, Yu Yang's assistant, had been hinting that he might be thinking of moving on so it wouldn't hurt to get someone else in. Since Gail was a graduate she must be at least halfway intelligent and might even be worth sending on a Computer Aided Design course.

“No,” I reflected, “it wouldn't hurt to interview her although an apprenticeship probably isn't the best thing.”

With a sigh I turned back and attacked my post. It was all very routine.

* * *

McNaughton's ran a chain of auto accessories and parts stores across Australia and their Head Office was in Burwood, roughly a half hour's drive away. I left at 12 and picked up a beef and salad roll and a coffee from a bakery in Burwood and ate it in the McNaughton car park. Their Head Office was about the same size as my factory but occupied four stories. The building had probably been radical and state of the art in the 1970s but now looked tawdry and out of place.

“Hello,” I said to the receptionist who wasn't a patch on Kasey. “Penny Dorchester to see Alan McNaughton.”

She looked suspiciously at me which is never a good sign in a receptionist then spoke briefly on the phone.

“If you could take a seat,” she said, “someone will be down in a moment.”

“OK,” I said and sat in one of the two barrel chairs placed in a corner surrounded by photographs of pre-war racing cars.

It's interesting how stereotypical names can cause misleading expectations. Alan McNaughton's secretary/personal assistant was called Babs and I had a mental image of a young, blonde, very busty girl in slightly too tight clothes and having perhaps somewhat limited secretarial skills. The woman who came to collect me was middle aged, plainly dressed and had her dark hair up in a bun. She even had a pencil tucked behind one ear.

“Penny Dorchester?” she said, bustling over efficiently. “I'm Babs, Mr McNaughton's PA. Please follow me.”

She took me up in an elevator to the top floor and into a small office lined with filing cabinets and remorselessly tidy. It reeked of efficiency.

“Miss Dorchester,” she said, showing me into another office beyond hers.

The racing car theme was continued with a gigantic colour photograph of a young Alan McNaughton winning the Bathurst 500 sometime before I was born. The man sitting in front of it bore a vague resemblance although with considerably less hair and significantly more waistline which was understandable since it had to have been a half century since he retired from motor racing.

“Hello,” said Alan, getting up and coming round his large desk. “We meet at last.”

“Yes, sorry about that,” I said. “There was a bit of an emergency this morning. Thanks for rescheduling.”

“At your factory?” he asked, gesturing me towards a large comfortable chair on the other side of the room.

“Oh no,” I said. “A friend of mine had a minor housing problem. Are those your trophies?”

Arrayed on two long shelves on the wall by the comfy chairs were twenty or thirty cups and statuettes of varying sizes.

“Nice little collection, isn't it” he said smiling broadly. He seemed to have several fewer teeth than his portrait as well and they weren't as brilliantly shiny.

“What's that one?” I asked, pointing to the largest.

“That was for my win at Bathurst,” he said.

“Oh really?” I said. “I never knew you won there. Just the once, was it?”

I did know, of course. Alan McNaughton was almost as famous as Phar Lap or Don Bradman but I wanted him to know I wasn't overawed by his reputation. Even at the lower levels of business gamesmanship is a big factor.

“Yes,” he said. “Just the once. But you know what? This one is the one I'm most proud of.”

He showed me a small, rather drab medallion on a strip of faded blue cloth in a picture frame.

“This was my first ever trophy,” he said. “Third place in Victorian Sedans in 1963 at Winton Raceway in Benalla. I was 17 and hadn't been signed up by Holden then. I was dead chuffed.”

OK, one up to Alan.

“Very impressive,” I said, working out in my head that he was now 72 or 73. “When did you stop racing?”

“1972,” he said. “I’d won all the big events in Australia and faced a choice of slowly fading out or going international and getting destroyed by the big boys in America and Europe. I didn’t like either option so I started this business and retired. I was starting to lose my reflexes anyway. Another five years and I’d have probably had a major crash. Can I offer you some coffee? Some lunch perhaps?”

“I’ve eaten,” I said, “but a coffee would be nice.”

He bustled off to organise Babs and I wandered over to look out of the long window. Being on the fourth floor he had a good view.

“This is a lovely view,” I said. “Is that Mount Dandenong over there?”

“Probably,” he said. “I haven’t see it for years. Short sighted now you see, and I hate wearing glasses.”

“Well, you seem to have done quite well for yourself,” I said. “Nice little business empire.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “199 stores around Australia so far. Another fifteen planned for the next two years then a major expansion into Indonesia. We’ll probably be going public to fund that.”

“You think I should buy some shares?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “We wouldn’t do it if we didn’t think it would be profitable. We’ll have a prospectus out in about six months. I’ll send you a copy.”

“Thanks,” I said. “What sort of offer price would you be looking at?”

“Oh, it’s a bit early to say,” he said, “but I would expect around \$7 or \$8 per \$1 share, something of that order.”

“Well good for you,” I said. “I don’t think Dorchester’s will be going public in the foreseeable future.”

Babs came in with a tray with two cups of coffee, a cute little pot of milk and a matching sugar bowl.

"Thank you, my dear," said Alan, beaming at her. She put the cups on a side table between the two armchairs. I leaned forward and added a splash of milk to the one nearest to me.

"And now to business," said Alan, "if you don't mind?"

"By all means," I said.

He picked up a folder and started leafing through it.

"Dorchester Light Engineering," he said. "An interesting company. Based in Dandenong, established in the 1970s, by your grandfather, I believe?"

"Yes," I said. "My father took over in 2002."

"Ah, yes," he said. "And you took over in 2014."

"That's right," I said. "We're keeping it in the family."

"Quite," said Alan, studying the documents in the file. "Steady profits throughout the last ten years. A minor dip in 2014 but they returned the following year, which is a credit to yourself. Turnover has increased steadily from \$4 million to \$8 million last year."

"It'll be down a little this year," I said. "There's been a downturn in the industry in the last few months."

"And what do you attribute that to?" he asked.

"Cheap Chinese imports," I said. "We can't really compete on labour costs."

"Yes, it's a major problem. Not confined to Australia, of course. The Americans are planning to impose import tariffs in the New Year and Australia may well follow suit. What plans do you have to counter the Chinese?"

"We have a few ideas," I said vaguely. I certainly wasn't going to tell him what our plans were until I knew what this meeting was all about, and probably not even then.

"I'm sure you do," he said. "Still, at \$2 million or thereabouts your labour costs don't seem unreasonable although if you could halve that you'd be in a considerably stronger position."

"Well, obviously," I said.

"Surely he isn't thinking about taking us over?" I thought incredulously. "McNaughton's had got to be worth third of a billion or so, why waste time with us?"

"Looking at your balance sheets," he mused, "you seem quite healthy. Ratio of debt to assets is not unreasonably high although your plant does seem to be on the old side. Much of it is fully depreciated."

"Yes," I said. "Dad focused on expanding the business so most of our equipment dates from when he moved to our present location in 2004."

"You are not looking to expand?" he asked.

"It's under consideration," I said. "Although capital is a bit short at the moment."

"You've 10,000 shares authorised," he said, "but only a thousand issued. You could release the other nine thousand."

"This is a family business," I said. "Those thousand shares are held by just four of us. Issuing the other nine thousand outside we four would have serious implications regarding control and voting but I doubt we could raise much capital between us."

"Yes, that is the difficulty with small family businesses," he said. "Still, losing overall control may be an option."

"Perhaps," I said, knowing that there was no way I would ever do that. Perhaps in the future we might issue more shares to change the

proportions between myself, Gramps, mum and Kevin but the control would always stay within the family which meant no outsiders.

“Ah well,” he said. “Anyway, you seem stable enough,” and closed the file, leaving it resting on his knee.

“Here it comes,” I thought, bracing myself. “He’s going to propose McNaughton’s take the other nine thousand shares. God knows what for though.”

“I would like to put a proposition to you,” he said. “As you know, McNaughton’s is essentially a chain of auto parts and accessories and we currently have some arrangements in place with other organisations to manufacture our own brand of the more popular parts, such as fan belts, distributors, air filters and the like.”

“That sounds sensible,” I said. “Although I confess I have a leased car and never buy car parts.”

“Fortunately Australia is a land of DIY car mechanics,” he said with a smile, “and a strong tradition of buying tools for Father’s Day and Christmas. What we have in mind is to start our own line of toolboxes for those tools. We anticipate a substantial market, ranging from small portable toolboxes for the home enthusiast up to large boxes for mounting in utes and vans for tradies and mobile mechanics. Would you be interested in manufacturing them?”

“As a supplier?” I asked, “or a subsidiary?”

“As a supplier, of course,” he said. “We have no plans for vertical integration. You would retain complete independence.”

“Oh thank god for that,” I said to myself with a sigh of relief.

“It’s certainly an idea worth exploring,” I said. “What sort of volume are you expecting?”

I left his office two hours later with an armful of printed spreadsheets, a draft contract, an arrangement for a second meeting in early January and a spinning head. There was no doubt about it, the old

man had a head for business and a ruthless streak despite his apparent charm. I didn't get back to the office until a little after five and everyone had gone apart from Chris, who was in charge of purchasing, who was working on sourcing some 4mm brass sheet for Art Victoria who were setting up a Sculpture Garden in two and a half hectares of newly reclaimed land in Footscray. He wasn't having much luck as most suppliers of brass sheet only go to 7 gauge which is 3.66mm.

"I'm probably going to have to get it from China or India," he told me, "as they are the only places that still make boilers for steam trains."

"Will it be expensive?" I asked.

"Expensive is a relative term," he said. "Certainly it'll be cheaper to import than having 4mm brass custom made here. The real question is, do we need to use 4mm brass? Couldn't we use 7 gauge instead?"

"The specs require 4mm," I said, "but I'll check with Art Victoria in the morning. I don't imagine free standing Art needs particularly high tolerances."

Back in my office I jotted down a note to myself about the brass then sat there for a while looking at the stack of printouts. The thought of ploughing through them exhausted me.

"I'll start tomorrow," I promised myself. "I'm going home. I wonder what's for dinner?"

* * *

I half expected to dream about racing cars that night but I didn't. I had that dream about the girl with the poison dripping on her face again although it didn't wake me up. What woke me was my phone.

"Yeah?" I said sleepily when it rang the second time.

"Penelope Dorchester?" asked the male voice.

"Yeah," I said, sleepily. "Who is this?"

“You are the emergency contact for Dorchester Light Engineering Proprietary Limited?” he asked.

“That's right,” I said, suddenly waking up. “What's the problem?”

“This is Dandenong CFA,” he said. “We are currently attending a fire at your premises.”

Chapter Fifteen

I was quite impressed when I got to the factory. There were two big fire trucks, a CFA Control Vehicle and a bunch of hunky guys milling around doing things with hoses. There was also a police car. By the look of it the fire was out though. I couldn't see any flames and there was very little smoke.

"Please move your vehicle to the far side of the car park," said the policeman coming over as soon as I stopped beside the tape barrier.

"I'm the factory owner," I said.

He didn't even blink. "Please move your vehicle to the far side of the car park," he repeated, this time pointing in case I didn't know where the other side of the car park was.

"OK," I said and reversed the car.

He went back to talk to one of the firemen who was peering in through one of the side windows to the factory. The fireman looked over at me and nodded and the two of them came to meet me by the tape.

"I'm Penny Dorchester," I said. "Managing Director of this factory. What the hell happened?"

"Leading Fireman Watkins," said the fireman. "I'm the investigator for this incident. This is Sergeant Suri of the Victoria Police Arson and Explosives Squad."

"Arson?" I said. "Hold on, you're saying this was arson?"

"Not necessarily," said Sergeant Suri. "The CFA calls us in whenever there is a suspicious fire but this may not be a suspicious fire."

Watkins snorted. "Yeah, right."

"So what caused it?" I asked.

“Can't say for certain yet,” he said. “Have to wait for daylight and investigate the interior and prepare an official report. Do you store petrol on the premises?”

“Petrol? God no,” I said. “We keep a little methylated spirits for cleaning but that's kept in the Stores on the other side of the building. So, umm, unofficially?”

“Petrol bomb,” he said. “You can still smell the petrol. Looks like the side window was smashed and we'll probably find a bottle or can of some sort inside. What's the layout of the interior?”

“This side is machinery and the toilets and showers,” I said. “The offices are over there and the Stores is at the far end. When can I go in and check the damage?”

“We're checking for structural safety now,” he said, “although it looks to have been fairly superficial and the roof supports are steel. Do you have gas laid to the premises?”

“Yes,” I said. “We've got a gas fired furnace which is right down there, near the Stores, and a gas cooker in the lunchroom which is over in that corner, near the main entrance.”

“Right,” he said, “we'll check those out. All the other machines are electrically operated?”

“Yes,” I said. “And each has an isolator.”

“Excellent,” he said. “We'll shut down all those showing signs of damage although I'd advise you to get in a qualified electrician as soon as possible. Any explosives or inflammable materials?”

“No, we're sheet metal fabricators,” I said, “not mining engineers. Oh, wait, yes. There's the oxy-acetylene for the welder and the fork-lift is gas powered,” and I explained where they were kept.

He jotted all these details down and when he'd finished I asked about getting inside again.

“Give us another six hours to do safety checks,” he said, “then you can go in but a lot of the machinery will still be hot even if it isn't damaged and there could also be water and smoke damage.”

“And how long before we can get back to work?” I asked.

“That depends on the extent of the damage,” he said, “but I'd say two days minimum before you can use what hasn't been damaged. You'll also need to get someone out to secure the premises. We had to take out the windows on this side and there are some roof panels that are damaged. Fortunately there wasn't much wind.”

“Wind?” I asked. “You mean fanning the flames?”

“No,” he said. “Carrying sparks to the other units on this estate. You've got a freight company the other side and god knows what they're holding at the moment and a plastics company this side which could have been nasty if it had caught alight. On the whole it's been a fairly minor incident. Right, I'd better get back to work. Catch up with you later, Norm.”

“Bert,” said Norm Suri the policeman.

“You look a little shaken,” he said, turning back to me. “Bit of a shock, was it?”

“God, yes,” I said. “I was sound asleep when someone rang. Jesus, a fire, we've never had a fire before, well not here anyway.”

“You've had a fire before?” he asked. “Where and when was that?”

“Oh lord,” I said. “I'd have to ask my grandfather. It was back in the early nineties, I think, when the factory was in Eumemmering. It was his factory then.”

“And do you know the cause of that fire?” he asked.

“No I don't,” I said. “But it was pretty bad although the insurance enabled him to set up a bigger factory in Dandenong South.”

“And when did you move here?” he asked.

“2004,” I said. “My father ran it then.”

“And how was that move funded?” he asked.

“Out of profits,” I said. “He ran this site half empty for a couple of years while he built up the equipment. Why?”

“And your father still owns the factory?” he asked.

“No, my father died in 2014,” I said. “I took over as Managing Director although the factory is actually family owned.”

“I see,” he said. “And are you planning to move to bigger premises?”

“Not for a long time,” I said. “We’re down a bit on orders at the moment.”

“Yes, a lot of businesses are struggling at the moment,” he said. “Asian imports, that sort of thing. So you’re running at a loss at the moment, then?”

“A loss?” I said, puzzled. “Definitely not. Profits this year will be down a little but they’ll still be quite satisfactory.”

“Well that’s good news, isn’t it,” he said. “So have you had to sack anyone recently?”

“How recently’s recently?” I asked. “I’ve had two guys quit this year but no, I haven’t sacked anyone since last year. Why?”

“Why did the two who quit leave?” he asked.

“They both got better jobs,” I said.

“So they left quite voluntarily?” he asked. “They weren’t pressured to leave in any way?”

“God no,” I said. “I was annoyed that they left. They were both bloody

good workers. Why?"

"At this stage we can't be certain this was arson," he said, "but you don't have any enemies, do you?"

"Enemies?" I said, surprised. "No, of course not."

Then the penny dropped.

"Oh god, you think it was me?" I said, stepping backwards. "You think, I set fire to the factory for the insurance?"

"It's not unknown," he said dryly, "although if it was deliberate I don't think it was you or a past employee."

"Well that's nice of you," I said sarcastically. "Why not?"

"Anyone who worked here wouldn't have set the fire at this end," he said. "From what you were saying all the flammables and the offices are at the other end. This looks more like someone came to this end so they wouldn't be seen from the road and didn't have a clue what to target. Still, you'll have no objection to our forensic accountants looking through your books?"

"No, of course not," I said. "It's all on computer with plenty of backups. I'll introduce you to Martha when she gets here. She handles the accounts."

"Martha's surname?" he asked, pulling out his notebook.

"Martha Blatherskill," I said and spelt it out for him.

He sighed and looked back at the factory. In the pre-dawn light I could see that most of the side wall was still intact even though the windows were missing.

"Can I go over and look through the window?" I asked. I was anxious about the damage inside.

"No, not until the CFA have given approval," he said. "Don't want the

wall collapsing on you, do we.”

“I suppose not,” I said.

“So, no enemies at all?” he asked after a few moments. “That’s pretty impressive, you’ve managed to live your entire life without pissing anyone off?”

“Not enough to bomb the factory,” I said. “Oh,” and I stopped.

Out came the notebook again.

“You’ve thought of someone?” he said.

“Umm, I don’t know,” I said. “I suppose it’s just possible but ...”

“Can you give me a name?” he asked.

“Shane,” I said. “I don’t know his surname.”

“And he lives in Dandenong?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He did but he may have moved, I don’t know yet.”

“Yet?” asked Norm.

“What kind of name is Suri?” I wondered, my mind wandering. “Oh, umm, I had to move a tenant and he was her partner,” I said.

“So presumably he’s with her?” he said. “Do you know where she is?”

“Oh yes, she’s in Pickett Street,” I said, “but Shane isn’t there. At least I bloody hope he isn’t.”

“I think you’d better tell me the whole story,” he said. “Come and sit in my car.”

I sat in the passenger seat of his car and told him about Sarah and how we’d moved her the previous night. I probably wasn’t as clear as I

could have been as he got me to go through it a second time.

"And you think there were drugs involved," he asked at one point. "Why didn't you report that to us immediately?"

"I'm no expert on drugs," I said. "I don't even know the difference between aspirin and paracetamol. I'm not going to report someone just because of a funny smell especially when it could easily have been some burnt plastic."

"Hmm," he said, unconvinced. No doubt he was wondering if I could be an accessory to some international narcotics ring. He thought for a moment then picked up his radio handset.

"Control, Sergeant Suri, 369" he reported. "Currently at the site of a possible arson on a factory. Possible suspect, identified only as Shane at this time but there are reasonable grounds to suspect possession or trafficking of drugs. Requesting search and seizure of premises at 7 Quiddich Street and detaining of any persons at those premises, over."

"Unit 2," I said. "There are three apartments at that address. Mine's the middle one, unit 2."

"Acknowledged, Sergeant Suri," crackled the radio. "Request logged at 06:39, confirm address 7 Quidditch Street, over."

"Control, Suri, 369," he said, "address is the middle apartment, unit 2, repeat unit 2, 7 Quidditch Street, over."

"Acknowledged, middle apartment, unit 2, out."

"Well," he said cheerfully, "be pretty impressive if we can get this sorted this morning. Where is Sarah now?"

"She's at another of my houses," I said. "Can't you leave her out of it? She's been through a rough time."

"OK," he said, "we'll leave it for now as there's no reason to think she's involved in any arson although if there are drugs found on the premises she is renting she will have to be questioned."

"I guess," I said and fell silent. I was pretty sure Sarah wasn't involved in drugs and this wasn't a good time for her to get caught up in a police investigation.

"Hey," I said, having a sudden thought. "If you find any drugs there that'll be today, won't it."

"Obviously," said Norm.

"Then she isn't renting the place," I said. "She moved out on Monday and if Shane's there, he's squatting."

"A minor detail," he said. "You've already told me Shane was there when she was the tenant but I'll make a note of it. It'll be up to the FVIU to decide."

"FVIU?" I asked.

"Family Violence Investigation Unit," he said.

Bert, the fire investigation officer, tapped on the rear windscreen, startling us both.

"Definitely arson," he said when Norm got out so I opened the door to hear what he had to say.

"How come?" asked Norm.

"We found a milk carton near the broken window, partially intact. It looks like the perpetrator broke the window and threw in the carton filled with a propellant, almost certainly petrol."

"Right," said Norm. "I'll come and seal off the area. I'll call for forensics first. With a bit of luck we'll get some fingerprints."

"OK," said Bert.

"Can I go in yet?" I asked.

"No, not yet," said Bert. "Although it looks like the damage isn't too

extensive. The three machines near this wall have suffered extensive damage as has the partition to the toilet block but the machines at the far end and the offices are untouched beyond some water on the floor. You'll probably need some new carpet. Give us a couple more hours."

"OK, thanks," I said.

* * *

"What happened to you?" asked Darrell when I got home that afternoon. "You ran out of the house like a banshee shouting something incomprehensible and you disappeared before I'd woken up enough to ask what was wrong."

"There was a fire at the factory," I said. "Make me a coffee would you, hon, I'm parched."

"You're joking," he said, staring at me and not making any move towards the kitchen.

"I wish," I said. "When you come back with the coffee I'll tell you all about it."

"Anyone hurt?" he asked, still not moving towards the kitchen. "Is the place destroyed? Was it an explosion? Is it going to be on TV?"

"No one's hurt," I said. "The kitchen's over there."

"Oh yeah," he said. "Coffee."

"So are you out of business?" he called from the kitchen.

"No," I said, getting up and going into the kitchen since my throat hurt a little from the lingering smoke from the fire and I didn't want to shout. "Some of the machines were damaged and we've got to clean up the water and repair a couple of walls and the roof but we should be back at work on Friday."

"So how did it start?" he asked, putting a mug of coffee in front of me. "Have you eaten? I could do you a toasted chicken sandwich?"

“Was that supposed to be funny?” I asked wearily.

“Funny? No,” he said. “Oh shit, yeah, toast, sorry.”

“No, I’m too tired to eat,” I said. “I’m going to bed in a bit. It’s been a stressful couple of days.”

“So what happened?” he said, sitting opposite me and taking my hand in his.

“Someone threw in a petrol bomb,” I said.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” he said, staring at me. “A petrol bomb? What the hell for?”

“Revenge,” I said. “It was that guy Sarah was with. He must have seen the company name on the side of the van when we got her stuff and decided to burn the place down.”

“Did you tell the police about him?” he asked. “He isn’t going to come and burn this house down as well, is he?”

“No,” I said. “The police have already arrested him. They raided the apartment and found him and arrested him on drugs charges since they found some bags in the unit and in his car. They think he was dealing as well since there was quite a lot in his car. Oh, and they found a half empty petrol can as well. They’re checking for fingerprints at the factory and they’ll probably charge him for that too.”

“Thank god for that,” said Darrell. “So long as you’re safe.”

“And Sarah,” I said. “He doesn’t know where she is so she should be safe too.”

“Well, yeah,” said Darrell. “He sounds like a bloody madman. How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted,” I said. “Emotionally drained, anxious, scared, you name it. The only thing I’m not feeling is hungry.”

“Oh you poor thing,” he said, getting up and coming round to my side of the table. “Want a hug?”

“More than anything,” I said, so he gave me a hug.

It might have been several hugs or just one very long one, I wasn't sure but then I wasn't counting either. It was just so good to be held and I started to feel quite safe and protected. I could have stayed like that for hours but my coffee was getting cold.

“I'm going to bed,” I said. “What with moving Sarah out, meeting Alan McNaughton, being woken up in the middle of the night and having to deal with the fire I could sleep for a week.”

“So sleep for a week,” said Darrell. “There's no rush to go back to work.”

“I can't,” I said. “I've got to get the factory back up and running. Oh, I've got Barry, Aman and Greg coming round tomorrow. Hope you don't mind.”

“I don't mind,” he said. “Although why are they coming here?”

“They're checking all the machines this afternoon,” I said, “and Giovanni's checking the Stores for damage too. In the morning we're meeting here to work out what jobs we can still do and sort out a new production schedule and decide what to do about the rest while the guys get on with cleaning up. We may need to cancel some orders or maybe sub-contract out some work and at some point in the next couple of days an insurance assessor will come out too so once that's done I'm going to have to make some decisions on whether to get more machines or lay off staff or maybe even move to new premises and organise repairs to the building and argue with the insurance company and figure out how to pay everyone. And on top of all that I've got to decide what to do about McNaughton's and I'm supposed to be interviewing for a new apprentice and I don't even have a factory for them to apprentice to. I'm not sure I can cope with it all.”

I was starting to get tearful.

“Of course you can cope,” said Darrell. “You just need some sleep, that's all.”

“That's easy for you to say,” I said, bursting into tears. I fumbled my coffee mug and dropped it and coffee went everywhere. “You don't have to think about everyone's bloody Christmas presents on top of everything else!”

Chapter Sixteen

“As part of the government initiative on fire prevention,” said the smarmy young man at the door, “we are offering free installation and servicing of smoke detectors and allied equipment in homes in your area.”

“Oh yes,” I said incuriously. No doubt it made a change from selling electricity door to door.

“Can I ask if you have a smoke detector installed?” he asked.

I found the question a little ironic but it was unlikely he knew about the factory.

“Yes, we do,” I said.

He seemed crestfallen.

“And when was it last checked?” he asked.

“Three or four days ago,” I said. “It goes off every time we fry things and forget to shut the kitchen door.”

“Excellent,” he said looking disappointed. He stepped back and give the facade of the house a pretend scan. “You have a lovely home here.”

“We like it,” I said. “No thanks.”

“What do you mean, no thanks?” he asked, trying to look puzzled although he knew exactly what I meant.

“Whatever security upgrades you’re selling we’re not interested,” I said. “Have a nice day.”

“But ...,” he started.

I gave him a big smile and firmly shut the door. One day these people will realise that not turning up in a car means they can only be door to door salesmen which puts them at an immediate disadvantage. And

a 'government initiative'? Don't be absurd. Governments don't send people door to door, it's far too expensive. At best they'd send a leaflet. The only reason I'd spoken to him was that he'd ambushed me as I was showing Greg, Barry and Aman to the door after our meeting.

I went back into my home office and collected the mugs and took them through to the kitchen and dumped them in the dishwasher for Darrell to deal with. I'd taken one of the dining chairs back into the dining room when my phone started ringing.

"Oh god," I said to myself when I saw who was ringing, "just what I need."

I braced myself then answered. "Hello Gramps."

"A fire? A damned fire?" he shouted. "What the hell are you playing at?"

"I'm fine, thanks" I said. "How are you?"

"Why did you set my factory on fire?" he shouted.

"I didn't," I said. "Someone else did."

"Sack the bastard," he said loudly.

"I will," I promised. "How did you find out?"

"It's in the Advertiser," he said. "At the bottom of page 5. Is the place gutted?"

"It's on page 5," I said. "If it was gutted it would have been on page 2 at least, maybe even the front page with a big colour photo."

"So it wasn't much of a fire then?" he said.

Was it my imagination or did he sound disappointed?

"We lost three machines," I said, "and part of the toilets."

“How will that affect production?” he asked.

“30% or so,” I said. “We’ll sub-contract some of the work until the insurance replaces them.”

“Get some of them Rigsby Automated Folders,” he said, “and cut labour costs. I’ve heard they’re very cost effective.”

“How do you know about them?” I asked. “They aren’t on the market yet.”

“I was talking to someone about them,” he said.

“Did you give that someone my name?” I asked.

“You might have been mentioned,” he said, a little defensively. “I don’t remember.”

Well, that cleared up that little mystery. Darren Boscombe of Clarke’s Engineering Solutions had claimed we’d had a rapport even though I had had no recollection of ever meeting him.

“Anyway,” he continued, trying to go on the attack, “when were you going to tell the rest of us about the fire? Obviously it’s going to affect this year’s profits.”

“It was only yesterday,” I said. “We had to ascertain the damage and figure out how to work round it. I’ll organise a meeting for next week or maybe in the New Year, depending on Kevin’s schedule. We need to give some thought to how we move forward from this.”

“Grph,” he said. “Make it this weekend. Doesn’t matter if Kevin’s there or not, he’ll have nothing useful to contribute. I’ll get his proxy.”

“Oh no,” I said. “It’s important he’s involved. He has a long term stake in this company as well, you know, so I’ll set a date when he’s available.”

Actually that wasn’t my main concern. The way the share holdings were split, it would take all three of them to out-vote me whereas I

only needed one ally to have the majority vote. If Gramps had Kevin's proxy then he was half way to getting his own way which wasn't necessarily the way I would want to go. Gramps was also a child of the 1940s and 50s and had been furious when he found out how dad, his son, had split his shares between mum and us two kids, since I ended up as the biggest single shareholder with 36%. As I had an engineering degree he hadn't been able to stop me becoming the Managing Director as neither my mum nor Kevin had shared his lack of faith in women and none of us wanted an outsider. What Gramps had really wanted was to be the boss again, especially as he'd expected Dad to outlive him. Needless to say he hadn't been overjoyed by Kevin taking up ballet instead of metal work.

Just to complicate things I also needed to put McNaughton's proposal to the family as it had too many ramifications to be just another purchase order but I didn't want any of them to know about it until I put it to them all at the same time otherwise there'd be a fair amount of behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing going on. Gramps also stayed in contact with one or two of the older employees and wasn't above trying to use them to find out information in advance. Still, one of the major benefits of being a small family business was that I didn't have to be particularly formal. If we were a public company I'd have to give out the details in advance and define an agenda and so forth. Being a private company I could just call a meeting and print the agenda afterwards. It made life a little easier as I wasn't particularly good on the political front. Having seen Dallas on TV as a child I knew what big business was like and knew I wouldn't last five minutes in that environment.

"When will you ring him?" asked Gramps. "This afternoon?"

"It's not exactly urgent," I said. "Current production is under control, or will be tomorrow anyway, and we can't do much about planning until we know what the insurance company's going to do."

"But we need to know what's going on," he said. "This is no way to run a business."

"When I have some information I'll pass it on," I said, "and when decisions need to be made we'll make them."

“But you ...,” he started

“And don't you go scaring mum,” I said. “I'll ring her later today and update her but don't you get on her case and try to make her vote for something when she doesn't know what she's voting for, OK? You know she doesn't understand the business. We'll have a meeting soon when I've got more information and talk about it then. Was there anything else?”

“Grmph, no I suppose not,” he said testily. I'm sure I heard him shake his Dandenong Advertiser at me.

“You're 81,” I thought for the umpteenth time, after hanging up. “Do you really think you can run the business again? And for how long?”

I sighed and lounged back in the armchair then put my feet on the edge of the occasional table and stared sightlessly at the blank TV. It was one of those huge new ones that are so big the screen has to be curved slightly so it was all in focus at the same time and I found it a little scary when there was a close-up of someone as their head would be twice normal size. For some reason that was OK in the cinema but intimidating in my own lounge. Still, Darrell seemed to like it and I rarely watched TV.

“End of next week,” I thought, “at the earliest. After Christmas would be better. That way I'll have time to think through McNaughton's proposal in relation to the fire.”

I sighed again and found Kevin in my Contacts.

“This is Kevin,” said Kevin's voicemail message, “and Maurice,” chimed in another voice happily. “Leave us a wonderful message, don't be a stranger!” and what sounded like a couple of wet kisses.

“Kev, it's Penny,” I said. “Call me back when you're free. Thanks.”

“Maurice?” I wondered. “Who's Maurice? What's happened to Jean-Claude?”

Kevin's inclinations were another source of grandfatherly disapproval

although they didn't bother me. In fact, I'd quite liked Jean-Claude on the couple of occasions I'd met him.

"Yes, Brian?" I said when my phone rang thirty seconds later. Brian was the Head of Sales.

"I've just been talking with Barry," he said. "We need a rethink on the panels for Doherty's since the vari-angle corner notcher's bugged."

"Can't we do them on the fixed notcher?" I asked. From memory the corners on Doherty's panels were standard ninety degrees.

"Not if we're going to meet the deadline," he said. "The fixed's tied up with Dewson's according to this new schedule."

"Hang on a moment," I said. "I'll just get my copy."

I went into my home office and spent the next twenty minutes on a conference call with Brian, Barry and Yu Yang sorting out a way to get both jobs through one machine at the same time. Maybe it wasn't as complex as playing three dimensional chess against Mr Spock but scheduling can have its moments.

No sooner had I sorted out that little problem than my phone rang again.

"Yeah, Chris," I said. "Give me some good news."

"I've got a plumbing contractor coming in tomorrow, first thing, to fix the damaged toilets and the end shower," he said. "Can't get anyone in to replace the partition wall until Monday so the guys will just have to piss in public tomorrow."

"Is that legal?" I asked. "Isn't there some sort of H&S regulation about that?"

"Bugger," he said, "probably. OK, I'll get Angus to rig up some tarps or something for the day, the lads will understand. Fortunately the ladies lav wasn't touched."

“OK,” I said. “How about the side wall, windows and roof?”

“Ahh, the roof,” he said. “Were you happy with Kent Roofing's job after the storm last week?”

“They seemed OK,” I said. “Bit expensive but they were quick and efficient, why?”

“They can do the roof tomorrow morning,” he said. “The others I've tried can't make it until Monday or Tuesday.”

“Go with Kent, then,” I said. “I don't want to be roofless all weekend. How about the wall?”

“I was hoping you wouldn't ask,” he said. “I can't find any builders till the new year except one who'll squeeze it in on Sunday but he's expensive. Seems there's a rush on to get building work completed before Christmas.”

“How expensive?” I asked.

“A grand over the odds,” he said.

“Tell him to get lost,” I said. “That's just blatant opportunism and I'm not paying for his Christmas trip to Bali. Get someone reasonable as soon as possible in the new year.”

“In the meantime?” he asked.

“In the meantime, I'll get one of the foremen to make a temporary wall from some steel in stock and we'll park the truck up close on the outside,” I said.

“OK,” he said. “That'll give the glaziers time as well, good. Right, carpets. Statewide Carpets can be in on Monday to lay new carpet tiles in the offices and lunchroom so long as you don't mind the blue as they haven't enough of the grey in stock. Is that OK?”

“Good question,” I said. “How's the smell there? I haven't been in since just after the fire and it stank of smoke.”

"It's pretty strong," he admitted. "We've got all the windows and doors open."

"I was afraid of that," I said. "I suppose we'll have to redecorate so let's go with the blue carpet tiles and tart up the offices around them. Get some quotes on that, would you?"

"How about scrubbing down the brickwork on the shop floor?" he asked. "There's a fair amount of soot around where the actual fire was."

"Probably too big a job for Mr Do Van Tien," I said. "Better see if you can find a commercial cleaner for that. Anything else?"

"Tim's got the lights sorted," he said. "He had to get four new units although we had some cabling in stock. There was also a couple of racks of things against that wall but no one seems to know what was on them. Have you any idea?"

"God, I don't know," I said. "Probably just some crap that's accumulated over the years if no one knows what was there. If any of it was important someone will remember sooner or later."

"OK," he said, "that's it for now."

"Great, thanks," I said. "Put some estimates together and get them to Martha, would you?"

"Doing them now," he said. "You in tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said.

"OK, I'll give you an update then. Ciao."

"Oh, could you tell ..." I said but he'd already gone.

"Hi Martha," I said when she answered. "It's me. Chris will be giving you some estimates for repairs later today. Could you set up a new job to collect all the costs?"

"I've already done that," she said, "and given it to the foremen for the sub-contract jobs. Give me a few days and I'll have some figures for the overall cost of the fire. The insurance assessor won't be in until Monday as he's off sick but as far as I can tell from the policy we're covered for most things, including loss of profits. Are you going to redecorate?"

"Is that covered?" I asked.

"Damned well hope so," she said. "It stinks in here. Tina's looking like she's going to be sick."

"Tina always looks like she's going to be sick," I said.

"Umm, I've got you on speaker," said Martha.

"Only joking Tina!" I called. "I'm just jealous of your complexion, that's all."

"She wasn't in the room," said Martha, laughing. "Redecorating?"

My phone beeped to tell me I had a call waiting.

"Hang on," I said. "I've got another call."

"Hello?" I said after switching to the other call.

"I'm so sorry!" screeched a voice.

"Who is this?" I asked, alarmed.

"It's me, Sarah," said Sarah, sounding upset.

"Are you alright?" I asked dubiously. Frankly, it crossed my mind that this might be the start of a new pattern of behaviour and not one I particularly wanted to encourage.

"I've been with the cops all day," she said. "They told me about the fire!"

“Oh, yeah,” I said. I'd actually forgotten, with all the organising that needed doing, about the cause of the fire and Sarah's involvement. “Listen, I'm on another call at the moment. Can I call you back?”

“Oh, sorry,” she said, sounding flustered. “Yeah, sure, sorry, umm.”

“Talk to you later,” I said, hanging up. “Martha?”

“I'm here,” she said.

“Chris is getting some estimates for redecorating,” I said. “By the way, I'm going to call an Extraordinary General Meeting, how much notice do we have to give?”

Martha was the Company Secretary as well as the accountant so she knew about such things.

“Twenty one days,” she said, “but why are you calling a EGM?”

“To tell them about the fire and decide how to move forwards,” I said.

“Then you don't need an EGM,” she said. “EGMs are only for changing directors or auditors unless you're planning to ask the shareholders to fund the repairs. If it's just operational matters you can just have an informal meeting.”

“Oh really?” I said. “Interesting. So do I even need to have a meeting with the others?”

“Technically no,” she said, “since you're the Managing Director and your role is to manage the business.”

“I can sense a 'but' here,” I said.

She laughed again. “Well, it would be politic to have a meeting,” she said. “They could always band together and sack you if they really don't like what you're doing.”

“Yeah, that's what I thought,” I said. “But just an informal meeting will do?”

“Yes,” she said. “Although to be safe I’d get the minutes written up and circulated anyway, just to cover yourself. It’s amazing how people’s memories can change. Do you want me there?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ll think about it. OK, I’ll be in tomorrow. Talk to you then.”

I hung up and got my charger out of my bag and plugged my phone in, then took a few moments to psyche myself up before calling Sarah back.

“It’s all my fault!” she screeched when she answered.

“I’m hanging up if you’re going to keep screaming at me,” I said.

She went silent as this probably wasn’t the reaction she expected.

“That’s better,” I said after a few moments of silence. “It’s not your fault. He was a drug addict and a dealer, as it turns out, and a stupid one at that. You leaving may have been the trigger but you’re not to blame. Anything could have set him off at any moment so don’t give me any more of your self guilt. That loser set my factory on fire and I’ve got a hell of a lot of work to do to put things right and I really don’t need you adding to it.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I said. “Be glad you’re rid of him. So what did the police say? Did they just interview you or are they going to charge you with anything?”

Something started nagging at my memory but, for the moment anyway, I couldn’t remember what it was.

“Oh,” she said. “Umm, they’re not going to charge me with anything but they want me to press charges for domestic violence.”

“Good,” I said. “Are you going to?”

“I dunno,” she said.

"Hmm," I said, "well, no one can force you. What else did they say?"

"He's been charged with several drug offences and arson," she said. "He's got a preliminary hearing on Monday and the judge will set bail then. Do you think I should press charges?"

"Yes," I said. "If nothing else that provides the link between the drugs and the arson since I'll probably have to go to court at some point to give evidence about why my factory was targeted. That means your name'll come up anyway and you'll probably have to give evidence too. Might as well press charges since it is going to come up. Umm, I don't know if I should say this but it seems to me that if he's charged with trafficking, assault and arson he's probably less likely to get bail which means he'll be held in prison."

"I don't want him to go to no prison," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "Umm, it's probably better for you if he does."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, he did try to burn down my factory for helping you," I said. "What do you think he'll do if he finds out where you live now?"

"Oh," she said. "I didn't think of that. You think he'll try to burn down your house as well?"

"I'm not too worried about that," I said, "since it's insured. But what if you're inside it? Or what if he sees you in the supermarket or down at Centrelink?"

"Oh shit," she said, "he wouldn't, would he?"

"He already has," I said. "How's your face?"

"Interviews," I remembered. "They're on Monday."

"The bruises are almost gone," she said. "Oh, I see what you mean."

"Good," I said. "So give some serious thought to pressing charges, and

even if you don't, go and look for some new furniture tomorrow. You need to start looking forward to a new life, not back on an old one."

"Yeah, I guess," she said. "Ain't got much money at the moment though."

"Well, it's up to you," I said. "Listen, I've got to go, I've got a stack of things to do to get the factory up and running again ..."

"OK," she said, "umm, well, I'm sorry for all this trouble, like, and thank you again."

"My pleasure," I said, then an ill formed thought crossed my mind. "Hey, you haven't done any modelling, have you?"

"I did some in school," she said. "Part of Media Studies, why?"

"You remember Darrell, my partner?" I said.

"Yeah," she replied.

"He's a photographer," I said. "He'd like to photograph you sometime when your bruises have gone. Umm, he'll pay you."

"OK, I guess," she said. "What kind of modelling?"

"He's a wedding photographer," I said, "but he wants to do some artistic photography as well."

"What, you mean like porn?" she asked uncertainly.

"No way" I said instantly. "If he takes photos of you naked he's a dead man, OK? Let's get that straight right now. I'm guessing more like pictures of you and Kaylee with roses in the background or something like that. You know, arty."

"Oh, OK," she said. "Yeah I can do that. How much do you reckon he'll pay?"

"I've no idea," I said. "I'll get him to call you and sort it out, OK? And

if they're any good he might be able to get you some other modelling work. He knows a few people. Anyway, think it over, I really need to go."

I managed to get off the line with only one more apology and two thank you for everythings and rang Kasey to get her to move the interviews to Tuesday since the carpet tiles were being laid on Monday. I was just making some coffee when Darrell came in.

"Hi hon," I said. "Making coffee, want some?"

"Please," he said. "Had a good day?"

"It's been a bit frantic," I said, "but you were right, all I needed was a good night's sleep. Umm, you remember we talked about Sarah doing some modelling for you?"

"That tenant girl?" he said, "yeah."

"Would you mind paying her? I kind of promised you would."

Chapter Seventeen

They say that interviews are won or lost in the first ten seconds. In Gail's case it only took about a tenth of a second.

The three boys I'd interviewed were fairly ordinary with the usual suppressed attitude problems and with varying, but generally low, levels of social skills. One, Rufus – 'me mates calls me Fester' – had managed to overcome his distaste for people in authority enough to make me think he had potential although, like most people over twenty five, I despaired of the younger generation. I much preferred to interview older men who'd already got some work experience and skills which we could talk about.

The first afternoon interview hadn't even lasted the half hour I usually put aside for interviews so I got on with a spreadsheet I was working on, trying to estimate the costs and benefits of Alan McNaughton's proposal over the next six quarters.

"Gail Guichard's here, Penny," said Kasey, sticking her head round my door.

"OK, show her in," I said, and typed in a couple more numbers and saved the spreadsheet.

"Hello," I said, looking up and instantly thinking 'no way'. "Grab a seat. Would you like some coffee or something?"

Gail was of average height, blonde and dressed in what you might expect an Art student to think would be appropriate for office wear. This could have been fine if she'd been applying for an office job but she wasn't. She had applied for an apprenticeship in sheet metal work; in an environment populated almost entirely by men who probably couldn't even spell 'politically correct' or 'equal opportunities' and that was before you took their varied cultural backgrounds into account. Gail wasn't a beauty queen by any means but she was decidedly on the wrong side of cute and that would be a liability. I know it's sexist but as an apprentice she'd also be at the bottom of the power hierarchy and that would need serious consideration. Rufus, on the other hand, was stereotypical apprentice material and would fit in

easily.

“Could I have some water?” she asked, a little nervously.

I glanced over at Kasey who was loitering in the doorway in case refreshments were needed and she nodded and disappeared.

“On its way,” I said cheerfully. “Sit.”

Two of the interviewees had lounged in the chair and Rufus had sat solidly upright. Gail sat primly on the edge, her hands clasped in her lap, watching me warily through what looked like eyelash extensions. I couldn't see her nails but I was pretty certain they were fairly long and artistically manicured. Ideal for manual work.

“Guichard's an unusual name,” I commented. “You're not by any chance related to Laetitia Guichard, are you?”

“I don't know her,” said Gail, looking faintly puzzled.

“She's a famous French photographer,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “I don't think anyone in my family's French.”

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “It's just that my partner's a photographer and he was talking about her recently. Ah, here's your water.”

Kasey came in with Gail's water and put it on my desk in front of her with a polite smile of intense dislike which, for some reason, I found amusing. Kasey was only three or four years older than Gail but wasn't as, well, stylish. Gail smiled back blankly and took a small sip. Even though the decision was made, we still had to go through the formalities for show.

“I apologise for the smell, by the way,” I said. “We had a fire here a few days ago and the offices got filled with smoke. We're going to redecorate to get rid of it.”

“Do you get a lot of fires?” she asked. “I didn't think sheet metal work would be that dangerous.”

“Oh it wasn't from the work,” I said hurriedly since I didn't want anyone thinking we didn't adhere to all the health and safety standards. “Someone threw a petrol bomb in the window.”

“A petrol bomb?” she said, her eyes widening. “Are you serious? Wow, you mean, like, a terrorist or something?”

I laughed. “Oh god no,” I said. “Terrorists wouldn't waste their time in Dandy. It was just someone who was pissed off at me over something.”

“You mean, like a death threat?” she asked. “I mean, well, it wasn't a threat, was it. Does this happen often? Was it someone who worked here?”

“I'm giving you the wrong idea,” I said. “It's never happened before and probably won't ever happen again and it was nothing to do with the factory. I just helped someone out and it pissed off someone else who got a bit upset about it and wanted revenge.”

“Wow,” she said. “I knew Dandenong was rough but ...” and she petered off.

“Well, it's not quite as gentile as Ivanhoe,” I said. “I have to admit that. Dandenong does have its share of, well, troubled people I suppose you could call them and it's not one of the wealthier suburbs either. Would that be a problem for you, living and working in this area?”

“Umm, no,” she said firmly. “Although I wouldn't have to live here, would I?”

“You can live where you want,” I said, “although the pay for an apprentice is, to be honest, pretty poor. It's a lot cheaper to live in Dandenong and you wouldn't have commuting costs either.”

“I've got a scooter,” she said. “It's very economical.”

“Great,” I said, picking up her application form. “Now, you went to Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School I see. Did you do any vocational courses there or was it all VCE?”

“Umm, they didn't offer vocational courses,” she said.

“So you weren't thinking of going into a trade back then?” I asked.

“Umm, no,” she said. “I wanted to be an artist.”

“So you went to university to study Art?” I said. “That makes sense.”

“Art and Design,” she said. “My degree's in Art and Design.”

“Ah, right,” I said, glancing down at her application. Sure enough it did say 'Art and Design', I just hadn't picked up on that. I paused, not really sure how to proceed with the interview. “Umm, so why do you want a trade apprenticeship? Have you lost interest in art?”

“Actually Design is my main interest,” she said. “I started off concentrating on Art but during the first year at Uni I found the Design side to be a lot more interesting and challenging so I concentrated on that.”

“Well, yes, I can understand that,” I said. “I'm an engineer myself. But I have to be honest, I don't really see why you're wanting to move into sheet metal work. Why not stay in Design? Perhaps a career in something like advertising?”

“Most of what I designed at Uni was on paper or computer,” she said. “We didn't do much practical work and what we did was mostly with clay or cardboard or sometimes plastic. I want to learn how to work with metals and things like that.”

“OK,” I said. “So why not go to TAFE?”

“Umm, well, I also want to learn about production,” she said. “I've only had part time jobs in pubs and cafes, waitressing and stuff, and I don't know anything about actually making things in the real world. I did do Business in VCE though so I know a little about administration.”

“Right,” I said. “I think I understand. You want to know how to actually manufacture something, not just design it?”

“Exactly,” she said. “I want to get into manufacturing but I don't want to just get a job on an assembly line. I want to know about all the processes and get the skills for all of them.”

“Well, OK,” I said. “You haven't thought of studying Engineering or Production?”

“I thought of it,” she said, “but it's all still theory, isn't it.”

“Well, yes, to a large extent,” I said. “I have to admit I am puzzled, though. You do know that this apprenticeship is for sheet metal work?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “Of course.”

“And at the risk of sounding obvious,” I continued, “sheet metal work involves working with sheet metal.”

“Umm, that's what I thought,” she said with a half smile and a quizzical expression.

“Which means that what we do is very limited,” I said. “We cut sheets of metal and bend and shape it and fit handles and hinges and so on. It's skilled work but not especially varied.”

“Yes,” she said. “I understand that but that's what I want to do.”

I sat back in my chair and frowned.

“I'm missing something,” I said. “I'll be completely honest with you. You're clearly very intelligent and creative, you've a degree in Art and Design and your social skills seem to be quite reasonable. Why on earth would you want to limit yourself to sheet metal work when you could probably go into something more, I don't know, more lucrative, like graphic art, advertising or fashion or something ...?”

I was tempted to add 'more suitable to her social class', but didn't feel comfortable saying it so I said 'more upmarket' instead. I suppose referring to social class would imply I was downmarket myself but, hell, I ran the company.

“I want to help people,” she said, looking challengingly at me.

“Help people?” I said, totally astonished. “Help people? How's sheet metal work going to help people? Why not become a nurse or a social worker or something? How's making mailboxes going to help people?”

“Umm,” she said nervously, “I don't want to make mailboxes.”

I sat and stared at her, speechless.

“So what do you want to make?” I asked an eternity later.

“Umm, I have a design,” she said. “I developed it for my Honours thesis.”

“A design for what?” I asked.

“I'd rather not say,” she said.

“OK,” I said. “If that's how you want to play it.”

I sat back in my chair, tapping a pencil on the desk, not sure what to do next. This was like no interview I'd ever held before.

“Umm,” she said after a while, “I suppose I'm not going to get the job then.”

“No,” I said, probably unkindly. “I really don't think you're cut out to be an apprentice.”

“Well, umm, thank you for the opportunity anyway,” she said and stood up. “I'll, err, go then.”

Completely inappropriately it struck me that she had a figure which wouldn't be wholly hidden inside a grungy pair of overalls.

“Sit down,” I said, leaning forward. “So if you have a viable design for something why are you looking for a job where you learn production skills? Why not just take it to manufacturers and get them to put it into production? Maybe sell them the concept or do it as a licensing

arrangement or something along those lines?”

“I’ve tried,” she said. “No one’s interested because there’s no profit in it.”

“OK,” I said slowly. “So you’ve designed something no one wants and you’re surprised no one will make it?”

Maybe she wasn’t as intelligent as I’d thought.

She gave a half laugh, half snort and shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe no one wants it,” she said, “but hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, need it.”

“You’re not making sense,” I said, searching around in my head for something that people need but don’t want. “You mean, like false teeth or something? You want to make false teeth from sheet metal?”

“Oh god no,” she said. “I mean my design isn’t profitable because to be worthwhile it has to be very cheap and with no profit built in. Companies aren’t interested because they won’t make money on it.”

“Oh, I see, a charitable thing,” I said.

“Yes, kind of,” she said.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t know what you’ll end up doing but don’t waste your time looking for a job that needs good communication skills.”

That seemed to upset her and she looked hurt.

“You’re not explaining yourself well,” I said. “If you did a better job of it I might be able to help you. Who knows, I might even change my mind and give you the apprenticeship but you’re making no sense whatsoever and, frankly, if this is how you’ve been approaching possible manufacturers I’m not surprised you haven’t got anywhere.”

“I’m sorry,” she said after a few moments. “I just didn’t expect it to come up in the interview.”

"You didn't think I'd want to know why you wanted to work with sheet metal?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "No, it never occurred to me," she said. "I guess I just assumed you'd think I wanted any apprenticeship. Pretty stupid, huh."

"Actually, no, not really," I said. "Most people that I've interviewed over the years just want to learn a trade and they'll do whatever trade they can get a job in. It's just that you're not the usual sort of person who applies for a job like this. I'm guessing you haven't applied for other apprenticeships before?"

"Well, no," she said. "I'd more or less given up on looking for a manufacturer and I saw this job online so I thought, what the hell. If no one will make my design maybe I can learn to make it myself."

"So why won't you tell me what it is?" I asked. "If you're ashamed of it no one will make it anyway."

"I'm not ashamed of it," she said, flaring up a little. "It's just that, well, ..."

"Ohhh," I said, suddenly realising. "You're afraid I'll steal your idea?"

She didn't say anything but her face showed I was right.

I laughed.

"I wouldn't worry about that, if I was you," I said. "If you told me you'd designed, I don't know, a new kind of engine that runs on sewage that doesn't mean I'd be able to design it myself. And even if I did, you said it would only be worth doing if there was no profit in it and, like any other business, we need to make a profit. So not only wouldn't I know the particular features of your design but it wouldn't be worth my while doing anything about it anyway and that's before all the legal problems after you find out about it."

"I guess," she said, uncertainly.

“And if there's no profit in it,” I said, “what does it matter if someone else does steal the design and make it? You won't have lost anything.”

“I'll have lost the credit,” she said. “It's not like I'm going to get the Nobel Peace Prize or anything but I would like my name to be associated with it.”

“Oh, you mean like biro pens or diesel engines?” I said. “László Bíró and Rudolf Diesel?”

“Yes,” she said. “Or nissen huts.”

“Really?” I said. “I didn't know that.”

“Peter Norman Nissen,” she said with a wry smile.

“Learn something everyday,” I said. “So, in very broad terms, what's a Guichard?”

“I like the sound of that,” she said. “A Guichard, cool.”

“Very nice,” I said. “So what is it?”

“I suppose there's no harm,” she said. “Umm, it's a cheap, quickly assembled, flat packed house.”

“OK,” I said. “Umm, what's so radical about that? Don't we have them already?”

“It's for refugees,” she said. “Like those refugee camps or disaster areas where thousands of homeless people get crammed together with no shelter or facilities. My idea is that when people start flooding in to an area my shelters can be quickly and easily flown or trucked in and quickly assembled to provide basic shelter until more permanent facilities can be found. Then when the people move on the shelters can be quickly and easily taken apart again and moved to another area.”

“You mean like tents?” I asked.

“Yes, but more sturdily constructed and providing better shelter,” she said.

“OK,” I said, leaning back in my chair again. “It’s a nice idea but don’t we have these things already? I mean, well, like nissen huts.”

“They’re not easily transported,” she said. “They’re not flat packed so you’re not maximising the space capacity of a plane or a truck and they have no facilities. They’re just empty huts. My design is modular and can provide sanitation, cooking, heating and so on as well as being storm proof.”

“Right,” I said. “Hence the sheet metal, yes?”

“Yes,” she said. “Although they’d need more than sheet metal. They need some form of insulation and, umm, other things.”

“What sort of other things?” I asked.

“Umm,” she said, clearly reluctant to continue.

“You know,” I remarked, “it’s going to be difficult to convince someone to make these things if you won’t give any more details. You really think you’re going to be able to learn how to make them then actually get into production and make hundreds of thousands, all on your own?”

“I suppose not,” she said sadly, “when you put it that way. Maybe I should patent it?”

“Bit of a waste of time,” I said. “It’s expensive and time consuming to patent something and you’d have to do it in every country and you’ve got all the hassles of tracking down patent breaches and then going to court.”

“I was kind of thinking of getting it into basic production on my own,” she said, “and then just licencing it to anyone who wants to make it. Bit like open source software.”

“That might work,” I said, “although who’s going to manufacture it for

free? Have you thought about the development costs?"

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, I'd be astonished if you've got your design absolutely perfect," I said, "especially as you don't know how to actually make it. If you did you wouldn't be here now. It's quite possible there's a flaw in your design that you haven't discovered yet and it's more than likely that a few modifications here and there could make the manufacturing process a lot more efficient and therefore cheaper. I've got a design engineer who spends her time doing just that, reworking customers' designs so we can manufacture their product more effectively."

"Oh," she said and stared out of the window while I doodled on her application form.

"There are literally hundreds of thousands of people around the world living in desperate conditions," she said quietly. "Did you know that there are more refugees and displaced people now than at any time since World War II?"

"To be honest," I said, "no, I didn't know that."

"They've been driven from their homes by wars and terrorism," she continued, still looking out of the window. "Or religious or political persecution or environmental disasters or just plain economic collapse. These poor people have been deprived of their homes and possessions and families, even their basic citizenship. Did you know that more than half of them are children? They often have to walk for hundreds of miles until they end up at a border somewhere where they're herded into camps with next to no protection from the weather and no sanitation or anything until they can be taken to one of the permanent refugee camps run by the UN or a charity. Hundreds of thousands of them, doesn't it just want to make you cry?"

"But doesn't the UN look after them?" I said.

"Sure," she said, looking back at me. "If and when they ever get that far. But what do they do before that? After they've been forced out of their homes, beaten, raped, starved and so on but before they get to a

permanent camp?”

“Which is where your idea comes in, I suppose,” I said and she nodded.

I sat up straight and put my pencil down.

“Have you ever heard of a non-disclosure agreement?” I asked. “That way you can at least talk to people who can help you.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Where is everyone?” I asked Kasey after I'd shown Gail out.

The factory was deserted and the place was as silent as a tomb.

“They've gone,” she said. “It's Christmas Eve, we've shut down, remember?”

“Oh god,” I said. “I'm sorry, I forgot. I've been so wrapped up in everything. Why are you still here?”

“I stayed in case you needed anything after the interviews,” said Kasey. “Be a nice Christmas present if you've decided on someone.”

“That Rufus was the only one worth considering,” I said then hesitated. “Oh, OK. Give him a ring and offer it to him. If he wants it tell him to come in when we're back after the break and we'll do the paperwork. When's the first Monday in January?”

“The 6th,” said Kasey, checking her calendar.

“He can start then,” I said and went back to my office. “Give him a quick ring then go home.”

I went back into my office to gather up some paperwork to take home and a couple of minutes later Kasey stuck her head round my door to say Rufus had accepted the offer.

“Yeah, I know,” I said, grinning. “I heard him from in here. He seemed pretty happy, didn't he.”

“He nearly burst my eardrum,” said Kasey. “Is there anything else?”

“Actually there is one more thing,” I said, opening a filing cabinet. I took out a package and handed it to her. “Happy Christmas. Don't open it until tomorrow.”

“Oh, you shouldn't have,” she said, going round eyed. “I got my Christmas Bonus like everyone else, there was no need for you to get

me something else too. Now I feel guilty for not getting you something.”

That didn't stop her from shaking the package to try to work out what was in it. Everyone does, it's a primordial instinct. It didn't make a sound as Body Shop Gift Packs are well packaged.

“The Christmas Bonus is for the workers from the Company,” I said. “This is for you from me, personally, you don't need to get me anything. I just wanted to get you a little something to show how much I appreciate you.”

This was true, actually. Kasey had joined at the end of the previous January and she had become more than just one of the staff. She'd almost become a friend although I shied away from letting things go that far.

“Aww, thank you,” she said, looking as though she was going to burst into tears. She didn't but she surprised me even more by suddenly giving me a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Go home,” I said. “And drive carefully. There'll be a lot of drunks going home after their work parties.”

“OK,” she said. “Have a wonderful Christmas.”

She gave me a huge smile and bounced out of the office. I watched her go then piled a few more papers into my bag and wrote a quick note to Barry about taking on Rufus. Barry, being the most experienced, was in charge of new apprentices. I left my bag on Kasey's desk while I went out to the shop floor to leave the note for Barry and to do a check that all the windows and doors were secured. Mr Do Van Tien wouldn't be in again until after the break.

As always there was the atmosphere of desolation that the empty factory has when everyone has finished for the day although it was stronger than usual. The temporary repairs had left the comfortable, familiar factory feeling injured and sorry for itself. It didn't feel right to just walk away and leave it all alone for a week or so. I slowly wandered around, running my hand over the still warm machines then

went over to where the steel sheets blocked the fire damaged wall.

"It's been a funny couple of weeks," I said quietly to the factory, putting both hands on the injured brickwork. "Still, it's over now. I wonder what the New Year will bring? We'll cope though, won't we. You and me. Bloody but unbowed, hey."

I know I'm supposed to be a cold hearted, no nonsense engineer, but I'm not really. Even though it was an ordinary brick factory with elderly machinery in it, it was still a part of me and in the quiet semi-darkness, the hustling bustling workers gone, I felt an empathy with the place. Like it agreed.

* * *

"Well that's it for another year," I said when I got home.

Darrell was, as usual, sprawled on the couch in the lounge.

"I bet you're looking forward to a week off," he said looking up with a smile.

"Yes, I am," I said. "Although I've got a bit of bad news."

"Oh god, now what?" he said, his face falling.

"Kevin phoned this afternoon," I said, dropping into an armchair. "He's free on Saturday so we're going to have a family meeting then."

"What, this Saturday?" said Darrell, sitting up.

"Yeah," I said. "Apparently he's going to be tied up with auditions and rehearsals for a new production in the New Year and it's going to be awkward for him to find time except in the middle of the night."

"But we're going away," he said. "Just you and me on a driving holiday. I even got one of those little camping cookers from KMart so we can make coffee in the wilderness."

"I know," I said. "It's a bummer but that's the only time he can make

it for a couple of months at least. And I'm going to need the Friday to prepare figures and things. We can still go on Sunday, or maybe Saturday night if it doesn't go on too long."

"Oh for god's sake," he said angrily. "That bloody company rules your frigging life."

"And your damned weddings don't rule yours?" I retorted, my temper rising automatically. "We never get a weekend together because you're always working."

"The one weekend I get off you have to go and arrange a bloody shareholders' meeting," he said. "It's always the bloody same!"

"What do you mean it's always the same?" I demanded.

"That time we were going to Bali?" he said, "you had to go and meet with a bloody customer."

"But that was years ago," I said, "and it was a very important customer, they gave us a lot of business."

"I cancelled a booking for Bali," he said tersely. "I can't cancel bookings then reinstate them whenever I feel like it and we had to change the flight and ended up only being there for four days. Cost a bloody fortune and wasn't any fun."

"Well, all right then," I said feeling deflated since that trip had turned out to be a nightmare because of my change of plans. I searched my memory for times his bookings had disrupted our plans but couldn't think of any. Wedding photographers were usually booked six months or more in advance. "I suppose I'm just a horrible person then for ruining
everything."

"You could have talked to me about it first," he said coldly, "before going ahead and organising the meeting instead of just letting me go ahead and organise things."

"Organise what?" I demanded. "All you've done is buy a bloody camping cooker and it's not like we're going to have to try and get a

refund. We can use it another time.”

“That’s because there’s no point in organising things,” he said. “I knew you’d do something like this. I thought we were going to have a nice, romantic trip but obviously you’ve got more important things to do!”

“Romantic?” I said. “Romantic? What’s so frigging romantic about sitting there watching you prancing around taking crappy pictures of dead trees or cows in fields?”

“Crappy pictures?” he shouted. “They’re artistic for crying out loud. I thought you liked them!”

“The first hundred I did,” I said coldly. “They’ve got a bit old. One dead tree’s much like any other.”

“Oh go to hell,” he said, “you cold hearted bitch,” and stormed off to his work room.

“Bastard,” I said as he shut the door then sat there trying not to burst into tears. “Even the cows look bored.”

* * *

“Come on in, dear,” said mum when I turned up on Saturday. “You’re looking well, how are you? How’s Darrell? Is he doing another wedding today? I rather expected him to come with you.”

“This is business, mum,” I said, going in her immaculate hallway. “You know he never visits when it’s business. Don’t I get a hug?”

“I was so looking forward to seeing him again,” she said, bustling into the kitchen then bustling out again to give me a hug. “I’m just putting the kettle on, I haven’t seen him for such a long time.”

“He was here Christmas Day, mum,” I said. “That was only three days ago. Hello Gramps, how are you?”

“Mustn’t grumble,” he said, looking as though that was exactly what he intended to do. He was sitting staunchly upright at the kitchen

table with his tie neatly knotted and an exercise book and pen squared off beside him.

“Good,” I said bending to give him a kiss on his cheek.

I sat down and put my bag on the floor beside me.

“Kevin not here yet?” I asked as mum put a cup of tea in front of me. “Thanks, mum.”

“That boy's always late,” growled Gramps.

“It's a long way from Fitzroy,” said mum putting a large plate of home baked Lamingtons on the table in front of Gramps. “Can I make you a sandwich, dear?”

“No thanks,” I said, reaching for a Lamington. Mum made delicious Lamingtons, usually with a jam filling. This time it was apricot jam. “Oooh, mmmm, they've wonderful,” I said with my mouth full and dropping coconut crumbs everywhere.

“So tell us about the factory,” said Gramps, ignoring the Lamingtons.

“When Kevin's here,” I said. “No point in repeating myself. So how's that project going?”

“Which one?” he asked.

“Oh, umm,” I said, desperately trying to remember what projects he kept himself busy with. “The barbecue in your back yard?”

“Finished that months ago,” he said. “I'm restoring a 1950s Norton motorcycle frame for someone at the moment, renovating the bathroom and building a patio for Mrs Abelard next door so she can get out in her wheelchair.”

“Great, so you're keeping busy then,” I said, taking another Lamington.

“Always got to keep busy,” he said, deciding to take a Lamington

before I ate them all. “Devil finds work for idle hands.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “I suppose so.”

“That sounds like Kevin now,” said mum, her ears pricking up at the sound of an unsilenced sewing machine in the drive. She jumped up and bustled to the front door.

“Hello, mum,” came Kevin's voice.

Mum bustled back into the kitchen beaming with happiness. She never really understood these meetings but she loved them anyway. It was the only time she ever got both her kids in the house at the same time. Being in the Entertainment industry, Kevin kept to a different routine to most of the rest of the world.

“Penny darling!” he cried from the kitchen doorway. “I just love your outfit! Mwah mwah.”

He kissed both my cheeks before taking off his crash helmet and checking his hair momentarily in the hall mirror.

“Granddad,” he said, gruffly, coming back into the kitchen.

“Kevin,” said Gramps, equally gruffly.

“Ohhhh, Lamingtons!” cried Kevin and carefully cut one in half before taking a small bite. “Simply divine!”

“Have some more,” said mum, pushing the plate over.

“Still got your scooter, then?” I asked.

“Got to watch my figure, mum,” he trilled, patting a waist a ballet dancer would die for. “Can't choreograph dancers if I'm a fat pig like Penny.”

“Penny's not fat, dear,” said mum as I slapped his shoulder. Granddad watched, slightly bemused.

“Yes, my trusty silver steed,” he said. “Penny’s the same weight as me, mum, and I’m three inches taller than she is. How many Lamingtons have you had?”

“Only two,” I said, pushing my plate away guiltily.

“She’s had three,” said Gramps, “not that anyone’s counting.”

“Have another, dear,” said mum. “They’ll only go to waste otherwise.”

“So what happened to Jean-Claude?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t mention that man’s name to me again!” said Kevin theatrically putting his hand to his forehead. “He has been expunged from my mind and my memory!”

“Oh that’s a shame,” I said. “I rather liked him. Who’s Maurice?”

“Maurice is such a darling,” said Kevin, putting his hand on my arm. “You’ll just love him even more than you know who.”

“I’m sure I will,” I said. “When can I meet him?”

“I can give you some tickets to our production of *Danger: High Voltage*,” said Kevin. “It’s opening in March. Mo is going to be in the chorus line.”

“What’s it about?” I asked.

“It’s a post modern interpretation of *Anne Karenina* through the lens of Islam,” said Kevin. “al-Qaeda in counterpoint to Russian Imperialism in a uniquely Australian contextualisation.”

“Sounds riveting,” I said as Gramps snorted.

“We’ve got Fedor Lubianski as the principle,” said Kevin ignoring Gramps. “He’s on loan from the State Steelworkers Ballet in Vladivostok for the season.”

“Steelworkers doing ballet?” grumbled Gramps. “Come off it.”

“They take ballet very seriously in Russia,” said Kevin primly. “Unlike Australian philistines.”

“Can we please get on with the business of the meeting?” said Gramps. “I haven’t got all day, you know.”

“If we must,” said Kevin dismissively. “Although why we have to have these meetings when we have a perfectly good Managing Director in Penny, I can’t imagine.”

“What’s your salary as Assistant Choreographer these days?” I asked. “\$25,000?”

“\$27,000.” he said, “but I do it for love not for money.”

“Yeah,” I said drily. “And you got a little under \$189,000 in dividends last year from Dorchester’s so you might throw a little love that way too. A meeting once or twice a year isn’t too much to ask is it?”

“Well, if you put it that way,” he said airily with a wave of his hand. “So what problems do you need my help with?”

“You’re only here because you’re a shareholder,” said Gramps. “When she needs any help she’ll go to someone as can help her.”

“Like mum,” said Kevin cackling.

“I’m sure I’m going to be no help,” said mum. “I don’t know the first thing about the business. I left it all to your father. Would anyone like some more tea?”

“I told you it would be a mistake to get them two involved,” said Gramps. “This meeting’s going to be a waste of time, as usual.”

“I don’t need any help,” I said, getting a folder out of my bag. “I just need to let you know why profits will be significantly down this year, as will your dividends, and give you the opportunity to express any thoughts you might have on a proposal we’ve been given.”

That caused a shock wave all right. Mum and Kevin were happy to

leave the business entirely to me and professed to have no interest in it so long as the dividends rolled in to maintain their lifestyles. Gramps, on the other hand, had never been happy to leave the business to me and he was suddenly gleeful at the prospect of being able to pontificate on a proposal.

“How much down?” asked Kevin worriedly.

“15% or so,” I said. “As you know we had a fire before Christmas and although the insurance will cover most of the damage, our production capacity is going to be down by about 33% until we can replace the equipment. Some of the lost capacity we can sub-contract but that will significantly increase the costs and we may well lose some orders if we have to quote over the market rates.”

“How long will production be affected?” asked Gramps, studying the spreadsheet printout I’d handed out. Mum didn’t even bother to look at hers and Kevin was holding his upside-down and squinting at it.

“Two to four months,” I said. “There was also some damage to the concrete floor which will take a couple of weeks to repair. I’ve been assured by the claims assessor that the insurance will cover the damage but it’ll take at least a month for the claim to be processed and the money released. It may take longer.”

“Couldn’t you get an interim loan in the meantime?” asked Gramps. “That way you could get replacement machines sooner and get back to full production.”

“It’s an option,” I said, “although short term finance will be expensive. That’s covered in Schedule B.”

Gramps turned to Schedule B and Kevin gave up pretending and surreptitiously took the other half of his Lamington.

“What complicates this,” I said, “is the choice of replacement machines. We can go three ways. One way is to simply replace the lost machines with the same machines. That way we carry on the way we have been. On the other hand, we could replace the lost machines with more flexible, semi-automated machines which could increase the

diversity of our manufacturing capability. Even if they don't, the semi-automation has the potential to reduce our labour costs. The disadvantage is that such machines are significantly more expensive and therefore cannot be bought entirely out of the insurance money. Additional financing will be required and the cheapest approach is through reducing the dividend still further. Some ideas on this are in Schedule C although if we go down that path I need to investigate the range of semi and fully automated machines more carefully and weigh the likely income from the new capacity. For example, there is a folding machine capable of handling 30 millimetre steel but I really don't see a lot of demand for armour plating in Dandenong. At least, not for several years."

That rather pathetic attempt at humour fell flat since both mum and Gramps felt it was insulting to their home town and Kevin probably thought that armour plating should have been introduced in Dandenong years ago.

"Also," I said, "there may be a significant cost to introducing a level of automation if we have to lay off staff as retrenchment can be expensive. I haven't produced any figures for that as we may be able to handle it through natural wastage."

"She means not replacing staff when they leave," said Gramps to Kevin's look of blank incomprehension.

"Exactly," I said. "And when we do replace staff, the semi-automated machines will mean we can employ staff with a lower skill level."

"That doesn't seem very nice," said mum. "Your father always said 'look after your workers and they'll look after you'."

"Absolutely," I said. "And there'd be a knock on effect in the community as regards our reputation as an employer. There is another possible downside which you need to be aware of. We are facing increased competition from cheaper imports from China. The increased flexibility and capacity from these machines could turn out to be wasted. On the other hand, one possible strategy to counter the cheap imports is to focus on high quality products that depend on skilled labour."

"I think I'm getting a headache," said Kevin.

"Do you want some panadol?" asked mum, getting up. "More tea anyone?"

"Could I have a coffee?" I asked. "Too much tea gives me a sore throat."

"What's the third option?" asked Gramps. "I don't see any more Schedules."

"Yeah," I said as mum went to make more tea and find the panadol. "We've been approached by McNaughton's."

"The auto parts chain?" asked Gramps, his eyes lighting up.

"Yes," I said. "I had a long meeting with Alan McNaughton. Essentially what he's proposing is to introduce a line of McNaughton's own brand tool boxes in a range of sizes and he wants us to make them under a long term contract."

"Oh very nice," said Gramps, rubbing his hands. "A long term contract with McNaughton's. How long is long term here?"

"He mentioned five years," I said, "with possible extensions but I could probably get him to seven years."

"So why are you bringing this up?" asked Gramps. "That's the obvious way to go. Seven years of guaranteed income, it's a no-brainer."

"There are downsides," I said. "Firstly if we agree then meeting his orders will take at least 60% of our capacity and since our capacity is already down by 33% that'll leave only 7% for all our existing customers which will destroy all the goodwill we've built up over the years. Secondly, it will basically make us a subsidiary of McNaughton's and if they should suffer problems themselves or even simply decide the toolboxes are no longer worth continuing we'll be left high and dry with no other customers to fall back on. We'd have to begin again from scratch. Thirdly, because of the scale of McNaughton's proposal they want reciprocation through a reduced profit margin. In other

words we'd have to commit to supplying McNaughton's more or less exclusively and with less profit. On the other hand, we could make substantial cost savings by replacing the damaged machines with cheaper simpler machines as toolboxes are very simple to make. We'd also only need to buy and stock aluminium in two, perhaps three thicknesses which would also reduce costs."

"Here's your panadol, dear," said mum passing a couple of tablets to Kevin, "and your coffee, Penny."

"Thanks, mum," I said, helping myself to another Lamington.

"I'm lost," said Kevin.

"Where did I lose you?" I asked.

"Just after you said dividends will go down," he said and swallowed the panadol with a careful sip of tea since it was hot. "Could you say it all again, only simpler?"

"Sure," I said, glancing at Gramps who was looking faintly contemptuous. "We can replace the machines exactly as they are and keep going as we are and risk overseas competition. Or we can get fancy new expensive machines and risk over-extending ourselves or we could get really cheap machines and get tied-in with McNaughton's and risk being destroyed if they dump us for any reason."

"Oh," he said. "So how will this affect my dividend?"

"If we stay as we are your dividend will probably slowly go down year by year in the long term," I said. "If we go with McNaughton's your dividend will probably stay much the same but could potentially disappear if they pull the plug and we go out of business. And if we go with the fancy machines your dividend will drop a lot in the short term but could go up a lot higher in the medium term."

"I still think it's a no brainer," said Gramps. "McNaughton's is guaranteed. Can't say fairer than that."

"Mum?" I asked. "Any thoughts?"

"I don't like the idea of laying off the staff," she said. "Your father wouldn't have liked it."

"So you're for staying as we are then?" I asked.

"Yes, dear," she said. "I don't like change. It scares me."

"And you, Kevin?" I asked. "Which way do you want to go?"

"I don't like the idea of lower dividends," he said, "but I'm willing to take a cut now if they're going to be higher in the future."

"Great," I said sardonically. "Three options and you've each chosen a different one. Does anyone want that last Lamington?"

Chapter Nineteen

To: penny@dle.com.au
From: richj1602@gmail.com
Re: Happy Christmas

Dear Penny, if I am permitted to call you Penny, or Ms Dorchester, if not. It occurs to me that we may have differing perceptions of my status in that tiny space that is the intersection of our two worlds.

I came across an mp3 from my childhood recently while frittering away my time unproductively on that seemingly infinite repository of nonsense commonly known as 'the Internet'. Quite why it has taken over our lives is a question for another day but I do wonder if it is the destiny of Humanity to evolve into a single, amorphous collective consciousness. If we ever do reach the Stars it will be as an extension of Facebook and not as Captain Kirk and his merry band of happy wanderers. Perhaps another global mass extinction would be preferred.

No matter. I played the tune, recalled my innocent childhood years and thought of you. Not, I hasten to explain, because I think of you as a child or as innocent, but because you are an engineer and it is a Western Cultural tradition for sentimentality to come to the fore at this point in the Earth's orbit. Hence my attaching aforesaid mp3 for your entertainment.

Regards

Richard (Judicael, in case you know others who labour under the same misbegotten moniker.)

P.S. Should you know more than one Richard Judicael then the above will be of little help.

P.P.S. Conversely you may well have forgotten, or otherwise expunged, me and I can't blame you for trying. Should that be the case then neither the Richard nor the Judicael will have significance. Perhaps the tune will have sufficient significance in its own right.

To: penny@dle.com.au
From: richj1602@gmail.com
Fwd: Re: Happy Christmas

It would probably have been helpful if I had actually attached the mp3 to my last email. I hereby rectify that omission.

attached: marvellous_toy.mp3

“You never use one word when ten could be used instead, do you?” I asked my computer when I'd read his emails. “You could have just said 'Thought you might like this song' but, oh no, that would be way too easy.”

I reached over and turned on the speakers then double clicked the attachment.

*When I was just a wee little lad, full of health and joy
One Christmas morning I received a marvellous little toy
A wonder to behold it was, with many colours bright
And the first time I laid eyes on it, it became my hearts delight*

*It went zip when it moved
And bop when it stopped
And whirrr when it stood still
I never knew just what it was
And I guess I never will'*

I was entranced!

It's a silly little song but it brought tears to my eyes and swelled my heart as it captured my childhood perfectly. Dad would give me toys and they did things like whirr and zip and I never really knew just what they were but I loved them all the same.

“I wonder what happened to them?” I whispered, filled with nostalgia. “Maybe mum kept some of them?”

1 Marvellous Toy, Tom Paxton, 1968. Lyrics © Reservoir Media Music, Chrysalis One Music Publishing Group Ireland, Bmg Ruby Songs, Bmg Rights Management (Ireland) Ltd

I played the song again and became eighteen months old, filled with joy and wonder at this strange but marvellous world. I'd even had a toy with two big buttons that looked like big green eyes, just like the song said.

To: richj1602@gmail.com

From: penny@dle.com.au

Re: Happy Christmas

And a Happy Christmas to you too! What a marvellous song!

Thank you so much for sharing it with me :)

Penny

P.S. I don't know what the rest of your email was about. You know as well as I do that it would take months of hypnosis and very powerful drugs to erase the shocking memory of you from anyone's mind which, of course, is why you are the way you are. I mean that in the nicest possible way :D

P.P.S. What does the 1602 in your address mean? Surely to God there aren't 1601 others like you?

After sending the reply I played the song again and sang along with the chorus. If nothing else, it would fortify me before reading Gail Guichard's email which I could see a little further down the list in my In box. No doubt it would be either a pleading missive begging me to relent or something abusive but I had to read it just in case it wasn't. I'd had both kinds before from people whose job applications I'd rejected. I'd even had one man threaten to set up in direct competition with us and drive us out of business. I'd politely replied wishing him good luck with his proposed venture but, as far as I know, he hadn't.

I made myself a coffee and brought it back to the computer and played The Marvellous Toy again just for the sheer fun of it.

To: penny@dle.com.au

From: guicharddesign@outlook.com

Re: Interview for apprenticeship

Dear Mrs Dorchester

Thank you once again for considering me for the above position and I understand your reasons for rejecting my application.

I am writing to say that I took your advice and saw a solicitor about a non-disclosure agreement. Fortunately the brother of one of my uncles' wife is a solicitor so I got it for free.

I was wondering if you would be willing to agree to this non-disclosure agreement and meet with me so I could get your opinion on my design? As you said, there might be flaws that I haven't seen. I could come to your factory any time that is convenient to you.

Thank you :)

Gail Guichard

I had to read her email twice since it wasn't what I'd expected and had only skimmed it the first time. I had to admit to myself that she was more mature than I'd expected. I played Marvellous Toy again while I thought about how to reply.

To: guicharddesign@outlook.com

From: penny@dle.com.au

Re: Interview for apprenticeship

Dear Gail

Thank you for your email.

I'm willing to sign your non-disclosure agreement and I'm happy to look over your design.

The factory is currently closed until 2nd January and, frankly, there are endless interruptions there anyway. I suggest you come to my house one afternoon either before 2nd January or the following weekend.

Regards

Penny Dorchester

I was tempted to attach The Marvellous Toy but decided, reluctantly, that it was probably inappropriate. Gail might even think I was poking fun at her ideas. Still, that was no reason not to play it again so I did. It made me smile. Another email arrived before the final words faded away.

*To: penny@dle.com.au
From: richj1602@gmail.com
Re: Happy Christmas*

Judy wishes you to know that the world can barely cope with one version of me let alone 1602 of us but she empathises with your strategy for hypnotherapy.

The reference to 1602 is, in fact, to commemorate the year in which the Bodleian Library was founded. at least in its present incarnation. Said library being the only thing I found of academic interest during my stay at the associated centre of so called learning although there were a number of local taverns which adequately managed my non-academic interests during those years.

It occurs to me that as you sign yourself 'Penny' in a contraction of Penelope that you may desire to contract my appellation to 'Ricky', 'Dick' or similar. Can I venture to remind you that self control is widely considered a virtue?

I was sorely tempted to reply and call him 'Dickie' or 'Richie Rich' but managed to exercise some self control and virtuously looked up the Bodleian Library instead, never having heard of it.

"So he went to Oxford University, did he?" I muttered to myself. "Show off!"

I checked my email one last time before shutting down the computer and found that Gail had replied, suggesting the following afternoon.

That was fine by me so I sent her an email with my address and wondered briefly whether or not to bake a cake. I decided not to as it somehow didn't seem appropriate so I played The Marvellous Toy once more just for the heck of it then went into the lounge to ponder. The previous day's shareholders' meeting had been both productive and non productive. Productive because whatever I decided to do I'd have the support of one of the three others but non-productive because the final decision was left to me and I was struggling to make a decision.

Some decisions are fairly straightforward because you simply lay out the facts and chose the option which most closely approaches your goals. Others are fairly simple because you just choose the one you want then spend a while thinking up ways to justify the choice. This one wasn't either. I had no clear goal, since all three options would keep the company alive and profitable, at least for the time being, and I had no clear gut feeling about any of them, beyond a vague desire to do more than just make tool boxes for the rest of my life. On the other hand, making tool boxes was better than being unemployed or, perhaps worse, working for another company if Dorchester's went out of business. It was a quandary.

I spent a while drawing little diagrams and clouds with arrows of pros and cons which got me nowhere then spent longer shading them all in and doodling arcane engineering shapes so that the page ended up looking more like a Heath Robinson design than a decision making aid then balled it up. I went into the kitchen to bin it and make some dinner and decided to make a cake anyway. I didn't have to offer Gail any cake when she turned up and it would be something to do. If nothing else it would use up the quarter packet of frozen berries still loitering in the freezer.

I ate my dinner watching my DVD of Apollo 13. As always I wondered how I'd handle it if I was presented with a pile of junk and told to improvise a CO₂ scrubber – they make it look so easy in the film but in real life improvisation is far harder than design. Still, it can be fun to try although not when people's lives are at stake.

It was right at the end of the film, when Tom Hanks says “Houston, we're at stable one, the ship is secure. This is Apollo 13 signing off.”,

and Ed Harris, the Mission Controller, does a double thumbs up, that I decided to send Richard another email so I fired up the computer.

To: richj1602@gmail.com

From: penny@dle.com.au

Re:

Hi Richard

Can we get together sometime in the next few days? There's something I'd like to discuss with you.

Penny

I spent a while browsing through YouTube videos of magicians since I'm fascinated by magicians but he didn't reply so I played The Marvellous Toy again and went to bed. I dreamed about the girl being poisoned in a kitchen again.

* * *

I heard a faint whirr, a little like a drone flying overhead, which intrigued me as I was indoors so I got up and peered out the window. There was a rather cute little black and white motorcycle parked in the driveway although there was no one around. Puzzled I went over to the front door and opened it.

“Oh, hello,” I said, taken by surprise.

“Umm, hello,” said Gail. “I was looking for a door bell.”

“It's right there,” I said, pointing to the fairly conspicuous door bell on the side of the front door frame at roughly shoulder level.

“Ah, yes,” she said.

She looked nervously at me then reached over and pushed it. Unsurprisingly the door bell sounded.

“I have to go,” I said. “There's someone at the door.”

Clearly my sense of humour still hadn't found its mojo as she looked confused.

"Come on in," I said. "Is that your bike?"

"Yes," she said, "it's a scooter."

"My brother's got a scooter," I said, holding open the door. "Doesn't look anything like yours. It's all silver and chrome."

"Mine's a Yamaha," she said, coming in. "Where shall I put my helmet?"

"Oh, dump it anywhere," I said. "Would you like some coffee or juice or something?"

"Oh could I have some juice, please?" she said looking round then unceremoniously putting her helmet on the floor beside the door.

"No problem," I said, "come into the lounge. Would you like some cake?"

"Not right now, thanks," she said.

"Let's sit at the table," I said, going off to the kitchen to get a couple of glasses of juice. She was sitting at the table when I came back, getting a laptop computer out of her bag.

"Right," I said, putting down the glasses. "Let's see this non disclosure agreement."

Self consciously she took a green cardboard folder out of her bag and passed it to me.

"Your relative seems to know his stuff," I said, glancing through it. "Thirty one clauses and god knows how many sub clauses."

"He works for Symmons Lacklustre in Bourke Street," she said.

"Can't say I've ever heard of them," I said. "Have you got a pen?"

“Umm, yes,” she said, scrabbling in her bag.

I watched her for a while then got up and got a pen from my office. She looked flustered.

“Sorry,” she said. “It must have fallen out.”

“No worries,” I said and signed both copies with a flourish.”You too.”

Gail signed both as well and I put one back in her folder and pushed it over.

“Right,” I said. “So what's your design?”

She opened her laptop and booted it.

“I've got all my drawings on here,” she said.

“We'll look at those later,” I said. “Just tell me the concept for now.”

“OK,” she said, taking a deep breath. “Basically it's a system of flat square sheets which can be assembled into cubes. The basic idea is that a single cube forms a living space for potentially three adults or two adults and two children.”

“How big is it?” I asked.

“2.4 metres on each side,” she said. “That's the standard width of a truck or shipping container which makes transport easier. Each panel is 3cm thick so a complete cube of six panels is only 18cm high when flat packed.”

“That's pretty small for three people though,” I said.

“It's emergency accommodation,” she said. “More like a tent than a luxury hotel but the panels are made of 2mm aluminium for strength and durability with 27mm of insulation and a 1mm inner plastic or fabric lining so it's a lot better than a tent or sitting out in the rain or sun.”

“OK, fair point,” I said. “Are the edges and corners water proof?”

“Depends what you mean by water proof,” she said. “They should keep out a storm but I wouldn't want to try to live in one underwater.”

I smiled since the Water Discus Hotel in the Maldives, which intrigued me, was a very expensive, luxurious underwater hotel and undoubtedly huge sums of money had gone into making it very waterproof.

“So the basic idea is that when refugees start turning up somewhere, these cubes can be quickly delivered and assembled. They don't need any special tools, I've designed a sliding joint so they just slide into place. It would only take a minute or so for one person to assemble.”

“That's a good idea,” I said. “I've tried to assemble a garden shed and they're a damned pain. So you've assembled your cube. How do you get people inside?”

“That's the next part of the design,” she said. “Since each panel is the same dimensions as all the other panels and made from the same materials you can put in any features that you want. Obviously one out of every six panels is going to have to be an entryway of some sort, either a hinged door or a hanging cloth or a fly screen or whatever, but you could also have panels with windows. I've also designed a panel to be used as a roof which is essentially a solar panel to provide electricity and could produce up to half a kilowatt.”

“And where are the batteries to store that electricity?” I asked, drinking some of my juice.

“Well, they could be used without batteries,” she said, “particularly in countries where there's a lot of sunshine but I've also designed another panel which is essentially a 2.4 metre square battery. My thinking is that you could have the battery panel as the base which would give the cube significantly more stability in a windy location.”

“That's good thinking,” I said. “But half a kilowatt isn't much power.”

“That's right,” she said. “But the design is modular. The basic unit

would be five simple sides with an entryway side, but you could have a unit with any combination of facility panels like an entryway, a solar roof, a battery floor, storage facilities and cooking or sanitation.”

“Jesus, that's packing a lot into a 2.4 metre cube,” I said in surprise. “Three adults, cooking and sanitation facilities as well as storage? How big are these adults?”

“You wouldn't do that,” said Gail, patiently. “Like I said, it's all modular. Not only do the panels slide together to form a cube but the cubes can also be interlinked. You could have multiple cubes strung out in a straight line or backed against each other in ranks. Look, I think this might be a common layout.”

She grabbed my pen and quickly sketched a three by two grid of squares on the back of her copy of the non disclosure agreement.

“With something like this you could have all six with solar panels which would generate 3 kilowatts of power, and you could use one for cooking and storage and one for sanitation leaving four to accommodate up to twelve people, all with inter-joining internal entryways. Six would seem to be a nice super unit, if you like, but you don't have to stop there. You would be able to fit forty of these cubes, flat packed, into a single standard forty foot shipping container. That means very basic shelter for a hundred and twenty people but you could also accommodate a hundred people with two cubes for cooking and two for sanitation or whatever combination you wanted. They could all be free standing or all joined or however you want to lay them out without restricting freedom of movement. And the beauty of it is that all forty could be assembled by one person in an hour or so and because they're so simple to assemble even a young child could be shown how to do it in seconds so you don't need to worry about language issues.”

“Actually, that's pretty impressive,” I said. “So would only those cubes with a solar panel have power?”

“No,” she said. “Every panel would carry basic wiring so that when it's joined with a solar cube that cube would also have power. So if you had a cluster of say six cubes with one solar panel, all six would have

power although obviously not much. Certainly enough to run some lighting and maybe a fan or something which is better than nothing. It would all depend on the needs of the situation.”

“Could you join, say, four of these together in a square and leave out the inner panels so they formed a large 2.8 metre square room?” I asked.

“I don't know,” she said, her face creasing into a frown. “I haven't built a prototype and I don't know enough about the materials to know if they'll be structurally strong enough to stand up without all six sides. For all I know they might even be strong enough to have a second layer on top. I've also had to assume that the ground they're put on is reasonably flat and level so it would have to be cleared first but bulldozers are good at that.”

“Well, that would seem to be a priority,” I said. “Certainly I can see it would be very useful to be able to create bigger spaces using these cubes. You could have an operating theatre, for example, or a medical centre.”

“Yes, that's what I thought,” she said.

“You said some of these could be used for sanitation or cooking,” I said, thoughtfully. “How would that work?”

“Well, obviously cooking and sanitation facilities can't be built in because of the flat-pack design,” she said, “but when you look at my drawings you'll see that every panel would be pre-configured with slots so standardised facility units could be clipped in. Things like an electric hot plate, an oven, a shower, a toilet, whatever you wanted, so long as they fit the dimensions but you could also slot in bunk beds, benches and so on.”

“So how would you get water in and sewage out?” I asked.

“That's a problem area,” she admitted. “Anything electrical can run off the in-built wiring but it seems to me that either I'm going to have special panels with inlets and outlets for fluids or have a tool to cut holes which would destroy the integrity and re-usability of the panel.

What do you think?"

"Hmmm, I think it would probably be better to have panels with the pipework pre-installed," I said. "I think from a hygiene point of view it would be better to have the sanitation cubes separated from the living and cooking cubes. But certainly I like the overall concept although I'm not certain they could be produced economically enough. Let's have a look at your drawings. I'm intrigued as to how they all fit together."

Chapter Twenty

“Come over any time,” Richard had said when I'd got his email that evening. “I never go anywhere.”

Surprisingly his address was in Castlemaine which was a fair drive from Berwick but since I didn't have any particular plans I decided to go the next day. A bit like a trip to the dentist, these things are best done quickly before you lose the motivation and I was a little apprehensive as he might well not appreciate the nuances of the situation or even care enough. Fortunately it was one of those lovely days you get in Melbourne where the sun is shining but it isn't too hot and the air wasn't thick and humid. If it had been cold and raining I probably wouldn't have bothered but a drive through the countryside on a nice day is always an event for a city slicker.

He, or they, I should say, lived in a small house on the main road into Castlemaine. His van was mostly parked on the driveway, although the passenger side wheels had missed and were off the concrete and in the dirt beside it. I left my SUV in the road and squeezed between the van and a large, unkempt rose bush that guarded the entrance, scratching the back of my hand in the process. Blood started to well up and it stung. I swore mildly and fished inside my bag for a tissue before realising I was being watched. Between me and the front door was a large stone gargoyle, half hidden by a bush, its leering eyes watching my every move as it squatted on a plinth, hunched over with its wings half extended.

“Spooky,” I muttered and gave it as wide a berth as I could. It seemed like its head swivelled to follow me but that could have been a trick of the light as it stayed facing forwards although I sensed its talons gripping the plinth more tightly.

Still, the front door was a perfectly ordinary wooden front door with a narrow glass strip down one side and a small stick-on sign which read DO NOT KNOCK which was a bit of a problem as there was no door bell. I hesitated then decided on a compromise and tapped hard on the door. There was a wild scrabble of multiple feet and a chorus of barking but no one opened the door. The barking died down so I tapped again, harder which seemed to make the dogs hysterical.

“Even if he can't hear the knocking he must surely hear the dogs,” I thought but still no one answered the door.

I lifted the tissue on the back of my hand and the blood seemed to have stopped oozing which was a good sign. I rummaged in my bag to get my phone and rang him. I could hear a phone inside the house ringing but no one answered it.

“Typical,” I muttered. “He's always in except when I turn up then he's out.”

I turned and walked down the cracked path in front of the house and hesitated at the gargoyles. To the left was the driveway and my car but to the right was an old carport and a bright yellow gate leading to the back yard. On impulse I turned right and went through the carport and opened the gate.

There was Richard, standing perfectly still with his back to me. He was balanced on one leg with his hands crossed in front of his bare chest and seemed to be wearing nothing but a baggy pair of pink women's harem pants.

“Umm, hello,” I called. “I knocked but ...”

He didn't answer. In fact he resolutely ignored me. Slowly he extended the raised leg in front of him and waved his arms then stepped forward and bowed to the ground and lifted the other leg.

“Umm ... hello?” I said and stepped forward.

He straightened this leg in front of him and waved his arms again and stepped forward again then froze for a heartbeat then made some strange movement with his arms and stepped sideways. He squatted down and made a swooping motion with his hand near the ground then stepped to the other side and did the same thing with his other hand. I watched, intrigued. I had a vague recollection of seeing something like this on TV. He made a few other moves then brought his feet together and stood firmly upright and held his hands as if in prayer then slowly exhaled.

“Oh hello,” he said, noticing me. “I thought I heard the dogs. Nice day, isn't it.”

“I, umm, did knock,” I said.

“Uh huh,” he said, walking over. “Are you making a blood sacrifice?”

“I'm sorry?” I said, taken aback.

“That offering you have in your hand,” he said. “Is it a charm to ward off evil spirits?”

“I, umm, scratched my hand on the rose bush,” I said, holding out the bloody tissue to illustrate my point.

“Ahh, my mistake,” he said. “You'd better come in to the medical centre. This way.”

He headed off up the path to the back door so I followed.

“It's only a scratch,” I said as he opened the door and two small beasts of indeterminate breed hurtled out. They started circling me, sniffing my ankles.

“Ignore them,” he said, disappearing inside.

Shuffling, so as not to kick the dogs, I followed him into what seemed to be the kitchen although it was mostly bookcases, crammed with books of all shapes and sizes, There was even a pile of books on top of the small fridge.

“Show me your injuries,” he said, opening a cupboard and taking out a plastic ice cream carton.

“It's only a scratch,” I said.

“That's what Nelson said,” said Richard, “and look what happened to him.”

“Who's Nelson?” I asked, “and what happened to him?”

“Admiral Lord Nelson,” said Richard, “and he died. Mind you they didn't have elastoplast in those days, or antibiotics. Mind you, we've got no antibiotics either, just elastoplast so you'll have to take your chances. Which hand sustained the injury?”

“This one,” I said, holding it up.

“Pfft, it's only a scratch,” he said. “What are you making such a fuss about?”

“I'm not making a fuss,” I said, “you are.”

“Oh, am I?” he asked, looking puzzled. “I just thought I was being hospitable. Hang on a minute.”

He fished a packet of elastoplast out of the ice cream carton and peeled one and gently stuck it on my hand.

“There,” he said stepping back to admire his handiwork, “that should do the job although if it gets worse we've got some other odds and ends in here.” He started going through the ice cream carton. “Umm, panadol, indigestion things, some vitamin B12 tablets and some flea treatment for dogs. You haven't got indigestion, have you, by any chance?”

“No, I haven't,” I said.

“Shame,” he said peering at the label. “They're more than a year out of date. We ought to use them up soon. How about fleas?”

“No, I don't have fleas either,” I said.

“Well, if you start getting itchy, let me know,” he said. “A drop of this stuff on the back of your neck works wonders. Now then, I've forgotten something, I wonder what it was. Judy would know, except she's at work at the moment.”

He put the ice cream carton back in the cupboard with a mildly worried frown on his face.

“Aha!” he said suddenly. “You’re a visitor! I should have offered you a hot beverage. I’ll just put the kettle on. Tea? Coffee? Spiced Rum?”

“Umm, a coffee, thanks,” I said. “Can I ask what you were doing in the garden?”

“I was doing Tai Chi,” he said fussing with the kettle and mugs.

“Ohhh,” I said. “I’ve heard of that. It’s like Kung Fu, isn’t it?”

“In a sense,” he said. “Strictly speaking Kung Fu is any activity that requires patience, discipline and skill so that would include what you do, as engineering takes a lot of patience, discipline and skill. However, in the West, Kung Fu has been sensationalised to mean combat. I suppose in that sense Tai Chi is a form of Kung Fu but it’s low force combat, not high force.”

“What do you mean, low force combat?” I asked, rather liking the idea of engineering being a form of Kung Fu. “Isn’t all combat high force?”

“Oh gosh, no,” he said. “What you think of as Kung Fu is where people whirl round and try to kick someone’s head off. That’s high force. It’s all about impact, hitting and kicking to injure and kill. Tai Chi is about embracing the yin rather than the yang, about absorbing and avoiding impact. You should know about that from an engineering perspective. Cars aren’t designed to resist a collision as the resulting shock waves can cause extensive damage. They’re designed to crumple and absorb the energy, not to resist it.”

“Well, OK,” I said. “So what was all that that you were doing in the garden?”

“Oh those were a sequence of moves for improving health and mental clarity,” he said. “Let’s take the coffees into the lounge. No, I’m not interested in the martial aspect. I took up Tai Chi to improve my agility as I’m getting old and I’ve found it’s a good form of meditation as well. It helps clear the mind and promotes calm. I do it every day.”

“Great,” I said, looking at the seemingly endless bookcases in the lounge. “Have you read all of these?”

“Most of them,” he said. “Although we had a cull a few months ago and gave a lot to an op shop. These are just the ones that survived the cull although I swear that they’re breeding. No matter how many books we get rid of we always seem to end up with more. I don’t understand it, I really don’t. Anyway, find yourself a comfy seat while I get out of my Tai Chi uniform. I find it helps to have a specific outfit for different aspects of life. It seems to keep the boundaries more defined and aids mental transition.”

“So those are your Tai Chi clothes?” I asked. “They look like harem pants to me.”

“They are,” he said, looking down at his legs admiringly. “I got them off eBay for \$12 including postage. Nice colour aren’t they.”

“Aren’t they women’s clothes?” I asked.

“Oh tsk, tsk,” he said, wagging a finger at me. “How can a piece of cloth have a gender? Cloth is cloth, it’s neutral. The notion of men’s or women’s clothes is largely a mental construct although I concede that certain items of apparel are designed for a specifically male or female body. Brassieres, for example, or y-fronts, although in my case a brassiere could be beneficial because I’m so overweight. In terms of form, however, men and women are mostly constructed the same way. You, I’m sure, wear trousers from time to time.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, “although I don’t know that men in skirts is particularly appealing.”

“That’s a purely cultural thing,” he said. “There are any number of cultures where men wear a garment that could broadly be called a skirt that are attractive to women of that culture. If men in Australia started wearing skirts as a matter of routine I’m sure your idea of what is appealing would change. I don’t imagine for one minute that the clothes boys wore when you were fifteen or sixteen that you found so attractive appeal to you now.”

“OK, you’ve got a point there,” I said. “No way would I go out with someone wearing drop crotch cargo pants now. Especially those ones with straps and buckles all down the legs.”

“Anyway,” he said, “I’ll go and change into something more appropriate.”

He disappeared so I started to browse the bookshelves. There was a very eclectic mix, with a copy of the Koran nestled between a Bible and a book of Hindu Mythology, any number of books on mathematics, the sciences and philosophy as well as a long row of books about, according to the back covers, an exorcist called Merrily Watkins which seemed to be fiction.

“Found anything to interest you?” he asked, coming back in, the dogs close on his heels. He was now wearing a lurid lime green sleeveless tee shirt with stains down the front and a pair of very old faded shorts which may once have been red. The shorts were liberally coated with what looked like fairly recent paint splodges. To complete his man-about-town wardrobe he sported a pair of battered grey ankle slippers.

“What are these Merrily Watkins books?” I asked. “Are they fiction?”

“Sadly yes,” he said. “Although I believe they are based on the Deliverance Ministry in England.”

“Is that exorcism?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Apparently the modern Church is worried about their public image so they don’t refer to exorcism any more, it has too many negative and archaic associations for the modern Church which strikes me as faintly absurd. If you grant the existence of God, Satan, angels and fallen angels then it would seem reasonable to allow lesser manifestations which would seek to possess and usurp our souls and bodies. Anyway, I’m sure you didn’t come all this way to talk about exorcisms, or if you did you’d probably be better off with a priest.”

“Why on Earth would I want to be exorcised?” I asked. “The ATO already possesses my soul more than Satan ever could.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Richard sitting down in an overgrown office chair styled armchair. “Much as I’ve love to try an exorcism I really don’t think reading a few novels about it would properly qualify me. If there is any truth in it I’d probably end up making things worse, not

better. So, tell me your troubles. I doubt I'll have any useful solutions to offer but the mere act of telling me may help you find your own solution."

"It's more a matter of indecisiveness," I said. "I'm faced with a dilemma. I've done a bunch of spreadsheets, given the options a lot of thought, talked it over with the other shareholders and even listened to my gut instinct and haven't really got anywhere. There are three feasible ways to go and each has its own merits and demerits."

"So it's about business?" he asked. "Shame. I'd prefer a nice juicy personal problem like those you get in those TV shows from America. You know, 'my boyfriend slept with my father' type things, or Dr Phil or Jerry Springer or Judge Judy. They seem like great fun."

"Sorry," I said. "This is purely a business dilemma."

"Oh I doubt that very much," he said. "The dilemma is inside your head so your attitudes, values and psychology will be at the forefront. Still, give me the gist."

I briefly explained about the fire and the proposal from McNaughton's and outlined the three options that lay before the company and he listened intently, with his fingers steepled in front of him while gazing out of the window. The two dogs had arranged themselves on cushions on the floor and showed every sign of being asleep.

"You said you love to argue," I said, looking expectantly at him when I'd finished. "Argue with each of the options and we'll see which one turns out to be the best."

"Oh I can't argue with your reasoning," he said. "I don't know enough about the business or the business environment or even what the next few years will bring."

"Oh," I said, feeling deflated. "I somehow thought you'd magic up some clever argument."

"I'm touched by your faith in me," he said, "especially on such short acquaintance. You've almost made me feel guilty."

He leaned back in his chair, put both feet up on a convenient shelf on the bookcase beside him and twisted so he could stare at me.

"Hmm," he said after a few moments and started to chew his beard.

"You don't smoke, do you?" he asked suddenly.

"No," I said. "Why?"

"It's a filthy habit," he said, "but smoking is often conducive to thought. Back in a moment."

He jumped up, suggesting that the Tai Chi had been good for his agility and headed for the door.

"Fancy some biscuits?" he asked, pausing. "We've got some Tim Tams somewhere."

"Not for me thanks," I said.

"Oh well," he said and disappeared. The dogs didn't appear to move.

He came back a few moments later with a pouch of tobacco and sat down again. He rolled what looked, even to my inexperienced eye, to be a very thin cigarette and lit it before resuming staring at me again.

"You know," he said conversationally, "one thing does occur to me. If you take the McNaughton's offer you're worried that you'll effectively become a subsidiary of McNaughton's, yes?"

"Yes," I said. Hadn't I just explained that?

"So if you do take that option, what will you do all day?" he asked.

"How do you mean?" I asked. "I'd run the company just as I do now."

"Well, actually you wouldn't," he said. "The people who make these boxes will make the boxes, certainly, but I don't see that you'd actually have anything to do. McNaughton's will periodically let you know how many of whatever sizes they need and your people will make them and

send them off but one of your foremen can handle that. I don't see anything for you to actually do except, perhaps, oversee that foreman. In fact, I don't see any particular point in employing sales people since you will have a guaranteed buyer. That probably goes for your people who buy in your materials since you'll just set up a supply arrangement with one or two suppliers just as McNaughton's are doing with you. Do you have any other staff?"

"Yes," I said wondering, now that he'd mentioned it, just what role I would have, "there's the Accounts and the Design teams."

"Well, I imagine you'll still have some basic accounting to do," he said, "although it'll be greatly simplified and McNaughton's will do all the design work themselves I imagine."

"You know," I said, alarmed, "I hadn't thought of that. I'd have to lay off the Sales and Design teams."

"Which would no doubt save a lot of money," he said, re-lighting his cigarette which had gone out. "It would make that proposal much more cost effective, especially if you yourself departed the company as an employee."

"Well, that settles that," I said. "No way am I taking the company down that path. I'm bloody glad you pointed that out. I can't believe I was so stupid not to think of it."

I coughed as he blew a cloud of smoke in my face.

"I wouldn't be too hasty," he said. "Personally I think it makes their proposal more attractive, not less."

"Oh come on," I said waving my hand to clear the air around me. "What could possibly be attractive about making myself and a third of my staff redundant?"

"Oh I wouldn't make them redundant," he said. "Keep them on and take on some more staff."

"What on Earth for?" I asked. "Why take on and pay more staff when

they won't have anything to do?"

"You really ought to have some Tim Tams," he said, tossing his cigarette butt into a filthy glass coffee jar sitting on the bookcase. "They'd increase your blood glucose level and help you think better."

"You're not making any sense," I said.

"Oh, studies have shown that administering glucose can enhance aspects of cognitive function," he said. "Also, the brain also uses up more glucose during challenging mental tasks so a higher blood glucose would aid ..."

"No," I said a little irritably. "I don't mean that. I mean about taking on more staff."

"Ahh, my mistake," he said. "Sorry. No, a basic principle I've always adhered to is that the right option is always obvious. If you can't choose between options it can only be because you haven't thought of the option you're going to choose."

"What's in those cigarettes?" I asked.

"Just tobacco," he said startled. "Why? Are you a drug taker?"

"No," I said, "but the cigarette seems to have driven out your common sense."

He burst out laughing.

"There's no such thing as common sense," he said. "If there was then good sense would be more common. No, you've just not thought of the fourth option."

"So what's the fourth option?" I said.

"The flaw in your thinking," said Richard, "apart from declining Tim Tams, is that you see your three options as mutually exclusive and I don't see any good reason to do that."

I frowned at him in puzzlement.

"It seems to me," he said, looking at his tobacco pouch as though wondering whether or not to have another. "Umm, it seems to me that you have a perfectly viable workforce complete with Sales and Design people and, one must assume, reasonably effective management. So why get rid of them? Why not keep all that side of things going and simply take on a few more fabricators and a machine or two to handle the McNaughton's, umm, work. That way you'll have the guaranteed income from McNaughton's and the flexibility to carry out other operations without losing customers, goodwill or staff and you'll probably significantly increase profits in the process."

"But ...," I said, looking at him in astonishment. "But ..."

"You really do need some Tim Tams," he said getting up again. "Would you prefer Original or Chewy Caramel?"

"But ..." I said, desperately trying to think up a counter argument or, at least, a reason why I hadn't thought of the fourth option.

He reappeared a moment later with a packet of Chewy Caramels.

"I think you need the extra sugar in these," he said. "Brain food."

I took a couple of Tim Tams automatically and he settled himself in his chair and fiddled with his tobacco pouch. Both dogs' noses twitched then they both got up and ambled over to sit expectantly at his feet, hoping for hand-outs. He must have reached a decision as he started to roll another.

"Tell me, Penny," he said, leaning forward with his elbow on the arm of the chair to peer at me closely. "Have you had that dream again since that party?"

Chapter Twenty One

“Well, yes,” I said taken aback by the sudden change in topic. “The last couple of nights actually. Why?”

“Two nights in a row?” he said, perking up with interest. “Has that happened before?”

“Umm, no,” I said, thinking back. “I’ve had that dream maybe half a dozen times but not two nights in a row. Why are we talking about this?”

“Oh just an idle thought I had,” he said. “So what happened yesterday? Have another Tim Tam.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taking one. Both dogs watched me carefully in case I dropped it.

“I’m just guessing,” he said, taking one himself, “but I wonder if something happened yesterday that triggered the second occurrence of the dream so soon after the other one.” He snapped the Tim Tam in half and gave it to the dogs. One snatched its half from his fingers and the other delicately took it. Either way the halves were gone instantly.

“Well, I did have a meeting yesterday,” I said. “With someone who had an idea for an engineering project, but I can’t tell you anything about it.”

“It wasn’t that interesting?” he asked taking a Tim Tam for himself.

“Oh it was very interesting,” I said. “But I had to sign a non disclosure agreement so that’s that.”

“Ahh, right,” he said. “Yes, I understand that. I’m still bound by the British Official Secrets Act even though I haven’t lived there for donkey’s years.”

“You weren’t a secret agent, then, were you?” I asked.

“Oh god no,” he said. “I was just a clerk at the Ministry of Defence,

pushing application forms around for people who wanted to join the Navy. All very tedious.”

“Isn't that a bit low level for an Oxford graduate?” I asked.

“Who said I was an Oxford graduate?” he asked, giving me a sharp look.

“You did,” I said. “When you told me the Budding Library was founded in 1293 or whatever it was.”

“The Bodleian Library,” he corrected gently, “and it was 1602.”

“That one, yes,” I said. “And that's run by Oxford University.”

“Indeed it is,” he said. “You should visit it sometime, a very venerable institution. Oh, what happened to all the Tim Tams?”

“The dogs ate them,” I said. “So were you at Oxford?”

“Speaking of eating,” he said, “Judy will be home from work any minute. Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Oh, is it that late already?” I asked, thumbing my phone to check the time. “It's only 4 o'clock.”

“We eat early,” he said. “Judy does a heavy manual job and I like to make sure she eats properly and stays healthy. Ahh, I think that's her now. I'll just put the kettle on, would you like some more coffee?”

“Oh, umm, yes please,” I said, holding out my mug. “That's nice coffee, what is it?”

“I get it from a friend of mine,” he said getting up. “It's made from the Peaberry coffee bean and he grows it on his plantation in Thailand. He sends me over a few kilos every Christmas.”

The dogs suddenly went wild as the front door opened and rushed to greet Judy, yapping excitedly.

“She sings to them, you see,” said Richard apologetically. “They love her for that. Back in a mo’.”

Judy appeared in the doorway, struggling to walk as the two dogs vied for her attention.

“Oh hello,” she said. “I thought it might be you, your car was outside. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” I said, getting up. “Did you enjoy the party?”

“What party?” she asked. “Oh, yes, that party. Sorry, still got my work head on.”

“What do you do?” I asked, sitting back down when she sat down.

“Oh, I work at the local chicken farm,” she said. “Heavy work but the people are nice.”

“I rather expected you to work in an office,” I said.

She smiled. “I used to but it gets so tedious. You’re in engineering, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve got a factory in Dandenong.”

“How nice,” she said. “Oh, thank you, dear.”

Richard put a mug of coffee beside her then another beside me before sitting down.

“We were just talking about Penny’s business,” he said. “She has some excellent ideas for the future.”

“Oh, that’s good,” said Judy. “So many businesses seem to be struggling these days. It’s nice to hear of one making a success of itself.”

“We seem to be doing well enough at the moment,” I said, “although there are always challenges.”

"It's not the challenge that matters," said Richard. "It's how you face up to it that counts. Penny's staying for dinner, Jude."

"If that's OK," I said, "I don't want to intrude or be a bother."

"It's no bother," she said, glancing over at Richard. "He loves to cook but he gets a little bored just cooking for the two of us. What are you going to do?"

"I was going to do plain chicken and rice," he said, "but since we have a visitor, I thought I might do a chicken and coconut curry, Thai style."

"Sounds delicious," I said, "I love Thai food."

"Yes," said Judy smiling. "When he says Thai style he doesn't mean it. He means Richard style and if it bears any resemblance to something you'd get in Thailand it's pure coincidence."

"Nonsense," said Richard getting up. "I am renowned for my interpretation of classic Thai cuisine, although come to think of it we don't have any coconut. I'll have to improvise. Actually, I'm not too sure we even have any chicken. Never mind, worst case scenario we'll have Satay Khumpang Ping."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Thai for peanut butter on toast," he said over his shoulder disappearing into the kitchen.

"Ahhh," said Judy, sitting back in her chair and relaxing. She sipped her coffee. "A jolt of caffeine works wonders, doesn't it."

"Yes," I said.

"I hope he hasn't been boring you," she said. "He sometimes gets carried away by his own brilliance and forgets others don't always appreciate it."

"Quite the opposite," I said. "I've been boring him with my own

problems and indecisiveness. He's a very patient man, isn't he."

Judy jerked up suddenly as she spilt her coffee down the front of her tee-shirt, making the Starship Enterprise on the front look like it had been caught in a web of Klingon goo.

"Damn," she said putting her mug on the floor and getting up. "I'll just get a cloth."

"I'm sorry about that," she said coming back in a moment later wiping her chest with a cloth. "I was just caught by surprise when you said you thought he was patient. He's the most impatient man I know."

She bent over to pick up the mug and wiped its bottom then the ring of coffee on the wooden floorboards.

"Oh," I said, a little surprised since I'd only ever seen Richard sitting down and pontificating. "He seems very patient with me and there's all that Tai Chi and Eastern stuff as well. Isn't he philosophical about things?"

"He's only patient with you because you interest him," she said. "I need to go and get changed."

"Who interests who?" asked Richard coming in. He was wearing an apron with a woman's figure dressed in a bikini on it, for some reason.

"Penny thinks you are patient," said Judy. "I spilt my coffee laughing."

"That's because you have no sense of the nature of the time continuum," he said. "I am the epitome of patience. Patience personified, incarnate even."

"Personified and incarnate are the same thing," she said.

"Incarnate is to do with deities," he said. "Personified is for all other things. In what way am I not patient? I live with you, after all."

"The supermarket?" she said. "The bank? The Post Office?"

She looked over at me. “He gets upset and walks out if he has to wait more than five seconds in the queue.”

“That’s not a matter of impatience,” he said. “That’s a matter of customer valuation. If you look at Queuing Optimisation Theory you will see that the optimum number of operatives in a multi-checkout system is a balance between the cost of servicing the checkout and the value placed on customer waiting times. I was reading a paper about optimal location planning of public urinals just recently as a matter of fact, by a Japanese theorist named Noritake.”

“I don’t think we ought to compare the local supermarket to public urinals,” said Judy. “It seems a little derogatory.”

“Derogatory indeed,” he sniffed. “When the supermarket has ten checkouts but only staffs two of them they are making a statement on the value they place on their customers. I am not being impatient, I am merely making a counter statement of my own about their valuation of me as a customer. Who’s being derogatory?”

“As if it really matters,” she retorted. “They know as well as I do that they won’t lose our business. All that happens is that you dump the trolley and walk out so I have to go in and collect the trolley and stand in the queue while you sit in the van smoking. It ends up taking longer. That’s why I refuse to go shopping with you.”

“Oh piffle,” he said. “A man has to make a stand on principle or the world will become a mass of oppressed automatons labouring under the whip of the illusory free market economy.”

“Is that something burning?” she said, winking at me.

“Excuse me,” he said, heading back to the kitchen. “I have weighty matters to attend to.”

“Back in a moment,” said Judy to me. “I’ll just change.”

I sat there all on my own, feeling bemused. Richard had given me a lot to think about and their bantering exchange was exhausting to follow although they both seemed to thrive on it. Judy came back a

few moments later in a pair of black leggings and a tee-shirt with a tiger's head on it. Her hair was freshly brushed as well.

"There, that's better," she said picking up her coffee. "So how is Dandenong these days? I haven't been there for a long time. Didn't they get a huge payout to beautify the place or something?"

"Well," I said, "it is changing but ..."

"Dinner will be five minutes," said Richard, sticking his head round the door. "Table or trays?"

"I'll set the table," said Judy reluctantly putting her coffee mug down again. "Why don't you get changed for dinner? We have a guest after all."

"Typical colonial attitude," said Richard. "We have to dress to impress the natives. So much for the advance of civilisation, we remain embedded in outdated cultural mores. Would it please you if I changed for dinner?"

"Very much," she said.

"Then it shall be so," he said, heading off to, presumably, the bedroom. "The voice of all authority speaks and the minions rush to do its bidding with alacrity and a sense of purpose."

"What do you suppose he'll change into?" asked Judy rhetorically.

"I can't imagine," I said. "Umm, he doesn't seem to have much sense of style."

Judy laughed. "Actually you are quite wrong there. He has an excellent sense of style, he just refuses to be beholden to other people's conventions and expectations. A few years ago I bought him four new pairs of shorts and carefully matched tee-shirts to go with them and wrapped each pair of shorts with the matching tee shirt so he'd know which went with which."

"What happened?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

“He has yet to wear the right tee-shirt with the right shorts,” she said with a sigh. “If he had no sense of style and simply chose them at random sooner or later the right combinations would come up by chance. He spends as much time as a woman planning his outfits in order to get them just perfectly wrong. Come and help me set the table.”

“Ta-daa!” cried Richard, leaping moderately agilely through the doorway a minute later. “Dost my lady approve?”

He was wearing a pair of long canary yellow shorts, a purple sweat shirt with a V-twin motorcycle engine on it with the logo MOTO 66 CAFE in red and a pair of old sandals with Union Jack socks.

“Well, that's better than your painting shorts,” she said.

“Excellent,” he said. “Shall I serve?”

“It smells wonderful,” I said. “I'm sure I can smell coconut though.”

“I found a can of coconut milk at the back of the cupboard,” he said. “It was less than three years out of date so I thought it would still be OK.”

“Don't listen to him,” said Judy. “There's not the slightest chance he'd use anything out of date. He just says things like that to shock.”

“Oh,” I said and thought about it. I couldn't think of anything else to add so I left it at that.

“I didn't do any rice as it would take too long,” said Richard busying himself at the other end of the kitchen, “so I made some naan bread to go with it instead.”

He ladled some of the curry into three bowls and brought them over then returned with a platter of thin naan breads.

“Enjoy,” he said, sitting down. “I hope it isn't too hot.”

I dipped my spoon into my bowl and gingerly sampled the curry. I've

had home made curries before and have learnt to be wary. This one was slightly sweet with a lime tang and the rich coconut sauce softened the heat of the curry.

“This is perfect,” I said and greedily stuffed the rest of the spoonful into my mouth. Incredibly the chicken tasted of chicken and wasn't just a lump of something with a funny texture in the curry sauce. “You're a very good cook.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Try the naan.”

Obediently I took a bread and broke off a piece.

“Interesting,” I said. “That's ... unusual. Nice but different.”

“I threw in some aniseed,” he said. “Gives it a bit of oomph.”

“It does go well with the curry,” I said.

“Makes a change from Cup-A-Soup,” he said.

“As if you'd allow Cup-A-Soup in this house,” said Judy and Richard just smiled.

“So why were you asking me about my dream earlier?” I asked, remembering.

“What dream is this?” asked Judy.

I quickly explained to her about the dream I'd been having about the girl with poison dripping into her face.

“Sounds unpleasant,” said Judy. “Not your usual dream about flying or falling or something like that.”

“That's why I found it so interesting,” said Richard. “The kitchen, the person, the poison, even the dripping. They're all elements that seem to be indicative of something. I wasn't sure but I am now.”

“So what do you think it means?” I asked, “and why are you now

sure?”

“Well,” he said, taking another piece of naan and ignoring the dogs watching his every move. “I’m pretty sure the girl is you. There’s no one else in your life of any particular significance at the moment from what you’ve told me and the kitchen setting clearly represents your personal self and life. Kitchens are highly symbolic of security, welfare and success.”

“Why success?” asked Judy.

“A well equipped and stocked kitchen requires success,” he said. “A run down kitchen with little or no food is not life fulfilling so it would seem to me to be symbolic of failure.”

“OK,” she said. “And the poison? Why’s there poison in the kitchen?”

“I think it symbolises the death or destruction of the security and welfare of the kitchen,” he said. “And that’s why I think the girl is you because the poison is going in her face and the face is arguably the most important identifier of the self. Certainly if you looked in a mirror and saw someone else’s face you would be very disturbed, far more so than someone else’s foot, say. This is why we say things like ‘saving face’, or having a ‘face to face meeting’. Even more so for a woman, I suspect, as her face is central to a woman’s concept of self. Virtually all make-up is centred around the face, even hairstyles.”

“OK,” I said slowly, thinking about it. “I can see what you’re saying there.”

“Actually it goes further,” he said. “Attacks to the face are more threatening than attacks to other parts of the body, especially the eyes. Was the poison going in the girl’s eyes or her face generally?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Even though I’ve had that dream several times I don’t remember all the fine details.”

“Not to worry,” he said. “It’s the dripping that I find most interesting. The slowness of it, indicating a passage of time rather than, for example, the speed of drinking poison or being shot with a poisoned

arrow. Bringing it all together, it seems to me that your subconscious is trying to tell you that you are being killed or destroyed or somehow otherwise damaged in or possibly by your perceived security and that it is happening in the long term rather than representing a fear of something sudden. In fact, the kitchen also represents here the familiar. We're not looking at something unexpected, we're talking about something very secure, very familiar but which is slowly bringing you down, little by little, over a longish period of time."

"Wow," I said, putting down my spoon and sitting back. "That's a hell of a lot to get from one little dream."

"Is it?" he asked, looking puzzled. "I said all that in, what, three or four sentences? How long do you need to represent it through symbols visually? One second? Two? We don't need a feature length movie style dream here, it is rather a simple message after all. Some aspect of your life, something that you depend upon, is slowly destroying you."

"But surely there is some other interpretation?" I said.

"Of course there is," he said. "Dreams don't have to mean anything or if they do perhaps the symbolism is a lot deeper and it's really telling you that you need to go skiing next Easter or take up big game fishing or get yourself pregnant. That's the joy of symbols. If you want precision and clarity don't resort to symbolism."

"Why on Earth would the dream be telling her to go skiing?" said Judy. "That's just silly."

"Exactly," said Richard. "It doesn't make a lot of sense and if we're going to deduce meanings from dreams they really ought to have some sort of sense behind them."

"But why do you think my poisoning myself with my life makes sense?" I asked. "I have a good career and a nice life. OK, admittedly I'm 36 and I doubt I'll ever have children now so maybe the thing about getting pregnant would have some validity but wouldn't that have been more useful a few years ago?"

"Quite," said Richard, feeding some naan to the dogs. "That's what I

thought, until you told me you had the dream two nights running.”

“You've lost me,” I said.

“Don't worry,” said Judy caustically. “He loses everyone sooner or later.”

“I haven't lost you, my beloved,” he said with a smile.

“Not yet,” she said. “Give it time.”

“She was threatening to divorce me before we even got married,” said Richard. “That's why I married her, so she could give it some substance.”

“Substance abuse, I call it,” said Judy. “A new year starts tomorrow. Maybe this will be the year I make my bid for freedom.”

“Maybe,” said Richard, “but you dream about aliens not the slow destruction of your life.”

“Well, OK then,” said Judy. “They don't get more alien than you. I suppose I'll have to put in another year at the asylum after all.”

“You'd be mad not to,” said Richard.

“Excuse me,” I said, “my dream. Remember?”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Umm, what was I talking about?”

“Two nights running,” I said.

“Of course,” he said. “Something happened that day to trigger the second night's dream and that, I'm pretty certain, is conclusive.”

“Explain,” I said. “I don't get you.”

“It's simple,” he said. “You've had several dreams at intervals where your subconscious is telling you about some dissatisfaction in your life then you have a meeting with someone who tells you about some very

interesting engineering project and that triggers a rerun of the dream immediately. I'd say you're bored with your life and this person has come along with something that will make your life more interesting. I don't know what it is since you can't tell me but you can certainly tell me if it's an interesting project and whether or not you want to get involved."

"Jesus," I said, staring at him.

"Do you want that last piece of naan?" he asked.

Chapter Twenty Two

I was supposed to be going to see the New Year fireworks on the Yarra River in Melbourne that night with some friends but I called and cancelled and spent New Year's Eve alone at home. I needed to think. Richard's interpretation had been, I suppose, revelatory and it was one of those occasions when it 'felt' right. Yes, I had been vaguely conscious of a mild dissatisfaction with the business. I was a trained, qualified engineer and sheet metal fabrication, while profitable, wasn't exactly the most challenging of engineering tasks and was entirely predictable. Occasionally we got an unusual order but they were rare and Dandenong isn't exactly the hub of sheet metal innovation.

He was also right about Gail's idea. It was an intriguing idea and, despite a few engineering flaws, could be put into production and, in time, could make a significant contribution to society, unlike, say, McNaughton's proposal which was really just plain consumerism. Like the world needs yet another cut price toolbox. Emergency shelters for refugees, on the other hand, seemed to be worthwhile.

Richard's, well, insight, I suppose, had, in a sense, let the cat out of the bag for me. Although I couldn't talk to him about Gail's ideas I found that my excitement started to rise while driving home, which is why I cancelled my Firework Spectacular. It honestly hadn't occurred to me to accept the McNaughton's proposal and use it as a fairly secure base for ... well, for doing something risky. There was no way I would risk Dorchester's future on Gail's idea but maybe, just maybe, it would be a risk worth taking if there was a solid and secure foundation.

Back home I started to list the design flaws and possible production problems. I wasn't totally convinced, for example, that Gail's design for the edges of the panels was either as reliable or as water resistant as she thought. She wasn't an engineer, after all. She was an artist who'd moved over to design but, with one or two 'proper' engineers, namely myself and Yu Yang, we could probably modify the design so it was water resistant. On the other hand, her idea for solar panels wasn't likely to be feasible as both the solar panels themselves and the batteries, 2.4m square and 25mm thick, would need to be custom manufactured which would be expensive. On the other hand, there

was no reason why Gail's units couldn't be supplemented by conventional solar panel systems, at least in the short to medium term.

Production-wise there were minor points. We'd probably have to search around to find a suitable adhesive for attaching the insulation to the metal sheets and we'd need to do the maths to check exactly which metal and which thickness would supply sufficient strength while minimising cost. Experience suggested that straight aluminium wouldn't be strong enough but possibly some bracing fitted inside the insulation would be sufficient, or perhaps an aluminium alloy or perhaps even a steel frame with a thinner aluminium or even plastic or carbon fibre based sheet on top. Once the idea is there, engineering can usually overcome the practical issues.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it was technically feasible but commercially unviable. The objective of Gail's idea was humanitarian and therefore had to be as low a cost as possible and that was a stumbling block. Admittedly some organisations are ruthless enough to try to screw every last cent out of charities but I wasn't like that. I'd not that long before read in the papers of an expose of an American charity that spent 90% of its income from public donations on fundraising and that the company that did the fundraising was, surprise surprise, owned by the very same person who'd set up the charity so that most of the donations went into their pocket and not to the needy they were supposedly trying to help. Still, if you're going to make reasonable quality goods you need to pay decent wages to the people who make them and you also need to be able to invest in research and development and maintain and replace your manufacturing equipment which means there has to be a profit element to feed back into those costs. At the same time there also needs to be a return to the shareholders since they are the owners of the business and the equipment and if I committed the company to manufacturing an unprofitable product I would be sacked and the entire venture abandoned. Yes, there would be some profit from the McNaughton's project but nowhere near previous levels and the deficit wouldn't be wholly covered by the 40% of our capacity that McNaughton's didn't need.

I was in the kitchen on New Year's Day frying a couple of eggs to make a quick egg sandwich for dinner and gazing out of the window

at the garden shed when a thought struck me. Just because an idea has a humanitarian origin it doesn't mean that it can only be used for humanitarian purposes. At the same time, just because a structure as been conceived as a temporary dwelling it doesn't have to be only used for that. Why couldn't Gail's portable units be used for other purposes? Such as garden sheds, market stalls or building sites? There were probably a lot of other possible uses as well. Once the technical problems were ironed out and the units in production there was no reason why they couldn't be sold in two different markets. Some could be sold at more or less cost to humanitarian organisations and others, with a commercial mark-up, on the wider market. In fact, increasing the production levels would also result in cost savings on a per unit basis making the humanitarian ones cheaper.

I didn't get much sleep that night. I hadn't been this excited for a long time.

* * *

The factory reopened after the break at 8am the next day and Rufus was there waiting by the door when I arrived.

"All ready to start work?" I asked, unlocking the door and turning on the lights.

"Too fucking right, boss," he said, grinning enthusiastically.

"OK," I said, turning to face him. "Let's get something straight right now. You're not at school anymore and while I'm going to train you up I am not a teacher and I don't have to put up with any of your crap. I am your employer and I will be paying you. You ever swear at me again or swear at any of my staff or threaten anyone you are straight out the door and back on the dole queue. OK?"

"Umm, sorry boss," he said, looking sheepish. "I don't mean nothing, like."

There was no chance that he would stop swearing but one thing my dad had taught me, backed up by Gramps, was that if you made these things clear right from the beginning it made life easier. Kids aren't

taught to respect their teachers at school, at least not in this part of the world, and a proportion of them come into the workforce expecting things to be much the same. It isn't. Dad had had a problem with a new apprentice, not long after he'd taken over from Gramps, who hadn't liked the foreman telling him what to do so he'd pulled a knife on the foreman and that kind of attitude isn't too good for Workplace Health and Safety.

"Good," I said. "Are you carrying a weapon?"

"Umm, no, boss," he said. "Do I need to?"

"God no," I said. "And if I ever find out you are carrying a weapon I'll sack you immediately and call the police. This is a factory and you have a job to do. Do that job and be respectful of everyone else and you'll be fine. Step out of line and you won't know what hit you."

"Umm, yes, boss," he said, looking subdued.

The idea of my little spiel wasn't to threaten him, it was more to see how he reacted. A lot of the guys on the shop floor carried a pocket knife and they all swore and, from time to time, played tricks on each other and had arguments and that was all fine. That's the way life goes. But if Rufus had shown any sign of not accepting my authority immediately then he wouldn't even get to start his first day.

"Good," I said. "Come on in. We'll get the paperwork sorted out then I'll introduce you to Barry who's in charge of the apprentices. Do what he tells you and show willing and you'll do just fine. Now, you start officially on Monday and Barry will tell you what clothing you need to get. In the next week or so we'll also sort you out a place at the TAFE and organise what you need for that as well. Umm, payday's on Wednesdays so your first pay will come through in about two weeks. Do you need money before that? Rent or anything? I can give you an advance if you need it."

"Umm, no, I live with me mum," he said.

"That's good," I said. "Now, if you've any questions or problems, Barry's the person to talk to but if there's something you need to talk

about and don't want to talk to Barry, come and see me. My door is always open. I may be the boss but I need good workers. Work hard and keep your nose clean and we'll both be happy, OK?"

"Yes, boss," he said, smiling happily.

"Good," I said, scanning Kasey's desk for his folder. "Right, sit down over there and read this contract and the Workplace Health And Safety summary while I find Barry. Have you got a Tax File Number?"

"Umm, I don't think so," he said. "Do I need one?"

"Yes you do," I said. "Don't worry though, we'll organise that for you."

I left him studiously reading the paperwork while I found Barry then sent him off to start his new life. I had good feelings about Rufus. He'd responded in the right way.

"Happy New Year, Chris," I said, spotting him standing in the doorway to the Buying Office. He'd arrived and was contemplatively stirring his coffee and coming to terms with the fact that he was back at work. "Have a nice Christmas?"

"Don't ever have kids," he said grimacing. "Or if you do don't let them get past twelve or so."

"As good as that, huh?" I asked. "Well, you're safe enough here at any rate." I turned to go back to my office then said, on impulse, "The builders are due in on Monday to repair the wall, aren't they?"

"I'm pretty sure they are," he said. He went over to his desk and pulled a file out from one of the drawers. "Give me a few moments and I'll check."

"Well, cancel it, whenever it is," I said.

He looked at me in astonishment. "We're not fixing the wall?" he asked.

"We will," I said, "but not yet. I've got some ideas and I need to talk to

some people but it might be better to extend the wall a couple of metres to give more room so there's no point repairing it just yet then knocking it down. If I go down that path we might as well get the builders in once, not twice."

"OK," he said slowly, no doubt trying to get his mind up to work speed again and away from the trials and tribulations of three daughters aged 14, 15 and 17 and no mother to guide them. "So we're expanding?"

"Maybe," I said. "I haven't decided yet. Also, you remember that Rigsby Automated Sheet Metal Folder? I gave you the tech specs a couple of weeks ago."

"Vaguely," he said. "I've got it somewhere."

"Well find it, would you, and check around to see what else there is that's comparable that we can get on better terms," I said. "When you start getting quotes tell them that we're interested in two. See if that'll get a better discount."

"Two?" he said. "You have had a busy Christmas, haven't you."

"I'll want to see operational demonstrations before making any commitments," I said. "but if we go ahead with what I'm thinking we'll be getting two of the automated ones as well as a combi cutter/punch, a press and replacements for the damaged bender and deburrer."

He looked thoughtfully at me then smiled. "Well that sort of order should get me a few free lunches," he said then grinned. "Maybe even a stripper."

"Like I said, don't make any commitments," I said, "least of all to the stripper. You don't want to go through all that again."

"That was sixteen years ago," he said ruefully, "but yeah, never again. I'm still living with the consequences."

"Give me a week or so," I said. "Just get me some preliminary figures for now."

"I'll grab another coffee then get on to it," he said.

"Thanks," I said and went off to see Brian.

"Have a good Christmas?" I asked, sitting down in the spare chair in his office.

"Very pleasant," he said. "The wife and I went down to Lakes Entrance and stayed with a friend who's got a yacht."

"Sounds like fun," I said. "So what do you know about selling to charities?"

"Bugger all," he said, scratching his head. "I know they're hard though."

"In what way?" I asked.

"With the smaller ones, they don't have any money," he said, "and the big ones are riddled with bureaucracy. What are you thinking of?"

"What about the big ones that handle international humanitarian crises?" I asked.

"Jesus," he said. "You mean like UNICEF?"

"Yeah, like that," I said.

"Hmm," he said. "I don't really know but I think they'd be like selling to the Government. Endless trials and evaluations and stringent requirements to begin with and probably language difficulties but once in, you're in, if you know what I mean."

"How long would it take to find out?" I asked.

He gazed thoughtfully at me for a few moments. "I can make some calls," he said. "Although a lot of people are away on holiday at the moment. Give me a couple of days. Do you have any particular organisations in mind?"

“Well, UNICEF for one,” I said, “and UNHCR.”

“UNHCR? What's that?” he asked.

“United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,” I said, having come across them the evening before. I'd never heard of them but apparently they were the big wigs in handling refugees.

He let out a long whistle. “Well, I don't know what you're planning,” he said, “but you're certainly thinking big. Want to give me a clue?”

“I can't,” I said. “Not at the moment anyway.”

“Well, are we talking products for the agencies or for the refugees?” he asked. “That'll be a factor.”

“The refugees,” I said. “And keep it to yourself for now.”

“Hmm,” he said, thinking. “Well, we may need to be certified in some way and we may find we're simply too small for them to take any notice of. They must be dealing with millions if not tens of millions of refugees. I don't see how we could operate on that scale.”

“Well, that's something you could find out, isn't it,” I said. “Which organisations operate at what levels?”

“Well, I suppose,” he said. “There are probably a few that are Australian based as well which would probably be a starting point. What sort of time scale are you looking at?”

“Oh months,” I said, “if not longer. If we go ahead with what I'm thinking of we've got some design work to do then prototyping and testing.”

“That's a relief,” he said grinning. “Knowing you I half thought you'd want a sales plan this afternoon.”

“Oh, I'm not that bad,” I said. “End of tomorrow will be fine.”

“Yeah right,” he said. “Can't do much until I have an idea of what

we're selling. Any clues?"

"Sorry," I said. "I can't yet but if it does go ahead we'll probably need to take on another salesman so keep your ears open. You might hear some names mentioned."

He looked a little dubious at that. "Well, maybe," he said. "OK, leave it with me."

I got up and walked out onto the shop floor. It was humming with activity and, curiously, so was I. I was feeling very, alive, I suppose. Confident and energised. I felt good.

"McNaughton's were on the phone just now," said Kasey when I went back to my office. "They wanted to confirm your meeting with Alan McNaughton on the 10th."

"Oh, right," I said, suddenly feeling deflated.

"What shall I tell them?" she asked, reaching for the phone.

"Nothing for the moment," I said. "Give me a few minutes and could you get me a coffee? I need to think."

"No problem," she said, giving me a curious look.

"Thanks," I said and went into my office and shut the door.

"Jesus," I thought to myself as I sat down. "Suddenly it's not a game anymore."

I stared out of the window into the car park, my heart beating faster than usual. Even though a second meeting with McNaughton's wouldn't commit me to anything it brought home the reality of what I'd been thinking about over the last couple of days.

Did I really want to tie Dorchester's into at least a five year relationship with McNaughton's? Did I really want to tie Dorchester's into the financial commitments of re-equipping to produce the untested thoughts of a design student? Would Gramps, mum and

Kevin ever understand what I was trying to do?

"Are you all right?" asked Kasey, suddenly coming in with my coffee and startling me. "You don't look too well."

"I'm fine," I said, trying to hide the nervous tremble that had started in my hands. I'd taken over the business from dad and had run it well enough, simply by continuing what he'd been doing. Was I really up to taking the business in a completely new direction? Could I handle all the planning? Could I really manage this upheaval and build it into something worthwhile and productive? Didn't I owe it to the staff and the family to keep things as they were?

"Well, OK," said Kasey dubiously. "Want me to get you something to eat from the lunchroom?"

"No, thanks," I said. "Umm, what would you do if you had to make a choice between something safe and predictable or something very risky but which could do a lot of good if it worked out?"

"Oh god," said Kasey, "I don't know. Me, well I'd probably play it safe but I'm not like you. I couldn't run a business, I just don't have the balls for it. My granddad used to say, if a job's worth doing it's worth doing properly and I'm happy enough in the job I'm doing and I can do it properly."

"Yes, you do a very good job," I said. "I couldn't manage without you."

"Of course you could," she said brightly. "You're one of those people who makes things happen. That's why you are the boss here. Shall I shut the door again?"

"Yes, thanks," I said and waited until she'd gone before unclasping my hands.

"Courage?" I thought. "She thinks I've got the courage to do this? I've got thirty staff depending on me to make the right decisions and three relatives who need the money. Kevin could maybe get a better paid job but mum and Gramps can't. The safe option is the sensible option. Turn down McNaughton's, forget Gail's design and focus on building

the business the way it's been going for the last fifty years. That's what dad would do."

I pulled over a pad of paper and started to draft a letter to Alan McNaughton, respectfully declining his proposal.

An image of Richard in his yellow shorts and purple sweat shirt appeared in my mind's eye.

"You're a chicken," he said. "A curried chicken with coconut. You always do what you think your dad would do. No wonder the poison is dripping in your face. You're doing it to yourself, drip by tiny drip. Plop, plop, plop, all over your face. You think you can run a business? You heard the girl, if a job's worth doing it's worth doing properly. Swallow the poison and get it over with. Go back to making mailboxes for the rest of your life."

"Oh sod off, you old fart," I said. "It's none of your business. It's my business."

I reached out and picked up my phone. The handset was cold against my cheek and the dial tone irritated me. Impatiently I dialled the number and waited, drumming my fingers on my desk.

"Hello, Gail?" I said. "It's Penny Dorchester. Could you come in to see me tomorrow afternoon? There's something I want to discuss with you."

Chapter Twenty Three

“Oh, hello,” she said sounding puzzled. “I’m doing something tomorrow. What do you want to talk to me about? Surely not that apprentice job?”

“Ah, no,” I said slightly embarrassed as I’d completely forgotten Gail had applied for the apprenticeship and I’d turned her down. “No, I took on someone for that and he’s starting on Monday. I wanted to talk some more with you about your design.”

There was a long pause.

“I suppose you’ve found some more faults with it,” said Gail sounding sad and distant. “No, I really don’t feel up to any more criticism at the moment, if you don’t mind. Now’s really a bad time. I ju ... No, maybe in a week or two, OK? I’ll call you,” and she hung up.

“What?” I thought, staring at the dead phone in my hand. “What was all that about?”

I rang again and the call was disconnected after a couple of rings so I sat back in my chair, confused. Did she really think I’d spent the last few days studying her design looking for flaws?

I gave a short derisive bark of laughter. That’s actually exactly what I’d been doing but for some reason she thought it was simply to criticise her. I needed to make it clear to her that that wasn’t the case.

“Oh, come in Barry,” I said, putting the phone down when he tapped on the door frame. “How’s that new lad going?”

“I sent him home,” he said, coming in. “He’s gone off to get some work boots and overalls. He’s starting Monday, formal like?”

“Yes,” I said. “You reckon he’ll be OK?”

“Too early to tell,” he said looking sour, “but he seemed to be paying attention although I daresay it’s all very confusing,” then he gave me a broad grin. “He started to swear one time then caught ’imself. Reckon

you must of given 'im your little talking to."

"Yes, I did," I said. "So he's a quick learner, then? That's good."

"Yeah, reckon so," said Barry. "Maybe I'll even take 'im off sweeping up after a month or so, see how he goes with the tube bender."

"I leave all that to you, Barry," I said, "but thanks for letting me know. Any problems with the factory after the shutdown?"

"We've had a spot of rain come in round the sheeting on the busted wall," he said. "No damage done and I got one of the lads to squirt in a bit of sealant. Umm, word's going round the wall ain't being fixed."

"It's definitely going to be fixed," I said, taken aback as usual about how quickly rumours spread round this place. The speed of gossip here put old ladies to shame. "I'm just delaying it a few days while we think if there's a better way of doing things. It depends on the replacement machines we decide on and exactly where to put them. Things might need shifting round."

"Yeah, reckon I know how that is," he said. "The wife wanted one o' them double door fridge-freezers couple of years back, ended up rebuilding the whole bloody kitchen to fit it in. Right, I'll be getting back to work."

"Thanks again, Barry," I said as he left.

I picked up the phone to ring Gail again and this time a different voice answered.

"Oh, hello," I said. "Can I speak to Gail please?"

"She's busy," said the voice. "This is her mother."

"Ahh, OK," I said. "Umm, this is Penny Dorchester of Dorchester Light Engineering. Umm, Gail applied for a job here before Christmas ..."

"Yes, I know," said her mother. "And you turned her down. Why are you still harassing her?"

“Harassing her?” I said in astonishment. “I’m sorry, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I’m not harassing her, I just wanted to ...”

“Look, you pointed out god knows how many faults with her ideas and now you’re ringing to point out some more,” said her mother angrily. “If that’s not harassment I don’t know what is. You really upset her.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Guichard,” I said. “I didn’t mean to upset her but any engineer will tell you that every design has problems to begin with and ...”

“Well, that’s as may be,” said Mrs Guichard, “but what gives you the right to criticise her work when she doesn’t even work for you? Hmm? You tell me that. ‘Specially coming right after, well, that’s beside the point. You leave her alone, or you’ll have me to answer to.”

I paused, wondering how to handle this.

“Well, I do apologise,” I said. “Would you apologise to Gail for me and give her a message?”

“I’ll tell her you apologised,” she said gruffly. “But I make no promises on the message. Depends what it is.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Could you tell Gail that I want to put her design into production and would she call me so we can sort out the details?”

“Could you repeat that?” said Mrs Guichard after a long silence.

“I said I want to put her design into production,” I said. “But there are a lot of details to sort out so if Gail could ring me?”

“Is this a joke?” said Mrs Guichard.

“No,” I said then stopped as I could hear muffled voices at the other end.

“McNaughton’s on the phone again,” mouthed Kasey from the

doorway.

“Confirm the meeting,” I said, holding my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. She nodded and disappeared.

There were still muffled voices on the line then I clearly heard 'then talk to her!' then the phone went dead.

“Jesus,” I said to myself, hanging up. “Do I really want to get involved with this?”

I was wondering whether or not to phone again when my mobile rang.

“Hello,” I said, picking it up.

“Mum said you want to put it into production?” said what sounded like Gail.

“Is that Gail?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Are you winding us up or something?”

“No,” I said. “It's not a joke. Like I said the other day there are a few design issues but I think we can sort those out and I wanted to talk to you about putting ...”

I had to drop the phone because of the ear-splitting squeal. I waited for a few moments for the ringing sound to fade then picked up the phone again.

“... there?” she said, anxiously.

“I'm here,” I said. “Umm, is that OK?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, “tomorrow, yes, what time?”

“Umm, how about 2 o'clock?” I said, keeping the phone a little way away from my ear in case she squealed again.

“I'll be there,” she said, still breathless, “yes, 2 o'clock, I'll be there,

oooohh thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Don't get too excited,” I said. “There's a lot to sort out and there's no guarantee we'll get it into production but we can at least start the process.”

“OK,” she said in a voice that showed she didn't believe me. I had a feeling she could already see the units rolling off the production lines.

“And bring some more of those non-disclosure forms,” I said. “We're going to have to get some other people involved before we can finalise anything.”

“Oh, OK,” she said. “Is there anything else I should bring?”

“Not for now,” I said, desperately hoping she wouldn't want to bring her mother as support. “This will just be a preliminary chat, umm, so that we agree on the basics and how to move forward, if we move forward.”

“Cool,” she said, “umm, so what do we do now?”

“We hang up,” I said, “and meet tomorrow. Listen, I know you want to help refugees, but it would be a good idea if you gave a little thought to what you want to get out of this yourself. At some point you're going to need an income so think about whether you want to make some money out of this for yourself or if you just want to use it as a launch for a career in design or whatever. You really ought to have an idea what your objectives are in the long term.”

“OK, I will,” she said, “but you really want to put my design into production?”

“Yes,” I said. “If we can make it feasible.”

“Oh,” she said, suddenly sounding disappointed. “What do you mean, make it feasible?”

“That's what we're going to talk about tomorrow,” I said. “It's one thing to draw something on a piece of paper and another thing to

actually make it and get it working properly. We're going to have to have a lot of meetings and discussions before we even get a prototype and still more discussions and planning before we can get it into production."

"I suppose," she said doubtfully, then brightened up. "This is going to be, like, so totally cool!"

"Right, well, I'll see you tomorrow," I said. "Byee."

I leaned back in my chair wondering if I was doing the right thing.

"Oh well," I said to myself. "It's just a preliminary discussion, but I hope to Christ she's calmed down by tomorrow. I really can't work with a diva."

I sighed and went out onto the shop floor to look at the production schedule, more to refresh my memory than anything else. The outstanding jobs were a touch on the thin side but this was normal for the time of year. It would pick up in a week or two when other businesses were over the holiday period, just as we were short staffed as well, because of holidays. It also meant I didn't have a huge amount to do either so I wandered back to my office. I couldn't even really start planning much for the new project with Gail until we'd at least reached some sort of agreement.

"Cheryl from Dandenong Real Estate for you," said Kasey a while later.

"OK, thanks," I said, picking up the phone. "Hi Cheryl."

"Hi Penny," said Cheryl. "Just rang to touch base after the holiday. How are you?"

"I'm good thanks," I said. "Did you get much of a break over Christmas?"

"Just the public holidays," she said. "A lot of people like to move at the beginning of the year although it's quietening down now with the school holidays. I'm taking a couple of weeks off at the end of January

and into February. We're going to New York."

"Oh, that'll be fun," I said. "I've never been to the States but I know New York from TV shows."

"Paul's going to see a few agents as well while we're there," she said. "See if he can get his novel published."

"Well, good luck to him," I said. "I hear the book market's dying because of things like Netflix."

"Maybe he'll be able to sell his novel to a film company," she said, "although I don't see a lot of demand for a movie about religious persecution in the Philippines although I suppose they could switch it to Chicago or something. Anyway, I wanted to let you know we've had three applicants for your Quidditch Street unit. I'm doing checks today and hopefully I'll be able to get someone in the week after next."

"Oh that's awesome," I said. "So that'll be at the higher rent?"

"Yes," she said. "The extra \$10 a week isn't proving to be a disincentive."

"Good," I said. "Did you manage to get Sarah onto a contract?"

"I did," said Cheryl. "In fact since you moved her to Pickett Street she's being very cooperative. She couldn't manage the first week's rent but she's paid the second and is adding \$20 a week to pay off that first week over the next three months. She said sooner if she can find someone to share but she hadn't the last time I spoke to her."

"I wouldn't have thought she wouldn't have had too much of a problem," I said. "I thought there were plenty of people in Dandy needing cheap shared accommodation."

"Mostly men," said Cheryl, "and Sarah doesn't want to share with a man."

"Understandable," I said. "How come it's mostly men?"

"Family breakups," she said, "and generally it's the man who has to

move out and pay maintenance. A lot can't afford to rent somewhere on their own as a result."

The thought flashed through my mind to get a large plot of land and fill it with Gail's units and rent them out for \$40 or \$50 a week to these men but I quashed it fairly quickly. No way would the Council approve it. It would end up looking like a refugee centre which wouldn't fit in with the Beautification Plan.

"Oh well," I said. "They should treat their families better then."

"Well, quite," said Cheryl. "I've also had a request from the Johnson's in McCrae Street. It seems Daniel Johnson is being sent to the Bahamas by his employer for two months and Desdemona will be going with him."

"I want his job," I said.

"Oh, I'll fight you for it," said Cheryl laughing. "Anyway, they wanted to know if you'd be willing to let them sub-let for those two months."

"Really?" I asked. "You think they'd find a tenant for two months? What about all their furniture and stuff?"

"Well, that's the thing," she said. "They want to let it fully furnished as AirBNB short term accommodation."

"No way," I said immediately. "I'm not having the place turned into a party house."

"That's what I thought you'd say," said Cheryl, "and I'd have advised you against it anyway but I had to put the request through. I'll let them know you declined the opportunity."

"I'm surprised they even thought I would," I said.

"He's in Banking," she said. "Clueless and amoral, what do you expect?"

"Well, true," I said. "Make sure they pay the rent for the months

they're away. His employer's probably paying it anyway. They're there for another six months aren't they?"

"They may be staying longer," she said. "They love the house but they're not certain what'll be happening in the new tax year. If they do stay do you want it month by month or another twelve month contract?"

"Ordinarily I'd go with a monthly," I said, thinking, "but if they're going to disappear for a couple of months at a time it would make sense to do a twelve month. That way they'll have to come back and not go somewhere else afterwards."

"OK," she said. "I've made a note of that. I'll get back to you when we've got a finalist for Quidditch."

"Great, thanks," I said. "Umm, do you do checks for drug addicts or abusers?"

"I'd love to," she said, "but you can't really put questions about those on the application form and you can't demand a blood test for potential tenants, at least not yet anyway. Still, if they're twitchy when I meet them I tend not to process the applications. You're thinking about the man Sarah was living with?"

"Yes," I said. "I'd rather not go through that again."

"You probably won't," she said. "At least not with the drugs anyway. You're more likely to get that at McCrae Street. It's the higher income earners that are more likely to be users since the unemployed and low incomes can't generally afford them. Abusers you get across all income levels. Surprising really."

"Well, yes," I said. "I always thought that domestic violence was more common in low income families."

"Well, violence is," she said. "But abuse takes many forms and the higher the income the more subtle it seems to get. With higher incomes you get more social and emotional abuse, you know, things like controlling who you can see or talk to, that sort of thing. And, of

course, it's really only the higher incomes that can afford to have trafficked servants although you do get the occasional backstreet brothel using illegal immigrants in poor areas. No, the only real factor is the gender pay gap, or so they told me at uni."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I did Sociology at uni," she said. "I remember reading about some studies that have found that the closer the woman's income is to the man's the less likely there is to be domestic abuse. They said it was because of an equalisation of power but I reckon it's more because the victim can afford to move out. Not much you can do when your abuser controls all the money, especially when it takes Centrelink a couple of months to process your claim."

"I didn't know you did Sociology," I said. "That explains why you know so much about it."

"Oh god no," she said. "We didn't cover domestic abuse much at all. No, most of what I know I've picked up as a property agent. We've seen just about everything here. Jesus I could tell you some stories. Like, oh four months ago, maybe five, I had to get a plumber out to sort out a blocked drain at a rental. It turned out that the tenants went out every two weeks and bought a sheep and slaughtered it in the back yard."

"How did that block the drains?" I asked, not really wanting to know.

"It's halal," she explained. "They have to slaughter the animal by cutting its jugular and letting it bleed to death. The blood was going into the drains and coagulating and over a few months it built up and blocked it."

"Jesus," I said feeling a little sick.

"Well, it wasn't just the blood," she said ghoulishly. "The plumber found bits of ..."

"Stop!" I said, holding up my hand even though she couldn't see it. "I really don't want to know. Just don't get me any Muslim tenants, OK."

“Sorry, can't do that,” she said. “We can't discriminate on religious grounds, although the final decision on any applicant is down to you but be aware that you may get hauled up before the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.”

“So what did you do?” I asked after I'd got my stomach under control again.

“Well, slaughtering animals at home is quite legal,” she said, “so long as the animal is for that family's consumption only so all I could do was warn them about the laws on animal cruelty and gave them the bill from the plumber.”

“Did they pay it?” I asked, morbidly fascinated.

“Yes,” she said. “They're probably still doing it, just getting the plumber in directly without going through me.”

“Did you think of reporting them for cruelty?” I asked.

“I thought about it,” she said, “but at the end of the day halal slaughter is legal and since they're doing it every two weeks they've had a lot of practice.”

“I guess,” I said, unconvinced. “Umm, but what about the smell?”

“Well, yes,” she said. “There's that. That's why we got the plumber in in the first place. Anyway, I'd love to chat but I've got things to do and I'm sure you have as well. I'll get back to you when I've got someone for Quidditch.”

“OK,” I said, “thanks.”

“Yukky,” I said to myself, gazing through the window onto the shop floor. “But I wonder if there's a market for these units as sheep sheds? Or maybe pig sties or chicken coups?”

Or maybe home slaughterhouses, but I squashed that thought very quickly and had a salad sandwich from the lunchroom for lunch.

Chapter Twenty Four

"It's that girl again," said Kasey the next afternoon, coming into my office and pushing the door to behind her, "that one who wanted the apprentice job, says she's got an appointment."

"Oh, Gail Guichard?" I said, looking up from the designs of a very respectable purchase order. Ashley in Sales had been in discussions with Stuart Tudor of Tudor Fastenings and Linings for several months and had despaired of reaching any sort of agreement. Mr Tudor must have had a pleasant enough Christmas since he'd faxed through the, hopefully, final designs that morning together with a contract. I was giving the designs a final going over before agreeing the contract. This contract alone would take up about 7% of our pre-fire capacity and the really good news was that it would be at least a couple of months before we had to start production. "She's a bit early isn't she?"

"So she does have an appointment?" said Kasey, with a definite chill in her voice.

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you," I said.

She gave me a mildly hostile look.

"It would be helpful if you made appointments through me," she said. "How am I supposed to manage your appointments if I don't know when they are?"

"Yeah, right," I said. "As if I have that many appointments, maybe three a week if it's busy. I'm sure you can cope with that."

"It's the principle," she said.

"OK, OK, I'll remember to let you know next time I make an appointment," I said. "Send her in."

"No, you shouldn't be making any appointments," said Kasey. "You should tell people to contact me to arrange a suitable time. It enhances your status as a corporate CEO."

“Enhances my status?” I said, staring at her. “Since when have you given a stuff about my status?”

“Me uncle gave me a book for Christmas,” she said. “It’s American. All about how PAs are the power behind the throne and that’s me. I’m your secret weapon.”

I tried, fairly successfully I hope, to hide a smile. If there was a throne here it was a very small one.

“So you’ve been reading it?” I asked.

“Shit, yeah,” she said. “It’s brilliant. Wanna see it?”

“Maybe later,” I said. “Send Gail in.” She nodded and slipped back through the door.

“Miss Dorchester’s in conference,” I heard her say to Gail. “She should only be a few moments.”

“Since when have I been Miss Dorchester?” I wondered. “And how much longer am I going to be in conference?”

Not long as it turned out. I was just debating whether or not to get up and fetch Gail myself and undermine the power behind my throne when Kasey tapped on my door in what she no doubt imagined was a deferential executive style and ushered Gail in.

“Hello, Gail,” I said, “grab a seat.”

Kasey was hovering as though she wanted to attend to my every need and, frankly, it made me nervous. Clearly I had a lot to learn about being the CEO of a power assistant.

“Umm, could you get us some coffees, Kasey?” I said. “Thanks, and shut the door, would you?”

She sniffed and shut the door with a slight bang.

“Maybe she hasn’t got to that chapter yet,” I thought to myself.

"Thanks for coming," I said. "Umm, I want to apologise for any misunderstanding about harassing you. I really wasn't trying to do that."

"No, it's my fault," she said, a little embarrassed. "I, umm, broke up with my boyfriend on New Year's Eve and I was a little emotional."

"Oh, that's dreadful," I said. "No wonder you thought I was going to criticise your design again. Do you think you'll be getting back together?"

"No way," she said. "And now you want to start making my units he's history. An unperson. There's no room in my mind for losers like him."

"Well, OK," I said. In my experience ex-boyfriends tend to linger in the mind for a surprisingly long time but we're all different. Gail didn't seem the sort to be boyfriend-less for any longer than she wanted to be. On the plus side, she probably wasn't a diva after all.

Kasey came in with a neat little tray and two cups and saucers of coffee and put one in front of Gail and the other in front of me.

"You were serious, weren't you?" Gail asked, studying my face. "I mean, about my design?"

"Yes," I said distractedly. Cups and saucers?

"Will that be all?" asked Kasey.

"Yes, thanks, Kasey," I said and she departed. I stared after her.

"Only you seem to be thinking of something else, if you don't mind me saying," said Gail.

"I'm sorry," I said, dragging myself back. "Kasey got a book for Christmas about how to be the perfect assistant and I'm finding it a bit unsettling."

I took a sip of coffee. It felt strange to be using a little cup at work.

The context was all wrong.

“Right,” I said, picking up the faxed pages from Stuart Tudor and putting them to one side. “I think the first thing I need to do is give you a crash course in engineering so that you don’t take any criticisms personally.”

“OK,” she said, taking a thick A4 pad out of her bag. “Do you mind if I take notes?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Now, you’ve had an idea and you’ve created some designs which form the basic concept. But, and this is a big but, while we may agree on the concept you aren’t an engineer. So, the first thing we need to do is look at every aspect of your design and do the maths. Not just dimensions but structural strength, corrosion resistance in varied environments and so on. You’ve said, for example, to use 3mm aluminium but I suspect that won’t be strong enough but another factor here is the insulation. Depending on the material used for insulation we may be able to use thinner aluminium or we may need to use a stronger metal so we’ll need to consider how the panels will be transported and used and the conditions in which they’ll be used. Do they need to be acid resistant, for example, or able to withstand sand storms? Since your design uses a panel as a base it’ll need to be able to support the weight of three adults without deforming and they may well be used for storage of god knows what which could be significantly heavier. Once we’ve narrowed down the materials and the tolerances we’ll then need to rework the design based around those materials and tolerances and produce highly detailed technical drawings.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, who’d stopped scribbling fairly quickly. “So my drawings aren’t good enough?”

“They’re great for the concept,” I said, “but nowhere near detailed enough for a fabricator or machinist to work from. Anyway, once we have the technical specifications we’ll need to build at least one exactly as specified and test it. Then we go back to the design and rework the things that didn’t perform up to requirements and that may require redesigning other aspects to accommodate the changes and then we do it all again and keep doing it until we have an effectively

working prototype.”

“So this could take a while, then?” she said.

“That’s not even half of it,” I said. “Once we’ve got the prototype and everything is working properly we go back to the drawing board and redesign it so it can be made efficiently.”

“How do you mean?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“Well, umm, well for example, your design calls for 2.4 metre square sheets of metal,” I said. “Do you know if there are any machines that will cut and bend metal of that size?”

“Oh, I haven’t got a clue,” she said. “I just assumed ...”

“Exactly,” I said. “Well, there are machines that big but they’re expensive and we don’t have any here so we’d need to redesign the panels so they can be made by the equipment we have which then leads into the problem of whether to weld or rivet sub-panels, which will depend on the metal we use. Now, that kind of thing we can do at the preliminary stage but other aspects of production may not become clear until we have a prototype. For sure we’re going to have to give serious thought to the different stages of the manufacturing process. Do we, for example, fold the sheets before or after they’re welded? Again it depends on the metal and the nature of the weld. Some combinations will need to be welded after folding as the weld could fracture and ultimately lead to leaks or a reduced lifespan. On the other hand, we could end up with a less than efficient manufacturing process which will increase the labour cost. Even leaving a machine idle unnecessarily adds to the cost.”

“Right,” she said, staring intently at my doodled illustrations. “That’s why I applied to be an apprentice, so I could learn this stuff.”

“Actually apprentices don’t learn this stuff,” I said. “They learn how to take the technical specs and make the item exactly as specified but they don’t get involved in the technical or process design stages.”

“OK,” she said. “So, umm, will you be doing all this yourself or will I

be involved?"

"That's up to you," I said, "but we're still a long way off thinking about that side of things. There's still more to the design side to think about yet."

"Wow," she said, "isn't that enough already?"

I smiled and finished my coffee.

"We had a fire here a few weeks ago," I said, "and some of our machinery was destroyed. Now the insurance will cover their replacement but, if we're going to put these units into production we need to think about what new machines to get. Do we, for example, get machines big enough to handle the panels whole or do we get smaller machines and manufacture the panels in sections?"

"Are you asking my opinion?" she asked, looking puzzled.

"Not really," I said. "I was just saying that to illustrate a point. We need to look at the costs. Is it cost effective to get the big machines or would it be more cost effective to get the smaller machines and increase the labour costs by having to assemble the components."

"Oh right," she said, her brow furrowing. "Umm, wouldn't it be more cost effective to use the bigger machines?"

"That depends," I said, "more or less on two things. Firstly, the price differential of the different sizes of machine. Generally the standard sized machines are considerably cheaper. It may, for example, be cheaper to buy two smaller machines than one big one, even allowing for the labour cost of joining the components."

"OK," she said, slowly. "And the other?"

"Yes," I said, "the other. This one is a bit trickier. Since you want these units to be sold more or less at cost, we have to make a profit another way. That means we can't make these units and nothing else. We have to be able to manufacture a range of other products for other customers. That means we can't tie up machinery exclusively for these

units. The replacement machines will need to be flexible enough to fit in with all the other work we do although it's quite possible that certain machines will make it possible to open up new markets for us. Now I'm not saying this will be the case but it could well be that getting a machine to handle 2.4 metre sheet will allow us to offer that option to other possible customers. What I'm saying is that not only do we have to work out the needs for producing these units efficiently but we have to balance that with our other business so it may end up that we don't produce these as efficiently as we could but we have to look at the overall mix of products.”

“Jesus,” she said. “I didn't realise it would be so complicated. I thought it would be quite straightforward.”

“Nothing in engineering is ever as straightforward as it looks,” I said. “Have you ever had a can of Coke?”

“Sure,” she said. “Why?”

“Have you ever thought about the can?” I asked, “or do you just pop the ring pull?”

“Oh, I get you,” she said. “Yeah, we talked about that when I started doing design. Aren't there like six or seven components in a can?”

“Something like that,” I said. “But more to the point, there are somewhere around fifty different processes needed to make the can from a sheet of aluminium. The ring pull alone is pretty complex and every single one of those processes has to be thought through. Anyway, that's just the start of it. We do all that and we have a product rolling off the production line.”

“Great,” she said, “so when do we start?”

I burst out laughing.

“Yeah, like I said, that's just the start of it. We have all these units coming off the production line. What do we do with them?”

“Send them out to the refugees,” she said. “That's the whole point.”

“Umm, no,” I said. “There’s no way we can directly get involved in that, we simply don’t have the resources or the funding. Organisations like UNHCR or Oxfam have the infrastructure for locating the refugees, feeding them, providing medical care, liaising with governments and so on. There’s no way we can do that. So, we’re going to have to sell the units to those organisations and that means we’re going to have to devise selling strategies to interest those organisations and convince them that our units are practical and worth using. We may have to go through a variety of evaluation tests and it’s quite possible that they’ll want modifications which means going back to the drawing board. And, when all that is done, we have to package and ship the units. It’s no good contracting to provide this number of units to Oxfam if we’ve no idea how to get them to where they want them.”

“So are you saying it isn’t worth doing?” she asked after sitting there silently for a few moments.

“No way am I saying that,” I said. “I know it all sounds horribly complicated but I do this all the time. Look, I had this fax through today,” and I held up the fax from Stuart Tudor, “and even though they’ve faxed me their design, I have to go through all those stages that I’ve just been talking about, including deciding whether to deliver them with our own truck or to use a freight company. Aside from myself I’ve got a couple of design engineers, four sales people and a couple of buyers to source the materials as well as an accountant and her assistant to keep track of all the costs and eighteen fabricators to do the actual manufacturing. The reason I’ve explained all this is that you absolutely need to understand what has to be done before your ideas can get to the people who need your help. It’s not like we’re going to sort everything out today and start production on Monday. It could easily be six months before we start manufacturing properly.”

“Is that how long your products normally take?” she asked. I was pleased to hear she was curious and not totally overwhelmed and on the verge of giving up.

“Oh no,” I said, “most of what we do we’ve done before so it’s all very routine and most of the rest is fairly standardised and the customer has a detailed design. With this though we’ve got a fair amount of

research to do as well. Which is the best insulating material? How do we bond it to the metal? Is your joint design completely waterproof? Things like that.”

“OK,” she said, staring at her notepad, which she'd yet to write anything on.

I watched her for a while.

“So do you still want to go ahead?” I asked quietly.

“God, yes,” she said, looking at me undaunted.

“OK,” I said. “Why?”

“Why?” she said, her eyes suddenly flashing. She leaned forward intently. “There are literally millions of refugees out there, more than at any time in history and so many no one really knows just how many there are and they've been forced out of their homes by wars and persecution and famine and they've got nothing and they're dying of starvation and disease and Christ knows what else and those that survive end up living in shit conditions with no hope of ever getting out and I just hate that I'm a part of what everyone says is a civilised world and yet we just stand by and let this kind of, of, of atrocity happen and not do anything about it just so long as we get to drink our beer and watch our footy every bloody weekend. I just hate it and maybe my design isn't that frigging great but it's the best I can come up with at the moment and maybe it isn't that great but it'll help some of them and, and ...”

“And?” I prompted.

“And one day I'll think of something better,” she said, with a shrug. “But I've got to do something.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Umm, you do realise that this is only a small business? We can't begin to make a million of these units.”

“But it's a start, though, isn't it,” she said, “and maybe some other companies will come on board.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Which leads me to another question.”

“OK,” she said.

“What do you want to get out of this personally?” I asked. “I know you want to help the refugees but what's in it for you?”

“I don't get you,” she said. “I'd like the credit for my design, but that's all.”

“OK,” I said. “Umm, what did you have for breakfast?”

“Some muesli,” she said frowning. “Why?”

“Who paid for it?” I asked.

“My parents, I guess,” she said. “What are you getting at?”

“So are you going to live off your parents for the rest of your life?” I asked, “or maybe find a husband to support you?”

“Oh,” she said, her face clearing. “Now I get you. You're saying I should get a job and forget about this?”

“No,” I said. “I'm saying that whatever happens in this world you're going to need money, if only to survive long enough to think of something better.”

She gave me a long, thoughtful look.

“You're leading up to something, aren't you,” she said. “I can tell.”

I smiled. “Actually, yes,” I said. “It seems to me that your desire to help refugees is very laudable and that you'll want to sell these units to the refugee organisations at cost, which is fine, but these units could also be sold commercially to people and businesses that aren't refugees. What I'm saying is that if we get these into production we can move some along to the charities and sell some for a profit and in that way get both of us an income. After all, you aren't actually able to make any of them since you don't have any manufacturing skills so

you can't be included in the labour costs and, since this is the real world that we live in, I have to generate some profits for the company's shareholders or they'll kick me out and bring in someone who won't be interested in refugees or your units."

"I suppose," she said. "So long as we can make enough to make a difference."

"Which leads me on to another point," I said. "Dorchester's simply can't make millions of these units, more like ten thousand a year, maybe more, it depends. The thing is, would you prefer to find another, larger company that could make millions of them or would you be willing to allow a number of smaller companies to manufacture them from your design, even though you wouldn't personally be involved?"

"I don't really care," she said. "The important thing is to get them out to the people who need them, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "although something we are going to have to sort out very soon is our relationship."

"How do you mean?" she asked, frowning again. She wasn't as pretty when she frowned.

"Well, do you want to be an employee here?" I asked. "Or perhaps stay independent and order the units like any other customer, or simply give us your design and let us do what we want with it? How do you want to play this?"

"Oh god," she said, letting her lower jaw droop. "I haven't got a clue."

"OK," I said. "To be honest, I don't really have much of a clue myself. Did you bring your non-disclosure agreement?"

"I've got it on USB," she said. "Can you print it?"

"Sure," I said. "Would you be willing to bring in someone else to this discussion?"

“Who?” she asked.

“Martha,” I said. “My accountant. She’ll probably have some ideas on how to structure this.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Encouragingly, Martha took it very well. I called her into my office at half past three on a Friday afternoon, a time when her head was almost certainly going into weekend mode, and told her to sign a non disclosure form, which she did without question. I then subjected her to a lengthy monologue on turning the company over to the non-profit manufacture of shelters for refugees. It must have been a fairly surreal experience for her, especially in front of a young women she'd never seen or heard of before. Still, accountants live in their own little worlds and I fancied I could faintly hear the cogs rotating rapidly in her head. Beyond a 'nice to meet you,' to Gail she didn't say anything until I stopped talking. Just blinked every now and then.

“So any preliminary thoughts?” I asked, probably unfairly.

“Let me get this straight,” she said, blinking again. “You want to manufacture these, umm, products and sell them at cost price and you're happy to let other manufacturers manufacture them?”

“In a nutshell,” I said. “And we want Gail to keep the credit for the design.”

“OK,” she said, “then don't waste your time and money patenting it. Patents are costly and largely ignored in many countries and since you won't be pursuing anyone legally if they do breach the patent it would seem fruitless.”

“That's what I thought,” I said.

“That would also apply to a Utility Model,” she said. “They're a cheaper alternative to a patent but many countries don't recognise them. You could copyright the design but that's easily got around by changing the appearance of the product and, anyway, you're not wanting to stop others manufacturing. It's certainly an unusual problem.”

The thing with Martha is that she likes to take her time and think things through so I decided to let her.

"I'll get us some coffees," I said, getting up.

"Please," said Martha, abstractedly. "Hmm, I wonder."

"Not for me thanks," said Gail, who hadn't touched her earlier coffee.

"Would you like some fruit juice or water or something?" I asked.

"Oh, some juice would be great," she said, with a small smile as she watched Martha cogitate.

"Could you get us some more coffees, and some juice, Kasey?" I asked, sticking my head out of the door. "And what's with the cups and saucers?"

"You need to make a good impression," she said, "so I stopped off at KMart on the way home last night and got them. I thought they'd be good for your image."

"You got this from your book?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "It's my role to ensure your office presents a professional and efficient ambiance."

"And you think teacups will do that?" I asked. "What about the rest of my office?"

"Baby steps," she said. "Although I do want to talk to you about getting a decorator in. I'll just get the dirty cups. Won't be a mo'."

"A decorator?" I thought, following her back into my office. "But I like it like this. It's comfortable and homely."

"Any ideas?" I asked sitting down.

"It seems to me," said Martha in her slow, even voice, "that your best option would be to form a new company using Miss Guichard's name and for that company to purchase her design. This formally puts the copyright in the hands of the company and shows its intent to manufacture. I would suggest that this company then either

manufactures the product itself by renting machines and labour from Dorchester's or engages Dorchester's to manufacture the product and purchases them at cost. Should any other manufacturer desire to manufacture the product directly this company can licence the design to them for whatever fee the company wishes to charge. I would also suggest that all research and development costs are borne by this new company thus firmly establishing it as the originator of the design."

"Why have my name in it?" asked Gail.

"A company is a legal entity," said Martha, "and its objectives are defined in the Memorandum of Association at the time it is incorporated. Generally the Memorandum is broadly written to give a company a very wide latitude in what business it undertakes, but if the name of the company includes your name, as the designer, and the Memorandum states that its sole objective is to develop and manufacture that design, or any other designs you may create in the future, you have very solidly established your proprietorship."

"Oh," said Gail. "Is that a good thing?"

"She means it proves you are the designer if it ever went to court," I said. "Have you got any money?"

"Umm, you mean on me?" she asked. "Maybe fifty dollars."

"No, I meant savings or saleable assets," I said. "How much money could you put into this business?"

"I've got a little under three hundred dollars in the bank," she said, "and I could probably sell my scooter."

"That's nowhere near enough," I said. "Martha, how can Gail get around the problem of not having any capital?"

Martha half raised an eyebrow. "I imagine you were planning to invest in this venture," she said. "Why else would we be having this meeting?"

“OK,” I said. “Well, since Dorchester's will be doing the manufacturing and I want to be involved, is there any reason why this new company couldn't be a partnership?”

“Oh I wouldn't do that,” she said. “A partnership has very little standing in the commercial world.”

“No, I don't mean a partnership like a law firm,” I said. “I mean a limited company with me and Gail as the only shareholders.”

“Yes, that would be simple enough,” said Martha, “and it would be beneficial as well as it combines the designer with the principle manufacturer. Would Dorchester's be involved in the initial research and development?”

“Yes,” I said, “assuming Gail still wants us to be.”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “So you're saying we set up a company to make these units with you and me as the owners?”

“Yes. The actual manufacturing will be done by this company,” I said, pointing at my desk, “but the units will be made and sold through the new company. All this stuff about renting machines and labour is just accounting guff.”

“It's not guff,” said Martha. “We'll need to study the tax implications and implement accounting procedures accordingly.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “What do you think Gail?”

“I'm going to have my own company?” she said, looking awed.

“Well, part of it,” I said. “I'll have the rest and we'll both be directors of the company as well. Unless you think Dorchester's should do it, Martha?”

“Definitely not,” she said. “That would make the new company a subsidiary. Best if you do this as a private individual.”

“OK,” I said. “How much will it cost and how long will it take to set

up?”

“Ohh, probably \$500 or thereabouts if you get an off-the-shelf company,” she said. “I could have it done by Monday if you want me to organise things.”

“Gail?” I asked.

“I don't have \$500,” she said.

“Good point,” I said. “How do we give the company capital?”

“Will you be providing the finance or will you be getting a loan?” asked Martha.

“I'll do it myself,” I said, “at least in the short term.”

“Then I suggest that you set up the company jointly then give the company a loan. It's very simple really,” she said. “You will need a Company Secretary, though.”

“Would you be willing to do that?” I asked. “We'll pay you, of course.”

“Of course,” she said, with a flicker of a smile. “This is all to help refugees?”

“Yes,” said Gail.

“And you won't be taking a salary or dividends?” she asked.

“Actually, we've got to sort something out there,” I said. “Gail has no income and she's going to need something.”

“That will be difficult if the company isn't adding a profit element to the base cost of purchases from Dorchester's, but I'm sure we'll find a way,” said Martha. “Assuming we go ahead with this, my salary for being Company Secretary will be \$1 a year.”

“As much as that?” I said, feigning astonishment. “I was thinking half that amount.”

Martha just looked at me, as though I was a precocious child. Gail just looked bemused.

“What do you want to call the company?” asked Martha.

“How about Guichard Housing?” I said.

“No, that's not a good name,” said Martha. “It sounds like a property developer and the ATO will keep a very close eye on you. How about Guichard Designs or Guichard Engineering?”

“Shouldn't Penny's name be in there as well?” asked Gail.

“Yes, good point,” said Martha. “Dorchester Guichard?”

“Gail's the driver here,” I said. “I think she should go first.”

“OK,” said Martha. “Guichard Dorchester Pty Ltd, or do you want something about engineering or design in there too?”

“Guichard Dorchester Design Engineering?” I said. “Sounds pretty flash but it's very cumbersome.”

“I like Guichard Dorchester,” said Gail.

“Fine by me,” I said.

“I'll check it's available,” said Martha. “Assuming it is, I'll set the company's objective in the Memorandum as the development and manufacture of Guichard designs to cover any future designs of Miss Guichard's.”

“Call her Gail,” I said. “We're all in this together.”

“Very well,” said Martha. “How do you want the shares structured?”

“One each?” I asked.

“That could be problematic,” said Martha. “In the event of a disagreement there could be no resolution. One of you should have a

majority shareholding.”

“What does that mean?” asked Gail.

“If you both have the same number of shares and you have a disagreement about some aspect of the company's business,” said Martha, “then neither of you will be able to outvote the other so there will be stalemate. I would suggest Penny has the majority vote as she has the practical experience of both engineering and running a company.”

“But wouldn't that mean she'd always be able to overrule me?” asked Gail.

“Well, yes,” said Martha.

“Then what would be the point of me being involved?” asked Gail. “What if Penny decided to whack on a huge profit? How could I stop her?”

“I wouldn't,” I said.

“But what if you did?” asked Gail.

“You'd be outvoted,” said Martha.

“I can't let that happen,” said Gail. “That's the whole point of this. It's my design and I want to keep control of it.”

“Penny?” asked Martha.

“I have to say I'm not too happy about giving Gail control,” I said, slowly. “She has no experience.”

Martha smiled. “I see we have a stalemate already,” she said. “There is one other option, however. A third person with a small number of shares. You two have the same number each and, effectively, joint control of the company but, in the event of a disagreement, this third person becomes the arbitrator.”

"I could live with that," I said. "After all, that's how Dorchester's works. The only problem is who to give that share to."

"How about Martha?" asked Gail.

"That would be a bad idea," said Martha. "I'm too closely interrelated with Penny. If I voted against you you might believe it was under influence from her. Still, for the time being why don't I set the company up with 101 shares and you each take 50? The owner of the other share can be decided later."

"OK," I said. "Gail?"

"This will get my design into production?" she asked.

"Kind of," I said. "We've still got a lot of work to do but this is the first step. You'll be part owner of a company called Guichard-Dorchester which exists to manufacture your shelters, although we still have to figure out how to actually make them. You in?"

"Yes," said Gail, decisively. "I'm in."

"Excellent," said Martha. "I just need your full name and address and I'll start the ball rolling this afternoon. The company documentation should be ready for your signatures on Monday, all you two need to do is decide who to have as the third share holder and then it'll be operational."

"Cool," said Gail, "I'll just write my address down for you."

"You're living in Kinglake?" I said in surprise when I saw her writing her address. "I thought you were in Ivanhoe?"

"That was when I was at uni," she said. "I've had to move back with mum and dad since I can't afford the rent."

"But that's going to be a hell of a drive every day," I said. "We can do some of this design work over the net but you're going to have to be here a lot as well."

“What else can I do?” she asked then grinned. “I applied for a job but you turned me down.”

“Oooh, nasty,” I said.

“If I can interrupt,” said Martha.

“Sure,” I said.

“Gail, if you could give me an invoice for the sale of your design I can get that put through the books as soon as the company is incorporated which will copyright it immediately,” she said.

“Oh, an invoice,” said Gail worriedly. “Umm, how much should I charge?”

“That's up to you,” said Martha.

“Oh gosh, I don't know,” she said. “Penny?”

“Make it \$2000,” I said, “and I'll loan the company \$2000 immediately to cover it. That way Gail can have some cash to find somewhere closer to live until we work out some sort of paid job for her.”

“Two thousand dollars?” said Gail, “but ...”

“You're right,” I said. “That doesn't seem enough. Make it five grand.”

“Five?” said Gail. “Are you serious?”

“I think if we're going to have a productive working relationship you're going to have to learn to take me seriously,” I said seriously.

“You filled that apprenticeship position, didn't you?” asked Martha.

“Yes,” I said. “Rufus, he starts on Monday.”

“Well, why don't you employ Gail as a consultant for this specific development project,” said Martha. “We can sort something else when

things are up and running.”

“Actually, that's not a bad idea,” I said ruminating. “Hey, do you mind sharing a house with someone else?”

“No,” said Gail. “I was sharing all the time I was at uni. It would be nice to have a place of my own but, you know.”

“Well, I don't know if you'd be interested,” I said, “but I own an investment property here in Dandy and my tenant is struggling to pay the rent. She's a single mum, the same age as you and she's all alone and looking for someone to share. Would you be interested?”

“Sure,” said Gail. “It would make things a lot easier. Is she a student as well?”

“No,” I said, “but that shouldn't matter. I'll call her and give her your number. She may have found someone but if she hasn't I'll suggest she calls you and you can have a chat. See how it goes. Her name's Sarah, by the way.”

“That would be so cool,” said Gail. “Wow, my own company and a place to live, awesome!”

“And a job,” I said drily. “This design of yours had better be worth it.”

“Would you be doing all this for me if it wasn't?” she asked.

“I'll, umm, leave you two to it,” said Martha, getting up.

“Thanks for your help, Martha,” I said. “We appreciate it.”

“You're welcome,” she said.

“So, umm, what do we do now?” asked Gail after she'd gone.

“Hang on a minute,” I said and got up.

“Kasey, is there anything in that book of yours about being a power PA about not forgetting things?” I asked, putting my head around the

door.

Kasey looked up from her computer. "Sure," she said. "It's one of the first things they talk about."

"OK," I said. "And have you forgotten anything?"

"I don't think so," she said, looking around at the things on her desk then at her notepad. "Have I?"

"I'm in a meeting with a potential business partner," I said, "and we're getting a little dry."

Kasey stared at me for a few seconds then remembered.

"Oh shit," she cried, "I'm so sorry! I was washing up the cups and the frigging phone rang and, oh my god, I'm so sorry. I'll do them right away. Two coffees, wasn't it?"

"Bit late for that," I said. "Martha's gone now. One coffee and a juice, OK."

"Right away," said Kasey, leaping up.

"One other thing," I said, trying to look serious.

"Oh god, what have I done?" cried Kasey, looking flustered.

"I'm just guessing here," I said, "but I'm thinking your book says it's probably not a good idea for the power behind the throne to say things like 'frigging' to the throne itself, if you know what I mean."

"Oh fuck," she said. "Sorry."

"That's much better," I said and shut the door.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Gail.

"Kasey," I said. "She just makes me laugh, that's all."

“Yes, she was always a character,” said Gail.

“You know each other?” I asked, startled.

“We were at school together,” said Gail. “Well, not really together, she was three years ahead of me.”

“OK,” I said. “So you probably didn't know each other too well then.”

“We bumped into each other a few times,” said Gail.

“You know,” I said, not really listening. “Once the company has been formed and bought your design, you should rescind the non disclosure agreement. We'll set up a non disclosure clause in the company's terms and conditions just to be on the safe side, but it'll be a lot easier if we can talk to people in this company. We'll need to get Chris and Sonya in Purchasing involved very quickly to source materials and it would be a good idea to get Yu Yang's input on the designs and her assistant Benjy can do the technical drawings. It's part of their contracts not to divulge any information given to Dorchester's.”

“If you say so,” said Gail. “To be honest, I'm suffering from overload at the moment. I came here to talk some more about my design and hoping that we'd be able to start thinking about maybe putting it into production and here I am with shares in my own company. Jesus, Guichard-Dorchester Pty Ltd, this is, like, so far out!”

Kasey came in with our drinks and gave Gail a less than professional look. Gail ignored her.

“Thanks, Kasey,” I said, my eyes narrowing.

“Bit of antipathy there,” I thought. “Still, Gail won't have much to do with Kasey and if this becomes a success she can get her own PA.”

“Hey,” I said as a brilliant idea hit me. “I've just had an idea for the third shareholder. Are you busy over the weekend?”

“Who?” she asked, “no, why?”

“This man I know,” I said. “I’ll give him a ring and see what he says. If he’s up for it I’ll take you to meet him over the weekend. He’s a bit of a weird kind of person but he’s totally independent. You’ll, ahh, ... hmmm.”

I was going to say, 'you’ll love him', but there was a more than even chance she wouldn't. I wasn't even sure myself why I thought it was a good idea.

Chapter Twenty Six

“Well howdy pardner,” came Darrell's voice when I answered the phone on Sunday evening.

“That's a really horrible fake accent,” I said, still feeling slightly numb. “Hey, I wasn't expecting you to ring for another week or so. How's it going?”

As chance would have it, the day after Darrell and I had had the minor row about the family meeting in the middle of the week Darrell and I were supposed to have gone away, Max had phoned. Max and another friend, Joey, were supposed to be spending Christmas on a Dude Ranch vacation in Nevada, riding horses, herding steers, camping and otherwise pretending to be Wild West cowboys. Joey had got drunk and fallen down some stairs and broken his leg and couldn't go. Would Darrell like to go in his place? Darrell had jumped at the opportunity, paid for the airline booking name change and packed most of his camera equipment and a clean pair of jeans and waved goodbye. Being a kind soul I'd driven him to Tullamarine Airport. After their week as Dudes the two of them were going hiking in the Rockies for another week, assuming they could still walk after riding horses.

“It's been awesome,” he said, his voice as clear as a whistle despite him being 13,000km away although there was a slight lag. “We're back at the Homestead and we're off to Lake Tahoe in the morning to start hiking. I've got some incredible photos already.”

“I'm looking forward to seeing them,” I said, wondering just how incredible a picture of some pretend Dudes around a campfire would be. “You will be careful of grizzly bears, won't you?”

“The dudes here say there aren't any grizzlies in Nevada,” he said cheerfully, “just some black bears.”

“Oh that's all right then,” I said slightly sarcastically. “No one's ever been hurt by a black bear.”

“Apparently the thing you have to watch out for here is rattlesnakes,”

he said. "There are five different species of rattlesnake here and they're all poisonous. I'm hoping to get some nice photos of some, especially a diamondback."

"Maybe you could publish a photo-essay on the stages of death from rattlesnake bite," I said.

"I don't think Max would hold still long enough," he said. "Anything exciting happened there?"

"Gramps had a heart attack," I said and the phone went silent.

"Oh for god's sake," he said after a moment or two. "Why did you let me rabbit on about Nevada? Is he OK? When did it happen? How're you holding up?"

"It happened yesterday afternoon," I said. "He was doing some gardening out the front of his place and his neighbour saw him fall over. When he didn't get back up again the neighbour went to investigate and called an ambulance. They took him to Monash hospital but he seems to be over the worst of it. Mum rang earlier. They're talking about moving him out of intensive care some time on Monday morning to one of the wards. I should be able to visit him tomorrow or Tuesday at the latest."

"Oh that's good news," said Darrell. "But how are you? And your mum?"

"I'm still in a bit in shock," I said, "but I'm holding up OK. Mum's been with him since he went into hospital. She spent the night there although she's promised me she'll go home this evening. I'm going round to hers as soon as she lets me know when she leaves."

"Monash is a great hospital," said Darrell. "Umm, it's midnight here so everything's shut down but first thing in the morning I'll cancel the rest of the trip and catch a plane back. I should be back sometime Tuesday afternoon."

"Don't be silly," I said. "There's nothing you can do here and Max will think he's jinxed if you crash out on him as well. Gramps is going to

be fine, the doctor said that if he survives the first forty eight hours he should be all right and he's a lot better already and it's only been twenty four hours."

I could hear some muffled voices in the background.

"Max says he doesn't feel jinxed and that he'll come back too," reported Darrell.

"Seriously," I said. "Enjoy your trip. Gramps is 81 and he's had a good innings. Stay there and take some great photos. I'm sure he'd love to see them when you get back, you know how much he loves snakes and he'll be so jealous you've actually seen a rattlesnake."

"Well, yeah," said Darrell with a chuckle. "He does so, doesn't he. You remember that time when he found that copperhead and brought it over to show us?"

"Oh god, don't remind me," I said shuddering. "It wrapped itself around his arm, ugh."

"So you don't want me to come back?" he asked.

"Of course I want you to come back," I said. "Just you don't need to come back right now, come back next weekend, like you're supposed to."

"You're sure?" he said.

It occurred to me that maybe he wanted me to tell him to break his trip and come back immediately but I really couldn't be bothered with him right now.

"I'm sure," I said, "only when you do come back, come back alive, OK? Not riddled with snake bites or torn apart by grizzlies."

"I won't," he said, "umm, I'll be out of range for the next few days but if anything happens text me and I'll get it as soon as we're back in range, OK?"

“Sure,” I said. “Have a great trip.”

“I’ll call you when we get a signal again,” he said. “Umm, OK.”

“That’s great,” I said. “Hey, someone’s trying to ring me so it’s probably mum. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye.”

“Bye hon,” he said and we hung up.

No one was trying to ring me. I just needed to end the call and get back to fretting about Gramps in peace.

* * *

“Hey mum,” I whispered, when I got to the hospital on Monday afternoon. She looked exhausted.

“Hello, Penny,” she whispered back, looking up from her chair beside Gramps’ bed. “He’s asleep.”

He looked very small and frail, wrapped in white bed clothes in that large hospital bed with a bundle of wires trailing away from his chest. Not the big powerful man I remembered from my childhood. A machine beside the bed showed his heart beating regularly.

“They brought him to this ward a few hours ago,” she whispered.

“How’s he doing?” I whispered, kneeling beside her. There was only the one chair and I was afraid to sit on the bed.

“They said he’s doing well,” she whispered. “He’ll probably sleep for a long time. They said most people do after a heart attack.”

“Did you get any sleep last night?” I asked.

“A little,” she said. “I’m feeling so much better now he’s out of intensive care.”

“Why don’t you go home?” I asked. “I’m here now and I’ll sit with him until Kevin gets here after tonight’s performance.”

“No, I should stay here,” she said.

“Come on, mum,” I said, reaching out to take her hand. “He’ll be fine, and I’ll be here when he wakes up. You really need to get some sleep, you look exhausted. Did you drive here?”

“Umm, no I got a taxi,” she said, vaguely.

“Good thinking,” I replied gently. “Look, I’ll call for a taxi to take you home. Kev will be here most of the night so you come back first thing in the morning, OK.”

“You can’t use a phone in here,” she said.

“There’s a cafeteria on the floor below,” I said. “Come on, let’s get some coffee and call from there.”

I stood up and gently pulled her hand and, surprisingly, she slowly stood up as well. We got some coffee and I made her eat a sandwich while I called for a taxi. We didn’t say much, just sat in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. The taxi arrived after a while and I took mum down to meet it. She gave me a long, desperate hug before she got in.

Back in Gramps’ room, there was another bed in it but it wasn’t occupied. I sat and watched him for a while. His breathing was slow and steady and every now and then he stirred and muttered something but didn’t wake. Periodically a nurse would come in and check various things then go away again.

“I should have brought a book,” I thought after a couple of hours.

There was a TV hanging over the foot of the bed but I didn’t want to wake him and I rarely watch TV anyway. Another hour or more passed, slowly. A different nurse came in and asked me if I wanted a cup of tea. I thanked her and declined and went and got a bottle of apple juice from the cafeteria. He was still asleep when I got back.

I was beginning to doze off when I became aware his eyes were open and he was staring at me.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, a little weakly.

“Oh, you're awake,” I said, sitting up and leaning forward.”

“Ohhh, it's you,” he said. “Hello. Bit of a bugger, this, isn't it.”

“Well, yes,” I said, since I could hardly deny it. “How are you feeling?”

“Empty,” he said, “weak as a kitten and just drained.”

“It's been a hell of a shock to your system,” I said, wondering if he knew he'd had a heart attack.

“Don't I know it,” he said, following the line of cabling with his eyes. “Damned ticker. Still it was going to give out sooner or later. God, I'm thirsty.”

“There's some water here,” I said and helped him drink some from a bottle with a nozzle.

“Thanks,” he said, settling back. “I was having a funny old dream, then I woke up and saw you there. I thought you were someone else at first.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Who did you think I was? Mum?”

“Domenica,” he said.

“Domenica?” I asked, “who's she? One of the nurses?”

“Just someone I used to know,” he said, “a long time ago. Can I have some more water?”

I helped him drink some more water then he settled back again. He seemed a little stronger and his eyes swept the room. I wondered who Domenica was. For sure, it wasn't Gran's name.

“So how's the company?” he asked.

We'd never had that much to talk about. He'd largely ignored me and

Kevin when we were young and talked mainly about engineering as I made my way through university. Since I'd taken over when dad died, the company was our primary topic of conversation since it was about the only thing we had in common. Hopefully he'd be asleep again when Kevin arrived as Gramps wasn't the world's biggest fan of ballet.

"Oh getting by," I said then, for want of anything better to say I added, "I'm looking at expanding when we get the insurance money through."

"Are you taking up that deal from, umm, those people?" he asked.

I noticed his hands gripping his bedsheets to hide their trembling. Gramps had never liked his weaknesses to be visible.

"McNaughton's?" I asked. "Yes, I'm meeting them again on Friday. We'll probably settle the contract then."

"That's good," he said, his eyes closing. "Need the security, see."

He dozed off for a few minutes then his eyes flashed open again.

"So you're expanding," he said. "That's good. Should never be afraid to expand when the time's right. So new machinery, is it?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm planning to bring in some more flexibility so that the McNaughton's deal won't be too limiting."

"Good, good," he said, nodding. "Flexibility, good."

We sat in silence for a while.

"I'm also getting involved in a new project," I said when the silence began to hang. I think I also wanted some sign of approval from him, although this probably wasn't the best time to talk about it.

"A new project," he said. "Very good, very good, profitable is it?"

"There won't be any profit," I said. "It's a humanitarian project, building shelters for refugees."

He started to cough so I helped him drink some more water.

“Looks like he doesn't approve,” I thought sadly. “I hope he doesn't start shouting.”

He leaned back against his pillows then said viciously. “I feel so bloody helpless!” and tried to bang his fist on the bed. It was a bit feeble but he managed to dislodge one of the wires going to his chest and an alarm started beeping loudly.

“Oh shit,” I said, leaping up and grabbing the loose cable. “This looks important!”

I pulled back the bed sheet to try to find where the cable went just as a nurse came bustling in the door. She gave me a very suspicious look and snatched the cable from my hand.

“He dislodged it,” I said. “I was trying to put it back.”

“Please do not touch the equipment,” she said, clipping the cable back onto a pad glued to the side of his chest. “Relative are you?”

“Yes, I'm his grand-daughter,” I said.

She nodded and studied the monitoring equipment.

“That all looks fine,” she said, then reminded me not to touch the equipment again before reluctantly leaving the room.

“She thinks you tried to kill me,” said Gramps gleefully. “Silly old bitch.”

“Hey, don't call her that,” I said. “She cares about you.”

“I suppose,” he said then paused. “Domenica was a refugee.”

“Who was she?” I asked, hoping she hadn't been someone Gramps had had an affair with while Gran was still alive.

“Girl I used to know,” he said gruffly. “Nice girl, didn't speak much

English though.”

“Where did you meet her?” I asked.

“At school,” he said closing his eyes again. “We were, ohh, twelve or thirteen, something like that. The teacher said she was from Poo-Land which made us all laugh. Me mate Johnny said it must be a shit place which was why she’d come to Australia. It was a long time before I found out Poland was a country.”

“So this was, what, 1952?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “She must have been one of them refugees from Eastern Europe after the war. She didn’t have any parents.”

“Where did she live, then?” I asked. “If she was only twelve.”

“She was at the refugee camp in Bonegilla,” he said. “That’s up near Wodonga.”

“How come she went to a school in Melbourne then?” I asked, puzzled. “That’s, what, 300km away.”

“Nah, the school was in Wodonga,” he said. “That’s where I was born.”

“I never knew that,” I said in surprise. “I always thought you were from Melbourne.”

“I came down to Melbourne after I left school,” he said. “Wodonga was a nasty little country town back then so I kept it quiet, like. City folk looked down on us country folk.”

Yet another nurse came in at that point carrying a small tray of food. She fussed around with one of those small tables on wheels that fit over the bed then left the tray on it for him.

“I can’t eat nothing,” he said after looking briefly at it and tried to push the table away. He didn’t have the strength.

“You need to eat,” I said. “Look, it’s a nice piece of fish.”

Actually it looked to be a nasty piece of fish, in a thin, unappetising white sauce with steamed broccoli. He ignored me.

“Well, at least eat the jelly,” I said.

He groaned and picked up the plastic spoon and grudgingly ate it while I watched.

“Happy now?” he asked, dropping the spoon in the table.

“Try a little of the fish,” I said, picking up a sliver with the plastic fork and offering it to him. He just glowered sulkily at me.

“Eat the fish and I won't make you eat the broccoli,” I said, keeping the fork in front of his mouth.

He gave me the filthiest look I'd ever seen but slowly opened his mouth. It took a while but he ate all of the fish, very deliberately chewing every mouthful thoroughly to emphasise his distaste. Despite his weakened body, his will was as strong as ever and I found the whole thing exhausting.

“Oh, aren't you a good boy!” said the nurse brightly when she came back in and saw the tray. She recoiled slightly when she saw the look he gave her then regathered herself. “But we must eat our vegetables, mustn't we!”

“We?” he said. “You fucking eat them then.”

“I'm not the one who's had a heart attack,” she said sweetly and gave me a look that clearly said how much she appreciated cantankerous old men at the end of her shift. I had to smile.

“Gramps appreciated the fish,” I said. “He thought it was very nice.”

“I'm sure Robert did,” said the nurse. “Now here's tomorrow's menu. Make your selections and I'll be back shortly to collect it.”

She bustled out efficiently, her starched uniform rasping as she walked.

“Here, you do it,” said Gramps, “I really can't be bothered but she'll only nag. She's that type.”

“It's her job,” I said. “Just like when you ran the company, you had to tell people what to do.”

He curled his lip so I ordered him some more steamed broccoli to go with his chicken the next day.

“So what happened to Domenica?” I asked, wondering if I was heartless enough to order him muesli for breakfast.

“Buggered if I know,” he said. “I think she liked me but we both left school and went our separate ways.”

That seemed sad so I ordered him wholemeal toast and Vegemite instead, since he liked Vegemite.

“Didn't you ever ask her out?” I asked.

“Took her to the pictures once,” he said, sipping some water from the bottle unaided. “She didn't like it and ran out half way through.”

“Oh god,” I said. “What movie did you take her to? A horror?”

“From Here To Eternity,” he said, closing his eyes again. “Me mate Johnny said it was a romance and I'm not denying that's what I had in mind, being 15 and all.”

“From Here To Eternity?” I said. “Isn't that a war film?”

“Yup,” he said. “It wasn't until I was in my thirties that I realised that that wasn't really the best film to take a refugee girl to see, not one who'd lost both her parents when Poland was under German occupation, not if I wanted a cuddle, like.”

“Well, no,” I said.

“Ah well,” he said, “all water under the bridge now. So what's this project you're getting involved in?”

I started to explain about Gail's design for modular emergency shelters for refugees and how I wanted Dorchester's to be involved in making them, despite there not being any apparent profit unless I could find a commercial market for them as well. He paid attention for a while, half-heartedly grumbling about the absence of profit, then dozed off. He was sound asleep when Kevin arrived, fresh from an almost half sold out performance of Rooble And Jamilah, a contemporary experimental ballet reinterpreting Shakespeare's Romeo And Juliet against a backdrop of the Somali Civil War. Sadly, unlike the Montagues and Capulets, the latest phase of Somali belligerents, the Somali Government backed by the USA and Al Qaeda backed by Islamic State, are unlikely to be reconciled by the deaths of two star crossed lovers.

Chapter Twenty Seven

“How's your grandfather?” asked Gail a couple of days later when I picked her up in Kinglake.

“He seems to be on the mend,” I said. “He should be out of hospital by the weekend.”

“Does he live alone?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “but my mum is taking him in for a couple of weeks until he's able to look after himself. Apparently people who've had a heart attack are a bit dodderly on their feet for a while afterwards. Anyway, how are you going finding somewhere to live?”

“I had a talk with Sarah, your tenant,” she said, “on the phone. I'm going round there at the weekend to meet her and see the place.”

“It'll be good if you like it,” I said. “I really ought to get out this way more often, Kinglake looks like a really nice place, especially this side with that awesome view over the Yarra Valley and Melbourne.”

“Oh, you should have seen it back when the bushfire hit,” said Gail. “It's all green again now but back then the place was almost destroyed. We lost our house.”

“You mean Black Friday?” I said.

“Black Saturday,” she replied. “I was only ten or eleven, it was really scary when dad made us get in the car and leave everything behind. The fires were at the end of the garden. We nearly left Ossie, my cat behind.”

“It must have been bad,” I said.

“We came back after two or three days,” she said, quietly. “All the trees were just black stumps, some were still smouldering. Our house was just a fireplace and a pile of burnt out rubble. Mum couldn't stop crying. Everything was gone, all her family photos, our clothes, dad's pool table, everything.”

“Jesus,” I said, unable to really imagine what it had been like.

“I didn't mind at first,” she said. “I was just happy my homework had been burnt and the school was gone. I thought it was pretty cool, until we started to drive back to the refuge.”

I glanced over but didn't say anything. She was staring fixedly out of the windscreen, scraping the nail of her thumb with her other hand unconsciously.

“We were going out of town, the other side,” she said. “And we came up to where my friend Bessie lived with her mum and dad and their car was in the driveway, well half in the driveway and half on the road, all burnt and twisted and dad pulled over to see what state their house was in and we saw, Jesus, we saw their burnt bodies still in the car.”

I reached over and grabbed her hand but she shook it off.

“The emergency crews hadn't got to that side of town then,” she said. “Some policemen came by and made us turn around and go back the way we'd come. Just as well, really.”

“Why?” I asked.

“That side of town was the worst hit,” she said matter of factly. “I went to thirteen funerals, some were friends, some relatives of friends, a couple of my teachers. It ... was an experience.”

I had no idea what to say so I said nothing and we drove on in silence for a while.

“Do you know what I remember most?” she said, quite suddenly. “Afterwards, when we came back, it was like looking at an old black and white photograph. Everything was just shades of grey, there was no colour. Everything that wasn't burnt was covered in soot and ash, even the shop windows.”

“How did you cope with it?” I asked.

“I thought I was strong,” she said. “I had a few bad dreams for a week

or so but I got over it. Dad had bad dreams for a lot longer and mum had to see a doctor and was on anti-depressants for a couple of years. We nearly moved to Melbourne but we decided to stay here and rebuild, you know, the house, our lives and everything. Turned out I wasn't strong though. Three or four years afterwards my grades started going to shit and I was skipping school and, well, you don't need to know but I turned into a really nasty little shit. I got so bad the School Principal referred me to a psychiatrist and I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Do you mind me telling you all this?"

"Umm, no, not at all," I said. Well, what else can you say? Yes, I do mind, shut up immediately?

"I thought you ought to know, seeing as how we're going to be working together," she said, glancing over at me. "Me being a fruit-cake and all."

"You're not a fruit-cake," I said. "You just had a really bad experience, that's all."

"Yeah, that's what the psychiatrist said," said Gail. "I spend a couple of months in one on one sessions with him then he put me into a mindfulness group and that went on for, like six months or something. It seemed to work since I turned things round and my grades and stuff went back up again. Good enough to get me into uni, anyway. Still, it was that mindfulness group that got me started thinking I was a refugee, you know, what with losing my home and my friends and stuff, I don't know, maybe it made it seem more romantic or something, maybe a bit glamorous, like 'I survived Black Saturday!'. Anyway, it wasn't until a few years later that I started to read and hear about what real refugees suffer that I managed to get it all into proportion. Like, I mean, it wasn't as though I saw any of my friends raped and butchered in front of me, was it? There was just a nasty fire and they had the bad luck to get caught in it. Like a car crash or something, no one was doing it because they hated them or anything and there were so many people trying to help us afterwards, complete strangers giving us handouts and government people everywhere. Dad said even the insurance company paid up quickly. Not like real refugees who go through total shit then get tossed from one place to

another with no one giving a damn about them, just ripping them off and moving them on. Hey, I'm sorry, I was wanting to tell you I had a bad experience and went through a bit of counselling so you'd know. I didn't mean for it to get this heavy."

"No," I said, "I'm glad you told me. It was a brave thing to do."

"If I'd been any good at science I would have been a doctor or something," she said. "I did OK but nowhere near good enough to get into medical college which is why I went into design. I'm good at seeing things and drawing them, so that's what I did."

"It does explain why you don't seem to care about making money out of this," I said.

"Yeah," she said with a laugh. "I really don't care about that. But you know what? Something I discovered when I was trying to get companies interested in my design is that the world doesn't work the way I think it should work. Everything seems to be ruled by money and if they aren't going to make any money out of it then they won't bother, no matter how much people are suffering."

"Yeah," I said, "But there are a lot of people who don't think that way. That's why there's the UN, UNICEF, Oxfam, the Red Cross, Mercy Corps, World Vision, ShelterBox, the Salvation Army and a whole bunch of others. They're all trying to make the world a better place."

"You missed out an important one," she said.

"That's because there are hundreds," I said. "Those were just some of the big ones, that's all. Who were you thinking of?"

"You," she said.

"Oh don't be absurd," I said. "I'm not a charity. I run a business for profit, just like all the others you've approached."

"Yes, you run a business," she said, "but not like the others. They dismissed my design out of hand as soon as they realised there wasn't any money in it for them. You didn't. You've been trying to find ways

of producing my design and still meet your other responsibilities. Jesus, you're not just going to make these shelters as cheaply as possible but you're trying to help your shareholders and the people at your factory. You're even trying to find a way to give me a job when you could just take the design and use it without me."

"What do you mean?" I said, surprised. "You're an integral part of this. You've got the concept, the ideas, I'm just the one who might be able to make them real."

"No you're not," she said. "I'm very naive about business, you could easily have manipulated me into giving you control of Guichard-Dorchester but instead you're trying to make it fair. You could easily have talked me into making Martha be the third person, or some lawyer who'll do what you want, but instead you're taking me to see someone you think will be completely unbiased and independent."

"Why do you think he isn't under my thumb?" I asked, intrigued.

She laughed. "You just wouldn't do that," she said. "You wouldn't go to all this trouble."

"Hey, underneath this gentle, loveable facade I'm another ruthless tycoon," I said.

"Oh balls," said Gail. "Sarah told me what you did for her. Ruthless landlords don't do that sort of thing. So what's he like, anyway?"

"What's who like?" I asked, confused by both the strange opinion she had of me and the sudden change of topic.

"This man we're going to see, Richard thingy," she said.

"Ohh," I said. "He's, umm, well, umm, it rather difficult to pin down really. His wife's nice though, even if he is a bit, well, strange. I don't know him that well but I think he's strange deliberately, like there's almost a calculation behind his strangeness. As though he knows what he's expected to do then does the opposite for some reason known only to himself. He sent me an email a while back, asking for a job and when he turned up for the interview he said he didn't want a job

and asked me why I tried to always do what my father would have wanted me to do. That isn't normal, is it?"

"You're asking the wrong person," she said. "I went to Art college. He sounds just like some of my professors, you know, the type who'll accidentally spill their lunch on a napkin then try to convince you that the result is Art whose meaning depends on your own perceptions and if it doesn't move you in unpredictable ways it's because you don't have the artistic sensibilities. That's if they even use a napkin which a lot don't as they see it as an attempt to regiment them through conformity to a outmoded social norm."

"Actually, that does sound a little like Richard," I said, laughing. "Maybe he's a retired Art professor."

* * *

Predictably there was no answer to my knock on the door, other than the dogs going insane. I felt free to knock because the Do Not Knock sign had fallen off.

"We'll go round the back," I said. "I don't think he likes answering the door and his van's here."

We went round the side of the house and down through the car port into the back garden. Richard wasn't doing his Tai Chi. This time he was bent over a bush of some description with his ear pressed against the fence where the neighbour's garage was.

"Wow," said Gail, looking round. "These are just fabulous!"

"What are?" I said.

"These sculptures," she said. "Look at that one, it looks almost like something from Easter Island, ohh, and look at that one over there, that strange deformed shape."

"Oh yeah," I said, "I didn't notice them last time."

"Shhhh!" hissed Richard, waving his hand angrily at me.

“Sorry,” I whispered back.

“Is that ...?” whispered Gail.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Why are we whispering?”

“You started it,” she said. “He seems busy, I’m going to look at the sculptures.”

“Hmph,” snorted Richard, standing up. He was naked, apart from a small towel wrapped tightly around his waist. The towel was decorated with surfboards.

“Umm, are we interrupting something?” I asked.

“Judy thinks you’re after my body,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, blinking rapidly, not having a clue how to respond.

“Well, here it is,” he said, giving me a twirl. “Not really worth the drive, is it?”

“Oh I don’t know,” said Gail. “There is a beauty in dereliction, like an ancient Greek temple now in ruins.”

“I don’t know who you are,” said Richard, turning to look at her. “But I have a feeling I’m going to like you.”

“She a friend of mine,” I said. “I did tell you I was bringing her.”

“Did you?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “Now that you mention it, I seem to remember you did. What’s your name?”

“Gail Guichard,” she said holding out her hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Any relation to that photographer?” he asked, reaching out to shake hands then snatching his hand back to keep the towel in place. “Lucinda? Patricia? Something like that.”

“No, 'fraid not,” she said. “Although I am pretty good with my phone camera. Who did these sculptures?”

“Judy, my wife,” he said. “It's her hobby.”

“They're very good,” said Gail. “What does that one represent?”

“An alien,” he said. “Or more strictly her imagination of an alien, since she's never actually seen one as far as I know. Come inside.”

“There's a definite Polynesian element to these sculptures,” said Gail, following Richard inside. I brought up the rear, although the dogs seemed pleased to see me. “Where did she study?”

“Oh she never studied sculpture,” he said, “apart from a day with a man she met at the Bendigo Market. She just looks at the block of limestone until she sees what's inside then cuts away the rest. She's very clever. Can I offer you a hot beverage or would you prefer something cold?”

“Some water would be nice,” said Gail.

“I've got some lemonade,” he said. “It's in the fridge.”

“Oh, that would be nice,” said Gail.

“Same for me,” I said, reminding him I was there too.

He beamed genially.

“Let's go into the lounge,” he said after serving up some drinks. “And you can tell me why you can't stay away.”

He sat in his chair in the lounge while Gail and I sat on the couch.

“Umm,” I said, realising he wasn't wearing anything under the towel. “Umm, the towel ...”

“Oh god, I'm sorry,” he said leaping up and proving the worth of Tai Chi. “I'm not used to visitors. Back in a moment.”

Gail managed to refrain from giggling until he'd left the room.

"I think he likes you," I whispered which made her giggle more.

"I read something the other day," he said, returning in a very ordinary pair of sand coloured chinos and a black shirt with roses on it. "Made me think of you. I'll remember what it was in a minute."

"Why were you listening to the fence?" I asked.

"Oh, you noticed?" he said, sitting down.

"We couldn't not notice," I said. "You were pretty obvious."

"Oh dear," he said, looking glum. "And there I was thinking I'd make a good undercover policeman or something."

"Were you spying on your neighbours?" I asked.

He froze and cautiously looked around the room.

"I think they're drug dealers," he whispered hoarsely. "I was trying to hear what they get up to in the garage."

"Why do you think they're drug dealers?" asked Gail.

"They get a lot of visitors who don't stay long," he said. "Anyway, I'm keeping a log but don't tell anyone, OK."

"Maybe they're just sociable," I said. "Some people are."

"Oh probably," he said. "But it's more fun to imagine they run a crime syndicate from this sleepy little street. Do you know where I can get a mobile phone interceptor?"

"I think you can get them through the dark web," said Gail.

"Oh really?" he said, perking up and looking interested. "I've heard of that. Do you know how to access it?"

“Not really,” she said, “although I know someone who does.”

“Do you think you could get one for me?” he asked.

“Probably,” she said, “but it wouldn't be a good idea. They're illegal and if your neighbours are drug dealers and you reported them you'd get into trouble too.”

“Well, there is that,” he said looking disappointed. “I don't suppose Judy would approve either.”

I got the impression he was more concerned about Judy's non-approval than whether or not these devices were legal.

“Oh well,” he said, leaning back and reaching for his tobacco. “One door opens, another closes.”

“It's the other way around,” I said. “A door closes and another opens.”

“What difference does it make?” he asked, licking the edge of his cigarette paper.

“A door closes and another opens means that when an opportunity disappears another come along,” I said. “Saying the other way around doesn't really mean anything.”

“Surely it means that if you follow one opportunity you're closing off the options for other opportunities?” he asked. “You know, committing resources and so on.”

“Well, I suppose,” I said. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Ah well,” he said then paused to light his cigarette. “So are you here to open a door or close one? And who for?”

“Well, I just wanted you to meet Gail,” I said, giving Gail a questioning look. She nodded.

“How nice,” he said, “although you do realise I'm married, and she is rather young.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Actually Gail and I are setting up a company and we were hoping you'd be a shareholder with us.”

“Oh, I never invest in shares,” he said. “Far too risky.”

“It's not like that,” I said. “This is a non profit company and we need someone to hold just one share so that if Gail and I disagree about something, you would carry the deciding vote but most of the time, of course, we'd agree so you wouldn't need to be involved.”

“Ahh,” he said. “You want me to be a power broker.”

“Well, I suppose, if you want to look at it that way,” I said. “Don't you want to know more about it?”

“Can you wait a bit before explaining?” he asked. “Judy will be back any minute and it'll save you explaining it again. I'm certainly not going to invest in anything without her approval.”

“You won't be investing anything,” I said, “well, \$1 and I'll pay that for you, if you like.”

He frowned. “It's not anything fraudulent, is it? One of these Ponzi schemes or something?”

“Of course not,” I said, wondering why the conversation was going in a completely different direction to any of the ways I'd expected.

“Oh that's all right then,” he said. “Judy'll be back in a minute. Anyway, I've remembered what I wanted to tell you.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“OK,” I said, “what did you want to tell me?”

“You've heard of the World Health Organisation?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“They issued a bulletin last Sunday,” he said. “Apparently there's an outbreak of an unknown respiratory disease in China, a place called Wuhan which is inland from Beijing.”

“OK,” I said. “So?”

“It's probably nothing,” he said, “but I remembered you saying you were getting a lot of competition from China with your sheet metal work, so if this disease does turn into something you may find in a few months that your competitors start to drop away.”

“What, you mean like an epidemic?” asked Gail.

“Yes,” he said. “They do get them from time to time in Asia. In fact I was reading about a recent discovery, ohh, before Christmas anyway, about a village in Northern China where they found a house with over a hundred dead bodies from some epidemic stuffed inside.”

“Jesus,” I said, “I didn't see that in the papers.”

“Oh, you wouldn't have done,” said Richard. “It was five thousand years ago, a place called Hamin Mangha.”

“Well, OK,” I said, feeling a little confused. “But why are you telling me about this WHO thing? Surely it's just a minor outbreak?”

“It is at the moment,” he said, “but these things sometimes get worse. Anyway, it's an example of your opening and closing doors. If you prepare for the possibility of an epidemic then you might well find yourself at an advantage when it happens. You know, if one of your Chinese competitors stops supplies you can step in and get a new customer because your Australian competitors aren't prepared.”

“Well, perhaps,” I said. “It’s a big if though isn’t it.”

“It was just a thought,” he said. “I’m not pushing an agenda, just trying to be helpful.”

“Actually,” I said, thinking out loud, “it’s worth thinking about. I’ve got some new machinery coming in the next month or two so there’ll be some extra capacity for a while. It certainly wouldn’t hurt to let it be known we have that capacity so if a foreign supplier fails to deliver we could be available to step in.”

“Aha, I think that’s Judy now,” he said, as he and both dogs cocked their heads. “I’ll make her coffee. Are you sure neither of you wants any?”

“Not for me, thanks,” said Gail.

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind,” I said absently. If I ordered machines with flexible capabilities it wouldn’t hurt to let the market know when we had spare capacity. It would certainly be worth getting Brian, my head sales honcho to think about. We could even detail spare future capacities on our website. Even if it didn’t generate much extra business directly, it could generate a fair amount of goodwill.

“Of course, there is a downside,” he said, getting up. “If it turns into an epidemic, it could easily turn into a pandemic and affect Australia directly. Do you have any contingency plans for when half your workforce is off sick?”

“No,” I said then laughed. “We tend to plan for things after they’ve happened, not before.”

“That’s not good,” he said. “Even if you only spend half an hour planning for the possibility, if it happens it’ll put you streets ahead of those who haven’t planned and have to react in a panic. Back in a moment.”

The dogs went wild as Judy came in. She was looking a little tired, but it was the end of the week.

“Oh, hello,” she said, trying to act brightly and seem pleased to have visitors.

“Hello Judy,” I said. “This is Gail.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Judy.

“I love your sculptures,” said Gail. “You have a real talent.”

“Well, thank you,” said Judy. “It's just a little hobby, though.”

“I'm sure you could sell some,” said Gail. “Have you thought of having an exhibition?”

“Oh I wouldn't want to sell any,” she said. “I like having them here too much.”

“There's your coffee, dear,” said Richard coming in with the coffees. “You were quite wrong, Penny isn't after my body at all, although Gail might be. Apparently she likes ancient Greek ruins.”

“You're not Greek,” said Judy, “although the rest is true.”

“Which means I'm safe,” he said. “Excellent. Incidentally, Penny and Gail want me to invest in a company they're setting up.”

“Oh great,” said Judy, looking dubious. “Are you going to?”

“Not until they've explained to you what it's all about,” he said. “Personally I think they're setting up some sort of elder abuse scheme.”

“Oh for god's sake,” I said and he smiled happily. “Let me explain what this is all about.”

“Oh I couldn't possibly do that,” cried Richard, aghast, when Gail and I had finished explaining. “That would mean taking responsibility and I do so hate being responsible for anything.”

“Actually, that's true,” said Judy, frowning. “He'll give any amount of

advice to anyone just as long as there's no chance of them ever acting on it."

"Are you serious?" I said, suddenly feeling tired. "You mean you're just full of hot air?"

"Most definitely," he said. "And I'm sorry if I gave you any impression to the contrary. All I do is argue for the sake of it."

"But don't you think this is a worthwhile cause?" asked Judy.

"That would make it even more irresponsible to ask me to be responsible," he said.

"But you think it's a worthwhile cause, Judy?" asked Gail. "Don't you."

"Oh yes, definitely," she said.

"So why don't you be our third shareholder?" asked Gail.

"Me?" said Judy in surprise. "I don't know the first thing about engineering."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea," said Richard. "I don't imagine they'll disagree over anything as simple as an engineering point. It'll be something obtuse and probably meaningless like an ethical point. You could explain whatever the problem is to me then make a decision. You are a very responsible person, after all, and you keep me grounded so you shouldn't have any difficulties with these two."

"I like that idea as well," I said. "It won't cost you anything and there won't be any dividends or other payout but you'll be doing something to help the plight of refugees around the world. And don't forget, Gail and I will be in agreement on virtually everything, after we've discussed whatever the issue is."

"Oh god," said Judy, looking a little harassed. "Can I think about it? I've only just got back from work."

"Of course," I said. "Look, why don't we fill in the form and you can

sign it and post it in a day or two if you think it's a good idea and if you don't you can just chuck it in the bin."

"That sounds like a plan," said Richard. "Would you two like to stay for dinner?"

"I'd love to," I said, "but I have to get back to Melbourne. My grandfather is in hospital and I want to visit him tonight."

"Oh dear," said Judy. "Nothing too serious, I hope?"

"He had a heart attack a few days ago," I said, "but he's getting better. He should be out of hospital by the weekend."

"Let's hope so," said Richard. "Nasty unhealthy places, hospitals. Full of sick people."

"Well, yes," I said. "Come on, Gail, let's be off. Thank you both for your time and for taking us seriously. By the way, Richard, you really ought to think about doing some repairs to that garden fence of yours."

"Repairs?" he said looking puzzled. He glanced at Judy. "What's wrong with it? Have you noticed anything?"

"I'm sure you'll find something if you look hard enough," I said. "And if your hand accidentally slips and you unfortunately make a nail hole in the metal side of the neighbour's garage it would be a great shame but it could be years before anyone noticed."

"Well, yes," he said. "I suppose so." He frowned and stared at me.

I smiled happily at him then turned to Gail.

"Do you want to take any photographs of Judy's sculptures?" I asked. "With the camera in your phone?" and I tapped the camera lens in my phone to emphasise the point.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind," she said. "There's one that looks African that I really love."

I saw Richard's frown deepen then clear when he worked out what I was talking about. He picked up his own phone from beside his coffee jar ashtray and started inspecting it.

"Have to be a decent sized nail," he muttered.

Gail and Judy went outside to talk about the statues and Richard followed them to study the side of the neighbour's garage so I loitered by the gate and patted the dogs for a while until Gail was ready to leave.

We were almost at the Calder Highway when I got a call from mum to tell me Gramps had had another heart attack. He'd died barely half an hour previously. Gail was full of concern and hugged me while I cried for a few minutes. We hadn't been especially close but he was still my grand dad and I'd known him all my life.

"You need to get home and be with your mum," said Gail after I was able to start driving again. "Don't take me all the way back to Kinglake. Drop me in Tullamarine, at the airport and I'll get the train. You'll be going past anyway to get to Dandy."

"Are you sure?" I asked, feeling a very strong urge to be with my mum.

"It's not a problem," she said, "I'll get the train then the bus to Kinglake and that way you can cut through Citilink. Don't worry about me."

"Thank you," I said. "It means a lot to me."

Actually if I had been thinking rationally it would have been quicker to go to Dandenong via Kinglake anyway. At that time of day the Monash Highway was a parking lot and I crawled most of the way in first gear, fretting and fuming at all the idiots who were wasting my time by driving home from work.

"Kevin's on his way," said mum after we'd had a long hug. "He's stuck in traffic."

"Yeah, it's a killer tonight," I said then wished I could have bitten my

tongue off.

Mum insisted on cooking a complicated meal for the three of us although none of us felt much like eating. I think it was her way of coping and most of it ended up in the freezer. We spent the rest of the evening talking about Gramps and periodically half-heartedly adding things to the list of what needed to be done and people who needed to be informed. As mum was Gramps' executor she insisted she wanted to do everything and not let me or Kevin do anything.

"It's the last thing I can do for him," she explained. "Just like with your dad, once this is all over there won't be anything else I can do for him."

It was a nice sentiment but mum was, when all was said and done, somewhat inefficient and a bit of a ditherer and I had ended up doing most things when dad had died. She had simply signed things when I put them in front of her, much as she had for dad when dad was alive.

"Did Gramps want to be buried or cremated?" asked Kevin.

"I'm pretty sure he wanted to be buried next to Gran," I said, "at Springvale Botanical Gardens. Which funeral director should we get? How about the one who did Gran's?"

"Yes, they did a very nice ceremony," said mum. "I'll ring them tomorrow. Oh dear, I wonder where I put his Will?"

"It'll be in your papers somewhere," I said. "I'll help you find it tomorrow."

She gazed vacantly around the room for a few moments then got heavily to her feet. "No, I need to find it now."

"OK, mum," I said and we went to dad's old home office where she kept all the paperwork. She had a simple filing system. Everything was in chronological order, with a separate pile for each year. It was effective when you knew roughly the date of what you were looking for. Unfortunately she couldn't remember when Gramps had given her a copy of his Will. We found it eventually, in the pile from seven years

ago.

“Oh god,” I said when I read it through. “This could be a problem.”

“What's wrong?” asked Kevin.

“He left his entire estate to mum and dad,” I said, “with a bit to you and me, but he left his shares in the business to dad and dad died five years ago.”

“Oh,” said Kevin. “Does that matter?”

“Yes,” I said. “If your beneficiary dies before you do something special happens but I don't know what. I've a feeling it goes to the government, like if someone dies with no Will at all, you know, intestate.”

“So you're saying the government will be owning part of our business?” he asked, alarmed. “Don't they get enough in taxes already?”

“I don't know,” I said, staring at the Will. “I can't believe he didn't do another Will after dad died. I suppose we'd better go through all your papers again, mum.”

“Maybe he did another Will but didn't give mum a copy,” said Kevin. “Wouldn't it be better to go through his papers at his house?”

“Good point,” I said. “Actually it would probably be better to talk to his solicitor first. He might know of a more recent Will. Shall I give him a ring in the morning or will you do it, mum?”

“Is it really that urgent, dear,” she asked. “Can't it wait until next week?”

“I suppose,” I said. “But what if his 28% of the business does go to the government or to someone we don't know? For sure he wouldn't have left them to you or me, you know what he thought of women in business.”

"Maybe he left them to me," said Kevin with a short sarcastic laugh.

"Yeah, how likely is that?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said sadly. "He thought less of poofters than women."

"Well, it is only 28%," I said, "so an outsider wouldn't have control but they could be a serious nuisance, especially if we want to do something that needs more than 75% of the votes and they might know lots of legal tricks as well. I'll ring the solicitor myself, mum. This has got me worried."

"If you want, dear," said mum. "Would you like some more tea?"

I didn't sleep well that night. Aside from the death of Gramps, I worried about how an outsider, especially if it turned out to be some anonymous government bureaucrat, would respond to what I was trying to do with Gail and whether or not they would try to block it in some way. Mum and Kevin would probably go along with me if it came to a fight but nothing was guaranteed and if whoever it was was sufficiently persuasive, or just plain scary, mum and Kevin might vote with them, overwhelming my 36%. Guichard-Dorchester would continue to exist but it may not be able to get the shelters at cost or even manufactured in the first place. On the other hand, it could be that the shares had to be sold which could cause a problem for myself and Kevin, if not mum, and could conceivably mean the shares ending up on the open market and possibly even being bought by a competitor. Jesus, even Alan McNaughton might buy them, which was a terrifying thought.

I phoned Dingle, Twitcher & Assoc at 8:59 the following morning.

"Thurlow Dingle," said Thurlow Dingle when the cut-glass woman on reception deigned to put me through. "How may I help you?"

"My name's Penny Dorchester," I said. "I believe you handled my grand father's affairs, Robert Dorchester."

"Oh dear," he said. "Has he died?"

“Excuse me?” I said.

“I do apologise,” said Thurlow. “That was remiss of me and I regret any upset I may have caused you, however temporary. I am, indeed, Mr Robert Dorchester’s solicitor. How may I help you?”

“Well, he has died,” I said. “He died yesterday.”

“May I offer my sincere condolences?” he said.

“Thank you,” I said. “Umm, why did you so quickly assume he had died?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say,” he said. “There is a possibility, however slim, that you may not be his grand daughter.”

“OK,” I said. “Well, he has died and I need to talk to you about his Will so how do we move this forward?”

“Would it be possible for you to attend my office with identification and the Death Certificate?” he asked.

“I’m picking up the Death Certificate from the hospital later today,” I said, “so I could come in to see you late this afternoon.”

“Shall we say four o’clock?” he asked.

“Fine by me,” I said. “When you say identification, do you mean his or mine?”

“Yours,” he said.

“Of course,” I said. “Passport, driver’s licence?”

“Those will be sufficient,” he said.

“Do you need my mother to come in as well?” I asked. “After all, she is his Executor.”

“No, that will not be necessary at this stage,” he said. “All we need to

do is establish the fact of his demise and your credentials.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll see you at four.”

I then phoned the funeral director and they, with practised smoothness, took over all the arrangements for handling Gramps’ body. I set up a meeting with them for the next day to choose the coffin and talk about the funeral. None of us felt in the mood to go round to Gramps’ house to start going through things. It would keep.

It didn’t take more than an hour to find the right person at Monash Hospital to get Gramps’ Death Certificate and since I’d allowed longer, I stopped for a coffee in Noble Park on the way to see Thurlow Dingle. I was nervous so coffee probably wasn’t the best choice but it was sweet and hot. I was sitting by the window looking out over the dubious delights of Railway Parade, with its unromantic view of freight traffic on the Eastlink Freeway in the distance when I got a text message which read “form in po5t> jvdy” which I took to mean that Judy had decided to become our third shareholder. I had a ball of worry in my stomach that wasn’t being dissolved by the coffee and so, feeling that this venture might well be dead in the water already, I texted back my thanks but didn’t let Gail know. I’d tell her later when I had a better idea of what was going to happen.

I was shown into Thurlow Dingle’s office by a stout lady whose white blonde hair was so heavily lacquered it resembled some of the casings we made in the factory, I clutched my passport and Gramps’ Certificate in my hand like a talisman.

“Charmed,” murmured Thurlow when she introduced me. Thurlow looked to be about 103 but he was probably only in his early nineties. He studied my passport, driver’s licence and the Death Certificate as though they were stock options on a dubious Russian gold mine.

“You will be needing several certified copies of this Death Certificate,” he said with a faint lisp as though his false teeth didn’t quite fit. “Would you allow me to organise that for you?”

“Oh, please,” I said and he made a note on his pad then put it to one side.

“Now, to the matter at hand,” he murmured, picking up a folder conveniently at hand.

“We've got a Will of my grand father's,” I said, “but it's seven years old. I was wondering if that was his last Will or if he made another.”

“Mr Robert Dorchester's most recent Will is dated January 7th this year,” he said, peering at a document from the folder.

“The 7th?” I said, surprised. “That was Tuesday. He was in hospital then.”

“Indeed,” said Thurlow. “At Mr Dorchester's telephoned request I attended his bedside on the afternoon of the 7th and he informed me that he did not expect to live more than a few days and that he desired to update his Will.”

“Oh,” I said. I wondered what it must be like to be lying in a bed, surrounded by people caring for you yet knowing you were about to die.

He looked at me for a few moments.

“Mr Dorchester named you, Penelope Charmaine Dorchester, as his Executrix,” he said.

I winced automatically at the use of my middle name which I hate with a passion, although not quite enough to ever get around to changing it. It was easier to simply ignore it and anyone who used it.

“OK,” I said, wondering how to break it to mum that she wasn't his Executor any more.

“I shall be giving you his Will,” said Thurlow, “although I feel it incumbent upon me to explain that his Estate is to be divided into two parts. The first part comprises his net assets, excluding a small sum of money and a list of named items, and is to be divided in equal parts between his daughter Maureen Priscilla Dorchester and his two grandchildren, yourself and Raymond Kevin Dorchester. The second part comprises the sum of money and the named items which are

bequeathed to specific named individuals.”

“Is there anything in there about the shares in Dorchester Light Engineering?” I asked.

“Indeed there is,” he said. “Those shares form one of the named items and I am enjoined to give you a personal message from your grandfather before divulging the beneficiary of those shares.”

“Oh god,” I said, my heart sinking. “I’m not sure I really want to hear this.” Obviously the old sod wanted to rub it in one last time that he deemed me to be an incompetent female.

Thurlow Dingle picked up a single sheet of paper with Gramps spidery hand writing on it and read it through carefully before looking up at me. He cleared his throat with an air of drama.

“Penny,” he read aloud, “a long time ago I saw a show on the television where someone, I think it was the President of the United States, said ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.’ and I have never forgotten those words. I have often doubted you, not least because of your sex, but I now know that you are the only one of my family with any real vision and that only you have the gumption to carry that vision into the world. I give you my shares in Dorchester’s, and with them the majority shareholding, knowing the company is in safe hands and that you will work to make the world a better place. Domenica was my friend. Your loving grandfather, Robbie.”

He put down the sheet of paper and looked worriedly at me.

“Would you like a tissue?” he asked as I burst into tears.